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Grassroots Comics in India: Activism through Diffusion of Innovations

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Abstract

World Comics India (WCI) is an innovative movement in India that is empowering people with few resources to create and disseminate grassroots comics that address the concerns of one village or even a particular neighborhood. World Comics India trains local activists to create simple, usually single-page, comics, and in turn, these activists recruit people from the community and teach them to make such comics. The diffusion of innovations theory, developed by Everett Rogers, is used to determine whether grassroots comics possess the factors that make an innovation successful, and how the WCI strategy progresses through the five phases of adopting an innovation. Grassroots comics seem to be ideally suited for giving voice to the marginalized and advocating solutions to local problems because they are an innovation that is easy to understand, simple enough to be experimented with, learned in a short period of time, and quickly sharable.

The world is saturated with communication. However, political cartoonist Sharad Sharma believes that professionally produced mass media merely gives the illusion of representing the “common people,” but actually presents “a corporate viewpoint.” Sharma co-founded an organization, World Comics India (WCI), devoted to giving “a voice to the unheard” by training people to use what he calls grassroots comics to express individual points of view (“Grassroots Comics” n.d.).

In this essay, we explore the implications of grassroots comics created by non-professionals as a means of advancing social issues and guided by processes popularized by WCI. In order to make sense of the efficacy and processes of WCI's efforts, we apply a theory of communication called the Diffusion of Innovations (Rogers, 2003). That theory has been employed to explain the likelihood of adopting new processes, ideas, and technologies in a number of cultures across the globe, but to our knowledge it has yet to be utilized in Comics Studies. By introducing it here, we hope to shed new light on the WCI movement and the viability of using comics as a communication technology across cultures.

We begin by contextualizing the emergence of WCI with a brief review of comics in India before introducing the WCI enterprise. We then introduce the Diffusion of Innovations theory before applying two aspects of the theory: factors involved in the likelihood of an innovation being adopted and the process of adoption, both of which we believe align with reports of how WCI has succeeded. We conclude with some insights into how the movement and the theory may be applied to comics going forward.

Comics Culture in India

In her history of Mexican comics Anne Rubenstein (1998) observes that "comic books are not a global medium; they have very different niches in the cultural ecologies of every region where they are found" (7). India is a large nation with many co-cultures and languages. Reading of comics, and even exposure to comics, can vary widely by region and demographic factors within each region.

Many Indians were introduced to Western style cartooning in the latter half of the 19th century through issues of the London-based satirical magazine *Punch* that found

their way to India. *Punch* was unofficially "franchised" throughout the British empire. There were scores of *Punch* magazines published in India, most prominently *Avadh Punch* (aka *Oudh Punch*), published in Lucknow from 1877 to 1937 (Parekh, 2019).

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Laxman, who became India's most famous cartoonist and popularly known as R.K. Laxman, was fascinated by the drawings in *Punch* before he could read the text. As he grew older, Laxman savored the political cartoons of David Low in the English-language newspaper *The Hindu*. The influence of David Low can be seen in the style of Laxman's daily political cartoon strip "You Said It," which first appeared in *The Times of India* in 1951 and ran for nearly six decades. Laxman's Common Man character was a silent observer of Indian society, and his strip contained "a wealth of details that are easily identifiable and mischievously personal in their Indian-ness" (Chatterjee, 2007).

Another "common man" view of life in India was provided by Chacha Chaudhary, a middle-class, kindly "uncle" who exemplifies the common-sense wisdom of elders. Chacha was created by Pran Kumar Sharma, simply known as Pran. As a newspaper cartoonist in the early 1960s, "Pran broke the monopoly of syndicated foreign comic strips and gave India its first comic characters the teenaged Dabu and his mentor, Professor Adhikari" (Kumar, 2019, p. 6). Chacha Chaudhary, originally created for the humor magazine *Lotpot*, has become one of the most widely known comics characters in India, with hundreds of comic book published in 10 languages and selling over 10 million copies (India Today Online, 2013). Chacha remained popular into the 21st century with both live-action and animated television series. Pran was included in 1995 People of the Year list by Limca Book of Records for popularizing comics in India, and in the *World Encyclopedia of Comics* Maurice Horn (1999) refers to Pran as "the Walt Disney of India" (p. 42).

