

## Introduction

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The post-millennial years have been witness to significant developments in the field of popular visuality in South Asia. For India at least, a liberalised economy, advancements in digital technology, satellite television, urban beautification projects and a publishing boom have all shaped what we see, how we see it and why we see it. From the enormous, roadside posters advertising a television serial's next cliffhanger, the special effects of Anubav Sinha's 2011 blockbuster *Ra.One* to the social messaging of public wall art in Mumbai, Indians are being called to see more, and to see differently. Other South Asian countries are experiencing similar trajectories in terms of what is seen and also how it is seen; Pakistan's television serials have travelled beyond the country's own transmission circuit, Bangladesh is nurturing an emerging graphic narrative scene and in Sri Lanka, visual practices in the field of modern art are involved in remembering and narrating post-conflict society.

Across South Asia and particularly within India, it has been argued that the role of visuality is defining given that the concepts of *darshan* and *drishti* (as ideas of "seeing" or "gazing") are often at the heart of Hindu modes of haptic visuality (see Ramaswamy 2003, xxv), and the same can also be said of broader (non-Hindu) Indian and thus broader South Asian cultural practices in a related haptic notion such as *nazar*. Transcending language and ethnic or religious belonging, 'seeing' in South Asia is more than simply looking upon or gazing, Bhatti and Pinney (2011) write:

Vision in South Asia, it seems, has never been concerned with just looking: it has always sought in many arenas to incorporate other senses and emotions, uniting vision with the somatic while concurrently diminishing the distance between subject and object. (2011: 227)

Moreover, Freitag (2003) suggests that the visual realm is a critical component in South Asian modernity because 'acts of seeing become acts of knowing as viewers/consumers impute new meanings to familiar images' (2003: 366). Such a process enables change to take

place and this is particularly important when societies are evolving at pace, which has been and continues to be the case for post-millennial India and for parts (such as urban centres) of the wider South Asia region. Globalisation, increased domestic and international travel, regional partnerships and changes to society in terms of education, job opportunities and shifting perceptions of women's roles have all contributed to the field of visuality in new and often unanticipated ways.

Although this Special Issue explores a range of visual cultures and practices, the graphic novel as a material mode of 'seeing' is discussed in some detail. There can be no doubt that the Indian graphic novel in particular is a site where the process described above by Freitag is enacted. It is thus a site where old and new modes of visuality confer and where India is represented anew but often in an uncomfortable or an inauspicious manner. This new trajectory of text-image production has partly come out of a tradition of Indian comics combined with heightened consumerism in South Asia, particularly in India following the liberalisation of the economy, felt most intensely post-2000. This moment where competing factors have been at play has allowed the graphic novel to develop and grow to find a unique voice and an ever-expanding domestic readership, including an increasingly international one too. The public and popular nature of these new modes of visuality must not be ignored, whether television serials, films, posters, or animation, the visual is almost always '*material in nature*' (Freitag, 2014) and in this respect, the graphic novel format is no exception. Freitag (2014) says that:

[i]mages – whether framed, viewed as bound objects, or recombined on a wall by owners/viewers [ ... ] involve vision and the gaze"; thus it is important to remember that "the *handling* of an object, or *interactions* of bodies" are equally important aspects to consider when we talk about visuality (2014: 399, original emphases).

The material object that is the graphic novel clearly embodies the visuality that Freitag invokes here, given the 'handling' of the graphic novel that takes place whilst 'consuming'. The graphic novel therefore marks out this realm of the visual as different from the interactions with television serials, films or other media. Furthermore, the graphic novel anchors itself in the moment, in the publishing scene of the contemporary moment and thus acts as and indeed is a cultural and literary 'product' of our times. Importantly, the economic changes and development over the last ten years in the region have significantly impacted the

publishing scene of which Narayanan (2012) describes as the new de/reterritorialization (2012: 107) of publishing houses. Citing the example of Penguin, she writes:

No longer identified as just a UK-based company, the publisher is regarded as a 'worldwide' corporation since its locations are spread across the US, Canada, the UK, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, India, South Africa and China. This polycentric configuration has made it possible for books, like other commercial products, to be produced, designed, translated, and marketed across the world. (Narayanan, 2012: 107)

Other such publishing companies with an office in India include HarperCollins India and Hachette India - both have significantly grown their graphic novel catalogues in the last ten years - but as Narayana warns, 'if the global visibility of Indian writers is a significant consequence of de/reterritorialized corporations, its most adverse effect is the hegemony of these corporations as the prime global producers of Indian writing' (2012: 107). In a complementary move of sorts, the independent presses of India have also flourished under this post-millennial sky and are heavily involved in the proliferation of genre fiction with some publishing short and full length graphic novels.

