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Changing Visual Representation of Gods in Indian Print Culture

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Abstract:
The paper reveals the features of lithographic god posters of the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century and printed gods (both lithographic and graphic) based comics of post-colonial period. Through the features of these arts, the paper presents a comparative study of changing visual representation of gods in the Indian print culture.

Keywords: Popular God Images, Media, Religion, Masculinity, Comic Culture and Print Culture

1. Introduction
Recently, many scholars have written about the new change in visual arts, particularly the Indian comic culture. They have underlined the Indian comic culture majorly influenced by the western graphic comic culture [1,2,3,4]. Particularly Shefali Anand has explored the new muscular look ("updated look") of Indian gods in Indian comics. But these scholars haven't discussed how the new visual changes are comparatively different than the old printed images of Indian gods inside and outside Indian comic culture. Therefore, the paper discusses the historical background of printed lithographic god, print market and their artisans. The paper reveals the features of lithographic god posters of the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century and printed gods (both lithographic and graphic) based comics of post-colonial period. Through the features of these arts, the paper presents a comparative study of changing visual representation of gods in the Indian print culture.

2. History of Lithographic God Images in India
The lithographic printed gods had a strong market in India till the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century. The printed religious or non-religious lithographs were coming predominantly from Italy, Germany, England and etc. The central themes of these lithographs were based on Puranic tradition, Hinduism, Christianity and Imperialism. Therefore, the lithographs also carried out the symbols and techniques of the European lithographic style. The change acquired from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. It was the period of Indian printed visual arts, (both commercial and non-commercial) printing press and print market in India, which was growing with the waves of mass movements. Thus, India witnessed a major process of production, reproduction and circulation of popular prints. The impacts of two world wars and national movement also helped the native markets to develop its domestic networks and goods due to the decreasing imports and exports to international markets and consumers [5]. The native markets were circulating the puranic and nationalist iconographies in forms of paintings, posters, brand labels, advertisements and calendars of native and overseas companies. The printed visual arts had an interlinked network of big or small printing houses, sales agents, stockists and distributors in urban, town and rural markets. They all were working vertically and horizontally to fulfill the demands of socio-political parties and selected masses. For instance, in Bombay, Ravi Varma Press (1894), Chonker Art Studio and Chitrashala Press were famous publishers. Anant Shivaji Desai & Co was well-known stockist and sale agent from Moti Bazaar, Bombay and was working with the Ravi Varma Fine Art Lithography Press. Moreover, S. S. Brijbasi FAO Works was a printing house in Mathura and was a big name in the north Indian print market. It had various branches in Karachi, Bombay and other

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parts of India. Later it was known as S.S. Brijbasi & Sons. Hem Chandra Bhargava and Co (1900) was one of the oldest companies from Delhi. In Calcutta, there were Rising Art Cottage, Calcutta Art Studio, Art Publishing Company, Art Framing Co, S. C. Banerjee Press, Kansaripara Art Studio, K. A. D. Litho Press, Chorbagan Studio, etc. Some of them like S. S. Brijbasi and Sons, Hem Chandra Bhargava and Co, Sivakashi Pictures and Ravi Verma press took prepaid overseas orders [6]. It was also a period of famous nationalist artisans and publishers like Raja Ravi Varma, the modern master of the lithographic art (1848–1906), Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951) M. V. Dhurandhar (1867-1944), R. G. Chonker, B. P. Banerjee, M. L. Sharma, etc.