The humorous adventures of Chacha certainly have some appeal to children, but perhaps not as strong as those of the more dynamic and extraordinary characters that began to permeate Indian popular culture in the latter half of the 20th century. Since 1947 there had been a heavily illustrated monthly magazine for children, *Chandamama*, but when actual comic books began to appear in India they were filled with characters of Western origins. In 1964, Bennet, Coleman & Co, publisher of India's leading newspaper, *The Times of India*, licensed a number of King Features comic strip characters and began publishing their adventures in a series of comic books with the imprint Indrajal Comics. *Times* book division employee Anant Pai was given the task of overseeing the launch of Indrajal Comics. Flash Gordon, Mandrake, Rip Kirby, Buz Sawyer, and other adventure characters appeared in various issues throughout the series, but none were quite as popular as The Phantom. The lead story in the first 32 issues of Indrajal Comics featured The Phantom and the jungle hero starred in a popular comic strip in *The Illustrated Weekly of India* (Patrick, 2014). The children's magazine *Anandamela*, launched in 1975, translated the exploits of Western comics characters such as Archie, Asterix, Batman, Flash Gordon, Spider-Man, Tarzan, and Tintin into Bengali.

In 1976 Indrajal Comics introduced Bahadur, who might be considered the first Indian superhero. However, Gotham Chopra and Sharad Devarajan (2015) point out that the spiritual traditions of India "count hundreds of Gods and Goddesses amongst the divine pantheon and for us, they represent the original Superhero Universe" (p. 376). Beginning in the late 1960s, India Book House, which had been reprinting *The Adventures of Tintin,* utilized this pantheon to produce one of India's most popular and fondly remembered comic book series.

According to some sources, book salesman G.K. Ananthram encouraged children's book publisher India Book House to begin a comic book series for young readers and suggested the name Amar Chitra Katha (Immortal Picture Stories) (Srinivasaraju,

2011) Whatever Ananthram's initial involvement, the publisher gave responsibility for developing Amar Chitra Katha to Anant Pai, who had overseen the launch of Indrajal Comics just a few years earlier (Patrick, 2012). Anant Pai claimed he intended the comics "to acquaint Indian children with their heritage" (Ahuja, 2007). *Amar Chitra Katha* comics, filled with historical and mythological subject matter, were considered by the publisher, and many parents, to be "cultural education" (Rao, 1999, p. 165).

Some historians believe the Amar Chitra Katha comics were "oriented toward urban, middle-class children," primarily in English-speaking families (Rao, 165), and some critics have perceived a subtle, if unintentional, Hindu nationalism in the presentation of the history and myths (Amin, 2017). On the other hand, the series has been translated into more than 20 languages and sold over 100 million copies (Amin, 2017). Amar Chitra Katha is probably the manifestation of comics that is most widely known throughout India (S. Devarajan, personal communication, July 12, 2021).

In 1980, Anant Pai's influence on future comics fans and creators was expanded with the launch of the children's magazine *Tinkle*, which included short comics as part of its varied contents. Some of the comics related to readers' everyday experiences, and "laid a foundation of reader participation in comics culture, which later creators would draw upon in crafting activist comics narratives" (Stoll, 2013, p. 370). As the middle-class and above readers of *Tinkle* readers grew up they found a wide array of comic books reading choices (Kumar, 2019).

By the 1990s there were a substantial number of comic books geared toward an older, teenage audience (Rao, 1999). Focusing first on humor, but offering a variety of genres, Diamond Comics became by the end of the century the leading comic book publisher in India (Rao, 1999). In the early 21st century, Diamond was surpassed by Raj Comics, with sales "larger than all Indian comic book brands added together"

(Khanduri, 2010, p. 188). The comic books published by Raj and their imitators tended to have contemporary settings and fantasy, horror, or superhero stories reminiscent of European or American comic books. Raj was particularly successful with costumed superheroes, such as Nagraj, Super Commando Dhruva, and Inspector Steel. And even though most publishers marketed to a Hindi speaking audience (Rao, 1999) through small libraries that rented comic books, these Hindi comics found their way to a wide, diverse, and appreciative secondary audience (Kaur & Eqbal, 2019).

