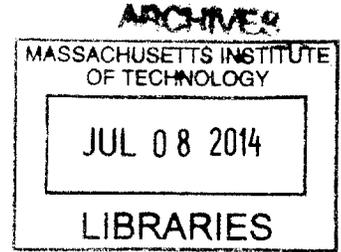


# Indian Comics as Public Culture

By

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Comparative Media Studies

## ABSTRACT:

The Amar Chitra Katha (ACK) series of comic books have, since 1967, dominated the market for domestic comic books in India. In this thesis, I examine how these comics function as public culture, creating a platform around which groups and individuals negotiate and re-negotiate their identities (religious, class, gender, regional, national) through their experience of the mass-media phenomenon of ACK. I also argue that the comics, for the most part, toe a conservative line - drawing heavily from Hindu nationalist schools of thought.

In order to demonstrate these arguments, I examine selected groups of ACK titles closely in the first two chapters. I perform a detailed content analysis of these comics, considering the ways in which they draw upon history and primary texts, the artistic and editorial choices as well the implications of these decisions. In the third chapter, I draw a picture of the consumption of these comics, studying the varying interpretations and reactions that fans across generations have had to the works, connecting their conversations to my argument about ACK as public culture. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate the extent of ACK's role in the popular imagination of its large readership as well as the part it plays in the negotiation of their identities as Indians.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS:

Abstract	3
Introduction	7
Chapter 1: History, Religion and Regionalism in Amar Chitra Katha	19
Chapter 2: The Representation of Women in Amar Chitra Katha	35
Chapter 3: The Consumption of Amar Chitra Katha	60
Conclusion	79
Acknowledgments	82
Bibliography	83



## **Introduction:**

India has had a history of reading comic books since at least the 1940s, when the market was suddenly saturated with homegrown comics magazines like *Chandamama* followed by cheaply reproduced volumes of Western comics ranging from King's Features characters - *The Phantom* to *Flash Gordon* – to DC properties like Superman. Popular as these other publications were, the comics publisher most synonymous with the Indian market remains Amar Chitra Katha (also referred to herein as ACK). In an impromptu survey I conducted of twelve classrooms in six schools in Kolkata and Mumbai, the response to 'which comics series do you most closely identify with India and Indian culture' was unanimously 'Amar Chitra Katha'.

Founded by editor-in-chief Anant Pai in 1967, Amar Chitra Katha (the name translating from the Hindi as “immortal picture stories”) has sold over 90 million issues consisting of nearly 500 different titles, translated into 20 languages. The comics are dedicated in their entirety to Indian national figures, real and fictional. Initially, the series was restricted to mythological characters, recreating the stories of deities from classical narratives like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharat*. Subsequently, the series expanded its focus to include historical figures, ranging from famous kings such as Shivaji and Birbal to more modern luminaries like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru.

It is significant that Amar Chitra Katha was founded by Pai as a reaction to what he perceived as an excess of foreign cultural influences seeping into the popular culture consumed by Indian youth. He began his career in comics in the early 1960s as editor at Indrajal Comics, the company that published the more popular of the Western comics in India – the aforementioned King's Features titles. Pai noticed the attraction that the Western comic book held for young audiences, both in terms of form and

content. The immersive, dynamic and visual nature of the books combined with the exciting characters and plots driven by action and adventure had clearly struck a chord as Indrajal's sales climbed steadily since its inception in 1964. He also realized that while characters such as Superman who operated in a mostly Western milieu were popular, the biggest audiences were being drawn by titles that touched upon colonial issues (however excruciatingly or broadly drawn). Primary among these were Lee Falk's creations – *The Phantom* and *Mandrake the Magician*, both of whom were involved in adventures that played out in colonial locales like western Africa, India and China.

There was clearly a place in the comics field for stories that tapped into the Indian sensibility as the popularity of *The Phantom* and *Mandrake* indicated. However, instead of creating more Western heroes making incursions into the colonial heart of darkness as portrayed by those comics, he reversed the paradigm. The Amar Chitra Katha titles were to be about Indian 'superheroes' fighting against the implacable tide of brutal outsiders, whether those outsiders were demons (as with the mythological comics) or foreign invaders (as in many of the historical narratives). These heroes were frequently identified with the Hindu faith. Despite this paradigm shift, the content of the stories clearly fit the comic book medium as defined by the American writers and artists that Indrajal had sold to Indian audiences for years.

The role of the comic book medium itself is significant in consideration of the fact that the intended audience for ACK is schoolchildren. At the time of its creation (as well as now, to a great extent), comics were strictly considered children's literature. Pai's decision to frame these stories in the comic book medium had the dual effect of indicating to the parents that the texts were aimed at children while suggesting to the children that the hitherto dry approach to history and mythology was to undergo a radical change. By virtue of being comic books, ACK already had what Dorfman and Mattelart term “a

biologically captive, pre-determined audience” (Dorfman, Mattelart 30). The hero worship that formed an inevitable part of the relationship between a school-age child and his/her comic book characters also helped the case for the medium. In this case, the hero worship is appropriated in the service of national figures, turning the child's natural affinity for the adventurous, outlandishly dressed protagonists of Western superhero comics toward the much preferable, equally adventurous and only slightly less outlandishly dressed national figures Pai wished for them to become familiar with. As Indian comics scholar Nandini Chandra points out in her study of the national and the local in ACK, the series' “ideological charge draws upon two sources: the innocence that it projects onto its child audience and the reliance of its narrative on the naturalizing effect of the photographic realism of its drawings” (Chandra 6). The issues of art and the other advantages offered by the medium itself will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters.

Having built this model of the 'Indian hero', taking full advantage of the sales potential embodied by the latent indignation of the colonized Hindu, the next question becomes that of what actually constitutes 'Indian'. The decades following independence from the British in 1947 have seen a steady attempt to construct a hegemonic Indian identity. Despite India's place as the world's largest secular democracy, this concept of Indianness marginalized non-Hindu religious and cultural 'outsiders', privileged the Hindu middle and upper classes and forced women into certain 'traditional' roles. In the process, the moral and cultural high ground has been strongly Hinduised. Given that Pai's intention was to reinvigorate young audiences' interest in their 'cultural identity' (more on his intentions in the 'Background' section), Amar Chitra Katha was ready to become another player in the negotiation of said identity.

In this thesis, I intend to examine the ways in which Amar Chitra Katha deploys narratives, history and

mythology in conjunction with the words and images of the comic book medium in order to create and recreate the dominant ideology. As religious studies scholar Karline McLain states - “hegemonic forms are always in flux: dominant ideologies do not just exist passively but are created and recreated amidst ongoing debate” (McLain 22). However, ACK is also a ubiquitous form of public culture, familiar to an enormous section of the educated Indian population and, practically, creating a shared shorthand for their conceptualization of Indian history and mythology while simultaneously functioning as a platform for debates surrounding that very conceptualization. My intention is to study how ACK functions as public culture, using Appadurai and Breckenridge's definition of the term as a “zone” of sociocultural debate. I argue that the comics exist as what they define as “a set of cultural arenas...where different social groups (classes, ethnic groups, genders) constitute their identities by their experience of mass mediated forms in relation to the practices of everyday life” (Appadurai and Breckenridge 4-5). I hope to make clearer the important role played by Amar Chitra Katha in the ongoing conversation over what it means to be “Indian” and how the dominant discourses with regard to religion, nation and gender are supported (and, in some cases, challenged) by the various titles under its purview. I argue that the comics adopt a consistently conservative stand – equating the dominant middle class Hindu nationalist ideology with that of the nation as a whole. However, I also intend to demonstrate that the image presented of national culture contains enough contradictions and mixed messages that it also sparks significant debate amidst readers as to what said culture actually consists of. The study will take into account both the processes of production and consumption of the texts.

## **Structural Details:**

A large section of this thesis will be devoted to content analysis. I will attempt to draw out the connections between the comics and the larger visual and narrative traditions that inform them, breaking down the lines between history and mythology. The analysis will also draw from comics theory, expanding upon the juxtaposition of word and image and how they support and, occasionally, subvert the text or the ostensible ideology of the piece. There are instances in which individual writers or artists have inserted their own unique stamp upon the comics, breaking from the strict editorial direction given to them.

The next section of the thesis will consist of a more detailed background and history of the Amar Chitra Katha series as well as a brief overview of the production processes. Drawing from interviews conducted by myself and others, I will also attempt to paint a picture of Anant Pai's goals and editorial directives across the history of the series.

The bulk of the remainder will consist of three chapters, structured as case studies, taking a close look at groups of titles that deal with a particular facet of cultural discourse contributed to by ACK. Chapter 1 will concentrate on history, nationalism and religion in the comics. I will use the *Shivaji* title (based on the life of the Hindu king) as an example. I also consider the relationship between the historical and mythological in ACK as well as the narrative and artistic strategies employed by the creators to shape the discourse in religious and caste terms.

In Chapter 2, I look at the depiction of women in ACK titles – both historical and mythological. The model of femininity put forward by the comics will be examined in conjunction with the traditional

concepts of what it means to be an 'Indian woman'. I will consider how some of the female producers involved in the comics attempted to reform the more conservative models put forward despite the comparatively limited degrees of success they enjoyed (overt or subversive).

Chapter 3 will focus on the consumption and interpretation of these comics. It will draw on interviews conducted by myself and other scholarly writers with fans of the series. I attempt to discern the nature of ACK's audience, the ways in which they engage with the ideology of the comics and the part this plays in the individual/group's ongoing negotiation of identity.

The final section will summarize my findings and conclusions from the previous chapters, briefly talk about what the future might bring for ACK and make some final comments about how the study of these comics form an important part of the negotiation of contemporary middle class Indian identity.

### **Background:**

The story of *Amar Chitra Katha* runs parallel with that of Anant Pai, the founder, who remains in the Editor-in-Chief position today and still exercises a strong editorial control over all the titles. He has written numerous scripts for the comics himself and shapes the choices made by the artists. Given his continual personal investment in the series and auteurist grip over the direction it has taken over the years, it is safe to assert that Pai's beliefs (political, religious and cultural) have had more of an impact on the comics than that of any other writer, artist or editor.

From the very beginning, Pai intended the title to act as a counterpoint to the Western influences that he

felt were steering middle class schoolchildren, studying as they were in English-medium schools, away from their heritage and their true identity as Indians. In an interview with religious studies scholar Karlene McLain, Pai discusses how the inspirational moment for ACK came while he was watching a televised quiz program in 1967, where students could not name the mother of Ram but sailed through the questions that dealt with names of the Greek gods (McLain 28). Having already gained some familiarity with the comic book medium through being involved in the creation and development of the Indrajal Comics line, it was not an enormous leap for him to realize the potential of comics to draw in a readership for historical and mythological homegrown stories that young people may not otherwise have been too interested in. He found support for the idea from H.G. Mirchandani, the director of India Book House who hired him as Editor-in-Chief for the new ACK series.

After a few abortive attempts at translating classic fairytales, the first 'traditional' ACK title was released in 1969 – the *Krishna* issue. In the choice for this first issue, then, Pai's devout Hinduism is already apparent. Instead of choosing a historical figure like Gandhi or Nehru, who had helped found the post-Independence state, he picked one of the most popular gods from the Hindu pantheon. The production process of the Krishna issue is also representative in many ways of how subsequent ACK comics were created. Having chosen the subject matter, Pai wrote the script himself, basing it on the Sanskrit text of the Bhagavad Purana. Having done so, he located the first two members of the ACK team of artists – Ram Waaerkar (the illustrator) and Yusuf Bangalorewala (cover). Pai kept an extremely close eye on the art as it was being created – obsessing over the accuracy of period details such as costumes and weaponry. His savvy in terms of the nature of the medium as well as the best way to present the material to his readers was already becoming clear in several of the decisions he was making. Given that the artists were not yet accustomed to creating for the comic book medium, Pai drew from his own instinctive understanding of the visual language of comics and instructed Waaerkar

in several areas, especially panel composition. He indicated where closeups should be employed, how to produce the illusion of rapid motion and the usefulness of resizing panels.

Pai also kept an eye towards the audience. He realized that many of the readers (educated members of the English-medium school community as they were) would not be as receptive towards the continual stream of miraculous elements that littered the Krishna stories in the original text, a realization tempered by the fact that his own scientific background (a degree in chemistry and physics) set limits to his belief in miracles, devout as he was. Consequently, he instructed the artists on how to depict certain events in a light that made them less overtly supernatural and more open to interpretation. A sequence where the Yamuna river parts for baby Krishna's rescuer Vasudeva is reinterpreted and made more ambiguous. The script has Vasudeva wondering why the river was not as deep as it was elsewhere and the art (redrawn several times to Pai's specifications) depicts the river not as actually parting but simply being at a lower level than usual.

The sales for the *Krishna* issue were initially a bit slow but they escalated with increasing visibility of the ACK line as artists and writers were hired, became better used to the medium and subsequent titles like *Shivaji* and *Shakuntala* were quickly released. By the mid 1970s, the comics had outstripped the foreign competitors in sales, a feat hitherto unheard of by Indian comics. As of today, the *Krishna* title has been reprinted 66 times and has sold well over a million copies. Significantly, however, the *Krishna* title also exemplifies the struggle that ACK production staff and Anant Pai himself had with the text, revealing that it is not just the consumers that struggle with the products in relation to their own identities and experiences, but the producers as well. As it turned out, a new revised edition of *Krishna* was created in 1980, which retained the miraculous elements of the original Sanskrit texts. In this version, Krishna lifts mountains with his little finger and the waters of the Yamuna do indeed part

for Vasudeva.

The change of heart stemmed from the way Pai found himself restructuring his own faith around the cultural influence of the comics he was creating. Since the publication of the original comic, many readers had written in with criticisms about the understated nature of the events – asking to see the more superhuman aspects of the Krishna stories. He began to realize, in fact, that people had come to look upon ACK as a voice for the sacred texts themselves. He recounts an incident in 1975, where at a Ramayana Mela (fair), a question came up in conversation about who Ram's mother actually was and “a man said 'ACK says it is Kaushalya so it must be so.' This made me realize...that people think the ACKs are a legitimate source of these sacred stories” (McLain 40). There was a shift, therefore, in the way Pai looked at the text and related it to his own identity as an Indian, a Hindu and as a human being who believed in reason and science. He began by creating a comic book that followed what one might call a more 'worldly' pattern – open to a comparatively reasonable interpretation of the events in the original Sanskrit texts. In interacting with his readers and the texts further, however, his own faith was to change as he began to separate the realm of science from that of the mythological, feeling more responsible towards the authority of the primary documents. 'Authenticity', then, came not with some objective standard of realism but through the depiction of events in those intrinsically 'Indian' primary texts without being filtered through the lens of science. Pai held his faith up to the mirror of the *Krishna* issue and, finding it wanting, worked through his spiritual questions in a way that resolved the personal tension he experienced between his devout and scientific sides but also ensured the increasing success of the ACK titles. The revised *Krishna* issue was to sell even better than before and Pai's hand remained strong in all the other titles, ensuring that his finger on the pulse of the readership was never to lose relevance.