The third quarter of the twentieth century had also seen the rapid growth of popular printed visual arts which justified with the rise of a new generation of old print houses and artisans. For instance, the S. S. Brijbasi and Sons (Bombay branch, 1950 and Delhi Branch, 1954) was the new generation reinvented from its predecessor, S.S. Brijbasi FAO Work. In south, a similar company was popularly known as Sivakasi (Associated Calendars, main office in Sivakasi). Sivakasi is a town in Virudhunagar District of Tamil Nadu and a hub of printed images and print companies in India popularly known as "Little Japan". It had a wide network in print markets of India and established Sivakasi Pictures (Delhi agent) and Sivakasi Emporium (Calcutta agent). Further, in new painting houses and agents, there were Takore Art Works (Calcutta), Ajanta Art Calendar Mfg. Co (Delhi, Madras and Calcutta), Harnarayan & Sons (Jodhpur and Bombay), Belgium Glass House (Ludhiana), Sree Lakshmi Agencies (Sivakashi), Bombay Glass (1950), and Krishana Calendar Co (Ahmadabad), National Art Gallery (a government aided institution in Bombay) and etc. It was also a time of new popular artisans like K. P. Sivam, L. A. Joshi (of Joshi Art Worker from Ahmadabad), R. K. Dutt (Bengal) and C. Kondiah Raju and his successors (K. Madhavan, M. Ramalingkum, T. S. Subbiah, etc.) from Kovilpatti near Sivakasi [7]. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, there were the Jain Picture Publication from Bombay (1962) and Delhi (early 1980s), Sharma Picture Publication from Bombay, VCB Press from Nagpur, J. B. Khanna & Co from Madras, and Jayna Advertisers, Anant Ram Gupta Manufacturers, Moti Calendar Co from Nai Sarak, Delhi [8]. For this genealogical development in the print market of the twentieth century, Susan Wadley said it was a "rich and dynamic period" and Kajri Jain said it was typically a "mass reproduction and commodity culture"[9, 10].

3. History of Comic Culture in India
The printed god culture had been well established when comics came to India in the late 1960s. At the beginning of lithographic posters and calendars, the comic culture was derived in India from the western comics. Before the 1960s, the western comics were dominating over the Indian comic market. They had a small readership from Indian upper class students in metro cities. At that time, a few western comic characters like Tintin, Superman and others were available and popular among them. But, due to the high prices, English language and western characters, these comics were not easily accessible for the lower and the middle classes.
In the mid 1960s, this problem was identified by Indian cartoonists and publishing houses like Indrajal and *Amar Chitra Katha* (ACK, 1967). As, Anant Pai, the founder of

Amar Chitra Katha (Immortal Visual Story) and the father of Indian comics claimed the Amar Chitra Katha not only explore, even preserve the Indian heritage. It teaches students and children about the immortal Indian heroes and ethnic traditions. By this way, the Amar Chitra Katha came out with these aims in the comics market and soon they produced comics for their selected middle class readers. At the beginning, they launched comics in simple English language and at an average price. Like the lithographic god images, the stories and characters of the comics borrowed from the Puranas (Hindu mythological traditions), Ramayana, Mahabharata (Indian epics), Indian history and national movement. These stories and characters were already popular among the Indian masses via oral and print cultures. Later, they targeted economically weaker sections of readers and regional language readers by local languages like Hindi, Bangla, Marathi and local heroes like Kabir, Guru Nanak and Jhansi Ki Rani. These comics not only served as the historical and mythological traditions of India, but created a myth of Indianness and secularism among its readers in India and aboard, as the Nehruvian and Congress governments wished to see among people of 1950s to 70s[11, 12, 13, 14].

By 80s, the domination of Amar Chitra Katha was challenged by new comic houses like Raj Comics and Diamond Comics. Both comics came out with the social and local issues of Indian societies and produced characters like Shrimatiji, Chacha Chaudhari, Sabu, Billoo, Pinki and others. Raj Comic was the leading company who produced many modern Indian superheroes besides the traditional epic heroes. The most popular characters of Raj Comic are Nagaraj, Dhruv, Tiranga, Parmanu and Doga.

In late 2000s, and 2010s, the new changes in comic culture emerged with the coming of Vimanika and other graphic comics. These comics have used 3D graphic and inspired by the western superhero comics like Marvel comics. Their targeted readers are teenagers and youth. They reproduced the puranic gods and represented the superhero looks for puranic gods. The graphic comics produced many graphic artisans like Dheeraj Verma and Karan Vir, the founder of Vimanika Comic.

