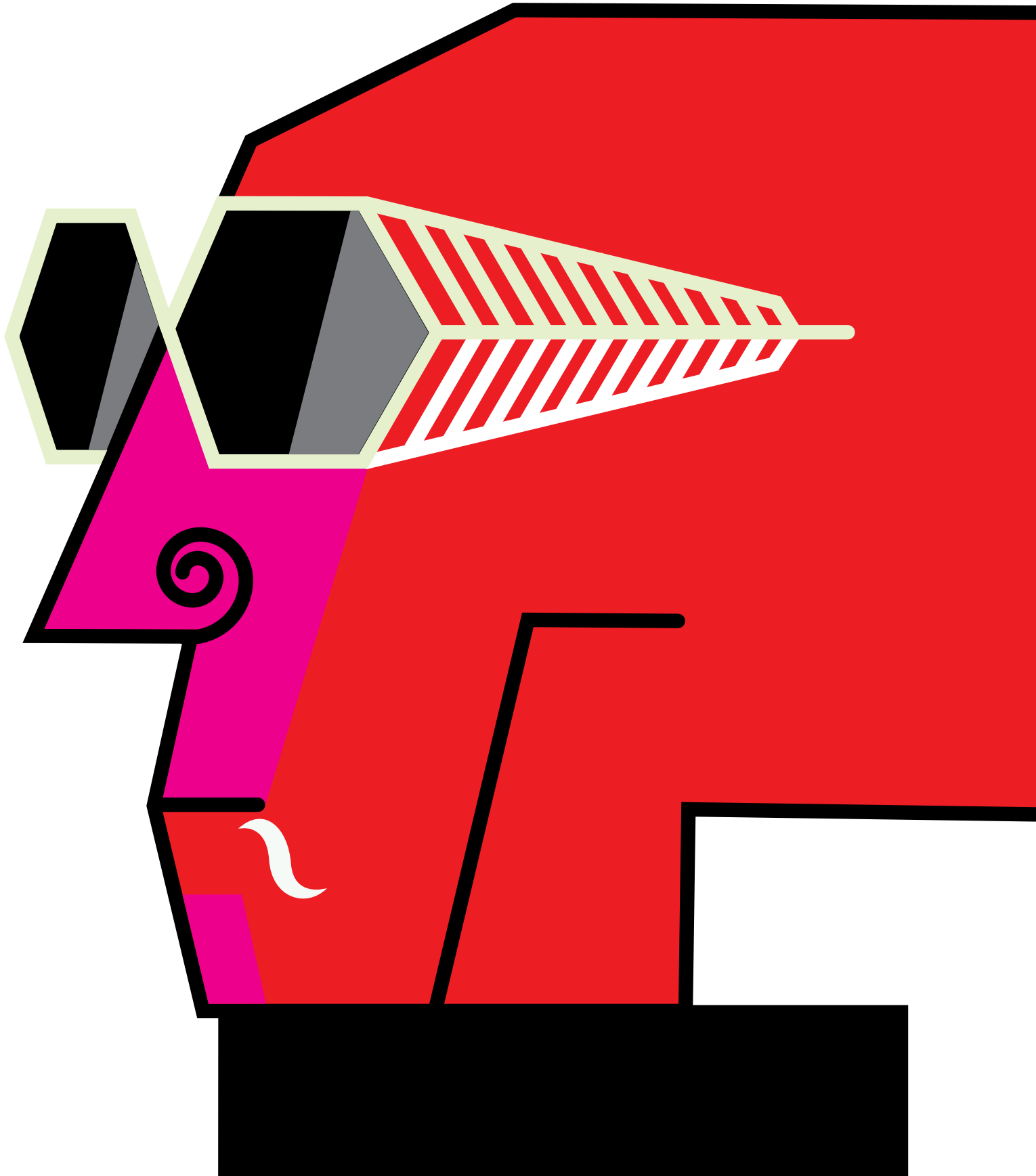




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SUPER NATURALLY INDIAN

BY SARITHA RAO RAYACHOTI

ARTIST AND DESIGNER, RAJKAMAL, MAKES THE CONCEPT OF LARGER-THAN-LIFE SUPERHEROES CHARMING AND DELECTABLE WITH HIS UNIQUELY INDIAN TOUCH



