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Ideological History, Contested Culture, and the Politics of Representation in *Amar Chitra Katha*

Abstract

The evolution of culture and societies through the course of history is not *a priori* but is discursively constructed by a constellation of beliefs and myths and is shaped by different ideological institutions. This paper addresses the historical narratives of *Amar Chitra Katha* (from now on *ACK*), the first indigenous children's comics in India, which began publishing in 1967. Despite a growing body of research on the media landscape in postcolonial India, Indian children's media culture continues to be underrepresented in the field of history and popular culture. When we engage with the world of comics and graphic novels, we realize how it shapes, and is shaped by, not just the minds of individuals but also the collective consciousness of communities and their (un)sung histories. *ACK* has been an important cultural institution that has played a significant role in defining, for several generations of Indian readers, what it means to be Hindu and Indian. In the process, the comics tradition seems to portray a delimited world view of India, often erasing non-Hindu subjects and lower caste strata of the society from India's history.

While the research will focus on reformist and revisionist impulses that *ACK* carries, it will also engage in the way these historical parables of India are narrated, the stories that are chosen to be told, the faces and the voices that are prioritized (or obliterated) for the purpose, and the collaboration of literary and visual image on which they rely to accomplish their re-presentation of history. Thus, the paper seeks to address the politics of representation and the symbolic significance of the visual representation of different historical figures and events throughout the history of India. The historical representations of this comic book tradition render *ACK* a crucial resource to understand paradigm shift in the ways the nation imagines itself.

1. Introduction

The evolution of culture and societies through history is not *a priori* or given but is discursively produced within a constellation of discourses—cultural beliefs and national myths, in particular—and is shaped by different ideological institutions. The narration of "history" is, thereby, consequent upon the expression of different ideologies. It is quite interesting to note how the changing modes of representation of the past—ranging from cave paintings to digital storytelling—have refracted history through their own prism of ideologies, more so since the twentieth century world's transition into modernity. Thus, visual communication remains an indispensable medium of expression that has remained discreetly efficient even while the technical means of its circulation and reproduction have radically altered. While considering the above concerns, this paper addresses the comic book tradition of *Amar Chitra Katha* — the first indigenous children's comics to be published in 1967 postcolonial India, and the manner in which it has brought Indian history to life. *ACK*'s idiosyncrasies lie in its ability to narrate stories through indigenous or mythographic prisms.

Translated from Hindi as "Immortal Picture Stories," *Amar Chitra Katha*, a brainchild of Anant Pai, has been known for the representation of Indian history, historical figures, and regional folktales in the form of graphic narratives. In its inception, *ACK* portrayed a delimited world view of India in terms of Hindu religious nationalism, often erasing non-Hindu subjects and lower caste strata of the society from India's historic and religious fabric. *ACK* is an important cultural institution that has played a significant role in defining, for several generations of readers, what it means to be Hindu and Indian. Drawn from Hindu mythology, the first heroes of *ACK* were Hindu gods and goddesses like Krishna, Durga and Rama. However, later in the 1970s, historical Indian figures were added to into the mix, including several warrior kings and freedom fighters, ranging from Akbar and Shivaji to Bhagat Singh and Mahatma Gandhi. Thus, *ACK*'s efforts towards inclusive Indian nationalism seem to be a recent phenomenon, which cannot go unnoticed. By delving into the politics of representation, this paper examines visionary icons and leaders who have marked important turnings in India's history and how they are couched in the larger social, cultural, and ideological national imagery. While considering some of the national figures as case study, this research delves

into the literary historical epochs of *ACK*, locating its graphic tradition within the broader paradigm of historical narratives in popular culture.

Over the last few decades, the series of *ACK* have been considered not merely as entertainment product, but as foundational texts for the religious and national education of young readers. The profound significance of these comics in the everyday lives of the readers remains the pivot of this research. In this context, an entire raft of questions seems evocative: as a cultural comment on history, what are the politics of *ACK*? How was it accepted in evolving postcolonial Indian society? How does popular imagination of historical events and personages, even through comic books, contribute to shaping contemporary India? Although sharing a rich narrative corpus can arguably evoke a sense of (supposed) indigenous myths, collective tradition, and national history linking many generations of India, does the mechanical reproduction (cf. Walter Benjamin) of these historical as well as oral narrative traditions eliminate actual correspondence among the target readers owing to a different mode of production?

This research attempts to document and explore these questions by analyzing different historical personages, viz. Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Rani Padmini of Chittor, Queen of Jhansi, and B.R. Ambedkar. The historical representations in *ACK* render it a crucial resource to understand paradigm shifts in the way the nation imagines itself, and the way it has educated whole generations of Indian children, both native and expatriate, on mythology, folklore, history, and other aspects of Indian culture. However, this paper highlights how the representations of religion and gender in these comics are neither inclusive nor egalitarian. Further, it emphasizes how *ACK*'s reliance on hegemonic "original" versions of epic tales underscores the patriarchal, racist, and casteist ideologies of contemporary Hindu nationalism in India (McLain).

Despite a growing body of research on the media landscape in postcolonial India, Indian children's media culture continues to be underrepresented in the field of history and popular memory. And yet, when we engage with the world of comics and graphic novels, we realize how it shapes, and is shaped by, not just the minds of individuals but also collective consciousness of communities and their (un)sung histories. While this research focuses on reformist and revisionist impulses that *ACK* carries, it also draws attention to the way these historical parables of India are narrated, the stories that are chosen to be told, the faces

and the voices that are prioritized (or obliterated) for the political purpose of peddling a dominant rightwing ideology, and the collaboration of literary and visual image on which they rely to accomplish their re-presentation of history. Thus, this paper seeks to address the politics of representation and the symbolic significance of the visual representation of different historical figures and events across different times and places in India's history. A sustained concern in this account is with the historical representations of *ACK*—how the narrative highlights certain aspects while negating others. For a major part in the early series of *ACK*, it could be felt that the founder editor Anant Pai revolutionized children's entertainment by interweaving it with India's historical narratives. However, he also altered religious education for children, predominantly in the shades and hues of Hindu religious education, largely omitting religious minorities in India like Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs. Thus, examining *ACK* remains crucial, on one hand, when looking into the historical parables shared in the visual-textual format; on the other hand, it remains vital to understand the paradigm shifts in the ways a nation is imagined.