4. Features of Printed Lithographic Gods and Impact of South Indian Art
In colonial India, the printed images of gods were inspired by European lithographic art and south Indian art particularly Dravidian art and Thanjavore Art. It can be easily found in Ravi Verma's paintings. Raja Ravi Verma was south (Kerala and Travancore) based artist. He learnt oil painting techniques of Thanjavore art from his uncle Raja Raja Varma and European oil painting style from Theodre Jensen (a Dutch painter) and Alagiri Naidu (a court painter of princely state of Travancore). Ravi Verma was the first among Indian oil lithographic painters who had introduced the European techniques to Indian painting traditions. At the beginning of his career, his paintings were published by European presses. But later in 1897, he set up his own press known as Ravi Verma Press in Gotkopar which later shifted to Malavli near Bombay. He became an inspiration and father for many Indian painters. Many paintings of Raja Ravi Verma were re-depicted by Indian nationalist painters to mingle religion and politics in the public domain of colonial India [15]. His lithographs sustained Indian tradition which helped the culture nationalists to create the national culture in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century.

The themes of his lithographic paintings were based on the Indian puranic tradition and puranic gods like Vishnu and Siva and their avatars. In the early paintings of Ravi Verma Press, the puranic gods were painted and printed with tummies, unfit bodies, simple hairs, long beards and mustache. The halo, a shining circle of divine power behind the head of the gods, was not portrayed in the god images. The weapons of the gods were mostly portrayed very short and ordinary. In the modern body language sense or superhero sense, there is no "attitude" in lithographic god images. Instead of muscles and face, long beard and mustache of gods were signs of muscularity and warrior look in the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century.

The impacts of South Indian tradition could be seen on the outfits of gods. For instance, most of the gods have the long crown with a ring which quite similar to *Shikhar*, a pyramid type of roof of Dravidian temples. The representation of bodies of gods with a long garland of flowers (*phoolon ki mala*) and heavy jewels is an old tradition in south India. It could be even seen in the sculpture and lithographic arts. But the early paintings of Ravi Verma Press had depicted very little gold and pearl jewels which represented the poor economic conditions of colonial India. The bright and golden colors had been used to decorate the borders of sari, dhoti (*lungi*), jewels and crown. The green, yellow, white, red, light blue and orange colors had been used for outfits and landscape. In landscapes of god images, the royal court (*Durbar*), rocks, mountains, clouds, flowers, rivers, gardens, birds, animals, temples, shrines, and other holy symbols particularly belongs to the gods and goddesses were depicted with and behind the god images. For instance, Shiva and Parvati had been depicted with cobra (snake), bull (*Nandi*) and lion while Vishnu had been depicted with *Sheshnaga* (snake with many heads) and *Garunda* (parrot). Sometime in god images, the European lithographic symbols depicted mainly in landscape like angels, crown and western architecture. For instance, in a picture of the early twentieth century, Markandeya with Siva and Yama portrayed with the Greek-Roman arch and the Victorian crown.

The new lithographic changes emerged in the 1940s and 1960s. At the same time, in Indian politics, the political power transferred from the British Indian government to Indian government. In the India lithographic painting world, it was the time of S. S. Brijbasi, Kondiah Raju, K. P. Sivam and etc. They came with new painting techniques. But many techniques of Ravi Verma and south Indian art were also sustained by these artists. In their paintings, muscularity not only depicted in bodies, but also in landscapes. For instance, the loose body of god took up a fit body space but the muscles yet not emerged. Long and simple hairs of gods had been replaced by curly hairs and long beard and mustache had been removed. It enhanced handsome looks of Indian gods.

In the landscape of post-colonial paintings, the battlefield and the body of gods were emerging as new landscapes in the god painting genre which depicted the warrior and muscular look of gods like Vishnu, Krishna and Rama. For instance, Ravana, a famous character and King of Lanka, was portrayed with long mustache, warrior armour and long arrow and bow in a poster of *Ravana-vadh*, an episode from Ramayana. Another famous character from Mahabharata, Arjun was depicted with long mustache, warrior armour and

long arrow and bow in *Virata Svaroop* of Vishnu, a scene from Gita. Many flowers mainly lotus had been depicted in the battlefield scene of god posters. The halo was depicted in bright color behind the heads of gods which enhanced the divine power of gods.

Moreover, the Virata Svaroop of Vishnu was emerged as a new landscape of other subordinate/subaltern gods and goddesses [16]. Vishnu was drawn with Sheshnaga and many heads, hands and weapons of gods and goddesses. It reminds us an image of *Kamadhanu* (a holy cow in the puranic mythologies) published by Ravi Verma Press during the cow protection movement. In the post-colonial India, the Virata Svaroop image represented the Nehruvian government's slogan "unity in diversity" with other secular images of the Nehruvian era [17]. In the post-colonial god posters, the golden color had been used in large extent for jewellery and other ornaments. It represented a myth of new and prosperous post-colonial Indian economy.

