

the last five years in the life of indian print comics

By Payal Khandelwal

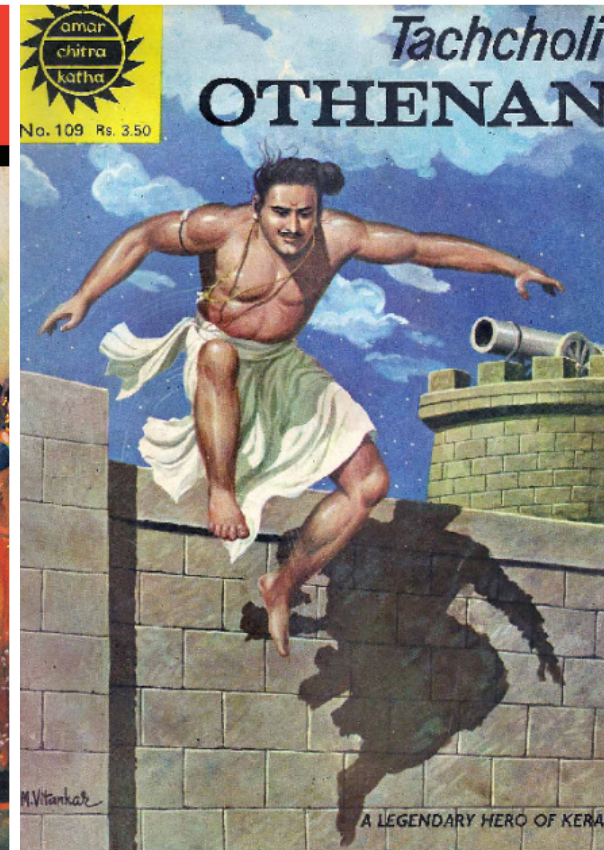
PWI speaks to four people from the print comics business to get a lowdown on how the landscape has evolved over the last five years

For many of us, school summer vacations meant a sweet whiff of freedom and a stack of comic books. Day after day, we would gloriously dive into well-told mythological stories and crazy adventures of various local heroes who often became an integral part of our lives. Fortunately, the experience of reading comic books hasn't metamorphosed into nostalgia. This is because many of our beloved comic books have survived, and thrived, despite the challenges faced by the print medium in general.

Over the years, indigenous comic books have evolved in a rather interesting way. Instead of abandoning print completely to move over to digital, many traditional titles have made themselves available through both mediums. Moreover, we have also seen new print comic books with contemporary themes enter the market, some of them targeting young adults and adults.

We decided to take the last five years into account to trace the evolution of print comic books in India. For this, we spoke to Reena Puri from the iconic Amar Chitra Katha, one of the oldest running comic books in India. ACK was of course launched by the late Anant Pai – often referred to as the creator of 'Indian Comics' – in 1967. We also spoke to Shriya Ghate from Tinkle (part of ACK) which began its journey in 1981.

We also mapped the last five years through our conversation with indie comic books publisher, Abhijeet Kini, whose 'Angry Maushi' character started with one sketch at a Comic Con and then evolved into a trilogy because of the great reception it got. Kini has now published six print comic books, the most recent being Rhyme Fighters. We also got in touch with Chariot Comics which started its journey in 2012. Interestingly, they wanted to launch digital-only comic books but eventually decided that print was still what the readers wanted and print was still what made more business sense. It's been five years, and despite the umpteen challenges, founder Aniruddho Chakraborty couldn't be happier with his decision.



