Chapter 1

*Amar Chitra Katha: The Product and the ‘Brand’*

The first chapter deals with *Amar Chitra Katha* (hereafter ACK) as a product and a brand in the market. I concentrate on the ‘physical’ aspect of these comic books while their (so-called) ‘content’, both visual and verbal, is attended to in the chapters that follow. In other words, I intend to observe these material entities-in-circulation, not the frameworks of meaning borne out by the stories contained in them. We will look at these thin printed volumes, stapled and sometimes pasted, each around thirty-pages long and very colorful, produced in bulk and distributed in a hurry to different corners of the country and outside. The operation of this interdependent chain of activities and agents – a widely cast network involving people and technologies in an ‘assembly line’ mode – is what I try to examine in detail. On that count, ACK appears no different from many other consumer durables, available and functioning under the laws of supply and demand in a capitalist economy. However, we will also find a parallel, if complementary, model of ‘exchange’, smaller in scope (subsequent to the dominant profit-based model but not subservient) no less important – that of ‘gift economy’.

Let me draw a more schematic outline of my proposed analysis. I present a brief narrative account of the rise of ACK and Tinkle, a comic book series and an illustrated magazine

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1 It is worthwhile to think of the ACK’s social-material status through the gift economy model following the (western) sociological/anthropological idea of gift as ‘total social phenomena’ implicating mutually obligatory contract, after Durkheim or Mauss. It is indeed an important source of ACK’s purported ‘value’ and positively encouraged by its own brand creation strategies. However, to think of ACK as a phenomenon only or primarily within this model and not as marketable commodity would be a gross overreading.
in post-independence India for children respectively, published by India Book House\textsuperscript{2}, Mumbai (then Bombay), and provide sales figures for each as made available from journalistic accounts and personal correspondence or interviews\textsuperscript{3}. Although the stated focus of my discussion is ACK, we cannot do without Tinkle (that the present owners/distributors claim to be the most popular children’s magazine in India at the moment) because of their interconnected publication history and marketing strategies as I will try to show. This discussion is then placed in a comparative context of children’s book publication in post-independence India where my chosen field is English and Hindi-language books and magazines having a pan-Indian audience\textsuperscript{4}.

A sustained concern in this account is with the particularities of ACK’s material properties – the kind of paper and color-printing technology used – as well as its

\textsuperscript{2} Factually speaking, these books used to be published by IBH, but not any longer. Since 19th May, 2010, tables have turned – IBH is now the distribution arm of ACK Media or Amar Chitra Katha Private Limited. The erstwhile publisher, one of the biggest distributors of books in India since 1952, of ACK and Tinkle has been acquired by ACK Media for an undisclosed amount. See G. Shah, ‘Amar Chitra Katha buys IBH’, on http://www.livemint.com/2010/05/19222608/Amar-Chitra-Katha-publisher-bu.html, accessed on 17th January, 2011.

\textsuperscript{3} Let me clarify once and for all that these sales figures and information about the product through interviews and newspaper/magazine reports are the primary ‘archival’ material that I draw on and I find the information sufficient to draw certain conclusions about the product. Popular literature or ‘ephemera’ have different parameters as regards their ‘archive’, i.e. different from that of ‘high’ literature. As a researcher, I could not but depend upon these ‘informal’ sources. Private enterprises do not officially disclose profit-and-loss figures to anyone (with the possible exception of business partners and tax authorities). The relatively smaller enterprises (like ACK, unlike big industrial houses) are not very methodical about maintaining these records. It has changed somewhat since the post-90s ‘corporatization’. Mr. Anant Pai was extremely obliging in supplying the sales figures, unlike the new owner ACK Media Corp.

\textsuperscript{4} There is no particular reason behind this apart from my lack of familiarity with most ‘local’ languages in a country which recognizes as many as twenty-two languages as per 92nd Constitutional Amendment of 2003. The actual number is much more. A wikipedia entry accessed on 13th March, 2011, shows fifty-six native languages, each having one lakh or more speakers according to the 2001 census. A further ten having sixty-five thousand or more speakers are also noted. There is a separate list of about one hundred and twenty ‘ethnic’ languages prepared by the SIL International, a Christian charity/service organization that produces Bibles in these languages and distributes them among these linguistic communities. However, ACK and Tinkle being English-language products (subsequently translated or ‘syndicated’), the choice of English was obvious. Hindi, though a relatively recent and fully ‘constructed’ language made up from north Indian literary and spoken languages, is recognized as the ‘official’ state language and taught regularly in schools, and also in government offices. It is no surprise, then, that the second-highest sale of ACK is in Hindi-language syndication.
production and distribution networks. In other words, my objective would be to see ACK as a ‘living’ thing made up of a number of processes, and coming together as a constellation as it were. Quite obviously, I treat these quantitative data as being a chief source of their particular ‘value’, more so because they come in a more-or-less inalterable or already processed form and affect reading experience (or readership) not as choice but as condition – an already settled part of the ‘contract’\(^5\). Methodologically, I consider these factual data to complement other contingent aspects of reading (e.g. gender, class, territorial location). This relatively stable set of data becomes an important index of assessing readership insofar any change made in the former is accompanied by a perceptible change in the pattern of the latter. Also, being identifiable and concrete manifestations of capital\(^6\), these indexes draw our attention to the production of this popular literature. By saying ‘production’, I mean actual reproduction of books as well as conditions of reception. Since I do not take actual samples of reception of this literature into account, these data remain crucial to my assessment.

Does this insistence on the materiality of the book (as opposed to the ‘meaningful’, sutured ‘text’ for the playful semiotician), that assume a rich life of its own through passages of production and circulation, take us perilously close to the idea of a fetish? Both yes and no. Yes, because it invests the buyer/reader’s perceptible sense of being with the book – choosing a particular book over others placed in the same rack or laterally spread in a smaller bookstall, holding it in hand, browsing through the pages or

\(^5\) The word ‘contract’ pertains to the formal-textual and material conditions of reading.

\(^6\) This is how Marx puts it in the ‘Preface’ to Capital (1st edition): “... in bourgeois society the commodity form of the product of labor – or the value form of the commodity – is the economic cell form ... they are of the same order as those dealt with microscopic anatomy.”, in Lewis S. Fewer ed., Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy (London: Fontana, 1969), 175.
possessing the whole book – with what I might call other kinds of lives-in-flux that are both hidden (or excessive) yet apparent. That also initiates a sense of de-centering that makes the reader to be able to see the book as a matrix where different material operations (including labor in the graphic form) come together and leave their trace – which is probably a closer approximation of its materiality than its value (and/or price) as commodity. My point, in both cases, is that this approach is at least as materialist as a philological or stylistic exegesis of a book.

Let me clarify once and for all that I do not consider these comic-book retellings of oral epics, mythology, fictional or dramatic literature, and folktales as having generated a reading experience and attendant affect (the material basis of which lies in its wide popularity for more than four decades now) that is similar to that of ‘original’ or source-stories. Although the sharing of a rich narrative corpus can arguably evoke a sense of (purported) ‘indigenous’, collective ‘tradition’ that binds one generation to the next, mechanical reproduction in case of ACK (and similar literature) obviates any easy correspondence among the readers belonging to these vastly different times. Taking cue from a well-known essay on the consequences of ‘modern’ methods of mechanical reproduction of works of art by the noted Marxist cultural critic Walter Benjamin, we could say that the main difference lies in the permanent detachment from the ‘original’ time-space context of any artwork that can only be put into play at the behest of the

Obviously, such a proposition might give rise to various grounds of objection, the most abstruse of which is ideological – that any talk of such a tradition is always constructivist and exclusive in principle. To me, the most imminent of these criticisms in this case comes from the biological age and cognitive (im)maturity of the chief target audience of ACK. The sense of historical continuity implied by such hoary ‘tradition’ and the idea of an abstract, essentialized ‘cultural identity’ are quite difficult to grasp even for any average adult. I discuss this issue in the third chapter.
capitalist mode of production\textsuperscript{8}. The resulting \textit{autonomous chronotopic register} produced in and through mechanical repetition\textsuperscript{9}, a material entity that eludes modern readers because s/he takes it for granted, constitutes the \textit{living configuration of capital}. It can exist only at the cost of the ‘originary’ condition or what Benjamin calls ‘aura’ – the ritual-magical function of artwork in community. The new formation appears as the aura’s ghost or double, but eventually replaces the singular traditional art-form since it can \textit{reproduce itself endlessly as} (sufficient though not necessary) \textit{condition, and giving} (a new) \textit{form}. With time, what started off as a technique of mass production asserts its utility-function, and is screened behind the (by now) normative form – a process likened to ‘reification’ in Marxist terms\textsuperscript{10}. One can think of a familiar example from modern culture – the hand-in-the-process of writing in a manuscript vis-à-vis the moveable type set for printed books. Both are examples of technology (kinesthetic and mechanical, respectively) at work, but the latter leaves traces that are so uniform (and evenly distributed) that they do not amount to being indexical at all.


\textsuperscript{9} Benjamin considers technology to be a physis of connecting with the world. It is of decisive importance to him since the workings of sensory and cognitive apparatus hold the key to human experience – a kind of mechanistic, but true to his Marxist vocation, materialist and ‘scientific’, understanding of what connects an individual to his/her history through the mediating influence of technology. The sentence reads: “In technology a physis is being organized through which mankind’s contact with the cosmos takes a new but different form from that which it had in nations and families”, One-Way Street and other Writings ( London: Verso, 1985), 104. The concluding words in this sentence have been italicized to draw attention to his conception of different, and specific, axes or ethos/ ethoi of organizing community in between-the-wars Europe.

\textsuperscript{10} The choice is potentially ethical as well as one borne out by practical considerations. The witty and ironic epigraph by Duchess Claire de Duras (cited in Benjamin’s second version of the artwork essay) is telling: “The true is what he can; the false is what he wants.” Benjamin is, needless to say, unburdened by the postmodern ‘calling’ to celebrate plurality as the ethical principle par excellence.
The most obvious difficulty in the way of providing a thorough official history of ACK is the non-availability of sufficient sales records – reportedly, due to a fire that broke out in the India Book House office in the mid-1990s. The data provided here are mostly based on personal interviews with writers, editors, artists (mostly associated with ACK on a free-lance basis), conducted at the IBH office then located in Andheri and now in Worli, or their respective offices or residences in the suburbs of Mumbai during two field-trips, as well as the articles published in newspapers and magazines supplied by the founder and editorial head of this comic book series, (the late) Mr. Anant Pai.

