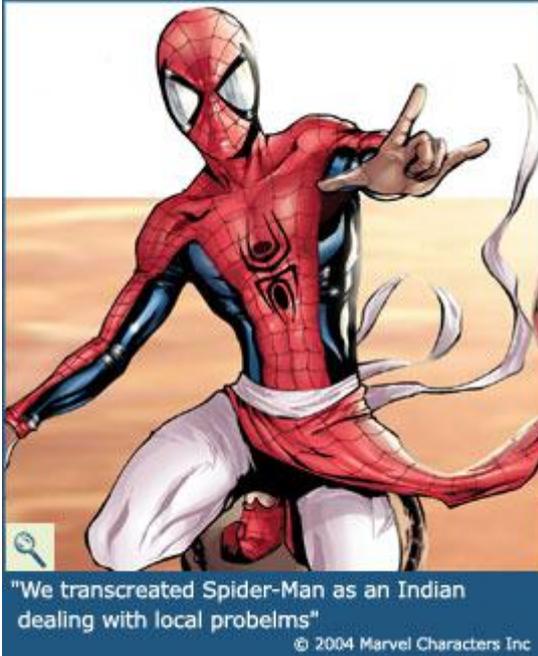


World wide web

23 Dec 2004



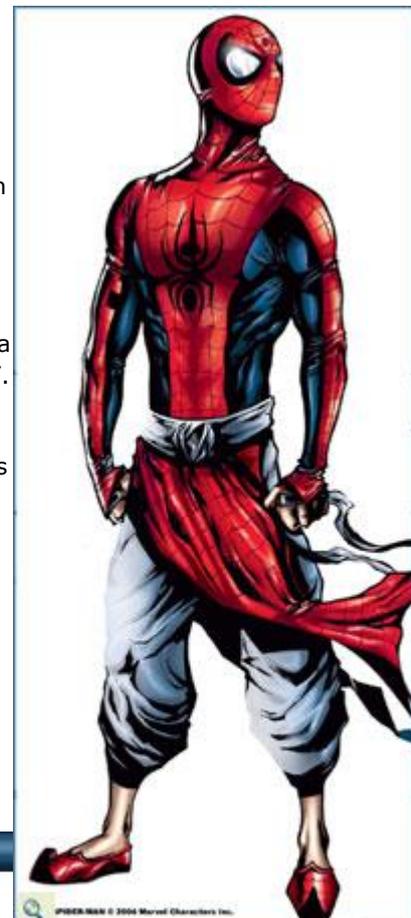
This month, the comic-book and film hero Spider-Man 'moves' to India. The first issue of *Spider-Man India* has just been released on sale there. This new comic book is a touchstone for the kinds of highly sophisticated globalisation processes that are now becoming much more common-place in the Twenty-First Century.

There is, of course, nothing new about simply exporting popular books or film products to different countries. Books are translated, while films are often sub-titled or dubbed, into a foreign language. Sometimes the names of the characters are even changed. For instance, as far back as the 1930s, the classic American comedy duo 'Laurel and Hardy' were re-named 'Dick and Doof' in Germany, 'Gog and Cokke' in Denmark and 'Crik and Crok' in Italy. However, *Spider-Man India* now takes the process a stage further, both in terms of how the property is licensed and produced; and also in the multiple ways in which the story has been entirely re-imagined by Indian writers and artists to show Indian

characters in a local setting. *Spider-Man India* displays some truly fascinating aspects of contemporary globalisation.

Marvel Entertainment Group, the owners of American comic book series *The Amazing Spider-Man*, have leased their character to an Indian firm. Based in Bangalore, Gotham Entertainment Group is South Asia's leading provider of international comic books and magazines. Marvel already uses Gotham to publish translated versions of its popular comic titles, like *The Hulk* and *X-Men*; the pictures are not re-drawn, though, and the action still takes place in America. Now, they have granted Gotham the freedom to make whatever changes they can to Spider-Man in order to give him the greatest possible appeal to young Indians. As a result, the new comic depicts Spider-Man as a young Indian boy growing up in Mumbai (Bombay) instead of as a New York teenager! Rather than a translation, Gotham Entertainment Group calls this a 'transcreation'.

