Article-4
Bengali graphic novels for children-Sustaining an intangible heritage of storytelling traditions from oral to contemporary literature
- Dr. Lopamudra Maitra

Abstract
The paper looks into graphic novels acting as an important part of preserving and sustaining a part of intangible heritage and a specific trend of socio-cultural traditions pertaining to children across the globe- the art of storytelling. In West Bengal, the art of storytelling for children sustains itself through time through various proverbs, anecdotes, rhymes and stories, handed down from generations and expressing more than mere words in oral tradition. Occupying a significant aspect of communication even in recent times, the publication and recent popularity of several graphic novels in Bengali have reintroduced several of these stories from oral tradition yet again with the help of popular culture. Along with the plethora of such stories from oral tradition is the recent range of literature for children in Bengali. Thus, the variety of graphic novels include various stories which were collected and published from oral traditions nearly a hundred years back, to the most recent creations of printed literature for children. The conceptions embrace the efforts of stalwarts of Bengali children’s literature, including, Dakkhinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, Upendrakishore Raychowdhury, Sukumar Ray, Satyajit Ray, Shibram Chakraborty, Narayan Gangopadhyay, Premendra Mitra and others. Exploring a significant part of the intangible heritage of mankind- the art of storytelling for children survives across the globe in varied and myriad hues of expression- with two significant contributors occupying centre stage- the narrator and the listener. Over a period of time, as the former has been gradually replaced in many occasions, by printed and digital matter- away from the human narrators in the form of parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts of earlier times, the latter remains constant as the recipient of the stories. Occupying an important part of the socio-cultural and religious ethos from across the globe, the art of storytelling for children explores a much vivid discipline of the complex process of growing up, of learning and of sharing of knowledge and values of life. As graphic novels explore the social participatory aspect of comic-book reading on one hand and on the other, they also attempt to communicate more than stories. As Bengali children’s literature explore the same through graphic novels, they discuss more than simple heritage as they stand as a reflection of history down the ages and sustain the very art of storytelling- through changing times and across generations.

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Hector Munroe is ruthlessly defeated at the end of a fierce struggle with Blackhole Brandon on a remote island (latitude 33° north, longitude 33° west) on 13th December, 1622. At the end of the fight, the victor- Blackhole Brandon, looks straight into the eyes of readers and all spectators- declaring the threat of treading on ‘his’ island and meeting him to collect any information about a specific and rare plant that spelled doom for Munroe’s adventure.

Thus goes the beginning panels of the Bengali graphic novel, based on Satyajit Ray’s novel in Bengali- Professor Shanku and Monroe Dweep (Professor Shanku and Monroe Island). From the one-eyed pirate with a black patch to cover the bad right eye, to the sash around the waist and a half-torn silk leggings and shirt- Blackhole Brandon and Hector Munroe comes alive through the fierce struggle as the characters and their clothes closely resemble those from famous English novels of yesteryears- Robert Louis Stevenson’s Treasure Island (1883) and Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (1719). Soon the panels of the graphic novel moves with rapidity to explain the story as it progresses in present times- across a period of 400 years- further explaining the growing popularity and fast developing range of graphic novels in Bengali.

As children and young readers mostly standout as prominent and ardent buyers of these Bengali graphic novels for children, the growing range of titles over the last five years has also brought another section of the target audience to its list of admirers- the large number of comic book aficionados across the globe- cutting across ages, with Bengal being no exception. With multiplying demand amidst children and other readers over the years, the range of titles have also diversified to include stories from Bengal’s oral traditions as well as contemporary children’s literature from recent times. In the process, the very concept of popular culture as reflected through the graphic novels, help to connect to a significant aspect of intangible heritage- the art of storytelling. Highlighting the growing popularity of Bengali graphic novels for children, this paper explores the sustainability attempts of popular culture to connect oral tradition with contemporary literature for children- over a period of time. In the process, the tradition connects to the bigger discipline of intangible heritage across the globe where the art of storytelling through childrens’ graphic novels have mushroomed tremendously over the last ten years to include varied titles in English as well as other languages. Exploring the significant aspect of social participatory approach of comic books and graphic novels as an important social activity, this paper looks into the significant aspect of reader- narrator relationship and the messages conveyed between the two, with a short introduction to understand the initiation of the popularity of comic-books in USA- which was a forerunner to coin the term graphic novels.

Following the theme of the conference- sustainability, the paper is an attempt to look into a niche amidst the bigger paradigm of human existence and its socio-cultural and religious attributes- the art of human communication and that of storytelling, that has evolved through human history as an important part of the cultural ethos of mankind- especially contributing towards shaping the myriad world of children in their process of growing up.
The story of graphic novels for children- from global platform to India and Bengal-

Ancient history of Greece speaks of many anecdotes and legends associated with the historical battle of Thermopylae when a 300 man army of Spartans held off a massive invading Persian force, many times their own numbers and inspired the rest of Greece to unite over their sacrifice- leaving behind a glowing example of the strength of democracy. This historical battle of Thermopylae reincarnated for children through a graphic novel in English in 1998 through the touches of creator Frank Miller, who as a child was influenced by the English feature film *The 300 Spartans*. As the popularity of the graphic novel spread, it was finally adapted into an English motion picture, titled- *300*. Directed by Zack Snyder, it was released on March 9, 2007- setting a new record for movie openings, producing the 3rd highest openings for an R-rated movie till date and also held the continuous number one slot at the box office for the first two weekends in the USA- quickly earning over 100 million $ in attendance revenue (Note-1).

As the popularity of graphic novels in various languages continues across the globe, the commencement of the tradition goes back several decades. Often the very term of graphic novels- interlinked with comic books, can be traced to its very initiation days from the cave drawings of yore- several of which are still alive and witness to the changing times through centuries. However, the term graphic novel is a more recent discovery- away from the shelves of ancient art and is in itself self-explanatory. In the initial years, though it was often referred to as comic books, but over the years, has grown to create a niche for itself in the wide range of comics and books for young readers and children across the globe. Occupying a significant position amidst the genre of popular culture in the USA, the very word of comic books and its contents have variously been defined by many American scholars as a ‘low’ form of art. However, imparting a degree of respect to the notion, the Franco-Belgian term- *bande dessinée* (literally drawn strip) paints a different picture. Famous for its various comic books, the region was also the leader in influencing various other parts of the globe with its fantastic sketches and stories of adventure and mystery and bravery through various comic books (Note-2).