2. Background: The Phenomenon of *Amar Chitra Katha*

Amar Chitra Katha, a leading historical comics-book series in India, enjoys a ubiquitous presence among the urban middle-class in India and the South Asian diaspora. Founded in 1967 by Editor-in-Chief Anant Pai, *ACK* has sold over 100 million issues consisting of nearly 500 different titles, translated into 20 Indian languages, including Assamese, Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, and Tamil, among others, and several international languages like Mandarin, French, Portuguese, and Taiwanese. Pai worked as an editor at Indrajal Comics in the early 1960s—the company that popularized Western comics in India since its inception in 1964. Thus, *ACK* was founded as a reaction to what was perceived by Pai as an excess of foreign influences trickling into the consumption of popular culture by Indian youth. Pai realized how characters like Superman, Phantom, Mandrake, and the like, operated in a mostly Western milieu, while drawing upon colonial issues and playing out their adventures in colonial locales like Western Africa, India, and China, to name a few, howsoever excruciatingly represented.

The popularity of The Phantom and Mandrake clearly indicated the mass-market appeal of comic books to the Indian popular culture sensibilities.

However, instead of creating more Western heroes, Pai, by invading the colonial heart of darkness, reversed the entire structural paradigm of comic books in India. Thus, *ACK* was founded on the principle of educating the young readers of India about Indian myths and mythology, religion and history, and nation and national figures. As a matter of fact, Pai envisaged *ACK* as a means of teaching Indian themes to the Western educated Indian children who were more attentive to Western history, supposedly at the expense of Indian history and mythology. Accordingly, these comics now could be loosely grouped into two categories: mythological and historical. The mythological ones, including narratives from classical Indian epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and various Puranic stories, were retold in a child-friendly way. On the other hand, the historical ones added several years later, feature regional personalities to promote national integration, according to Pai, by teaching people in one region about the culture and history of another.

Initially, the series of *ACK* books were merely restricted to mythological characters, recreating the stories of deities from classical narratives like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Subsequently the series expanded its focus to include historical figures, ranging from notable kings and queens like such as Shivaji, Padmini, Lakshmibai, to more modern leaders and luminaries like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and B.R. Ambedkar. As Pai stated, *ACK* brings to life personages and events from the forgotten pages of Indian history. Despite this paradigmatic shift to favour the depiction of real-life historical figures, *ACK* clearly appropriated the comics medium popularized by American writers and artists that Indrajal had been selling to the Indian audiences for years.

Amar Chitra Katha presents complex historical facts and intricate mythology in a format that appeals to children. The stories not only entertain, but also provide a fitting introduction to India's cultural heritage. In a country so vast and varied, the series also serves as a medium of national integration by introducing young readers to the rich cultural diversity of the country and highlighting the achievements of local heroes (Pai 1899, inside cover).

In one of his early interviews with Karline McLain, Pai mentions that his chief concern is weaning young Indian readers away from Western culture, American comics and other popular culture, back into what, according to him, was a much healthier moral, social and cultural environment: "This is the trouble with our educational system. Children are getting alienated from their

own culture" (McLain 2005, 47). Thus, although *ACK* as a visual narrative form is different from its Western counterpart, it does apply some of the formal conventions of Western comics in its visuals. An in-depth exploration of *ACK*'s intertextuality reflects how it merges different pre-novelistic conventions of India along with some visual and formal conventions of Western comics to create an effect that is common to the existing comic books tradition, yet unique due to its focus on the immediate historical context of India. In this vein, *ACK* as a historical narrative form significantly contributes to the production and consumption of essentially traditional elements—signified by the word *katha* which translates to "storytelling," yet, at once contemporary—reflected by the contemporaneity of the content it represents.

3. *Amar Chitra Katha*: A Dialogue between Tradition and Contemporaneity

Although Indian mythology—a rich source of delightful children's stories—is what *ACK* initially focused on, over time its role gradually broadened to cover aspects of contemporary Indian history. In so doing, *ACK* has duly appropriated the pedagogic implementations and possibilities of Western comic books while instigating a dialogue between tradition (religion, myth, and mythology) and contemporaneity (national figures and modern-day heroes). By virtue of being comic books, a dominant form of popular culture, *ACK* already had what Dorfman and Mattelart state as "a biologically captive, pre-determined audience" (1975, 30). Hero worship remains an inevitable part of the relationship between an adolescent and the character of his/her comic book—an established norm duly appropriated by *ACK* for mass propagation of its ideology. Placed within this context, hero worship is used for manoeuvring the child's natural affinity towards the historical and national figures that Pai wanted Indian children to be familiar with. Examining the local and the national in *ACK*, Nandini Chandra observes how 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 2008, 6).

Having built upon this model of the "Indian hero," while taking benefit of the sales potential brought about by the latent indignation of the colonized Hindu, the crucial question is, what actually constitutes "Indianness." While

ACK has constructed a legendary past of India for impressionable generations of Indian middle-class children, it has also indelibly projected an Indian identity wedded with prejudiced norms. Since its debut in 1967, *ACK* on one hand has been reinforcing many of the problematic tenets of Indian society by tying together masculinity, fair skin, dominance of the high caste, and Hinduism. On the other hand, by often erasing non-Hindu subjects from India's history and religious fabric, *ACK* reinforced many problematic aspects of Hindu nationalism, tenets that partially drive the platform of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, currently criticized both domestically and internationally for policies targeting religious minorities and lower castes.

A steady attempt to construct a hegemonic Indian identity could be evidently noticed in the decades following independence from the British in 1947. Despite being the world's largest secular democracy, this hegemonic concept of "Indianness" marginalized the non-Hindus as a religious and cultural outsider while privileging the Hindu upper castes, and relegated Indian women to the limited traditional roles delineated by the patriarchal Indian society. In the process, the cultural and moral high ground of what can be considered "Indian" has been strongly projected as Hinduised. Considering that Pai's intention was to reinvigorate the young readership's interest in their cultural identity, *ACK*, in many of its issues, played an active role in perpetuating that identity. Moreover, *ACK*'s stories about gods, goddesses, kings, and historical legends have often associated light-skinned masculine figures with strength, virtues, compassion, and upper caste status, whereas dark skin, in the comic book illustrations, has primarily been coded through the semiotics of violence, brutality, and low caste status.

