The Challenges of a Sleeping Giant
Nina Sabnani

Animation may be the answer to India's multilingual, multicultural environment's needs, but who's listening? In a land where stories abound, and exaggeration, symbols, and metaphors are an integral part of the cultural language, it would appear entirely reasonable to claim animation and make it our own. Animation lends itself perfectly to direct communication without barriers of language or cultural differences. It is the language of imagination, and India is a country of myths and fantasy. So what seems to be the problem? Why are there no films or characters worth remembering? Why is animation in India largely a sweatshop industry? India makes eight hundred feature films every year, and yet when it comes to animated films, one can barely name one or two that have been made and not necessarily seen by the Indian audiences! One wonders if the Indian audience is not receptive to animation—or perhaps if animation in India is not truly Indian or not for Indians.

The Evolution of the Animation Industry
From being a propaganda tool to becoming a medium of expression and entertainment, animation in India has traversed a testing terrain. It has been synonymous with Disney cartoons, time-consuming hard work, intended for juvenile consumption, and the domain of those with extremely good hand skills. Perhaps the answers lie in the manner in which animation was introduced to India and continues to be interpreted by media moguls. Perhaps animation never was claimed by the Indian film industry for itself. From its very inception, it was the child of the state. It stayed as a government monopoly until the advent of TV. Animation didn't come to India in a significant manner until the 1950s, although there were pioneer filmmakers such as Dadasaheb Phalke, Gunamoy Banerjee, Jehangir Bhownagery, and Mandar Mallick,[1] to name a few who had experimented with animation.

Animation's potential as a propaganda tool was perceived by the government, which set up a special Cartoon Unit for animation at the Films Division in 1945. UNESCO and the U.S. Technical Aid Program brought an ex-Disney animator, Clair Weeks, to the Films Division in 1956 to train a group of animators who have contributed to the animation industry in India. Notable among them are Ram Mohan, Bhimsain, and the late Kantilal Rathod. Clair Weeks also trained the first batch of animators at the National Institute of Design in 1980. In the late '50s, the Films Division made some really interesting films that experimented with the miniature painting style as in

1   Jayanti Sen has been able to find more on the contributions to animation by filmmakers in East India. See "The Neglected Queen of Indian Animation," *Animation World Magazine* 4:7 (October 1999).

Figure 1
Bheeru No.1
Duration: 7 minutes, 41 seconds
by Uttam, Parag and Mehul
Synopsis: The film is inspired from the typical structure of film making in Bollywood. It comprises a range of emotions including action, romance, tragedy, comedy and the miracle popularity known as the "Masala Mix." (This film is done in Macromedia Flash with video as the final output.)
Producer: Ram Mohan

2   For more details on the history of Indian Animation, see Jayanti Sen, "India's Growing Might," *Animation World Magazine* 4:7 (October 1999).

Radha and Krishna and the Ajanta fresco style as in *The Banyan Deer*.[2] The unit soon began to experiment with social awareness themes. Such films revolved around population control, national unity, civic hygiene, and similar public issues. While the issues they addressed were very important and meaningful, the manner in which they evolved tended to be simplistic. Take the example of family planning or population control. The film showed a man and his wife and two children standing under an umbrella while it is raining. Then the family begins to grow, but there is not enough room under the umbrella for everyone so some members of the family get wet. Moral of the story: don't have too many babies or you will not be able to provide for them. It didn't really solve the population problem, but it did get some laughs. These films were shown as shorts before the main feature in cinemas across the country. This really popularized animation in the pre-television days, and contributed to awareness of the medium. But since the subject matter of the films tended to be didactic, animation became synonymous with propaganda rather than as a medium for expressive communication. It is possible that it discouraged some from entering the field.

Without sufficient numbers of new films, cinemas also showed a lot of Disney shorts with Mickey Mouse and Pluto, and animation became synonymous with Disney. It stayed this way for many years until the cinemas stopped showing cartoons and newsreels, which were standard fare before the main feature. Possibly the theatres were not willing to pay for the shorts anymore, or were more interested in raising revenue from advertisements. Perhaps there simply wasn't enough time to show them. What happened is that animation left the big screen, and could only be seen at film clubs, among film buffs, and at national film awards ceremonies. Thus, the audience for animation disappeared even before Indian animation had an opportunity to make its mark in the industry. Those who were intrigued by animation had nowhere to go to learn animation techniques, and the technology did not permit individual efforts. Raw stock had to be bought with a permit, so only licensed production houses could buy it. And, if an individual really wanted to learn or make animation films, the only place was the Cartoon Unit, Films Division, or an apprenticeship in an advertising agency. Advertising agencies used animation sparingly, due to time requirements and the limited call for it. Animation became synonymous with labor and time, and therefore expensive. Before animation could be absorbed as an economic activity, it already was seen as a hole in the pocket.