As ACK's popularity started to take off in the 1970s, the struggle to find it a legitimate place in India's literary and cultural hierarchy began. It had, thus far, been marketed only as children's literature but as Pai raised the bar in terms of research behind each issue, quality of art and writing and the respectability of the subject matter (through his inclusion of historical figures as well as mythological), the comics were also suggested as suitable reading for adults. The late 70s saw the beginnings of ACK's reshaping itself as an educational medium as opposed to catering solely to recreational readers. This approach had the double-pronged effect of increasing ACK's legitimacy in the eyes of potential adult readers (as well as parents that might hold off on buying comics due to their intrinsically disreputable nature) but also advancing Pai's cause of making sure that ACK was a part of the march towards producing patriotic, culturally informed Indian citizens.

In February 1978, India Book House organized a seminar on the role of ACK in schools, heavily attended by educators from all over the country, with then Union Minister for Education Dr Pratap Chunder as chief guest. Here, Pai and his staff demonstrated how the comics dealt exclusively with respectable subject matter that was already in play across national school curricula but did so harnessing the unique advantages of the comic book medium, ensuring attention from students that could not be elicited by the dry words of a textbook. Further respectability was lent to the medium with the suggestion that 'comics' (or at least ACKs) be reclassified as 'chitra kathas' (immortal stories) – a precursor to the current 'comic book' versus 'graphic novel' debate. The seminar was a success and sales of ACK skyrocketed as educational institutions put them on their official syllabi. Advertising revenue was enhanced as ad-space was bought in the comics by companies manufacturing school supplies and the comics were proudly marketed on billboards as 'the only comics allowed in schools'. These developments, combined with Pai's targeting of the upwardly mobile potential readership that was reaching for middle class status with the translation of the comics into regional languages, ensured the

absolute ubiquity of ACK throughout India's population centers, from major bookstores to stalls on railway platforms and city pavements. By the mid 1980s, the monthly sales figures for just the English language issues exceeded 60,000 copies (Doctor 38). This did not take into account a secondary market as poorer children would acquire second-hand issues for a rupee or two each and the comics hooked a second round of fans.

The late 1980s saw a dip in the readership but not in the influence of the comics. The transformative event was the sudden soaring popularity of and access to television. Children read less comics as they were hooked by Sunday afternoon Disney cartoons. However, ACK still exerted its influence upon the people, albeit indirectly. The state-run Doordarshan channels aired the Ramayan and Mahabharat serials from 1987 to 1990, programmes that enraptured Indian audiences in an way that had never been seen before. An estimated 80 to 100 million people tuned in for the more popular episodes (Lutgendorf 223). The creators of the serials, however, drew heavily upon the mythological comics as inspiration for the episodes, both in terms of writing and art/production design. Doordarshan was, inadvertently, broadcasting the ACK ideology to even more people than the comics had originally reached.

ACK did, however, recover partially from the hardship of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The books underwent a complete redesign as 'bumper/deluxe editions' (akin to contemporary Western trade paperbacks) would combine older issues and repackage them to attract new readers. The comics took on a more professional sheen, with better paper stock and glossy covers. The late 1990s saw a further recovery as ACK appropriated a new technological platform to distribute its work – that of the multimedia CD-ROM, a medium that held great appeal for the middle class, adding 'acquisition of computer skills' to the list of reasons for parents to encourage the reading of the comics. In 1998, UTV produced a popular live-action television serial based on ACK titles, drawing directly from their scripts

and visual compositions. The national celebrations in 1997 of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Indian Independence saw the launch of an ACK bumper issue *The Story of the Freedom Struggle* by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee as part of the ceremonies. Now, as the Internet gains increasing traction in Indian households, ACK stands on the brink of a new media phase (discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3), the results of which are yet to be seen but will, no doubt, be of interest.

It is clear, therefore, that ACK has cemented its grip on the popular imagination of an enormous readership and taken up the mantle of public culture. One of the most significant indications of this is the extreme loyalty of the readership. The majority of the adult fans I interviewed for the third chapter's discussion of the comics' consumption recounted their enduring love for these comics they had grown up with and many claim to preserve their collections in family homes. Just as older generations would pass stories of the various epics down verbally, these fans now talk about how they – instead – pass on their ACK comics to their children and grandchildren. The readers view the comics as authoritative sources on Indian culture as much as younger generations used to value the authority of the elders that used to tell them those same stories (no coincidence that Anant Pai is popularly known by the fans as 'Uncle Pai'). The question still remains, however, whether the Indian culture on view was, in fact, the culture of the nation as a whole but that of the handful of people that guide the voice of the comics. The revealing coda to that question is that Pai himself had his faith altered through his interactions with the fans and the texts, adding further support to the argument for ACK's function as public culture, demonstrating how the comics act as an arena for social debate.

## Chapter 1

### History, Religion and Regionalism in *Amar Chitra Katha*

In this chapter, I will consider the role played by Amar Chitra Katha as part of the popular cultural mechanism through which the dominant Hindu nationalist ideology has circulated and gained considerable traction. Indian politics in the last few decades has been plagued by the forces of communalism as represented by the right-wing, anti-Muslim Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party which was in rule until 2004 and still wields considerable influence. While I associate no nefarious and aggressively anti-Muslim agenda to ACK, I will still argue that the dominant ideology disseminated by the comics only contains a marginal role for Muslims, with Hindus taking up the mantle of the real architects of the nation.

A decisive factor with regards to the inroads made by Amar Chitra Katha into Indian 'high culture' was the inclusion of historical protagonists. In 1971, after the success of the initial run of mythology-based issues, Pai decided to branch the imprint out into series based on Indian history, beginning with a run about the famous Marathi king Shivaji Bhonsle (1627-80). Thus began Amar Chitra Katha's significant role in shaping the way generations of schoolchildren have interpreted Indian history and constructed their sense of national identity. From the outset, it became clear that 'Indian historical figures' more often than not meant Hindu-centric protagonists. The pattern began with the *Shivaji* title which I will discuss in detail later in this chapter. It is not, however, the only example. Some of these examples feted historical figures that widely accepted scholarship has declared as dubious candidates for celebration.

One instance of this was the *Dayananda* title, focusing on Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883), the

founder of a Hindu reformist party known as the Arya Samaj. The party ideology was the basis for the subsequent development of several militaristic and right-wing Hindu nationalist parties such as the Hindu Mahasabha. The introduction on the inside cover of the issue makes the allegiance clear, stating that Dayananda did not “propagate or establish a new creed or a new sect...his main purpose behind establishing the Arya Samaj was to make people good, to rid the society of its evils and thereby build a free, strong and united nation”. However, as scholar Sailaja Krishnamurti points out, he did, in fact, set forth a new creed by advocating Vedic values, a cultural “program of purification, coupled with [an] insistence on 'disciplined' procreation” (Krishnamurti 116) that borders on a eugenic approach.

Another example of a controversial figure who is recast in a decidedly uncontroversial and positive light is that of Veer Savarkar, previously brought up by Frances Pritchett in her study of ACK. Savarkar was the author of *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* a foundational text for the Hindu right. As a young anti-colonial he was arrested by the British and imprisoned for eleven days on the Andaman Islands, the period focused on in the *Veer Savarkar* title. Savarkar was an extremely right-wing, anti-Gandhian leader and a vocal supporter of a Hindu-centric state, to whom Muslim organizations were the enemy. His anti-Gandhian speeches were, in fact, inspiration to Nathuram Godse, Gandhi's assassin. The structure of the comic book leaves out these facts entirely, focusing instead on Savarkar's early career as an anti-colonialist fighting the British and training fellow revolutionaries until he is captured. The majority of the subsequent pages are devoted to his experience within the prison – replete with depictions of physical and mental torture – as he endured the abuse that the British piled upon him. Only the last page of the issue gave any attention to his release and subsequent political life (which is, in fact, the part of his life that makes him historically relevant), the brief epilogue stating that he remained a freedom fighter for the rest of his life and lived to see Independence Day.

The rhetoric, therefore, is that Savarkar was yet another Hindu nationalist fighting heroically for an unpartitioned and united India, disguising his anti-Muslim sentiments with an ideology of anti-colonial nationalism free of any such prejudices. As Pritchett points out, this is the only reason for the ACK treatment of Savarkar, given that other less prejudiced and right-wing heroes were available for the comics to mine, the goal was to pick a communally tainted figure and “airbrush him into blandness” (Pritchett 94). The tactic, therefore, seems to homogenize these figures – that actually varied wildly in their politics, prejudices and intentions – under the banner of specifically Hindu 'brave freedom fighters'. Given that the comics would often focus on specific periods in their lives, further details, context and analysis was omitted, leaving the readers to come to the conclusion that these were all fine, upstanding men deserving of a place in the ACK pantheon.

### **Shivaji: History and Representation**

In this section, I will use the *Shivaji* series (written by Balaji Rao Bhagwat and illustrated by Pratap Mulick) as my primary case study for the chapter, attempting to detail the template - used repeatedly since 1971 - by which the Amar Chitra Katha comics represent history and construct larger issues like religion and cultural identity. The text I will use is the original English language version of the series. Pai was well aware that the largest audience for his stories was the growing English-speaking middle class and even though the comics are translated into several regional languages, it was initially scripted in English.

Shivaji is a well known historical figure throughout India but - notably - he is especially revered by the Hindus of the western Indian state of Maharashtra. He had fought off the Mughal invaders led by the Emperor Aurangzeb and established a Marathi kingdom in the 1670s that formed the basis for the state

of Marathi-speaking state of Maharashtra as it exists today. The comic book begins with his birth, the first issue concerning itself mostly with the young Shivaji's education. Major significance is imparted to an early sequence where Shivaji's mother Jijabai reads to him from Indian epics like the Bhagavad Gita, emphasizing Krishna's lesson that one's paramount duty in life "lies in fighting for your people" (Shivaji #1 p.8). This led to Shivaji raising a small army and experiencing his first military victory at the end of the first issue, capturing a fort owned by the reigning Sultan Adil Ali Shah. In the second issue, the Sultan sends his general Afzal Khan to assassinate Shivaji under the pretext of a parley session. Having been warned by one of his spies, Shivaji still chooses to walk into the trap, wearing armour under his clothing and carrying a concealed weapon. Afzal Khan welcomes him effusively and, upon embracing him, tries to stab him. Shivaji's armour protects him and he fights the dagger from Khan's hands and kills him.

This incident is an iconic part of the core canon of popular Indian stories, frequently told in and out of schools. The religious politics of this particular telling are worth consideration. Afzal Khan is portrayed as the prototypical villain. Mulick's illustrations depict him with twisted facial expressions incorporating near-absurd levels of visible malice, given that this is meant to be lulling Shivaji's suspicions. His religion is made paramount in the sequence as he cries out "Ya Allah!" (Shivaji #2, p 14) as Shivaji stabs him - his portrayal as evil Muslim outsider complete. This rhetorical stance is further enhanced by the comic book format as the full page splash of Shivaji stabbing Khan is offset by the facing page, depicting his Marathi warriors flooding in with the Hindu religious cry of "Har, Har Mahadev" (Shivaji #2, p 15). Khan is pictured as physically towering over Shivaji in the first page even as he is being stabbed, while the latter is drawn with a look of extreme regret, indicating his unwillingness to kill even in retaliation to an assassination attempt. On the facing page, his crumpled corpse cuts a diminutive figure as the Marathi soldiers sound out their victory cry to the Hindu god

Mahadev, making it clear which exhortation was meant to remain with the readers.

The four issue series portrays many of the other iconic events of Shivaji's life - his escape from house arrest imposed on him by the Mughal emperor, his victory at Pune's Lal Mahal and various other stories of his military exploits. The series ends, however, with his coronation as the "people's king" (Shivaji #4, p 36). The religious iconography in this sequence is explicit and, as pointed out by Karlene McLain (159), is closely paralleled with Amar Chitra Katha's previously running mythological title *Rama* (detailing the life of the titular Hindu king and avatar of the god Vishnu). This series ends with Rama's coronation in Ayodhya, the positioning of the characters and composition of the setting in the final panel of the sequence identical to those in the corresponding panel of Shivaji. Textually too, there is a parallel. The final words in the Shivaji comic book read "he ruled for only five years; but the Maratha power he built, flourished for many years" (Shivaji #4, p 36). The corresponding caption in the Rama story reads "he ruled for many years but his influence on the traditions of Hinduism flourished for many years" (Rama #6 p. 42). This explicit connection between the storyboarding, art and writing in the two consecutive series indicates how the direction taken in preparing them incorporates the belief that history and mythology are not mutually exclusive but, rather, complementary to each other. This is a belief that is manifested throughout the Indian educational system with stories of mythological figures like Rama being included in history textbooks alongside chapters on Mahatma Gandhi or Jawaharlal Nehru.

This homogenized and heavily editorialized depiction of Shivaji and its subsequent wide acceptance has not gone unchallenged. Immediately after Amar Chitra Katha published a number of tertiary Shivaji titles ("Tales of Shivaji", as well as titles about his companion Tanaji) in 1993, cultural critic and journalist Nancy Adajania wrote an article in *The Illustrated Weekly* where she lamented the

selective nature of the comics and their near-complete avoidance of depicting Shivaji as a complex human being as opposed to a whitewashed heroic figure, the first in a line of “nationalist superheroes” (Adajania 34). She argued that the lack of nuance or contextualizing facts led to students absorbing an incomplete, jingoistic picture of events. In the article, she references aspects of Shivaji that were never touched on in the comic books, for example, the onerous taxes he imposed on his people and his constant pillaging of the Gangetic plain. This caused an extreme reaction within the state and national ruling parties, the Shiv Sena and the Bharatiya Janata Party respectively, both of whom are rightwing Hindu nationalist groups. Adajania was accused of offending the Marathi people and had a legal case filed against her and the publisher for “promoting enmity between different groups on the grounds of religion”. The case was dismissed but the issue was banned and the editor of the magazine apologized publicly. The intensity of this reaction, along with the widespread public support that it garnered, illustrates the way in which historical figures had become enshrined as sacred (in more than one sense of the word) entities and the key role Amar Chitra Katha was playing in the process. It also indicates the level to which state officials (despite India’s status as a democracy with a dedication to the concept of separating religion and state affairs) are invested in these depictions of historical icons.

