MYSTICS, MAHARAJAS, AND SACRED COWS: STEREOTYPICAL DEPICTIONS OF INDIA IN FRENCH AND FRANCOPHONE COMICS

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Abstract
This paper explores the representation of India in French and francophone comics and graphic novels published in the twentieth century by analysing comics such as *Les Aventures de Tintin, Astérix chez Rahâzade, and La Vallée des Cobras*. It leans upon the theories of Edward Said and Homi K Bhabha to examine how colonial-era imagery of mysticism and exoticism serve to reinforce stereotypes, juxtaposing Indian traditions with Western rationality. This article highlights the role of visual storytelling in shaping the perception of India in and by the West, perpetuating reductive and often distorted views of its culture and people.

Keywords: India, Representation, Stereotype, Comics, Orientalism

'The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.'[1]

Representation is to give meaning to something in a specific context. The colour red, for example, is not limited to how our eyes interpret light reflected in a certain way. It can symbolise passion or anger, a signal or danger, love or fear, depending on the context in which it is used.

'Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It does involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things.'[2]

But how does one represent an entity as vast and diverse as India?

It is Edward Said who laid the foundation for understanding the representation of India or any eastern country, by the western world, in his seminal work Orientalism. He explains that when the West depicts the East, it is in the form of an exotic land, usually backward and fundamentally different from their own. This act of portraying the East as separate and different is rooted in power and imperial dominance. In the Orientalist framework, the East is characterised as exotic, mystical, and irrational, qualities that serve to reinforce the West's self-perception as rational, modern, and superior. In the French comics and graphic novels, particularly in those from the 20th century, India is often reduced to an archetypal land of mysticism, populated by snake charmers, fakirs, and maharajas. Such representations are not neutral but serve to sustain colonial hierarchies by reaffirming the otherness of the colonised. According to Said, when a European person looks at the East in order to portray it, he doesn't look at it from the perspective of an unbiased individual, but with that of a European person. This means that since he is already drawing his words and narration from his preconceived notions of the Orient, we cannot expect from him a representation which is just and closer to reality.

Building on Said's critique, Stuart Hall's theory of representation in Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices emphasises the centrality of language and images in producing meaning. Hall identifies two key processes of representation: reflective, where images mirror reality, and intentional, where meaning is shaped by the producer's intent. However, it is the third, the constructionist approach that is most relevant to analysing India's depiction in

comics. According to Hall, representation does not simply reflect reality but actively constructs it, using signs and symbols to produce cultural meanings that can reinforce or challenge stereotypes.[3]

The stereotype, according to Homi K Bhabha, in his book The Location of Culture (1994), is a key mechanism of colonial power. It creates fixed and repetitive representations that both attract and repulse. This duality, or the simultaneous attraction towards and fear of the other are what Bhabha calls ambivalence. However, when two cultures interact, the spaces between them result in a hybridity of cultures. This hybridity disrupts the binary nature of the two cultures by introducing spaces where cultural meanings are negotiated and transformed.

For decades, French and francophone comics limit India to a country of elephants, mystics and maharajahs. Much like the Orient that Saïd spoke of, the image of India conveyed in French and Francophone graphic literature was generalised, mixed with the Middle East on one hand, and marked with religious and exotic elements on the other.

Visual Representation: Orientalist Imagery reinforcing stereotypes

The 20th century saw India emerge as a centre of interest in the world of francophone comics for the first time through the works of the famous Belgian comic artist Hergé in the Adventures of Tintin, and then of Goscinny and Uderzo in the famous comics series Astérix and Obélix and other less popular comics.

Tintin the young Belgian reporter, protagonist of The Adventures of Tintin, appears in India on three occasions. The first of these appearances, which also happens to be the earliest reference to India in the French and francophone comics, is in the children's supplement of the Belgian newspaper Le Petit Vingtième. The story appeared as a black and white comic strip serialised weekly from December 1932 to February 1934, and was initially called The Adventures of Tintin, Reporter, in the Orient. It was much later in 1934 that the comic strips were compiled, rendered in colour and published as a book under the title Les aventures de Tintin: Les Cigares du Pharaon (The Adventures of Tintin: The Cigars of the Pharaoh).