Vivalok, funded by the education-focused Viveka Foundation, published comic books that challenged Hindu hegemony with regional "folk stories and local plots" (Khanduri, 2010, pp. 174 & 178). According to Vivalok editor Rukmini Sekhar "Our focus is very local, province by province. . . . We choose a small area and go deep into its worldview" (quoted in McLain, 2009, p. 27). *Vivalok* "attempted to put creative power in the hands of regional experts and artists," and represent the diverse stories circulating in India, "especially those not recognized by official discourse, and accordingly by ACK." Stoll also notes, "Similar to *Vivalok* and ACK, Virgin Comics was established in the mid 2000's to reinvigorate Indian storytelling, with a wide array of titles based upon traditional culture" (Stoll, 2011). However, Virgin sought a broader audience and employed celebrity authors. Virgin was restructured into Liquid Comics, which has been absorbed into Graphic India, which still publishes comics, but stresses storytelling across multiple media platforms.

As graphic novels emerged in India they provided another source of local, even personal, perspectives. *River of Stories* (1994) by Orijit Sen, one of the first graphic novels produced in India, mixes fictional characters with the real plight of indigenous Adivasi being displaced from their ancestral lands by the huge Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River. When Sarnath Banerjee began creating graphic novels, such as *Corridor* (2004) and *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* (2015), he stressed that he was making them for "a readership that is fundamentally local" (Ghosal, 2018, p. 180). *First Hand*

(2016) edited by Orijit Sen and Vidyun Sabhaney, which contains biography, autobiography, commentary, reportage, documentary and oral histories in comic form, is touted as "the first anthology of nonfiction graphic narrative published in India" (Ghosal, 2018, p. 182). A statement on the back cover lets readers of First Hand know that "each comic tells the story of an Indian reality."

To stress that their comics are rooted in an Indian reality, "publishing houses frequently inform their readers of a historical or cultural expert among their staff" (Khanduri, 2010, p. 174), and comics historian Jeremy Stoll opines that no matter how super or supernatural the protagonist might be, a great many of the comics created in India are "telling stories grounded in everyday life in South Asia" (Stoll, 2014, p. 24). From the common sense of Laxman and Pran's everyman, to the wisdom and values of the ancient literature presented in Amar Chitra Katha, to the morality tales in Indian superhero comics, to the lessons of regional folklore, to the first-person perspectives of nonfiction graphic novels, the comics produced in India have always been strongly connected to the culture.

There is an innovative movement in India that is empowering people to create extremely local comics, sometimes speaking to the concerns of one village or even a particular neighborhood. World Comics India takes a deliberate, systematic approach to helping people with few resources to reach an audience through the medium of comics, in a form they term grassroots comics.

Grassroots Comics

Grassroots comics are simple, often one-page, comics created by a local person in the local language to convey a story or a concern to members of the community and, sometimes, to officials or organizations who have the power to effect change. The people creating the comics are usually not artists, and the artwork might be considered "primitive." However, a short, simple comic, making use of local cultural

knowledge and traditions, can effectively communicate concepts even in low literacy populations. Because they can be created with no materials other than pencil and paper, can be crafted in a short period of time, and do not have to be mass produced to be "distributed" locally, grassroots comics circumvent the usual monetary, social class, and education level barriers to media access.

Grassroots comics have appeared spontaneously in a number of countries, but the grassroots comics movement that became known as World Comics has been most active in Africa and South Asia, by way of Finland. Leif Packalen, a commercial attaché in Nigeria and Sudan for the Embassy of Finland, started down a new path in his early 40s. As he tells it, "On realising the power of comics, I went to a comic-making course. Then, to drawing classes. In fact, I started drawing only at the age of 42" (Noronha, 2005). In 1997, Packalen founded World Comics Finland and began conducting workshops in Africa and India "to enable people who have something to say, to convert their ideas into comic-format" (Noronha, 2005).