There are a number of other incidents stretching over the past decade that demonstrate the degree to which Shivaji has become a nodal point for the construction of Marathi (and Hindu) identity in Maharashtra. In 2003, James Laine published a book called *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India* which led to another furor. He contested the legitimacy of Shivaji’s parentage and - like Adajania - his role as an ideal hero for the Marathi people. Violent protests all over the state led to the withdrawal of this book. However, a group named the Sambhaji Brigade attacked the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune, where Laine had conducted his research. This group worshipped Shivaji’s mother Jijabai as a deity and the historian’s questioning of whether or not she was even his mother enraged

several key political figures with ties to the Brigade. In order to demonstrate their solidarity with the Hindu constituents, state and national politicians stumbled over each other to plan tributes to Shivaji - the trend reaching all the way up to then Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee who unveiled a statue of Shivaji near the Mumbai airport and added his public support to the Brigade's actions (stopping just short of condoning their violence). Even the northern city of Agra, traditionally a symbol of Mughal (and Islamic) strength was contested, as a shrine to Shivaji was raised there.

While I am not arguing that the Amar Chitra Katha comic books were the sole factor behind this sanctification of Shivaji, it is significant that they were cited by both the writers above as well as the protesters as a part of their respective sides of the argument. They had, for better or worse, become a major part of the popular discourse around Shivaji in specific and the issue of representing historical figures in general. In the following paragraphs, I will try to connect the comic books to the historical material that preceded the comic book, which the producers drew upon to create their immortalizing picture of Shivaji. Stretching over more than two centuries and several media platforms, the political, religious and personal image of Shivaji evolved to culminate in the form it has reached in the comic book.

Nineteenth-century historian James Mill wrote in his *History of British India* that their "ancient literature affords not a single production to which the historical character belongs" (Mills 144). He continues to argue that the historical texts that exist on the subcontinent draw little distinction between the mythological and the factual as they frequently take on an overtly religious nature. This provides a relevant context in which to frame the connection between historical facts, their blurring with mythological borders and the resulting combination produced in the comic books. It is also significant that the histories can be drawn from both British colonial and post-Independence Indian sources. I

should, at this point, mention that I am not attempting to prove or disprove the accounts put forward in the comic books or the ones in the key history texts that I will go on to cite. The purpose is to illustrate how there are several well documented facets to the constructed narrative of Shivaji's life and to illuminate the ideology behind the comic books by considering which facets of the conflicting historical arguments were left out and which were included.

In 1826, James Grant Duff wrote the first British text on the Marathi people - *A History of the Mahrattas* - in which he attempted to humanize Shivaji, warts and all. He writes about how Shivaji persuaded a Hindu in Afzal Khan's employ to join his side. In Duff's account (Duff, 210-213), the Hindu servant persuaded Khan to attend the parley in muslin clothing and an openly carried sword and it was Shivaji who arrived with a concealed assassin's weapon and armour. He continues to relate how it was Shivaji who lulled Khan's suspicions and proceeded to strike him down from behind. This is in clear contrast with the comic book's version which accentuates Shivaji's defensive status and bravery while detailing Khan's deceit. Duff wraps up this account by asserting (similar to Adajania and Lane a century and a half later) that Shivaji was not the hero he was made out to be and was responsible for murdering many Hindu kings that stood in the way of his territorializing as well as having possessed a tendency to assassinate enemy officials like Khan under cover of truce. Duff claimed that his narrative was constructed from the account of the Hindu scribe who had set up the meeting.

His findings were corroborated by another historian - James Douglas - in 1883. Douglas drew from several primary sources, including the personal accounts of Henry Oxinden, the English Ambassador at the time. Douglas relates how Oxinden witnessed Shivaji's instructions to his troops, quoting him as repeating the phrase "no plunder no pay" (Douglas 309-310). Douglas also incorporates multiple accounts collected by ambassadorial aide and historian Sir Charles Napier that support Duff's belief

that Shivaji assassinated Afzal Khan at a pre-arranged truce and disemboweled him with concealed weapons while embracing him. He refers to this as one of Shivaji's "two great crimes" (Douglas 311), the other being the well documented murder of the (Hindu) Raja of Jauli.

It is significant, then, that the comic book excises all mention of Shivaji's various crimes against Hindu rulers and their people while stressing the antagonism and deceit of Muslim outsiders. The comics do enhance their historical credibility by choosing not to include the widespread view among the Marathi people that Shivaji was a divine avatar. They do, as mentioned, draw an explicit connection between Shivaji and the (overwhelmingly positively spun) Hindu rule of the region ever since his victories over the Mughals, an aspect of his significance that is confirmed (sans the positive spin) by the historical accounts beginning with those of Duff and Douglas. The latter illustrates Shivaji's religiosity by documenting the story (Douglas 319) of how Aurangzeb's daughter fell deeply in love with Shivaji who reciprocated those feelings with equal intensity. Eventually, however, Shivaji chose his religion over the princess, refusing to convert to Islam for the marriage. This was said to be an additional factor in the continuing hostility between Shivaji and Aurangzeb.

The comic book's rendition of this event depicts the two lovers as being unfairly persecuted by the monolithic face of Islamic law. The princess is written as willing to convert to Hinduism, the only obstacle in their path being Aurangzeb's unreasonable insistence that Shivaji be the one to convert instead. There is no documentation of this being the case, with Douglas and Duff (along with future historians like Adajania) agreeing that it was as unlikely that the princess was willing to convert to Hinduism as it was that Shivaji was willing to convert to Islam. Yet, there are panels where the submissively portrayed princess takes the unlikely stance - "Dear lord, I would in a heartbeat adopt your faith but my father has forbidden it. But what religion would stand in the way of lovers uniting?"

(Shivaji #2, p22). Little mention is made in the comic book how it was equally unfair of the Hindu Shivaji to refuse to compromise his religious principles in the face of true love.

Another pertinent aspect of Douglas' account is pointed out by scholar Karlene McLain's dissection of the colonial and postcolonial histories of Shivaji. She isolates a passage in his book (McLain 189) where he brings together the various accounts of Shivaji from members of local communities stretching from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the time of his writing, asserting that at no point had the ruler ever been popular or well respected. He says that "no man now cares for Shivaji. Over all those wide domains... not one man contributes a rupee to keep or repair the tomb of the founder of the Maratha Empire" (Douglas 140-141). This begins to make it clearer that the sanctification and sterilization of Shivaji's persona is a much more recent phenomena, resulting in the increasingly Hindu nationalist direction taken by the educational system and culture of Maharashtra - two institutions in which Amar Chitra Katha continues to play a major part.

Douglas' seminal text on Shivaji prompted a backlash in Maharashtra as Indian historians began to construct a counter-narrative to what they believed to be a colonial besmirching of the ruler's character (a reflex reaction to Western opinion - one of Anant Pai's major motivations behind launching Amar Chitra Katha's historical series). In 1885, the Indian Justice of Maharashtra, M.G. Ranade, picked up on Douglas' comment and began a movement to restore the tomb and, in doing so, drum up support for the view that Shivaji was a regional hero. He did succeed in raising some money, though most of it came from the English governor of Bombay and other aristocrats. Not one to give up, Ranade wrote his own book, *Rise of the Maratha Power* (1900), in which he put forth the view (now prevailing, as described, in most educational and cultural circles) that Shivaji was the Hindu saviour of the Marathi

people, having “helped to dismember the Great Moghul Empire” (Ranade 1). He reminds the reader that there is “particular moral significance in the story of the rise and fall of a freebooting Power, which thrived by plunder and adventure” (Ranade 1) thus condemning the accounts that had gone before and planting the seeds for the depiction of Shivaji as the morally superior Hindu. It was Ranade’s work that was key in providing a template for much of the rhetoric put forth by the Hindu nationalist parties like the Shiv Sena (Bal Thackeray, leader of the Sena, quotes him directly on several occasions while talking about Shivaji in the wake of the Adajania protests) as well as for the producers of the Shivaji comic books.

While he disagreed with the accounts that Shivaji was a deceitful and despotic plunderer, Ranade was careful not to discredit himself in academic circles by claiming that the ruler was a deity (a tactic imitated, as mentioned, by Anant Pai and his creative staff). He makes a concerted effort to follow the colonial historians’ tendency to humanize Shivaji and not divorce the narrative from the human motivations that drove it. For example, on the topic of the assassination of Afzal Khan, he does not directly dispute the accounts that Shivaji was the antagonist of the event. He does, however, assert (Ranade 6-7) that treachery was a common and widely accepted tactic of warfare at the time and that Shivaji’s actions - had he, in fact, been the aggressor - were not as morally suspect in the seventeenth century as they were in the time of his writing. It should be pointed out again, though, that the comic book does not adopt this particular line of Ranade’s argument, choosing to portray Afzal Khan as the over-the-top villain of the piece.

The other media forms that came into play during this ongoing discourse were paintings and the printing press. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, India was beginning to produce a number of artists

that were bridging the gap between British colonial and nationalist tastes. These artists were celebrated by the British as being non-Western practitioners who had mastered European academia's sense of aesthetics, incorporated a level of realism hitherto uncommon in local art. Indians, on the other hand, celebrated these artists as nation-builders - the creators of the kind of iconography that would go on to expel the outsiders from the borders of the Hindu motherland.

One of the more famous of these artists was Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906), whose narrative paintings had been lauded by people on both sides of the colonial divide. He was especially well known for his depictions of Shivaji which, interestingly, had been appropriated by colonial and nationalist historians in the contexts of their differing takes on the Shivaji narrative. English historians like Douglas used Varma's paintings as frontispieces for their work, simply to illustrate the text and put a warlike face on the character they were building. The paintings were even more valuable to the nationalists. One such example was that of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, a vocal proponent of the emerging Hindu nationalist construction of Shivaji in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century. He published a detailed commentary on the well known Varma painting "Shivaji Maharaj". In the painting, Shivaji is sitting on his horse, holding a sword aloft and leading a line of men out of a fort they have just captured. The men all have their weapons raised and are screaming out a war cry in unison (presumably the famous refrain of "Har Har Mahadev!").

In his commentary, Tilak says "the frozen moment, in its combination of the ideal and the real, can remind the Marathi people of the glorious past and perhaps even indicate the possibility of future glories" (Tilak 32). It was clear to him, then, that images such as these could be used to spread the nationalist and religious ideas embodied by Shivaji much better than dry academic texts - a precursor to the similar epiphany experienced by Anant Pai in 1971. Inspired by the painting, Tilak started the

Putsch festival in 1896. Arguably the first trans-media construction of the Shivaji narrative, the festival was a celebration of Shivaji as Maratha hero, with much of its program consisting of re-enactments of key events in his life. They appropriated the more Hindu-friendly accounts such as those of Ranade and further mythicized them into compelling stories of heroism and struggle. Popular discourse around Shivaji as a deity was to spread from this focal point in the Marathi community calendar. Major events included Martand Joshi's play *Victory to Shiva Chhatrapati* which celebrated Afzal Khan's assassination as an event identical (in terms of both narrative and ideology) to the version in Amar Chitra Katha. Tilak commissioned several portraits of Shivaji and his guru Ramdas and organized a procession of these portraits through the festival space. He also produced and circulated lithographs of the Varma paintings - an extremely successful endeavour which led Varma to start his own lithograph press. In addition, the festival incorporated scripture readings and songs as well as prayer offerings, giving the Shivaji festival a decidedly religious air.

When Varma started his lithograph press in 1896, the first painting he reproduced was his "Shivaji Maharaj" - already an iconic image in the region due to its promotion by the Hindu nationalists and its high visibility during the festival. The initial run was immensely popular and the image gained further popularity all over Western India. This revered position given to the painting in Marathi culture was used to great advantage by Pai and his creative team. Pai has frequently stressed the imprint's adherence to source material whenever possible and one example he has brought up repeatedly in interviews is that of the Shivaji comic book. During interviews with Karline McLain, several of the Amar Chitra Katha artists admitted to drawing direct inspiration from the "Shivaji Maharaj" painting, an image they were directed to by Pai.

The cover of the first issue of Shivaji is a minimally modified version of the painting. It is, for the most

part, a very dynamic image. A swirl of purple and saffron around the figures indicates frenetic movement and the horses are drawn in positions indicating haste. This active, narrative depiction serves to evoke the heroic nature of Shivaji's story. However, as McLain points out (McLain 174), there is a definite suspension of narrative and action elements with the illustration of Shivaji in the center of the painting. McLain quotes Svetlana Alpers in her description of Shivaji on the cover as possessing "a fixity of pose and an avoidance of outward expression" (Alpers 15). Shivaji's face does not express any emotions and provides no way for the viewer of the cover to 'read' it. The depiction becomes an abstraction of Shivaji's narrative. He is transformed into an icon - an immortal hero, who is going to be riding into the sunset to defeat the Marathas' enemies forever. As Alpers says in an article about narrative representation (which applies perfectly to this cover image), "the pictorial modes of narrative and icon are merged, neither completely apart from the other, creating a dynamic relationship between realism and idealism, history and mythology" (Alpers 16).

The representation of the Shivaji story in *Amar Chitra Katha*, therefore, is clearly a heavily mediated and carefully constructed one, created with an editorial agenda in mind beyond that of mere entertainment or the educating of the people. It is an extension of the mythmaking, nation-building and religious upliftment that Tilak began with the Shivaji festival, immersed in the Indian 'pop culture' of the time. The agenda was never a secret. Anant Pai revealed early in interviews with McLain that his aim was to wean young readers away from Western culture in a time when they were being increasingly won over by American comics and other forms of pop culture and back into what he felt was a healthier moral and social environment - "this is the trouble with our educational system. Children are getting alienated from their own culture" (McLain 47). A devout Hindu, brought up in Maharashtra (though he was born in Karnataka), Pai made the decision to begin his mission to win over the hearts and minds of Indian children with Shivaji, the historical figure that most embodied his view

of the ideal Marathi.

