

SUPERHEROES AND THE NATION-STATE: AN ANALYSIS OF TIRANGA COMICS

Neha Khurana

Assistant Professor
Department of English,
Gargi College (University of Delhi),
Delhi

ABSTRACT

This paper purports to analyse the role of the genre of superhero comics in the context of ‘modern’ neo-liberal India through a sequence of Tiranga comics (a production of Raj comics) by pointing out crucial differences between the older superheroes and the more contemporary Tiranga equipped with latest gadgets. Through an exploration of the nation and the genre of comics through Arjun Appadurai’s notions of modernity and the nation-state, the paper reaches the conclusion that owing to the kind of crisis that globalization and liberalization have posed for the nation-state, the conventional genre of superhero comics is also undergoing a crisis (evident in the necessary difference between Tiranga and older superheroes). In the process, the hierarchy between comics (often considered ‘light’ and meant for the ‘non-serious reader’) and other genres of literature (like poetry and novels) as well as other disciplines (like theology, philosophy and so on which are considered as apt for the ‘serious’ reader) is sufficiently questioned.

The central question that this paper on Tiranga comics, drawing also from Arjun Appadurai’s book ‘Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization’, purports to address is that of the role of superheroes in neo-liberal India marked not only by cultural diversity and migration but also globalization and modernity which entails development in a particular direction that is marked by technological advancement. The issues that then become central to the paper are several- first, why do we need superheroes? What do they tell us about our society? Specifically in the case of Tiranga comics, we should ask - how and why is Tiranga different from other standard superheroes? Second, what role, if at all, does the superhero genre play in engaging with philosophical and/or theological questions? (where I will refer to critic Ben Saunders’s argument and the debate between Tiranga and Nagraj). Third, are superheroes necessarily localized? What is a ‘locality’? Fourth, what is the scope of patriotism in a post-national/globalised world? What is the role of patriotic superheroes like Tiranga? What is the crisis they currently face? For the last two issues I will refer again to Appadurai and his concept of the coming together of ethnoscapas, technoscapas and mediascapas in Tiranga. It is here that

we can talk about the gadgets used by Tiranga compared to the use of snakes by Nagraj as well as the evolution of the language used in Raj comics.

The first thing that strikes one about superheroes and the immense market that any comics industry finds for superhero comics is that they symbolize that there is a difference between how our world is and how we think it ought to be. Superheroes come out of their ordinary alter egos only when there is a need to stop or change something that is seen as morally wrong or a potential threat to an individual, a nation or sometimes, all of humanity. The very fact that there is the need not just of a hero (thought of as greater than ordinary folks) but of a superhero gives an idea of the magnitude of the problem which is such that it needs more than human effort to solve it. One of Doga's dialogues in Amitabh Kumar's essay 'Raj Comics for the Hard-Headed' sums up this lack as well as the popularity of superheroes well- "Somewhere the common man, because of his limitations cannot protect himself against villains. So, when he sees Nagraj or me do what he wanted to do with the criminals... we automatically turn into a ... superhero". Further Amitabh Kumar makes a distinction between the various Raj comics' superheroes on the basis of the magnitude of the problems that they are called upon to solve. In this scheme of things, Nagraj is literally the 'raja' of superheroes and only called upon to tackle the severest of problems that affect the world at large (like "an international crisis, an alien invasion, a major plot of terrorism or a demon reborn") and superheroes like Doga solve crimes within the society. Tiranga, occupying the somewhat middle position on this gradient makes him a particularly interesting superhero as he fights crimes ranging from embezzlement in construction material leading to collapse of a flyover (as in the 'Deshdrohi' comic), to the dirtiness of Indian politics where people are killed for political gain (as in the 'Deshbhakt' comic) to often fighting terrorism.

What is further particularly interesting about Tiranga is that he has no superpowers to fight these crimes the way other standard superheroes do! Nagraj has an army of infinite snakes inside his body who work at his commands; Super Commando Dhruv can talk to animals and can breathe under water; Parmanu can fly, release atomic bombs and even change his own size. Even Doga who fights crimes only within a society has an army of dogs who back him up. Tiranga however has nothing except a well-built body and training in martial arts. He solves everything with the help of his clever mind and those kicks and punches. Also, unlike the majority of other superheroes like Nagraj, Tiranga is not invincible. In fact, it becomes evident from a reading of several of his comics that he often gets stuck and needs help from other superheroes. The perfect case in point is the comic 'Andhi Duniya' where he repeatedly needs Blind Death to save him from trouble. Thus here I think at least one largely accepted notion of a superhero has been subverted: this superhero is not invincible, does not even have supernatural powers but is infused with an obsession to save his country and its people.

This obsession brings to mind the very interesting debate that Tiranga has with Nagraj in the comic 'I Spy' where they both figure together. The debate is over what exactly the duty of a superhero is and what not and whether legal obligations bind superheroes. I think that the more significant question that this debate inadvertently raises fits somewhere in the paradigmatic difference between what the world is and what we think it ought to be. The question actually concerns the intelligibility of the world as what we call 'God' perhaps made it and the feasibility or appropriate-ness of the laws and moral codes that we have ascribed to it.

