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Hinduism's New Champions

Gods, Advaita, Soul Power are Major Forces In Non-stop Action of D.C. & Marvel Comics

Comics. Kids love them. Parents loathe them. Still, one of the most persuasive mediums for Hindu teachings is the 200-plus comic book series Amar Chitra Katha put out by India Book House in Bombay. But right in New York City, Marvel Comics and D.C. Comics are cranking out monthly stories that are comic. Ask Layne Little. He works in a comic book store in Salt Lake City, Utah, and runs Hanuman Imports. He called "Hinduism Today" to alert us that Hinduism has leapt into US comics like Superman leaps tall buildings. Layne sent a thick binder of examples. We were surprised and impressed.

Assignment: evaluate a stack of comic books that range from Batman to Dr. Strange to The Young Gods, the 'brainchildren' of writers and illustrators who stretch imagination to its breaking point, then let it rip. In fact, as these comics lie strewn around my desk, it's obvious that many have orbited way out of Western thinking into the outer and inner space of Hinduism.

I mean this is major mind boggling. I flip through Arak, Son of Thunder - a 16th century American Indian built like Rambo. He is exploring the Island of the Elephants off the coast of Bombay when a towering image of Lord Ganesha carved into a temple wall suddenly looms out of the jungle. Arak's guide explains, "Ganesha - remover of obstacles, sanctifier of journeys - and most important the Hindu God of luck." I can't even explain it that well.

Tossing Arak aside, an issue of Marvel Comics' Powerman and IronFist catches my eye. On the front cover Iron Fist is sitting in full lotus position, in a meditative trance. He is trapped with his buddy, Powerman, in an underground room. The temperature is falling way below freezing. Powerman, who has cold-resistant skin, is trying to talk to IronFist, who has to explain, "But you know my yoga trance is the only thing between me and death, so please..." I laugh. But it's true. Even superheroes are mortal. And somewhere, from some master, IronFist learned will the science of Yoga. He did survive, naturally, and went on to clobber a robotic creature threatening an entire city.

Kamandi, the Last Boy on Earth, also references yoga. It is the near future; he is in low earth orbit, the entirety of mankind obliterated in an earthwide natural disaster and the animals - now intelligent - rule. Kamandi encounters a derelict Russian space station, and the last remaining cosmonaut is sitting up in his space suit. Kamandi cries out to his friend, Pyra - a woman-like alien being - "It is called the lotus position, used in the practice of yoga." Telepathic Pyra replies, "He was an excellent student of yoga. It helped to save his life. He was able to slow his heart beat to a minimum."

Now, as I read this, it dawns on me that millions of kids are reading it in the West. And also a crowd of adults who got hooked on comics as a fantastic form of entertainment and exploring the human/cosmic psyche. Combining science fiction, myth, mysticism, humor and adventure, superhero comics are the great ancient epic tales transported into our near-21st century world. The bards are the writers and artists, whose creations are closely followed and often intelligently critiqued by readers. One aficionado writes of the latest Dr. Fate series: "'The Night of Brahma' takes beliefs from both Eastern and Western religions...and subtly analyzes their components. I am impressed by J.M. De Matteis' willingness to openly explore religion to such an extent in a comic."

And it is a billion-dollar business. Look at the success of Batman, the movie, Right in front of me is a comic page of Batman standing across from Mount Kailash - sacred to Hindus and Buddhists - contemplating if his destiny will be revealed to him. Hinduism jumps into these scenarios both as an exotic element - the Norse God Thor battles Lord Siva to gain a spark of power for his thunder-hammer - or as a sublime teaching difficult to find in a cynical world. In D.C. Comic's Firestorm - an elemental being of fire - tells fellow elementals of water, wind and vegetation: "While I lay at the bottom of the sea, I heard a voice - the voice of the primal earth spirit - calling herself Maya. Maya said we - all the elements - were extensions of her, created to protect the planet and protect its inhabitants, particularly humanity,

as they prepare to jump to the stars." In the Dr. Fate "Night of Brahma" series, the philosophical focus is on the Hindu concept of Mahapralaya, great withdrawal," the absorption of all existence back into the Mind of God. Dr. Fate is a fused man/woman, an ardhinariswara, "Lord whose half is female," who wears a helmet covering the face. There is a brilliant series of panels where Fate enters a vision state and see raw creation foaming: "I simply watch as an enformed ocean of love roars outward...shapes, forms, energies - entire worlds...universes emerging from that sea of love!" The scene ends with a soft discussion on the simultaneous union and separateness of souls.