The appetite in South Asia for comics and graphic novels is nascent in Bangladesh and Nepal but is clearly gathering pace in India, and their representation within this Special Issue is testament to this trend. The graphic novel and comics' production referred to in this issue of *SAPC* talks to and of the legendary *Amar Chitra Katha* comic series of the 1970s and 80s. Introduced in 1967, the publications concerned themselves with Indian epics as well as the *Puranas*, classics from Indian literature, fables and humour as well as stories of Indian brave hearts and visionaries. The post-millennial years however, have brought about a sea-change in the way India recognises and indeed defines its comic and graphic novel production. The growing number of independent comic and graphic novel presses, the diverse and challenging array of narrative, as well as the quality of production and print, have meant that Indian graphic novels (and comics) are unrecognisable when compared to the *Amar Chitra Katha* works of the 1970s and 80s. Borne out of Orijit Sen's revolutionary *River of Stories* (1994), these post-millennial Indian graphic narratives often pursue difficult topics, they engage critically with Indian cultural practices and traditions and have even brought taboo subjects to light through the text-image medium. The difficulty of the content is echoed through the graphic narratives' craft and artistic styles; stark lines, heavily-inked drawings, sketchy

amorphous characterisation and non-linear narrative forms all coalesce in order to imagine the unimaginable, the inauspicious and the reality of old and new India, in all its pluralities. These ‘uncomfortable’ depictions of India (and Indian cultural practices) are in complete divergence from the *Amar Chitra Katha* tradition which celebrated India and Indianness through bold colours, neat line drawings and auspicious iconography found particularly in public calendar art and religious imagery (see Jain, 2000). The graphic novel’s ‘double marginality’ in terms of form and content allows for a certain creativity through which unsavoury or inauspicious representations of Indian society are communicated (see Dawson Varughese, 2016) and thus demand new ways of ‘seeing’ beyond the darśanic.

The pluralities of India and the South Asia region, with its contradictions and possibilities of modern living alongside older practices and customs across the region are brought into sharp relief in the collection of essays presented here. Through the graphic novel and other related visual forms, one of the tasks we set ourselves as artists, scholars, practitioners, readers and fans was to explore how best might we articulate a sense of situating and critically reading some of the products in this arena? To this end, Filippo Menozzi uses the graphic novel *Drawing from the City* to argue for and illustrate a specific aesthetic that can be seen in this graphic fiction and literature about caste. Menozzi demonstrates the multiplicity of caste lives and capital labour alongside understandings about caste exploitation and social agency to offer readings about the individual and the collective as embedded in the aesthetic. Using the case of the Pakistani TV drama *Uraan*, Shirin Zubair illustrates a complex aesthetic at work in the series which simultaneously represents Pakistani women’s agency in the public sphere, while also still offering ambivalent possibilities about femininity in the developing South Asian urban context. From the South Asian subcontinent to the international and diasporic space of South Asian lives in the USA, Winona Landis offers a compelling reading of *Ms. Marvel*, featuring its teenager South Asian American Muslim leading protagonist. Drawing on work around fans of popular genres as readers and consumers of visual and literacy texts, Landis goes on to argue beyond the South Asian-Americanness of the Ms Marvel figure as being able to appeal cross-racial identifications. Deepali Yadav poses the question of how a graphic representation of caste might work in the contemporary Indian context, not least when it involves the adaptation of a nineteenth-century novel based around caste as slavery? By considering the visual depictions of caste in the present she poses a prescient question for us - what connections and possibilities does this render for our understanding of caste in the

past and present? Spandan Bhattacharya and Anugyan Nag in their analysis of tele-serials from Pakistan aired on Indian television illustrate the possibilities for a changing visual landscape of Pakistani and Muslim representations in India, not least in the context of a contemporary BJP-led political public sphere. Madhuja Mukherjee critically reflects as an artist and practitioner of the graphic novel form on the processes involved in creating her own graphic novel in Bengali, *War Cry of the Beggars*. The ways in which literary style, cinematic evocation and sequential art are used and brought into dialogue with each other are given careful attention, as well as the political content of the social outsider within the text.

In the Working Notes section we offer three contemplative, artistic, commentary-based and interview pieces by Aanchal Malhotra on Partition through memory and material objects, Swarnavel Pillai on the revival and related historical overview of Tamil comics, and an interview with one of the founding and leading proponents of the graphic novel form in India, Orijit Sen, by Emma Varughese. Collectively, what is presented in this Special Issue is a juxtaposition of form and content of graphic novels and visual culture in terms of their aesthetics, forms of production, their possible critical readings, and the different relationships and points of intersections across text, genres, different media and the cultural politics that they occupy amongst artists, practitioners of the form, fans and readers, scholars and consumers. These configurations chart how visual cultures across South Asia are responding to a new world order. At times these visual cultures attempt to re-shape previous modes of visibility by elaborating on what it means to be living in South Asia and across its connected global cultural politics today. Thus, this Special Issue offers some insight into the ways in which this narrative is unfolding, the kind of stories which are being told and how, in telling these stories, society is called upon to engage and crucially, to react to what we see, how and why we see it.

### **Notes on editors**

Rajinder Dudrah is Professor of Cultural Studies and Creative Industries in the School of Media at Birmingham City University. He has researched and published widely across film, media and cultural studies in international journals and is the author and co-editor of ten books, including *SRK and Global Bollywood* (with Elke Mader and Bernhard Fuchs, Oxford University Press, 2015), *Bollywood Travels: Culture, Diaspora and Border Crossings in*

*Popular Hindi Cinema* (Routledge, 2012), and *Theorising World Cinema* (with Lucia Nagib and Chris Perriam, IB Tauris, 2015).

E. Dawson Varughese is a global cultural studies scholar and her specialism is India. She is the author of *Beyond the Postcolonial* (Palgrave, 2012) and *Reading New India* (Bloomsbury, 2013) and is a co-author of *Indian Writing in English and Issues of Visual Representation* (Palgrave, 2015). Most latterly, her monograph entitled *Genre Fiction of New India: post-millennial receptions of 'weird' narratives* was published with Routledge. She is currently writing a book on visuality and the Indian Graphic Novel in which she explores 'new ways of seeing in New India'. See her work at: [www.beyondthepostcolonial.com](http://www.beyondthepostcolonial.com)

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