There are minor disagreements as to the beginning and exact number of issues published under the ACK banner. To add to the confusion, there are contradictions among the data presented in those articles. The Fact Sheet on ACK (reprinted July 1994) says: “436 titles (are) published in this series”. But the first 10 titles were done under license from a comic book series of U.S. origin, called 'Classics Illustrated', and by paying due royalties to them. Among these titles are all-time favorite fairy tales mostly of foreign origin, such

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11 Pai is quite a pioneer to reckon with as far as books meant for children’s entertainment in the post-independence era. He was instrumental in starting Tinkle. He also started Rang Rekha Features, India’s first Comics and Cartoons Syndicate in 1969. Pai’s other works include a number of books on personality development for children and teenagers, (“How To Develop Self-confidence”, “How to Achieve Success”, “How To Develop A Super Memory”, UBS Publishers) and a series of audio-book versions of Amar Chitra Katha stories, titled ”Storytime with Uncle Pai”), where he plays the role of a narrator-storyteller. He also founded the Partha Institute for Personality Development that offered courses through correspondence in 1978, i.e. after he became a well-known figure associated with children’s literature and publishing industry.

12 Anant Pai, e-mail to the author. Starting its journey in 1941 as ‘Classic Comics’, this monthly series was renamed ‘Classics Illustrated’ in 1947, and continued till 1971 – totaling up to 169 titles. Like ACK, many of these titles were cheap (10-15 cents) comic book versions of popular and high literature (fiction, saga or plays belonging to the hybrid bookshelf-category christened ‘classics’, e.g. works by Dumas, Dickens, Hugo, H. B. Stowe, Shakespeare) aimed at quick reading for teenagers and adolescents. And somewhat like its Indian counterpart once again, they were translated into 26 languages and distributed across 36 countries; also, they were followed by spin-offs and similar products of poorer quality (like Aadarsh Chitra Katha or Gaurav Gatha vis-à-vis ACK) that eventually fell out of competition. The remarkable number of similarities in material property (four-color offset print in newsprint-quality paper) and career is partly attributable to the industrial logic. Its sister product aimed at younger children was called ‘Classics Illustrated Junior’ – the first ten ACK titles were most probably syndications from this series although Pai does not mention this fact particularly during the
as Jack and the Beanstalk, Aladdin and his Lamp, Little Red Riding Hood etc\textsuperscript{13}. They were also translated in eight other Indian languages viz. Hindi, Gujarati, Tamil, Malayalam, Bengali, Kannada, Telegu, and Marathi. These books, having the same target audience (English-medium schoolchildren) and marketing effort as ACKs later did, did not sell very well and were not reprinted. The first fully 'Indian' ACK issue, Krishna, was scripted by Pai himself. It was published in February 1970\textsuperscript{14} (though some reports have it as February 1969\textsuperscript{15} and some others as early as July 1967\textsuperscript{16}) and the last title, Jawaharlal Nehru, in November 1991. However, it would be better to dub Nehru as the last regular ACK title. After Nehru, 7 more titles have been published although IBH has stopped producing new ACK titles on a regular basis. Only four of these (Jesus Christ, Swami Pranabananda, Kalpana Chawla and Mother Teresa) are totally new. The other three (The Story of the Freedom Struggle, Ramayana and Dasha Avatar), either in part or whole, are revised versions or reworking of some of the old titles. Hence, arguably, the total number of ACKs published till now is 440\textsuperscript{17}. But it is interesting to note that the complete catalogue of ACK does not list the first 10 titles and starts from no. 11, i.e. Krishna.


\textsuperscript{14} Anant Pai, e-mail to the author.

\textsuperscript{15} Jyoti Punwani, 'Comics are Big Business', The Sunday Observer, 4.9.83 and also V. Gangadhar, 'Anant Pai and His Amar Chitra Kathas', Reader's Digest, August 1988.

\textsuperscript{16} Srinivas Krishnan, 'In Search of Immortality', The Strategist, Business Standard, 18.11.97.

\textsuperscript{17} The website www.amarchitrakatha.com declares that there are 439 titles, of which 289 are in print. These 289 titles, plus a set of 16 special titles, are included in the present complete ACK collection that one can buy online, priced at Rs. 14,885. If one counts the title Jesus Christ as a special/bumper issue – a single book lengthier than usual – the figure 439 is correct.
Throughout the intermediate period of about two decades, 1970s and 80s, ACK enjoyed enviable popularity and became a phenomenal success in the Indian comics market. Although no presently available comparative study can support this claim, it can be safely said that it was certainly the most popular comic book series for children in this period. There are very few, if any, brand(s) of literature for children in India that have received such an appreciation at popular and the official/bureaucratic levels so consistently. The success story that has inspired many successors (i.e. publishers coming up with comic books that are remarkably similar in terms of titles and style/mode of visual representation) and occasioned many an article in newspapers, magazines, and books, is liable to be called a phenomenon of sorts in the history of publishing industry in post-independence India, more specifically as popular literature and/or products targeted at children. The term 'success story' is quite apt, for the frequency with which Pai's personal life and the career of ACK have lent themselves to some form of 'narrative' cannot be missed\(^\text{18}\). The cult derives its authority from, among other things, such repeated narrativisation. This question demands further examination but before that, we will look at ACK's career in terms of sales figures\(^\text{19}\).

Before Krishna, the first ACK to make its appearance, there were but a few comic books published in India that told Indian stories. There were two well-known comic book versions of the Indian epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, which resulted in a one-off

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\(^{19}\) Most of these figures correspond to those provided by Mr Pai (through interviews, e-mails and newspaper articles in the then ACK office in Andheri, Mumbai) during my first visit to the ACK office in Aug-September 2000. The present owner ACK Pvt. Ltd. has not complied to repeated requests to furnish any sales/marketing data either during my visit in May 2010 or later.
Newspapers like ‘The Times of India’ (TOI) carried comic strips in children’s supplements. It was the Times group, once again, who took the first step when they decided to publish comic books under the brand name of ‘Indrajal Comics’. These comics were syndications, i.e. Indian-language translations/versions of Phantom and a few other superhero or adventure stories of US origin. Mr. Pai, who was in charge of the ‘Indrajal’ project, approached the TOI management for comic books that would carry stories involving a fictional south Indian character (called Kunju Pillai). His ultimate plan was to start a comic book that would only carry stories (and characters) of Indian origin. At this stage, he had to leave TOI. But he was determined to make his idea work. So he went on to approach other publishing houses until India Book House (IBH) agreed.

*Krishna*, the first ACK, appeared in February 1970 and was followed by *Shakuntala, The Pandava Princes, Savitri, Rama, Nala and Damayanti, Harishchandra, The Sons of Rama, Hanuman* and *Mahabharata* over a period of 18 months. These titles sold less than 20000 copies each during the first three years. This 20000 comprised of 10000 in English and 5000 each in Hindi and Marathi. Among the historical titles, *Chanakya* was the first to be published (August 1971), followed by *Shivaji* (October 1971), *Rana Pratap*

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20 In all probability, these two, done in three colors and published in 1956, are the first comic books (minus speech balloons or thought-bubbles though) to have been published in India. Mr. Pai told me that it was done for Dunlop, the tyre company. They seem to have been quite popular at least with Bengali-speaking children, known more or less all over India, and are still in circulation. They were published by Shishu Sahitya Samsad, printed by Nataraj Offset Press (both located in the northern part of Kolkata, West Bengal), and in its 44th reprint in February 2005, priced at Rs. 25.

21 The word ‘Indrajal’ means magic or sorcery.

22 Phantom formed the largest chunk. Others included Mandrake, Flash Gordon etc., from large houses like DC or Marvel Comics.

23 ‘Thirty Years of Amar Chitra Katha’ (pamphlet provided by IBH office).

24 V. Gangadhara, ‘Anant Pai’. But Mr. Pai puts it as "more than one and a half years" in his personal interview with the present author.

25 Srinivas Krishnan, ‘In Search’.
(November 1971), Guru Govind Singh and Harsha26. There are interesting exceptions here, too. Buddha, which appeared just after Chanakya, is not a 'historical' title going by ACK's categorization27. By the late 1970s, ACKs were being translated into several other regional languages, e.g. Bengali, Assamese, Malayalam etc., and were selling about 3.5 million copies annually28. The graph started to take off, according to Mr. Pai, around 1975. For the first four years after its inception, one title in every three months used to hit the stands. In 1973, it became once in every two months and next year they made it one each month. From 1975, they were publishing one issue every fortnight29. In the late seventies, the print run rose to 5000030. The sales reached their peak around 198431. They were selling 60000 copies per month in English, 25000 in Hindi, 8000 in Assamese, 6000 each in Bengali and Kannada32. At the same time, a cheaper Malyalam translation, smaller in size (known in the market lingo as a ‘pocket-book’), and printed by a franchisee of Meghalaya Manorama group, sold 140000 copies per year33. In the lean months, the sales were around the 300000-figure mark while during the summer, Puja and Diwali months it went up to 4/500000-mark. IBH also used to reprint old titles every month. For the first print, the figure never went over a little over 100000-mark34. Of the

26 'Thirty Years'. The dates for Guru Govind Singh and Harsha were not available. However, these historical titles do not appear one after another in the complete catalogue of Amar Chitra Katha.
27 'Thirty Years'.
28 V. Gangadhar, ‘Anant Pai’.
31 Anant Pai, personal interview with the author; several newspaper reports also agree that the peak was around the early 80's.
32 Vikram Doctor, 'The Return of Mythological Heroes', Business World, 7.6.97
33 Ibid.
34 Pai, e-mail to the author.
sales figure given for the lean months, one-third was accounted for by the reprints. Things went on well for some time but presumably during the late eighties the sales started to decline. In 1991 the sales dropped to an all-time low of 24000 copies for Jawaharlal Nehru. Since the break-even figure was 40000 copies, IBH decided to stop\textsuperscript{35}. Since then, new titles are not published \textit{on a regular basis}. Four new titles have come out – \textit{The Story of the Freedom Struggle} (72 pages) in August 1997, \textit{Swami Pranabananda, Kalpana Chawla} (2005) and \textit{Mother Teresa} (August 2010). As of 1994, three ‘Bumper’ issues, of a length about thrice the usual (96 pages), had been brought out as well. These are \textit{Jesus Christ, Dasha Avatar} and \textit{Ramayana}. There were sixteen such special issues (five more forthcoming)\textsuperscript{36}, priced at Rs.60 each. Apart from these, there were fifteen hardbound 'Pancharatna' (a collection of five issues) volumes, with five more forthcoming\textsuperscript{37}, and ‘Digest’ volumes, priced at Rs.140. Two hundred ACKs were then available in deluxe volumes, published since 1994\textsuperscript{38}, priced at Rs. 25, with laminated art card cover and better quality pages. This was started after the fire that broke out in IBH office. Since they used process positives for the cover, the cost was reduced while it enabled them to break even very quickly\textsuperscript{39}. A newspaper report of June, 1997 says that IBH prints 8-10 titles a month and sells about 100000 in English\textsuperscript{40}. The sales figures in Hindi are not available since IBH has sold the rights for Hindi issues to its rival, 

\textsuperscript{35} Doctor, ‘The Return’. Srinivas Krishnan supports the figure supplied by Doctor and says that ” Nehru hardly sold any of the 32000 copies of its initial print run”. Ajay Sharma informs, talking of a slide in ACK’s fortunes, that 28000 copies were sold in September, 1992. However, it actually indicates a rise compared to the figures here given for the year 1991 in other newspapers. See Sharma, fn 29.

