

### Chapter 3

#### Reading the *Amar Chitra Katha* in India

While in the previous chapter, I enumerated on the different categories of Queer in ancient Vedic India, its representation among Hindu Gods and Goddesses, and mythologies of different kinds, in this chapter I shall focus on the politics of omission and distortion in mythological comic books and how it affects the educational system. David Kunzle defines the comic book as a sequence of separate images that tell a story that is both topical and moral in nature. The content should be more visual than textual and should be able to be produced on a mass level (Kunzle, 1974, 2). While comics had been introduced globally much before, India's tryst with the graphic narrative started in the 1960s after the launch of *Indrajal Comics* by the Times of India. However, most of these comics sought to readapt the western comics into Hindi versions with comics like Lee Falk's *Phantom* being readapted as the *Vetal* series. A major breakthrough in the publication of Hindi comic books came in 1967 when Anant Pai published his comic series *Amar Chitra Katha*. *Amar Chitra Katha* revolutionized the comic book market in India and set forth a precedent for other major comic series such as *Tinkle*, *Diamond Comics* or *Raj Comics* (Rao, 2001, 37). In this chapter, I shall map the trajectory of the *Amar Chitra Katha* in India—its rise, fall and subsequent comeback. In the first part of the chapter, I shall explore the circumstances that led to the rise of this revolutionary series; the various influences and inspirations for the series and how it eventually shaped to be formed. In the second part of the chapter, I shall explore deeper into the relation between the series and its maker, Anant Pai, and attempt to understand how this relationship impacted the marketing of the series to its readers. I map the path taken by the first issue of *Amar Chitra Katha*, *Krishna* and attempt to see, through the issue, how the comic, with time and political influences, took its final shape. In the final part of the chapter, I attempt to put forth the legacy of *Amar Chitra Katha* in middle class Indian households. In this part I try to ascertain the impact that the series has had in India and abroad, especially among the Indian diaspora, and how it has reshaped not only Indian literature but also the definitions of Hinduism for them. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a mapping of the rise, fall and comeback of *Amar Chitra Katha*, and its continuing impact on the minds of Indian children and adults alike.

## I. Rise of the *Amar Chitra Katha* in India

The American comic book market, since its initiation, was largely dominated by superheroes—people with extraordinary powers, enemies, a strong moral code, a secret identity, a costume, and an origin story that explained how the hero acquired their powers (Oropeza, 2005, 5; Reynolds, 1992, 12-16). These superheroes became very popular globally with reprints of these comic books selling in the millions. Like, all countries, the comic book craze also affected the Indian readership. Soon these comic books began to be published in Indian newspapers and magazines and the increasing market for superhero comic books gave rise to a much-needed genre of literature in India—an Indian superhero comic (Lutgendorf, 1991, 249-250). Indian comics began with tales of mythology and moral codes through the likes of *Chandamama* or *Indrajal comics*. However, there was still a gap felt in the comic book market. This gap was bridged in 1967 with the coming of Anant Pai's *Amar Chitra Katha*.

*Amar Chitra Katha* set a benchmark for comic books in India with its release. Reading at thirty-two pages long and each page being divided into several sequential panels (typically 3-6 per page), the pages feature a mixture of visual images, dialogue balloons, and narrative text. Unlike American or Japanese comics, Indian comics have more words to depict an action or thought. They rely more on naturalism to put forth their narrative. *Amar Chitra Katha* was largely inspired by the American comics that were available in India in the 1950s and 1960s such as *Tarzan*, *Mandrake*, or *Phantom* (Rao, 2001, 38-40).

*Amar Chitra Katha* derived from its predecessors and followed a few characteristics of the Indian comic book as set forth by them. It was highly influenced by western comic art and storytelling traditions. *Amar Chitra Katha*, like the comic book franchises before it, drew upon a long tradition of Indian visual and mythological culture. In order to create a national canon of Indian heroes and indigenize the comic book medium, it combines mythology and history, the sacred and the secular. *Amar Chitra Katha*, then, successfully transforms such figures into superheroes who encounter their foes, whether they are mythological demons or Muslim kings or colonial British officers; engages them in fierce battles, and in the end either emerge victorious or die bravely in the process (Sreenivas, 2010, 39-40).

Many authors or artists in India are directly engaged with international comics, especially from the USA, Japan, or Europe. Indian comics remain relatively obscure in those countries. The result is often a lack of appreciation for Indian comics in this context. However, *Amar Chitra Katha* as an Indian comic book series sought to change that context. One of the key terms in the Indian comic book context has been *chitrakatha* or picture stories. This term mainly originates with Anant Pai, who was the editor and founder of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic series in the later 1960s (Stoll, 2016, 1). The series featured stories on mythology, history, and folklore and sought to introduce children to “the world of words” and “inculcate cultural values” in them. Anant Pai labeled the comics *chitrakatha* and made it a source of education, thus establishing the medium as cultural heritage (UNESCO 1967 endorsement) (Stoll, 2016, 1). Pai used the term *chitrakatha* in his comics which allowed the series to become an essential part of school curricula and establish a national readership.