While not entirely focused on India, a large part of its story unfolds in the country, when Tintin, the young Belgian reporter crashes over an Indian jungle as he runs out of fuel while escaping Arabia in a stolen airplane. The first living beings he encounters in India are predictably a herd of elephants, shortly followed by a large display of Oriental stereotypes and colonial imagination.[4]

Graphic literature is an impactful medium through which narratives can be strongly established in the readers' minds, as it offers data implicitly through pictorial, as well as textual means.

Hergé in the Adventures of Tintin visually portrays India as a tropical exotic land with stark differences to the West. Most Indian men, from the kings to common men are drawn wearing the same type of turban which looks like an indistinguishable mélange of a couple of different styles of Indian headgear. A lot of them appear bare-chested, wearing simply a short dhoti, a traditional, loose, long loincloth worn around the hips and thighs by men in parts of India. The women are saree clad and most people on the street are drawn barefooted. This depiction subtly marks India as a country whose people lack even the most basic resources. In Tintin au Tibet (Tintin in Tibet) originally published in 1958 and then as a book in 1960, much after India's independence, the people of the Indian capital in Hergé's drawings still address the white men with folded hands and address them as *Sahib* (in a symbol of reverence in a quiet and intuitive acceptance of their inferiority. It is worth noting that the iconic landmarks of New Delhi, like the Qutab Minar and the Red Fort have been beautifully depicted along with the bustling streets of the old city.[5]

The prosperity and extravagance of the kings of India is another aspect of the country well known by the West, and thus vast and majestic palaces find their place in the panels of Les Cigares du Pharaon, and its sequel Le Lotus Bleu (The Blue Lotus) published in 1935. There are grand royal

processions of beautiful elephants adorned with ornaments and the king rides an elephant to go hunting tigers. These depictions of grandeur add to the exotic allure of India, captivating European readers with images of opulence, inviting fascination but perpetuating clichés.

A very similar representation of Indian palaces is found in Asterix and Obelix by Uderzo and Goscinny. Astérix chez Rahazade (Asterix and the Magic Carpet, 1987) is a testament to the generalisation of the Orient by the West. Since the Orient is a vast and loosely defined geographical area to the east of Europe comprising the north of Africa, the Middle-East, and Asia, based upon how the three greatest colonising Empires; Britain, France and America, interacted with them, the Occidental depictions of the Orient are a homogenised version of the cultures of the aforementioned regions. Astérix chez Rahazade picturises India, or rather The Valley of the Ganges as they call it, as a haphazard version of traditional India in a Middle Eastern setting which evokes an Arabian Nights-like atmosphere rather than a distinctly Indian one. This conflation might stem from a lack of detailed research or a deliberate choice to emphasise exoticism over authenticity, catering to Western readers' pre-existing notions of the East as a single, magical realm. The drawings also feature dhoti-clad, bare-chested fakirs, magic carpets, and turban-wearing barefooted men, and dense tropical forests with exotic animals.[6] The over-the-top imagery reflects a deliberate effort to entertain rather than authentically represent, which complicates its critique of stereotypes. The visual elements in these comics underscore the power of visual storytelling in shaping perceptions of distant lands without the slightest dependence on text or dialogue. While they often reinforce stereotypes, their gradual engagement with cultural specificity hints at the potential for comics to move beyond colonial narratives.

Thematic Representation: Mysticism, Exoticism, and Humour

The narratives and underlying themes in these popular comics speaks volumes about how the Occident perceives the Orient in general, including India. These recurrent themes illustrate perfectly the principle of ambivalence defined by Bhabha in The Location of Culture. Normalising people having irrational faith and inexplicable magical experiences in India, makes it intriguing for the rational and educated western mind, while simultaneously establishing it as crude and primitive.

In Les Cigares du Pharaon and Le Lotus Bleu, India's thematic role is tied to mysticism and danger. Tintin encounters secret societies and enigmatic figures, reinforcing the idea of India as a land of hidden knowledge and intrigue. The themes align with the colonial-era fascination with the unknown East, which was both alluring and threatening to European audiences. In Tintin au Tibet, a more humanistic portrayal of Eastern cultures, notably the Chinese culture is introduced, emphasising universal values such as friendship and perseverance. While India's representation remains peripheral, there is hardly any evolution seen displayed.