\textsuperscript{36} Fact Sheet, Amar Chitra Katha.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{39} See Vikram Doctor, ‘The Return’.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid. It also says that Amar Chitra Katha in Hindi sells close to what it does in English. The pamphlet, ‘Thirty Years etc.’ says that 6-12 titles are reprinted every month in deluxe volumes.
Diamond Comics. In the recent years, however, sales are increasing. The sales figures of ACK in the last few years are given below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Sales (copies)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995-96</td>
<td>327000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996-97</td>
<td>591000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997-98</td>
<td>542000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998-99</td>
<td>687000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999-2000</td>
<td>790000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, it seems that by the 1990s, ACK had ceased to enjoy the popularity it used to do in the eighties. *The Story of the Freedom Struggle*, however, has sold 22000 in the first three weeks of its release\(^{42}\). If the market has been increasing in the mid-90s\(^{43}\), it is a lot different from its heydays not only in terms of sales figures but also in nature. A detailed discussion of this aspect is will be taken up later. ACK has been translated in 38 languages (officially claimed as the 'only comic in the world' to have done so, an unlikely piece of 'fact'\(^{44}\) of the world including Dutch, French, German, Swahili, Serbo-Croat, Spanish, Fijian, Japanese, Bahasa Indonesia, Sinhalese, Luganda as well as other Indian regional languages and has sold over 80 million copies\(^{45}\). The actual number of readers is much higher than this, since each comic book is claimed to have been read by 11 persons on an average, in some cases going up to 14\(^{46}\). ACKs were selling, as one report in 1991

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\(^{41}\) Pai, e-mail to the author.

\(^{42}\) Srinivas Krishnan, ‘In Search’.

\(^{43}\) It already seems to be increasing from 1993. See Ajay Sharma, ‘Brand Equity’: "The current sales of Amar Chitra Katha are 40000 a month and increasing at the rate of 5% a month.”

\(^{44}\) Fact Sheet, Amar Chitra Katha.

\(^{45}\) Ibid.

has it, at an estimated profit margin of 30-40% at an average price of Rs.2 per copy. Among the titles published, Krishna is definitely the most popular by far. It remains the most translated (in over 38 languages), most reprinted issue, and has sold more than 1.1 million copies. Some successful (sales-wise) and unsuccessful titles are listed below:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Krishna} & \quad 1 \text{ million copies} \\
\text{Rama} & \quad 686000 \text{ copies} \\
\text{Sons of Rama} & \quad 640000 \text{ copies} \\
\text{Hanuman} & \quad 430000 \text{ copies} \\
\text{Panchtantra} & \quad 420000 \text{ copies} \\
\text{The Bhagwad Gita} & \quad 382000 \text{ copies}
\end{align*}
\]

Now for the second category:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Lal Bahadur Shastri} & \quad 50000 \text{ copies} \\
\text{History of India} & \quad 40000 \text{ copies} \\
\text{Mohammed Shah} & \quad 35000 \text{ copies} \\
\text{Balban} & \quad 25000 \text{ copies} \\
\text{Indus Valley Adventure} & \quad 20000 \text{ copies}
\end{align*}
\]

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48 ‘Thirty Years’.
49 Pai, interview, ibid. One newspaper report has it as "more than 30 times" (‘Learning through Fun’) and another (Vikram Doctor, ‘The Return’) as "over 60 reprints".
50 ‘Thirty Years’.
51 Farah Barla, ‘A Twist’.
One can easily add Jawaharlal Nehru, which took years to sell its initial 32000 copies, in the list of unsuccessful titles also. These sales figures are more significant than mere pieces of fact, as we will see very soon. Apart from different packaging, ACK also caters to the need of the corporate sector. ACK was reported as actively pursuing institutional clients such as Jet Airways and Tata Chemicals for guaranteed sales of around 10000 copies. They would print special editions for institutional clients with the same content but with customized covers. Jet Airways, for example, was buying ACK to hand out to children on its flights after having promised purchase of more than 25000 copies. For guaranteed purchases of 25000 copies, ACK would also produce an entirely new comic of the organization’s choice but the publisher retained editorial control in all such cases.

Swami Pranabananda is one such example. This is, one assumes, a much later development. At present, ACK is busy marketing its much-vaunted 14-volume Mahabharata, a faithful rendering of the original Sanskrit text, to various companies. Each of these volumes runs into 100 pages including the covers (i.e. these are special volumes). They come in a gift set, along with a complimentary copy of The Gita at a price of Rs.980, and are offered initially at a special pre-publication price of Rs.850. The companies can order a minimum of 250 sets and afford a discount of 33.3%. The copies

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52 Vikram Doctor, ‘The Return’.
53 Srinivas Krishnan, ‘In Search’.
54 One interesting case that Pai recounted during interview was IBH’s refusal to do an ACK issue on Rajiv Gandhi during late 1990s, even though there was active solicitation from the Congress headquarters. According to recent newspaper reports, ACK would feature N. R. Narayana Murthy, the prominent software industrialist (founder of the Infosys and an investor in the field of children’s education), according a newspaper report (Rajesh S Kurup, ‘Infosys founder to be Amar Chitra Katha’s comic book hero’, March 6, 2009, Business Standard, Mumbai). The same report cites the names of the cricket icon Sachin Tendulkar, the former President A. P. J. Abdul Kalam (a key person behind India’s first satellite launch vehicle and guided missile programme) and an engineer, and the physicist Homi Bhabha (the pioneer in atomic research in India) to be on the same ‘wish-list’. Kalam became a much-publicized (and self-styled) grandparently pedagogue during his tenure, somewhat like Mr. Pai.
are to be supplied to them with their (i.e. the respective corporate house’s) message or advertisements on the cover page 3 of all the 14 volumes\textsuperscript{55}.

Apart from comic books, ACKs are available on various other media. In 1975, audiocassettes based on ACK were produced by IBH under the name 'Amarnad'. Polydor (later renamed Music India Ltd.) produced LP records based on them\textsuperscript{56}. They were also shown on the state-owned TV channel Doordarshan serially from August 1998. The project started as a 50-50 joint venture between IBH and United Studios Limited. However, after the first 13 episodes, IBH decided to withdraw because they found it unprofitable\textsuperscript{57}. As of now, they are back again on Cartoon Network during prime-time Sunday morning slot. ACKs are also available in CD-ROMs. The then Prime Minister Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee released the first of these on November 13, 1998\textsuperscript{58}. These were being produced by Phoenix Global Solutions Ltd., Bangalore\textsuperscript{59}. Since April 1997, ACK was made available on the internet on a number of websites. The site www.freeindia.org, a domain owned by Dharma Universe Limited Liability Company no longer offers the facility\textsuperscript{60}. The website www.amarchitrakatha.com was first created since by a person

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{55} 'Mahabharata', a pamphlet provided by the IBH office.
\item \textsuperscript{56} 'Thirty Years'.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Anant Pai, interview with the author.
\item \textsuperscript{58} But see Raja M, ‘Dear Uncle Pai’, which claims that the first CD-ROM based on Amar Chitra Katha, Subhash Chandra Bose, has already been released in USA in 1997. It also mentions the name of a certain Rajesh Jain who was launching web sites on Amar Chitra Katha and is never mentioned again by Pai or any newspaper reports currently available.
\item \textsuperscript{59} 'Thirty Years'.
\item \textsuperscript{60} The common charge of being partial to Hindu community is most visible here. Any website (apart from the official one completely owned by the company) that recommends ACK, and provides them for reading or buying online, has consistently been guilty on that ground ever since the web made its first inroads in India during the mid-late 1990s. These websites would offer almost everything to do with the nomenclature ‘Hindu’, starting from biographies of great achievers, news, discussion boards, blogs, lessons on Astrology, prayers to Puranic Gods or Mother India, education portals, matrimonials, prescription for puja etc., apart from one distinct category: branded consumer items.
\end{itemize}
called Ajay Shah\textsuperscript{61}. This one was more exciting for the viewers to watch. Here, as the pictures were downloaded, the speech balloons and commentary panels could also be heard\textsuperscript{62}. But ACK seemed to have lost out around the same period to other products or kind of products in its core segment – the school-going children. According to a newspaper report, they account for only 10\% of its total sales\textsuperscript{63}.

ACK in its heydays used to sell in maximum number in and around Bombay and then in South India, North-East, and North-west in a descending order. The sale was relatively lower in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh\textsuperscript{64}. Language-wise, expectedly, the maximum sale is in English. It is followed by Hindi but, according to Mr. Pai, it is not encouraging compared to the size of the Hindi-speaking population. Then come Kannada, Bengali, and Assamese in a descending order. Malayalam sales are (or were) also quite high because, as has been mentioned earlier, they sell in a smaller and cheaper version\textsuperscript{65}. Apart from being available all over India they also have an outlet in Los Altos, California, called ACK Book Agency.

We now turn to other, we could call them more informal and ‘intimate’, aspects of ACK’s history. There are several things to grapple with. First, there are numerous and different kinds and levels of narratives. There are those about Anant Pai, the founder-editor of ACK, his own narratives about himself and the product and of course, ACK's own

\textsuperscript{61} Anant Pai, e-mail to the author. I had the chance of corresponding with Shah, via e-mail, about 10 years back. The details of the present website (i.e. creation and maintenance) are not known to me. But since ACK Media seems to have invested crores of money to take the digital leap and commands a set of qualified personnel on the company payroll for the same purpose at present, the whole nature of work must have changed both qualitatively and quantitatively.

\textsuperscript{62} ‘Thirty Years etc’.

\textsuperscript{63} Srinivas Krishnan, ‘In Search’.

