

Sketching laughs on the Web

Webcomics rooted in Indian sensibilities and inspired by varied subjects — from Bollywood to 'Malgudi Days' — are gaining ground. Meet a growing tribe of young Indian artists who are working on tickling your funny bone

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TIMES NEWS NETWORK

About a year ago, Sahil Rizwan was killing time on Facebook by posting notes on the most unintentionally funny Bollywood movies he had seen. Heartened by the response he received from friends, he started a blog, thevigilidiot.blogspot.com. This featured webcomics spoofing the latest Bollywood releases; some poked fun at the *sas-bahu* sagas on the telly. When the site traffic began to mount, his roommates created thevigilidiot.com. This time around, Rizwan decided to focus solely on Bollywood. Days after a film released, he would update the site with a hilarious webcomic related to it. Earlier this month, he completed a year of creating webcomic spoofs. Over the past year, his site pulled in over 7,20,000 page views. "I have no formal education in art or film studies. My only real qualification is the fact that I've seen a lot of movies and have a half-decent sense of humour," says the Nojda-based 22-year-old BBA graduate, who also works as a freelance writer.

Those who dabble in the media have taken to the web owing to the ease of operation. "I have been doodling since my school days. I started drawing webcomics when I found out how easy it is to publish content through blogging platforms," says Anshul Maheshwari, 25, who lets his creative juices flow on brainstuck.com while juggling his day job at a logistics company in Delhi.

The Indian webcomic scene — fyyoufools.com, brainstuck.com and arbit-mba.com are among the most popular sites — is relatively nascent, but the numbers are steadily growing. "Social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter help popularise a webcomic," says Saad Akhtar, whose fyyoufools.com gets an average of 70,000 hits a day. "If I come up with something people like, it gets posted and tweeted about and that boosts traffic."

Akhtar is one of the rare webcomic writer-artists with a design background — he is a new media

designer from the National Institute of Design. The 31-year-old says he can't draw, so he works with photographs on Adobe Photoshop. "I just tried it out a couple of times, but now it has become my style," says Akhtar, who works as an interaction designer with a software company in Delhi. Akhtar's site is a rant about "life and its irritations".

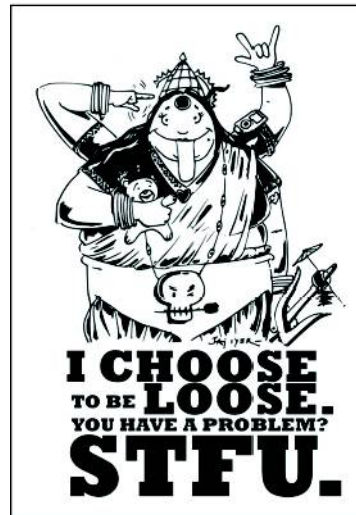
Like Akhtar, Jai Iyer, a Bangalore-based blogger and webcomic artist, does not restrict himself to one theme. His style, inspired by the Japanese cartooning style of manga, is called Inga. He started by drawing a

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cartoon in support of the Pink Chaddi campaign against the infamous Sri Ram Sena. Iyer hosted his cartoon on a temporary blog and it received thousands of hits. That's when he introduced art on his blog iyer-matter.wordpress.com. "I like to write and illustrate quaint, quirky short stories set in everyday India. It's an urban Malgudi-ish theme that explores, as R K Narayan once said, the 'extraordinary ordinariness' of our lives," says the 32-year-old IIM-B graduate. "I chose this theme, because it comes naturally to me. I'm fascinated by autorickshaws, typewriters, telephones, post boxes, and the old man in the park who diligently goes to laughter club meetings every morning. I like to embed references to many things in my comics, so that they work at many levels for my readers."

Theme-based webcomics, like [vigilidiot](http://vigilidiot.com) and [**The Indian webcomic scene is relatively nascent, but the numbers are steadily growing. Unlike in the West, they do not generate substantial revenue for the writer-artists, but they do give them a platform to attract more lucrative assignments**](http://arbitm-</p>
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LIFE'S MOSTLY HA-HA, HEE-HEE: Bangalore-based Jai Iyer's cartoons draw inspiration from everyday incidents (left) and events like the Pink Chaddi campaign (above)



COCKING A SNOOK: Saad Akhtar's fyyoufools.com spoofs everything from ads to films and the media

ba have the distinct advantage of a more loyal, though seemingly niche, audience. The B-school fraternity is hooked to the entire cast of the Arbit family, which includes Arbit Choudhury, a B-school comic character, his classmate Antique the topper, his engineering friend TekNik who works in an IT company, his girl friend Maya, a junior Perplex Singh and Prof LR. Started by Nikhil Kulkarni, Shubham Choudhury, and Hemantkumar Jain, who met as MBA students at NITIE, Mumbai in 2004, the webcomic has featured 100 comic strips since and has a mailing list of 3,000-plus fans.

Inspiration for the humour comes from comics like Dilbert, sitcoms like *Friends*, *Seinfeld* and *Two and a Half Men*, animation shows like the *Simpsons* and *South Park*, Ricky Gervais audiobooks, British comedies like *Monty Python*, *Black Adder* and *Fawlty Towers*, and international webcomics like abstrusegoose.com, savegechickens.com and whattheduck.com.

Unlike in the West, none of the Indian webcomics generate substantial revenue for their writers. "There's no way I can live off the Google Ads money that the site pulls in," says Rizwan. But it does give these writer-artists a platform to attract more lucrative assignments. Rizwan's career as a freelancer got a boost with assignments from cricinfo.com and *Mumbai Mirror*. Akhtar and Iyer too have received offers from authors (for the graphic quotient in their books), advertising agencies, magazines, newspapers and portals. But owing to their day jobs, they take up only a select few assignments. "We need more platforms to popularise webcomics and publishers need to be ready to pay to publish them. It can survive without money, but it can't grow without it," says Jain of [arbitmba](http://arbitmba.com). "We came across a couple of occasions where the publishers were surprised to hear that we expected money in return for comics to be published."

Merchandising is one option to rake in the moolah. The [arbitmba](http://arbitmba.com) team plans to monetise by getting placed in print media publications as well as providing Arbit Choudhury as a mascot for events or brands. Publishing their work, of course, seems like a natural culmination of these artists' efforts. Iyer, for instance, wants to publish the Inga series someday. But none of the webcomic writer-artists seem too keen on running a strip in newspapers or turning their series into an animation show on TV. "In my webcomic, I can be politically incorrect. After all, my site is not meant for children. But in India, things get messy very soon," says Akhtar. "The moment you get on TV or a newspaper, there are restrictions in terms of content and size. That takes the fun away." Iyer loves the fact that his blog allows him to experiment, tune his art and get instant feedback: "It's an invaluable medium that way," he says and would not trade it for anything. ■