In the first two comics, Les Cigares du Pharaon and Le Lotus Bleu, as they share the same intrigue, a few themes run in common. Setting a rather ominous tone is a mysterious poison that makes people lose their sanity and reduces them to cheerful fools. This poison is administered by the rather primeval means of poisonous darts shot out of a blowpipe by no less than a malicious bare bodied, turban and loincloth-wearing fakir. The said fakir also happens to possess magical powers and can hypnotise people by staring into their eyes leaving them at the mercy of his will. The use of a primitive weapon like a blowpipe to administer a madness-inducing poison reflects a Western fascination with India as a realm where strange, arcane practices prevail over reason and modernity. In another example, the Maharadjah of Rawhajpoutalah (which reminds us of the Rajputana) invites the fakir Cipaçalouvishni to show his skills to Tintin. The fakir proceeds to bounce off shards of glass, stab himself through and through with a dozen daggers, balance

himself on the tip of his nose on a large spike and sit on a bed of spikes as the cushions are too hard for his sensitive skin, without getting harmed in the least.[7] The fakirs, who are essentially ascetics who devote their lives to the worship of God, and who live solely on alms, seem to carry the responsibility of bringing the otherworldliness and mystical absurdity in Hergé's comics.

Another recurrent theme in Hergé's comics is the sacred cow. It not only features in the stories of Tintin, but also in Les Aventures de Jo, Zette et Jocko: La Vallée des Cobras. A cow sits peacefully on the road, blocking the entire traffic. The white man, practical and logical in his approach, tries to move it out of the way. His attempts are thwarted by the locals, who insist that since the cow is a sacred animal, it cannot be disturbed. They will have to wait until it decides to allow them to cross.[8] Or in another incident, Milou, Tintin's dog, politely asks a cow at what time she saw the last train pass. The cow feels insulted at being approached by a dog. Offended, she tells him that she is a sacred animal, and tries to teach Milou a lesson in politeness. Milou is chased by enraged locals who catch him and take him to the altar of Shiva to be sacrificed.[9]

The dramatic escalation of this situation to a sacrificial ritual reflects a gross exaggeration and misrepresentation of Indian cultural practices. By framing this sequence as both humorous and menacing, it perpetuates the stereotype of Indian culture as absurd and hostile. The locals' exaggerated reaction aligns with colonial narratives that depict non-Western societies as governed by superstition and incapable of rational behaviour. The sacred status of cows in Indian culture is portrayed in a way that exaggerates its impact on daily life, presenting it as an absurd obstacle to logic and progress. The reverence for cows becomes a source of both fascination and ridicule, reducing a deeply symbolic and spiritual tradition to a comical inconvenience for the practical Western protagonist.

Indian characters are often shown as bound by irrational beliefs, such as in La Vallée des Cobras (The Valley of the Cobras, Hergé, 1957), where superstition drives much of the conflict. Superstition is created and propagated by none other than an evil fakir. One of the lesser known comics of Hergé, it follows the exact template of drawings and representation as The Adventures of Tintin. The Maharaja of Gopal is a pompous, bad tempered fellow who cannot take defeat in any form however trivial. His long-suffering secretary Badalah is constantly at the receiving end of the Maharaja's eccentric behaviour. He somehow manages to convince Jo and Zette's father, Mr. Legrand, to come to India to build a bridge in his Himalayan kingdom. Despite being one of the protagonists, the Maharaja comes across as an untaught, annoying person, who on one occasion receives a sound spanking from Mr. Legrand before he learns some manners.[10] The good Mr. Legrand saves the Maharaja several times in the story, risking his own life fighting giant cobras to build the bridge. In short, the perfect Western family of the Legrands, comes to a backward but rich country of India, teaches manners to the king, defeats his entire team of corrupt ministers or overrules the irrational beliefs of the simple-minded citizens while constructing an architectural marvel.

The narrative positions the Legrand family as beacons of rationality, courage, and ingenuity, embodying the colonial ideal of the benevolent Westerner who selflessly aids a lesser-developed society. The contrast between the Maharaja's eccentric behaviour and the Legrands' virtue amplifies the cultural hierarchy, reinforcing stereotypes of Indian rulers as incapable of effective governance and in need of Western guidance. This depiction reduces Indian leadership to a source of ridicule and marginalises Indian agency. The citizens, portrayed as gullible, are easily overruled by the rational, heroic efforts of the Western protagonists. By constructing the bridge, which is a symbol of progress and modernity, Mr. Legrand embodies the colonial myth of Western technological and moral superiority. The story thus perpetuates a vision of India as a land of wealth and potential, but only realisable through Western intervention.