Though the story of comic books started in America a hundred years ago, the very distinction between comics and graphic novels slightly differed from the modern sense of the term, as the former spoke about stories and connotated lighter readings, while the bigger comic books were renamed as graphic novels. Though often referred to as a comic book, but the first of its kind graphic novel was published in the US in 1842- *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck*. Still later, by the 1940’s, certain brand of comic books started to rename themselves as graphic novels in the USA- those published by Diamond Comics. This started with the title of *All-Flash Quarterly*, when its contents were described as "novel-length stories" and "full-length four chapter novels." On the cover it mentioned visual novel and graphic novel. In due course of time and with influences from Japanese and European counterparts, the graphic novel storytelling art started witnessing many more titles- including *CAPA-ALPHA #2* (November 1964), *Fantasy Illustrated #5* (Spring 1966), *The Sinister House of Secret Love #2* (Jan. 1972) and also *Will Eisner's A Contract with God, and Other Tenement Stories* (October 1978). With the increasing number of titles, the USA market also witnessed the first self-proclaimed graphic novels- which suit the recent definitions as they were not merely comic books,
but were comic book adaptations of former printed literature. The jacket covers mentioned the term graphic novels and included titles like *Bloodstar* by Richard Corben (adapted from a story by Robert E. Howard) in 1976 and George Metzger’s *Beyond Time and Again* - which was put into publication as a graphic novel, published by Kyle & Wheary between 1967 to 1972 and was titled "A Graphic Novel" on the inside title page of the 48-page, black-and-white, hardcover book (Note-3). Following closely its American counterpart, many British publications also started coming up with their own editions of comic books, titled under the category of graphic novels. Many of these also included reprints of USA newspaper comic strips, including *Modesty Blaise* and *Garth* by 1981. Finally, the comic book series of Batman, published as bound books helped to further extend the popularity of the term graphic novels. However, most of the titles included the publication of comic books under the titles of graphic novels, excepting a few and thus, severe criticism always followed the terminology of graphic novels, with many scholars labeling the vain attempt of media houses and marketing departments to sale ‘cheap’ and ‘low’ art and comic books under the garb of novels and stories, including writers Alan Moore and Daniel Raeburn in the USA. Nevertheless, comic book publications continued and still do, with the recent surge of graphic novels taking a totally different definition from the age-old nexus with comic books. Reflecting the growing demand and popularity of graphic novels is also the 2005 report of the Time Magazine, when in October 24, the magazine placed *Watchmen* graphic novel as one of the 100 best English-language novels from 1923 to the present.

With the US market witnessing various titles under the category of graphic novels gain popularity over the last few decades, the Indian market too, started to witness a rise in the titles, especially pertaining to the works of popular internationally acclaimed authors, including Alfred Hitchcock, various murder-mystery collections by Agatha Christie, including the adventures of *Miss Marple* or *Hercule Poirot*, or popular titles of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle or the adventures of Mowgli in Rudyard Kipling’s *Jungle Book*. And with the international English fiction finding its way into the Indian market, the Indian authors were not far behind. Thus, the last five years saw a burgeoning demand of graphic novels for children- written by Indian authors who resided in India thus, mention may be made of Goa-based writer-designer Orijit Sen’s *The River of Stories* from the 1990’s or artist-filmmaker Sarnath Banerjee’s *Corridor* in 2004 and *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* in 2007, and his *Kashmir Pending* - written by Srinagar-based Naseer Ahmed and illustrated by Saurabh Singh (an artist with the weekly magazine India Today). As *Kashmir Pending* went on to win critical applause for the real-life depiction of alienation in a land bedevilled by militancy, Sarnath’s works also started getting noticed and liked all over the nation. Significant is also the *Devi* series by novelist Samit Basu from Virgin Comics- author of such works as *The Simogin Prophecies* and *The Manticore’s Secret*. Basu has written eight issues of *Devi*, a graphic novel series by Virgin Comics, and is now working on three new comic book lines (Note-4). Soon followed a 116-pages English graphic novel *Kari* by Amruta Patil (2008) (Note-5). With most of the drawings being sketched in black and white, along with little dabbles of colours, comic book-like blurbs display the essence of the theme and the dialogues between characters.
As Indian-English graphic novels by authors based out of India started to gain importance, the regional touches were not very far away. Thus, mention may be made of many such contributions of Tamil, Telugu, Assamese, Marathi, Gujarati and Bengali graphic novels. As the paper looks into the Bengali market, the following details deals specifically with the genre. The introduction of regional touch with Bengali graphic novels to the scene helped to shape the attributes of the popular culture further- starting with the publication of various stories by noted Bengali authors over a lengthy period of hundred years. Thus, over the last five years, Bengal witnessed the publication and growing popularity of titles from the creations of popular children’s author- Satyajit Ray, including the adventures of detective Feluda and his compatriots or the exploits and adventures of world-renowned scientist and inventor- Professor Shanku or the mystery adventures of Tenida and his gang of friends (based on the novels by Narayan Gangopadhyay) and Ghanada (based on the novels by Premendra Mitra) or Harshobardhan and Gobardhan- based on the short and long stories by noted author and humorist of yesteryears- Shibram Chakraborty from Kolkata. The wide range of Bengali graphic novels also included many creations based on short and long stories of authors even nearly a hundred years back, e.g. Dakkhhinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, Upendrakishore Raychowdhury and Sukumar Ray- with their novels having been framed and modeled after stories and anecdotes collected from the oral traditions of Bengal. Thus, the market of Bengali graphic novels has witnessed a rising popularity of titles, which were already well-known within the readers of Bengal and abroad through the original books, but the re-invention through the styles and formats of graphic novels helped to recreate and restructure the history of storytelling of Bengal- an integral part of intangible heritage of not only Bengal, but the world over. However, it is also interesting to note that the similarity of expressions in graphic novels for children follow the path of geographical proximity from Bengal- till further north-east of India. Here, mention may be made of the comic book Rongomon of Assam, which also has an online version and speaks of similar interest of recreating storytelling for young minds.