This paper, then, highlights the way *ACK* deploys religion, mythology, and history, on one hand, and nation and national identity on the other, in conjunction with words and images of the comic book medium to create and recreate the dominant ideology. Many of the subsequent issues of *ACK* exclude the intersectionality of marginalized non-Hindu religious subjects and Hindu lower castes as cultural "outsiders" in its politics of representation. While the graphic narrative has educated an entire generation of Indian children on mythology, folklore, history, and other such aspects of Indian culture, this paper delves into how these graphic representations of history, religion, and women in *ACK* are neither inclusive nor egalitarian. Furthermore, it could be observed that *ACK*'s reliance on hegemonic "original" versions of historical narratives underscores the patriarchal, racist, and casteist ideologies of contemporary

Hindu nationalism in India. As noted by McLain, "hegemonic forms are always in flux: dominant ideologies do not just exist passively but are created and recreated amidst ongoing debate" (2005, 22). In a similar vein, *ACK*, a ubiquitous form of public culture familiar to an enormous section of the educated Indian population, practically creates shared shorthand for its conceptualization of Indian history and mythology while simultaneously functioning as a platform for debates surrounding that very conceptualization. Thus, the research here delves into the multifarious roles played by *ACK* and the functions it plays in shaping the public culture. Addressing the concerns of contested history and gender, *chitrakathas* (or picture stories), viz. *Dayananda: His Strength Was His Virtue* (1976), *Padmini: A Tale of Love and Honour* (1973), *Rani of Jhansi: The Flame of Freedom* (1974) and *Babasaheb Ambedkar: He Dared to Fight* (1979), would be analysed within the ambit of this proposed research.

4. Swami Dayananda Saraswati, "His Strength Was His Virtue"

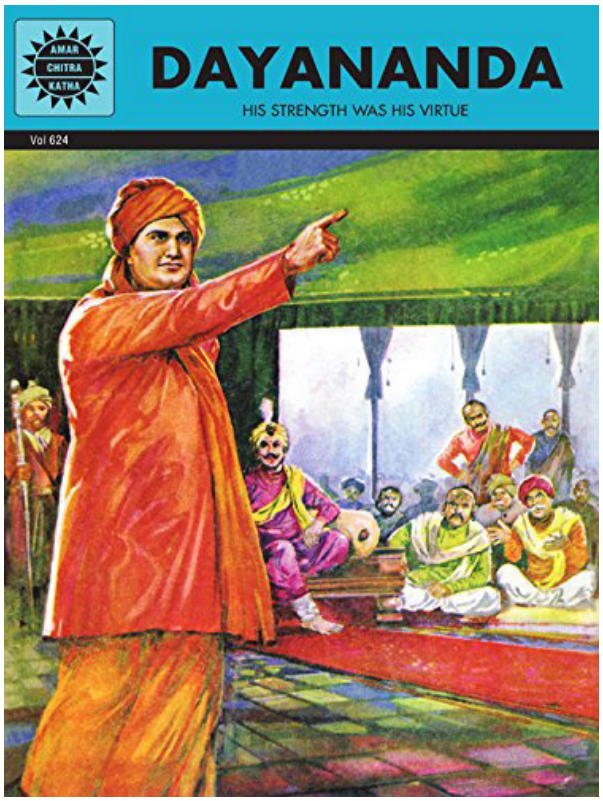

Fig. 4.1. Cover Illustration, *Dayananda*, Anant Pai, 1967

Hindu nationalism owes its genesis to Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883). The Arya Samaj—a monotheistic Hindu reform institution—founded by Dayananda in 1875 pervaded the entire social, intellectual, and cultural scenario of the late nineteenth century northern India. Established on the motto of "कृण्वन्तो वश्विमार्यम्", translated to "make the world noble," the primary goal of Arya Samaj was to foster one's self-identity while promoting physical, spiritual, and social wellbeing of all. This ethical framework, although it helped to spread education and bring about social reforms, seemed to be based on exclusionary policies meant only for the upper caste, Hindu privileged society. While the issue of *ACK* on Dayananda emphasized his reform works for the revival of the lost ideals of India—symbolized by his slogan "Back to the Vedas"—the comic book turned a blind eye to his censure of various non-Hindu religions and beliefs. Historians argue the ideologies perpetuated by Arya Samaji played a crucial role in the later development of increasingly militaristic, right-wing Hindu nationalist organizations like the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS),[1] among others (Krishnamurti 2004, 116). Given this background, it is curious to note why *ACK* chose to eulogize Dayananda in its comic book. Explicitly stating Swami Dayananda Saraswati's reformist stance, *ACK* in the "Introduction" states:

> Swami Dayananda was born at a time when our country was under foreign domination. Most of the people were steeped in ignorance and poverty. Hypocrisy and corruption flourished in the name of religion . . . Prejudices of creed, caste and community had corroded the social cohesion and the wily and the wicked were ruling the roost. (Pai 1967, inside front cover)

It could be noted that Dayananda Saraswati's message struck a deep chord through its ambiguous stance. On one hand, he stood for sharp criticism of child marriage and taboos on widow remarriage. On the other hand, he propagated existing Hindu practices such as idolatry and polytheism and supported Brahmin predominance and the varna system (multiplicity of castes based on birth, viz. Brahmins, Kshatrias, Vaishyas, Sudras), along with an equally strong assertion of the superiority of a purified Vedic Hinduism

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1 Founded in 1925, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, often abbreviated as RSS, is an Indian rightwing Hindu nationalist volunteer organization. RSS has been often accused of plotting assassinations, stoking riots against religious minorities, and indulging in acts of terrorism. For further details, cf. Kelkar.

over all the other faiths including Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism. In fact, many of the successor organizations to the Arya Samaj did not shy away from explicitly blaming the Muslims and other religious minorities for India's ensuing political problems. It cannot be denied that Dayananda Saraswati played a crucial role in the upliftment of women, primarily widows and those belonging to lowly castes, laying the initial groundwork for Mahatma Gandhi's later projects (Pai 1967, inside front cover); and yet, the innocuously depoliticized way in which these reforms are depicted in *ACK* are partial in its representation. Uma Chakravarti, Radha Kumar, and others have opined that reformers of this period who spoke for women were not necessarily progressive in their political beliefs (Chakravati 1990, 245). In this vein, the incident portrayed in *ACK* where Dayananda gave *janeu* or sacred thread to women and Dalit[2]—as a means of denting the caste system—remains crucial. While the comic book highlighted the efficacy of Dayananda's ideology, the homogenizing tendencies of his ideals are not duly depicted in the text. Elucidating this further, Uma Chakravarty states:

> According to Dayananda, during Vedic times, society recognized only varnas based on the skills and accomplishments of an individual and not a system of hereditary endogamous castes. He, however, recommended that people marry within their varna to maintain social order, and was primarily interested in the religious education of young women in order to prepare them to do their "duty" as "mothers of the nation." (Chakravarti 1990, 256-257)

Contrary to the details mentioned by Chakravarti, *ACK* states, "For women to acquire that place of honour, they must get proper education. Give up Purdah! Give up superstitions" (Pai 1967, 21). While this statement contributes to the commemoration of Dayananda Saraswati as an advocate of women's rights, it is equally important to consider how he also recognized Purdah and "superstitions" as essentially Islamic imports that debased the "purity" of Hindu culture. While it appealed to the Hindus to reject the outward aspects of European culture and emulate their basic values such as hard work and discipline, he was, however, also a staunch believer in the traditional varna system. Arya Samaj was deliberately founded on a

2 Dalit is a name for people belonging to the lowest caste in India, characterised as "untouchable".

Brahminical worldview and held that every Hindu mind needs to be saturated with the consciousness of being not just an Indian, but also a Hindu. Similarly, the establishment of the Dayananda Anglo-Vedic (DAV) educational institutions, although including a study of both English and Western culture, had as its sole intention to take forwards the aims and objectives of the Arya Samaj. In the process, DAV, akin to Arya Samaj, stood to induce a sense of common language and religion.