Astérix chez Rahâzade (1987) approaches India with a humorous and satirical lens. As part of the long-running Astérix series, the narrative parodies the conventions of Orientalist adventure stories. The famous village of Gauls receives a dark skinned, turban and loincloth-wearing fakir who has travelled for twenty days straight on a magic carpet. He claims to have come from the valley of Ganges which is shown to be under a severe dry spell having provoked the anger of *Indra*, the god of rains. The fakir Kiçah does not need food or sleep, and when he does sleep it is only on a bed of nails. He is an ascetic who possesses magical powers and must abstain from meat and alcohol. He has undertaken this long journey because the only thing that could save the valley from drought is Cacofonix the bard, who makes it rain whenever he sings. It is important for Kiçah to bring the Gaulish party to India before a certain promised hour to stop the evil Guru from sacrificing princess Rahazade (a play on the name Scheherazade, the princess from Arabian Nights) to appease the gods. Back in India, people are seen bathing in the wet mud of the nearly dry Ganges to wash their sins.[11] The rest is a spectacle of elephants, monkeys, rhinoceros, tigers and a war of spells between the good fakir Kiçah and an evil fakir Mercikhi, while sitting on fakir-powered carpets of course.

Also worth noting are the religious references and the frequent invocation of Indian gods. The evil Guru who is explained as the leader of a religious caste Uderzo, as well as the Rajah are often depicted swearing by or referring to Indian gods, such as 'May the thirty million vedic gods carry them to Nirvana for the miracle they are about to work.' or 'By all the avatars!', 'Agni consume you in the fire of hell!', and even the god of time 'Kala turn you to stone till the end of time!.[12] These references play into Western perceptions of Hinduism as a pantheon overflowing with deities, creating an aura of mystique and chaos around Indian religion. While these references add a comedic flair and lend an exotic flavor to the narrative, they oversimplify the nuanced and multifaceted nature of Indian religious practices. The exaggerated number of gods and the casual conflation of concepts such as avatars and nirvana, which are serious terms rooted in spiritual and philosophical traditions, shows that catering to Western curiosity and imagination is more important than authentic representation.

The Gauls' journey to India to save the princess mirrors a colonial narrative where outsiders are the agents of salvation in a land plagued by internal strife and superstition. While the comic uses parody and humour, it ultimately reinforces stereotypes of India as a land of mystical oddities, backward customs, and a need for external intervention. This approach, though entertaining, perpetuates an oversimplified and homogenised view of Indian culture for Western audiences.

Conclusion: A Legacy of Orientalism in the Representation of India

The image of India portrayed in the French and francophone comics of the twentieth century is nothing but a testament to the enduring influence of Orientalist perspectives on Western depictions of the East. The construction of India as a land of mysticism, spiritual allure, and exotic curiosities is central to these stories, reflecting broader Orientalist frameworks that sought to simplify and generalise the complexities of Eastern cultures for Western audiences.

This representation impacts the perception of India by emphasising the exotic and irrational, presenting its culture as one of extremes, of mystical power and absurdity, without context or depth. It reinforces the colonial narrative that Indian traditions are rooted in spectacle rather than substance. It invites readers to view India through a lens of fascination tempered with fear, a hallmark of Orientalist narratives that seek to both entertain and assert Western superiority, reinforcing a dichotomy between the rational West and the irrational East.

India is frequently depicted as a land of contradictions: ancient yet stagnant, spiritual yet irrational, rich in culture yet needing guidance from the West.

Sacred practices are stripped of their cultural significance and presented as obstacles to

modernity or sources of danger, reducing Indian traditions to sources of exotic amusement or exaggerated peril for Western audiences. Through these depictions, India is framed as a land of inscrutable beliefs that clash with the logical sensibilities of the European visitor, perpetuating the Orientalist notion of cultural inferiority.

These comics succeed in entertaining the readers as creative and captivating stories, but they fail to present India as a complex and vibrant culture that it is by disregarding the depth of its traditions. They demonstrate how little the East has invested in representing itself and serve as a reminder of the value of critically examining cultural representations and the necessity of a narrative that honours the complexity and diversity of the cultures it aims to portray.

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