**And the art of storytelling for children- from across the globe to India and Bengal**-

Quite like the uncertain beginning of graphic novels the world over, it is very difficult to put a yardstick to measure the beginning of the time and period of the art of story-telling. As UNESCO declared the art to be an integral part of the intangible heritage of mankind- which needs urgent notice to survive the world over, the ethos of storytelling, especially for children entails the weaving of a glorious story down the path of history. As words travel through oral traditions and across geographical boundaries, it is more than the essence of mere stories which are carried further, with the very socio-cultural attributes, in due course of time, being rendered a touch of the adopted region. Thus, stories change and characters take the shape and form of other regions to suit the likes and dislikes of the people of other regions. A typical example is a specific story of a sly fox, a Brahman pundit or a learned man and a stupid tiger- which features amidst well-known folktales from Bengal (Note-6). Few years back, while doing research on folktales from Thailand, I happened to come across the same story with the exact same characters from amidst a collection of folktales from Thailand. India as well as Bengal, has had commercial and cultural contacts with Thailand since the last thousand years on a regular basis. Various Indian influences are portrayed through the art, architecture, religion as well as names of
people from the country- all of which shows their direct influences of Indian society and culture thus, it is not unlikely that the influence of the folktales also travelled in a similar manner to Thailand from Bengal and till date- survives amidst the folktales of Thailand. Thus, survives one of the most vibrant aspects of intangible heritage of the world, occupying a significant place amidst culture studies in the modern global world, especially as the art of storytelling helps to determine several socio-cultural aspects of a region. The stories themselves bear testimony to the changing historical developments of a region. They also help to portray social and natural calamities including, battles, wars, struggles and immigrations as well as floods, famines, draughts or earthquakes. As most of the stories from oral tradition relate to the vagaries of daily life, they also help to reflect the socio-economic condition of the various agro-pastoral communities across the globe. Thus, stories from Europe holds special bonds to explain the hardships of the pastoral communities in the harsh winters of the region with very little food to sustain life. In a similar manner, various stories from China and north India, often relate to stories of the annual flooding of the mighty rivers of the region- on which depends the livelihood of millions.

The art of storytelling is also specified as an ‘art’ as it requires a specific character of speech- including intonation, voice modulation, body language and facial expressions. Often, e.g. in Morocco, various professional storytellers are still seen to perform the task of narrating important stories about the land and its people. In Bengal, in a similar manner, storytellers used to frequent bazaars and the houses of the landlords even a hundred years back and used to be called as kathak or the one who speaks and their narration was referred to as kathakatha or the words of the kathak. Being ardent travellers themselves, they often used to bear news, incidents and anecdotes of places they used to travel to and visit. This was also their method of income- to earn by telling and narrating their experiences through stories. Thus, travelled stories across various regions of Bengal- cutting across geographical barriers. Though the number of kathaks have gone down in due course of time, the art of storytelling continued- in nooks and crannies of half-lamp lit, dark courtyards of Bengal through time, as children would gather near grandparents or their mothers to listen to the stories of lands afar and of prince and princesses travelling great distances and across hurdles to rescue people and women in despair. As the art of storytelling continued in Bengal, the various attempts of specific British civil servants helped to render a helping hand towards the preservation of the same by collecting and publishing them in print as books for children. Mostly published in English, these still stand as important repositories of information for modern research work. Thus, mention may be made of the efforts of few British Civil Servants and administrators of various posts placed throughout Bengal during colonial times e.g. Rev. William McCulloch (Bengali Household Tales- towards the last quarter of 19th century), Carolyn Sherwin Bailey (Firelight Stories- folktalest retold for kindergarden, school and home- 1907), J.F. Campbell (Notes on Folktales- 1886) and others. Inspired by the nationalist feeling to preserve the essence of the socio-cultural ethos of Bengal, various noted litterateurs also started contributing towards the collection and subsequent publication of stories from the oral tradition of Bengal for children, including prominent literary and scholarly figures such as Dineshendra Sen (1866-1939), Upendrakishore RoyChowdhury (1863- 1915), Jasimuddin (1904-1976), Abanindranath Tagore (1871-
1951), and Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) to name a few, contributed immensely towards the recovery and preservation of Bengali folk literature, especially taking shape and influencing the Swadeshi mind during the tumultuous period of the Banga-Bhanga Andolan (1905) or the Bengal Partition Movement of 1905.

**Graphic novels in Bengali- popular culture sustaining a connection between oral tradition and contemporary literature.-**

Concentrating on the essence of storytelling, it is also important to understand the real meaning behind the term graphic novel. As critics the world over debate over the ‘low’ art form of comics and the definition of graphic novels being just a ‘marketing gimmick’ to promote the same comic books to a wider audience at a higher price, there are yet others who perceive the art as a developing mode of communication. Thus, the definition of graphic novel can best be explained as- referring to a comic book, which has a sequential story, with a “beginning, a middle and an end and also signifies works that are usually more mature and complex than traditional superhero fare or comic strip funnies” (Shuma Raha: The Telegraph, 2007) (Note-7). Also, as both comic books and graphic novels explore familiar sequential art designs, combining texts, panels, and images, the length of the visual-aided texts often help to determine its connotation. Often, it is remarked that a comic book is around twenty to thirty pages where a graphic novel can span hundreds of pages. Indeed, in Europe and the US, where the art form has a near cult following, some of the best graphic novels can be highly literary, allusive and symbolic. Raha also goes to quote Abhijit Gupta, professor of English, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, who teaches graphic novels as part of the university’s undergraduate English course, “In the West some of the best literary talents are working in the graphic novel form.” On the other hand, Samit Basu with his Devi series was quoted by The Telegraph to mention about Indian market for graphic novels as “new, fresh and unexplored…..” And thus, when Virgin Comics asked him to work in the genre he was quoted by Raha to have mentioned, “I thought this was absolutely what I wanted to do.” Virgin Comics have already marketed several Indian English graphic novels, including Sadhu, Snakewoman and others- all of them having an Indian cultural background. Thus, with the growing demand amidst youngsters in the market, publishers and distributors are also keen in the genre and Raha (The Telegraph, 2007) further quoted V Karthika, publisher, Harper Collins, India mentioning, “Sarnath’s novels have sold very well, and there’s a lot of new talent. We are certainly keen on doing good graphic novels.”