Indian’s comic culture was greatly transformed by the *Amar Chitra Katha* series. However, this transformation was initially heavily challenged by imported comics entering the Indian market. Yet, *Amar Chitra Katha* offered something relatively new in the Indian market—locally created comic books. Before the *Amar Chitra Katha* series, Anant Pai and the Times of India group had worked on *Indrajal* comics, a children-focused imprint that started in 1964. Pai left *Indrajal* comics only three years after the first issue as the local comics he supported were replaced with educational content. However, before departing he managed to convince the Times of India group to present Lee Falk’s *Phantom* over *Superman*, which provided popular content for the publisher. Later, *Indrajal*’s manager A. C. Shukla worked with Aabid Surti as well as several artists including Govind Brahmania, to create one of India’s first superheroes, Bahadur, an adventuring detective in an orange tunic (Stoll, 2016, 4). Being published in multiple languages and presenting a diversity of characters, *Indrajal* reached sales in the hundreds of thousands in the early 1980s (Rao, 2001, 45).

After the Times of India group rejected Pai’s ideas, he sold them to India Book House in 1967 who then published the *Amar Chitra Katha* series. The first ten issues were based on western fairy tales and published in Kannada, whereas the eleventh shifted to English and brought forth *Amar Chitra Katha*’s characteristic mythological and educational approach (Srinivasraju, 2011). With the issues following the first issue on

Krishna selling at 20,000 issues in three years, the sale of *Amar Chitra Katha* soon exploded to five million prints per year. Pai's heritage-based approach created a space for comics within Indian culture and established a national readership (Stoll, 2016, 5). As *Amar Chitra Katha's* readership grew, the creators added titles about historical figures from the many regions of India in a bid to promote national integration. There was the need for uniting India into the idea of a nation post Partition. *Amar Chitra Katha* played a major role in the unification of India and creators soon began to market the series as "the route to your roots" (Hawley, 2001, 218).

*Amar Chitra Katha* also played a very important role in creating the middle-class identity. The middle-class readers targeted by *Amar Chitra Katha* read and spoke English, came from an urban background, and had a global outlook. During the release of the comics, the number of English-speaking children were few as English education required enrollment in private English medium schools and was expensive. Since most of these children were first-generation English learners, *Amar Chitra Katha* became a means for them to practice English outside the boundaries of the classroom. It became a means for them to maintain a balance between the western and Indian culture at the same time. Since, *Amar Chitra Katha* targeted the English-speaking audience, many of its readers were based abroad. They often lauded it for appealing to their American inclination while maintaining their Indian sensibility. These readers have been exposed to the effects of globalization from a very young age. They admitted that *Amar Chitra Katha* helped them retain their Indian identity in the face of increasing global homogenization. When globalization heralded the western past, *Amar Chitra Katha* put forth the Indian one (Hawley. 2001, 225).

*Amar Chitra Katha* plays an equally important role in the religious education of its readers. The readers of *Amar Chitra Katha*, mostly middle-class children, and adults, belonged to the nuclear family setup and were thus, often not exposed to religious education as propagated through grandparents or village priests. Even in schools, religious education was secondary to the learning of science and technology. In the lack of a better reference, *Amar Chitra Katha* began to be seen as "accurate and authentic" products that were loyal to the Hindu scriptures. These comics helped an entire generation develop a national consciousness through their titles based on historical figures and mythology. They allowed Hindus to connect with the ancient

scriptures by recasting classical Sanskrit stories of Hindu Gods and Goddesses in the popular medium (Sreenivas, 2010, 41).

In the 1980s-1990s, the definition of Hinduism began to be debated upon and the class and caste hierarchy came to be enforced actively. These debates formed the background against which the heroes and villains of *Amar Chitra Katha's* titles were decided (Jaffrelot, 2007, 3-5). Not only does the stereotyping of certain communities as villains and certain as heroes mislead the readers, but it also illustrates the Hindu nationalist conception of India as a Hindu land. This illustration then becomes the absolute truth, a truth so cherished that it becomes taboo to even question it (Jaffrelot, 2007, 20-21). However, *Amar Chitra Katha* readers actively reject any political agendas in the comics. While they agree they are not trivial children's books, they believe *Amar Chitra Katha* to be beyond the boundaries of cold calculation and political agendas, and to be of utmost significance in the lives of middle-class Indians. Meant for children, they like to believe *Amar Chitra Katha* to be bereft of any larger implications. But as adults, many of the same readers are able to read into the same underlying layers of the comics.

While they may agree or disagree, all Hindu readers of the comics agree that *Amar Chitra Katha* helps enforce their religious beliefs. Not only does it help them learn more about their religion but seeing their favourite characters and deities being represented also reinforces their religious knowledge base. Often, when asked to recall the images of said deities, they resort to remembering the images illustrated in *Amar Chitra Katha*. Thus, *Amar Chitra Katha* equals the significance of *darshan* for them—the primary act of Hindu worship of beholding the deity with one's own eyes and worshipping them. (Eck, 1998, 3).