5. Features of Printed Lithographic Gods in Amar Chitra Katha

In the comic world, the early illustrations and covers of Amar Chitra Katha were made under the direction of Pratap Mulick, Ram Waeerkar and Yusuf Lien. They were the leading illustrators of Amar Chitra Katha. They borrowed many techniques and features from popular printed god images, but they also developed their own painting styles. Simplicity or simple visual text was one of their styles because these visual texts of comics were made for children.

For instance, some features of Virata Svaroop of Vishnu have been depicted in the Anant Pai's *The Gita*, an issue of Amar Chitra Katha published in 1977. But in his *The Gita*, Virata Svaroop of Vishnu has been replaced by the Virata Svaroop of Krishna. In the illustration of Virata Svaroop of Krishna painted by Pratap Mulick, the numbers of small gods over the body of Krishna were reduced to make a simple visual text. Moreover the illustrator tried to focus on Krishna and battlefield. Krishna visualized with a long chakra, weapon of Krishna, a roman type footwear, sun type halo and crown. In the cover made by P. G. Sircar, Lord Krishna and Arjun with *Rath* (vehicle), weapons and warrior amours have been portrayed in the battlefield. The cover represents a popular conversation between Krishna and Arjun. The early issues of Amar Chitra Katha have represented the Indian gods in fit body, but not in muscular body. In the Indian comic world, it was Raj comic that for the first time represented the muscular body for Indian comic characters like Nagaraj, Dhruv, Tiranga and Doga.

6. Features of Printed Graphic Gods and impact of western comics arts

The simple visual text of Amar Chitra Katha has been replaced by the graphic and overdramatic visual texts of the graphic comics. These comics are predominantly inspired by the western superhero comics. Therefore, many new changes appeared in Vimanika and other Indian comics.

In the graphic comics, the weapons have been attractive and strong. For instance, the *trishul* of Shiva look like the roman god Neptune's weapon. The bows and arrows of Rama and Vishnu are long, attractive and strong and decorated with the geometric designs. In the battlefields depictions of graphic comics, the arrows burn fiery and looks like rockets and their *raths* fly as a spaceship. With black background, the red color used to depict the battlefields and blue used to draw the

evening and night. The garland of *rudrakshas* (seeds used for prayer) replaced the garland of flowers and heavy jewels of gods.

The most important change is the new muscular look of gods. The bodies of gods have been attractive, pumped up and upgraded as the bodies of western gods and superheroes. They have "V" shape face and muscular body with six pack abs (stomach muscles), heavy chest and arms. The curly hair has been replaced by long dark hair. And hair has been waving in most of the pictures. The biological changes represented a modern attitude in graphic comics. By this way, these changes created another myth of the puranic tradition and increased the complexity of comic culture.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to say in India, the print culture has a long tradition of printed god images. The popular prints of gods were produced and reproduced in colonial and post-colonial India in different sizes, styles and forms. For circulation, the well established print market helped the artisans and comic companies. These god images helped the Indian nationalists and comic companies to sustain the Indian tradition.

Moreover the superhero powers and simplicity are the souls of Indian art and already existed in the lithographic god images. However, recently the graphic paintings and comics upgraded them, but western art never replaced them. The graphic god images and comics have a separate and selected public domain, outside the domains of lithographic god images and comics. Therefore, both lithographic and graphic god images and comics have been contesting with each other and created new complexity.

