

From Sacred to Secular: Reconstructing Micro Traditions in *Amar Chitra Katha*

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Abstract

As a cultural product, the comic series *Amar Chitra Katha* ushered in a new perspective of interrogating comics. *Amar Chitra Katha* charts out a cultural history of India by interweaving in its fold various local/micro traditions, disconnected and disparate cults and practices. The present research paper interrogates such practices and traditions which have inspired the visuals and narratives of *Amar Chitra Katha*. Images have often been labeled as polysemous, therefore the present study will also foreground the sources for its visual imagery. It will also be highlighted how the fragmented traditions and practices cohere and affect a departure from sacred iconography to secular portrayal of characters drawn from mythology and folktales.

Stories are crucial mainly because they are ubiquitous. A narrative is indisputably a resource for invention and a source for domination. This should come as no surprise—stories, after all, constitute the most extensive field of culture. How we narrate our lives, for instance, is a deep cultural structure (one important way of characterizing a culture is by the narrative models it makes available for describing the course of a life) and ones that sets limits to how we can think of our lives as well as providing opportunities for the course of a life. For Barthes, narrative is almost coterminous with social actuality: ‘narrative begins with the very history of humanity; there is not, there has never been, any people anywhere without narrative...narrative is there, like life.’ One thing that many theorist of narrative agree on is that the ubiquity of narrative is its most salient feature. Thus J. Hillis Miller writes:

From our earliest childhood we hear stories and learn to repeat them...As adults, we hear, read, see and tell stories all day long- for example, in the newspaper, on television, in encounters with co-workers or family members. In a continuous silent internal activity, we tell stories to ourselves all day long. Jokes are one form of narration. Advertising is another...At night we sleep,

and our unconscious minds tell us more stories in our dreams, often exceedingly strange ones. Even within 'literature proper' the range of narrative is wide and diverse. It included not only short stories and novels but also dramas, epic, platonic dialogues, narrative poems and so on. (qtd in Certeau, 126-127).

The plethora of narratives, often in a densely truncated form suggests a massive arena of ideas, persuasively framed as stories. For de Certeau this ubiquity of stories can be recognized as a passive culture of persuasion: the great archive of ideological positions. Stories saturate the social field, but this store of persuasion that solicits our passive acceptance, is only ever a partial account of the narrative activity that is at work in culture in its fullest and most general sense.

Narratives cover a wide range of different practices: from oral traditions of storytelling to the playing and recounting of games; from the micro-narratives of proverbs and other forms of popular wisdom to the more elaborate telling of folktales; from condensed advertising narrative to the sprawling and expansive novel. These resources, while in many ways are different yet they share a common denominator in that they are resources that often, if not always, describe and comment on the performance of everyday practices. And they do this outside of the pressure of life. One such genre which has gained increasing popularity is of 'Visual Narratives' which can be best described as a combination of visuals and narrative. Visual story-telling is a phenomenon that every society is acquainted with. The label "Visual Narrative" is applied in a generic sense to denote anything from an illustrated story-book to motion pictures. Far from being a trivial term, "Visual Narrative" is in reality an all encompassing idiom, it is a sub-genre of Visual Studies itself. One may not have come across a specialized field or department called Visual Narrative but one most certainly must be acquainted with terms such as –Narrative Art, Visual storytelling, pictorial Stories, illustrated Stories, Comics, Sequential art and Graphic Novels. These sub genres coalesce and form the broader territory of Visual Narrativity. The present research paper studies one such genre of visual storytelling, popularly known as comics or graphic novels.

The mixing-up of two mediums (verbalized and visual) opens up another dimension of narrativity which is different from the primary narratives of epics like the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and historical text-books by recreating the story as visual representation in context of contemporary India. *Amar Chitra Katha* (commonly referred as ACK) started its career in 1967, when different fractions of religion and nationalism dominated the post-independent India. ACK is a series of comic books, which retells and reconstructs classical, traditional folk tales, religious stories, biographies and moments in history and for the most part these can be gleaned from different cultural, religious and historical perspectives.

Marketed to parents as educational tools, the audience of the series is primarily children of the middle class in India and the diaspora. ACK which translates as “Immortal Illustrated Story” was begun by Anant Pai, who was the editor of the series. ACK has been published in more than two hundred volumes of thirty-two colour illustrated pages. Anant Pai has written, edited and supervised the production of each issue. The publisher, India Book House, claims that the series has sold more than fifty million copies worldwide. Every issue of the series is written originally in English, which continues to be its best-selling language. Most of them have been translated into other national languages. The series began with its first title *Krishna* (a narrative from Mahabharata) and at its highest grew to over five hundred volumes.

