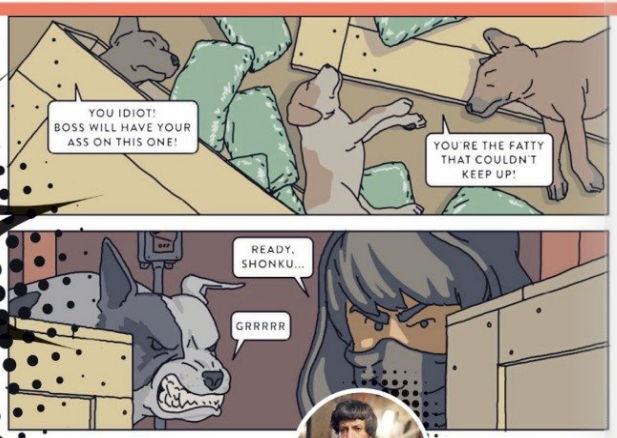
Desi 'John Wick', drawn to action



American comic book artist Brittain Peck collaborates with actor Anshuman Jha to create a comic book franchise based on his film on an animal-loving vigilante, Lakadbaggha

AKSHITA MAHESHWARI

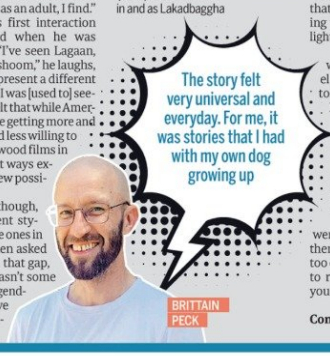
IN A world packed with larger-than-life superheroes who want to avenge their loved ones and save the world at the same time, comes our simple hero Arjun. He is a humble martial arts teacher with a love for dogs, who turns into a hero to save his four-legged friends. In that, Lakadbaggha (2023) was a unique film, but that's not where it stops. Producer and actor Anshuman Jha has now collaborated with American comic book artist, Brittain Peck to bring us Lakadbaggha: The Prologue, a first-of-its-kind graphic novel adaptation of an Indian film series.

Arjun, our protagonist, turns into a vigilante upon uncovering an illegal animal meat smuggling ring. This was the first draw for Peck, who himself has a pet dog, Ozzie. Peck says, "I met Anshuman for the first time at an alumni meeting in North Carolina. His wife, Sierra, and I were in the same programme at different times. They're just a really delightful couple. And we had just the best time. Even if this project had not come out of that meeting, I felt like I made a new friend, which is kind of rare in adulthood. I don't know if it's different in India. I think in the US we're a little bit more socially scattered from each other. It is harder to make friends as an adult, I find."

Peck had his first interaction with Bollywood when he was studying film. "I've seen Lagaan, Agni Varsha, Dishoom," he laughs, "These films represent a different voice than what I was [used to] seeing in the US. I felt that while American movies were getting more and more similar and less willing to take risks, Bollywood films in a lot of different ways excited me with new possibilities."

Films here, though, are very different stylistically than the ones in Hollywood. When asked how he bridged that gap, Peck says, "It wasn't some grand, heroic, legendary story of love on a mountaintop. I could connect with it from my own experiences, as an everyday person and even as an American. The story felt very universal and everyday. For me, it was stories that I had with my own dog growing up," he says, his face instantly lighting up while referring to Ozzie.

A panel from the graphic novel Lakkadbaggha: The Prologue; (inset) Anshuman Jha in and as Lakadbaggha



Peck was inspired by Tintin when drawing this graphic novel. He was absolutely delighted to discover Tintin's popularity in India. "If you look at American comics in the 1990s, the heroes just kept getting bigger, muscles on top of muscles, everything was extra. The characters, the panels, the words — everything had to pop out," he says.

"Looking back, some pages were actually hard to read, because there were too many details, it was too overwhelming. The intent was to really pull you in, overwhelm your senses, much like an American action movie — explosions, cars, always trying to one-up each other. That's fun, but when I look at Indian comics, I notice a different kind of storytelling. They're easy to dive into, clear and simple. Visually, that's something I really like. That kind of simplicity, that's what I aim for in my own work."

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On his trip to India, Peck visited various comic book stores and stocked up his collection. He shows us some of his favourites. "I love everything about Chacha Chaudhary comics; the sound effects, some of the panels just made me giggle," Peck continues, cracking up as he recalls some of the jokes, "His big friend with no shirt does ridiculous things like riding a rocket, or when a villain crashes and catches on fire, all his clothes burn off and he runs away naked. There was a levity to everything. When I came across Amar Chitra Katha — I've known a little about Indian folklore, legends, and stories — I realised I have so much more to read and learn."

An extract from the graphic novel Lakadbaggha: The Prologue

When asked what's in store for sequels, he says, "We really want to do things that the films don't include, even things that the film cannot include. There's just a different experience when you sit with a book. It excites me to see kids reading comics; something's going on in their mind, they're experiencing something that's taking them to a new place, but their mind is the vehicle for it. That's why we love making these books so much."