One of the first World Comics Finland workshops was in Karsanmoor, India, where participants addressed issues including poverty, illiteracy, and child labor. There was an enthusiastic response to the workshop and the use of advocacy comics "spread to 500 villages of Tamil Nadu, involving over a hundred NGOs" (Helping Hand, 2004). Political cartoonist Sharad Sharma, who had already realized that cartooning was a valuable tool in literacy campaigns, attended some of the workshops, and he is largely responsible for the spread of grassroots comics in India (About us).

In June 2002, under the leadership of Sharad Sharma, a group of artists, journalists and social activists, created World Comics India (WCI) to promote the use of grassroots comics as a means of advocating for change at the local level (Noronha, 2004). From 2000 to 2010 Sharma collaborated extensively with World Comics

Finland, including an annual joint workshop, primarily funded by the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (Long cooperation, 2011).

Grassroot comics workshops have spread throughout India and other parts of South Asia. Hundreds of thousands of people have made a comic for the first time in their lives and shared those comics with their communities. To understand how this happened it is useful to consider the concept of diffusion of innovation.

Diffusion of Innovations Theory

Diffusion of Innovations (DOI) is a theory developed by Everett M. Rogers and widely embraced across communication and allied social sciences. An *innovation* may be an idea, a human behavior, or an object that is perceived to be new to an audience. In other words, the innovation need not be new, just new to you! Adopting an innovation almost always presents individuals with some uncertainty and thus communication activities are crucial to reducing that uncertainty and encouraging adoption of the innovation.

According to Rogers (2003), diffusion is the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system. In regards to channels an important distinction must be drawn between mass media channels and interpersonal channels. The theory concentrates on how interpersonal conversations encourage adoptions of innovation. While mass media like advertising and news stories might spread awareness of an innovation, they do not necessarily encourage adoption as directly; rather, peer networks encourage people to take the risks associated with adoption, be those financial, social, or time misspent.

The members of a social system are inter-related to one another; they have a relationship that focuses on common goals or problem-solving (e.g., a family or an

organization). Influential peers are called opinion leaders and they are not always people of higher social standing, "rather they are sought out for their trustworthiness, expertise, and accessibility to those seeking advice or a social model example" (Kim, D. K., et al., 2020, p. 159).

As Rogers' research on the subject developed, he discovered that the adoption of an innovation is dependent on five factors:

1. Relative advantage is a perception that the innovation is superior to whatever previous innovation it may be replacing. This is a matter of perception and is not determined by some external judgment of comparative advantage, only the individual's preference.
2. Compatibility is the degree to which an innovation is consistent with existing values and social practices. The more aligned the innovation is, the more quickly it will be adopted. An innovation consisting of smaller steps may be more easily adopted if the steps may be taken in sequence.
3. Simplicity is the degree to which an innovation is perceived to be easy to understand or use. The more complex an innovation, the more time may be required to adopt it.
4. Triability is the degree to which an innovation may be experimented with for limited time. If it can be tried for short periods of time, it may be more readily adopted.
5. Observability is the ease with which people can see results, discuss and pass them along. The more readily observable the results, the more likely it is to hasten adoption.

The process of adoption has five phases. The first is knowledge, when individuals become aware of the innovation. The second is persuasion, as the individual begins to develop a perspective on the innovation, thanks to information from peers. The third is decision, when the individual decides to adopt the innovation or not. Presuming they do, the fourth stage is implementation, when the individual begins to

use the innovation, grows familiar with it, and reduces uncertainty associated with it. The fifth stage is confirmation, when the individual collects more information that reinforces their adoption—or learns more that may reverse the adoption (Singer, 2021).

Increasingly, DOI has been applied to an ever-widening range of research endeavors. These endeavors include the use of health care communication, for example offering villages in Africa alternatives to the practice of female genital mutilation (Ngenye, 2020) or innovating new ways to prevent the spread of malaria (Smith, et al., 2020). It has also been used to explain perceptions of virtual reality tourism (Kim, M. J., et al., 2020), the adoption of artificially intelligent avatars in online gaming (Butt, et al., 2021); as well as perceptions of value with 3D printing of objects (Wiecek, et al., 2020). The versatility of the theory lends itself to a whole host of human endeavors, including, as we contend, the making of comics.

