

Sarnath Gets Graphic

Sunday Mid Day | April 12th, 2009

**EXTRAS** "Don't leave home without your sword — your intellect."  
— Alan Moore, creator of the graphic novel series *Watchmen*

**ART 13**  
APRIL 12, 2009  
SUNDAY MID DAY



Sarnath Banerjee

"I was hardcore into sports and all. If I was in a co-ed, I would have been the jock. I was a regular, normal kid, not your typical comic book writer

PIC/SHADAB KHAN



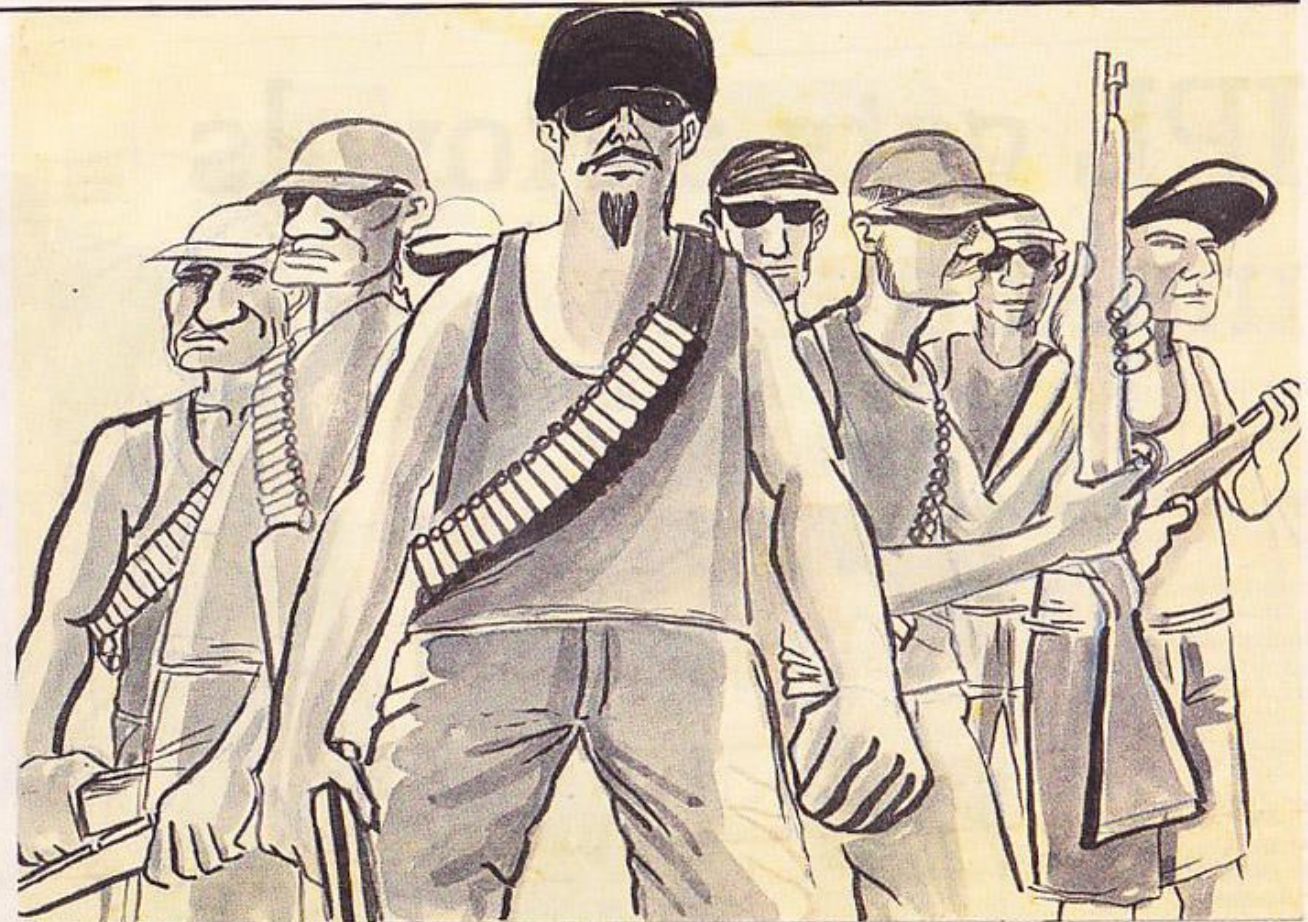
"Imaad could be a character straight out of my books, like an amateur detective or an archivist