LADDOO BOY

REAL NAME

LALTU SEN

SUPER POWER

Can throw laddoos at great speed and with deadly accuracy

©RAJ

What do Mishti Bose, Chotu Lal and K. Rangaswamy have in common? They are all civilian identities of Indian superheroes called Jalebi Woman, Samosa Man and Idlii Man created by Rajkamal. I stumbled upon Raj's delightfully quirky celebration of Indian food on the Internet and spoke to him about his work, especially the Indian superheroes series.

Raj belongs to a family of painters – his father and brother are artists and his grandfather is known to have been one. 'My earliest memory is of paint and canvas. My father's studio was the living room. So the natural progression for me was to study the five-year visual arts course at the Government College of Art and Craft, Kolkata. Like every artist, I too started out with pencil and paint, but my transition to the digital medium happened as early as in 1995. Even though I did not own a computer back then, I used a digital board and a stylus,' he says.

Raj joined the advertising industry but realised that his heart was not in it. A fascination for economics combined with his visual arts training has led him to become a data visualiser for media publications. He plumbs boring statistics and conveys the essence of the data in simple and catchy info-graphics. 'People don't have time. Take my mother, for instance. If I had to present data about food in India in bar graphs and pie charts, she would simply turn the page. But if I made the pie look like a Chapathi, she would stop to read the data that accompanies it. It could also go on to become a conversation starter,' he adds.

I didn't realise until then that Raj was the illustrator behind the popular feature on American Superheroes re-imagined in India. This was not a reimagining in the simplistic sense, but about juxtaposing American superheroes with their unique idiosyncrasies in stereotypical Indian

contexts. The Invisible Man is glaringly conspicuous in his resplendent Rajasthani Panchrangi Safa, smoking a beedi and sporting gold studs in his ears. The demure Bengali bride during the Shubhodrishti ritual holds up leaves to cover her face. Only, the leaves look distinctly like the ones she is named after – Poison Ivy. Hulk is depicted as a Tamil Brahmin with a sacred thread, effectively merging the stereotype of a mild-mannered bloke with the question that perhaps there are vast reserves of unexpressed anger simmering under that furrowed, holy-ash-streaked brow. There was also the cheeky referencing of the Aam Aadmi Party with a slogan on the Gandhi cap of a DC comics superhero, proudly proclaiming in Hindi, मैं हूँ फ़्लैश (I am Flash).

Not content with importing American superheroes, Raj proceeded to then create a home-grown series of Indian superheroes. 'We love everything imported. We will pay Rs. 300 for a ticket to watch Caucasian and blonde superheroes on the large screen. The rest is ignored. The superheroes we've created in India are simply not imaginative enough, so I decided that the ones I create would have to be based on something that binds the country together. What could be better than food? If a sponge can be a beloved character abroad, why not a Laddoo in India?'



ARTIST AND DESIGNER RAJKAMAL AICH

His Indian superheroes brim with mischief and sport distinctly Indian symbols. Laltu Sen, a.k.a. Laddoo Boy possesses the power to throw laddoos at great speed and with deadly accuracy. He wears a monogrammed humble 'banian' with shorts, sports the common white rubber chappals with blue straps and has a giant Motichur Laddoo for a head. Jalebi Woman a.k.a. Mishti Bose is all feline grace in a body suit that shows off her navel. She wields a pauni (ladle), and is known to 'dunk enemies in sugar syrup after tying them in knots'.

Stylistically different, the Bengali Vampire is a dhoti-clad gaunt man with a hypnotic gaze. He has a rolled-up newspaper tucked under his arm and holds a bag of shopping that includes the Bengali staple, fish. Unlike other vampires who seek blood to sustain themselves, Rosomoy Ganguly sucks the sugar syrup out of the city's Rasagullas.