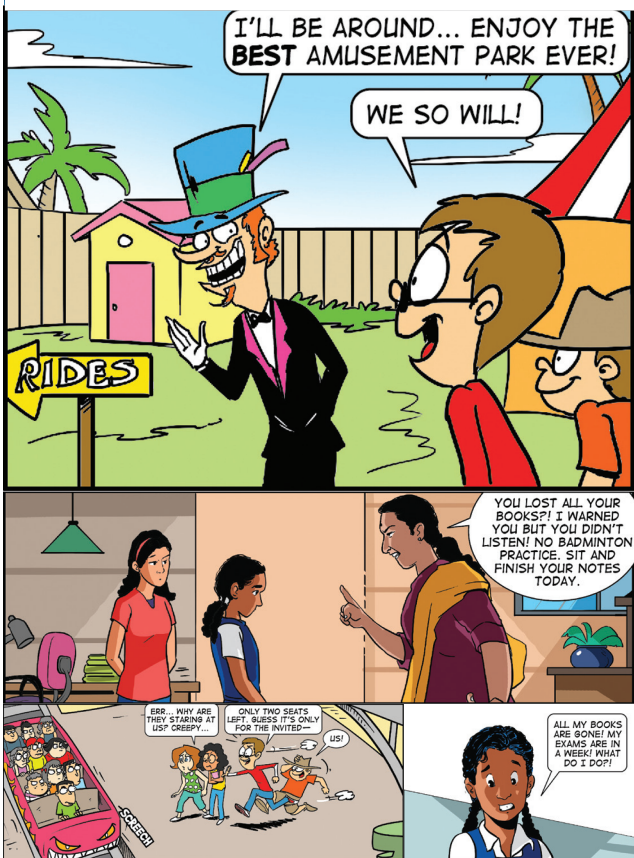
Reena I. Puri,
executive editor, Amar Chitra Katha

Over the last five years, what have been some of the most significant changes (especially in terms of adapting to digital mediums) that you have done in Amar Chitra Katha?

Though print is still our largest-selling medium, we have forayed into various digital mediums over the last few years. We have an Amar Chitra Katha e-com site. We also have an app which is Android and iOS compatible. Currently, it is being updated in a major way. There's also a whole bunch of video content on YouTube and we are also in the process of developing content which is slightly removed from the traditional ACK content. Moreover, we are present on Magster, Google and Kindle.

What have been your biggest challenge and achievement in the last five years?

Walking the tight rope between our traditional comics and the new ones. We have thousands of readers in their 30s and 40s who do not want us to change at all! On the other hand, we have the young children and college-going crowd which would like to see contemporary styles. So we are caught in these two worlds. However, we have to move forward and we are doing that without losing our basic vision, which is to tell stories of India to the young people of India.