ACK manages to straddle the ideologies of Hindu nationalism as well as secularism by tapping into those articulations where the two are imbricated— in their validation of an unbroken national culture, and endorsement of a normative modernity. ACK borrowed heavily from its pan-Indian profile. The infinite reservoir of stories from *Puranas*, *Kathasaritsagar*, *Ramayana*, and *Mahabharata* which formed the great tradition was rendered pictorially by encapsulating them in little tradition along with popular legends which proved to be a great source of cultural reawakening in the manner of classic illustrated. There has been no doubt that Pai’s inventory of visual art was dependent on Hari Katha tradition, Madhubani art, Dadasaheb Phalke’s stills, calendar art, poster images, bazaar art and most of all from Raja Ravi Verma’s Oleographs. It has also incorporated various cults, micro-traditions inspired by the bas reliefs at Bharhut, Sanchi and Ajanta.

The important question at the heart of the discussion is how ACK negotiates the distance between its ‘lofty’ propositions and the popular perception of the comic? Perhaps the clues lies in the story of its many borrowings and assimilation— the dexterity and shrewdness with which it mixes the pre-modern as well as contemporary popular/hybrid Indian visual traditions with western forms of animation to achieve a secular and contemporary effect.

The curious thing about ACK is that it operates most of the time in the interstices between different ideological systems, at times conflating the local with the national, at other times blending the sacred/classical with popular, ancient with scientific and history with the voice of the people. ACK has assimilated various different local micro traditions, disparate, disconnected cults and practices into an outline of what can be termed as ‘little tradition’. ACK also breaks the elitist and exclusivist narrativity of the Sanskrit texts of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* by rendering characters, no matter how elite, in the comic mode. The decade of nineties and hence forth saw characters from Kalidasa’s *Raghuvamsha* and Bhavabhuti *Uttara Ramacharita* coming live across as cartoons and caricatures. Therefore there is a continuous translation/transformation that goes on between the great tradition and the little tradition of Indian culture as represented in the ACK Series.

ACK freely dappled with innovation and incorporated new artistic and indigenous elements in its fold to build its composite 'Indian' identity. A closer scrutiny of the visual and the content would enable the readers to decipher its pre-novelistic Indian visual and storytelling concerns. Deepa Sreenivas, suggests that a linkage with the "katha" tradition lie at the foundation of ACK. The insertion of the word "katha" as in *Amar Chitra Katha* denotes strong ties with the oral tradition of storytelling prevalent in ancient India. For instance, in Banabhatta's *Kadambari*, "there is lavish use of poetic imagination as well as elaborate and intricate construction in relating the story. The embellishments of description sometimes eclipse the events that are being described. There is no attempt to make the description realistic and invention is valued in itself "(Sreenivas, 50). The lavish panels of ACK replete with bold and daring feats accomplished by the heroes with beautiful and chaste women belonging to the classics, folk tales and history of India, one cannot fail to trace its connection to the "katha" tradition of India. The past, it is true, is the staple diet for most of ACK narratives but important translations take place to mark its contemporaneity. In 'katha', embellishments and inventiveness are valued in themselves, but in ACK, details of description and visual splendor are geared towards a reality effect. The visual density of a scene consisting of doors, lattices, ornaments, curtains, flowers, and so on, go on to shore up the authenticity of a scene and are not mere embellishments. They contribute to the mood of a scene or a character and to the physical impact of the event. The past is made plausible by generating a Barthesian effect:

There would always be a corner, a detail, an inflection of space or colour to report...by posing the referential as real, by pretending to follow it in a submissive fashion, realistic description avoids being reduced to fantasmatic activity. (qtd in Sreenivas, 51)

The fantastic and surreal in ACK are always told through a reference to 'reality'. Popular myths about the birth and reincarnation of gods are dealt deftly and with a degree of ambivalence. Struggling with his scientific conscience and the limit of his own faith, Pai walked a fine line between presenting these events as scientifically plausible and as miraculous occurrence in the comic book. The miraculous events accompanying the birth of Krishna like the parting of Yamuna river are shown with ambiguity and the readers are left to their better judgment to decide whether it is low ebb in the current or plausibly parting of the river. In the sequence of action, where Krishna lifts the Govardhan Mountain on his small finger, the same technique is employed. Rather than have the sequence depicted in panels unlike the popular rendition, the narrative focuses on people reaction who stand amazed with open mouths at the sight of Govardhan Mountain moving. Undoubtedly, ACK has left it to its readers to infer the nature of these events.

Noted critic Auradha Kapur while writing on Parsi theatre is of the view that the mythical story involving gods/goddesses become personalized with a touch of human when narrated in a 'personalized tone of voice and the causality of narrative secularizes the event

and makes the action seemingly plausible in human terms. Therefore, in the narrative of *Krishna*, Vasudeva's reaction to the parting of river or the crowd gaping at the moving Govardhan mountain makes the action look plausible and seemingly real.