As a result, there were very few animated Indian films, and little point having an Indian Animation festival. The National Film Festival had a small category for cartoons (the more common name for animation), and most of the entries came from the Cartoon Unit, Films Division, and invariably won all of the awards. Festivals dedicated to animation existed only outside of the country. Indian

films could be sent to a festival only through the Films Division or the NFDC. If sent independently, the sender had to pay re-importation fees/duties to have them returned. There was no scope for a die-hard animator to even get his work seen, much less sell or get royalties for the work.

The Film and TV Institute in India (FTII) set up in 1961 does not have any specialization in animation to date, and the art schools were never really equipped for animation. This was before TV, before personal computers, and with virtually no training opportunities. Animation was seen as a domain for experts—those who could draw like Disney. Animation also was linked to children, so the Children's Film Society was the only funding body commissioning animated films. Cable TV was a long way off, so animation did not become part of Indian culture until Channel V and MTV made animation popular in the '90s.

Animation Training at the NID

Animation activities began at the National Institute of Design in the mid-1960s, with Ishu Patel emerging as the sole animator from the Institute during the '70s. Foreign collaboration and funding helped develop the first level of trained teachers of animation. It was under the aegis of the Indo-U.S. Subcommission and the United Nations Development Program that experts such as Clair Weeks and Roger Noake (from the UK) came to NID for extended periods between 1980 and 1984 to train specially recruited faculty.[3] Both believed that animation could become indigenous to India, and helped to shape the program to meet Indian needs. The Advanced Entry Program in Animation began in 1985 and, by 1989, courses were being offered at the graduate and postgraduate levels. With no real animation industry in India at the time, it was more in anticipation of a future need that such a program was initiated. The general awareness of animation was so poor that people actually would call up and ask for the "ammunition" department! Films made at the NID found no venue for display except at foreign film festivals. And even that was only possible with duplication on videotape because sending films to several festivals in the film format was prohibitively expensive.

The Animation Program at the NID encourages its students to explore various approaches to the medium, and to find innovative means of communication. Apart from acquiring the requisite skills, students had to bring their own observations and concerns about their environment to their films. Students and faculty have made films on diverse subjects and issues, ranging from colonial hangover to reckless driving. The strength and versatility of the program has been proved by the worldwide recognition given to its student films. The films have been selected for screenings at prestigious competitive film festivals in Ottawa, Stuttgart, Hiroshima, Lisbon, New York, Mumbai, and Trivandrum, and have won a number of awards.

Figure 2 (above)
Alpana
Duration 3 minutes, 35 seconds
by Prasun Basu
Synopsis: A film inspired by the Santhal dancers of Bengal. It is an exploration of bringing together hand drawn and digital media. ©National Institute of Design, Paldi, Ahmedabad, India (2002).

Figure 3 (below)
Kabad Khan (Rag Picker)
Duration 6 minutes by Sonali Bhatia
Synopsis: The trials and tribulations of a man who collect garbage and makes it useful. The film is made in the stop motion technique. ©National Institute of Design, Paldi, Ahmedabad, India (2001).

3   Excerpted from Nina Sabnani, "Frame by Frame," a paper presented on animation training in India, NID 1992.

Figure 4 (left)
The Protagonist
Duration: 3 minutes 15 seconds
by Prakash Moorthy
Synopsis: The age-old story of Divide and Rule in a little place in Kerala. ©National Institute of Design, Paldi, Ahmedabad, India (1987).
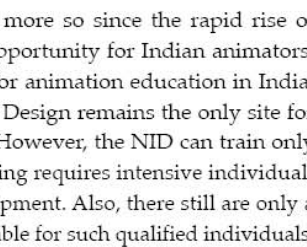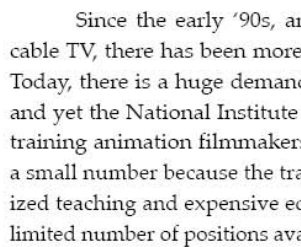
Figure 5 (right)
His Master's Choice
Duration: 6 minutes 55 seconds
by Shrinivasa Bhakta
This film is about Colonial Imperialism in Bengal in the early twentieth century. ©National Institute of Design, Paldi, Ahmedabad, India (1994).