And underlining a specific trend amidst graphic novels, Raha moved on to the last paragraph to mention the need amidst publishers to break away from the western model and build graphic novels on Indian themes (Note-8), Bengali graphic novels for children takes off from that very point- closely associating the age-old art of storytelling of Bengal to popular culture. With the establishment of printing and publication, as the art of storytelling took a different meaning, the world of transcription helped to change the formats of the discussion between the narrator and the listener. As time went by and as print started being supplemented and complimented by digital media, including radio, television, cinema, CD’s and DVD’s, the world of storytelling further received a touch of restructuring. With the rapid growth and development of nucleus families and the growing lacunae of the grandparents to fill the lost essence, parents and children started
looking for the ethos amidst the changing formats of media. As it exists today as a popular medium of expression, it is also significant to consider the dialogue between the narrator and the reader or spectator in Bengali graphic novels for children. As they closely resemble the formatting styles of comic books, the layout and design follow similar patterns, however, as in graphic novels- the panels require to ‘speak’ a lot more than mere comic books as the stories have definite beginning, middle and endings. Following the pattern are also regional children’s magazine- e.g. Rongmon children’s magazine of Assam. Expanding the imaginary world of regional graphic novels through children’s magazines, Rongmon presents a product which is both educational as well as entertaining and is rooted in the regional ethos. Though the brand name of Tinkle has evolved as an example of such types of graphic novels who expertise in the art of storytelling by retelling various stories from folk traditions from across the globe, yet amidst regional attempts, Rongmon stands apart. The issues are succinct and precise and the stories concentrate on the simple moral lessons for young minds and readers. Also available online, this magazine on one hand, refer to stories of the Indian epics, including The Ramayana and The Mahabharata (Note-9) and on the other, they speak of local stories for children on teaching them the right from the wrong.

With the spread of messages, it is more than mere knowledge about mythologies and moral lessons which are spread to minds both young and old. Examples are the efforts of the utilisation of comics and graphic novels by several Indian authors to spread awareness about various recent social issues as well as developmental work, e.g. the work of Bangalore-based Communication for Development and Learning, which came out with a book titled Devtoons: Cartoons for Development and also the efforts of World Comics India (WCI)- a registered non-profit, which was formed in June 2002 “by a group of artists, media persons and social activists, who wanted to promote the use of comics as a medium in social change.” (Note-10) Thus, utilising the visual power of storytelling, their attempts incorporated spreading awareness and education from Jharkhand to Mizoram, including messages like migration, displacement, tribal rights, ‘witch’ hunting, alcoholism and corruption in Jharkhand and HIV/AIDS, jhum (shifting) cultivation and other related aspects of the environment in Mizoram. With a remarkable response, the, Sharad Sharma, the main brain behind the idea was quoted by an online article to state that the “success of wallposter comics in Jharkhand and in Mizoram shows "the path for future". Thus, with comic books having entertained young minds as well as old ones- through generations- shaping our vivid imagination and acting as a passageway into the realm of the fantastic world, it has also borne the concern to shoulder the responsibilities to spread messages for development and sustainability- one of the important features of sustaining developmental communication at a global level.

From tuntuni and raja (the tailor bird and the king) to Feluda and Co.- as the journey continues-

Finally, it should be mentioned as a prelude towards the conclusion of the discussion that socio-cultural heritage does not manifest itself through only objects and monuments which form parts of tangible heritage. Supplementing the concept are the intangible traits of material culture - which includes attributes from countless communities- handed across generations. Oral traditions form an integral part of this attribute. It not only helps
to preserve the socio-cultural ethos through time, but also acts as repositories of knowledge handed down through generations and through history for better understanding the socio-cultural and religious environment around us. The state of West Bengal in India, having an agricultural background, interwoven within its socio-cultural and religious paraphernalia, features as a rich ground for the development and spread of various anecdotes, stories, poems, riddles and proverbs pertaining to the rich oral tradition of the region. Reflecting historical changes, especially over the last 1000 years of Bengal’s history, several of these stories also help to understand the nuances and spheres of anxieties, fear, worries, happiness and sadness encompassing each and every aspect of the socio-cultural and religious life of the people from the days of yore. Thus, the stories of the king and the tailor bird or *tuntuni* (as it is locally referred to in the Bengali language), helps to understand the tension, concerns and apprehensions of the poor agricultural labourers in various villages over excess taxation and the pending punishment for untimely payment of dues to the king and other landlords. As Upendrakishore Raychowdhury’s efforts helped to collect and gather the stories of *tuntuni* and the wicked king or the wicked tiger into published editions for children almost a hundred years back, it was more than an effort in the direction of transcribing folklore. In a similar manner, the efforts of Dakhinaranjan Mitra Majumdar reflected a degree of permanency through transcription of several folklore collected from all across Bengal. Majumdar’s efforts were published in various volumes, of which the popular ones include collected oral tradition from Bengal- *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Grandmother’s Bag of Tales) and *Thakurdadar Thole* (Grandfather’s bag of Tales), published more than a 100 years back in 1907. As the modern world and academic critics the world over, debate over the loss of authenticity resulting from the transcription of folklore and oral traditions, including songs, riddles, stories, proverbs, etc., such primary attempts also helped to initiate a process of preserving the intangible heritage- making it part of the popular culture and thus also, adding a degree of conformity towards the transformation into tangible heritage. In this respect it is also important to mention that the procedure of transcription of oral tradition is not a recent phenomenon in India as it brings back to memory the very ethos of the transcription of the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas as well as other popular literature including the Buddhist and Jain repositories of oral tradition which constitute the *Jataka Tales* or the *Tales from Panchatantra* as well as the great Indian epics- the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The process of beginning of all of the above mentioned evidences in India initiated with the intrinsic idea of *smriti* (memory) and *sruti* (hearing)- which translates as ‘committing to memory the knowledge that percolates through the auditory senses.’ As the various transcriptions of these works of remarkable historical value left their marks in the path of time, it also helped to render a degree of permanency to the floating mass of folklore, especially the Indian epics-*Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*- whose basis of formation is the oral tradition of India. In recent times, over the last few decades, several of the stories from this vast repository of literature based on oral traditions of India have also found a voice and an expression through the popular culture of graphic novels. Especially noted are the various titles of *Amar Chitra Katha*, as well as *Tinkle* or the above mentioned *Rongmon* children’s magazine- where several titles were published in English as well as in various regional languages as well, including Bengali. Thus, neither the transcription of oral literature, nor the practice of their representation through popular culture in the form of graphic novels
is a recent process and the recent attempts in Bengali literature for children only follows a long line of tradition- dating back to more than a thousand years of the history of our country- when the first novels started to be penned down into manuscripts with information gathered from oral tradition, under the able patronage of the Gupta rulers of India, between 4th - 6th century A.D.