Pai was certainly no fanatical villain - Amar Chitra Katha went on to publish comic books on a vast range of historical figures from various castes and religions. He is well known for seeking the approval of community groups that revere the various figures he chooses to steer the series toward. However, the determination with which he pushed through his editorial agenda on the Shivaji title is telling. Examples of this agenda have already been mentioned but, significantly, Pai even faced down his publishers over his vision for the comic book. The financial backers of Amar Chitra Katha wanted the flagship Shivaji title to appeal to Brahmins and non Brahmins alike, which raised the issue of Shivaji being a devout disciple of the Brahmin sage Ramdas. Despite pressure to edit the sequence, he includes a splash page in issue 2 where Shivaji prostrates himself before the sage Ramdas with his entire army watching, seeking his blessing for the martial campaigns to follow. He receives this blessing, with the Hindu god Hanuman watching from above and further sanctifying what is already a prototypical piece of Brahmin iconography. These issues, then, leave very little room for interpretation with regards to the specific nature of Shivaji's Hinduism - reflecting the Brahmanical inclinations of Pai as well as most of his creative team.

It is apparent, then, that in the Indian context, there is no easy division between history and mythology. Mythological tales are often interpreted literally and historical figures frequently get drawn in mythic proportions. Adajania claimed in her article that Shivaji was portrayed not in 'real' historical terms but as a superhuman being, Amar Chitra Katha taking an enormous part of the responsibility for the popular dissemination of this portrayal. The question of the implications presented by the depiction of historical icons in this way is one that I will deal with further in the next chapter. Despite the many narrative options available to them from the various historical materials and interpretations, the

producers chose to depict the Hindu nationalist version. Despite the tremendous criticism, ranging from the portrayal of Muslims to the objections brought up by critics like Adajania, the comic book continues to be a bestseller today. It must, however, be remembered that the Shivaji canonized into stone by Amar Chitra Katha and its ilk represented only one side of the historical constructions of the man as he existed.

## Chapter 2

### The Representation of Women in *Amar Chitra Katha*

Ever since the publication of its first series with a female protagonist (*Shakuntala* in 1970), *Amar Chitra Katha* has been consistently criticized by the Indian media for its portrayal of women. This is not to suggest that women have no place in the comics. Female protagonists have been allotted a significant number of titles and given a considerable amount of attention in terms of character and voice. The complaints have, rather, been framed around the representation of these characters as objects, heavily filtered through the lens of 'tradition' and ready to throw themselves on burning pyres to defend the honour of male counterparts. In this chapter, I will take a closer look at the depiction of women in ACK, paying special attention to the particular titles that have inspired the most debate due to their treatment of key issues like sexuality, gender relations or the practice of *sati*. I will also examine the historical arguments and texts that the comics draw heavily from in order to better understand their ideology. My intention in doing so is to further detail the connection between this ideology and the discourses over 'tradition versus modernity' that were central to the negotiation of Indian identity in the twentieth century.

In the ongoing post-Independence sociocultural debates over what constitutes the genuinely 'Indian', the role of women and the feminine ideal have remained some of the most contested topics. The resulting model of femininity is characterized by a peculiarly schizophrenic rooting in the feudal as well as the contemporary capitalist systems, gestures toward the left-oriented Indian women's movement of the 70s and 80s while simultaneously drawing heavily from the conservative ideology of the Hindu nationalists. This has led to a situation where India, as a nation, pledges to uphold equal

rights on the international front by signing on to various charters and also on the domestic side by setting up institutions to (at least nominally) protect the interests of women. However, on the ground, there are serious violations at every level, concerning rights to education, nutrition, medical care, equal representation etc and continual resistance to the idea that women belong anywhere outside the domestic sphere.

This chasm between the superficial ideology and what lies under the surface is mirrored in the representation of female characters in ACK. Ostensibly, the titles with female protagonists look to celebrate the role of women in Indian history and mythology. The stated intention of the creators is to highlight the independence, strength and bravery of these women and highlight their strong presence in Hindu culture. However, a closer study reveals that beneath the surface, the language of the comics typically incorporates considerable sexism – the female protagonists either idealized, eroticized or tormented with conspicuous frequency under the guise of the consistently suspect argument of voluntarism. I do, therefore, assert that despite the tensions introduced into the debates surrounding the representation of gender by the rise of the women's movement, ACK consistently toes the conservative line – putting forward the Hindu nationalist ideal as the preferred type for all women.

#### THE STATUS OF THE FEMALE PROTAGONIST

Despite the number of women-centric ACK titles, an examination of the comics reveal that the female characters, which the comics are nominally about, are consistently subordinate to other (male) personalities or, at the very least, to the patriarchal systems of which they were a part. Power relations are never balanced and their agency within their own lives frequently dependent on male characters or their prioritizing of these characters before themselves.

Mythological heroines, even if they are goddesses, do not possess independent status very often. Many of the heroines are worshipped because they are consorts of the male gods – for example, Rukimini (despite being an incarnation of the goddess Lakshmi) is given divine status as the principal wife of Krishna. When goddesses are worshipped in and of themselves, the connotation given to this is often negative. Many characters are shown to worship Kali but this is interpreted as a negative action in the comics by highlighting the darker side of Kali cults – black magic and human sacrifice.

In her study of ACK, Nandini Chandra calls attention to how women in love are shown to be capable of doing anything in pursuit of the men with whom they are in love. In *Lila and Chanesar*, the queen Lila is tricked by Kaunuru, a princess disguised as a servant, into selling the latter a glimpse of her beloved Chanesar. The king then proceeds to leave Lila and marry Kaunuru. Once they have won the men's love, however, the women are portrayed as being compelled to place these men before themselves. In the *Joymati* series, the titular Assamese folk heroine is tied to a tree and whipped by men trying to discover her husband's location. Her husband sneaks up to her at night as she remains tied to the tree, asking whether she would prefer that he give himself up to his pursuers. This is the only point in the story in which she asserts herself – driving her husband away, insisting that she would rather sacrifice herself (Chandra 174-176). The status of the female protagonists, therefore, are consistently secondary to that of their husbands/lovers.

This pattern of women as subordinate characters even in their own books is derived from the model of Indian femininity that the Hindu nationalists had begun to construct from the late nineteenth century onward, a process that will now be discussed in detail, using the *Shakuntala* title as a specific case study.

## SHAKUNTALA OVER THE AGES: A HISTORICAL EXAMPLE

As discussed in earlier chapters, the paintings of Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906) were a major source of inspiration for numerous works of pop culture, including – significantly - the art in numerous ACK titles. The comics used his art as a source, both in terms of actual content (clothes, backgrounds, composition) but also in terms of ideology. In the words of acclaimed contemporary artist and critic A. Ramachandran, “his illustrations set the model for the so called popular arts of this century such as popular calendars, Amar Chitra Kathas and film and theater productions on mythological themes” (Ramachandran 22). Just as Varma's work was a key aspect of the late nineteenth century discourse around religion and national identity, it was also a major influence on the direction taken by the conversation that was building around the negotiation of the Indian feminine ideal.

As mass reproduction methods were gaining popularity in India, the nationalists were using these new media platforms to propagate their notion of the ideal Indian woman as sourced from the Vedic texts and the stories of epic heroines like Shakuntala and Damayanti (Chakravarti 46). As suggested by Karlene McLain, this was representative of the movement to consolidate the idea of a golden age of Indian civilization and that it was developing at the same time as the notion of the “Aryan” was gaining prominence in Orientalist scholarship. As a result, the golden age was not just a Hindu one, but an Aryan one as well. In this discourse, the epic heroines who were equated with the normative model of Indian womanhood were recast as Aryan women (McLain 120). Romila Thapar, an Indian historian, argues that as the nineteenth century was drawing to a close, this manifestation of 'race science' was gaining momentum, leading to a new interpretation of Shakuntala – the key figure in the negotiation of the feminine ideal within the arts. She was seen to embody the female virtues now being extolled as

being Indian, Hindu and Aryan all at once – chastity, devotion, self-sacrifice and modesty (Thapar 17).

There are several reasons for the sudden cultural significance of the Shakuntala story at the turn of the twentieth century but, first, a few details about the story itself. Shakuntala is an epic heroine whose story appears initially in the *Mahabharat*. However, it was the version of the story presented in the classic Sanskrit play *Abhigyan-Shakuntalam* (The Recognition of Shakuntala), written in the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D by the poet Kalidas that became the most popular. Shakuntala was a young woman raised in a forest hermitage. One day, the king – Dushyant – chances upon her while hunting. They fall in love and get married shortly after. Dushyant returns to his capital, promising to send for her. After waiting months for word, the pregnant Shakuntala sets out for the city herself. When she arrives, she is greeted by a Dushyant who claims to remember nothing of her or their marriage. While the two are happily reunited at the end of both versions of the story, the response to Dushyant's rebuttal and the path to the positive conclusion differ greatly between the two. The Shakuntala of Kalidas' play is depicted as shy, submissive, prone to thoughts of self-sacrifice and consistently inclined towards putting up with the unpleasant lot she is stuck with. The Shakuntala of the *Mahabharat*, on the other hand, is assertive, strong and independent, delivering a passionate speech in response to Dushyant's memory lapse and generally tending towards attempting to take control of the path her life takes.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Kalidas' narrative had become a cultural touchstone around which much of the previously mentioned discourse over the ideal of Indian womanhood was coalescing. The first factor contributing to this was the publication in 1855 of Sir M. Monier Williams' English translation of the play. Translations had been produced before but this edition was, by far, the most visible owing to the increasing circulation of printed material and the relevance of the text to the changes bubbling up in the zeitgeist. Williams proclaimed the original play (while notably making no

mention of the story in the Mahabharat) one of the literary highlights of “the Golden Age of Indian civilization” (Williams 9) feeding right into the nationalist conception of this classical period as a source for the characteristics of the ideal Indian woman.

This was followed by Raja Ravi Varma producing a number of paintings of Shakuntala in the 1870s. His position as an influential Indian artist who had received wide acclaim at home and elsewhere has already been established. However, his paintings of Shakuntala began to gain further visibility and cultural relevance in 1894 when Varma founded the Ravi Varma Lithographic Press. One of the earliest prints to be produced and circulated were of Varma's series of Shakuntala paintings. These prints were a staple addition to the prayer rooms of a large proportion of the Indian middle class, becoming an essential part of the iconography that lay at the heart of the discourse around femininity. Less than a century after, they would become the primary visual documents from which the art of the ACK series on Shakuntala was drawn.

As may be expected, Varma's paintings used the Kalidas version of the story as their basis. Shakuntala is consistently portrayed as a shy and submissive individual, frequently the object of a distinctly eroticized male gaze. An example would be one of the more well known of Varma's Shakuntala paintings *Shakuntala Looks Back at Dushyant*, in which she is portrayed as sneaking a glance back at the king while pretending to pick a thorn from her foot. Historian Tapati Guha-Thakurta writes about the painting - “(It) reflects the centrality of 'the male gaze' in defining the feminine image. Though absent from the pictorial frame, the male lover forms a pivotal point of reference, his gaze transfixes Shakuntala, as also Damayanti, into 'desired images', casting them as lyrical and sensual ideals” (Guha-Thakurta 37). It is this passive, self-sacrificing objectified version, identical to the character in Kalidas' play and in Varma's paintings that finds a place in the pages of ACK. The external signifiers from the

primary documents that so informed the re-negotiation of the feminine ideal at the turn of the twentieth century – the jewelry, postures and gestures – are mostly replicated in the comics. The clothing choices, however, are not always accurate for the period and often tend towards sexualizing the female protagonists by depicting them in more revealing clothes than would generally be worn at the time.

The cover of the first issue is an instance of the active/passive gendered approach. Shakuntala is sitting in a forest plain, surrounded by her animal friends, right before leaving for the city to search for Dushyant. As always, her posture is one of submission – looking down, a resigned expression on her face. Unknown to her, her adoptive father Kanva is watching her from behind a tree. The composition is strangely voyeuristic – once again, her passive presence as an object of the male gaze leads to the freezing of the narrative in one of what Mulvey refers to as “moments of erotic contemplation” (Mulvey 18). While Kanva's inclination might be interpreted as paternal, he is the intermediary for the audience's gaze which is guided into a territory a little less benign, given the sexualization of the Shakuntala figure throughout the comic in terms of clothing, posture and demeanor. This tension between historical accuracy of the clothing and the need to titillate the the audience (whether or not this is a conscious editorial/artistic choice) is further discussed in the last section of the chapter.

There are numerous other examples of this – a significant one being an issue (*Shakuntala* no. 12) in which she writes a love letter to Dushyant. One of the more popular Varma paintings is *Shakuntala Writes a Letter*, portraying a scene of her writing to Dushyant since she is unable to confront him with her feelings. This painting is a direct inspiration for the corresponding scene in the ACK title as the physically idealized Shakuntala (fair, slim-waisted and recognizably Aryan) writes upon a lotus leaf, too shy to talk to the object of her love. Once again, she is being watched unbeknownst to her – this time by Dushyant. His gaze is the point of reference here as Shakuntala is, once again, turned into an

object of desire (one that cannot give direct expression to her own corresponding desires and has to rely on animal companions to deliver love letters).

Her passivity in the comics is not restricted to her relationship with Dushyant. In keeping with the nationalist model for femininity, she remains an obedient daughter – unquestioning in her compliance to adoptive father Kanva's wishes. After the marriage to Dushyant, Shakuntala is shown speaking to Kanva (*Shakuntala* no. 12, p. 15). She is on her knees before him, her head bent toward the floor with a veil obscuring her face. Kanva instructs her to remain “a good and faithful wife” to which she responds “I shall do all that you say, dear father.” Everything about this panel indicates an almost ceremonial transformation of Shakuntala into the 'good wife', almost entirely deprived of agency in her own life. After this, she is publicly humiliated by her husband and thrown out of his court, subsequently spending years raising her son alone in a hermitage.

It is only after several years and a literal *deus ex machina* that Dushyant recants his previous story and reunites with Shakuntala. The depiction of this reunion in the comics (*Shakuntala*, no. 12) is a curious one, further indicating the expected behaviour of a woman in the face of hardship. Pointedly, Shakuntala does not reprimand or, in any way, hold Dushyant responsible for his tremendous lapse. Instead, she smiles, greets him with open arms and proceeds to introduce their son Bharat to him. It is significant that Bharat is claimed to have become a great emperor who united all of India under his rule. He was also said to be a direct ancestor of the Pandava and Kaurava dynasties of princes. One of the original names for the subcontinent - “Bharatvarsha” - was derived from his name. Being Bharat's mother thus becomes Shakuntala's primary role in the eyes of the comics' creators. The epilogue on the back cover of the final issue does not concern Shakuntala directly but states the above-mentioned stories about Bharat. In an interview with Karline McLain, Anant Pai says “Shakuntala is very

important, because she is the mother of Bharat. She is the mother of Bharat, the emperor, but also the foremother of all Indians” (McLain 111). He goes on to say that this was the primary reason that Shakuntala was chosen as the first female protagonist of the ACK comic books.