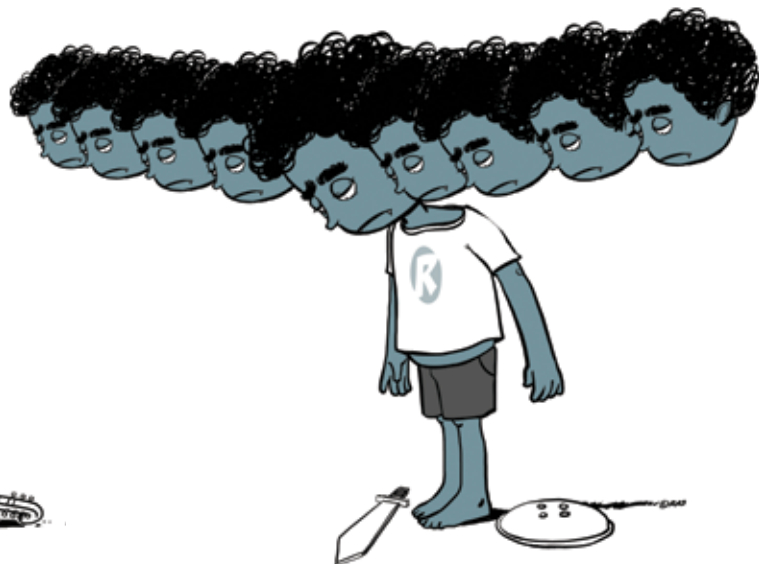
My personal favourite, for the Dahl-esque backstories he evokes, is Elasti Chharra, the stealer of underwear elastic. The lean hirsute character with the stealthy gait and mad glint wields a deadly pair of scissors in one hand and a freshly snipped elastic waistband in the other. Raj imagines him as '...a man