This transcreation is far more than a straight-forward translation of the original Marvel product. The company are sensitive to the tastes of the consumption culture that they are appealing to. Notably, Spider-man's uniform has even been changed, to reflect traditional Indian dress. The greater level of attention that Transnational Corportations (TNCs) such as Marvel are beginning to pay to the tailoring of their products for local markets is of growing interest to geographers and there is even a name for it - *glocalisation*. Other examples include recent Japanese blockbuster films that have been re-shot in the US using American actors, such as horror film *The Ring* (2002) and *The Grudge* (2004). The classic movie *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) is a much earlier example of this trend, re-inventing Japan's *The Seven Samurai* (1954) for the US box



Spider-Man India wearing the dhoti, a loincloth worn by Hindu men in India.
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office. Gotham Entertainment Group have their own name for this process of glocalisation – they call it ‘reverse globalisation’, as they attempt to ‘make an international hero also a local hero’, according to their press release.

Glocalisation

By ‘making an international hero a local hero’, the Indian publishers are following a rising trend that human geographers are becoming increasingly interested in – what geographer Peter Jackson (University of Sheffield) describes as ‘local consumptions in a globalizing world’.

(1) Glocalisation has developed out of the local sourcing of parts by Transnational Corporations when establishing branch plants overseas. This involves using components from local suppliers to assemble ‘global products’ closer to the markets where they will be sold (e.g. US firm Ford’s European division build cars using parts that were made in Europe).

(2) As demand for their products has begun to grow in the countries where manufacturing is taking place, TNCs have started to customise their products for sale in these local markets in an attempt to boost sales. Glocalisation has become an important aspect of any firm’s decision to enter the global market-place. It helps a firm to be accepted as part of the local business community. Customising the product to meet indigenous tastes may also aid its diffusion into local markets. It is therefore an economic, political and cultural strategy.

(3) Peter Jackson explains that ‘for all the corporate energy that has gone into creating a single ‘global’ message and despite the increasing transnational flow of people, money and artefacts, cultural homogenisation is still far from being achieved. Rather than rolling their existing products across a geographically undifferentiated market, producers have had to adapt their ‘global’ brands to a variety of local conditions. Paradoxically, then, ‘globalisation’ has itself required companies to adopt a variety of localizing strategies in order to succeed commercially’. He uses the example of Cadbury’s Chocolate, who have significantly changed their chocolate recipe in China to appeal to local tastes – reducing the sugar content but increasing cocoa levels.

Questions for students Can you explain why (1) cars have to be assembled differently for sale in American and British markets and (2) fast food items need to be altered for sale in different countries?

Note for teachers For more information, see the latest special ‘globalizing’ issue of our journal *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* (the quote from Peter Jackson is taken from here). It is a set of challenging new papers from leading geographers that attempts to tackle a range of local/global issues.



The stated aim of Gotham Entertainment Group is to 'reinvent the origin of Spider-Man so that he is an Indian boy growing up in Mumbai and dealing with local problems and challenges...which readers in this market can more readily identify with'. Gotham's president, Sharad Devarajan, adds that 'for Indian readers to see this new version of Spider-Man bouncing off rickshaws and climbing local monuments like the Gateway of India will be great fun and hopefully bring in many new readers' (*Comics International*, November 2004). The greatest change is to Spider-Man's origin. In the US version, young Peter Parker gains his amazing powers when he is bitten by a radioactive spider while attending a science show. In the new story, which is deeply rooted in Indian mythology, an ancient mystical being visits young Pavitr Prabhakar and magically creates his super-powers. Devarajan describes this as 'a synthesis allowing us to interweave the ethnic and mythological themes of India into Spider-Man's origin and powers'.

Spider-Man gets glocalised (or 'transcreated')

	Spider-Man USA	Spider-Man India
Secret identity	Peter Parker	Pavitr Prabhakar
Girlfriend	Mary Jane Watson	Meera Jain
Family members	Aunt May and Uncle Ben	Bhim and Maya
Backdrop	New York	Mumbai
Origin of powers	Bitten by a radioactive spider at a science fair	Visited by a mystic being
Arch enemy	A mad, powerful businessman dressed in a goblin suit and calling himself 'The Green Goblin'	An demon from ancient Indian myth that looks like a green goblin