Sooni Taraporevala with her kids Jahan and Iyanah  
PIC/ BIPIN KOKATE

"We got along famously and I've always felt that somewhere there's a Bong-Bawa connection

— Sooni Taraporevala



Sarnath gets graphic

Graphic novelist Sarnath Banerjee talks about his drawings for *Little Zizou* before flying off to the Heart of Darkness

BY FASHUTANA PATEL  
fashutana.patel@mid-day.com

WHEN we spoke to Sarnath Banerjee at around 1 am, he had just checked in to fly to a place that author Joseph Conrad termed as 'Heart of Darkness' — the Congo. The graphic artist will be there for three weeks, setting up workshops through an organisation called Espace Masolo. He'll be working with ex-child soldiers, "kids who have been trained to be murderers and assassins. I can't really call it excitement; people get excited to go to... Rome," says Banerjee, trying to describe his philosophical and psychological state; he settles on anxiety and excitement.

He may have caught your eye recently through Sooni-Taraporevala's whimsy-filled *Little Zizou* — the art that Artaxerxes Khodaiji so vehemently draws is created by Banerjee's hand.

The graphic novelist first came to prominence through his novel *Corridor*, published in 2004. Banerjee had previously working with a television channel but "the whole commercial aspect was bothering me," he says, so he decided to tell stories through text and images.



Main and above: Sarnath's drawings for Sooni Taraporevala's *Little Zizou*

Ask him where his offbeat characters and plotlines come from and, "I think my head has been infected, I don't have a plausible reason, it's like a pus-filled head oozing..." he says, and then probably thinking that's a bit unsettling asks, "Is that okay?" That's okay, we say.

Growing up, Banerjee, despite the pus and oozing statement didn't fall into the tortured-soul-arty-artist category: "I was hardcore into sports and all. If I was in a co-ed, I would have been the jock," he says, laughing. "I was a regular, normal kid, not your typical comic book writer." But a whole group of "oddball characters" will make for Banerjee's upcoming novel: someone who's obsessed with a pehelvan pre-Dara Singh; a man who ends up in a brothel because his flight is cancelled; a woman who achieves climax in five minutes no matter what and so forth.

Among the many who took note of *Corridor* was photographer, screenwriter

and director Sooni. "I've not really read any graphic novel besides Sarnath's," she says. "You know, when I started writing the script for *Little Zizou*, I was just trying to find a way to externalise Art's (played by Imaad Shah) imagination. When I called Sarnath up to do that, he said, 'Don't you remember, I had called for a photo reference?'" Banerjee had called Sooni because he was inspired by one of her photos for his second graphic novel *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers*. "We got along famously," says Sooni, "and I've always felt that somewhere there's a Bong-Bawa connection."

Even if we don't see Banerjee on screen in *Little Zizou*, we are seeing his traits. Imaad Shah took many of the artist's behavioural quirks for authenticity. "He took my myopic way of holding the book very close... I draw very fast... I crouch... Imaad is a very good observer. He could be a character straight out of my books, like an amateur detective or an archivist," he says.

What does Banerjee have to say about people who think graphic novels are comic books? "I have no views on that, a graphic novel is a subset of the comic book. I interchange all the time; there isn't much of a difference. It's not very productive thinking about it," he says. And as for the genre's progression in India, "It's doing well, it's become very fashionable, very chic — I'm not chic, I don't really care about it."