This sets the foundation block for the pattern that is visible across the ACK titles over the next three decades, with the representation of women modeled closely upon the Hindu nationalist model that started to take shape in the late nineteenth century and has evolved (or devolved, depending on one's perspective) since. Despite the apparent homage being paid to the role of strong women in Indian history and mythology, a closer look reveals a different perspective – one where female protagonists are important only as mothers, daughters or passive objects directed by male action.

#### THE DEPICTION OF SATI IN AMAR CHITRA KATHA

The single most controversial aspect of ACK's representation of women has been the depiction of *sati* in the various titles. The term refers explicitly to the act of self immolation by a wife or widow, usually to preserve the man's honor or as a mark of loyalty to a dead husband. The word is derived from the goddess Sati who killed herself as a gesture of protest against her father's humiliations of her husband Shiva. The term has also come to represent – in a wider context – the 'eternal' female principle of self-sacrifice as popularized by the Hindu nationalist model .

Given that the practice is now widely recognized as a horrifying holdover from the medieval period, the patriarchy has begun to re-negotiate the concept in terms of an internalization of the principles behind it and by putting forth the 'voluntarism' argument. While the act of self immolation is no longer condoned for the most part (and certainly not by the creators of ACK), it has nonetheless been inserted

into various ACK titles as a manifestation of the (very strongly condoned) principle of self sacrifice. The rationale put forward is that the act (at least in the instances shown in the comics) was a voluntary one, committed by the woman in question to assert her positive qualities as a self-sacrificial, honorable and courageous individual, thus appropriating liberal vocabulary to provide a regressive argument defending the not-quite-critical depiction of *sati* in the comics (and in the wider world, its place in the Hindu nationalist rhetoric).

There are several examples of *sati* in the ACK comics. The story of the goddess Sati herself is one. Another example is in the *Padmini* series (which began in 1973 but has been consistently popular and endured in reprint editions), where the titular Rajput queen kills herself in order to free her husband to fight an encroaching army and also to escape the clutches of the invaders' king. The inside front cover of the first *Padmini* comic book announces her status as “a perfect model of ideal Indian womanhood”, at least in part due to her willingness to sacrifice herself for her husband. In the years following the publication of the series, the Indian media has brought up the issue quite frequently, a notable example being a 1987 *Express Magazine* article by feminist activist Bulbul Pal in which she argued that the comics glorified *sati*.

During his interview with Karline McLain, Pai had a ready answer for the criticisms - “it happened. I cannot change that. And the Rajputs saw it as an act of bravery...that which is done for the good of others, even at the cost of the self, is good; that which is done to benefit the self, at the cost of another, is a sin” (McLain 142). The author of the *Padmini* comics – Yagya Sharma – has stated that values should be judged in relation to history and that readers should not use contemporary value systems to judge historical events. His belief is that the value of *sati* lies not in the action itself but in the fact that women were willing to make such an extreme sacrifice in defense of their principles.

*Sati*, therefore, is re-negotiated in this most public of spaces, not as an act of self-destruction but as “an act of self-fulfilment” (Chandra 159). The process is shown to originate not so much with external factors but as one inspired by the woman's own internal qualities and principles. This is further exhibited in the *Ranak Devi* title, where the villain actively tries to prevent Ranak Devi from committing *sati*, suggesting that it is not only a voluntary act but a heroic feminine equivalent to masculine quest narratives. Just as a man proves his valor by rushing into battle, a woman proves her worth by demonstrating her willingness to sacrifice. In the final page of the series, when Ranak finally succeeds in her quest to self-immolate, the final panels show people rushing to gather up the “sacred embers” and the building of a shrine to Ranak's memory. In this example, *sati* is practically equated with deification. The portrayal of *sati*, therefore, becomes a key element of the negotiation of feminine ideals in these comics. It is an example of the way the dominant ideology of the Hindu nationalists is being recreated amidst ongoing debate – in this instance, the recasting of *sati* as an undesirable cultural artifact.

## THE FEMININE IDEAL AND ITS EXTERNAL SIGNIFIERS

As important as the actions performed by the female characters and their roles in the story elements of the comics are, the external markers of their femininity in the comics' art play a significant part in bringing the more internalized ideals into the space of public discourse. These include such features as clothes, ornamentation, postures and gestures and, as mentioned earlier, these elements come together to form a pointed indication of the ideologies at work behind the panels. In this section I will perform a closer examination of some of the visual tendencies evident in ACK's body of work in relation to the feminine ideal, even across titles and artists.

As discussed earlier, the race issue was one that contributed to the negotiation of what constituted 'the Indian woman'. The model being constructed was derived from the Hindu and the decidedly Aryan (in the nationalist movement's hindsight) 'golden age'. It is no surprise, therefore, that the vast majority of the women portrayed in the ACK comics conform to the Aryan physical ideal, even though such an appearance is most likely inaccurate in terms of what many of these women may have actually looked like. This is in direct contradiction to ACK's much vocalized dedication to thorough research and its status as a source of information and reference material.

The women in the comics are consistently drawn as light skinned and slender, with small waists, wide hips and long legs. The clothing (the inaccuracy of the costumes will be discussed later) frequently reveal uniformly flat stomachs that seem more suited to 21<sup>st</sup> century fashion magazines rather than comic books about Indian epic heroines. Instances of this abound in the illustrations of nearly all the comics with significant female characters – examples can be found in *Shakuntala*, *The Ramayana*, *Nala and Damayanti* and numerous others. In a study carried out by scholars Radhika Parameswaran and Kavitha Cardoza, it was discovered that 160 out of 195 covers examined portrayed exclusively light-skinned characters, with many of the rest featuring blue-skinned gods. Furthermore, in a detailed examination of 30 of ACK's bestselling titles, they found that only 15% of the sample of *all* the women featured in those titles were dark-skinned while 85% were pink or light-skinned (Parameswaran and Cardoza 12). This physical homogeneity does a disservice to the reality of the situation, which is that different areas of India are populated by people of varying racial compositions. Dark-skinned, shorter, stockier individuals as can be found in many areas of southern and eastern India are rarely to be found in ACK and when they are, the portrayal is often negative.

The politics of skin color in relation to the feminine ideal is a topic that is hotly contested to this day. There is a consistent movement towards equating beauty with fair skin in all popular media. Matrimonial ads in classified sections and websites make a point of mentioning the prospective bride's complexion with fair skin being indicated as a clear plus. Magazines and television are inundated with 'fairness' creams and other skin products. Female film stars are rarely dark skinned. There is an extremely high premium attached to fair skin despite the fact that such a complexion cannot be associated with a considerable part of the Indian population. Given ACK's role in the ongoing construction of femininity in India, its tendency to support the hegemonic ideal is disturbing.

Throughout the comics, light skinned women are associated with a higher status in terms of class or caste. White or pink skin is used as a visual shorthand for beauty which, in turn, is an indicator of status. The lighter skinned women are almost always the heroines – goddesses or other divine beings, royalty or idealized mothers and daughters. Light skin and beauty is associated with innocence and happiness on the part of these women. They are frequently shown to be engaged in 'favoured' activities like playing instruments, communing with nature or reading. Almost without exception, the positive female characters – imbued with 'desirable' qualities like obedience, patience, loyalty and self-sacrifice – are drawn with white or pink skin. Other than panels where they are depicted as suffering from some kind of overt physical or mental abuse, these women are drawn in a way that enhances the aura of their idealized beauty, with continual expressions of happiness, contentment or – otherwise – demure or coy submission.

As Parameswaran and Cardoza point out, “captions accompanying the illustrations of these godly and royal female characters painted in pink reinforce...the 'feel-good' qualities of the visual images. Amar Chitra Katha comic books (consistently) use the words 'slim', 'fair', 'comely', 'beautiful', 'virtuous' and

'lovely' to describe light-skinned women” (Parameswaran and Cardoza 19). The theme of men's vulnerability to fair-skinned beauty is also an ongoing theme in the comics. Furthermore, this weakness for the pale feminine ideal is depicted as being practically crippling when it concerns dark-skinned men. Fair-skinned women are abducted by dark skinned *asuras* (demons) with alarming frequency in the comics. One example is in the *Urvashi* series, where the titular dancer is kidnapped by the *asuras* whose very existence centers around their obsession with her beauty. A king named Pururavas rescues her, only to become obsessed with her physical beauty himself. However, in this case, his determination to possess her only leads to his performance of various actions that impress the god Indra so much that he gifts Urvashi to Pururavas as a reward (her contentment with such a development being a given).

Dark-skinned women are doomed to an unpleasant role in these comics. They are often servants, illiterate women or lower caste friends of the benevolent fair-skinned protagonist. The dark complexion here serves as visual shorthand for an absence of physical beauty and – therefore – the qualities that make up the feminine ideal. When dark-complexioned women do play a significant role in the proceedings, they are almost always antagonists – portrayed in an exaggeratedly terrifying fashion. The *Ramayana* comic book is a particularly egregious instance of this tendency. Prince Rama encounters a *rakshasi* (demoness) named Tataka – an enormous, dark-skinned grotesque with protruding teeth, unkempt hair and a thirst for human blood. She is very clearly marked as a bestial creature, albeit one that is easily defeated by Rama.

Another sequence, also from the *Ramayana*, is especially important since, as Parameswaran and Cardoza point out (p. 20), it actively anchors the ideal of feminine beauty to light skin. Rama, his wife Sita and his brother Lakshman are living in a forest retreat. One afternoon, a rakshasa named Shoorpanakha observes Rama sitting under a tree. She is depicted as a dark-skinned, ugly old woman

with a wrinkled face and animal claws. The fair-skinned women in the comics are virtuous nearly to the one. However, Shoorpanakha is shown to be a promiscuous creature who covets Rama sexually. She decides to use her magical powers to transform herself into a 'beautiful' woman – predictably, a sharp featured, slender and fair-skinned individual who could be mistaken for Caucasian. In the course of events, she is discovered and Lakshman cuts off her ears and nose as punishment. What is notable here is the role of the art in the depiction of the sequence of events. The 'base' and subhuman demones is dark-skinned, short and stocky in her real form and when reaching for 'true' beauty, she transforms into the Aryan ideal.

We find, then, that the physical representation of the women in the comics is an important force in the ongoing cultural debates around femininity of which these artistic works are a part. Women that do not conform to the physical ideal are practically nonexistent in the ACK realm and when they do appear, they are not assigned constructive roles. They are assigned a position in the masculine space instead – 'ugly', physically strong and aggressive. These connotations have become an integral part of how the readers of ACK internalize the concepts of race and femininity and remain an important example of ACK comics as “public culture”. It seems pertinent here to reiterate Appadurai and Breckenridge's definition of the term as mentioned in the introduction, as a zone of cultural debate - “where different social groups constitute their identities by their experience of mass-mediated forms” (Appadurai and Breckenridge 10). As will be discussed in the next chapter, on fan consumption of the comics, these connotations constructed around physical characteristics have played an important role in the ways that many young readers understand race and gender roles.

An additional important aspect of the visual tradition of the comics is the clothing and ornamentation of the women. There is a significant point of deviation between the choices made in this regard by Raja

Ravi Varma, whose aesthetic tradition the comic books are otherwise very faithful to. Varma consistently chooses the sari to clothe the female subjects of his paintings with. The comics, however, portray the female characters as dressed in far less, usually a small upper garment that leaves the midriff bare and an unstitched wrapping around the waist going down to the knees or the ankles. In interviews with Karline McLain, when asked about his research with regard to costumes, Anant Pai always referred back to the texts, stating that the details of the clothing was drawn directly from descriptions or implications from primary texts like the Ramayan or Mahabharat (McLain 135). It is also known, as pointed out by art historian Partha Mitter, that Ravi Varma's consistency in applying the sari on his female subjects was not always accurate either but that, despite his research, he had decided that revealing clothes were not appropriate for the “proper” women of the Sanskrit classics (Mitter 201).

Some half-hearted gestures to modesty were made by the artists on occasion. One frequent artistic choice was to stage scenes where the objectification of the female character was bordering on excessive for a children's title, in forested areas. The politics of the space serve to defuse the sexuality implicit in these scenes, if only on the surface. Nature is often used in ACK as an extension of the domestic space. The female protagonists live in forest hermitages or in homes with extensive gardens. Therefore, many of the scenes where they are sexualized in some way (bathing, being watched by a male character, shedding clothes for whatever reason) are framed within a natural space, giving them a veneer of innocence. The forested backgrounds are also useful from a purely practical point of view, as the artists have the freedom to bring out the curves of the women's bodies while shielding key anatomical areas with well positioned foliage. Examples of this can be found throughout the ACK library, especially in titles like *Malavika*, where the titular heroine is frequently portrayed in sensuous terms while clinging to various trees.

Another tactic that tends toward the duplicitous is the defusing of male voyeurism by framing it within a religious context. As has already been established, the ACK titles are teeming with instances of such voyeurism, for example, the previously described moment from *Shakuntala*. Nandini Chandra points to two other significant moments (Chandra 165-166). The first is a sequence in the *Krishna and the False Vasudeva* book (no. 1 p. 12). Rukmini, the soon-to-be wife and queen of Krishna enters a temple and 'the myriad eyes' of her suitors are immediately drawn to her, 'drinking in her beauty'. The line between the sacred and profane is established in the very same panel as one suitor thinks to himself - "Alas! She can never be mine" - while another says out loud "she is the goddess of wealth incarnate". In the next panel, she is making offerings to an idol of Parvati (Shiva's consort), assigned the status of middle ground between gods and humans. In his discussion of women in calendar art, Tapati Guha-Thakurta talks about how voyeurism is defused by incorporating "the erotic experience within the religious and the mythological narrative" (Guha-Thakurta 97). This is a method that is carried over into the ACK comics.

The other sequence that Chandra draws attention to is from the ACK issue *Shiva and Parvati*. Parvati, having failed to seduce Shiva with physical allure, is subjecting herself to penance in the forest. Two sages watch her continually (and without her knowledge), ostensibly because they are worried about her health. In the meantime, Shiva observes this penance and changes his mind, accepting Parvati as his consort. Despite the fact that it is her suffering that wins him over in the end, the period of penance is also said to accentuate her beauty like "gold burnished through fire" (no. 1 p. 14). Voyeurism in the case of the sages is legitimized as concern for her physical well-being. On the part of Shiva, his observing of her penance leads him to recognize in her the desirable qualities like self-sacrifice and endurance. Despite his initial rejection of her advances, beauty is not rendered irrelevant in the face of

its enhancement through suffering.