As the recent creations help to highlight the continuous process of history, their publication has also extended the definition of storytelling into a new sphere. Inspired by the many efforts of authors over the last 100 years, who have contributed considerably towards the formulation of childrens’ literature in Bengali, these graphic novels exude a picture of sustainability through the touch of popular culture. Priced reasonably (though, albeit more than the original novel which it corresponds to) with colourful layouts, blurbs, panels and features and characters- the stories come ‘alive’ for the target audience- and hence the growing popularity and the rising demands resulting in the frequent addition of several new titles on popular demand by the young readers. Thus, the recent world of Bengali graphic novels- which is less than five years old, include historical examples of works of Dakhhinaranjan Mitra Majumdar’s Thakurmar Jhuli (Grandmother’s Bag of Tales) and Thakurdadar Thole (Grandfather’s Bag of Stories) and also Upendrakishore Raychowdhury’s Tuntunir Galpo (tailor bird series stories) as well as the magical stories of the ever-loving Gupi Gyne and Bagha Byne- including stories like, Gupi Gyne aar Bagha Byne (Gupi Gyne and Bagha Byne), Hirok Rajar Deshe (In the land of the king of Hirak) and Gupi Bagha Phire Elo (The return of Gupi and Bagha) (Note-11). As Majumdar and Raychowdhury’s works, famous for being part of the oral tradition, occupy a loving space in the graphic novel market, other titles include contemporary literature in Bengali, including such popular books as the mysterious adventures of Professor Shanku and Feluda- based on the novels by Satyajit Ray and also the adventures of Tenida- based on the novels by Narayan Gangopadhyay, Ghanada- based on novels by Premendra Mitra as well as the comic characters created by Shibram Chakraborty- Harshobardhan and Gobardhan.

As the realm of Bengali graphic novels are yet to delve into the arena of the utilisation of graphic novels to spread messages pertaining to developmental work, certain examples from north-east India shows the way, e.g. the activities of World Comics India in Mizoram to spread the awareness about HIV/AIDS and jhum (shifting) cultivation as mentioned above, as well as the correct utilisation of the messages of graphic novels as portrayed by Shillong-based Chillibreeze to bring out the graphic novel- A Tale of Two Magic Potions- to spread the awareness of malaria in not only Shillong and adjoining regions, but all across the nation. The story is woven through the typical format of a graphic novel- with a beginning, a middle and an ending exploring the adventures of two youngsters to spread the word amidst the masses. Similar are the attempts of Rongmon childrens’ magazine which retell stories about environment and its various factors of sustainability to spread the awareness amidst young minds regarding the environment and its sustainability.

Thus, as the Bengali graphic novels are yet to venture beyond the notions of exploring adventure stories of yesteryears and look into environmental stories published in recent
times to frame into graphic novels, the examples from north-east India stands as a glowing beacon towards the direction. In this respect, it is also important to understand the need of children’s stories and the art of storytelling forming an integral part of the intangible heritage of the socio-cultural ethos of man as mentioned above. Giving its due recognition, the aspect of oral traditions and intangible heritage occupies a significant definition even under UNESCO, which is mentioned and defined as- “The totality of tradition-based creations of a cultural community, expressed by a group of individuals and recognized as reflecting the expectations of a community in so far as they reflect its cultural and social identity; its standards and values are transmitted orally, by imitation or by other means. Its forms are, among others, language, literature, music, dance, games, mythology, rituals, customs, handicrafts, architecture and other arts. In addition to these examples, account will also be taken of traditional forms of communication and information.” (Note-12) Thus, the need for understanding the importance of graphic novels starts from scratch from understanding the significance of the survival of various cultural traditions across the globe as imperative tools for sustaining the heritage of man. As the world reduces through contacts and connections in the present time of globalisation, the apex global body dealing with cultural diversity felt a need to even specify it within its framework of activities- UNESCO. On the wake of the events of September 11, 2001, the UNESCO General Conference, in its 31st session, adopted unanimously the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity. It was also specified that inter-cultural dialogues is an imminent need of the time for one and all and “It was an opportunity for States to reaffirm their conviction that intercultural dialogue is the best guarantee of peace and to reject outright the theory of the inevitable clash of cultures and civilizations.” Aiming to understand culture as an important and “living” and “thus renewable treasure that must not be perceived as being unchanging heritage but a process guaranteeing the survival of humanity and to prevent segregation and fundamentalism”, the need for understanding the basic diversities across cultures is also important as it is the need of the day in the modern global world to better perceive “the common heritage of humanity”, “as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature.” (Director General Koïchiro Matsuura) (Note-13). Upon the adoption of the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity on November 2001, UNESCO also encouraged recognition and protection of intangible heritage in the same way as natural and cultural treasures of tangible heritage are protected- thus making it an important attribute to consider for conservation and preservation as part of the socio-cultural existence of mankind. Hence, understanding the varieties of cultural attributes includes a need to recognise both tangible and intangible heritages- echoing the voice of mankind and his tryst with destiny and speaking of tales and stories that went into weaving the glorious chapter of the evolution of man down the path of history. Occupying a significant part within this pallet is oral tradition.