4   For a further discussion on this theme, see John A. Lent, "Animation in Asia: Appropriation, Reinterpretation, and Adoption or Adaptation," www.latrobe.edu.au/www/ screeningthepast/firstrelease/fr1100/ jlfr11c.htm (Uploaded November 1, 2000).

Figure 6 left)
All About Nothing
Duration: 9 minutes 30 seconds
by Nina Sabnani
Synopsis: A stop motion film that conjectures on how the zero may have been invented. ©National Institute of Design, Paldi, Ahmedabad, India (1989).

Figure 7 (right)
Pakki Naukri
Duration: 4 minutes, 40 seconds
by D. M. Jagdish
Synopsis: The outcome of a permanent job in India is satirized in this film. ©National Institute of Design, Paldi, Ahmedabad, India (1991).

Since the early '90s, and more so since the rapid rise of cable TV, there has been more opportunity for Indian animators. Today, there is a huge demand for animation education in India, and yet the National Institute of Design remains the only site for training animation filmmakers. However, the NID can train only a small number because the training requires intensive individualized teaching and expensive equipment. Also, there still are only a limited number of positions available for such qualified individuals. In addition to the NID, several "institutes" of animation training basically teach animation software. Individuals emerging from these so-called animation schools call themselves "flash animators," "3D animators," and so on. They know the tools, but are not equipped to conceptualize or visualize ideas. They form the large labor force that is servicing the production industry.[4] NID graduates are working at TV channels such as the Cartoon Network, Channel V, and MTV as creative directors and producers, as well as with animation houses such as Famous, TOONZ, 2NZ, RM-USL, and Animagic, among others. There, they are given a free rein and encouraged to explore their own approaches. Some of them, including Vaibhav Kumaresh, Arnab Choudhary, and Prakash Moorthy, have evolved strong individual styles. Others have been absorbed into the animation industry overseas. NID graduates do not necessarily fit into the "sweatshop" industry. They often end up establishing their own shops or joining smaller production houses doing original work for the domestic market.

The Present Scenario

Contemporary animation discourse in India continues to be traditional in its content and approach as far as the industry is concerned. While modern and innovative approaches and personal expression in animation are being cultivated in educational institutions, they do not find resonance in this conservative industry. With the changing economic and technological scenario, some things have changed dramatically while others remain the same. It is possible to make animation films with just a computer and some software, without acquiring raw stock, renting animation cameras, or spending enormous amounts just for a simple dissolve. And yet, independent animation is like the poor farmer who tilled the land when we had kings and queens—he continued to till the land after Independence and TV, and continues while we chat online. Animation is not accepted in the same measure as Bollywood. Animation is not as glamorous, so it does not attract investors.

The problem also lies with the content of animation and the intended target audience. It is possible to identify the problems and phases experienced by the country by looking at the live-action films, mainstream or otherwise, made in India over the decades. This is not the case with animation in India. We have had a spate of films about the Ramayana and Pandavas, and now there is talk of Krishna. Such films do not address current situations or concerns. Indian audiences are not getting anything they can identify with. Most films employing traditional storytelling address the Western audience that wants an exotic India—not the India of today. And it even is not necessarily what the West wants, but what media moguls imagine the West wants. Focusing exclusively on the country's rich, historical tradition robs the average Indian of current opportunities. Some of the films being produced are directed at nonresident Indians who need to introduce their children to their cultural heritage. The Indians in India will continue to argue about the oversimplification that occurs in turning the epics into animated features, while others would rather watch the "soaps" dealing with everyday life. Obviously, there is no real audience for this sort of animation in India.

The nexus between the industry and training institutes is not very strong either. In most countries, art and industry drive each other, but the animation we see around us resists exploring such alliances. Animation as an art form is offered as a specialization in many art and design schools around the world, where it is explored from perspectives of drawing, illustration, and storytelling. Industry looks to these schools for fresh ideas and inspiration. The current relationship existing between Indian schools and the film industry is like a marriage of convenience. On the one hand, students need to cut their teeth on real-life projects, yet on the other hand, the industry needs a good portfolio to demonstrate in-house production capabilities in order to bring in big projects from overseas. This works well for now as they both get what they want, but this is not a sustainable,

Figure 8
Ae Bhai Zara Dekh Ke Chalo
(Look Brother Where You Go)
Duration: 3 minutes, 38 seconds
by Pavan Buragohain
Synopsis: A film about traffic safety and
crowded streets of Ahmedabad. First Prize
animation, I V fest, Tiruvananthapuram,1995.
© D' Three The Design Group (1993).