Also this is where I think this analysis feeds quite neatly into a slightly problematic argument presented by Ben Saunders, a Professor of English at University of Oregon in his book titled 'Do the Gods Wear Capers: Spirituality, Fantasy and Superheroes'. He argues that once we

accept the Nietzschean affirmation that “god is dead”, we in effect accept that there is no fixed centre or origin to go in search of, or even if there is, it is inaccessible and our world is unintelligible and humans, through different methods and disciplines (like theology, philosophy and so on) attempt to make sense of it. In terms of the typical deconstructionist dilemma, all these attempts will be equally true and equally false. Without distorting Saunders’s argument any further, let me quote a passage from his book which describes this argument and how it is connected to the genre of superhero comics:

“The point to be grasped, then, is that superhero comics draw much of their primary creative energy and appeal from the same rift between experience and desire that constitutes the beginning (and end) of modern philosophical inquiry—a space where traditional distinctions between philosophy, theology, and literature collide and break down—and that, unconstrained by the usual conventions of philosophical discourse, including the bar against overt acts of wish fulfilling fantasy, they can address some of the same profound questions. At the risk of provoking sneers from the skeptics I would therefore argue that superhero comics—brash, broad, and sometimes brutal melodramas though they are—often find themselves in the same conceptual territory as, say, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the tragedies of Shakespeare—texts that also happen to have a brash, broad, and sometimes brutal quality of melodrama about them, and that famously defy our traditional disciplinary categories by demanding to be read as philosophy, theology and literature, all at once.” (7-8)

Saunders further writes about the range of alternate discourses we can choose from in terms of consumerism and commodity culture, describing the constant deferral that we face and the continuing of desire:

“Thus it seems that on the one hand, we can embrace the passionate but potentially destructive madness of total commitment to a metaphysics of Truth, or, on the other hand, we can make a temporary selection from the vast array of lesser truths in the theological warehouse, like shoppers browsing an outlet mall. The range of “goods” can seem liberating, even intoxicating, until we realize that nothing will satisfy us for long—and that there is no way out of the mall and back to the church, because they knocked down the church in order to build the mall.” (12)

Since it is the experience of a lack, a danger, a need for change that binds the consumers of comic books, I would argue that the community it builds is very akin to Appadurai’s extension of Benedict Anderson’s concept of the ‘imagined community’. It is significant that this community, though based on a commonality of feeling and experience, is not predicated on the feeling for a presence but the feeling of a lack, the desire for change and desire for something fuller and better. It is noteworthy that when Appadurai describes this as what he calls a “community of sentiment”, it is in the context of describing collective (as opposed to individual) imagination which he sees as being furthered and nourished by ‘electronic capitalism’ which he sees as the counterpart of print capitalism in this neo-liberal, globalized world. There are two significant implications of this concept of electronic capitalism that Appadurai describes. The first is a curious coming together of different ‘ethnoscapes’, ‘technoscapes’ and ‘mediascapes’ as

Appadurai calls them. An instance of this is the parallel use of technology (signal sensor) by Tiranga and reading of signals from snakes by Nagraj. It is indeed a curious parallel as Nagraj is known to have ‘divine’ origin- conceived by the blessings of Lord Kalyaji who is the serpent around the neck of Shiva; and Tiranga has no such divine origin, is obsessed with patriotism and equipped with latest gadgets (including a touch phone and a signal sensor). Interestingly even the martial arts form that Tiranga uses is not of Indian origin. Appadurai astutely points out- “The transnational movement of the martial arts, particularly through Asia, as mediated by the Hollywood and Hong Kong film industries (Zarilli 1 995) is a rich illustration of the ways in which long-standing martial arts traditions, reformulated to meet the fantasies of contemporary (sometimes lumpen) youth populations, create new cultures of masculinity and violence, which are in turn the fuel for increased violence in national and international politics.” (Appadurai: 40-41)

This brings us to the second implication of electronic capitalism which is perhaps more significant. As electronic capitalism enhances the process of people sitting in different geographical locations coming together as imagined communities, it adds manifold, in Appadurai’s view, to the dissolution of the concept of the nation-state in its conventional territorial sense. Paraphrasing Vachani Appadurai writes:

“States throughout the world are under siege, especially where contests over the ideoscapes of democracy are fierce and fundamental, and where there are radical disjunctures between ideoscapes and technoscapes (as in the case of very small countries that lack contemporary technologies of production and information); or between ideoscapes and financescapes ... or between ideoscapes and ... or between ideoscapes and mediascapes ... In the Indian case, the myth of the law-breaking hero has emerged to mediate this naked struggle between the pieties and realities of Indian politics, which has grown increasingly brutalized and corrupt.” (40)

So it is in the light of this that one wonders what the scope and role of a super-patriot like Tiranga is. What really does the tiranga flag denote? What does the three-lion emblem denote? Given the large number of migrations, who exactly is Tiranga saving by saving the people he saves on Indian soil? These questions lead one to think that as the nation-state is in crisis, so is the concept of the super-patriot. This super-patriot could in this sense be seen as more of a universal symbol of constant human desire for change, and constant grappling with the question of the intelligibility of the world and our own legal and moral codes. The concept that takes the place of the nation-state is that of ‘locality’ which Appadurai, borrowing the phrase from Raymond Williams, has described as the ‘structure of feeling’ and writes further: “I view locality as primarily relational and contextual rather than as scalar or spatial. I see it as a complex phenomenological quality, constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts.” Thus we could say that it is perhaps this realization (though subconscious) and recognition (though not overt) of our globalized state of affairs that gives an impression of Tiranga as someone nearly (or approaching to be) redundant.

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