“The central act of Hindu worship, from the point of view of the lay person, is to stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the image with one's own eyes, to see and be seen by the deity. *Darshan* is sometimes translated as the “auspicious sight” of the divine, and its importance in the Hindu ritual complex reminds us that for Hindus “worship” is not only a matter of prayers and offerings and the devotional disposition of the heart. Since, in the Hindu understanding, the deity is present in the image, the visual apprehension of the image is charged with religious meaning. Beholding the

image is an act of worship, and through the eyes one gains the blessings of the divine.” (Eck, 1998, 3)

*Darshan*, hence, is not restricted to the images in temples and household shrines which have been officially consecrated through a ritual process. The experience of *darshan* extends to cheap printed images of the Gods, posters, calendar art and bazaar art. Regarding the widespread worship of media images as *darshan*, such as the viewing of Ramanand Sagar’s *Ramayana*, Philip Lutgendorf writes:

“[A] Benaras newspaper reported on a sweetshop where a borrowed television was set up each week on a makeshift altar sanctified with cow dung and Ganges water, worshipped with flowers and incense, and watched by a crowd of several hundred neighborhood residents, who then shared in the distribution of 125 kilos of sanctified sweets (*prasad*), which had been placed before the screen during the broadcast.” (Lutgendorf, 1995, 224)

While the comic books themselves are not intended for ritual worship, it has been difficult for readers to dissociate the image from God. Anant Pai specifically kept this in mind when designing the book covers, taking care that his characters never gaze out to the readers directly in a Godly stance, in order to prevent ritual worship of the comic books. Although in some issues the reader-character divine gaze is unavoidable, Pai has taken care to avoid such a connection in most of the works. In spite of that, readers have always found the comics to “radiate a spiritual force” (Rajadhyaksha, 1993, 47). They were not framed or ritually worshipped but extreme care was taken when handling the books by many readers. Readers had reported that their mothers would make special cardboard boxes for the books’ preservation. Some would consider it sacrilegious to throw away their collections and hence preserved them well into adulthood. These actions were not borne out of nostalgia or sentiment but out of the belief that *Amar Chitra Katha* could not be thrown away for fear that the Gods might consider it an act of disrespect (Pinney, 2004, 226).

Thus, to a substantial segment of the Indian population from the late 1960s to today, these comics were not merely trivial artifacts but were powerful resources that were crucial to the formation of their identities as Indians and Hindus. It is important to note that *Amar Chitra Katha* was thus known for putting forth the Indian identity—an identity that rapidly became synonymous with the Hindu identity. Hence, popular

Hindu beliefs and agendas also percolated to being a part of the Indian identity propagated by it. As it has been established, *Amar Chitra Katha* is biased towards a majoritarian religion and beliefs and that biasness is carried forth in the queer representation as well. The omission of any representation that does not fit into the agenda that *Amar Chitra Katha* believes in and propagates hence automatically becomes against the Indian identity. Children who could have benefitted from the rainbow representation of queerness as enumerated in Chapter Two (a fun means of portraying queerness for children) thus are eluded from this knowledge and upon encountering it at a later stage in life may consider it against the Indian identity too. Representation at a younger age would ensure better acceptance. However, the biasness of *Amar Chitra Katha* in its different titles has deeper connotations.

## **II. Anant Pai and the *Amar Chitra Katha* in India**

In order to understand the deeper connotations of *Amar Chitra Katha*'s biasness, it is necessary to understand about the man behind the series, Anant Pai. Anant Pai was born into an orthodox Hindu Vaishnava family of the Brahmin caste. Despite his background in science, Pai was drawn to the world of publishing and in 1967, he founded the *Amar Chitra Katha* series. Due to his intensive and prolonged involvement, Anant Pai's own beliefs have had a substantial impact on the narratives of these comics.

The idea for *Amar Chitra Katha* was born when Pai, one day, happened to watch a quiz show on TV featuring five students from St. Stephen's College. When asked the name of the mother of Lord Ram, the students could not answer the question. However, they could easily answer the questions asked about Greek mythology. This bothered Pai as, for him, it showed a gap in the education system where children were being alienated from their own culture. Inspired from the televised quiz show, and reflecting on his own nephew's love of American comic books, Pai was convinced that the comic book medium would be an excellent means of filling this gap in education and teaching Indian values and beliefs to children in English medium schools. He feared that instead of learning more about Indian culture, the children were learning more about western history, mythology, and values. (Rao, 2001, 50).

After trying unsuccessfully in several publishing houses, India Book House (IBH) agreed to publish the new comic book series called *Amar Chitra Katha*. The first ten issues which were Hindi translations of western classics like Cinderella, Snow White, and Red Riding Hood were unsuccessful in the market and failed to sell. Then, in 1969, Anant Pai published the title, *Krishna*. It was published in English, as Pai knew from his prior experience, that the market for these comic books was the rapidly growing English-speaking middle class of urban India. The title became extremely successful and inaugurated the birth of the Indian comic book industry. It was the first indigenous comic book created in India and featured an Indian hero and an Indian storyline (Rao, 2001, 51-52).

In order to understand the evolution of *Amar Chitra Katha* into the comic book franchise that is known today, it is important to map the trajectory of the first issue, *Krishna*, and understand how the choices made by Pai and his team affected the subsequent issues. The comic *Krishna* illustrates various episodes from the life of Krishna as depicted in the *Bhagavat Puran*. The comic establishes the formula for *Amar Chitra Katha*'s future issues by featuring one hero on the cover who shall be the center of the dramatic action of the narrative. For Pai, the decision to portray Krishna in the first issue was an easy one. According to him, Krishna is the most popular God. For him, Ram is the ideal man who never lies, is a loving son and brother, and so on. But Krishna is a real-life character—a human figure. Pai believed that Krishna actually lived, and hence like other humans he sometimes lied and stole butter, and so on (McLain, 2009, 26).