Adopting Grassroots Comics according to Diffusion of Innovations

The Diffusion of Innovations theory can be applied to the work of World Comics India (WCI) particularly as the initiative is outlined in two publications posted to the initiative's website, *Campaigning with Grassroots Comics* and *Wallposter Comics: A Development Communication Tool*, both created by Sharad Sharma (2009a; 2009b). Both publications acknowledge that the creation of grassroots comics is an intentional communicative act, one focused on achieving common goals within a community setting. In his *Campaigning* book, Sharma (2009a) notes that in most campaigns, materials are produced by professionals in distant communities and thus lack the local touch. This can be countered because "Grassroots comics help local people to bring forward their own issues and experiences by framing them in a visual story" (p. 5). It is particularly helpful to diversify the representation within such campaigns, such that multiple stakeholders participate. The lack of difference between creators and readers makes the messages all the more accessible.

For grassroots comics to be adopted as a communication innovation, they should match the standards put forward by Rogers (2003). First, the relative advantage should make grassroots comics superior to whatever alternatives preceded them. A "user-generated medium" such as grassroots comics has an advantage in culturally and linguistically diverse India because people do not respond as well to slickly produced materials from the national or regional capital as well as they do to "locally relevant content" produced by people who share their experiences and concerns (Sharma, 2014, p. 80). From Sharma's (2009a) account, it appears that grassroots comics are not replacing any other means of campaign communication, per se; rather, they seem to be reaching a wider audience (because of the distribution methods) than traditional face-to-face conversations or participation in public protests could. For those interested in reaching a larger audience—and presumably—affecting change more widely or rapidly, grassroots comics could be perceived to hold that relative advantage.

Second, grassroots comics should be perceived as compatible with existing values and social practices. Of course, grassroots comics are almost certain to reflect community values because they are expressions of the concerns of members of an often very small community. The process propagated by WCI begins with trainers, who are often members of Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and sponsor workshops for locals. The local creators are typically highly motivated to carry forward their cause. Grassroots comics are typically about carrying forward messages about social change, more so than mainstream commercial comics that typically seek to entertain rather than educate their audiences. For that reason, adopting the change may be more favorably received. Another aspect of compatibility is to request small steps taken in sequence; WCI certainly does this sort of scaffolding.

Third, as an innovation grassroot comics need to be perceived as easy to understand or use. Both publications from WCI make clear that creating grassroots comics requires a very low entry in terms of both access to technology and artistic skill. Even in the Third World, paper and drawing implements are accessible and most communities have copy machines within reasonable distances. Moreover, Sharma's (2009b) *Wallposter Comics* provides easy instructions on how to create four panel comics, right down to basic lessons in drawing, including successful placement of speech balloons, lessons on linear perspective, and efficiencies in panel composition. Even previously uninitiated artists can take this guidance and produce comics that can communicate meaning clearly.

Fourth, the so-called "triability" of the innovation, or the limited time it takes to experiment with it, is reasonably short. Although Sharma (2009a) advocates for training workshops over a period of several days, it is not improbable that even less time might be invested in experimenting with creating comics initially. Sharma does encourage that participants work collaboratively through an editorial process and this may take some time depending on the size of the group involved; however, given the inexpensive materials involved, experimenting with multiple drafts of one's own comic makes the level of triability quite high.

Fifth, the innovation should produce highly observable results that are easy to discuss and pass along. Participants in grassroots comics not only see the results of their creative efforts in short order, but they can observe the impact of their messages through subsequent direct observation of others consuming those comics. Accordingly, participants get feedback as they develop their comics and see them displayed as they post them around town or in roadside displays or online. Although there have been no published quantitative measures of the impact of grassroots comics in the social scientific literature, Sharad's accounts document several instances where enduring products and organizations resulted from previous campaigns.