Figure 9
Whose Reality?
Duration: 6 minutes, 50 seconds by Vaibhav
Kumaresh
Synopsis: A film about the distance between
the governed and those that govern.
Silver Conch, Mumbai International Film
Festival, 2000. © PRAXIS Institute for
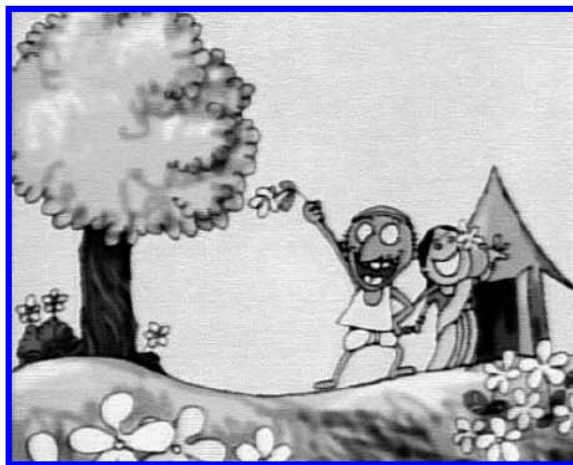Participatory Practices, Patna, India (1998).

Figure 10
Pudavai
Duration: 1 minute, 30 seconds
by Anitha Balachandran
Synopsis: A young girl's fascination with her
mother's sari brings it to life. Best Design,
Toonz, IN. SEA Animation Festival, Trivandrum.
Zagreb —2002 Best poetic film. © National
Institute of Design, Paldi, Ahmedabab, India
(2001).

sustainable, long-term relationship. As soon as a company gets a big project, it has no room for a creative person who wants to participate actively at the preproduction stage. And it may be quite difficult for the production house to actually indulge such a person. The industry cannot afford to take risks. However, animation students do not have these worries. They can experiment, explore, and push the envelope, the results of which can feed the industry. The schools can become laboratories for experimentation with content, structure, and styles. Encouraging this actively are Ram Mohan and Prakash Moorthy, who have been sponsoring student diploma projects giving a student free rein to explore storytelling, film language, and contemporary themes. While such gestures are supportive and welcome, a lot more is needed to make a difference and to bring Indian animation into its own.

The Sleeping Giant

It is said that animation in India is a sleeping giant and, once it awakens, will take the world by storm. Maybe this will happen. Or perhaps there are two giants: one has woken up, while the other still is fast asleep. The one that has woken up is the sweatshop industry, providing production facilities to film companies from abroad, while also providing job and training opportunities to many in India. It has its eyes peeled and fixed longingly outside for partnerships, and is happy to create some original work now and then, provided there is time and money. The second giant has its eyes tightly shut, and is scared to open them. Is it dreaming? Does it know its potential? This smaller giant can do a lot if it wakes up. It can create awareness about animation and its potential. It can create benchmarks for Indian animation, and make its own niche in the world, just like Bollywood. It can expand its audiences from children to viewers of all ages everywhere. It can finance, distribute, and showcase quality animation and still go singing to the bank. It can create jobs for students who emerge from animation institutes aspiring to create a revolution, and it probably can provide work for many production houses throughout the country. It is this second giant that we are worried about. Maybe this giant has a "Sleeping Beauty" syndrome, waiting for a prince to arrive.[5] This giant needs to realize that, in a democratic world, there are no princes, and that continuing to wait means sleeping on for another hundred years or more.

The challenges of the sleeping giant are many, but not insurmountable. They involve identifying and wooing an animation audience, as well as obtaining financing and distributing the films/content. The small giant needs to look around. There are lessons to be learned from the big giant. The Indian animation industry is a sweatshop industry because there is nothing Indian about it—nor is it addressing Indians in any significant way. It is based in India and provides jobs to Indians. This industry is big. In

2002, an Arthur Anderson report estimated the Indian animation industry to be worth $550 million and further anticipated growth to $15 billion by 2008.[6]

Clearly, there is a substantial body of professionals, quite active, and promising talent besides cheap labor. Ironically, animation still is not an established industry. There is no recognized body of animators, no trade laws, and no standards of operations. In July of 2002, some Indian animation companies in India came together to form a trade body (the name of which is yet to be decided) that will produce a white paper on the Indian animation industry, with facts and figures pertaining to exports, potential coproduction treatises, etc., while also promoting and protecting the interests of the Indian animation industry.[7] While this is good news indeed, one hopes that, along with their own interests, they also will extend their support to animators and animation schools that provide their talent.