\textsuperscript{64} Pai, interview.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
narratives – the body of narratives which it is. The narratives about the man and the product (these two are not to be seen as distinct for all practical purposes as also in popular perception\(^{66}\)) mostly have an anecdotal value. I take anecdotes, as also newspaper reports and the incidents recounted during personal interviews, to be (various) forms of narratives. And one can say, not without some justification, that the biographical narratives created by ACK are but extended anecdotes. Here I am reminded of an essay by Joel Fineman, whom Greenblatt approvingly quotes in the introduction to his book *Learning to Curse*. I find Fineman's formulations and indeed, Greenblatt's own extensions of that argument, particularly revealing and useful in this connection. Though Fineman talks about New Historicism's characteristic use of anecdotes there, I feel that his formulations can be applied to anecdotes in general. The anecdote, he says, produces the necessary reality-effect, "the occurrence of contingency, by establishing an event as an event within and yet without the framing context of its historical successivity, i.e., it does so only so far as its narration both comprises and refracts the narration it reports."\(^ {67}\)

The power or the effect of anecdotes derives precisely from this twin-faced nature. It lies, so to say, in the seam between the literary-fictional and the historical-referential. The accounts/anecdotes recounted by and about Pai have a similar value. Consider, for example, the (what one presumes to be an oft-told) story of Raji, the little Malayali girl living in Pai's neighbourhood to whom Pai gifts a copy of *Krishna*, the first comic in the ACK series. The little girl, as Pai recounts, who could not read even 'cat' or 'dog', leads him by the hand a few days after and reads out the whole comic to him. A curious Pai is

\(^{66}\) As seen in the title of a newspaper report 'Uncle Pai's Katha', see Farah Barla, 'A Twist'.  
\(^{67}\) Joel Fineman, in Stephen J. Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (Routledge, 1990), 'Introduction', 5
then told by her mother that the girl has made her read out the whole story each time she (i.e. the girl) has eaten or gone to bed. This story was recounted when the present author expressed doubt about the possibility of (objectively) measuring the effect of ACK on young minds\(^68\). And, Pai did not forget to add that this girl was now (then) in UK, after finishing her MBBS and MD\(^69\). It is not difficult to see what is achieved by retelling this 'incident'. There are Pai’s own intimate emotions attached to the first comic book written and brought out by him, the instant and captivating effect of that book on a young child and the kind of 'good effect' it has (if Raji does not learn to read then at least the process is expedited). Lastly, her subsequent success in terms of career provides Pai with an example in his favor when parents and teachers object to the 'ill effects' of comics on a young child. The "occurrence of contingency", as Fineman puts it, “the *real-life* truth-that is stranger-than-*fiction*” effect (italics mine), provides Pai with a narrative authority that has the best of both worlds. It continues to retain this unique value because it cannot be pinned down to either one of them.

Pai is particularly fond of telling such stories that serve his purpose well. It is an essential form connecting his activities. He tells stories through (in popular perception he is immediately associated with them) ACK and in public gatherings, becomes subject of stories, and loves to speak through this medium even in his private conversations and interviews. His own and ACK’s identities are bound up with the same act --- with telling stories. For him, it is not only a habit. It is, calculated or otherwise, a method.

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\(^68\) To be more specific, I was asking Mr. Pai about the History tests carried out by Amar Chitra Katha in some Delhi schools after which, reportedly, the product was unanimously agreed to be a useful medium/form of teaching the subject.

\(^69\) Elsewhere Pai adds that 'to this day, (she) is a voracious reader'. In the pamphlet titled 'The Impact of Comics on the Reading Habits of Children' he adds, in a parenthesis, that Raji is 'Dr. V. Sunita Balan today' and calims that for her, and indeed 'many others', 'first exposure to learning was only ACK' (italics added).
Let us look at the narratives that Pai recounts while talking about the beginning (he does this almost all the time without answering questions directly) of ACK. There are several such narratives. It is worth quoting them in full, as Pai (and others, if following him, in newspapers etc.) narrated them. But due to considerations of space, we will do with shorter versions for the time being – recounting the events that take place more than how they are actually remembered. It follows the version(s) recounted by Pai before the present author in a personal interview. The first one took place in Delhi in 1967. He was among the bystanders outside a big TV shop (TV was a novelty at that time) and happened to watch a quiz programme. A team from a premier Delhi college could not answer who Rama's mother was. What disappointed him more was that after this had happened, they answered a question on Greek gods. Pai was surprised because that incident happened despite Ramlilas taking place every year in Delhi. The second incident happened in Pai's own family circle in Mumbai. His nephews and nieces planned to start a magazine. The first issue contained a story about a boy called Bob who lived in Warrington and dreamt of going to London, ultimately becoming successful, and a poem on daffodils. In the third incident, Pai was taking a boat-ride with a child of four, called Tamara. As another boat sped past them, she asked, obviously excited, whether that was an 'imported' boat.

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70 One more reason is that Pai’s account, more or less identical, has appeared in a number of interviews/articles still available in print or on the web and is thus for anyone to check. See Pritchett, in Media and Transformation, Chandra, or the interview by Atula Ahuja, available on www.readingrainbow.in/interview-pai.html.

71 St. Stephen's College. Raja M., 'Dear Uncle Pai'.

72 Pai, interview with the author. There are some variations among the newspaper articles about this particular incident. See Raja M. “(they) … were fluently answering questions (italics mine) about Roman and Greek gods”. Pai Piper, Nina Martyris, The Sunday Times of India, (New Delhi, 31.8.97) says more or less the same thing. But Farah Barla, 'A Twist', says that the boys answered questions on "Winston Churchill and Socrates with alacrity!".

73 Called 'Family News'. Jyoti Punwani, 'Comics are Big Business'.
The 'chance' or the circumstantial factor needs not be stressed, especially in the first case. The other common element, presumably the crucial one, is the preference for something of foreign origin among the children/adolescents. It varies from a mechanized boat to knowledge of mythology. The question of 'chance' there, i.e. whether that particular boat was really 'foreign' or those boys knew at all about Ramayana, would lead us to diversions unnecessary for the present purpose. More important are Pai's corresponding reactions to them. Here again, the question of narrative becomes important. The feeling of dejection or betrayal (it is too ambitious to diagnose the exact nature of his feelings) is, at one level, a question of personal emotions. However, here they are not to be understood as distinct from a different emotion --- the urge that is also a social agenda. We will see how the necessary sublimation is, and is achieved through, narrative.

An anecdote, Fineman points out, is situated between two opposite poles and simultaneously deflects them too, by introducing what he calls "an opening". For our convenience, we can call these poles 'chance' and 'causality'. For Fineman, the quality of 'exceeding-ness' – the porous, pliant edges that these accounts must contain – retain the inexhaustibleness of such stories. The question remains that whether Pai and the (newspaper) reports also perceive this intriguing undecidability – a definite ‘formal’ source of their popular appeal – that cannot be settled and use them in that identical manner. It seems not; that is where narratives play a crucial role. They effectively close this inherently 'open' form in order to impose a design, to introduce causality. They leave out, for example, questions of child psychology that is perhaps an important

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74 Fineman, in Greenblatt, ibid.
75 Obviously, I do not insist on diagnosing such formal features as ‘formal’ (on Pai or the journalists’ part) in the sense the analyst or scholar understands it but an awareness. That they apparently do not is the beauty of such common, everyday acts.
consideration in deciding the issue, especially in the last two cases. The emergence of Pai as a 'man with a mission' is necessarily achieved thus, by integrating 'chance' within teleology. See for example, the newspaper report titled 'A Twist in the Tale':

The story begins at Karol Bagh junction in New Delhi one crisp February evening. The year is 1967 and Doordarshan is making debut waves in the capital. Across the street, a mob of bystanders crowds the shop window of Maharaja and Sons, dealers in television sets, for a glimpse at this strange new phenomenon: the portable picture house.

Anant Pai crosses the street for a better look --- a lean, gaunt figure in his mid thirties, with bright little eyes under a mop of jet black hair. … Thus was born Amar Chitra Katha, those immortal picture stories … ⁷⁶

Pai himself encourages such 'originary' narratives by repeating the tales every time he is asked about the beginning of ACK and drawing similar conclusions. He is caught, perhaps willingly, in this indirect causality (a hopeless oxymoron that perhaps serves my purpose for the time being) because it creates a convenient identity, an 'image' for him. He is habituated to being called, by children and adults alike, 'uncle' --- an intimate, elderly, storyteller-figure within the family. See another report, this one incorporating incidents from Pai's life before ACK and turning it into a tale:

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⁷⁶ ‘A Twist in the Tale’.
Once upon a time there lived an orphan who was often the subject of ridicule. Small, docile, he wore funny clothes and had even funnier ideas --- like growing up and becoming a chemical engineer only to tell stories through pictures for livelihood. … The world calls him Anant Pai, the pioneering czar in Indian comics. The children call him Uncle Pai.  

Such instances are not infrequent. This one serves as a paradigm for all such narratives, using a fairy-tale beginning. The dramatic quality that remains in those stories is due, and tantamount, to what has been called the 'reality-effect'. Now, however, Pai too readily picks up the image of the self-proclaimed savior. Let us look at his version of the incident that accounted for the beginning of PARTHA – the institute of personality development and a magazine of the same name started by him in 1979. The principal of a certain school told, quite harshly, a father that the latter's child could not be admitted to that school since the boy failed in the admission test. Pai was sitting there and the boy was crying. Observe Pai's account of his reaction after this:

As I sat there, I thought 'what is going to happen to this child?' his father may want him to get admission in a Science faculty, he may not get it. His father may want him to become a doctor, he may not get. By the time he grows up, he will have met with rejection a number of times. A child that meets with rejection cannot learn to love, can never learn to give. If he is convinced he is good for

77 Raja M., 'Dear Uncle Pai'.
78 See 'Uncle Pai's Katha' in Farah Barla, 'A Twist', and V. Gangadhar, 'Anant Pai and his Amar Chitra Katha'.

nothing, he would turn against himself. Or if he is convinced that if he is not able to achieve anything, it is because of some group, some other community, he will turn against the society and turn violent. In either case, it is a threat to the nation. That is where I got, you know, as Gautama Buddha had it under the Bodhi Tree, I thought I had a role to play.79

The question that springs to mind is whether such a seventies' (or eighties', as in the case cited last) Indian self is fundamentally/constitutionally different. Does this altruism also bear a legacy, if precarious, of the Nehruvian 'vision' in the wake of the nation-state? Perhaps it does not. But the zeal seems to be analogous80. Their historical contexts and nature of programmes are, however, somewhat different. In the case of Nehru, it is very much a part of the practical goals to be achieved by an active management of the state policies as well as its ideology. Pai, on the other hand, often insinuates the fact that his attempt is to fill a gap left by the failure of the state ideology on the masses. We will leave it at that because a detailed discussion of this point will lead us into areas that are outside the scope of the present chapter. Let it be said for the time being that both are guided by an imaginary of the nation and an idea of 'Indian modernity' which are not dissimilar in intent.