Grassroots Comics as a Diffusion Process

In order to test how effectively DOI explains WCI's initiative, it is helpful to consider the WCI process. Grassroots comics start with a sponsoring entity, such as an NGO, organizing a campaign for "creating awareness of a particular issue" (Sharma, 2009a, p. 9). Successful campaigns have clearly identified roles for those participating in them. Organizers recruit participants into the first comics workshop. The workshop trains participants to turn the campaign's message into a script which is rendered visually and reviewed by the group before the final artwork is finished. The initial workshop participants now become trainers themselves and return to local communities in order to train the next group of comics storytellers. Those comics are then copied and distributed throughout the community. Sharma (2009a) says that campaigns should release materials in a sequence, rather than all at once and thus risk losing momentum. Alternately, a "Comics Road Show" could be set up in a tent to draw common people's attention (p. 22). Such physical displays could be extended by posting the materials on a blog. Ideally, the trainers meet to share feedback on their efforts and learn how to improve the process going forward.

As noted previously, diffusion is a process characterized by phases of development. The first phase, knowledge, occurs once individuals acquire awareness of the innovation. As outlined in *Campaigning*, this occurs as trainers are introduced to the process during a multi-day training program:

> As the comics workshop is intended to initiate a campaign, it is important to share the programme, the campaign plan, the campaign methods, the key resource person lists, etc, with the participants on the first day of the workshop. It can be done with the additional help of films, drama, books, posters, websites, etc. (2009a, p. 11)

Thus, the acquisition of new knowledge forms the foundation of the campaign.

The second phase, persuasion, is where peers help individuals begin to develop a perspective on the innovation. As Sharma (2009a) outlines: “Once the technique of making comics is understood by people, then they can prepare comics on almost any issue in a very short time. The power of being able to share their views to other people fills them with enthusiasm” (p. 5). The trainers subsequently go out and train others to become storytellers in turn. Trainers are persuasive because they operate as opinion leaders or at least influential peers. Ideally, the workshop participants are convinced to continue forward and support the creation of comics that advance the goals of the campaign.

The third phase, decision, is when the individual decides to adopt the innovation or not. The initial batch of trainers in one of WCI’s campaigns and subsequent participants demonstrate their decision by agreeing to create comics, of course. The trainers further demonstrate that they have decided to adopt the innovation once they go forward to, in turn, train others.

The fourth stage, implementation, occurs as individuals grow more comfortable with the innovation. As Sharma (2009a) states, the goal of training trainers is for them to go forward and recruit more participant creators. As they do, they most likely are becoming more and more comfortable with the approach to message making. Workshop comics are presented as posters and may be hung as individual works on local bulletin boards or copied and distributed across a community. As observed during the Girl Child Rights campaign, “More than 300 wallposter comics were prepared by children and youths on these issues, and distributed among people, and discussions were raised. A selection of these wallposters were circulated in more than a hundred villages with the help of a motorbike rally” (Sharma, 2009a, p. 6). Such responsiveness suggests a strong track record for implementation.

The fifth stage, confirmation, is when the opportunity to collect more information either confirms or reverses the adoption of the innovation. A degree of confirmation comes as feedback is offered by the public and through follow-up workshops with the trainers that are encouraged as a part of the process.

Sharma (2009a) offers several examples of the grassroots comics initiative being carried forward, including campaigns to discuss child abuse by tourists, corporal punishment, and lack of electricity in rural areas. In the aforementioned Girl Child Rights campaign in Barmer, not only were hundreds of comics created and then spread to surrounding villages by a motorbike rally, but the Barmer Comics Manch organization was formed to continue producing comics independent of World Comics India (Sharma 2009a). The power of simple comics created by children has also been confirmed. There is Devendra who "made comics about the drunkard head-master of his village school in Uttarakhand, and soon the headmaster was suspended," and Amresh who made a series of comics about the lack of drinking water at his school "until handpumps were installed in his school in Bihar" (Sharma, 2014, p. 79).