As stories evolve around the globe to circulate across regions of tales of valour, prince, princesses, of recent inventions, wars, battles and various socio-cultural skirmishes, political battles and religious beliefs, the world of oral traditions help to portray history far from the pages of any printed publication. Though enmeshed in various critical appraisals over the transcription of the same leading to the loss of the original flavour, the world of oral tradition has immensely spread with the help of printing and publication...
aiding the process. Thus, as the oral tradition of Bengal speaks of the stories of a bird and the wicked king or the tiger or the prince and princesses who braved all danger to save their kingdoms and siblings- helps to portray the anxieties of the poor farmers and villagers at the hands of administrative powers as well as highlighting the important power amidst all mankind to fight the evils of society.

With transcription and publication making the very spirit of the epoch come ‘alive’ of the king, the bird and the tiger, and the adventures of the prince and princesses, it also adds to the plethora of literature for children that went into making the history of a specific region- with Bengal being no exception. Rendering a further humane touch of prominence are the recent publications of graphic novels for children in Bengal. Sustaining the tradition of storytelling through its multifarious touches of popular culture, as the books grow in popularity with the release of each title, it also helps to re-invent the works of stalwarts of Bengali literature for children- Upendrakishore Raychowdhury, Dakkhinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, Sukumar Ray, Satyajit Ray, Shibram Chakraborty, Premendra Mitra and Narayan Gangopadhyay (Note-14). A significant aspect of the growing popularity of these graphic novels – is the fact that several of the Bengali graphic novels have also been released in English, along with the Bengali titles and thus is an imperative need to understand the characters and features of oral tradition as “Over a period of time, these narratives serve as instruments of re-inventing culture. They are critical and pleasurable and is an imperative need in a fast-changing and developing global world to bring to the rural and the urban audience- both young and old - a lifelong vision of ethos” (Maitra, 2007).

Acting as important bodies of codes of messages as the graphic novels portray the visual aspect of transcript and published text and literature, it also acts as a mediator between the dialogue of recipient and narrator. This is an important and responsive role to play, especially with the increasing number of nucleus families across the globe, with reducing number of children being exposed to the evergreen storytelling sessions of grandparents from the days of yore on one hand and the rising concern amidst parents towards the declining habit of reading amidst children on the other. Times have changed and so has modes and ways of expression, however, cultural attributes as expressed in the forms of stories and oral tradition continue in the same specific manner as it used to be down the path of history. Thus, with direct influences of oral traditions as well as contemporary printed literature, these graphic novels echo the same concern for teaching youngsters the symbols for correct and wrong behaviour- in the same manner which underlines several stories from oral tradition down the path of history. In the process of its expression, the recent graphic novel also emphasises upon the significant aspect of the cultural mosaic and represents man-nature relationships and more often than not- the laws of nature as well. For a better understanding the culture-specific symbols within each graphic novel, it is also an imperative need to study and observe closely each story, while this paper is a small beacon of light towards initiating a study for a more intensive and meticulous work.

With the elimination of the human narrator in the process of storytelling as valuable intangible aspects and attributes including voice modulation, pitch, repertoire, intonation, facial expression, body and hand movements, the visual appeal of the graphic novels
takes after the formats of comic books- maximising upon the world of fantasy for children, for it also needs to be understood that fantasy is all about the fantastic and to all children, “it comes as an instinctive understanding that the characters and their performing acts are not real, and thus the immense popularity of fantasy literature,” (Maitra, 2007) and the living proof of the same is the audio-visual and digital adapted versions of online and video games, animation movies and feature films and merchandises pertaining to the characters of Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling or the several characters created by J.R. R. Tolkien for his Lord of the Rings series. As the characters come alive with the touch of digital videography, it is more than an extension of the fantasy world, as it helps to shape and formulate and make each and every character come alive through the magical touch of ‘talk’, ‘speech’ and ‘movements.’ The world of graphic novels too, explore the world of fantasy and the increasing popularity is extended through the rich appeal of its visuals- with many of them having strong influences of characters of modern English feature films from Hollywood or famous characters from already published literature in English, as cited in examples at the beginning of this paper. Thus, often, the characters of Feluda resemble those from the popular Tintin series by Belgian author, artist and creator Hergé. On the other hand, various characters from Professor Shanku often resemble those from the English feature films of Harry Potter or the characters of Harshobordhon and Gobordhan (adapted after the stories by Shibram Chakraborty) and Tenida (created from stories by Narayan Gangopadhyay) resemble urban youths of any global, multicultural and cosmopolitan city of India. With an increasing level of exposure of youngsters to modern English and European arts and its various representations in popular culture, a mental comparison and association is indeed an inevitable destiny and marketing on this very approach and thought are the recent creations of graphic novels for children in Bengali. With the global influences of various forms and channels of media feeding the average urban child almost every day with its rich audio-visual appeal through National Geographic magazine and television channels, Discovery Channel and Animal Planet, the characters from the books also stand anatomically corrected- away from the classical and original drawings of the creators and authors, including Dakkhinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, Upendrakishore Raychowdhury, Satyajit Ray or Narayan Gangopadhyay. Moving away from the classical, the art of storytelling rediscovers itself within the global village of present times and sustains itself through changing environs and in the process, the concept or the stories outlive the sketches and drawings. Hence, the various interpretations of Tuntuni and Raja or any story from Thakurmar Jhuli can have different forms in many editions of graphic novels as published by various publishing houses, however the core essence of the stories remain constant and the same- a procedure of sustainability amidst changing times.