While the causality built up here follows from its 'narrative' form as in the earlier anecdotes, the justification of his stand is backed by a bit of simplistic psychological/psychoanalytic explanation: that the unfortunate child will grow up as a

79 Pai, personal interview, ibid.
80 I discuss this particular issue of re-inaugurating the Nehruvian ideal (or its continuation as 'public rhetoric' in the 70s) in the third chapter.
failure in life and bad example of a citizen – something we can perhaps liken to a 'rational-scientific' effect. The other obvious element in this narrative is Pai's almost incredibly presumptuous attempt at myth-formation involving himself. The Barthesian notion of myth as a 'second order semiotic system' can be applied here as in the cases cited earlier. But the last case seems to be little more complicated, or ‘advanced’, in that it develops a second stage/tier. In the first one, the second-order sign is present in an already fully elaborated manner (i.e. Pai's explanation), as a finished product. It is present, to be precise, for the reader of the myth at the second stage after Pai has produced a myth (the first stage). It is also very much in keeping with Barthes' notion of mythical signifier being empty on the one hand and full on the other. Pai is the reader of the myth at the first stage and, after reading it, he becomes a mythographer as well.

That the myth, or (following Barthes) the 'signification', as it is the 'myth itself', at the second stage remains ambiguous, one presumes, has something to do with the anecdotal form. This ambiguity is crucial for Barthes. It is understood as a distortion of history but is not 'read' as such – it is an ‘organic’ transmutation of sorts. We should take a word of caution here that is central to Barthes' argument in the essay. There are many indices there which encourage the reading of myth as 'a lie', as a deliberate falsification or conspiracy on the part of an interested party. But the mythologist in that instance is also persuaded by a metaphysic of truth and is a utopian alienated from the present. If the mythographer is a liar, then the mythologist who 'exposes' him is more deluded in his vision of a perfect future. “It would seem”, he says, “(that) we are condemned for some time yet always to speak excessively about reality.” To laugh at Pai taking up the mantle

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of Buddha is to dismiss him too easily, to ignore him and thus fail to understand this cultural phenomenon. It seems more rewarding to accept him on his own terms and try to understand the conditions that make such a role-playing possible.82

Such narratives do not end there. They also speak of the nature and extent of ACK's popularity. They appear in the form of countless letters and fan mails that Pai receives every day and the accounts he gives of the heartiest welcomes received by him in every corner of the country. Let us look at the pamphlet provided by the IBH office, called 'The Impact of Comics on the Reading Habits of Children'. It is in fact the outline of a paper prepared and read out by Pai at an organized public gathering. After listing the familiar arguments against the medium of comics, Pai goes on to cite his case. It is tempting to quote him at length:

"No man can be a witness unto himself," said Jesus. Therefore, I am bringing in witnesses with the permission of the learned participants in this Seminar.

**Witness No. I:** I had been invited by I.I.T, Madras to deliver an extra-mural lecture on September 14, 1994. While welcoming me, Mr. Arvind Subramanian, General Secretary of the I.I.T Students Union said: "In our younger days you had enthralled us with your Amar Chitra Kathas."

I said to myself, many of these youngsters from I.I.T, who form the cream of our student community developed good reading habits did well in their academic career. This happened in spite of poring over Amar Chitra Kathas, or should I say because of Amar Chitra Kathas.

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82 Such ethic of parallel ‘truth effects’ is, need I point out, a dubious gift of the postmodernist turn of thought.
Pai’s predilection to associate himself with divine authorities, whether or not one calls it atrocious, is conspicuous, and is not, one supposes, entirely lost upon the audience he addresses in many cases. It is a mistake to judge the merit of such a statement by its apparent naivety. The power arises precisely from what we take to be its weakness — the ability to lend an axiomatic value to opinions which are inevitably personal. Yet that is taken to be the general agreement (the reference to I.I.T boys being the ‘cream of our student community’). It is also, for those who are present there, a natural and ‘real’ response to a ‘real’ situation. The mood is kept alive very effectively. The shift from personal/trivial to general (and hence, of common concern) is achieved by calculated rhetoric (‘in spite of … or should I say because of’ etc.) and a mock-legal form, balancing each other.

Pai’s witness no. 2 is even more interesting. He quotes three paragraphs from an article published in the children’s page in the Saturday supplement of a newspaper, the guarantee being that the author of this article “is a fairly successful correspondent of Deccan Herald.” It reads:

"Sometimes our wildest dreams come true. All those fairies, Easter bunnies, monsters and golliwogs do come alive. So do the heroes prancing on horsebacks, princesses gliding through forests, the knights in shining armor wielding swords to protect the country’s honor. Sometimes, just sometimes, the creator of all these characters steps out from behind the printed pages, to come alive before readers,

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83 Asma Naseer, ‘He cast a comic spell …‘, Deccan Herald, 17.9.94, followed by another short piece called ‘And a classic was born’. The latter is, understandably, continuation of the article mentioned first as the pseudo-Biblical echo in the successive titles suggests. The column/page is called ‘Open Sesame’.
making their wildest dreams turn out real." Then it goes on to describe the meeting with, or should one say the arrival of, Pai: "So it was one Saturday morning, when the father of Indian comics, Anant Pai, popularly known as Uncle Pai to thousands all over the country, came to spend a morning with the children of Garden city."

It is somewhat disturbing to see the way he takes the typically journalistic rhetoric literally. He turns the rhetoric on its head, in a manner of speaking. But perhaps it is not so difficult to see why Pai needs to lend some legitimacy or respectability to the source. What is more interesting to note are the specifics or the registers of such a popularity. What is its relation to the form of pseudo-miraculous revelation apart from the typical journalistic 'flair'? It is rather difficult and ambitious to provide any direct and conclusive answer. We can try to compare it with another incident that is not, to my view, dissimilar in kind. Here is Pai speaking on the resurgence of ACK's popularity:

For example, recently there is so much interest in ACK, that is partly because the parents are afraid that the children are exposed to the dish antennae and all that, they may lose the contact with their own culture. By the way, one small incident … Kamruddin, he is an advocate in the Supreme Court … his wife is also an advocate at the High Court … their son 7-year old Ambar, I met him on the way. And Kamruddin said, 'Beta, yeh uncle Pai hai.' The child looked up at me (and

84 Pai, personal interview, ibid.
said):’ Are you sure he is uncle (Pai)?’ – that kind of wonder in his eyes. That is something which I cherish … and the letters I receive (laughs).

Nothing could be more ordinary or probable. It is an incident that one might overlook at first or remember, as Pai does, as one happy snippet of memory. Pai, however, actually says much more. This is an experience that he cherishes above many things, perhaps over all material rewards, fame and social prestige that he has acquired in the course of his life. Let us take a closer look. What exactly happens here? The little boy is presumably an avid reader of ACK and lives in the ‘world’ of ACK more than the other two persons present during the course of this chance encounter. Here comes a man, shortish, dark, thick-lipped and every inch a pitifully common mortal and reveals himself as the uncle Pai whom the young boy has ‘known’ for years. Uncle Pai has been with him so many times – the dear old man who spins the web of stories. Each time he tells him a new story, magic descends. Nobody quite knows since when he is telling stories although they are familiar with his name. All he knows is that Uncle Pai will always be there with his enchanting sack of stories.

The situation, I suggest, is to be compared to a dream. A child’s dream shows his/her wish-fulfillment in a direct or uncomplicated way, after Freud. The urge to believe in case of a child is much more strong and intense than adults’. It is a direct transformation of some unrepressed wish in their waking state. The child’s ‘mistake’ that the adults here fail to interpret but enjoy so much, is actually a deliberate refusal to recognize Pai. The boy will rather continue in the sleeping state and dream on, than conflate the figure he has imagined with the person standing before him. The wonder in his eyes that Pai
recognizes as that of extreme satisfaction is actually a confusion arising out of a sudden shock or surprise that threatens to break off the child’s ‘sleep’.

Let us continue for some time with the newspaper article mentioned by Pai on the last page:

When I heard that Uncle Pai was in town and I was to meet him, my first reaction was one of utter disbelief. How did someone up there know that I wanted Uncle Pai for a long, long time? Now, wasn't that as if a genie from a magic lamp had granted a precious wish? Then confusion replaced surprise. Goodness! What am I going to say to him? What am I going to ask? Will he answer all my questions? Could I remember all that I wanted to know for hundreds of years?

One can note the direction in which ACK has travelled. It was once born out of a ‘need’ arising out of a national crisis showing its symptom everywhere. As a wake-up call, it vowed to bring back the new generation on the right track. It appeared as their savior and guide. In the last instance, however, it has become a myth. ACK is an inseparable part of what future generations will inherit as ‘Indian tradition’. It has found its permanent place in every Indian’s bookshelf. It is tempting to end this section with a newspaper article that follows the narrative trail:

Once upon a time there lived an orphan who was often the subject of ridicule. Small, docile, he wore funny clothes and had even funnier ideas – like growing up and becoming a chemical engineer only to tell stories through pictures for
livelihood. … The world calls him Anant Pai, the pioneering czar in Indian comics. The children call him Uncle Pai.85

**Two Products: two audience(s)?**

In this brief section, we take a look at the two majorly successful literature brands for children brought out by (the then) IBH – ACK and Tinkle. Obviously, there are lots of differences between them starting with the form (comic book and magazine made up of short strips, respectively). Tinkle was launched about ten years after ACK and now operates as a monthly86. It would initially compete with Champak and Chandamama (multi-lingual children’s magazines published from Delhi and Chennai respectively) and did so successfully87. As senior writers/editors put it, Tinkle initially cashed in on ACK’s brand equity but later proved to be a worthwhile venture on its own. In fact, apart from size and printing technology used, there is not much that is common to these two products. Why this comparative analysis then, at all?

Let us go back a few years, decades to be more accurate, and get a glimpse of the ‘inside story’. We are talking of the late 70s. A reservation, or should we say a distinct feeling of misgiving, was brewing within the ACK team even as Pai’s leadership – as the ‘public face’ of the product – was beyond question. The point that we have been laboring to demonstrate in a more formal, academic language was quite evident to some script-writers and editors: that ACK was going down in favor by conceding the simple charm of...