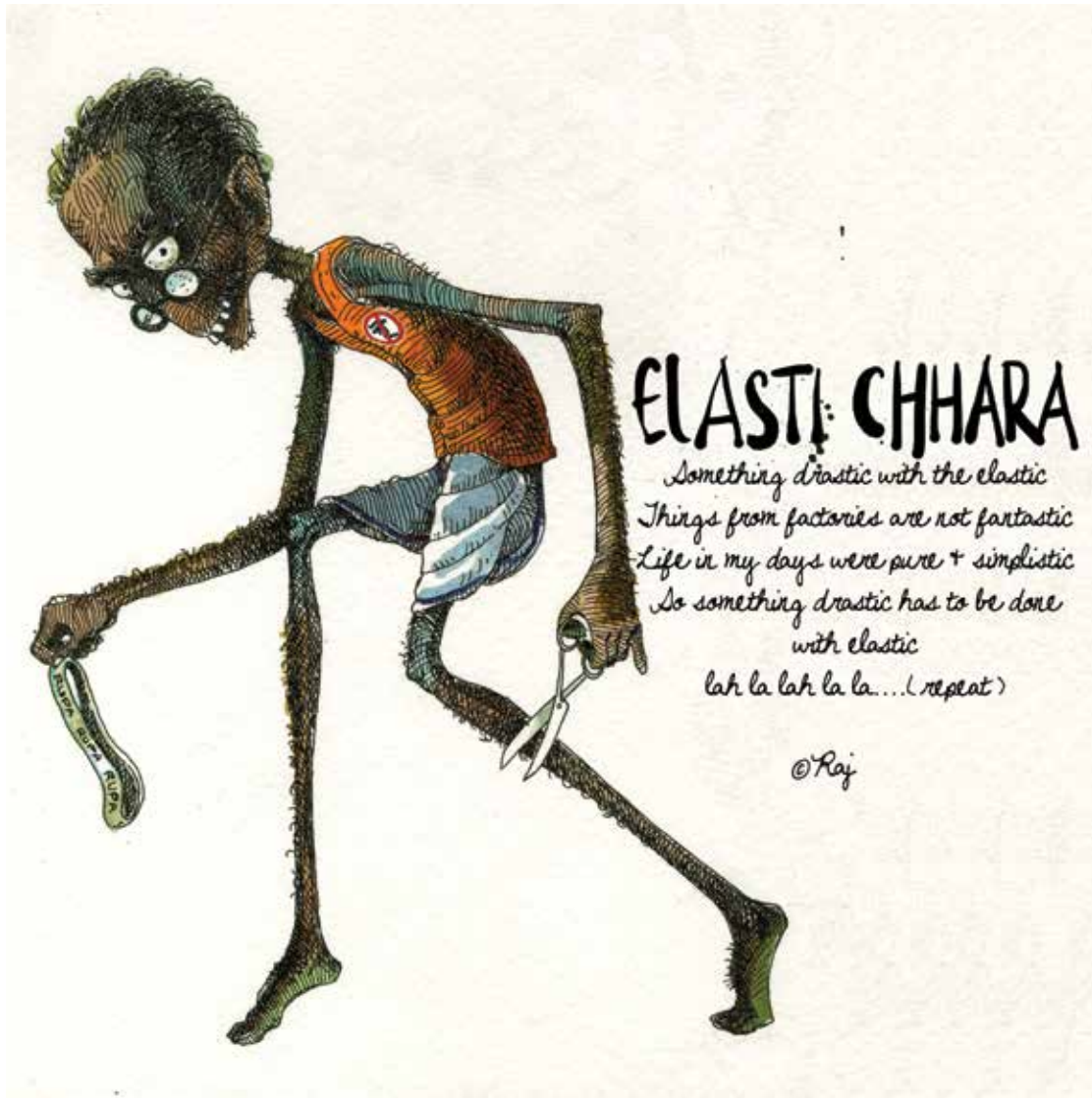
who used to make drawstring underwear. When elastic became the fastening medium of choice, he went bankrupt. He lurks now, in that strange place suspended between life and death, avenging his downfall by snipping the elastic from the underwear of his unsuspecting victims. He is not the typical villain as in the superhero universe, just a harmless nemesis who chases superheroes for the spandex in their costumes!



SARASWATI FROM THE SERIES CHILDREN OF GOD



RAAVAN FROM THE SERIES CHILDREN OF GOD



ELASTI CHHARRA FROM THE SERIES INDIAN SUPERHEROES

I discover that in Raj's work, perhaps because of his prowess with info-graphics, there is a strong sense of the narrative extending beyond the frame of the visual. There is a residue of child-like innocence in the reader's mind that is sometimes mischievous and sometimes poignant. His Children of God series is a startling example of the latter, a reminder of the power of the visual medium. 'We don't have a clear set of laws against child sexual abuse in India,' laments Raj. 'If we Indians believe that God resides in our children, there is a crying need to protect these little gods. I chose to portray each of them as a sad, abused child.'

Raj believes that if he also depicted the abusers in the same frame, the power of the visual would have got diluted. Interestingly, in this series that depicts

Ganesha, Shiva, Kali and Saraswati, he also chooses to include Raavan. 'I did think deeply about my choice of Raavan. As people, we like to stereotype not only people but also our gods and mythological characters. Raavan's adult self may have been the antagonist in Ramayana, but I like to think that he was also an innocent child at one point and just as vulnerable as the other gods I depicted.'

Raj chooses not to exhibit his work, and prefers using the social media to showcase his work. He is not keen on using his characters in a graphic novel as it is still a niche market in India, but he believes there are interesting possibilities with cinema or as an animated series. The Adventures of Laddoo Boy, anyone? I, for one, am totally game.



JALEBI WOMAN

— REAL NAME —

MISHTI BOSE

— SUPER POWER —

Dunks enemies into sugar syrup after tying them in knots

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