However, Pai's beliefs and interpretations clashed with his desire to adhere to the rendition of the Sanskrit text. For instance, when faced with the dilemma of whether he should include the episodes depicting the miracles in Krishna's life, Pai's own beliefs that Krishna was a human character who actually lived and was Vishnu incarnate, played a role in the depiction. He decided to mention all the key events in the life of Krishna but refrain from depicting them as miracles. Pai making the choice to deflect from the portrayal of the original Sanskrit text and bend the story according to his beliefs, shows that this may be true for other instances as well such as the portrayal of Krishna's sexuality where aspects of his sexuality may have been omitted or distorted to fit certain beliefs.



During the first three years of its release, sales of the issue *Krishna* were a bit slow with less than 20,000 copies being sold. However, Pai did not give up and pulled out all the stops to market the comic book series. With sales continuing to rise, *Amar Chitra Katha* overtook even foreign comics such as Lee Falk's *Phantom* and Edgar Rice Burrough's *Tarzan*. Presently, the issue of *Krishna* is one of the most popular *Amar Chitra Katha* titles. It has been reprinted more than sixty times and has sold over a million copies (Hawley, 1995, 115). But this current issue of *Krishna* is very different from the one that was initially released. Pai has made several changes to the initial issue in accordance with popular demand. For instance, Pai, in accordance with his own beliefs, chose to deflect from the Sanskrit text and eliminate miracles in the initial issue. However, later, in accordance with popular demand, he decided to reprint the issue, as he wanted to portray Krishna as transcendental and Godly (Desai, 2003, 325-333). It is interesting to note that keeping in rhythm with the changing times, several issues of *Amar Chitra Katha* have been revised and reprinted. However, even after repeated reprints none of the prints have included aspects of Krishna's sexuality being approached.

Pai decided that in the revised editions, his earlier views of a human Krishna who actually lived shall be dispelled for a more Godly and transcendental personality. This Godly personality was put forward through the illustrations of various miraculous episodes in Krishna's life. These episodes are important for they demonstrate his power and present him as a God in human form. From the parting of the river to the defeating of the wild elephant, Krishna is portrayed like a true comic book superhero or a Hindu God. He is shown to be not only the master of everything earthly but a master of Gods as well. On one hand, he is shown playing the flute and herding cattle like a human, and on the other hand, he is illustrated to be taking down monsters and accomplishing heroic feats like a true superhero. Pai tries to demonstrate that Krishna is indeed the supreme God Vishnu incarnate in human form. Krishna's humanity and humane qualities are elevated and his deeds are replaced with transcendental qualities (Hawley, 1983, 52; Haberman, 1994, 19). As enumerated upon in Chapter Two, in Hindu mythology, the divine is considered to have a lack of sexuality—a quality that makes them transcendental. Gods who display notions of sexuality are either considered weak, or looked down upon. Thus, it may be read that sexuality is human.

By making, the choice to portray Krishna (and subsequent mythological characters) as divine, Pai subconsciously robs them of their sexuality.

Most of the people working on the issues were devout Hindus and followers of Krishna themselves. For Ram Waerker, the artist behind the issue of *Krishna*, it was easier to produce the revised edition with miracles than the ones without because as a devout Vaishnava and devotee himself, he was familiar with the images to be drawn. He confessed to being exposed to these images his entire life and that reflected in his paintings. In 1975, Pai attended a Ramayan Mela in Bombay. In one of the events the question, ‘Who was the mother of the villain, Ravana?’ was asked. The answer was that “If *Amar Chitra Katha* says it’s Kaikesi, then it must be so.” This led Pai also to regard the mythological comic book as something sacred.

“This was in 1975, when there was a Ramayan Mela [festival] here in Bombay. People came from all over the world for this. There was a query: Who is the mother of the villain, Ravan? And a man said, ‘*Amar Chitra Katha* says it’s Kaikesi, so it must be so.’ This made me realise that I must be accurate, that people think the *Amar Chitra Kathas* are a legitimate source of these sacred stories.”—Anant Pai (McLain, 2009, 35)

Since then, Pai claimed to not tamper with the text of the mythology. He claims to feel a sense of responsibility towards textual authority over poetic license in the case of Hindu mythological narratives (McLain, 2009, 35). And yet changes are made in the text when it comes to the portrayal of titular characters. Things that may be considered politically or religiously unacceptable by the majority are removed. Representation of the various aspects of the characters or of a minority group such as LGBT+ are removed from the depiction. It may be questioned whether this opportunity to educate the masses on a minority group is removed to protect the sacred or to adhere to the politically majoritarian ideas.

*Amar Chitra Katha* produces comic books on both mythological and historical figures using the same formulaic pattern of a protagonist as the hero. Due to this, the line between the mythological and the historical often gets blurred. Every issue begins with a story that revolves around a central character—the hero. There is a need in *Amar Chitra Katha* to present the protagonist as the hero/heroine. The male hero would be brave, masculine and triumphant. The female heroine will be feminine, sad,

victorious and graceful. *Amar Chitra Katha* is enjoyed by children and adults alike (Sreenivas, 2010, 76-77). So not only children are kept away from an understanding of sexuality, so are adults. For titles which present transgender characters, such as *Amba*, it is divided into feminine and suffering in the first half and masculine and valiant in the second half, after the transformation. The story of *Amba* is further enumerated upon in Chapter Four. Most of these masculine or feminine characters are considered to be beyond humanity, given a transcendental halo that elevates them, unlike the transgender protagonists (who are never elevated to be Gods and remain human) as depicted in Chapter Two. Sexuality in their characterization shall humanize them. So, to dehumanize them and make them appear as Gods/Goddesses, sexuality is sacrificed.