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86 The first issue of Tinkle appeared in 1980. It was a fortnightly during the mid-1990s.
87 Ajay Sharma reports: “According to a recent CMS survey, Tinkle has a readership of 3,52,000 – 53,000 more than the combined readership of the next two, Target and Champak.” A Sharma, ‘Relationship Marketing’, Business Standard, 08.02.1994.
storytelling to the more ‘respectable’ image consciously nurtured by itself – of well-researched ‘authenticity’. The weighty and difficult script was eating into the easy flow of narration. The plot, especially in case of biographies, was inalterable and repetitive and did not leave much scope for the artists although the medium was *primarily visual*. The visuals came a poor second, meant only to accompany the word-dominated narrative rather than carry the plot forward on their own.

On the other hand, the growing aspiration for social/sociological ‘distinction’ was equally desirable for those who insisted on the consolidation of a ‘brand’. Pai’s firmness on this issue was decisive. ACK’s ‘success story’ was indeed an achievement in recent Indian history. Sales records ensured ACK’s success as a listed product comparable to other consumption items (ranging from toys, edibles, life insurance policies to audiocassettes) but it was not to go down as any other usable (and perishable) factory-produce for daily, middle-class, urbane livelihood. Recognition as a ‘literature brand’ was a unique phenomenon in itself, but not a guarantee of permanence usually associated with

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88 As I have indicated before, the publication of multi-volume comics (42 came out instead of 60 as planned initially) based on the epic Mahabharata – touted as a faithful rendition of the literary wealth contained in the shlokas – under the guidance of Kamala Chandrakant was a decisive move towards ‘literary’ fame.

89 In any case, a number of writers have said in their interviews that the relation between writers and artists was unevenly balanced in favor of the former. One could discern that also by looking at the work-structure that was developed in the ACK team in its heydays. Rao and Chandrakant, who were ‘plot’ and ‘language’ editors respectively, would have the script go round between them at least twice before sending it to Pai for the final nod. Detailed suggestions to artists were given by the individual writers, and never the other way round. Fernandez also tells me in his interview that the artists were mostly ‘lazy’ and never came up with suggestions except for Waerkar and Pratap Mullick. But given the working method and the artists’ freelance status, there is not much to blame. The truth is that ACK never thought of their comic books as primarily visual.

90 I draw upon the use of the term by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Such distinction or ‘taste’ are lived and ‘practiced’, they operate at once ‘below the level of consciousness and language’ and are marked – as sublimated and ‘embodied social structures’. Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of a Judgment of Taste (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984), 466-7. What Bourdieu calls ‘habitus’ is “not only putting into the real world that one is endeavoring to know … It means conferring on this knowledge a genuinely constitutive power”. Ibid., 467.
high literature – the stuff that ACK was *mediating* through comic book-form. We would do well to remember that brand creation/equity was then still an incipient adspeak restricted to a relatively smaller section (than, say, the last twenty years), not christened by the explosion of management studies and promotion of corporate capital by the Indian state through official policies. Perhaps the difference in opinion points at something more significant than the micro-history of a popular literary product. ACK, having established the ‘comics’ medium as a recent addition to the existing modes of storytelling, was anxious to shade the ill association of being an instrumental form (balloons and bubbles makes comics as realistic as a film but in print) imported from foreign shores and join the prestigious league of ‘*children’s literature*’ – acquire a cultural *pedigree*. One might note how Bourdieu describes an important general (although he admits that such principles, since they are internal and internalized, are *not* universal) feature of the process: “Knowledge of the social world has to take into account a practical knowledge of this world which pre-exists it and which it must not fail to include in its object, although, as a first stage, this knowledge has to be constituted *against* the partial and interested representations provided by practical knowledge.” This would fit, by and large, how Pai comes to establish ACK as a *desi* comics brand (i.e. ‘create’ a market which previously did not exist by facilitating the required condition of its production) and the subsequent attempt

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91 The reasons of political economy as well as state ideology are not too difficult to guess. Even the all-powerful state during the Emergency adopted pro-poor slogans and sought to eliminate, through typically populist and authoritarian measures, food shortage, literacy, corruption or population problems. The directness of language in addressing such problems was a matter of consensus for political parties and civil society alike.

92 Bourdieu, Distinction, 467.
to raise it to a socially higher ‘class’ of literature with a capital L, and the ‘crisis’ arising out of it.

There is a perceptible irony in it for the cultural historian (the brand overtaking the material worth of the product, proffering a ‘society of spectacles’), but the creation of ‘value’ in this case is not one-pronged. Consider the campaign carried by Pai: “No comics are accepted by schools all over India except Amar Chitra Katha”\textsuperscript{93}\textsuperscript{93}. Or, the ‘fact’, recounted by Pai as well as some other writers\textsuperscript{94}, that somebody in an inter-school meet cited ACK with the solemnity usually preserved for archived historical documents having ‘authoritative’ merit. ACK was, in other words, trying to get ahead of its own historicity through creation of a (then) culturally dominant value – coterminous with a supra-or trans-historical ‘tradition’. And ACK was evoking the same authority that it was supplementing, that of school education and textbooks, to that purpose. Predictably, if its goal was to become improved textbooks, its identity as comics was to be compromised.

The problem was eventually sorted out through a wonderful solution. The brain behind the ‘Tinkle’ project, although it came out as a team effort, was Mr Subba or Subbu Rao\textsuperscript{95}. Familiar criticisms of religion and gender bias apart\textsuperscript{96}, the more immediate worry for the ACK/IBH was a visible lack of balance between words and pictures. Biographies were crammed with information and driven to create an idealized roster of who’s-who of

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{93} Fernandez, interview with the present author in August-September 1999. Such a slogan could not have done much service to promoting comics as a medium in general.
\textsuperscript{94} Interview with Margie Shastry, August-September 1999.
\textsuperscript{95} By Rao’s own admission, Kamala Chandrakant, Luis Fernandez and the artist Pradeep Sathe were the other three figures instrumental for conceiving the Tinkle project. This, and other information that follow, are based on interviews with Rao and Fernandez in 1999 and 2010.
\textsuperscript{96} Such criticisms came occasionally from within the ACK team as well. Rao mentions Toni Patel (writer of Akbar, Chand Bibi, Amrit Manthan etc.) often taking issue with co-writers over such issues.
\end{flushleft}
Indian history, with a distinct focus on the freedom struggle, rubbing out all controversies and reduce the ‘characters-in-action’ to chapters from history textbooks in color. Rao and Luis Fernandez\(^{97}\), both of whom have written and edited stories for ACK, attributed this to difficult scripts accompanied by formulaic visuals. They voted in favor of simpler story-line from folk/regional tales (Panchatantra, Jataka being ‘traditional’ sources here) that would also create more scope for visuals – non-human creatures in expressive, humorous, cartoonish style\(^{98}\).

Tinkle, unlike ACK, is a children’s feature magazine and a mixed product. It puts together short tales in comics form interspersed with slices of general knowledge in various formats. The stories are of two kinds: folktales of Indian or foreign origin and humorous tales that run in series, featuring the characters created by the writers/editors. Some of these characters, e.g. Kalia the crow or Kapish, the do-gooder monkey, and the stories involving them might have been inspired by traditional wisdom tales and bestiaries such as the *Jataka* or *Panchatantra*\(^ {99}\). The humans (e.g. Shikari Shambhoo, Nasiruddin Hodja, Suppandi) are mostly variations of the traditional ‘simpleton’ who delight the readers by invariably pulling off the wrong act in wrong situations. ‘Tantri the Mantri’, a devious minister with a skinny physique and aquiline nose, always eyeing the throne by designing ingenious but unsuccessful plots to slay the king, deserves special

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\(^{97}\) Both have worked with other magazines or features companies of English and other South Indian languages (‘Sci-Fun, ‘Amrita Bharati’) independently. Fernandez had also floated a comics syndication company alongwith Pradeep Sathe the artist (a regular in ACK folktales) and occasionally worked with Delhi-based Manoj Comics. He is now back to ACK Media once again. Rao, a schoolteacher-turned-writer and editor, had a longer stint in the ACK-IBH team.

\(^{98}\) ACK was running out of mythological titles and biographies were becoming difficult to sell. All biographies after Nehru (J R D Tata, Swami Chinmayanand) were commissioned till Kalpana Chawla came out in 2005. A title on Rajiv Gandhi which was commissioned by the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation after the former PM’s death was abandoned mid-way due to mutual disagreements regarding the script.

\(^{99}\) The names of other animals in these stories are a mixture of Jataka names (Chamataka the jackal) and ordinary ones, sometimes a bit onomatopoeic (Doob-Doob the crocodile).
mention\textsuperscript{100}. The unwary king loves him more because his mistakes look like attempts to risk his own life to save the king’s.

There are stories around a host of child characters – ‘Ramu and Shamu’, ‘Little Raji’, and ‘Anwar’. The last was created by Subba Rao partially as a corrective to ACK’s anti-Muslim bias. Rao recounts in his interview how he was struck by a story sent by a Muslim boy where a Hindu king leads his army against several Muslim principalities, possibly inspired by similar plots in many an ACK. If these characters are representative of what the writers thought of their actual readers, a few consistent indicators stand out. They might occasionally embarrass their parents or teachers because of their naivety, but on the whole all of them are very pictures of middle-class adults’ idea of what a child should be – bonny, adorable, docile, innocent and ever childish. Another series, written by Margie Shastry\textsuperscript{101}, called ‘Anu’s Club’, shows an elderly, bespectacled, pedantic ‘uncle’ always lecturing on various subjects, conducting scientific experiments or building models. The script, predictably, appears contrived and static. Sometimes, though much less regularly, there might be an adventure story (heist or an odd ‘detective’ story where the youth brigade licks a criminal gang) about a group of adolescents.

Now for the other feature articles, which usually span a single page or two but occasionally, as in the case of a ‘story’ about the students of a school on their excursion trip to Rajasthan\textsuperscript{102}, could go up to as many as eight pages. Titled ‘India Adventure’, this is halfway between a story and informational literature (with badly printed illustrations of historical monuments) contained typically in a brochure of a tourism company. In a

\textsuperscript{100} As many have pointed out, the basic formula has striking resemblance to Goscinny’s Iznogud.

\textsuperscript{101} Shastry initially joined as a writer for Pai’s science magazine. She also wrote the script of the last regular ACK issue on Nehru.

\textsuperscript{102} Tinkle Digest, vol. 3 no. 5.
regular column called ‘Tinkle tells you Why’, the editorial team answers the questions sent by readers. These are usually scientific explanations of natural phenomena or technologies in daily use. The reader’s name and address are also printed. Sometimes such snippets would be presented in comics format, such as ‘The Story of the Bicycle’, ‘The Dance of the Bees’, or a short history of various writing materials, titled ‘From Clay Tablets to Paper’103. Another regular, an illustrated column (without panels), called ‘Fact Fantasy’, provides information on animal habitat or plants as well as highlights from mythology and historical anecdotes104. There are also quizzes with visual hints and multiple-choice answers where readers are asked, typically, to match certain animals against their country of habitation or scientific instruments against their respective inventors. Apart from these, there are simple jokes presented in comic strip form, with or without words, covering two to four panels105. Another column, titled ‘It Happened to Me’, was introduced as a regular feature, where readers shared some important incident in their life. Not that it always significantly added to the overall quality of the magazine (from the market perspective, an adult perspective), but provided one more space left exclusively for readers.