Occasionally, the grassroots comics innovation also receives confirmation from the attention of audiences beyond the local target audience. One of the benefits of the four panel "poster" comics is that they can easily be reformatted into a newspaper-friendly comic strip format. After some workshops, strips are offered to small newspapers, and such strips have appeared in "over 100 small- and medium-sized newspapers" (Sharma, 2014, p. 88). Another aspect of confirmation is the degree to which the grassroots comics movement has been legitimized by national and international entities. To mark International Literacy Day in 2014, a United Nations Task Team partnered with various government agencies of India and WCI to host a comics exhibit on the Right to Learn, addressing issues of quality, access, and equity. The Ministry of Human Resource Development published the comics in newspaper format (United Nations, 2014).

The usually unheard voices of the homeless were amplified by a campaign that resonated beyond the towns in which the workshops were held. A series of workshops in eight states of the country were conducted for mostly illiterate but working (rickshaw-pullers, domestic workers, street vendors, etc.) homeless people. Some of the participants were so enthusiastic about the comics they produced that they went on to train other homeless people to make grassroots comics. The best comics from the workshops were collected into an anthology that was shared with judges and legislators. Some of the homeless appeared on Lok Sabha TV (roughly equivalent to C-SPAN, which offers public affairs programming) to talk about their comics and the issues they raised. One comic, an explanation of how homeless persons without any permanent address could get their voter identity cards, was copied many times and began to appear as a wall poster in cities where no workshops had been held (Sharma, 2014, p. 85).

In sum, it appears that the reporting offered by Sharma evidences a process of knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation occurring in the WCI strategy, or, as succinctly laid out in the guide:

> The main objective of the workshop is to spread awareness among the common people on the issue of the campaign, as well as to help more and more people to create their own comics, and share them with others. It is very important to make photocopies of the comics prepared in the workshop, and to distribute them among the people in the community on the last day of the workshop. The feedback from the people will reveal their reaction to the campaign. (Sharma, 2009a, p. 14)

Figure 1: Sharad Sharma training future trainers. Used with permission of Sharad Sharma.

Figure 2: Wall display of comics created for the Apni Dikri Ro Hag (Girl Child Rights) campaign. Used with permission of Sharad Sharma.

Conclusion

In 2014, Sharad Sharma reported that over 50,000 people have created grassroots comics at the 1,000-plus workshops organized by World Comics India (2014). The spread of the grassroots comics innovation, and the viewpoints expressed through that innovation, are made possible through the use of peer networks. Local activists learn how to create simple comics and are trained how to recruit people from the community and teach them to make such comics. These trainers operate as opinion leaders, sometimes due to their standing in the community, but always because they have already done what they are training people to do. Grassroots comics are an innovation that is easy to understand, simple enough to be experimented with and learned in a short period of time, and quickly sharable. Participants in the workshop give each other feedback, and then display the comics for the community by various means, or directly approach people and discuss the comics with them.

The grassroots comics movement takes a systematic approach, clearly outlined in their handbooks, with the hope that small steps, taken in sequence, will lead to an on-going campaign on an issue, which might eventually lead to positive changes in the society. Simple grassroots comics are an assessible, yet powerful, communication tool that can empower the voiceless, give expression to marginalized perspectives, and start conversations that ripple through communities. And perhaps, in some cases, help make those communities more just, equitable, and sustainable.

For Area Studies scholars grassroots comics could be used as an ethnographic tool to understand the concerns of a particular community or region. The issues addressed in these comics are usually suggested by a local NGO, and then the workshop participants express individual perspectives, often based on personal experiences. Yet, these very personal comics can also reveal cultural filters if we consider the frames used to think about and communicate about problems and solutions. Are the frames

applied religious, humanistic, economic, or simply pragmatic, responding to a particular, perhaps personal, exigency?

It seems World Comic India is still going strong, and switching to mostly online workshops during the pandemic might have only expanded their reach. As thousands more of these comics are produced each year, they have important applied impact by giving voice to the marginalized and prompting solutions to local problems, but they also provide an ever-growing data set that can serve the more theoretical concerns of researchers in the fields of Comics Studies and Area Studies.

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