A major concern for the artists and producers of the comics was textual accuracy and authenticity. Most of the *Amar Chitra Katha* titles, around 70 percent, were created out of old, crumbling works of Bengali and European scholars of the Royal Asiatic Society's library. A good story that follows a chronological order, and imparts some positive moral values are essential for a good script, according to them. It should ultimately make the reader want to delve into the originals. Not only the epics, but *Amar Chitra Katha* has been known to adapt popular folklores of the epics too, as in the case of Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*, or Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Durgesh Nandini* (McLain, 2009, 37-38). However, queer folklores, such as the folklore of *Chitrangada*, are ignored in spite of its popularity.

To fully understand the impact that *Amar Chitra Katha* has on the mind of its readers, it is necessary to map how it is advertised. Originally, *Amar Chitra Katha* was intended to be marketed as children's leisure literature. However, the producers swiftly realized the potential in marketing the books to adults:

"I was bent on making *Amar Chitra Katha* family reading.... I knew that in those days children read what adults chose for them and any decent, well-produced reading material that appealed to parents and grandparents would reach the children. Besides, there were many adults who had never come across the stories gleaned from dusty, crumbling, literal translations, which made tedious reading unless one was a researcher! Any good story, well told, would appeal to all age groups was my firm belief, and it proved true!"—Producer No.2 (McLain, 2009, 41).

There were a number of prejudices against comics that were prevalent in the market at the time. Comics were considered to be intellectually inferior, recreational books that imparted no educational value and were a waste of time and money. They were feared to be a serious impediment to an Indian child's moral and intellectual development by diverting them from their studies and introducing western values in place of traditional ones (Nyberg, 1998, 165). The producers of *Amar Chitra Katha* recognized that they would have to overcome all these prejudices embedded in the Indian mind, in order to become a success. In an effort to do so, *Amar Chitra Katha* began to actively market the series as an educational product to parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and even educators. The producers tried immensely to have the book included as a part of the children's educational curriculum. Pai erased one of the most common fears of educators that the children might imitate the characters ensuring the characters produced by him would be worthy of being imitated. He was careful not to include violence in his *chitrakathas* (although many panels in his issues do depict scenes of violence), and he ensured that only those people are depicted as heroes in his series who cherish the values that sustain society, and the ones who do not, according to him, are depicted as villains (Sreenivas, 2010, 62-64). It may be questioned, at this point as to who decides what can be designated as good or bad—the majoritarian outlook, the political or religious setup or Pai himself.

In addition to these, keeping English as the primary language for printing, *Amar Chitra Katha* began to be available in other languages too such as Hindi, Bengali, Malayalam, Kannada and Assamese. By the 1970s the comics were available everywhere—from bookstores to streetside stalls on railway stations. In the early 1980s, fan clubs of *Amar Chitra Katha* sprouted up in different parts of the nation. These fan clubs became immensely popular with people all over the world sending in letters and over by 1985 *Amar Chitra Katha* offices had received over 4000 letters from more than 200 fan clubs.

Due to such marketing strategies, *Amar Chitra Katha* sales reached around 60,000 copies in English, 25,000 in Hindi, 8000 in Assamese and 6000 each in Kannada and Bengali every month. Additionally, further comic book sales occurred through joint ventures in foreign languages such as Bahasa, French, German, Japanese, Serbo-Croat, Spanish and Swahili. Moreover, what these figures failed to capture was the circulation that took place through sharing. Comics, like magazines, reach a larger

audience than is realized as they are usually shared with friends and siblings, borrowed from lending libraries or resold in secondhand *bazaars* (Doctor, 1997, 38).

However, the 1990s saw a dramatic fall in sales figures. From over 5 lakh copies a month, prints dropped to 6000 to 12,000 every month. *Amar Chitra Katha* producers and artists chalk the cause of this to be the growing popularity of television. With the rising popularity of Doordarshan's *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat*, Doordarshan appeared to be becoming more popular than *Amar Chitra Katha*. Doordarshan's target audience, similar to *Amar Chitra Katha*, was the urban middle class, especially women and children who were core purchasers of *Amar Chitra Katha* books. Additionally, television became a more entertaining way to impart education to the masses reaching them directly at the comfort of their homes. Hence, when Doordashan aired *Mahabharat*, and *Amar Chitra Katha* began producing its *Mahabharata* series at the same time, many people tired of the repetition discontinued their *Amar Chitra Katha* subscription (Lutgendorf, 1995, 223).