ACK engagement with the older art traditions of India and simultaneous investment with the modern led to an interstice between sacred and secular. This conflict is more or less apparent in many volumes where the rational and scientific is seemingly at odds with the mythological and revered. Many critics hail ACK to be a hybridized version of American superhero comic books which are famous for establishing the archetype of superhero between the 1930's and 1950's. A superhero is generally one who manifests six essential features, namely, extraordinary powers, enemies, a strong moral code, a secret identity, a costume and an origin story that explains how the hero acquired his powers and set forth his motivation. In the same vein, the Indian superhero manifests all these features. In the story of *Rama*, Rama demonstrates extraordinary powers through his bow and arrow in his battle with his demonic enemies, as when he defeated the unconquerable Ravana. He demonstrated a strong moral code when he willingly undertook an exile for fourteen years to fulfill a vow which his father had made. He assumes a secret identity during his years spent in exile, discarding his royal attire in favor of simple costume of a renouncer, therefore disguising his true identity of a crown prince of Ayodhya. Finally, he has a unique origin story as explained in the introduction to the comic book. Thus although the comic book *Rama* features a superhero that is in many ways akin to Captain America yet Rama remains a god in human form and the *Rama* comic book is therefore not a fictitious tale of good over evil but a Hindu devotional story told through the comic book medium.

Raja Ravi Verma's oleographs combined 'real' and 'aesthetic' in delineating the images of bodies, expressions, dress, décor and landscape. The iconic power of Ravi Verma rests on the facts that he is identified as the first to use oils and perspective, and also the first to Romanise the Indian Gods and therefore enabled Indian Gods to reach the domestic confines of Indian household. In India, the reawakening of the human sensorium went hand in hand with the insertion of mass-produced images. Importantly all Hindu deities experienced a cultural transposition from the space of devotion into the space of representation (print and electronic). This relocation involved movement from sacralized spaces to domestic space. The visual detailing of Rama in ACK is modeled on a clean shaven hero who conforms to Raja Ravi Verma style of painting which Romanised Indian gods rather than cast them as androgynous figures, as depicted in the traditional pantheon. However Raja Ravi Verma does not replicate the western academic realism in a passive way rather

the past is present clad in actual flesh and blood and costume. The figures from the past become *contemporarised* historical forms through an ingenious mixing of artistic genres and technique. He evokes the erotic fullness and erect poise of the archetypal figures from a classical/Aryan past and imbues them with immediacy and tactility through the use of oil medium.(qtd in Sreenivas,74)

In a similar vein, the women in ACK have coy expressions and guileful mannerism. The images of Sita, Draupadi and Shakuntala are direct replicas of Raja Ravi Verma. They appear as voluptuous flesh and blood women with curvaceous bodies. Shakuntala appears as wrapped in romantic dream when glancing back at her lover, Dushyant, under the pretext of picking a thorn from her feet. This gesture, invites the readers to place this scene within an imagined sequence of images and events. This visual also “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...into ‘desired’ images, casting them as lyrical and sensual ideals” (Thakurta, WS 94). This movement from iconic to real has been termed as ‘resacralisation’, where the iconic invested with ritualized gestures, roles or layers of religious meaning is not separated from the secular, rather the two are fused into a new synthesis.

The combined core of religious/mythic imagery in ACK lay at the heart of its appeal. The circular flow from ‘western’ to ‘Indian’ from the ‘real’ to ‘iconic’ through Ravi Verma oleographs charted out the route through which this new ‘high art’ passed into mass art and became a potentially saleable formula.

By its own admission ACK has owes a debt to the frescos and murals of Ajanta as an ideal source for visual storytelling. Anant Pai has repeatedly acknowledged the influences of the frescoes upon the artists who visited the caves of Ajanta in search of ideas. Images and visuals of ACK direct the viewers gaze towards efforts to strike a balance between a technological advanced form and historical content. According to Pai, the speech balloons are the only new feature of the modern comic. (Nandini Chandra, 211). The frescoes of Ajanta, as mediated through the nationalist grid, carry immense potential to be animated and situated into the ethical format of ACK with its continual emphasis on “Indian themes and values”. Also, given the fact that ACK is explicit in its ideology on secularizing and humanizing the sacred and mythological, therefore it becomes significant that Ajanta frescoes and murals served as a visual inspiration for the creators of ACK.

ACK has proved to be more than a comic series retelling stories of mythical and historical characters. It radiates a spiritual force that has been an adhesive of cultural consciousness. The generation of comic book readers growing up in middle-class urban families in India in the 1960’s and 1970’s, saw themselves as the ‘new generation’ who would unite across regional, linguistic and religious differences to help independent India prosper on a global stage. This generation would retain its distinctive Indianness while coming to terms with their urban environment and the forces of globalization; the generation raised to value English-language education, science and secularism. Undoubtedly, ACK goes a long way in helping this generation to develop a national consciousness through their focus on historic figures from the various regions of India and from its multiple religious communities. The ‘new generation’ while embracing science, English-language education and globalization has distinctly retained its unique Indian sensibility and identity and ACK has revived the old Indian culture in an uncomplicated way. For the past forty years, has been a resource by which millions have encountered the sacred in their everyday lives and a

medium that has helped Indian living in postcolonial India and throughout the world define what it means to be Indian.

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