In this 32-page *ACK* comic book, it is not until page 26 that Dayanand Swami establishes the Arya Samaj. "Arya Samaj" for Dayananda "means the society of virtuous men. We must all unite without distinction of caste or creed. Our objectives are to impart true knowledge, to bring about social justice and to achieve freedom from alien rule" (Pai 1967, 26). For Dayananda Saraswati, Aryans were the "original" Indians and were the only practitioners of the Vedic religion of his "Golden Age," conjecturally linking both Indian cultural and religious traditions. Quite interestingly, the foundation of the Arya Samaj anticipated the establishment of the Benares Hindu University (BHU) in 1915, which was meant to be a "modern institution with a religio-cultural agenda" (Kumar 2005, 10). It is noteworthy that the BHU was not a government institution, but a community project generated over the years through the collective effort of a vast network of upper-caste, landed, and feudal interests which were spread all over the United Provinces, the Central Provinces, and Bihar (Kumar 2005, 10).

In this sense, Hindu revivalism was based on rejection of both the secular and the modern. Dayananda's version of India was based on a blind aping of the West and nationalist spirit – reformed, rational, and above all, founded on the Vedic values. Thus, it could be reasonably argued that Dayananda advocated this new "creed" of Indian nationalism based on largely Hindu consciousness. In this regard, the liaison of the Arya Samaj to the Mahasabha, and later, the RSS movements, cannot be overlooked either. *ACK*, however, appears to consciously position Dayananda Saraswati in line with other nationalist heroes of India as chiefly in opposition to British rule, couching his Hindu reformist agenda as a response to colonization. This makes it possible for the readers to miss the Hindu-centric effects of the Arya Samaj and its anti-Muslim sentiments.

5. Padmini of Chittor, "A Tale of Love and Honour"

Fig. 5.1. Cover Illustration, *Padmini*, Anant Pai, 1973

The legend of Padmini of Chittor remains a foundational myth of the Hindu nation. *ACK*'s *Padmini*, published in 1973, integrally intertwines the purity of the nation and its women, and in turn, proposes her as a symbol of feminine heroism and spirituality. Padmini, who was also known as Padmavati, legendary Queen of Chittor (Mewar) and wife of King Ratan Sen, forms a foundational myth of the Hindu nation and Indian womanhood.

In the nationalist discourses of post-Independence India, the 1947 partition is marked as a national failure wherein Indian Muslims have been permanently marked as the saboteurs of the country and its ideals, and in extension, suspected of extra-territorial loyalties. The legend of Padmini, in this vein, is instrumental in reawakening the subject-citizen to the potential danger to one's family and nation:

> . . . the bardic legend of Padmini and Alauddin [Al-ud-din Khilji] . . . has acquired the status of historically authentic event not only in what is called popular perception but also among the articulate middle class intelligentsia. The transformation of a legend into a historical event

gives a fair indication of the historical perspective which is imposed upon scattered pieces of experiences. Alauddin [Al-ud-din], apart from being an archetype of the ruthless aggressors, also becomes an epitome of a furiously libidinous Muslim. (Agarwal 2018, 35-36)

The formation of Pakistan through partitioning of "Bharat Mata," translating to "Mother India," has been a recurring metaphor to reflect on the body of the pure Hindu woman, a site of negotiation where gender, politics, and nation merge into one another. The multiple gang rapes and abductions of Hindu women during the 1947 partition have been regarded as a stigma upon the national honour, thereby demanding a greater vigilance on the part of the state to avoid such "rupture of the nation" again (Bhutalia 2017, 67). In this vein, Urvashi Butalia writes: "The Indian state was regularly assailed for its failure to protect its women and to respond to Pakistan, the aggressor state, in the language that it deserved" (2017, 67).

In this context, reference to the cover page of the RSS mouthpiece *Organiser* (August 14, 1947) seems crucial. The illustration consisted of the Indian map superimposed with the figure of a woman—representing "Mother India"—with her severed limbs, and Jawaharlal Nehru is portrayed holding the bloody knife—symbolically making him responsible for this gory affair. RSS' call in the aftermath of the 1947 partition was first to alert the country against the enemy within, and supposedly, the one that did not share India's cultural and spiritual inheritance, and second, had their loyalties to Pakistan—a subtle hint towards the Muslim population of India.

The significance of *ACK*'s Padmini could be read in the mentioned context of the partition of India:

In the history of India Padmini of Chittor holds a very prominent position. She was a perfect model of ideal Indian womanhood. The values cherished by her were threatened by Ala-ud-din Khilji, the mighty Afghan King of Delhi. A lesser woman would not have been able to face Al-ud-din. But Padmini was not an ordinary woman. She faced her problems with exceptional courage, a living example of victorious womanhood. (Pai 1973, "Introduction")

Al-ud-din Khilji, as expounded in the narrative, is the "outsider" threatening the values cherished by Padmini, and by extension, the nation. The narrative, thereby, depicts the clash between two value systems: first, honour and purity of women, and second, the values of the nation. Represented as a tale of lust and war, *Padmini* centers on the lascivious Al-ud-din's lust for the Rani Padmini, the

beautiful queen of King Ratan Singh, and the latter's defeat in the war, which leads to a great betrayal that continues to haunt the post-partition national imaginary (Sreenivas 2010, 187). Evidently, the narration in *ACK* is double-edged: on one hand, it glorifies the Hindu ruler's pacifism; on the other hand, it is depicted in stark contrast with the Muslim ruler's deceit and debauchery. It could be noticed that *ACK*'s effort through Padmini's legend is to evoke the "dishonour" wrought upon Hindu women through abduction and rape by the Muslim "traitors" within the larger nationalistic partition narrative of India. In this context, Bhutalia states, "It is also the tolerance—hitherto important—which has rendered the Hindu male incapable of protecting women" (Qtd. in Sreenivas 2010, 188). Quoting from *Organize*, she further elucidates:

> . . . while other people take pride in savage campaigns launched by their ancestors for enslavement, exploitation and forcible proselytisation of their brother human beings, India, pregnant with the wisdom of her illustrious seers and true to her hoary culture, remembers only the key days of her glory when the impact of her glorious civilisation was felt far and wide. (Qtd. in Sreenivas 2010, 188)

Evident in the cover illustration of the comic book *Padmini*, one can verily witness Rani Padmini's self-sacrifice after Ratan Sen's death and defeat to avoid being enslaved by Al-u-din—a powerful image evoking women's bodies as a nationalist trope. Notably, the author of Padmini, Yagya Sharma, states how the values embodied by Padmini should be reviewed with regard to history, as using contemporary a value system as a yardstick to judge historical events would be inappropriate. The author seems to further believe the values of *sati* (an erstwhile practice in India whereby a widow was supposed to self-immolate on to her husband's funeral pyre) and *jauhar* (an act of mass self-immolation by women when facing defeat during a war) do not lie in the mere action of the women, but in the fact that they were prepared to take such an extreme step of self-annihilation in defense of their principles and morals—an idea which perpetuates a reductionist portrayal of women couched in culture and tradition.

Women's self-immolation, both in the form of *jauhar* and the more commonly practiced *sati*, has a painful history. The battle to give women rights to live even after the death of their husband was a hard fought one. Even though *sati* was banned by the colonial government in 1861, it was much later, in 1988, with The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act of 1987 that the law against this practice was made more stringent. Thus, the disturbing glorification of *jauhar*

in this comic book series, indefinitely, perpetuates a wrong sense of honour, which cannot go unremarked upon.

Furthermore, "othering" the Muslim identity in this comic series remains another seminal issue. In the late 1960s and 1970s, the critique of "appeasement policies" towards the minority Muslim population was renewed in the Nehruvian state. This, in turn, is seen as giving impetus to anti-nationalist parties like the Muslim league, Jamaat-i-Islami and Itehad-ul-Musalmeen that were accused of fostering "communal chauvinism" and loyalties towards Pakistan. Analyzed against this backdrop, the rhetoric of Al-ud-din's conceit towards Ratan Sen in the comic series serves as a major indicator of the misplaced faith that leaves one's women and one's nation vulnerable to the enemy: "Keep your nobility to yourself. Now I shall have Padmini with your cooperation" (Pai 1973, 22).

Despite his high ideals, King Ratan Sen emerges as a weak character in the comic book. When Ratan Sen's defeat is certain, Rani Padmini's decision to commit *jauhar* to escape dishonour by annihilating herself in the fire with the other Rajput women makes her a much-venerated figure of among Hindu women. As she says: "No sacrifice is too big to save one's honour!" (Pai 1973, 22). This act of Padmini which is more often read as her efforts at self-preservation is, in turn, transmuted to the great sacrifice in the nationalist imagination. Her sacrifice is meant to incite the upper caste Hindu male into action to protect the "threatened" nation—a metaphor where nation and women's bodies become one and all. Kumkum Sangari, analyzing such incitement of male honour through the voice (or, in this case, the memory) of a woman, notes:

> . . . there is an obsessive re-enactment and reclaiming of male honour [through such incitement], which first plays on male fears of dispossession as well as on women's anxieties, by displaying all Hindu woman as past and future victims of sexual violation, and then equates male sexual honour with the projected Hindu Rasht ra itself. 'Masculinity' acquires a single axis of social determination. The ability of Hindu men to protect their women, in a single universalisation of the claim to martial valour, becomes the basis of their right to self-government and their claim to monopolise a nation (Sangari 1989, 877).

Padmini's sacrifice, in fact, becomes a part of the national collective memory, wherein citizenship for an Indian who is a Muslim becomes an impossible institution. Befuddled Al-ud-din's reaction to Padmini's *jauhar* remains a crucial part of the final panel in this issue, where he asks Raghav Chetan, a traitor from Ratan Sen's court: "But why did they kill themselves?" (Pai 1973, 32). Raghav Chetan's reply

proves revealing: "Your Majesty! You will never understand" (Pai 1973, 32)—an indication that Al-ud-din is unable to comprehend the logic of Padmini's self-sacrifice since he has never witnessed a similar code of honour among the women of his own community. Through this narratorial move, Rani Padmini displaces not merely Al-ud-din but also Muslim women, and, by extension, lower caste women outside the ambit of the nation. The virtue of a woman, so unquestionably supreme within the value system of a Rajput like Ratan Sen, is an unfamiliar concept to Al-ud-din. Images of the voluptuous women in different poses of debauchery and servility surrounding Al-ud-din in *ACK* bear testimony to this. As the virtue of the upper-caste Hindu women is developed as the norm of the nation, other non-Hindu and other lower caste women are placed outside the purview of what constitutes ideal Indian womanhood, which would justify their rights over their bodies and foreground their alternative identities.

6. Rani of Jhansi, "The Flame of Freedom"

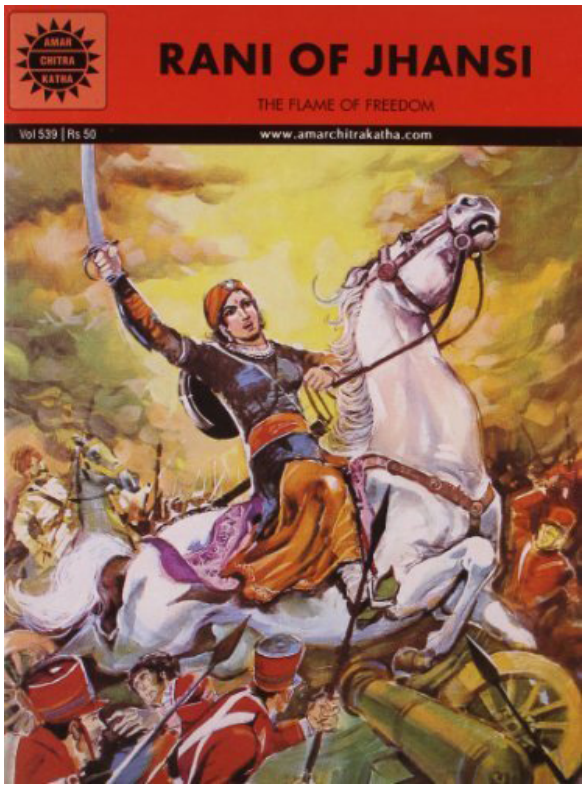

Fig. 6.1. Cover Illustration, *Rani of Jhansi: The Flame of Freedom*, Pai, 1974

Indian mythology is saturated with numerous goddesses as figures of much reverence and worship, yet the widespread understanding of women's role is limited to their domestic confinement. The stereotypical portrayals of women across different genres have rendered them in dichotomic representations: either in a hypersexualized manner while neatly labelling them in pejorative terms or as silent, passive, and meek figures and embodiments of virtues and ideals. It is noteworthy that when Queen Victoria reigned over England during the 1857 rebellion, Indian queens still were rarely entitled to occupy a parallel position of authority—in both British policies and Indian nationalism. Thus, *ACK*'s publication of its issue on Rani of Jhansi in 1974 remains crucial in shaping the mass culture of the young readers, considering how it is couched in the context of emerging new historical realities.