103 Script by Luis Fernandez and Illustrations by Pradeep Sathe, in Tinkle Digest, vol .1. These have panels but no dialogues, and hence no balloons.

104 Readers of ACK will be reminded of similar featurettes, especially in the later issues, usually at the end, but sometimes also in the middle, as in the case of Shantala, discussed in chapter 3. Stretching our imagination a little, one could also think of such govt.-sponsored promotional films before the beginning of an actual feature film regularly transmitted during the 1980s or even early 90s, but that practice no longer seems to be popular.

105 I am leaving out advertisements for purposes of this discussion. There are about three to four ads in regular issues, including those of the product itself as well as that of ACK. Additionally, there is often a subscription form for membership and for taking part in the Tinkle quiz.
Short tales, witty dialogues and funny incidents – accompanied by simple visuals – are the strength of these stories. Unlike ACK, Tinkle aims primarily at entertaining its readers and not imposing the coda of ideal behavior. Certainly it takes care not to set any ungainly example but is never burdened with the overwhelming obligation to build a ‘nation’. With its host of foolish characters, jokes, misadventures and tricksters, Tinkle offers a welcome breather from the respectable heroes of ACK biographies. It is less demanding on its readers, whether in terms of attention-span or its purported seriousness and merit. But where it mainly scores above ACK is by making its child-readers (or adolescents) participate and identify with the magazine, and create a sense of their having an autonomous space. From the very beginning, Tinkle invited contribution from children and gave them due acknowledgement in print. Reader’s name and addresses were printed, sometimes also with photographs. Such acknowledgement on part of the writers/editors (who undoubtedly had to rework the plot or situations) and identification on part of the readers paved way for a different, and timely, serious engagement with urbane schoolchildren, and it certainly marked a different understanding of children as readers and as a community vis-à-vis adults. This teenage audience was a new category, not expected to listen to and follow the adult’s footsteps but encourage them in having an equal partnership of sorts. If ACK biographies were a gift chosen by adults who took themselves too seriously in carving out a role model for children, Tinkle inspired, recognized and formalized how they could engage in a playful conversation. For once, the artists too enjoyed more freedom as they did not have to stick to realist idiom and

106 Occasionally, there would be (rather touching) declarations like: “This story was sent by a child who has forgotten to include name and address.”
factual ‘authenticity’ which was dictated by the story/words/scriptwriter. There would be different sections: stories of readers’ choice, stories sent by them (sometimes, though rarely, complete with illustration), stories suggested by them to continue the ones started by a senior author of the Tinkle team.

Mythology was the mainstay of ACK, and history had to be carefully showcased to fit to prescribe a code of growing up. When writers invented situations or added imaginary conversations, say show a Tilak or Rani Laxmibai as a child, the liberty was minimal. Pai would not allow any incident that would hold the future heroes in a bad light because he simply thought it would go against the character and ultimately the basic schema of presenting ‘living examples’ ¹°⁷. The golden principle was to inculcate a strong set of moral values; Pai was prepared to risk an indifferent script against including anything to depict the ACK heroes as fallible, common mortals. Their lives were but valuable lessons ¹°⁸.

Tinkle could re-introduce the element of humor (jokes, childish fun, mischief, unintended deception, misadventures) into the script with a frank directness though not overriding the moral boundaries of ACK. It was crucial that the magazine kept ‘knowledge’ and ‘fun’ formally separate although it threw in a bit of both – unlike ACK that took the onus of self-serious and wholesome transmission of values. Between the adult who had learnt to acknowledge the child as different, not the little adult in the making (of necessarily the kind that the adult was or wanted the child to become), and a generation that was allowed

¹°⁷ Fernandez told me as much during the interview conducted in August-September 1999.
¹°⁸ Although eulogizing a person is frequent in literary biographies, the ACK model is repressive and repetitive because certain socially accepted virtues dictate the portrayal of characters.
to choose its share, a different form of literature for children had emerged\(^\text{109}\). It signaled the birth of a new child audience also from a rights perspective, allowing them a near-equal share in deciding the kind of stories they wanted to hear. The importance lay not only in the fact that it marked an important change in the history (of popular printed literature for children in post-independence India), but it came from the recognition of a historical difference.

The Material Signifier

In this section, I propose to deal with the material aspects of ACK and similar comics or printed literature for children. I explore the material content, particular to the print medium, of these books even as the present owner of ACK and Tinkle (ACK Media, since 2007) looks to invest more and more in animation and digital, web-friendly version of these books\(^\text{110}\). But the ‘horizontal shift’ is unlikely to breathe a fresh lease of life as far as ACK is concerned – the branding has ensured its status as old-style storytelling for children. Any branding is to some extent self-consuming simply because it is self-referential – that the ultimate hero in advertisements is the product itself has its

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109 Tinkle was not the first or the only magazine to so. Balak, a Bengali magazine published from the house of Tagores during late 19th century, and ‘Chandamama’ in more recent past also did the same – kept ‘knowledge’ and ‘fun’ formally separate. In some ways, the trick lies in actually coming up with a prose style or imaginative ideas or imageries blending the two. The well-known Bengali writer Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri, writing for the magazine Sandesh or even Sakha, otherwise full of didactic content, was a master at this.

110 Let me say without much hesitation that I consider the project to be doomed from the start. Surely the total sales will rise, but increase in the number of products relating to the same content can hardly do anything than churn out a little more money. The digital content is pre-determined, and cannot accommodate any fundamental transformation. Merely transferring the print content on screen – be it on one’s mobile phone, television or film – and adding motion to them employing 2D or 3D techniques will not revive a product (ACK in particular) already on its wane. The whole thing is more a matter of corporate takeover and mainstreaming (employing organized labor) in the somewhat confusing economic imbroglio following globalization than a genuine attempt at creating new content, i.e. a qualitative change.
unavoidable pitfalls in the long run. Having already looked at the branding, here we shift our focus to turn at the product. The register of production, from a post-Marxist standpoint of cultural studies, has always been considered singularly important but the impulse to document the details of book production and trade as part of its cultural history is rather recent\textsuperscript{111}.

At the outset, I should say unabashedly that this particular section presents a set of tentative formulations based on work that I have just begun. It consists of two different, interrelated parts. For my purpose, I had selected samples from ten different books and had them tested at a university printing (engineering) laboratory. The objective was to have some idea regarding the kinds of paper that were used in making these books. I try to relate these material data to the kind of printing technology that was used (and still used) in the field of popular literature for children. Post-globalization, the situation has changed but not to a great extent\textsuperscript{112}. As indicated earlier, I intend to initiate a discussion that places the actual making of these books determining their market ‘value’.

Even in mid or late 1970s, and that situation did not change considerably throughout the next decade, ACK belonged to the upper segment of the lower stratum of available


\textsuperscript{112} New players have entered the fray, including big foreign publishing houses such as Oxford University Press, indigenous ones such as Tulika Books or Tara Books, or joint ventures such as Sterling Publishers or Pearson Education Company. Hence, the quality of printing has certainly gone up. Another new entrant, although limited mostly to the urban market, has been the software-based or computer-aided, interactive book products.
literature for children, for a number of reasons. These cheap, pulpy, and (almost raw) colorful books then shared space in libraries or book fairs with illustrated tales, printed literature from in or outside India with little or no pictures, large-sized Russian picture-books, popular (and often abridged) translations of western adventure stories and ‘classics’ such as Dickens or Dumas, and more expensive ‘foreign’ (in every sense of the term, although here meaning primarily European) books – their better and streamlined quality of binding, print and paper being the chief indicators of their ‘authenticity’. The last, although varied according to size (bigger-sized, paperback Tintin comics with laminated cover to neatly bound foolscap octavo books from Ladybird), authors (Nancy Drew or H. G. Wells), kind of stories (pedagogic tales to sci-fi) or targeted age-group (adaptation of Scott or Hugo would cut across generations), were often distinctive by their high price. In hindsight, the pricing was integrally connected with their better

113 This, of course, is a highly personal and in that sense, restricted or contingent, observation. Growing up in mid-late 1970’s West Bengal had its blessings in the form of numerous stories written specifically for children or young adults, and were available across different price range. Even a lower-middle class family would, if they wished, own a fairly decent and varied collection.

114 Russian children’s books – cheap, well-illustrated and a delight to read – which were available in West Bengal till the mid-1990s, have since then become extinct, not anything comparable has appeared.

115 Translations of thrillers by Forsyth, James Hadley Chase or Alistair McLean would probably fall in the same ‘shelf’ category but were not positively encouraged by parents – one usually found their way to these books by themselves or through friends. Perhaps I could share a humorous anecdote here that I was a witness to about ten years back, during the annual Calcutta Book Fair, then being held near Park Street in central Calcutta. As the parents of a Bengali girl, who appeared to be in the sixth or seventh standard (around 12 years, roughly), debated over buying a book titled ‘Arabian Nights for Young Readers’ (Chotoder Arabya Rajani) for her, she wryly commented: “I have read the one written for adults.” I could not help a hearty laugh but the parents were possibly not nearly as pleased, and certainly not so in public.

116 That happened usually because of weaker currency. At least in Bengal, where craving for national heroes or nationalist stories was never probably a very big issue at that time. A story from Panchatantra, American Indian mythology or Nordic sagas did not differ much in getting endorsed by parents. Perhaps the Leftist rule succeeded also in producing a breed of parents who were not staunch nationalists themselves, or obliging a child’s wishes was of considerable importance for the first generation of nuclear families. Again, I run the risk of generalizing in taking my experience as being indexical. But popularity of Russian books and stories must have had something to do with the official political stand of the then union government as well as the Leftist regime which came to power in West Bengal in 1977.
quality of production more than anything else. A definite reason behind the popularity of the Russian books, distributed in Kolkata though publishers or book sellers who had well-known leftist leanings\textsuperscript{117}, was that they could bridge the two.

