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Whose Immortal Picture Stories?: *Amar Chitra Katha* and the Construction of Indian Identities
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Abstract: *Amar Chitra Katha* ("Immortal Picture Stories"), the leading Indian comic book series, enjoys a ubiquitous presence among the urban middle-class in India and the South Asian diaspora. These comic books provide a unique opportunity for the study of the definition and negotiation of a modern middle-class Indian identity, as the multiplicity of intended and received messages of the comics can be examined by studying both their creation and consumption in conjunction with a careful reading of the content. My project will challenge traditional approaches to public culture which typically focus on either creation or consumption, one at the expense of the other, by viewing both as active and contested processes which together act with text and image to continually recreate and transform identities. Furthermore, my project will engage identity formation – particularly the formation of religious identities – on both the national and transnational levels and examine the tensions between them.

Background: *Amar Chitra Katha* has dominated the flourishing comic book market since its inception in 1967, selling over 436 titles and more than 78 million issues. Anant Pai, founder of the comics, conceived of them as a means of teaching "Indian themes and values" to western-educated Indian children who knew western history at the purported expense of Indian history and mythology. Hence the comics, which are first produced in English and then translated into Hindi and other languages according to demand, can be loosely grouped into two categories: mythologicals and historicals. The mythologicals were conceived of first and retell, in a child-friendly way, the classical epics and various Puranic stories. The historicals, added several years later, feature regional personalities in order to promote national integration, according to Pai, by teaching people in one region about the culture and history of another (Gangadhar, 1988). The comics are advertised as "the only comics welcomed in schools" and "the route to your roots," promoting their scholarly accuracy and "Indianness," qualities meant to appeal to specifically Hindu middle-class communities both within India and abroad.

Methodologies and Issues: I envision this project as an investigation of three primary

issues: content, production, and consumption. The first part of my study will consist in careful textual and visual analyses of *Amar Chitra Katha*, wherein I will explore relationships between text and image, noting when imagery supports or subverts the text. I will also approach this medium of public culture as a site in which global and transnational processes intersect and at times conflict with national processes. One such intersection is the use of the western comic book medium to depict Indian images and retell Indian themes. When *Amar Chitra Katha* was founded in 1967, Anant Pai recognized that western comics such as *Superman*, *Phantom*, and *Captain Marvel* were popular in India and designed his comics in the western artistic style. Furthermore, these comics utilize western scholarship on India to promote their historical and textual accuracy, thereby conveying some western biases. One example is the *Shah Jahan* issue (no. 642, 1979) which focuses more on the romance between Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal than on Shah Jahan's reign and military victories. This focus reflects the uncomplicated romantic image of Shah Jahan that was prevalent in the west prior to the 1980s, an image now superceded by newer scholarship that promotes a more imperial emphasis. The usage of a western artistic style along with content derived from previous western scholarship to teach "authentic" Indian values is a space wherein the tension between national and transnational politics of identity formation can be witnessed and problematized. By examining such contested spaces, I will be able to explore multiple intentions on the production side and multiple interpretations on the consumption side.

The second aspect of the project is an analysis of the production processes and the authorial function. I approach these comics as a consumer-oriented (as opposed to an author- or artist-focused) industry which makes use of marketing techniques to facilitate commodity exchange. The comics are semiprogrammed literature/art in that they are highly formulaic and repetitive, and are designed for an explicit, already-constituted audience. By observing and interviewing members of the company I will begin to discern the contours of the theoretical audience, the sort of market research conducted, the advertising principles employed, and other factors guiding the publication process. This will allow me to explore the multiple intentions behind the product, as authors and artists are encouraged to work within the comic book template, yet at times may contest editorial

decisions. J.S. Hawley and F. Pritchett note that the comics are created amidst competing tensions between sales versus educational values, scholarly accuracy versus appeasing particular interest groups, and truthfully depicting past conflict versus promoting national integration. The *Draupadi* issue (no. 542, 1974) exemplifies the kind of conflict that can occur during the creation of a comic book. Associate editor Kamala Chandrakant wanted to portray Draupadi as a woman of sharp intellect, questioning the actions of her husbands (Gangadhar 1988). This challenged the typical portrayal of Hindu wives as meek and traditional in the series and thus jeopardized a financially proven formula. Ms. Chandrakant informed me in a telephone interview that she left the company due to concerns over its representation of women and Muslims. In my view, a multiplicity of intended messages can result from such tensions between multiple authors over the constitution of "Indianness" and between the creative and economic processes.

The third aspect is ethnographic and focuses on the audience. I perceive *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books as "public culture" in Appadurai's and Breckenridge's sense of the term as describing not a *type* of cultural phenomenon but a *zone* of cultural debate; they are contestatory in character due to the contradictions between the national and transnational cultural processes they embody (Breckenridge 1995). In viewing comics as public culture, this project builds upon previous scholarship which has demonstrated that gender, race, sexuality, and class can imply radically different practices of pleasurable reading and viewing (Mulvey 1989, Radway 1984), and that the practices of marginalized groups can involve strategies of alternative readings, resistance, and co-optation (Staiger 1992, hooks 1994, Mankekar 1999). My focus is on the subjective experience of reading/viewing comics and the different sorts of pleasure, desire, and agency it entails. For instance, one reader might read *Rabindranath Tagore* (no. 548, 1977) as an example of Hindu-Muslim solidarity, for in one panel Hindus and Muslims are shown together protesting the British partitioning of Bengal along communal lines. However, another reader might instead see it as a token nod to political correctness that does not compensate for the general absence of modern Indo-Muslim figures or the widespread depiction of Muslims as the invading, conquering "other." Similarly, a female reader might engage traditional, self-sacrificing heroines such as Sita

and Savitri as female role models, or might instead favor independent women who forged roles for themselves in the male-dominated public realm such as the Rani of Jhansi or Sultana Razia.