One of the first forays introducing Lakshmibai into the annals of history and popular culture, *ACK*'s depiction of this female warrior is crucial in disrupting the nation's overwhelmingly masculine narrative. Lakshmibai, the Queen of the Maratha princely state of Jhansi (1828-58), was a leading figure of the Indian Rebellion of 1857. A symbol of resistance to the British Raj for the Indian nationalists, she has been celebrated as an epitome of female courage in the country. The *ACK* issue on Rani of Jhansi, evident from the subtitle of the comic book, "The Flame of Freedom" and the accompanied illustration (Fig. 6.1), is reflective of her passion and courage. The figure of Rani of Jhansi, charging her steed through enemy lines, with her sword raised for the next thrust, evidently justifies her name as the Warrior Queen of India.

A harbinger of India's struggle against colonialism, Rani of Jhansi, although she ruled over the small kingdom of Jhansi, aspired to freedom for the whole country from the British Raj. With her wits and force unmatched by the British generals, Lakshmibai, duly portrayed in *ACK*, was a central figure in the great revolt of 1857. A testimony to history, she is one of the few who has been venerated even by her adversaries for her resistance to the British rule. As noted by Partha Chatterjee, Lakshmibai is "doubly articulated as history and metaphor," appreciated by both rebels and oppressors alike (2002, 6). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that her legendary contributions to the Indian Mutiny made her immensely popular in folk tales, poetry, and oral traditions in India as well. The gallantry of Rani of Jhansi is the subject of many folktales and folksongs in Bundelkhand. For instance, Rahi Masoon Raza, in one such story, states:

Nagaha chup huye sab, a gayi bahar Rani
Fauj thi ek sadaf, us mein gauhar Rani
Matla-e-jahad pe hai gairat-e-Akhtar, Rani
Azm-e-paikar mein mardo'n ke barabar Rani

[Suddenly there was silence, here comes the Rani
The army was the oyster, the pearl was the Rani
In the battlefield, you could shame the stars, Rani
In bravery and courage, equal to men is the Rani] (Safvi 2018)

Born as Manikarnika to a Brahmin priest's house in Varanasi, Rani of Jhansi was renamed as Lakshmibai in 1842 after her marriage to Maharaja Gangadhar Rao Newalkar, the 5th King of Jhansi, located in northern India, in the Maratha Empire. After Maharaja Gangadhar Rao died in 1853, Jhansi was annexed by the British under Lord Dalhousie's infamous "Doctrine of Lapse," as the British denied Lakshmibai's adopted son Damodar Rao the right to rule. However, making a virtue out of her necessity, after Lakshmibai was forced out of the Jhansi fort, she relentlessly fought against the undue annexation of her territory by the British: "main apni Jhansi nahin doongi" (translating to "I will not give up my Jhansi"). Rani's story indicates the British discomfort with women who rule, and by extension, with their own Queen Victoria. This historical parable of the warrior Queen of India, on one hand, highlights both the Indian and British discomfort with women's political leadership; on the other hand, it reorders gender structures and disrupts patriarchy's sanctioned categories. The *ACK* issue on Lakshmibai appropriately portrays how this widowed queen, dressed in male attire, opposed the British forces. Even though the British forces gained the upper hand, and Lakshmibai was shot at and fell from her horse, the narrative displays her unwavering strength and her daunting courage, portraying her as an individual with an active agency. Rani of Jhansi was a rebel woman, a female warrior, and a monarch at the same time, hence a disruptive figure whose depiction could nonetheless be located within the confinements of domesticity.

In this issue of *ACK*, Rani is romanticized in terms of the utopian ideal of a female, symbolizing freedom, strength, and unmatched strength, yet still placed amidst the centre of the home—the building block of the society. This romantic reconfiguration of Rani relegates her to irrelevance: Rani is metamorphosed into a goddess but not given her deserved position in the

historical and political reality. Even as a female warrior, she is a daughter, a wife, and a mother, before she is a queen and a warrior: the Rani has to hold her home and nation above everything else. It could be thereby mentioned that she is barely uncharacteristic of Indian women whose feet are still grounded within the confinements of her domesticity even as a "heroine of unending fascination, her remaking in new forms transforms the marginalized into a bounded, integrated, and meaningful entity" (Singh 2019).

The female Indian rebel, monarch, and warrior is a disruptive figure, and the representation of this warrior queen is replete with paradox and ambiguity. Often depicted as an idealized character of literature, symbolizing freedom, strength, and the poetic worth of outmatched fights, these romantic figurations relegate the Rani to irrelevance; the Rani is worshipped as a goddess or mother figure, but not given the crucial regard she deserves in historical research and political reality. As daughter, wife, mother, and then queen, the Rani holds the home and nation above all else. Thus, she is hardly anomalous in Indian texts where even as a "heroine of unending fascination, her remaking in new forms transforms the marginalized into a bounded, integrated, and meaningful entity" (Singh 2019).

> It is the precise mobilizing of female icons, such as the Rani of Jhansi, in terms of their "power" that has been undertaken in this project. Thus, gesturing towards the mythically heroic Rani may at first be heard as an inspirational call to the nation's women. Closer reading, however, reveals the extent to which even the historical Rani may be recast as the fictional, poetic, or cinematic configuration of a traditional Indian womanhood that is instead a vehicle for the patriarchal destinies of the nation. Thus, at both colonial and postcolonial junctures, while traditional gender roles are most under scrutiny, the figure of Rani Lakshmi Bai, in equal parts, daughter, wife, mother, and queen, functions as a haven of representation—in which female strength may emerge and yet subside on male identified and male-dominated whims. (Singh 2014, 167)

For the eleven years that Lakshmibai was married to Raja Gangadhar Rao, she remained a mere queen. It was only in the tragic aftermath of her husband's death that the unwarranted denial of her adopted son's claim to the throne hurled her into the beginning of her own odyssey as a diplomat, a leader, and a modernist visionary. Thus, Lakshmibai's depiction, despite her bold stance as a rebel against the British rule, continues to be symbolized as a politically conservative figure: valiant, bold, and fearless, yet reclaimed within the socially sanctioned spheres of domesticity.