8. Images

Image A: *Virata Svaroop*, Ravi Verma Press, [18]

Image B: *Sri Vishwa Darshan*, PPC, [19]


Image C: *Virata Svaroop* [20]
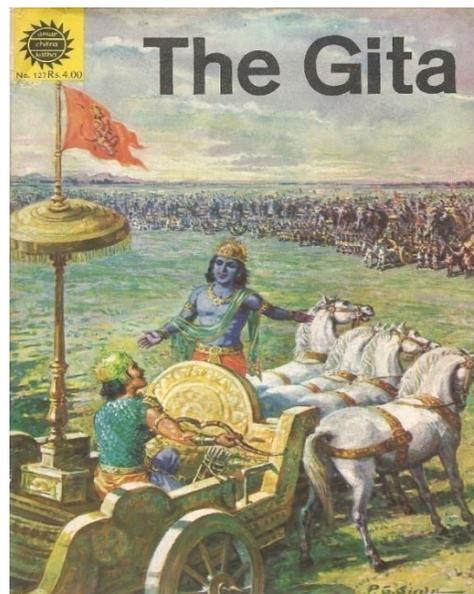
Image D: *The Gita*, ACK [21]
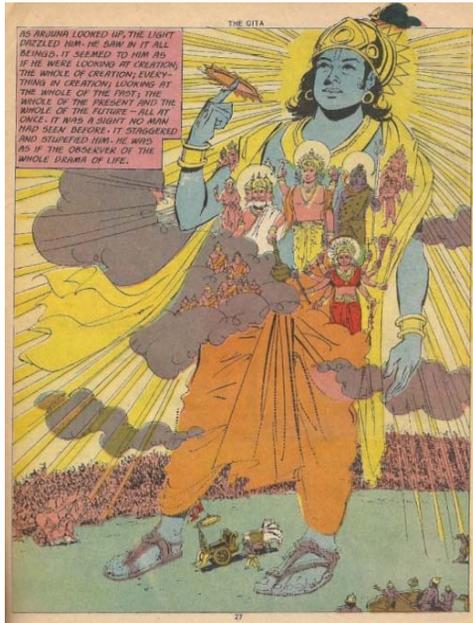
**Image E:** Virata Svaroop in *The Gita*, ACK [22]
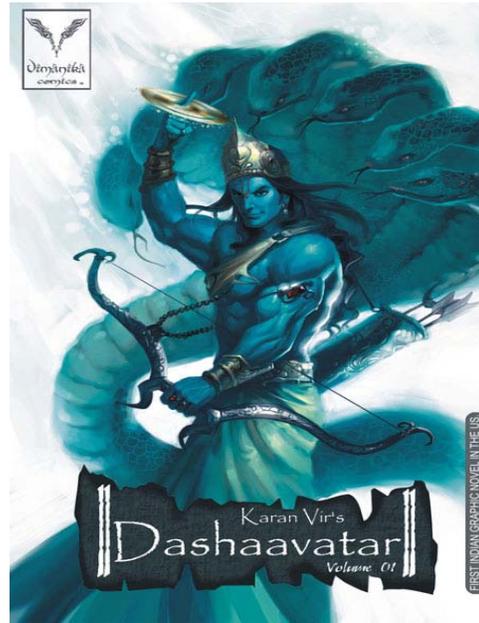
Image F: *Dashaavatar*, Vimanika Comics [23]

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18. Image A: *Virata Svaroop*, Ravi Verma Press. Source, http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00routesdata/0100_0199/gita/vishvaprints/vishvaprints.html (accessed on 12, 14, 15, and 16 May), 2015.
19. Image B: *Sri Vishwa Darshan*, PPC. Source, http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00routesdata/0100_0199/gita/vishvaprints/vishvaprints.html

(accessed on 12, 14, 15, and 16 May), 2015.
20. Image C: *Virata Svaroop*. Source, http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00routesdata/0100_0199/gita/vishvaprints/vishvaprints.html (accessed on 12,   14, 15, and 16 May), 2015.
21. Image D: *The Gita*, ACK script Anant Pai, Illustrations Pratap Mulick and Cover P. G. Sircar. Source, 1977, 127.
https://blogintomystery.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/gita.jpg(accessed on 16 May 2015)
22. Image E: Virata Svaroop in The Gita, ACK issue no. 127, script Anant Pai, Illustrations Pratap Mulick and Cover P. G. Sircar.   Source,   1977.
http://blogintomystery.com/2012/09/30/lets-travel-to-india-where-   the-comic-book-pantheon-has-pre-installed-blue-guys-amar-chitra-katha-the-gita/gitad/ (accessed on 16 May 2015)
23. Image F: *Dashaavatar*, Vimanika Comics. Source, http://www.ravishly.com/2014/07/30/hindugodsget-superheroupdateincomics (accessed on   14   May), 2015.