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The hills are calling

SUCHETA CHAKRABORTY

Second Chance, which releases in the theatres this week, centres on a young urban woman who finds healing, nourishment and renewed hope among the Himalayan mountains and its people


SUBHADRA MAHAJAN AND SWAPNIL S SONAWANE

I'M A PRODUCT of two very different worlds and I wanted to tell a story that would combine them," filmmaker Subhadra Mahajan tells us when we ask her of the genesis of her debut feature Second Chance which premiered at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival last year and is gearing for a theatrical release on June 13. Mahajan, "a Pahari kid", was born and raised in Himachal and spent a large part of her childhood in the Kullu Valley where the film is shot, only later adopting the life of a city person as she settled in Mumbai for higher studies and work. In her new film, faced with a sudden crisis, a 20-something protagonist Nia (Dheera Johnson), an urbanite, escapes to her family's summer home in the hills only to gradually open herself up to the people and ways of the Himalayan winter life.

The film's primary location, a quaint, lonesome house where Nia heals and re-centres herself, assumes the significance of a character in the film. A house in Manali, known locally as the Birla house, was chosen in favour of initial suggestions to use Mahajan's own home in Shimla for the shoot ("Shimla feels like a city"). "It was a miracle that the house was left pretty much the way it is [in the film] and it's got a huge orchard estate surrounding it, which means that there's not a lot of construction. So, it feels like a bit of a time capsule," says Mahajan. Its remoteness helped to build the film's soundscape, adds cinematographer Swapnil S Sonawane, known for his work on Sacred Games and films like Monica O My Darling, Newton, and Superboys of Malegaon.

Mahajan, who was a co-writer on the Pan Nalin-directed Angry Indian Goddesses, speaks of Iranian New Wave filmmakers like Majid Majidi and Abbas Kiarostami, and English filmmaker Andrea Arnold with her "imperfect young female protagonists" as inspirations for Second Chance. She believed the story's setting had to relay the idea of human insignificance when faced with the immensity of nature, as well as that of the inevitable passage of time "so that you can leave behind whatever's happened and move on, which is the crux of giving yourself a second chance. For me, I felt that that would be best expressed in the Pir Panjal Range." The other aspect, she says, was the culture of its inhabitants — a hard-working people whose wisdom is disguised in humour and who live by a gentle philosophy where they are openly giving to all, whether those from their community or outsiders. "This would be a great atmosphere for a person who's healing from betrayal, hurt and trauma to regain faith in life."

In Second Chance, a young urban protagonist travels to her family's summer home in the hills and gradually opens herself up to the people and ways of the Himalayan winter life

Second Chance's cast is made up of performers who have all faced a film camera for the first time. While Johnson's strong presence, energy, and whimsicality stood out for Mahajan, the rest of the characters were cast from the local community. This was because Mahajan sought a degree of authenticity — coming down to details like pigmentation on cheeks or facial lines caused by years of exposure to the harsh Himalayan sun.

The film is also shot in black and white, a decision that lends a starkness to the natural beauty of its location. Sonawane says, "The way black and white translates in a close-up is that you end up looking into a character's eyes more rather than getting distracted by everything else."

"I think the reason is because I was pretty certain I'm telling a story about healing, and Nia's journey is about finding light at the end of a long, dark tunnel," adds Mahajan. She points out that the locals of the region dress colourfully and with colour photography, there was a risk of reducing them to ethnographic representations of a tribe. "Once all that is stripped away, they become these characters with all these layers of emotion."

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Why am I watching this?

In a digital age, an increasing number of netizens are consuming real-life gore or violence — whether it is on Instagram, Reddit or the countless corners of the Internet's echo chambers. What's the charm?

TANISHA BANERJEE

SHE was just 12 when she stumbled upon a video of a girl being burnt alive. The flames licked at the girl's body as she screamed and ran in agony — the camera held steady, unflinching. That moment changed something in her. Now a recent graduate, Neha Gupta (name changed) finds herself drawn to graphic real-life content online — from brutal CCTV footage to actual decapitations. And she's not alone. Across Telegram channels, Instagram reels, and Reddit threads, people are either seeking or stumbling upon unfiltered violence, often without a single warning. In a world saturated with dread, what does it mean to keep choosing horror?

For Gupta, the fascination with violent content is a paradox — she fears it, yet returns to it again and again. Even though she began consuming such content to analyse the psychology behind the actions, it soon turned out to be her guilty pleasure. "It's a love-hate thing," she admits. "I get scared, but there's also this rush of adrenaline." What began as a deep dive into true crime documentaries evolved into stumbling upon gore accounts on Instagram and graphic CCTV footage. "Sometimes I block them. Then I go back looking for them." The fear isn't fictional but tethered to reality. "I live alone in a PG," she adds. "When I watch these videos, I empathise with the victims in a strange way. It keeps me grounded to the fact that anyone can fall prey to brutality."