7. Babasaheb Ambedkar, "He Dared to Fight"

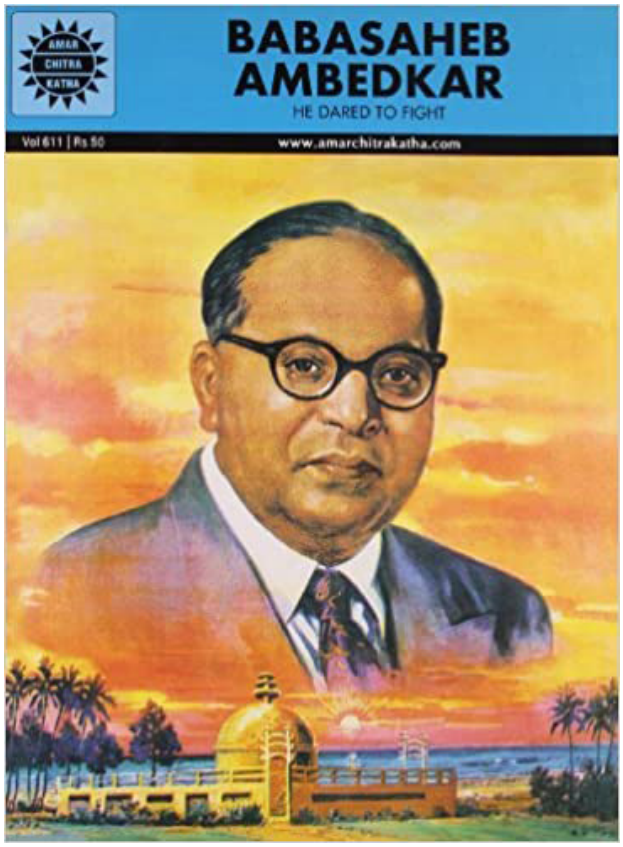

Fig. 7.1. Cover Illustration, *Babasaheb Ambedkar*, Anant Pai, 1979.

Indian politician Babasaheb Ambedkar can be located at the cutting edge of the cultural politics that marked the 1980s. The issue of *ACK* entitled *Babasaheb Ambedkar*[3] attempts to frame his place in Dalit politics to the measures of the nationalist project of modernity and progress. It is crucial to note that this series was republished in 1996 after the anti-Mandal agitation[4] of the early

3 *Babasaheb* is the popular name of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar; he was affectionately called "Bhim" by his sisters. *Babasaheb* is a Marathi word meaning "respected father". Considering Ambedkar's immense struggle for the upliftment of the society at large, particularly for the Dalits, he was called *Babasaheb.*

4 Mandal commission protests of the early 1990s were against reservation of government jobs in India based on the caste, rather than the competence and skills of the candidate.

1990s and the subsequent resurgence of interest in Ambedkar among Dalits and the backward classes. Analysis of Ambedkar's politics brings forth the notes of discordance, both in nationalistic politics and in the constitution of independent India, which challenged the "Hindu" ideal of citizenship and the order of the civil society. Within this context, *ACK* endeavors to shift Ambedkar and his politics onto the terrain of nationalism, modernity, and enlightenment. In fact, by positioning Ambedkar as a pedagogic authority, *ACK* it seeks to homogenize the claims of the upper caste bourgeoisie that reservation[5] (based on caste) would degrade idealism, hamper the spirit of independence, and make the individual "soft." Examining Ambedkar as an allegory of the present times, this series reiterates the nation as a homogenous entity and negates the historical differences of caste that might justify the demand for a separate electorate (as happened in 1932).

ACK's issue on Babasaheb Ambedkar may be viewed as a celebration of the triumph of the human spirit in the most adverse circumstances. A daunting narrative, tracing the progress of one person's journey to enlightenment, the comic book underscores Babasaheb Ambedkar's long-term battle against the markers of oppression, including caste, community, and gender. Depicting Ambedkar's fight against oppression and violence against the lower caste and gender, the narrative identifies those who perpetuate caste oppression, marking them as pre-modern and reactionary. In fact, B.R. Ambedkar's modernist project and his exposure to (Hindu) patriarchy starts quite early in his life. As a child, Ambedkar had to passively accept injustice meted out to him and his community. He had to sit separately in the class and could not drink water from the pot in the school unless someone poured out some for him. He was asked to get down from a bullock cart when the driver found out he was an untouchable. He was stoned by the Brahmins for drawing water from the village well, and so on. In one of the instances, Ambedkar asks his sister, "[b]ut why? What makes us different?" (Pai, *Babasaheb* 7). To this, she replies, "I don't know. That's the way it has been always." Bhim was not satisfied with

5 Based on the provisions in the Constitution of India, Reservation is a system that ensures equal representation of historically marginalized groups, often termed as "socially and economically backward citizens," in education, employment, and politics. It is intended to uplift these communities who have been the target of systematic oppression by the higher castes in Indian society.

his sister's answers" (Pai 1979, 7). However, now one could notice every act of injustice would accelerate Ambedkar's determination and the growth of his basic humanity. Addressing a group of individuals from socially backward classes, Ambedkar says: "It is time we root out of our minds the ideas of high and low. We can attain self-elevation only if we learn self-help and regain our self-respect. Liberty is never gifted away, it is fought for" (Pai 1979, 20).

Ambedkar's long hours of studies until two in the morning in a crowded one-room apartment in which he cohabited with his family, his endless toils at the British Museum Library in London, and many similar struggles remains important to his character development. However, as alleged by Upendra Baxi in "Emancipation as Justice," *ACK* has failed to highlight enough of these personal accounts of Ambedkar's life, the struggles of the student-scholar in particular (1995, 140). Instead, this issue focuses on the social inequalities that in some manner are presented as false consciousness. It suggests the onus is more often placed on the lower caste, left to fight their own battles.

Every outward struggle against the caste system is mostly presented in terms of an extension of the lower castes' inner battle rather than as a socially subversive act because the caste system is something wherein the lower castes are made to believe in their inherent inferiority. Certainly, *ACK* portrays the external factors and antagonists including the priestly classes, caste prejudices, and superstitions. In a striking incident, the comic book shows how Ambedkar leading a crowd of the "depressed classes" to Mahad's municipality tank, which has been legally open for four years but has never been used by the people of the lower castes. The narrative portrays how the crowd followed Ambedkar hesitantly: "Draw water from the tank? Do we dare to do it?" (Pai 1979, 21). The incident duly portrays how by one act of courage, drinking water from the tank with his cupped hands, Ambedkar makes a "miracle" happen: "This gesture had a remarkable effect. Ambedkar had exorcised fear from the mind of his people. Thousands drank water from the public tanks and made history" (Pai 1979, 21).

