

In India, Gods Rule The 'Toon' Universe

Advertisement

Hindu Myth a Fount of Superheroes

By Rama Lakshmi
Washington Post Foreign Service
Wednesday, January 9, 2008; A11

NEW DELHI -- Eight-year-old Tejas Vohra is used to spending most of his after-school hours watching "Power Rangers," "Transformers" and "Looney Tunes." But these days, one of his favorite superheroes is a cool cartoon version of Hanuman, the monkey-headed Hindu god.

For thousands of years, Hindus have prayed to Hanuman in times of trouble, beseeching him to perform miraculous feats in their lives. Last week, the god was revealed to Tejas in a movie theater. In "The Return of Hanuman," the adored deity is reborn as a boy who goes to school in khaki shorts, uses a computer, combats pollution and, most important, smashes the bad guys to pulp.

"I loved the film because Hanuman is a boy like me and saves planet Earth," said Tejas, a tall, wide-eyed second-grader. "It was awesome to see the gods laughing, singing and flying planes. The fights were really good, and in the end Hanuman sets everything right."

A number of haloed Hindu gods and goddesses have debuted in the frenetic world of animation over the past five years. Their appearance marks a shift from a decades-long period in which Indian children grew up almost exclusively on American TV and movie characters, including [Mickey Mouse](#), Tom and Jerry, and Spider-Man.

To many parents, though, the "mytho-cartoons" are more than a novelty; they are a way to introduce the ancient tales to a generation that seems to be losing touch with its 5,000-year heritage.

"We grew up hearing these stories from our grandparents. But my son is learning the epics from animation films," said Tejas's mother, Madhu Vohra, 36. "I am happy that he's imbibing our cultural values in a fun way. He can relate to the tales better this way. And I don't need to monitor him closely when he watches Indian mythology."

Like many parents in [New Delhi](#), Vohra recently barred Tejas from watching "Crayon Shin-Chan," an animated Japanese TV series featuring a foul-mouthed 5-year-old boy.

In [India](#) these days, children have a dazzling array of pop-culture choices. Parents worry about them being drawn to Western lifestyles, playing on computers rather than spending time with their families, and gaining easy access to all that is considered cool around the world. When sons and daughters greet their elders with a "Hi," rather than folding their hands and offering the traditional greeting of "Namaste," parents cringe.

The new cartoon films address this parental angst by presenting Indian mythology and folklore as cool and trendy. Besides Hanuman, deities featured on animated TV series and movies have included the elephant-headed Ganesha and the blue-bodied, mischievous Krishna. Indian jungle stories and princely tales are also being produced for television and the home video market.

The heady cocktail of ancient culture and popular entertainment has also fueled a marketing blitz, with manufacturers introducing T-shirts, toys and video games based on the cartoon characters.

The new shows have their roots in the explosion of private television channels in India more than a decade ago. It was then that marketers began to search for an opportunity to put uniquely Indian stories in cartoon format.

In 2001, the Cartoon Network broadcast the first Indian mythology show, "Pandavas," a version of a tale from the classical Hindu epic "Mahabharata" about the travails of five princely brothers. Since then, the channel, which reaches more than 27 million homes, has shown seven Indian animation series, along with international programs.

The latest, "Krishna," was rated the most popular series shown on any children's channel in India last year, topping a series based on the [Harry Potter](#) books, according to Anshuman Misra, the managing director of Turner International India, which owns the Cartoon Network and Pogo channels.

Misra said it's clear why the myth-based cartoons have become so popular.

"They are successful because there is an element of familiarity with these mythological characters, the stories are timeless, and Indian parents actively encourage the children to watch them," he said.

A recent study by the Confederation of Indian Industry reported that the nascent Indian animation industry, now worth \$285 million, is expected to be worth almost \$1 billion by 2010. Because of low overhead costs, India is also emerging as an outsourcing hub for international companies such as [Walt Disney](#) and [Paramount](#) that make animated films.

"But there is a dearth of skilled talent in India, and we end up bringing people from Korea and America each time," said Hari Varma, chief creative officer at Toonz Animation India, which worked on "The Return of Hanuman." "So we are opening animation schools across India now."

"Hanuman" is the second film to take a revered Hindu story line, tweak it, put it in a 21st-century context and bring the gods down to Earth. It shows the gods talking in colloquial "Hinglish," a fashionable hybrid of Hindi and English. The deities play the guitar instead of the traditional sitar, use the Internet and dodge bullets as if they were Neo, the hero of the U.S. movie "The Matrix."

Hanuman flies into space, watches over [New York](#) with a torch like the [Statue of Liberty](#)'s, captures [Osama bin Laden](#) and straightens the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Other characters speak to Hanuman using irreverent phrases such as "Chill, dude" or "Have you lost it, dude?"

Another big box office hit last year, "My Friend Ganesha," blended animation and live-action scenes to show the little elephant-headed god snowboarding and being taught to speak English by a nerdy schoolboy.

The next challenge for the Hindu "toon" gods is especially up-to-date. A forthcoming film features Hanuman going to [Manhattan](#), where he helps the [FBI](#) battle terrorists.

"Hanuman is the original superhero. He is thousands of years older than Superman, Spider-Man and Batman. He is a brand to reckon with among Indian children today," said Nadish Bhatia, general manager of marketing at Percept Picture Co., which co-produced "The Return of Hanuman."

"Every society is looking for heroes, and we want to make Hanuman global," Bhatia said. "If the Coca-Cola brand can come to India and connect with our sensibilities, why can't Hanuman go to New York?"

Post a Comment

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login](#) | [Register](#)

Submit

Comments that include profanity or personal attacks or other inappropriate comments or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

© 2008 The Washington Post Company

Ads by Google

[10 Rules Losing Belly Fat](#)

Lose 9 lbs every 11 Days with these 10 Easy Rules of Diet & Fat Loss.

www.FatLoss4Idiots.com

[What's New Scooby-Doo](#)

Own the Complete Third Season on DVD. 13 Episodes. Order Today!

www.ScoobyDoo.com

[Cartoon Character Tones](#)

Get Cartoon Character ringtones. Complimentary ringtones!

CartoonCharacter.AnyTonez.com