So, in a bid to recapture their lost audience, in 1994, India Book House relaunched the comic book series by releasing deluxe editions. The old covers were replaced with shiny covers made from premium, laminated paper stock. The titles were redone in a more attractive format, and the artwork was made bigger. Release parties were held for the launch of these books and they were even priced at a higher range making the books more expensive and exclusive. India Book House, in addition to the bimonthly issues, also decided to reprint previous bestsellers and also release new ninety-six pages 'bumper issues' beginning with *Ramayana*. Other special releases include *Tales from the Panchatantra*, *Tales from the Jatakas*, and a fourteen-volume *Mahabharata* set which was so popular that it sold out in spite of being significantly more expensive than the other volumes. The *Amar Chitra Katha* boom became so famous that *Amar Chitra Katha* began to be commissioned for certain issues. Issues like *Swami Pranavananda* and *Swami Chinmayananda*, were commissioned by their respective devotees to be the biographies of the spiritual leader's life from a follower's perspective (Khory, 1993, 121-137). The fact that these prominent organizations chose *Amar Chitra Katha* to illustrate the biographies of their spiritual leader is a noteworthy testament to the high regard that they have for the comic book series.

In 2000, *Amar Chitra Katha* released a 272 page tome, its lengthiest bumper issue yet, about the life of Krishna called *Bhagwat: The Krishna Avatar*. In this issue, Krishna is presented grander than before, performing miracles in his grandiose. When Pai was asked about the releasing of yet another issue on Krishna, Pai agreed and claimed that he believed Krishna to be the most popular God in India— “in the north, and the south, everywhere”. He believed Krishna is the God of all India.

“Yes, there are a lot of comic books on Krishna especially. You see, he is the most popular God in India—in the north, and the south, everywhere. Even the chief minister of Kerala, he is against religion, an atheist, but even he goes to a Krishna temple on important days. And there is a Muslim poet in Karnataka, he is still living today, Nissar Ahmed, who has written many poems to Krishna. Beautiful poems. And in Bengal roadside singers sing Krishna’s glory from village to village. Their songs are called ‘baul songs’. Krishna is the God of all India.”—Anant Pai (McLain, 2009, 50)

This statement demonstrates how Pai’s own understanding of a modern Hindu aligns with dominant discourses of religion and nation in two ways—

- i. It positions Vaishnavism as the dominant form of Hinduism. Hinduism is incredibly diverse with no single text of worship or system of belief. Hence, scholars can speak of Hinduism only in plural terms, as many ‘Hindu traditions’. In this process, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are often drawn upon due to their immense popularity throughout India to set forth a shared body of literature that would unite all Hindus. The effect of this was to privilege devotion to Krishna and Rama, the central Gods of the Indian epics who are both considered to be incarnations of Vishnu, making Vaishnavism, the worshipping of Vishnu to be the dominant form of Hinduism.
- ii. The statement that Krishna is the “God of all India” positions Hinduism as the national religion of India. Anant Pai believes that Krishna’s mythology should not only be familiar to all Hindus, but also to all Indians regardless of their personal beliefs. This sentiment was shared not just by Pai but by other *Amar Chitra Katha* producers as well who emphasized that the artists believe that the epics have happened in actuality and that they were

a part of ancient Indian history. They believe that being Hindu is equivalent to being Indian and hence any Indian with a knowledge of Indian history, specifically Hindu history, and mythology, can illustrate the comics. However, according to Karline McLain (2009), the combination of historical and mythological issues in *Amar Chitra Katha* has been particularly appealing to Hindu nationalist groups that seek to make Hinduism the national religion of India. A number of prominent leaders from such groups have also endorsed the series (Dalmia, 1995, 176-210 and 1997; Narayan, 2000, 761-779; Ilaiah, 2005, 48-49).

As documented by Prof. McLain (2009, 51), when *Bhagwat: The Krishna Avatar* was released in August 2000, Dr. Murli Manohar Joshi, India's then Union Human Resources Development and minister presided over the ceremony. He stressed the educational value of the comic book and stated that future generations should know about the country's rich heritage and culture with the education system of the country enabling the means to achieve this. He also clearly stated that both historical and mythological issues should be used in schools to help students connect to their roots. Dr. Joshi believed that the mythological and historical volumes of the *Amar Chitra Katha* series was ideal for the beliefs and morals of the youth of India,

From being a floundering product line that was viewed with suspicion and skepticism to being an authoritative source on the Hindu religion and Indian culture, a way back for Indians to their roots, *Amar Chitra Katha*'s popularity has been universal. Not only are these a window into Pai's own beliefs about what it means to be a Hindu but they are also a crucial site for ongoing discussions about what it means to be a modern Hindu and Indian, thus reflecting the values ascribed to these categories in its narrative.

### **III. The legacy of *Amar Chitra Katha* in India**

This definition of 'Indianness' was established even more after the release of two new issues that radically differed from the usual comic book formula—*An Exciting Find* and *Indus Valley Adventure*. These works broke away from the usual good versus evil pattern and followed the two protagonists on their journey

to rediscover ancient India. They would travel back in time using a time machine and experience Ancient Harappa for themselves instead of having the experience narrated to them. All the artists associated with the projects confessed to having put in their best work and illustrations in the issue.

“I said, let’s try using the common people as the central figures. Then we could write history from a completely different perspective. I thought we could look at the period from Harappa up to Akbar. Stopping at Akbar, because he was the last glorious king in India. And starting with Harappa because at that time there was a lot of new information coming out about that civilization. Lots of research was needed, a different kind of research, to write from this perspective. So we began with the *Indus Valley Adventure*. We planned two or three others on the Indus Valley, with these same characters, and then we were going to move on to the Vedic period. But I had to leave. I could not make enough of a living just writing the comic book scripts. So, I took another position. Possibly they couldn’t find the right author to write these scripts. It takes a lot of imagination to create new characters out of nothing and to tell the story from this sort of perspective. It is an unusual perspective. Perhaps the perspective was just too unusual. Perhaps it didn’t appeal.”—Author Yagya Sharma (McLain, 2009, 198)

And yet, in spite of its originality and fresh perspectives, the issues never worked. The readers were assumed to not be ready for this *Amar Chitra Katha* perspective. Instead, they wanted to read more about the Indian heritage in the old formulaic good versus evil style. They preferred formulaic heroes like Rama, Krishna, Shivaji, or Bhagat Singh who fought their foes and emerged victorious at the end or died bravely in the process.