One important lesson to be learned from the big giant is to raise the stakes. It makes sense—the larger the risk, the greater the responsibility and commitment. This will facilitate taking on larger projects such as episodic animation. The second lesson is to derive comfort from the existence of a large body of on-the-job-trained professionals who could service the domestic market just as well. A third lesson is to form an apex body of Indian animators committed to producing benchmarks, organizing festivals and film markets, facilitating loans and scholarships, and encouraging young talent. This body also could create standards for licensing, rates for payments, and platforms for coproduction. Yet another lesson from the bigger giant is knowing what to avoid imitating. It might be useful to do some things differently.

Reexamine Audience Engagement
The first step would be to reexamine this question about the Indian audience not being receptive. If the Indian audience could identify with the characters in the films, it would watch them. A country that loves the cinema and is willing to skip a meal in order to watch a movie cannot really ignore animation if it truly addresses issues that the average Indian can identify with. The live-action serial *Ramayana* (with lots of special effects) was so popular that streets would empty on Sunday mornings when it was aired.[8] The Indian audience should not be underestimated. This potential audience is close to 900 million if not one billion. The Indian animation industry doesn't have to look outside of the country for its audience!

The next obvious step would be to know this audience. There is no "one" audience, but niche audiences. No authoritative survey of Indian audiences and their expectations from an animated film has been made. This could provide the clues to what kind of films are needed. Much can be learned from the advertising industry that does this as a norm. Field testing the ideas also will strengthen the animation industry.

6 "Entertainment India's Second Largest Export" (Posted by Vidyadhara on May 22, 2002). Available at: www.indolink.com/Forum/India/messages/1713.html.

7 More information about the members of the Animation Association of India is available in *Animation Reporter* 1:2 (July–August 2002).

8 Mark Tully has cited incredible instances on audience behavior with reference to this serial in *No Full Stops in India* (New Delhi: Viking, 1991), 129.

Contextualizing Traditional Storytelling

If the little giant just looks around, he will find that India is a country where diversity is celebrated. India has been known to absorb everything in its fold, be it cricket or the English language. Defining anything as "Indian" is not easy. Shashi Tharoor has provided one of the best metaphors for India. In an interview, he said, "... if America is a melting pot, then, to me, India is a 'thali,' a selection of sumptuous dishes in different bowls. Each tastes different, and does not necessarily mix with the next, but they belong together on the same plate, and they complement each other in making the meal a satisfying repast." (A *thali* is a meal with Indian bread, vegetables, rice, yogurt, and lentils all arranged together on a large plate.)[9] Indians living in different regions are quite different from each other, and yet there is something that makes all of them Indians. This "something" possibly is their outlook on life and their philosophy of "live and let live." One such connection is a narrative tradition, although storytelling varies from one place to another. Indian stories have been the subject of some animation films, but the visualization concepts employed have been weak. Indiscriminate borrowings from the oral tradition do not consider the strengths of that tradition. Some of the films based directly on traditional stories haven't undergone the metamorphosis required for text to become audio-visual. The translation of an oral text into a visual medium is challenging, and unless skillfully done will be static. An oral narrative's focus is quite different: more about thoughts and abstract feelings, and less about visualization—all left to the listener's imagination. Take the example of the "Monkey and the Crocodile" from *Panchatantra*.[10] This text visualized as it exists would end up like "talking heads," a common result for narratives not scripted for animation. By contrast, the version of the "Monkey and the Crocodile" story by Vikram Seth in *Beastly Tales from Here and There* is so visual, it lends itself easily and beautifully to animation.[11] One of the greatest strengths of the oral tradition is its adaptability to the passage of time. An oral storyteller is constantly adapting the story and its events to suit current times and contexts, reflected in the use of language, metaphors, and events. This facilitates the audience's identification with the story's events and characters. The little giant can draw inspiration from this living tradition and "shape-shift" it to current times to draw its audience.

Finding One's Voice

The little giant may find to its dismay that, as a nation lacking pride in our own abilities to create, we copy. Is it necessary to imitate the best-selling West? Why reinvent the wheel? There can never be another Disney, so why not find one's own voice? The challenges of the small giant are also to address the issues of self-reliance and self-worth. The colonial hangover may not be over yet. This industry may not be the only one that is production-based. Looking at other areas such as textiles and fashion, the ratio of production versus

9   Shashi Tharoor is a diplomat and a writer. He has explored the diversity of culture in India, and written several books and articles. See http://resurgence.gn.apc.org/articles/tharoor.htm.