The incident underscores not merely the remarkable victory of the individual self but also poses an interesting opposition between civil societal equality (the public tank being open to all) and vestiges of the primitive that taint the society. Incensed at being stoned by upper-caste Hindus for drinking water from the public tanks, Ambedkar's followers say to him: "Give us word, Sir, and we shall finish them" (Pai 1979, 22). To this, Ambedkar replies, "No

violence will help. We'll do nothing unlawful. I have given my word that we will agitate peacefully" (Pai 1979, 22). The narrative further informs us that Ambedkar had promised the police that he would keep his people under control and thus "he prevented a bloodbath" (Pai 1979, 22).

However, *ACK* does not highlight Ambedkar's antagonistic attitude towards Mahatma Gandhi and his Harijan Sevak Sangh, which according to Ambedkar "kill[s] the spirit of independence among the untouchables" (Pai 1979, 267). Moreover, Ambedkar's stance at the Round Table Conferences, where he repeatedly presses the point that the depressed classes do not demand the immediate transfer of political power from Britain to the Indian people. In *Babasaheb Ambedkar* the narrative presents the voices of the lower castes as separate grievances while portraying them as a mere suffix to the nationalist demand for freedom:

> The Depressed classes of India also join in the demand for replacement of the British government by a government of the people for the people. . . our wrongs have remained as open sores and they have not been rightened although 150 years of British rule have rolled away. What good is such a government to anybody. (Pai 1979, 24)

Also significant is Gandhi's stamp of approval:

> From the reports that have reached me of your speeches at the First Round Table Conferences, I know you are a patriot of sterling worth. (Pai 1979, 24)

In a way, the establishment of Ambedkar's patriotic credentials in the narrative prepares us for his demand for a separate electorate. When the reader finally encounters this demand, its oppositional force is subordinate to Ambedkar's unquestionable patriotism. The *ACK* issue about Ambedkar, however, remains silent on his extremely critical stands on Gandhi, his methods of spiritual coercion, and how Gandhi fasted to make Ambedkar withdraw his demands.

In *ACK,* Ambedkar emerges as the nationalist leader, the individualist par excellence. As his unique and unyielding selfhood is magnified, there is simultaneous reinforcement of the category of citizenship to the exclusion of all other categories (caste, community, or gender). The struggles of Ambedkar's life are also represented as the battle for the modern nation which can only be "corrupted" by caste—whether it is articulated as discrimination or as demand. The words of Ambedkar as he presented the draft of the constitution to the

constituent assembly, chosen to be quoted in *ACK*, efface that other domain of politics which made the idea of the nation much less final and more fraught for him: ". . . and I appeal to all Indians to be a nation by discarding castes which have brought about separation in social life and created jealousy and hatred" (Pai 1979, 30).

8. Conclusion

The *Amar Chitra Katha* series of comic books have, since 1967, dominated the market for domestic comic books in India. In this paper, I have examined how these comics function as a site of public culture, creating a platform through which identities (religious, class, gender, regional, national) are negotiated and re-negotiated. The narrative traditions of *ACK*, even though targeted to young readers, were nonetheless meant to ideologically co-opt them into the appropriation of their middle-class Hindu nationalist readings of Indian mythology and history, or into their depiction of the stringent gender roles delineated by the societal structures. While including figures of mythological, historical, and contemporary relevance seems laudable, the flexible medium of a popular culture form aided the transformation of hegemonic and universal conceptualization of "Indianness" into the imagination of the intended readership.

Women have been more often depicted in *ACK* as devoted to their country and their husbands, while displaying a buttoned-up femininity that kept them within the confines of domesticity. *ACK* depicts how, for instance, Rani of Jhansi involves herself in *poojas*,[6] Subbu Lakhsmi takes care of her children, Rani Padmini lives and dies solely for her responsibility as King Ratan Sen's wife, and Marie Curie[7] is involved in domestic chores; all these depictions of

6 The word "pūjā" or pooja, is Sanskrit, and means "reverence, honour, homage, worship". It is a ritual performed by Hindus to offer their prayers to the deities.

7 Although *ACK* primarily delves into Indian culture and history, stories of some famous historical characters like Albert Einstein and Marie and Pierre Curie; the first edition on Marie Curie was published on February 1, 2011. An issue of *ACK* was published in 2010, *Travellers to India* (Megasthenes, Fa Hien, Hiuen tsang), that centers on some of the first foreign travelers to India. Megasthenes (302 B.C.-298 B.C) was the ambassador of Selecus (Greece), and visited India during the supremacy of Chandragupta Maurya. Fa Hien (405

women are in line with the overriding principles of neatly categorized gender roles. As *ACK* rarely gives them space for the expression of freedom of love or marriage, women are presented in a multiply jeopardized position—both by men, society, and nation. Thus, the portrayal of fearless women as victimized by society or as a coy character is problematic, since it carries the threat of unconsciously pressurizing the young readers to follow the ideals of golden-era Indian womanhood. Similarly, I have also argued how *ACK* as a historical narrative is also problematic, considering how it heavily draws from the Hindu nationalist schools of thought. On one hand, *ACK* often seems to be delineating non-Hindus as religious and cultural "outsiders" privileging Hindu upper and middle class; on the other hand, these visual narratives are observed to be representing, and rather coercing, females into traditional roles of domesticity.

ACK is a ubiquitous form of public culture, widely popular to an enormous section of the educated Indian population, nearly creating a shared shorthand-manual for their understanding of Indian culture, history, and mythology, while simultaneously functioning as a platform for debates surrounding that very understanding. Although *ACK* voices the erstwhile inaudible legends, it seems to co-opt them into the dominant cultural and national imaginary, thereby continuing and broadening the horizon of the cultural consciousness of the citizens of the country. The narratives examined in this paper underline *ACK's* role in shaping Indian public culture while highlighting how *ACK*'s comic books still sell the overriding, hegemonic ideals of the society.

A.D.-411 A.D.) was a Chinese Buddhist monk who visited India during the reign of Vikramaditya (Chandragupta II) and described his voyage in his travelogue *Record of Buddhist Kingdoms*. Hiuen Tsang (630 A.D.-645 A.D.) was a Chinese traveler, scholar and translator who visited India during the reign of Harsha Vardhana and is known for his work *Si-yu-ki* or *The Records of the Western World*.

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