Mouli Chakraborty, on the other hand, watches for understanding. "What I seek is different from what I come across," she says. "I want to know why it happened, who's involved, and whether someone fought back." For her, violence is not just visual noise — it's narrative. The context is crucial. "Watching crime footage helps me grasp the seriousness of it. I often look up crime scene photos after watching a documentary to see how accurately it was portrayed, and of course, out of curiosity."

But with exposure comes numbness. Both Gupta and Chakraborty speak of how the shock wears off over time. "Now I see violent content every two to three weeks," Chakraborty says. "It doesn't hit the same any more. Two years ago, it used to mess with my mind. Now it's just... there." Gupta agrees. "I used to read about crimes first — that helped me get desensitised before watching anything. But the line between horror and curiosity blurred quickly." A large part of this exposure isn't intentional. "It just appears on your social media feed," Chakraborty says. "Some videos don't even start off as violent — they escalate halfway in." Gupta calls it "a loop I can't break out of." Algorithms pick up on past engagement, feeding users more of what made them pause or click. And during bouts of mindless scrolling, people are often caught off-guard. "Doomscrolling turns into shockscrolling," Chakraborty adds. It begs the question if they ever really had a choice in a digital environment where extreme content can pop up without context nor consent.

Mouli Chakraborty engages in true crime content and footage to understand the crime. "Watching crime footage helps me grasp the seriousness of it." PIC/ASHISH RAJE

> I often look up crime scene photos after watching a documentary to see how accurately it was portrayed, and of course, out of curiosity
>
> Mouli Chakraborty

For horror filmmaker Sapna Bhavnani, the line between cruelty and storytelling is thin, and intentional. Violence and gore are seen as intrinsic to human nature, making them unavoidable themes in storytelling. "Humans are the most cruel species. Of course, we'll depict that in horror," she says. Fiction, for her, is a space of freedom, not moral policing. Bhavnani sees fiction as a realm of creative freedom where difficult subjects can be explored without judgment or censorship. "If violence fits the world you've built, it should be there. Fiction lets your imagination run wild."

But real violence hits differently. Gupta, who watches both horror films and gore accounts, makes a sharp distinction. "Movies don't scare me — they're fake. But real crimes? They terrify me because they can and do happen," Chakraborty echoes a similar sentiment. Documentaries satisfy her innate curiosity, offering the whole picture and the consequences of it.

Real footage, though, can be overwhelming. "My first instinct is to exit. It'll mess with my mind if I stay." However, once she prepares herself mentally, she always goes back to it. "I'd say that because it's visual, it narrates what happened in a more powerful way. While I'm doing it, I don't feel happy — I'm often questioning myself. But overall, it feels cathartic."

This growing tolerance might be a defence mechanism, but also a way to process the chaos of real violence. Each disturbing image becomes becomes a piece of a larger puzzle — a way to confront brutality while seeking meaning. So where do we draw the line? Are we growing numb to violence, or trying to make sense of it? This desensitisation to violence might point fingers towards the darker realities of human nature without losing yourself to it.

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> 'Stricter content moderation could help reduce the psychological harm'
>
> SHARINE JACOB, A CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST AND PSYCHOTHERAPIST

Jacob explains that people who have unresolved trauma may exhibit morbid curiosity. However, the way morbid curiosity manifests can vary significantly. "The type of trauma plays a role. For instance, a survivor of sexual assault is unlikely to consume content depicting similar violence. The form of morbid curiosity — if it appears — often differs based on the nature of the trauma." The emotional response to real-life violence tends to be far more intense than reactions to fictional content. "Real events elicit stronger visceral reactions because they carry an undeniable truth and threat," Jacob continues. "Consuming violent or extreme content can become addictive — in a manner similar to social media. The longer the exposure, the deeper the addiction can become." Recognising its addictive nature, Jacob presses on the need for regulation around how much violent content is accessible on mainstream platforms such as OTT services. Stricter content moderation could help reduce the psychological harm.

Sapna Bhavnani, a horror writer and filmmaker, says that violence and gore are intrinsic to human nature, making them unavoidable themes in storytelling. PIC/SAPNA BHAVNANI

OTT and the ascent of the crime documentary

In India, true crime docuseries have enjoyed sustained popularity. Netflix told us that The Hunt for Veerappan and The Indrani Mukerjea Story trended locally for six weeks each. House of Secrets: Burari Deaths trended worldwide for one week. This highlights a strong regional appetite for true crime rooted in the Indian context; the more morbid, the better. Meanwhile, platforms like Reddit, where one can find insurmountable gore and real-life violence, enforce strict rules against violent content without context, banning posts that glorify or incite violence to maintain a safer online environment, illustrating the ongoing tension between morbid curiosity and responsible content moderation.

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