These are mythic heroes - giants of honor and nobility and quite often a self-inquiring search of spirit. But they are also vulnerable and make mistakes. Often, the law of karma is invoked as a vehicle of cosmic balance and personal growth. It shows how deep-seated our fascination for hero-icons is in world culture that these epic comics immediately remind me of the heroes Yudhisthira, Arjuna and Bhima of the Pandava clan in the Mahabharata epic. Arjuna's battles of physique and psyche, often violent and mystically probing, can be seen in such intelligent superheroes as The Watchmen or Dr. Strange.

Like TV and movies these days, comic book violence is frequent and can be disturbing. More disturbing is the fact that carnage and mayhem is what attracts the younger kids to these publications, not the more subtle ideas that the creators are weaving through the narrative. Kali, the destructive Mother, appears frequently in all kinds of Western comics, quite often as a Goddess who grants special powers to women warriors. As in the Hindu epics, there is both violence for effect and the violence of righteous combat. Both require the eye of discrimination. Yet in the comic book industry, there is a sea change of sorts. The old writers, who dwelled on sheer adventure and mayhem, are gone. But the characters live on, with a new generation of writers developing them. And endearing example is the Swamp Thing, originally a sour-tempered, slime-dripping creature. Now, in the hands of Alan Moore - a British writer with wide knowledge of Hindu thought - the Swamp Thing is a gentle giant of a plant being who is trying to merge his mind and form back into a high mystical society of tree beings called the Parliament. He is a personified statement of ecological awareness, sits in yoga meditation and speaks in Japanese Haiku poetry. One of my favorites is The High Evolutionary, the most advanced being humanity has produced: "an entity composed of intellect and electromagnetism more than flesh and chemicals, he has transcended mortality in order to embrace the totality of the universe." The art shows him as a humanoid form of light, much like a soul body. But as the story goes, his intellect would be unable to encompass all the knowledge of the universe before the time the universe implodes on itself. So he mentally manufactures a bio-metallic body in order to directly manipulate matter and returns to earth to help create a higher

form of man.

On the other hand, some of the depictions of Hinduism in these comics are uniformed and insulting. A black magic priest in a Siva temple becomes a conduit for a monstrous Siva who battles a superhero. A collection of statues of the Vishnu avatars at a New York Museum are accidentally brought to life as stone creatures by powerful light amplifiers and go on a rampage against the Teen Titans. This stuff fizzles.

Along with Alan Moore, J.M. De Matteis is a writer with many Hindu sensibilities. A few years ago, he created a special graphics novel, Dr. Strange into Shamballa, and mentions Meher Baba - the Hindu visionary sage - on the title page as an inspiration. It is a because-fully illustrated work of soft, diffused water colors. It is the tale of man - once broken and alcoholic - who trains under an old guru in the Himalayas, becomes expert in psychic powers and returns to the West. When his guru dies, he goes back to his training temple in the Himalayas and embarks on a great mystic adventure in which he faces the karma of his occult lifestyle through a seering series of tests that wrench him from Central America to Karnataka, India, to England. Returning to the white snows of the mountain temple Dr. Strange finally learns from a brother disciple - a pure and meek man whom he disliked - that while he acquired powers from the master, the disciple inherited the master's true spiritual gift of advaitic realization.

Yawning, my mind and body beg for sleep. I think a lot of kids are probably sneaking comics under their covers tonight. I sit up in lotus position and meditate, sailing into still awareness. Maybe some kid is thinking about yoga as a result of these comics. Maybe he or she is sensing some affinity with these ideas. As with all things, you have to separate the milk from the water - like the fabled swans. Hmmm. Can a superhero do that.

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