The revealing clothing choices used in the comics were, in fact, accurate to a part of the Vedic period (the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD). However, given the range of periods and regions depicted in ACK, it seems unusual that the comics would choose to restrict themselves mainly to the one style that reveals the curves of their epic heroines the most, especially in conjunction with the fact that the ideology behind the behaviour of these protagonists attaches most value to modesty (physical and spiritual). The comics have prompted some ongoing debate on this matter in the 70s and 80s, with some notable visibility given to journalist Sanjay Joshi's article "ACKs: Distorted History or Education?" in English daily *The Telegraph*. In it, he accused the comics' creators of sexism and a double standard in that women in the books were rewarded for being 'modest' and 'traditional' in their demeanor but, simultaneously, were sexualized via their clothing (or lack thereof) and made into passive objects for the consumption of male readers.

Interestingly, this debate has largely died down without any real efforts by ACK's creators to alter the sartorial choices of the characters. An influential factor here is the fact that ACK's model of the ideal woman (including aforementioned sartorial choices) has been propagated so extensively and has served as a model for subsequent media texts so often that it has been internalized as entirely authentic and positive. India's most widely viewed (prior to the onset of cable in the early 1990s) televised narrative shows were the versions of the Mahabharat and Ramayana that were broadcast on the national state network Doordarshan. Pai (and producers of the show) have stated that the comics were used as reference points for the show. Later popular adaptations of ACK comics were also produced by UTV and, once again, as testified to by producer Zarina Mehta, the costumes were lifted straight from the panels of the comics. This near-universal acceptance of a single, revealing style of clothing for all

female characters from the Vedic to medieval periods (despite its inaccuracy) and its celebration as being 'accurate' indicates – as McLain points out - “how dominant the late nineteenth century image of the ideal woman as...a sex object has become” (p. 138).

#### DEBATE AND COUNTER-NARRATIVE:

As mentioned in the introductory section of this chapter, the 1970s saw the tempering of the 'Indian' model of femininity with the newly-injected ideas and energy of the left-oriented women's movement. Given ACK's status by this time of functioning as public culture, there was a reflection of the debate around femininity within its ranks. The early 70s saw the infusion into the ACK production staff of a number of female authors and editors – including Kamala Chandrakant, Meena Ranade and Toni Patel among others, many of whom were self-avowed members of the emerging women's movement whose beliefs ran counter to the Hindu nationalist ideals. Some of them applied to work at ACK with the specific intention of injecting some gender equity in the comics – former associate editor Kamala Chandrakant made this explicit in her interview with McLain (McLain 143). Their involvement in the production process brought about debates both inside and outside ACK about the depiction of women in the comics and led to a number of the titles featuring female protagonists that contrasted with the submissive like of Shakuntala and were, instead, active and independent characters. Most focused on historical queens who had taken up arms on behalf of their kingdoms. Such titles were released with frequency in the mid-70s, examples including *Chand Bibi* (1974), *Tarabai* (1974), *Rani Durgavati* (1976) and *Rani of Jhansi* (1974), all of which were written by the newly hired female writers.

This new direction was inspired not only by media responses to ACK's depiction of women but also by the debates being started by some (mostly female) readers of ACK not only through fan letters to Anant Pai but also on public platforms like letter columns in newspapers. Properly organized fan clubs were

still a few years away but ACK readers had already begun to make their voices heard. As the chapter on the consumption of ACK will indicate, a good proportion of the readers did (and do) absorb the ideological agenda of the comics but another group continued to question these ideals. A now adult fan club member I interviewed mentions how ACK-related letters to the editor became a presence in newspapers:

For a while in the early 70s I remember many letter exchanges in newspapers. As fans, we were always happy to see our comic mentioned in print and at the time I don't think I understood really what the arguments were about. But since there were no websites in those days or no real fan clubs we used to take clippings of whatever we could find and keep them with our comic collections. Looking back now, I laugh to think that most of those clippings were probably quite critical of our much loved comics. (Fan 26 Mumbai)

I was able to track down a fan club member that still had clippings from the old newspapers and an inspection of these letters indicate spirited arguments on the part of school-aged letter writers. One correspondent – Sanjukta Ray - brings up the question of physical templates in a June 1973 edition of the Hindustan Times :

When I read the comics, it seems to me that the women always look the same. They are thin, fair and tall. I don't think it's a good impression to give to us readers when we are already under pressure to look one way right from school. Our country is not just made up of thin, fair women. We are taught early on that the people of India are made up of many colours and creeds. So why does Uncle Pai not show this variety in his comics?

The responses to this letter were varied – two in support and two defending the comics as being accurate. An example of the latter was written by Prashun Chakravarty - “it may seem that they are

being biased but Pai is simply following the original sacred texts. ACK is very meticulously researched.” Ray's counter to this was to point out that “the texts are not always followed exactly so why should it be the case here? Regularly, Uncle Pai cuts out violent actions that happen in the texts because they are not good for young readers to see so why doesn't he change the appearance of the women sometimes showing there is only kind of woman is not good for young readers also”. Letters were also written to the paper about the nature of the usual female protagonists of ACK – submissive and reactive.

A letter written in August 1971 by Devika Patel cut directly to the heart of the issue: “how will ACK be fair to women readers until it hires women as writers and artists? So far all the writers are men. Pai should hire some women and soon he will get new kinds of stories.” Fan letters were also written directly to the ACK offices making the same suggestion and, as mentioned earlier, Pai did follow suit, leading to a new model of femininity emerging in the pages of ACK and the creation of new debates around the topic. As mentioned, the new titles focused mainly on historical queens who had taken up arms in defense of their kingdoms. In contrast to the female protagonists that had hitherto appeared in ACK, however, they were all active participants in the outcome of their life stories – strong and commanding individuals. The titles strove to incorporate some of the values that the burgeoning left-oriented women's movement had championed throughout India – independence, agency, equality, wielding of political influence.

Two prototypical examples of the new titles are the *Rani of Jhansi* and *Sultana Razia* series. In the former title, after the death of her husband the king, Lakshmibai of Jhansi takes up arms to fight the British in the 1857 Mutiny when the invaders try to claim her territory. In the second, Razia Sultan, daughter of the Sultan of Delhi is chosen over her brothers to rule after his death. The first was written

by a woman – Mala Singh – and the second (unusually) was credited to the 'Editorial Team' signifying a collaborative effort that was, nonetheless, influenced by female writers like Kamala Chandrakant. Both titles take pains to show that the women could perform tasks as well as men could, whether they be martial or political. Lakshmibai was shown to lead armies to many victories while Razia was depicted as an efficient and just ruler. Even the art was in contrast with earlier titles, with the women in active postures (as opposed to the static ones of Shakuntala) – fighting in battles, giving speeches, riding horses. There is no evidence of any of these women flinging themselves into martyrdom for the honor of the men in their lives.

While it is true that these new titles posited a new feminine ideal in ACK, this was not the end of debate. As ACK fan clubs began to spring up in the late 70s and early 80s, discussion of the titles left newspaper letter columns and entered the space of fan club meetings and newsletters. In this arena, readers began to pick up on the contradictions that lay within the depiction of the feminine ideal in these comics. A female ex-fan club member recalls:

I remember having some spirited discussions, sometimes with other club members but more often with relatives who would give me the comics and say 'look at how great these women are' about how the women were not really being independent but simply copying what men do in order to impress other men. They just became men with long hair to me, even wearing men's clothes. (Fan 28 Mumbai)

This was, in fact, a fair point. Lakshmibai would frequently be drawn wearing men's clothes. In nearly every one of these titles, the women were only forced to step in due to the absence of a male to adopt

the position of power (Razia being a notable exception). The *Rani of Jhansi* comic, for example, made it clear that the queen was simply acting as regent until her infant son could grow up and assume the throne, bringing front and center her role as a mother. One of the college-aged students I interviewed for the later chapter on readers, upon flipping through the comic, points out that “in the introduction they even say that she 'was not aggressive by nature'. Throughout the comic they keep telling us that she did these things that men usually have to do but actually all along she wanted to get back to not being aggressive and to being a mom. Is that a feminine ideal or a male ideal taken up by a woman?” (Fan 10 Mumbai).

This larger question has been asked in more public platforms in the years and decades that followed – in fan club discussions, editorials by journalists like Bulbul Pal and Nisha Susan, as well as scholarly works such as Nandini Chandra's critique of ACK. In her book *The Classic Popular*, Chandra also questions the alternative feminine ideal offered up in these titles - “although these women leave the confines of the domestic sphere, they end up as martyrs for the same 'domestic' cause” (p. 177). These public responses themselves initiated further debate on the matter amongst the readers. The release of Chandra's book in 2008 and the number of positive reviews in magazines such as *Tehelka* led a flurry of clashes in the Indian blogosphere as the more unquestioning members of the ACK readership argued with those that agreed with Chandra's critical take on the comics. For every blogger or writer whose reading of ACK is complicated in some way by the book – “Bloody hell, who would have thought that as I lay reading my favourite *Amar Chitra Katha* issue...I was willy-nilly being seeped in something more sinister than the adventures...of Vishnu would suggest” (Hazra August 11 2008) – another was indignant about what he perceived as “an overdose of widespread cynicism and jugglery of words” (Ratheesh Feb 9 2009).

Such discussions have affected the way in which contemporary readers have looked at the comics, given that the English-speaking middle class readership is gaining increasing access to the Internet with a resulting explosion in the size of the Indian blogosphere as well as the number of popular India-centric culture blogs like Sepia Mutiny. Another college-age reader interviewed for Chapter 3 mentions - “the fuss around ACK that came up when those books came out about how it's anti-feminist, made me look at them differently. Many people were so angry about it that I thought maybe there's something to it. Then I found that there actually is. Look at how mixed up the Sultana Razia comic is” (Fan 29 Kolkata). There is certainly evidence of mixed messages in the idea of femininity put forward in the title. Despite the fact that Razia was being held up as a role model for women, it was only through declaring herself free of her gender identity that she could take up the mantle of ruler. On page 5 of the comic book, she declares to her subjects - “because I am born a woman, I here and now solemnly pledge that I shall sit on this great throne...only if I prove to be as good as any man”. However, the list of deeds that was proffered as proof included “she dressed and acted like a king” and that “she appeared frequently in public without a veil” (Razia p. 13). The key factor here was that even when the female writers were involved in the production of a comic, Pai's editorial influence still had its effect. Kamala Chandrakant, for example, recalls many conflicts over the depiction of women. She cites the *Shiva Parvati* issue where Parvati was being portrayed as the devoted wife who had to do prolonged penance to win Shiva's love and the constant reiterations she pushed through in the art to make sure Parvati and Shiva were depicted as “wanting each other equally” (McLain 143).

We find, therefore, that the combination of the original production staff and the new blood from the women's movement led to a certain loss of control in terms of ACK's propagation of national culture through feminine ideals. This is not to say that the Hindu nationalist model was to lose out. What did occur, however, was the trapping of gender issues between the Hindu model and feminist constructions

in the later titles focusing on female protagonists. This conflict was to lead to debates amongst fans, scholars and journalists in both private and public forums, provoking them into a more dialogic relationship to the comics and the ideology they may have more unquestioningly absorbed otherwise. Such a relationship is evidence of ACK's function as public culture, the conflicts within the text leading to readers' attempts to form their own picture of feminine ideals in particular and Indian identity in general.

## **Chapter 3**

### **The Consumption of Amar Chitra Katha**

In preceding sections of this thesis, I have mentioned the opinions of critics, journalists and academics with regard to Amar Chitra Katha. In this chapter, however, I will focus on how the intended target audience of these comics – middle class Indian students - respond to them. In a discussion of how Indian identities are re-negotiated through the comics, the ways in which the readers themselves experience and engage with the texts is a key element of the argument. I will consider what they approve of in the comics and what they disapprove of, as well as the debates that arise for them over Indian (religious, national, gender) identities during the reading process.

In order for the comics to function to their full potential as zones of cultural debate, they had to be experienced as what Appadurai and Breckenridge refer to as “mass-mediated forms” with the emphasis on 'mass'. As familiar with ACK as I was from my own experience of reading these comics in the 1990s, it was only during the course of my research that I discovered the scope of their reach into the lives of middle class schoolchildren all over India. Until the late 1990s, which saw the opening up of Indian markets to reprints of DC and Marvel titles, Amar Chitra Katha had captured the overwhelming majority of the Indian comics readership. This was further aided by government recognition of ACK's potential as a pedagogical tool to communicate the hegemonic model of Indian identity to the impressionable young minds that were to become India's future citizens. Much of the educational value of the comics lay in their civic functions – the fact that they could instill in students a proper sense of what it meant to be an 'Indian citizen'. It is no accident that Dr Joshi was the government representative who participated in the book launch mentioned in chapter 1 – he was a highly visible member of the then ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), who recognized the opportunity in ACK to

project the group's ideology to students in the attractive package of the comic book medium.

To carry out this research, I interviewed a number of high school students from schools in Kolkata and Mumbai. They ranged from grades 8 to 11 and were all self-avowed regular readers of ACK. I also wanted to speak to readers who, like me, had grown up with ACK but also had a chance to think about it in hindsight, so I visited a couple of college campuses in the same two cities to conduct interviews. In addition, I corresponded with ten former (now adult) members of ACK fan clubs from Kolkata, Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore via email. Interviewees remain anonymous and are distinguished using identifying numbers. The personal interviews were all conducted in December of 2008 and January of 2009. While considering this topic, I have also drawn from the ACK-related interviews conducted by other scholars and journalists, such as Karline McLain, Nandini Chandra and Nancy Adajania.

Upon some initial questioning about the interviewees' ACK-centric reading habits, several patterns become evident immediately. The most popular titles are, by a considerable margin, the ones related to mythological epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The more adventure-related comics centered around specific characters from Indian mythology – for example, *Krishna* and *Rama* – and far removed historical characters like *Shivaji* are close behind. The importance of the genre trappings of the titles becomes clear when one considers that, on the flip side, the issues featuring more recent historical figures that conformed less to the adventure story type or featured less action or supernatural elements (demons, gods etc. all of which populate the mythological titles heavily) were far less popular. One example of this is the heavily researched prestige issue *Jawaharlal Nehru*, which took years to complete but did not even come close to selling enough copies to break even.

