

Rowling trophies



Just get a load on these amazing numbers behind the Harry Potter franchise: Twenty years, 18 billion dollars in value, seven books, eight films, translated into 68 languages, over 500 million copies sold (and still selling) worldwide, the largest selling book series ever and -- this has to be the most impressive part of the statistics -- none of which has been read or seen by me.

When the first Harry Potter book was released as children's book, I had one look at it and placed it back in the shelves because it did not have the thing that I always believed defined a children's book: Pictures. Seriously, when we were children, children's book meant: Comics. We wouldn't go near books that had large chunks of prose. Understanding this only, they started putting pics in between texts in school history and civics books. Thanks to this, we slowly began to develop interest in reading. And that also helped us understand a big truth about B R Ambedkar: In certain photos, he looked like actor Ranga Rao.

Also, in our formative years, we read our comics in Tamil and -- today's youngsters in this State may not believe this -- it is pretty cool to read stuff in your mother tongue. Anyway, at that time many of us didn't know that some of those comic characters had different names in their English originals. We didn't know their original names because we didn't know that they were from English originals.

Rani Comics and Muthu Comics, which published these comics series, essentially made our childhood and we read them with unremitting focus as we did not allow ourselves to be distracted by television. Probably, we were also helped by the fact that there was no television at that time, because we were reading them in the late '70s.

Here are some of the 'Tamil' comics characters that filled our childhood:

Irumbukkai Mayavi: As can be made out from the name, the character's singular specialty was his iron hand, which when he shoved into any electric power slot instantly tripped the connection and the whole household immediately became dark using which he escaped. Not really, what really happened was when he came in contact with a power line, Irumbukkai Mayavi immediately became invisible and only his artificial metal hand could be spotted hovering around. With this talent, today he could have been a great draw as a Bigg Boss contestant.

Mayavi's lone metal iron hand also doubled as a communication instrument, the fingers could fire off bullets, it also, in a trice, came in handy as a remote control for an array of devices. As you'd have deduced, the hand basically belonged to Rajinikanth.

Irumbukkai Mayavi was a secret agent and using his special power he solved many crimes, busted many gangs by becoming invisible in a jiffy. But they eventually retired him from service, most probably because they couldn't afford the power bill he ran up.

Mandrake: Mandrake's talent was magic, which, when you come down to it, you will agree is a pretty useful skill to have for solving crimes. In fact, we must wonder why we don't ask our police personnel to learn magic.

Mandrake had a huge package at his command, and that included illusion, hypnotism, teleportation, levitation, shapeshifting and the priceless ability to block tele-marketing calls. Okay, we made the last one up, but you get the drift. Mandrake could do anything and had skills to crack any crime within seconds, but he generally waited till -- truly a good soul -- the last page to finish off the baddies. He could also make things disappear. One moment you will see, say, a big huge building, and then Mandrake will 'gesture hypnotically' and, voila, the cartoonist will forget to draw the same building in the immediate next panel.

Despite limitless powers, Mandrake also could fall back on the muscular strength of Lothar, an African prince of seven nations, who for some reason moonlighted as the sidekick of Mandrake. Lothar, like all men of great physical strength, had the tendency to wear shirts six sizes smaller to what would generally fit him. In that sense, he was the Salman Khan of the cartoon universe.

Another of the persons who was a big part of Mandrake world was his cook Hojo. But he was a martial arts expert too and could speak six different languages. He used all this to camouflage his main work which was to head the international crime-busting agency called Inter-Intel. After Hojo quit comics he moved on to the greener pasture of the Vijayakanth character in Narasimha.

Mandrake's father Theron, a magic guru, is several hundreds of years old, and that would make him just a couple of years younger to Advani and Karunanidhi.

I would also like to write about other comic hero characters like CID Lawrence and Judo David (Codename Barracuda and Frolo) and Phantom (another of those wonderful superheroes who never figured out that undies were not meant for wearing over the pants), but have run out of space because Mandrake just gestured hypnotically.