The word sustainability, derived from the Latin sustinere (tenere, to hold; sust, up) and mostly denoting - to “maintain", "support", or "endure”, has over the years evolved to endure the concept of sustainability of human existence in relation to the bio-diversity of Earth, especially after the 1980's definition rendered by Brundtland Commission of the United Nations on March 20, 1987, which defined sustainable development as- “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” The definition was further extended an
expansive approach at the World Summit of 2005, when it was noted that to sustain livelihood on earth, three basic ideals needs to be carefully cultivated- environmental, social and economic demands- which are also referred to as the “three pillars”. Though the definition of UN has since undergone various interpretations, but the basic act of understanding remains significant- to protect the various spheres of existence- including environment and its concerns in relation to society, culture, politics, religion and geography. Thus, as the very concept of oral traditions, transcriptions and popular culture form an important part of the intangible heritage of mankind, it further helps to draw the attention towards the concept of sustainability of an important socio-cultural trait- amidst the bigger canvas of our surrounding and the environment. Graphic novels explore this significant aspect of sustainability of human culture through time.

With stories from oral traditions, lending themselves to be changed as they move through changing times as ‘there are both multiple versions of reality as well as multiple versions of fantasy’ (Hussain, Zakir, 1967) at play, the world of Bengali graphic novels borrows heavily from the rich repository of the world of comic books, including the creations of noted comic artists like Narayan Debnath, Shaila Chakraborty, Chandi Lahiri and others, over the last several decades. Rooted in the essence of Bengali socio-cultural ethos, these comic books helped to portray the simplicity of life- befitting various situations and events through changing time, which has a perennial appeal to all ages.

With the heavy influences of comic book formats, however, the Bengali graphic novels for children tries to make their very special place as the world of English graphic novels the world over as well as in India still debate over the exact definition of graphic novels. The formats and procedure of formulations of Bengali graphic novels follow a certain pattern- showing the creations of comic books being influenced by printed literature- in the process, omitting the line of uncertainty pertaining to the character of graphic novels and thus, it also follows the age-old definition of graphic novels to be creations that has a beginning, a middle and an end. This paper too, proposes the conformity of following this specific definition towards the understanding of what the term graphic novel signify. The above definition of graphic novels best suits the genre of Bengali literature for children as it aids in spreading the exact definition of the significant genre of popular culture that has helped to connect the disciplines of oral traditions, transcript folklore as well as contemporary publications of children’s literature in Bengal in recent times. With the UNESCO definition of oral and intangible heritage being explained as “the totality of tradition-based creations of a cultural community expressed by a group or individuals and recognised as reflecting the expectations of a community in so far as they reflect its cultural and social identity,” the art of storytelling through Bengali graphic novels for children expresses more than mere stories as it incorporates the historical value of transcription because, to quote UNESCO’s definition, “Intangible heritage is seen as a repository of cultural diversity, and creative expression, as well as a driving force for living cultures. Since it can be vulnerable to forces of globalisation, social transformation, and intolerance, UNESCO encourages communities to identify, document, protect, promote and revitalise such heritage.” Hence, as Tuntuni aar Raja, Dalimkumar, Laalikamal aar Neelkamal from the oral traditions join hands with Feluda and Co., Tenida, Harshobordhon and Gobordhan of present literature, they communicate
more than a simple dialogue through time- as they explore the vivid world of popular culture in an ever-expanding global world with cultural diversities maintaining their intrinsic ethos on one hand and connecting to a mass appeal towards the specific audiences the world over. Thus, this brings to the forefront the important aspect of narrator and reader relationship and graphic novels explain the act of reading comic books as a social participation. “Through their omnipresence and availability alone, comic books possess the ability to remind us of the fundamentally social nature of culture. But there is something about their structure as objects, the relationship between image, text, and layout, that defies the ordinary notion of reading as an isolated act in which the reader gives herself exclusively to an autonomous content through the text” (Note-15). Thus, in the process, the reader extends herself or himself into the realm of popular culture which is collective as well as performative. It is also important to thus understand that the genre of comic books and also of graphic novels is a cultural artifact which facilitate social participation. “Comic book reading represents a location where the process of culture is evident, where activity is driven by both its object(s) and its subject(s). Focused attention on interactions with such objects allows one to see culture as a generative activity involving an ongoing reconciliation of a multiplicity of orientations” (Note-16).

Thus, as the act of reading comic books and graphic novels helps through its intrinsic nature the dialogues in the social process of participation even in its most isolated moments, it also effectively reflects the act of involvement towards the bigger cultural process of ‘maintaining the social contract’ (Ferdinand de Saussure). Though, the world of Bengali graphic novels are yet to explore the domain of literature pertaining to environment and its various facets to spread awareness amidst young minds of which the examples of north-east India, as cited above, are glowing examples, yet the nascent venture to reach youngsters through visual depictions can be counted as a positive beginning towards the direction. Till then, the world of Bengali graphic novels continues to amuse the young and the old alike. Reaching across the target audience and more beyond geographical peripheries, the sketches, blurbs and panels of the Bengali graphic novels for children, connects with more than mere popular culture- underlining and emphasising into prominence the sustainability of a significant aspect of our socio-cultural existence- the continuity of the art and tradition of storytelling for children.
Figures (Note-17) -

Fig. 1- Cover of graphic novel- Professor Shanku and Monroe Dweep (Professor Shanku and Monroe Island)- based on Satyajit Ray’s novel by the same name. Note the resemblance to drawings and sketches of one-eyed pirates from popular Hollywood movies and famous English novels like Treasure Island and Robinson Crusoe.