The reasons put forward for this by the readers hammer home the importance of the package these

stories are wrapped in, both in terms of style and medium. I should mention here that all the interviewees mentioned here are of high school age unless it is specified otherwise. Fans frequently cited the mythological issues as favorites because of their moral values and, as might be expected, 'Indianness'. One reader mentioned how “the morals of the characters in epics are the most important part of the story – they provide us with the life lesson of how to become good people who do the right thing” (Fan 1 Kolkata). Another said “it is the best way for me to learn about my culture and also what is right and wrong because it comes straight from the words of our ancient classics and this, I think, is the best reason to read ACK” (Fan 3 Mumbai). In an interview with McLain, one reader said, speaking of her favourite title *Rama*, “I love the [epic] ones. Only these have an essence of Indianness that is truly worth appreciating. It makes you feel proud about being an Indian” (Anonymous Fan 7.4 McLain 301). It is already apparent, then, that the construction of their own 'Indianness' is on the minds of these readers.

However, the method of delivery is a significant aspect. Several fans used the words “exciting”, “adventurous”, “entertaining” and “understandable” to describe the epic stories and the more adventure-story-gearred historical issues with military heroes as protagonists. One fan makes the connection explicit - “one reason I like these issues so much is that they are entertaining and easy to understand. They are not like the boring textbooks that make it all complicated. In this way we can learn things while having fun” (Fan 2 Kolkata). The comics like *Jawaharlal Nehru*, that drew from Indian culture, history and values as much (or more) than any of the epic ones were given a considerably harsher verdict. These biographical comics had the words “boring”, “repetitive”, “complicated” and “slow” most frequently associated with them. A reader said “I don't like the biographies because they bore me and feel like a lecture or a schoolbook and I don't read comics for those” (Fan 4 Kolkata). Another went to the heart of the issue, saying “those ones (the biographies)

don't give me what I expect from ACK. When I read ACK I want excitement and adventures. These comics are too slowly paced and nothing happens for many pages” (Fan 3 Mumbai).

This brings up the subject of expectations. The interviews I have conducted (as well as the ones performed by other scholars) strongly indicate that the readers of ACK have great affection for the oft-used Amar Chitra Katha formula, one that applies especially to the comics about singular protagonists - “I know when I receive my subscription that I'm in for a treat. Even when the stories are familiar, I am curious to see how they are shown and am able to look at the art and action bits for a long time” (Fan 1 Kolkata). In considering the formula, we find that it begins with the hero or heroine being introduced, in a manner often akin to the origin stories of Western superheroes. Usually, they experience some key event during their early years that affects their entire future. They encounter a foe (or a series of progressively more dangerous foes, always defeating the initial ones), anyone ranging from a mythological monster to a foreign invader. Finally, they either emerge victorious or die a glorious death, with a sombre epilogue giving the reader a parting impression of the legacy left behind by the heroic protagonist.

The importance of repetition has frequently been considered in connection with the reception of various pop culture forms. For example, Janice Radway argues – in a study of the consumption of romance novels – that many readers embrace narrative repetition as a shortcut to the emotional reaction they seek from the text: “the redundancy of the discourse permits the reader to get by with a minimal amount of interpretive work after her initial encounter with the romantic form...her energy is reserved, therefore, for the more desirable activity of affective reaction rather than prematurely spent on the merely intermediary task of interpretation” (Radway 195-196). This applies equally to the readers of ACK. The successful narrative formula aside, some of the stories told in the comics are already known

to the readers, especially popular sequences from epics like the *Ramayan* and *Mahabharata*. However, even the familiar stories find new attraction because of the comic book medium. “Sometimes when I already know the story, I still look forward to the comics because I want to see how the characters are shown in the artwork. Many times, I've heard the story from my grandparents or read it in a book but it becomes much more exciting when it's in comics” (Fan 2 Kolkata).

It comes as no surprise, then, that the titles named by interviewees as their favourites, adhere most strongly to the ACK formula and the principle of repetition. An oft-cited issue is *Rama*, an archetypal example of this formula, featuring the trials of the titular prince during his journeys in exile, replete with dangers (supernatural and otherwise), concluding with his coronation as king of Ayodhya. Even deviations in the type of story told are not received well by ACK fans – a notable instance being a short-lived 1990 series depicting the time-travelling adventures of a brother-sister pair of young protagonists. The first issue of the series was called *An Exciting Find* while the second was named *Indus Valley Adventure* (the failure of the first two led to the cancellation of a third). The series, as always, dealt with an intrinsically 'Indian' topic – the protagonists time-travel to 2000 BC, finding themselves in the midst of the Indus Valley civilization, one of the oldest known on the Indian subcontinent.

However, the approach deviated considerably from the usual ACK type. The framing story (a narrative embellishment rarely used in the first place) is set in contemporary India, with a pair of main characters recognizable as the readers' peers. Above all, there is no attempt to add a grand mythology or an epic feel to the story. There were no larger-than-life heroes, only 'common people' – the stated focus of the story in marketing copy for the two issues. The children were common people (insofar as one may categorize middle class urbanites as common people) and the characters they encountered on their time

traveling journey to the ancient civilization were also common people – shopkeepers, other children, local citizenry. Clearly, the ACK fans preferred their characters represented on a grander scale as the sales for the two issues were very low. As one fan put it, “I don't read ACKs to see more people like us but to see heroes like in the superhero comics. I like that our ACK people are Indian but I also want that they stay like big heroes from the myths or the superhero comics” (Fan 3 Mumbai).

Related to this point is the importance of genre tropes in the success of the comics. Repetitive narrative or aesthetic choices are an important part of the use of genre in storytelling and given the importance given to repetition in ACK, it is a logical further step to consider the wider application of genre in the work. Even a cursory consideration of the comics reveal that the adventure and fantasy genres are mined extensively. The celebrated formulaic issues are replete with action sequences, varied settings and 'othered' enemies that, undoubtedly, recall the fondness and familiarity that readers hold for another ubiquitous Indian cultural phenomenon – the colonial adventure story. Mythological comics contain the additional fantasy elements of supernatural antagonists and/or protagonists. The eventful journeys of the Indian characters ironically recall the exploits of their British counterparts - “I like how the characters in the comics proceed from adventure to adventure as the enemies get more dangerous. It reminds me of *King Solomon's Mines* and *The Lost World*” (Fan 2 Kolkata). The mythological comics contain many elements of fantasy, especially the high fantasy and heroic fantasy sub-genres. Epic quests are common, as are thematic elements such as coming-of-age trials or the struggle between heavily contrasted images of good and evil.

The comparatively unpopular biographical comics contain considerably less action, taking a more text-heavy approach. They are what Scott McCloud terms as “word-specific” (McCloud 153), where text dominates the panels and the art serves as illustration and framing for the words but without adding

anything significant to the text. Issues such as *GD Birla* (about the famous industrialist) had to, by necessity, adopt this method, given that they were about people whose notable actions were conducted in offices and not on battlefields. So despite these latter comics drawing from the very same cultural and historical roots and certainly attempting to provide moral instruction (which Fan 3 from Mumbai described as one of the primary reasons that one should read ACK), the fact that they are devoid of genre trappings neutralizes those qualities for many of the readers (including fan 4 from Mumbai, who described the biographies as “too slowly paced”).

These preferences on the part of the readers underscore the importance of the comic book medium to the goals of ACK and Pai's considerable savvy in having chosen it. Readers needed the comic book medium to add an extra dimension to the stories. These were stories they had either heard many times before or read in a dry, academic format in textbooks. Now, they found “new life” (Fan 2 Kolkata) in comic books, gaining a visual aspect and, thanks to the demands of the format, by being filtered down to an efficient, kinetic narrative essence. Some of the stories did not lend themselves too well to the format – for example, the biographies – and these were reduced in number, far exceeded by the mythological and historical titles. Pai also began to choose biographies that could be rendered in a more action-oriented fashion, these including issues focusing on freedom fighters like Chandra Shekhar Azad that could depict exciting sequences of the protagonists doing battle with the British government and heroically withstanding torture and imprisonment.

At every point, however, ACK's mission to play a part in the way readers negotiated their identity as Indian citizens was kept in mind – not just on the side of the creators but also on the side of the readers. As indicated by the earlier quote from Fan 3 of Mumbai, many felt that the insight they received on the moral and cultural systems of India were (or at least, should be) one of the primary reasons for anyone

to read the comics. They had been told repeatedly that the comics were a vessel for the transmission of 'Indianness' and this was what they expected from them. What is more, this notion of Indianness was one that was believed to be impeccably researched and drawn from the ACK creators' intimate familiarity with the subcontinent's relevant primary texts, history and social mores. Interviews conducted both by myself and others frequently involve the terms 'Indian', 'authentic', 'real' and 'accurate' with regards to characteristics that ACK possessed and needed to possess in order to be successful in its goals. A reader from Bangalore told Karline McLain:

In my opinion (ACK's) accuracy and authenticity is 100%. The source from which every book is taken is clearly mentioned in the beginning. So how many ever versions there are – the source is clearly mentioned which makes it all the more accurate and authentic. It is all 100% Indian. I trust these comic makers to the fullest without a second thought. So far I have never encountered even a single grammatical mistake in each of their books I have read. I feel they know what they are doing and they have set the highest standards in comic making. (McLain 310)

That said, the readers clearly wanted this 'Indianness' to be packaged in a larger than life fashion – full of heroes, villains and grand confrontations. This notion of a “glorious heritage” (Fan 1 Mumbai) clearly remains inextricably tied up with their concept of 'Indianness'.

While I am, by no means, suggesting that all the readers remain passive consumers of the hegemonic concept of 'Indianness' that ACK frequently tends to advance, it is an inescapable fact that the cultural discourses constructed in the comics play a major role in the way many impressionable readers define aspects of their national identity. When asked their opinions regarding various aspects of the comics, many of the interviewees indicated an unquestioning acceptance of the values that underlie the texts.

For example, while discussing the artwork in some of the issues, several high schoolers described how the visual shorthand used by the artists in equating 'attractive' with 'good' and 'unattractive' with 'evil' helped them parse the nature of the conflicts. One reader stated “I like how the art makes it clear who to support. The villainous *rakshasis* are all ugly and monstrous with dark skin and manly bodies while the heroines are drawn as pretty and upstanding” (Fan 5 Mumbai). A female interviewee mentions how “the comics present a very nice idea of femininity. It teaches young readers how to properly present themselves as Indian women – with national costumes, a clean appearance and an eye to beauty. I think this is a great example since these days many people look at cable TV and American TV series to find their idea of beauty” (Fan 7 Mumbai). This tendency to equate the physical models presented in ACK with authentically Indian ideals of beauty was not restricted to just the one fan. Some, however, did struggle with the idea before giving in to it.

I know it's not really right to say that the thin, fair characters are pretty and usually heroines but aren't many of the comics based on true stories?  
I think the originals described the women characters as being slim and fair.  
And shouldn't society have some definition of what is pretty and what is not.  
It's the same as how we decide in society how something is right or something is wrong. It might not be fair to the people on the bad side but there are rules for everything and why not appearance. I think ACK is writing a correct idea of beauty as it fits with the ideas that come from the older texts and from society in general. (Fan 8 Kolkata)

A similar reception surrounded the various depictions of religion in the comics, specifically the heavily mediated representation of Islam in the *Shivaji* comics (as detailed in the first chapter). One reader describes the depiction of Muslims as exaggerated villains by asserting “that is what actually happened. ACK is well researched and we know that the stories are authentic. We cannot call them unfair if they

are only saying the facts” (Fan 5 Kolkata). The reputation that ACK possesses, therefore, for prizing 'authenticity' is relevant in terms of how the readers perceive the text. The role of the comic book medium itself also comes into play - “we know the Muslims are the villains of that story in real life so why not make it a little exaggerated. After all, it is a comic and it is all right for it to exaggerate a little as long as the basic facts are still there. I would not agree if it was not true that the Muslims invaded but we know from history that they did, so I think it's all right to show them as very villainous” (Fan 3 Kolkata).

This pattern was also evident in the adult readers, such as the former ACK fan club members I corresponded with as well as some of the college students. One college-age reader who had grown up with the comics recalls “I remember finding the women in ACK so beautiful. I would try to emulate their hairstyles or try to find jewelry that looked like their's. Obviously I wouldn't do something like that now but I do believe that the comics give women positive role models” (Fan 12 Kolkata). A former ACK fan club vice president who is now a member of the Indian diaspora, discussed the issue of *sati* in the comics:

Certainly, *sati* is a bad thing that should not happen now. But I think the ACK comics were right in depicting this as a glorious sacrifice by the heroines. They performed it voluntarily as a gesture to their code of honor so why would it be sexist to show this. If anything, it celebrates the strength of the Indian woman and makes me proud to be an Indian myself. These days, principles don't mean too much to people – men or women – and I think it is great for the comics to impart a lesson to young minds about what it means to stand up for your principles. It's for this feeling partly that I used to read ACK – it made me feel strongly for my culture and my heritage. (Fan Club member 2)

Many of the adult readers, however, had come to question their earlier acceptance of the comics' value system. Some recalled having disapproved of aspects of ACK even while growing up with them, continuing to read them only due to a combination of factors including lack of other comics options, the presence of the comics on school syllabi as well as the tendency of older family members to pick them as gifts. Several of the college students mentioned the issues involving *sati* as examples of ACK that they grew up to reconsider in a new light. One mentions that she “used to look at the *Padmini* issues as a great example of what I should grow up to become – a brave and principled woman. Now I realize that the comic is just telling me I should be a good wife whose only purpose is to defend my husband's honor” (Fan 10 Mumbai). Another cuts to the heart of the voluntarism argument:

I understand that the ACK writers say that it's something that happened and that the women did it by choice but in art, it's not just about the facts. It's about how you say them. And in the comics, it is clear that the act of *sati* is glorified and that it's meant to suggest some things about what a 'good' woman should do, one of them being putting your husband before you. There are ways of portraying history and being neutral about it but I don't think ACK is. It made me think about the idea of the good wife in India more and more. I even remember telling my mom that I didn't want to get married if it meant I had to kill myself to save my husband. She got so mad she took the comic book away! (Fan 17 Mumbai)

Similar sentiments have been expressed in interviews conducted by other scholars. In an interview with Karline McLain, one college-age fan says:

This comic (*Padmini*), especially the ending, really does glorify *sati*. This is quite evident from the ending. This is where the mediation comes into the telling of history. Of course it is a fact that this practice existed but that is not enough to

justify its presence here in this format. And here it is glorified as a personal choice, a heroic choice...but its social context, that is not told. Did Padmini really have a choice? (McLain 141-142)

The nationalist and religious discourse in the comics is also questioned by several of the adult readers. A Muslim reader, while discussing the *Shivaji* issues, points out that “it is interesting how the ACK series – at least when I was growing up with them – focused so much on the Hindu main characters and generally made the Muslims into outsiders and invaders. It made me feel a little bit like I didn't belong in my own country” (Fan 13 Kolkata). Lip service paid to tolerance had become a more transparent tactic than it was to readers when they were younger - “I used to fall for the occasional panels in the comics where they would show Hindus and Muslims standing around being brotherly or shaking hands. But I would never see how in those same issues, the Muslims were always marginalized. They always played second fiddle to the Hindu main characters. Muslims that played a big role in the Independence movement would be given some small role in the comics about Hindu freedom fighters and show up at the last page, shaking hands with the hero” (Fan 18 Mumbai). The regional inflections of the comics are also singled out for complaint - “why is it that even when they are telling stories about other parts of the country, like Bengal, the comics are written through the lens of the Maharashtran Hindu nationalist types. National pride did not originate with Maharashtra. I never see any mentions of the nationalist principles that started with Eastern Indian leaders” (Fan 16 Kolkata).