Shriya Ghate,
business head, Tinkle

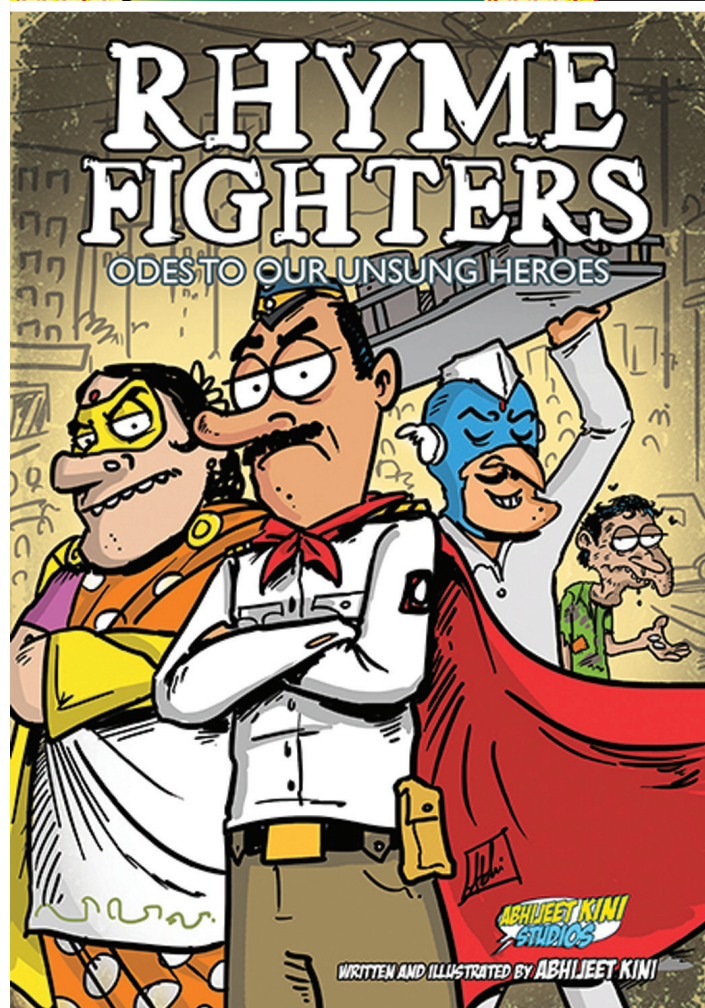
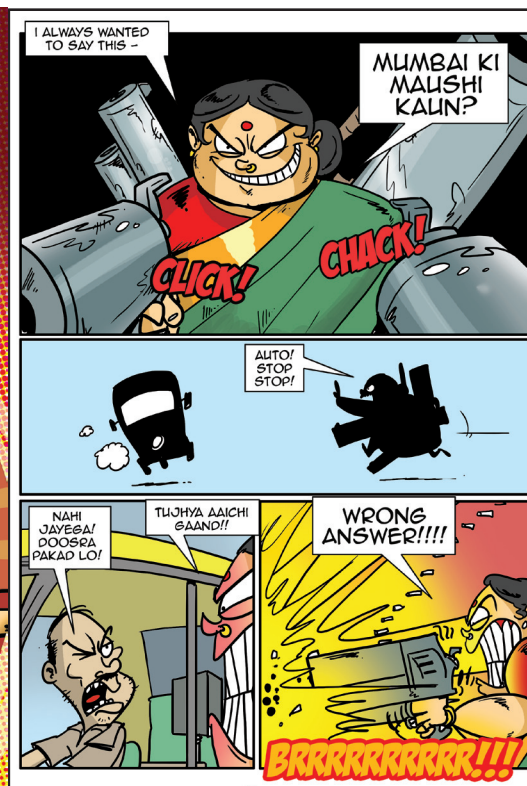
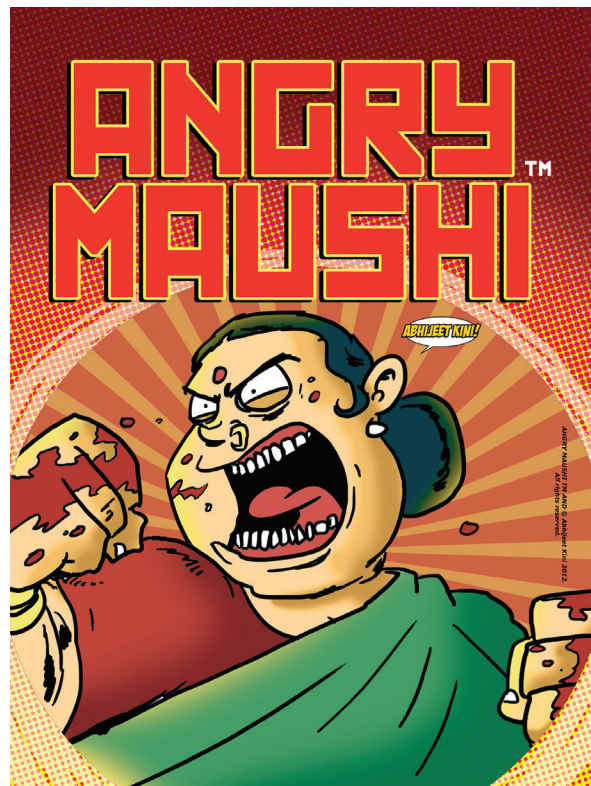
What have been some of the most significant changes that you have made in Tinkle in the last five years, especially to appeal to the digital audience?

In the last five years, we have evolved to serve our content through various mediums. As far as our comics are concerned, we are already available on both Android and iOS platforms so readers can enjoy their comics on their mobile devices. We are also available on Kindle. Apart from comics, our Youtube channel 'Suppandi & Friends' is very popular. We also have a Suppandi sticker app for iOS Messenger as well as a few Shambu game on Android.

What have been your biggest challenge and achievement in the last five years?

The biggest challenge in the last five years has been to stay relevant in spite of growing competition from mobile games and television, and the implications of that on a child's choice of entertainment.

Despite this challenge, we have managed to hold strong and grow. We have a focused customer-engagement strategy that works on both on-ground and social media platforms. This includes our successful school contact programme as well as live events where children can interact with their beloved characters.