Fig. 2- Cover of graphic novel- Professor Shanku- Congo Abhijaan (Professor Shanku and the Congo Expedition)- based on Satyajit Ray’s novel by the same name. Noteworthy are the cosmopolitan look of the clothes of the characters.
Fig. 3- Cover of graphic novels based on Satyajit Ray’s novels by the same names
(above) Goyenda Feludar Rahashyo Adventure-Darjeeling Jamjamat (Detective Feluda’s Mystery Adventures- Adventures at Darjeeling)
(below) Goyenda Feludar Rahashyo Adventure-Sheyal Debota Rahashya (Detective Feluda’s Mystery Adventures- The Mystery of the Wolf God)
Noteworthy are the cosmopolitan look of the characters and also the global touch through the representation of the deity resembling popular ancient Egyptian Gods and Goddesses.
Fig. 4- Cover of graphic novel- Pataldangar Tenida- Tenida Aar Sindhughatak and Tenida Aar Yeti (Pataldanga’s Tenida- Tenida and the Seal and Tenida and the Yeti) based on Narayan Gangopadhyay’s novel by the same name. Noteworthy are the rich colourful visuals

Fig. 5- Cover of a collection of comic book characters created by Narayan Debnath- a noted cartoonist of Bengal.

Fig. 6- Cover of a graphic novel in Bengali based on the story of Rudiyard Kipling’s English novel- *Jungle Book*
Fig. 7- Cover of a graphic novels in Bengali based on novels by the same names by Upendrakishore Raychowdhury.
(above) Chhobite Tuntunir Galpo (The Story of the Tailor Bird in Pictures)
(below) Chhobite Gupi Gyne O Bagha Byne (The Story of Gupi Gyne and Bagha Byne in Pictures)
Noteworthy are the features of the characters, especially of Gupi and Bagha- which resemble the actors from the famous childrens’ film by Satyajit Ray- Gupi Gyne Bagha Byne.
Fig.8- Cover of *A Tale of Two Magic Potions* by Chillibreeze of Shillong- a graphic novel/comic book for children to spread awareness about malaria. Note the two leading heroes of the novel dressed in typical cosmopolitan urban clothes and the utilisation of the word ‘magic’ to spread its spell in the recent world of youngsters who are fond of books like *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* - all of which utilises messages that connect to the world of fantasy.

Fig.9- Cover of *Rongmon* children’s magazine of Assam (left) and various characters from the magazine (right) which tells stories in the form of graphic novels. Note the popular characters from popular Indian mythologies and oral traditions.

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Notes
Note-1:
http://www.squidoo.com/three-hundred#module1850794
Note-2:
Franco-Belgian comics are created in Belgium and France. These countries have a long tradition in comics and comic books, where they are known as BDs, an abbreviation of *bande dessinée* (literally *drawn strip*) in French and *stripverhalen* (literally *strip stories*) in Dutch. The Flemish Belgian comic books (originally written in Dutch) are influenced by francophone comics, yet have a distinctly different style. Many other European comics, especially Italian comics, are strongly influenced by Franco-Belgian comics. (from- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franco-Belgian_comics)
Note-3:
Inputs from- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Graphic_novel
Note-4:
Referencehttp://www.telegraphindia.com/1070916/asp/7days/story_8322578.asp
Note-5:
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Note-6:
The story of the sly fox, the Brahman *pundit* or the learned man and the stupid tiger which was made famous by Upendrakishore Raychowdhury goes as- A Brahman *pundit* was on his way through a forest one day when he met a tiger inside a cage. With various pleadings as the tiger made promises to shower wealth on the Brahman *pundit*, the latter opened the door of the cage to let the tiger out. Immediately after coming out, as the tiger proposed to eat the Brahman *pundit*, the latter felt betrayed and said it is not what he expected for his act of kindness. While the conversation was on, a sly fox happened to be passing by and intervened to understand the situation. As the Brahman *pundit* began explaining, the fox feigned ignorance and pretended not to comprehend the situation correctly. Thus, in an impulsive act of anger as the tiger went into the cage to demonstrate how the situation was when the Brahman *pundit* was walking by the cage, the sly fox immediately shut and bolted the cage door and taught the Brahman *pundit* a lesson of life- never to trust the cunning.
Note-7:
Note-8:
The Telegraph- Sunday, September 16, 2007 – Shuma Raha- “But perhaps the biggest challenge before Indian writers and illustrators is to come up with an original idiom, one that’s free from overtones of Western mythologies or the superhero conventions of the Marvel or DC Comics variety. “We need to tell our own stories,” stresses author Amruta Patil. Indeed, many of them are trying to do just that, because they feel, as Abhijit Gupta, professor of English at Jadavpur University, Calcutta does, that the graphic novel is really the literary genre of the future. “In a few years you will see a lot of quality graphic novels coming out of India,” he predicts.”

Note-9:
The September issue, 2011 of Rongmon children’s magazine carries a story from The Ramayana retold in the local language- Assamese.

Note-10:
http://www.indiatogether.org/2004/may/med-comics.htm

Note-11:
The story of Gupi Gyne and Bagha Byne by Upendrakishore Raychowdhury- revolves around a drummer called Bagha Byne and a singer called Gupi Gyne who were blessed by the king of ghosts to perform miracles when they sing and the stories revolve around their adventures as they set to rescue several kingdoms from the clutches of nasty and scheming kings and ministers. The story was also later adapted into a popular Bengali feature film by the grandson of Raychowdhury- Satyajit Ray- featuring noted artists like Rabi Ghosh, Tapen Chatterjee, Utpal Dutta, Santosh Dutta, Harindranath Chatterjee, Jahar Ray, Chinmay Ray, Santi Chatterjee and others) (1968)

Note-12:

Note-13: DECLARATION ON CULTURAL DIVERSITY Adopted by the 31st Session of the General Conference of UNESCO PARIS, 2 NOVEMBER 2001

Note-14:
Names include the ones whose novels have, till date been published as graphic novels in Bengali for children. As the market demand grows with time, more titles and authors are likely to join the team of graphic novels.

Note-15:

Note-16: Ibid

Note-17: All credits of scanned books and images are mentioned in the references

About Author: Dr. Lopamudra Maitra - Culture Studies specialist (Historian and Visual Anthropologist) and an Independent Media Consultant