10 The *Panchatantra* belongs to the oral tradition, and is attributed to Visnu Sarma, whose existence has not been conclusively established. For more details, see *Book IV: Loss of Gains, The Pancatantra*, translated from Sanskrit with an introduction by Chandra Rajan (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1993), 353.

11 Vikram Seth, *Beastly Tales From Here and There*, (New Delhi: Viking, 1992), 1.

Indian branded products would be significant. The Asian countries have long been the provider of cheap labor, and under the guise of providing job opportunities everything becomes acceptable.[12] It is true that a large-scale production provides jobs to a large number of people, giving them training opportunities and a steady income. But should we not concern ourselves with creative freedom and creative expression, too? There is an analogy from the ancient past for this argument:

> As Bossy says to Rusty in *Hitopadesa*,
> "A life which is well known to be
> Of learning, fame, and bravery,
> Though even of a moment's span,
> It is truly lived by man.
> For even crows can long survive
> By eating scraps to stay alive."[13]

Finance and Distribution

Where can the money come from? Most investors are concerned with return on investment, and thus time becomes a deterrent. TV channels want the films to fit into their program package, and investors want the films finished in the same time as live-action episodes. However, if animation turned episodic, these problems could be solved and the characters would gain more exposure. TV audiences are familiar with serialized drama. They are willing to wait a week for the next episode, and have learned to remember several stories at once. Episodic animation will create more awareness about animation and also build viewer loyalty. Episodic animation or series animation has been quite successful in several countries. In the UK, Mark Baker and Neville Astley have moved from making shorts to a series (*The Big Knights*) without compromising their style or ideas.[14] Revenues may be raised from advertising if a serial becomes popular. Even if the funding problem is solved, the other challenge is finding venues for such work. At the moment, TV channels are happy to show old reruns from Disney, MGM, or Warner Brothers at throwaway prices. Indian filmmakers will need to get beyond producing one-of-a-kind films, however beautiful, because program packaging is more important to a TV channel than just the quality of a film. Here again, serialization could be the answer. Last but not the least, where are the training schools? Investments are needed to train future animators, and not just for today's production labor force.

Another Way of Telling

The most important lesson the little giant needs to learn is to trust that we can deliver, because nothing is achieved alone or without having faith in another's ability. Like our petty kingdoms in the past, we are divided and fragmented in our endeavors. Everyone wants to start his or her own studio rather than work together. Everyone wants to start his or her own training school or, better still, join hands

12 For a further discussion on this theme, see an interview of Ram Mohan by John A. Lent, "Animation in Asia: Appropriation, Reinterpretation, and Adoption or Adaptation" available at: www.latrobe.edu.au/www/ screeningthepast/firstrelease/fr1100/ jlfr11c.htm (Uploaded November 1, 2000).

13 Narayana, *The Hitopadesca* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India,1998), 89.

14 *Animation 2D and Beyond*, Jayne Pilling, ed. (East Sussex, UK: Rotovision 2001), 10.

with a well-known foreign university rather than explore possible collaborations within the country. Look at other Asian countries: Japanese animation has its own identity; and South Korea is producing its own features. It is no longer just a sweatshop industry. Both Japan and Korea can boast of their own animation films and festivals. The little giant needs to join forces—work in large teams. This keeps the spirits high, and the team can take on more challenging work. Schools and industry can collaborate along with artists, psychologists, sociologists, and storytellers. Alliances could be formed with the huge Bollywood industry, which has no dearth of writers and lyricists. Animated characters can become household names, like Bart Simpson, simply from weekly exposure. Characters from everyday life can become heroes, far beyond those from the animal kingdom. The target audience need not always be children, and the films do not always have to be funny. Apart from entertainment, there is a whole edutainment industry waiting to be serviced, perhaps even a gaming industry? The films need not appear only on TV, a networked environment is all set to distribute content. Today, things are different. Indian filmmakers are exploring individual styles and contemporary themes, and this is only the beginning. The challenges are many, but there is hope for animation to become an indigenous form. The current scenario is inviting. There is a trained labor force, there is a huge potential audience, there is a strong storytelling tradition, and there are eager storytellers waiting in the wings. There also is a small but sizeable number of trained animation filmmakers. This is the final wake-up call. Is the sleeping giant listening?

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