“We received a few positive letters. But we received many more letters of complaint, requesting that we bring back the old heroes.”—Anant Pai (McLain, 2009, 199)

For the readers of the comics, this was the definition of Indianness, not just in India but also for Indians abroad. And this definition stood true not only as Indians but also as Hindus living outside India.

There are many reasons why this formulaic pattern of presenting the heroes of *Amar Chitra Katha* stood the test of time among the Indian diaspora, but in order



to understand that it is necessary to understand the various pleasures of reading *Amar Chitra Katha* away from the country. The first pleasure is the ability to maintain a connection with one's homeland. The second pleasure is the ability to connect with one's Hindu religion and articulate it in an environment where Hinduism is not the majoritarian religion and a perceived vacuum of one's own religion is often felt.

Prof. McLain (2009, 201) documents the widespread readership of *Amar Chitra Katha* after being contacted by readers from Australia, Brazil, Kuwait, London, Singapore, Tanzania, and so on. These readers claimed that *Amar Chitra Katha* with its issues on ancient, medieval, and modern Indian heroes helped them develop a sense of pride in their own Indian heritage. It is interesting to note that as Prof. McLain (2009, 201) claims, a large majority of the readers who contacted her were Hindus and they claimed that the comics helped them to understand the various beliefs of Hinduism. Thus, *Amar Chitra Katha*, in this case, plays the role of establishing the definition of Hinduism. Hence, if *Amar Chitra Katha* does not depict sexuality or omits its representation, then it is assumed that Hinduism too follows the same norms.

To understand this even further, McLain (2009, 201-202) takes a closer look at the American-Indian diaspora. The immigration of the Indian diaspora happened in two phases. The first phase essentially acted on their own by either discarding their religious beliefs completely or by carrying out their private religions. The second phase was vastly different as they chose to not only retain their religious identities but also establish visible and permanent places of worship for Hinduism. These Indians were well-educated professionals who went to America in order to pursue their professional interests. Most of them planned to go back to India eventually. However, they ended up staying there, building homes, applying for permanent residency, and even creating permanent places of worship such as Hindu temples (Leonard, 1997, 107). Since their knowledge of Hinduism stemmed from *Amar Chitra Katha*, the beliefs propagated by the books defined the Hinduism they believed in and propagated through generations.

“In the 1970s new Indian immigrants to Boston, most of them professionals who had come during their student years, took jobs and settled in New England. They

all intended to return to India eventually. Then they began to have children, and before long their children were in grade school. By now, these young families were putting down deeper roots in America and beginning to look toward a future here. They realized that their children would have no cultural or religious identity as Hindus at all unless they themselves began to do something about it...These Hindus were engineers and doctors, metallurgists and biochemists, not temple builders. In fact, many of them had not been actively religious at all in India. Had they returned to Madras or Bangalore, they would never have become involved in the building or administration of a temple. But here in America their education as Hindus took on a new and practical form.” (Eck, 2002, 88-89)

The *Amar Chitra Katha* comics began to be produced in 1967 just as the second phase of immigration to America had begun. As more titles were released in the 1970s, these immigrants and their families found *Amar Chitra Katha* to be a handy tool to educate their children and themselves (McLain, 2009, 203). So, while readers in India, who were already familiar with the protagonists’ story would take pleasure in seeing the comics represented in media, readers in America would take pleasure not only in seeing the comic represented in media but also in learning about an Indian story for the first time. Being portable and easy to carry and transport, these comics introduced the Hindu pantheon, explained Hindu mythology, and provided an overview of Hindu history to the Indian diaspora. As Prof. McLain (2009, 204) documented, one *Amar Chitra Katha* reader even confessed to having learned “all the values of Hinduism, Hindu *devas*, *dharma*, morality, family values, roles of men and women, and the glory of ancient Indian culture.” Another reported that he loved the comics because *Amar Chitra Katha* “tells stories about Hindu culture and it teaches about good qualities that one should have.” Hence, *Amar Chitra Katha* served to be not only as a tool of education but also helped in uniting Hindus abroad across various paths through the tales of Rama, Krishna, Shiva, and other Hindu deities. As Prof. McLain (2009, 206) documents, there may be “an entire generation of young Hindus growing up in this country, educated on the myths recounted by *Amar Chitra Katha* where again, one storyline is presented and is ratified as ‘true’ unlike the oral tradition, which may present alternative versions of a story—and on symbolic meanings of temples, deities, and rituals.”