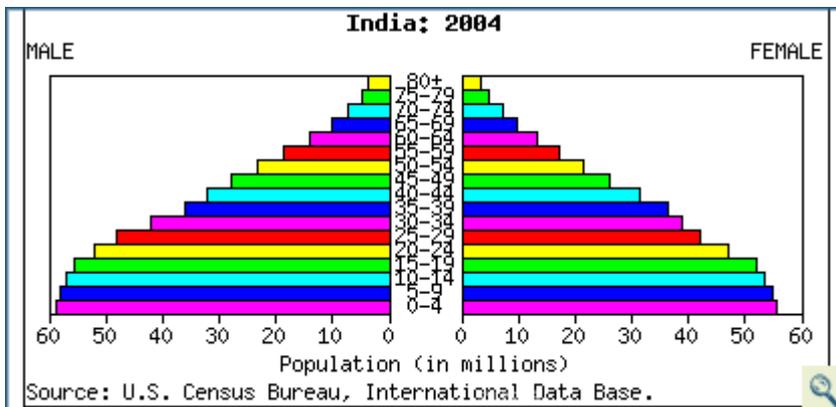
What historical changes have driven all of this?

What drives the globalising and glocalising behaviour of modern industries? Why has Marvel Entertainment Group - a firm whose activities span Secondary (printing and manufacturing) Tertiary (sales) and Quaternary (innovation and invention) - sought out this new market in Asia, in partnership with Gotham Entertainment Group? Part of the answer lies with changing consumption patterns taking place in established consumer markets in the US, the EU and Japan; the rest of the answer lies with demographics and the changing population size, structure and wealth of India.

The American comic book industry has been experiencing a growing crisis of consumption (falling sales) since the 1970s. During the industry's heyday of the 1940s, the monthly print-run of DC Comics'

Superman title exceeded one million copies! In total, around 12 million comics were printed in the US every month during the post-war years. But by the 1980s, only around 250,000 copies of a typical title such as *The Amazing Spider-Man* were being printed each month. In 2004, a popular mainstream title printed in the US is now expected to sell only between 50,000 and 100,000 worldwide; and many regularly published titles sell fewer copies. Much of this is due to changing tastes amongst American and European teenagers, who prefer to spend their money on games consoles and DVDs.

To survive financially, the owners of Spider-Man have had to focus on making films in recent years (with Toby McGuire as the super-hero). However, now they can see a chance to re-capture the lost comic-book market of the 1940s, but this time in India! India offers similar conditions to the US and Europe in past decades. It has a massive youthful population (see [India's dynamic population pyramid](#)), whose literacy levels and purchasing power are now growing but who mostly cannot yet afford more expensive consumer items such as games consoles. Comics are a cheap but exciting and colourful product that is starting to sell very well. Speaking to the magazine *Comics International*, Gotham president Sharad Devarajan admits to the company's 'desire to aggressively build... comic-books in the Indian market'. If sales are successful, it will, of course, be good news for the Marvel Entertainment Group whose shareholders will be set do very well out of the new licensing arrangement, as Spider-Man's army of new Indian fans starts to grow.



A-level: writing about Spider-Man India

Most Specifications require extended writing that deals with Global Shift – the movement of branch plants and back offices into LEDCs and NICs. Increasingly, it is important to also address the other side of the coin – the emergence of markets in countries such as India.

Transnational Corporations such as Marvel Entertainment are becoming just as interested in countries like India, with its huge population and a rapidly growing middle class, as places to sell things to, and not just as places to make things in. For instance, the following essay is taken from an Edexcel Specification B paper (unit 4) from 2002.

'With reference to one or more named Transnational Corporation, examine their role as global producers and employers' (16 marks)

The title invites consideration of how Marvel is increasingly producing products for Indians to buy – so do not just write a single-dimensional account of how Indian or Chinese workers are used by TNCs to produce cheap items for sale in MEDCs like the UK! The essay also invites consideration of how TNCs work in partnership with companies in LEDCs (as Marvel works with Gotham) and are not always direct employers.

Written by Dr Simon Oakes, who marks A-levels but still reads comics. The RGS-IBG extends thanks to Dez Skinn and Mike Conroy at Comics International for their assistance with the writing of this article; also Sharad Devarajan at Gotham Entertainment Group.

www.spidermanindia.com to view or buy Spider-Man India, written by Sharad Devarajan and Suresh Seetharaman; illustrated by Jeevan Kang.