Abhijeet Kini,
illustrator, animator, and indie
comics publisher

In this hyper-digital age, what inspired you to launch another print comic – Rhyme Fighters?
I think the medium of comics and print overall is never going to die due to the digital wave. And being a comic illustrator and indie publisher, I will always think about new titles and new themes to explore. And this is why Rhyme Fighters came up, a comic about rhymes based on everyday people in Mumbai.

Over the years, especially in terms of readership, how has your experience with Angry Maushi been?
Angry Maushi started off as a simple character sketch which was liked by many at the first Mumbai Comic Con in 2011, and then I decided to make a single issue comic based on her. It got such a good response that I went ahead and made two more 'episodes' and presented the story arc as a trilogy. The readership for Angry Maushi has been young adult to adult audience, since I have always made it very clear that this is an adult comic, not for kids. We now have a collector's edition called 'Essential Angry Maushi' containing the whole trilogy. The good part is that we have a dedicated reader base, and the number keeps increasing thanks to the new people coming over to Comic Cons and picking up more and more issues. So it's been good. Angry



Maushi has a sort of a cult following today.

Are there any specific things that you do to reach out to the digital audiences?

Yes, apart from social media that I extensively use to reach out to more people, I also keep sharing digital sketches and videos of these sketches, showing the process from scratch. This ensures an actively engaged audience which enjoys this kind of content. This is possible thanks to a few good apps and my iPad pro. I anyway illustrate all my comics using the digital medium – the Wacom tablet. So directly or indirectly, my audience can consume digital content that I share.

What have been your biggest challenge and achievement in the last five years in the comic publishing business?

The biggest challenge has been circulation and distribution. It is a big concern when it comes to self-published comics, especially in India. But, on the bright side, our biggest achievement is that thanks to the Comic Cons happening across India, I have had six titles under my belt over the last six years, something I never thought I would ever have. I always wanted to publish indie comics and I am living that dream now.

Aniruddho Chakraborty,
founder, Chariot Comics

Over the last five years, what have been some of the significant changes you have made?

Yes, we officially launched in 2012, and five years later the scenario is quite different from when we started out. Some of the key points on that note are:

1 DIGITAL MEDIUMS: When we started out, our ambition was to be a digital-only comic publisher. However, in 2012, the math just wasn't adding up, so we had to move to full print runs for our titles. We, however, did continue to push out our comics on indigenous platforms like Readwhere, ComicsCircle and HuHuba – but the traction has not been that encouraging so far. The average Indian comic book reader still prefers to buy in print and in case he/she is open to digital, is either not willing to pay for it or the number of such paying audience isn't enough yet.

2 SLOW AND GO: Looking at the estimated size of the buying audience over the years, the kind of traction we get at Comic Cons, and what's working and what's not – we've managed to tweak our production and print runs effectively. Honestly, the main reason we make comic books is because we enjoy them – so a "Slow and Go" approach, as we call it, works for us. We don't produce more than two titles a year and even those we distribute according to Comic Cons, fan demand and traction on previous titles. This has helped us break-even operationally and sell out print runs for our key titles. This also means that I don't have to shell out money from my pocket to fund the venture anymore.

3 DIVERSIFICATION: While we don't talk about it much, we have also diversified into many other avenues over the years – mostly in the branded content space and commissioned comics from film studios and ad agencies. This year, we are also looking at bringing diversity to our line-up of titles – with a keener focus on kids and early teens vs. the focus we have had on mature audience so far.

What have been your biggest challenge and achievement in the last five years?

The biggest challenge and the biggest achievement in these five years have been the same: Survival. This market is not nice to young upstarts looking to break in, and it takes a lot of time, energy, patience and money to stay above the water.

My bank statements over the past five years would probably make me look like fiscally irresponsible, putting good money behind bad money. But like I said, survival was the key. The fact that we are here, making comic books we want to make, without fear or pressure and on our own dime is our biggest achievement according to me. Then there are things like movie studio talks, franchising etc. which are always in the works – given the sudden need for IPs in today's streaming world. However, whether they culminate into something or not, I'd still think surviving for five years, on our own terms, is our greatest achievement.