She recounts an incident where a student once protested that the ending to Valmiki's *Ramayana*, where Rama banishes Sita to the forest, was wrong. The student insisted that the ending to the book was with the crowning of Rama as the king. In spite of her several protests, the student insisted on his word as his ending was the ending illustrated in *Amar Chitra Katha*'s issue on the *Ramayana*. Although McLain tried to teach the student about the various renditions of the epic and *Amar Chitra Katha* presenting only one of them, the student persisted. This incident goes on to prove the impact that *Amar Chitra Katha* had especially on the Indian diaspora—a community of people with no prior knowledge of the epics and for whom *Amar Chitra Katha* became 'the truth'.

However, when *Amar Chitra Katha* decided to stop the printing of new issues and reprint old bestsellers, a rumour arose that they have run out of subjects to portray in their series. For these readers, who believed in this rumour, the national canon of Gods, kings and other heroes were complete—no other Hindu Gods and Goddesses, no other religious figure from India's other religious traditions, no other men and women from any historical period needed to be added (McLain, 2009, 207). With the appeal of the comics restored with the reprinting of the bestsellers, the age-old debates that plagued the artists and everyone involved in the creative process were put to rest. *Amar Chitra Katha*, as proven earlier, became responsible once again for the creation of ideologies of religion and national identity even amid ongoing debates. Debates such as which Hindu Gods and Goddesses are central to Hinduism, what roles Muslims and other non-Hindus play in Indian history and society, who should be remembered as heroes in the struggle for Independence, and so on were diminished in the face of a large consensus that wanted the age-old traditional method of comic book illustrations in *Amar Chitra Katha*. For instance, there were no challenges or debates on whether all Indian children needed to learn Krishna's story, or when the decision was taken to sanitize the image of Kali in order to be portrayed, no debates arose (Pinney, 2001, 9). Like the image of Kali, *Amar Chitra Katha* has time and again resorted to sanitization, omission, or distortion to make its characters more appealing. These issues demonstrate not only that Hinduism is extremely central to the ideology of *Amar Chitra Katha* but also that it is a modern, middle-class, upper-caste, predominantly Vaishnava strand of Hinduism.

The history of *Amar Chitra Katha*, however, has not always been bereft of debates. In the 1970s debates arose about the depiction of women and Muslims which resulted in alternative feminine ideals and the portrayal of some Muslim emperors as heroes. But the emphasis nonetheless was still maintained on the heroine's self-sacrifice and on the evils of Muslim orthodoxy (McLain, 2009, 208). This goes on to show that the hegemonic conceptions of Hinduism and national Indian identity do not exist passively but is actively created amid ongoing debate. Thus, *Amar Chitra Katha* does not follow any norms of Hinduism but actively creates its own norms or definitions of Hinduism that are then passed down through generations. In many regions, *Amar Chitra Katha* is used as an alternative to textbooks and even awarded as a prize for students at various functions. The books are used not only for educational purposes, but schools also use this knowledge of the nation's past to create obedient citizens out of the children (Kumar, 2001, 20-21). When such knowledge is presented to children as authentic sources of information about India, the space for debates and challenges is largely foreclosed. It is already decided what it means to be Indian. *Amar Chitra Katha* enforces that certain vision without allowing alternatives such as alternatives of sexuality and identity.

While *Amar Chitra Katha* still retains the popularity it commanded in the comic book markets, alternatives, albeit less popular, have cropped up. Rukmini Sekhar has started a new comic book series called Vivalok Comics that portrays the reality and additional stories of certain tales that *Amar Chitra Katha* omits in its portrayal. For instance, Vivalok Comics' issues on the *Ramayana* do not end with Rama's return to Ayodhya but end with a short chapter called 'Sita Banished' that accurately illustrates the plight of Sita towards the end of the epic. In the USA, artist Chitra Ganesh has created her own comic book, *Tales of Amnesia* where she questions the definition of Indianness presented in *Amar Chitra Katha* by raising queer issues and feminist critiques. For instance, for the cover of *Tales of Amnesia*, she adapted the splash page from the *Hanuman Amar Chitra Katha* issues, transforming the mythological monkey into a half-monkey, half-jungle (barbaric) girl who defies social norms. She also portrays lesbian sexuality, drawing connection between Indian women in the diaspora and the plight of women in premodern India (McLain, 2009, 210).

However, despite all odds, as a form of public culture that has touched the everyday lives of millions of Indians for the past decades, *Amar Chitra Katha* has had a substantial impact on the concept of Hinduism and Indianness. Even beyond their audience, these comic books are largely influenced by the tradition of Indian visual and literary culture, especially during Indian nationalist period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when popular texts and images (including paintings, God posters, and bazaar art) were used in the struggle for Independence. In fact, it is believed that *Amar Chitra Katha* had modelled many of its heroines and Goddesses on the paintings and God posters by Raja Ravi Varma (Appadurai and Breckenridge, 1995, 1-20).

The stories of *Amar Chitra Katha*, thus began to spread its influence far and wide. Television producers repeatedly consulted the comics as a reference for costume design, set production, and subject matter. Dozens of Indian films have also been produced featuring the same Indian heroes that were canonized in *Amar Chitra Katha*. Creators of new animated cartoons and children's internet production also turn to *Amar Chitra Katha* for inspiration (McLain, 2009, 213). Thus, *Amar Chitra Katha* has not only been instrumental in establishing a national canon of Indian heroes that depict what it means to be a Hindu and an Indian for middle-class readers in India, but also has spread the influence in the Indian diaspora and to other countries. The definitions of what it means to be a Hindu and an Indian are also established through these comics, which play an instrumental role in the various readaptations of media.

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