This is not to say, however, that the picture is simply a polarized one where readers either passively consume ACK's conceptualization of Indian identity or constantly oppose it. A significant proportion of the readers form a middle ground, adopting both a receptive and an oppositional stance at different points, engaging in debate (both external and internal) in order to reconcile their reading of the text with their own life experiences and identities. This is an important aspect of the consumption process –

after all, Appadurai and Breckenridge project a sense of public culture as an arena for cultural debate (as opposed to cultural passive absorption).

Some readers actually came to realize and articulate this struggle with the text as they attempted to answer my questions. In response to my asking his opinion of the portrayal of religious minorities in ACK, one reader mentioned that he felt that the depictions were positive - "I think ACK takes care to not offend anybody and to show that all religions are equal in a democracy like India" (Fan 21 Kolkata). However, a few minutes later, while he interrupted another student's response to my question with a lengthy train of thought that got to the heart of some of ACK's conflicting signals, an extract from which I'm reproducing:

But then sometimes I also feel that there is a stereotype of religions that they create. In all the comics I remember, the Muslims are always wearing the same clothes with the cap and jacket and everything. And often they are like the *chela* (sidekick) of the Hindu guy. And again sometimes the text says one thing but the art shows another thing. Like if the text says that the Hindus and Muslims worked together to win a battle but the art shows a bunch of Hindu soldiers and one Muslim guy hanging around with arrows in his arm. It's like in *G.I. Joe* comics where they say 'Real American Hero' and put Flint and Duke on the cover even though Snake-Eyes from Japan wins the important battle in the story. Is it that maybe the artists and the writers have different views? Maybe one of them thinks that India should be mainly Hindu and the other has a more secular view. Even I'm not sure what to think sometimes when I hear about news of the Mumbai attacks and all that. (Fan 21 Kolkata)

This statement is quite representative of the struggle many of the readers face in simultaneously

supporting and resisting the dominant ideology projected by ACK. The interviewee also stumbles upon the issue of internal conflict as artists and writers occasionally work at cross-purposes or disagree with the editorial direction to subvert the text/artwork. As demonstrated in earlier chapters, the debate is ongoing within the offices of ACK as well as without, despite the current tendency to take the conservative Hindu nationalist stance. McLain offers another example of a reader in whom support and resistance to the ideology exists simultaneously. One interviewee mentioned that she enjoyed the comics because “the men are so muscular and the women are so pretty...their dress, their ornaments are so amazing”. Later in the interview, however, she says “Actually, though, they are only perpetuating stereotypes...I mean, look how they show the women as being so coy, yet showing everything, even their navels!” (McLain 313). McLain also offers the example of the conflicted reader who takes this conflict into the production of related media in the case of Zarina Mehta, a director at Indian television company UTV. Her rationale for producing an ACK-based television series was that when she was growing up, the comics were popular with both Hindu and non-Hindu children (being a Parsi, she belonged to the latter category. So the hope was that a TV serial based on the comics would “bring India's history and mythology to a new generation” (McLain 313). Even as she meant to bring together children of all religions through the common platform of India's history and mythology (her reading of the ACKs, their goals and their ideology), the only episodes aired for the 1998 show were mainly Hindu-centric ones like 'Krishna' and 'Shakuntala'. This was directly in conflict with the stated intention and only served as an example of the ongoing process of the equating of Hindu culture with 'Indian' culture.

The discussion of consumers that find themselves at the cusp of both embracing and resisting the text is also a good opportunity to talk about the beginnings of what media theorist Henry Jenkins terms as 'participatory culture' springing up around the ACK comics. The term refers to a culture where the

consumers also act as producers or (re)creators and not just passive recipients of the product (usually published media in this context), communities “defined through common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments” (Jenkins 137). The readers of ACK have always been very engaged with the production staff, with a strong tradition of continual correspondence between fans and staff members. Anant Pai has been especially well known for being attentive to reader mail, keeping up correspondence with many longtime fans and entertaining suggestions quite frequently. By the late 80s, there were over 450 ACK fan clubs, mailing in approximately 4000 letters a month (Sharma 4). The fans, however, clearly made an intellectual investment in the material as well as an emotional one. According to Pai, many of the letters formulated studied criticisms of aspects of the comics, not from detached academics or critics but from fans who criticized because they cared. Their engagement with the material itself and the ability to create or remix it was limited, however. Occasionally, fans would write and draw their own comics in the Amar Vikas fan clubs but had no way to disseminate them so the practice was not widespread.

This began to change with the advent of the 2000s and the inroads made by new media technology into the middle class Indian communities that formed the backbone of ACK's readership. As Jenkins points out, one of the trends that participatory cultures develop around is the increased diffusion of easy-to-use 'Do It Yourself' (DIY) technologies amongst the regular media consumers, empowering them to become more than simply spectators in that particular media economy. Fans may then use these technologies (whether they are geared towards media creation, manipulation, web design etc) to become part of these media economies, sometimes in a very influential way.

As computers and internet access became more widespread in the urban areas, engagement with the production staff increased since getting in touch with them had become easier. Input by the readers

increased exponentially, both in terms of characters and stories to be chosen as well specific directions the comics were to take (more action etc). Fan communities in geographically disparate areas were able to debate the pros and cons of issues over internet message boards and fan-built websites. This inter-fan communications has not developed as well as the connection between the readers and the producers owing to the absence of any sustained effort to organize the online interactions. Community websites and forums would be started up by fans but abandoned as the founders graduated high school or started careers. Significantly, individual readers did, however, take it upon themselves to articulate their struggle with the texts in the context of their own experiences by producing their own remix versions of ACK narratives. These critical reappropriations can be seen as further evidence of ACK's function as public culture as readers articulate their struggle with the text on an open forum. By engaging in this kind of a dialogic relationship with the original text (by remixing or otherwise reappropriating it), the readers also provide a platform for further conversations to coalesce around the comics.

The most well known of these endeavors is a remix of the ACK comics produced by an artist named Chitra Ganesh (now based in Brooklyn). Ganesh is an example of a reader who, having grown up as a fan of these books and assimilating their idea of 'Indianness', had revisited them as an adult and found herself questioning those selfsame dominant ideologies. As she herself states - "I'd like to create mythology that poses questions rather than clear answers" (Susan 33). In 2002, Ganesh created her own comic *Tales of Amnesia*, in which she re-appropriates ACK narratives using image manipulation and collage techniques. In this book, she resists and questions the hegemonic conceptions of 'Indianness' she finds in the comics, raising queer, feminist and diasporic issues (difficult to find in the original comics). She duplicates iconic panels and splash pages from the original comics, using the same style and composition but then proceeds to intersperse the images with jarringly incongruous elements, replacing the text in the balloons or combining elements from different ACK comics. Female

protagonists from the comics are depicted as yearning for the love of other women as opposed to the princes from the original materials, gods become human and text in caption boxes are replaced with obviously contemporary commentary about lives intersecting in a real-life urban environment. The result is not so much a work of comics narrative but a thoughtful modern art piece de-constructing some of the issues that ACK smooths over in its conceptualization of the Indian identity.

Ganesh is not the only one remixing ACK in this way. Indian painter Dhruvi Acharya takes a similar approach with her paintings inspired by her struggles with comics as she rediscovered them while reading to her young children. In her 'Words' series (widely exhibited in India) she divorces the words of ACK from the art, creating a collection of panels with balloons containing text from the comics but without any of the images (the space in the panel where ACK's art used to be is painted over). The resultant divorce of text from image makes rather stark her depiction of ACK as often ridiculous and sexist, with captions like “how strong and firm is his grip” and “I have worshipped the Gods but still have no child” prominently featured but without the art that contextualized it in the comic book.

Both Acharya and Ganesh have been widely exhibited and are typical of the new generation of often Western-trained artists (both studied their craft in the US) that have become increasingly popular with younger urban, middle class audiences. While school-age students are usually not exposed to such art, the college-age fans (or ex-fans) of ACK frequently attend these exhibitions as they are increasingly publicized in non-traditional forums such as pop culture blogs like Ultrabrown. As may be expected, this remix culture has had its effect on these readers (especially those in cities like Mumbai with vibrant art culture where these works are frequently exhibited) in terms of the conversations they have about ACK. While the readers from Kolkata were unfamiliar with their work, many of the college-age fans from Mumbai responded with recognition and laughter when asked whether they knew Ganesh or

Acharya's art. One fan claims “it was going to Acharya's exhibition last year that actually led me to revisit some of those old ACK comics that had been on my shelf for ages. The way she takes elements of the comics separate from others clarify how conservative they can be sometimes and I never noticed that before” (Fan 30 Mumbai). Others found validation for their opinions about ACK through the art - “before I saw *Tales of Amnesia*, I thought I was being overly picky when I was thinking very critically about ACK. Sometimes you think, it's just a comic but like Ganesh said at the exhibition I was at – it's never *just* anything if lots of people make it part of their lives. I look at work like Ganesh's and point it out to those of my friends that think there is nothing sexist about ACK and they find that having a second thought might be useful. I'm a fan too but at the same time you have to think about what you're a fan of and I think *Tales of Amnesia* helped me do that” (Fan 33 Mumbai).

In this chapter, therefore, we find that the ACK comics are not just stories to their fans but cultural lodestones that provide part of the context within which they construct their identities as Indians. Even though, as identified in the background section earlier in the thesis, the readership is comprised mainly of middle class, English-speaking Hindus, this (influential) category numbers in the tens of millions and ACK has been an important early force in shaping the construction of their identities. The chapter also demonstrates the significance of the form that Anant Pai put these stories out in – both in terms of the comic book medium itself as well as the content-related choices like genre, pace and the use of a successful formula. Equally important is the discourse of 'authenticity' and 'Indianness' that Pai efficiently surrounds the product with – a key factor in the attraction the comics hold for many of the readers. Finally, this is not to say that the fans are passive vessels into which the pure water of 'Indianness' is poured without resistance. Clearly, many readers notice that the waters often tend to run muddy and struggle with the implications of this. Some, like Ganesh and Acharya, engage with the comics in an active way, creating their own art through their struggle with the texts, encouraging

further debate amongst readers that look at the original ACKs differently as a result. This is another manifestation of the way in which ACK functions as public culture, as the contradictions within its message inspire readers to spearhead a movement countering the propagation of dominant ideology by re-appropriating the raw materials of the original text, allowing the conversation to develop in new directions.

## **Conclusion:**

In this thesis, we find, therefore, that the narrative tradition of the ACK comic books (and their offshoots in other media) has played a significant role in appropriating middle class Hindu nationalist readings of Indian history and mythology and transforming it into a hegemonic and universal conceptualization of 'Indianness'. This process was greatly aided by the choice of the comic book medium, providing as it did a flexible platform that was very attractive to the intended readership and open to the combination of 'respectable' content and outre genre trappings.

While, the overall effect of the comics was to propagate the dominant ideology, it is equally evident that there were struggles on both the sides of the producers and the consumers as groups within those categories either tried to actively resist the ideology or reconcile aspects of it that they found objectionable in their own personal contexts. The fact that the comics still sell the hegemonic ideal is, undoubtedly, partly due to the close guiding hand of Anant Pai and it would constitute an interesting study to see what direction ACK takes once he retires from his role as Editor-in-Chief. Also of interest are the policies that ACK will adopt in the face of an increasingly globalized market. Its new media initiative indicates a more aggressive attempt to appeal to non-resident Indians and more affluent Indians, groups that may not be as susceptible to what Nandini Chandra refers to as “dominant Hindu chic” (Chandra 228).

Also, this is clearly a crucial turning point in ACK's role as public culture. The shape of the nascent participatory culture surrounding the comics may change dramatically in the near future, with the new media initiative being rolled out by ACK Media, a new venture that acquired ACK from India Book House in 2007. A central Amar Chitra Katha website was launched late in 2008 that, subsequently,

began to add functionalities specifically designed for greater fan interactions. Sections of the site are set aside for encouraging and guiding readers wishing to submit their own art or scripts. A centralized ACK fan-site was also set up for fans to form a community on. The results of these new developments are yet to be seen since, as of this writing, they have not had time to build up steam. The policies of the administrators in terms of steering the content or the direction of fan interactions are also yet to be discovered and are worth looking out for, given the role they will undoubtedly play in shaping the extent and type of participation.

The capacity, however, for fans to build their own conversations around the comics using these new media platforms should not be underestimated. Just as fans discovered the usefulness of new directions of critical thought by consuming the remix work of Ganesh and Acharya, the wide reach of the online platform might accelerate this process exponentially. The creation of a central ACK community surrounding the website could lead to thoughtful readers finding each other and sharing controversial texts such as those of Acharya and Ganesh or even creating their own work and disseminating it. The opening up of image/text submissions to ACK through the website could also lead to the shedding of more light upon the contradictions within the texts as more diverse pools of talent are brought in to complicate the conflicting ideologies. Even if more controversial submissions are rejected, conversations surrounding such rejections and ACK's submission policy might build up in the community as it coalesces increasingly around the new media initiative spearheaded by ACK Media.

Regardless of possible future outcomes, it is clear that the comics have had an important impact on the public sphere, attempting to sell to the readers a brand that combined heroic Indianness with popular culture in a combination that had never existed before. However, they do so through texts contradictory enough to inspire new conversation and debate around the very issues they try to homogenize under a

united Hindu nationalist ideology.

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