I will incorporate audience reception theory and utilize ethnographic interviews of comic book consumers within India and the American diaspora to discern how the ideology of these comics is negotiated and thus expose the many layers of influence in an individual's or interpretive community's construction of identities. Specifically, I will interview urban middle-class consumers in northern and southern India, both Hindu and Muslim, male and female, in order to explore the intersections of religion, gender, ethnicity, class, and nationalism in the zone of public culture. Additionally, I will interview middle-class members of the South Asian diaspora in America to examine how these comics are reinterpreted in the process of negotiating hybrid identities and the extent to which the knowledge of the topics in *Amar Chitra Katha* derives from these comics rather than from more "traditional" sources not often available to the diaspora. I hope to demonstrate that comics provide insight not only into the ways in which colonial and nationalist discourses are engendered, but also into how competing transnational ideologies are intertwined in this medium, thereby leaving open the possibility of multiple and even subversive readings.

Significance of Project: This project is a unique study of a genre of Indian public culture which will be of interest to scholars in several fields. First, it will be an important contribution to the study of public culture in India, long dominated by studies of the film industry. As Appadurai and Breckenridge have argued, the contours of the media boom in India are barely understood, and studies of various media technologies are necessary as each has distinctive capabilities and interacts differently with older modes of organizing and disseminating information. Hawley and Pritchett are the only scholars who have studied Indian comics, and that only in brief. In their textual and production-oriented studies, Hawley and Pritchett agree that these comics present India as a multicultural nation and are sensitive to marginalized communities. Although these comics do insert didactic lessons on the "goodness" of religious minorities and outcastes, I believe that there is an overarching nationalist ideology that is not necessarily counterbalanced by such imposed themes, and that such themes may not be passively accepted by consumers. My study will provide

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a good base for further consideration of the roles of print culture, allowing the uniqueness of Indian comics as a medium for identity formation to be explored so that they may then be located in the wider, intertextual context of public culture, both in India and transnationally.

My project will also contribute significantly to the field of religious studies by exploring how public culture alters the circulation of religious symbols in Indian communities, by examining the place of religion in identity formation, and by investigating how the legacy of the past is recast to explain the present. This project will also be of value to scholars of visual history and literature, as my work will consider the boundaries of literary and visual theory by simultaneously engaging both audience response and the authorial function, viewing art and literature as spaces in which identity, difference, and cultural value are produced and contested. Furthermore, I will contribute to the study of print culture in these two fields, as my project will involve an analysis of the ways in which western products and forms shaped Indian print culture as a result of the colonial project. Finally, this project will be valuable to scholars interested in gender studies, as I will employ feminist scholarship and engage feminist concerns throughout each phase. Increasingly, comic books are receiving a serious place of study in the west (cf. Napier 1996, Schodt 1983). My project will allow India to occupy a place in these discussions, establishing foundations for further research which will bring India's comics into the discourse about the global community.

Qualifications and Timetable: To complete this study I seek funding for an eight month stay in India. The majority of this time will be spent in Mumbai at the *Amar Chitra Katha* office where I will observe the creative processes, from the first conceptualizations of issues to the final printings. I will also examine the *Amar Chitra Katha* archives, studying the comics and placing all of the titles in their original chronological order (new copyrights are given each time they are periodically reissued), tracing their evolution over time. Anant Pai has welcomed me to observe these processes and interview the writers and editors at the studio, including Subba Rao (editor) and Shri Ram Waeerkar (artist). However, as much of the writing and drawing is done on a freelance basis, I will also need to spend several months traveling to Calcutta to meet with Souren Roy (artist), to Hyderabad to meet with Chandu Mirge (artist), to Kerala to meet with Mohandas Menon (artist),

and finally to Chennai to meet with Kamala Chandrakant (former associate editor). While conducting open-ended interviews with these individuals, I will also take the opportunity to establish contact with consumers of the comics in these cities to conduct initial interviews. I plan to seek out a core group of approximately 25 individual consumers in Mumbai (of different gender, age, and religion) with whom I can conduct more extensive interviews. I would like to affiliate myself with the University of Delhi, as this association will allow me to contact feminist scholars such as Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Roy, who would provide valuable input into my project.

I am qualified to conduct this project for several reasons. First, for my master's thesis I analyzed the literary and visual content of *Amar Chitra Katha* in order to argue that the modern Indian identity constructed by these comics parallels Hindu nationalist discourse in several ways: in the makeup of the Indian (male) citizen and the impact of religion on citizenship; in the use of mythology in the construction of ideal gender role models and oppositional "others"; and in the visual employment of ritual fetish objects (such as the saffron flag). My dissertation will extend beyond the issue of Hindu nationalism, exploring the larger question of identity formation within public culture as a transnational, intertextual process. Second, I have studied Hindi and Urdu, as well as Sanskrit, throughout my graduate career. By the time of the award period I will have completed eleven semesters of Hindi and Urdu. Additionally, I attended the AIIS Summer Hindi Program in Udaipur, Rajasthan. This language training will allow me to conduct interviews in Hindi with those people who are more comfortable conversing in Hindi than in English. Third, as my transcripts demonstrate, my coursework covers the range of South Asian civilization, religion, and disciplinary approaches that I will employ, including several courses in gender studies. Finally, I have been in communication for the past year with Anant Pai and Kamala Chandrakant, and both have agreed to interviews and offered to help me in my research.

After spending eight months in India carrying out this research, I will return to the U.S. to conduct additional research within the diaspora community (two to three months), and plan to complete my dissertation by summer 2003. I intend to share the results of this research with my colleagues in India, and will seek publication for my dissertation in the U.S. as well as in India.