The reason I assign a place for ACK in the lower stratum has to do with the social/parental suspicion of comics as a genre in the first place – that to read these books is to indulge in leisure and waste time. The mainstay of the TOI brand, Indrajal Comics (the first comic book series/syndication to have had pan-Indian readership) was Phantom and it was replete with every possible lure considered inimical to the middle-class idea of a safe childhood – bikini-clad women, debauched villains, graphic violence and black magic. The distrust on part of the parents was often summed up in a different language though: that these were incredulous tales and therefore useless – one did not learn anything worthwhile from them\textsuperscript{118}. The pulpy, garish look of these books only reinforced this objection. ACK improved their case by virtue of their content, on two counts – telling ‘Indian’ stories and exemplary biographies\textsuperscript{119}.

\textsuperscript{117} The two major distributors were Raduga Publishers, a direct franchisee, and Manisha Book House that had close connection with CPI. The last one, which ran in shambles in early 1990s, has now closed down their bookshop on College Street, Kolkata.

\textsuperscript{118} One can go on analyzing the subtexts of such a phrasing: that the middle-class parents’ sense of responsibility and respectability (a projected super-ego, so to speak) barred them from even pronouncing the taboo words (‘sex/nudity’, ‘violence/murder’) in a strange and everyday act of sublimation – which might draw comparison with mainstream Hindi films’ careful avoidance of showing a kiss on screen until very recently. Or that the real problem lies in the representational power of the realistic medium, the apprehension that it might make wrong or potentially dangerous things or action appear ‘real’. The rather academic objection of political incorrectness is probably the most liberal vote of dissent. One should not also overlook the utilitarian approach in such endorsement/censure of values: that reading comics does not impart any pragmatic, worldly-wise skill/value and yields ‘only’ pleasure. Turning the statement around, one could also argue that it is an instance of ‘pure’ reading as the ‘contract’ does not bear out any discernible benefit even in the long run, material or otherwise.

\textsuperscript{119} But ACK was not the only nationalist literature in this category. The popular hero by Abid Soorty/Jagjit Uppal, Bahadur, alongwith his lady-love Bela, reformed dakaits and brave police inspectors formed a team called ‘Citizens’ Security Force’ who took the responsibility of delivering justice in their own hands with a vengeance.
What I am trying to get at is the possible connection between such disapproval and the standards\textsuperscript{120} of mass-scale mechanical production (or reproduction) of books for a large, middlebrow audience. Could it be that the palpable brittleness (of paper used, binding) of these books and crudeness of color (printing), the ‘feel’ and ‘look’ of these books as one held them in hands or browsed through, played a key role in determining their status and sales? In other words, to what extent are these books liable to be judged by their content or visual style (degree/versions of ‘realism’), even if there is any consistency to be found? The marketing strategies, as well as most appraisals (journalistic or academic) tend to focus on the kind or quality of storytelling (in comics idiom) and their purported appeal – what the books contain and how they are read. There is a difference though: marketing policies take these material qualities as their springboard in a sense – their objective being legitimization of these products (particular arrangement of material properties) as they are. The academic reflections, on the other hand, tend to regard these properties as having little or no importance even when being attentive to their market, except perhaps for assigning some importance to the book covers. Both, eventually, relegate these indicators, willingly or not, making them look like incidental or accidental appendages. My contention is that these are actually indispensable and at least as fundamental to these literatures as are the quality, stylistics and ideological implications of their ‘content’.

My samples vary from ACK issues and comics published during 1970s and later to other examples of popular illustrated literature published by recognized publishing houses

\textsuperscript{120} By ‘standard/s’ I mean to include both technology and actual props used.
(NBT, CBT)\textsuperscript{121}. Let me present the results first and then we would look at it from a comparative (though not exhaustive, due to reasons of space and my own incapability) perspective that should give us some idea about these neglected aspects of the ‘market’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serial No.</th>
<th>Sample name</th>
<th>Thickness\textsuperscript{122} (x .001 mm.)</th>
<th>G.S.M. (approx.)</th>
<th>Whether coated</th>
<th>Quality of paper (trade name)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>ACK bumper issue, no. 3: Tales from the Panchantantra (1\textsuperscript{st} generation\textsuperscript{123}, 1982, Rs. 9)</td>
<td>71.5</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Better-quality standard newsprint, also known as cream wove\textsuperscript{124} or white printing paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>ACK issue: Sati and Shiva (2\textsuperscript{nd} generation, 1994, Rs. 15)</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>Uncoated, but with fillers\textsuperscript{125}</td>
<td>Map litho</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>ACK issue:</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Map litho</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{121} I cannot but acknowledge my debt to those who helped me unconditionally in satisfying my queries and often went out of their way to do that. The personnel at the department of Printing Enginnering, Jadavpur University and four individuals (whom I do not name here) who are actively involved with the printing/publishing trade in and around Calcutta, as well as a few others who kindly let me visit their printing presses and answered my questions with patience, have actually made me understand that reading a book or developing an intellectual understanding of its content not only comes last but often the least difficult thing to do. It is indeed unfortunate that their (publisher, printer, compositor, binder, vendor) valuable work remains undocumented and will continue to be so in all likelihood. R. Darnton provides a rough schema of the network of book production and circulation in an introductory essay. Although I do not find his Venn diagrams drawn to my satisfaction, it is useful for anyone yet uninitiated. See Darnton, ‘What is the History of Books?’, Daedalus 111.3 (Summer 1982).

\textsuperscript{122} For measuring thickness and G.S. M. (gram per square meter, the standard measuring unit for area density of paper), four uncolored, square-shaped samples (per item) were selected and examined. The result shown is the arithmetic mean of these samples in each case.

\textsuperscript{123} The ‘generations’ are so called after the kind of paper used, rising gradually in quality.

\textsuperscript{124} Used previously, during the 1970s and 1980s, chiefly for printing textbooks. It is creamish in color.

\textsuperscript{125} ‘Fillers’, in popular parlance, refer to limestone or similar material (Calcium Bi-carbonate) added to uncoated paper. It reduces porosity of the paper and adds smoothness, making it more seasoned and amenable to better print resolution, especially in case of color printing.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serial No.</th>
<th>Sample name</th>
<th>Thickness(^{122}) (x .001 mm.)</th>
<th>G.S.M. (approx.)</th>
<th>Whether coated</th>
<th>Quality of paper (trade name)</th>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td><em>Chobitey Ramayan</em> (Shishu Sahitya Samsad, 47(^{th}) reprint, 2005, originally published in 1956, Calcutta, Rs. 24)</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>Uncoated, with fillers</td>
<td>Map litho</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td><em>Comics World/Comics Digest</em> (Diamond Comics, vol. 39, n.d., New Delhi, Rs. 30)</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Newsprint</td>
</tr>
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<td>6.</td>
<td><em>Havildar Bahadur aur Professor Tunda-Tu etc.</em> (Manoj Chitra Katha, New Delhi, n.d., Rs. 25)</td>
<td>75.5</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Standard newsprint or white print</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td><em>Bank Dakatir Jaaley</em>(^{126}) (Super Comics, no. 13, Calcutta, Rs. 5), B/W(^{127})</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>Uncoated, with fillers</td>
<td>Standard newsprint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td><em>Tales for All Times</em></td>
<td>70</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>Uncoated, Better quality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{126}\) Roughly translated as: ‘(Caught in) The Web of Bank Robbery’. The Bengali word ‘Jaaley’ is not very easily translatable because of its multiple evocations and homonyms in popular parlance, precisely the reason behind its currency. This one, along with Chobitey Ramayan, are the two Bengali comic books among the items presented. The latter is, as mentioned elsewhere, possibly the first comic book to be published in India, even before the widely popular and multi-lingual syndication Indrajal Comics of the TOI group entered the market and had a pan-Indian audience for the first time.

\(^{127}\) The only black-and white or monochrome print item among the samples. The illustrations in Chobitey Ramayan appear in three different colors: blue, orange and black.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serial No.</th>
<th>Sample name</th>
<th>Thickness(^{122}) (x .001 mm.)</th>
<th>G.S.M. (approx.)</th>
<th>Whether coated</th>
<th>Quality of paper (trade name)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Nehru Bal Pustakalaya, no. 17, a wing of National Book Trust, New Delhi, 3(^{rd}) edition, 1983, originally published in 1971, revised price Rs. 5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>with generous amount of fillers, close to map litho</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td><em>Treasury of Indian Tales</em>, vol. 1 (Children’s Book Trust, reprinted 2007, originally published in 1967, New Delhi, Rs. 45)</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Art paper</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The facts presented above give us some elementary ideas regarding the kind of paper used for comics and other illustrated literature for children, mostly restricted to popular variety but internally differentiated across price range. In some cases the items are not strictly comparable due to reasons of publication date or reprint – it was not possible to procure a copy of the first *Chobitey Ramayan* for example, to check whether the paper
used then was different. It was, in all probability, coarser as the quality of paper now known as ‘map litho’ (having 65-80 G.S.M., a rough figure, as I had to depend on personal interpretations\(^{128}\)) did not exist at that point of time in the Indian market. It followed the generation of paper known as white cream wove during the 1970s. We can safely deduce that before that time, textbooks and illustrated (colored or not) books were printed on similar-quality papers unless one went for a really costly production – clearly a difficult business proposition in a country still rattling under shortage of food. Another kind of paper in use for these comics, both B/W and in color, was the glazed newsprint, as in comics based on The Bible\(^ {129}\).

All ACKs were and still are done in four-color (CMYK) offset method, so is every other book targeted at middle-class children or young readers – to make them cost-effective and saleable. It is of considerable significance that Indrajal Comics was published by a big newspaper group (still the largest in India in terms of readership/sales) and on cheap newsprint – it goes to show what TOI thought of comics as a (‘literary’) product and its presumed readers, leaving aside the questions of optimizing profit\(^ {130}\). Pai’s own stint with Indrajal Comics was instrumental. Under his guidance in IBH, the quality of paper improved slightly but the size – that by then had acquired considerable acceptance as marker – remained the same (crown octavo)\(^ {131}\).

\(^{128}\) Some put it as above 80 g.s.m. which makes it close to ‘art paper’.

\(^{129}\) See the next chapter for illustration from one such Bible comics.

\(^{130}\) Another issue I leave aside because of lack of first-hand information is that of procuring newsprint by these large media houses. It is common knowledge that there was (and still is) an official benchmark or ceiling regarding the import of newsprint, just as there are ways to move around the law by floating ‘fake’ but registered companies.

\(^{131}\) These ACK comics and many school textbooks used the same (or similar quality) mass-supplied cream-wove paper for printing.
In some sense, the bigger size of *Chobitey Ramayan/Mahabharat* (demy quarto) would readily place it in the ‘children’s books’ category, not to mention the simpler composition (dominated by visuals; a single, often numbered, commentary box per panel, but the panels, unlike those in ACK, are often not outlined). Whereas the ACKs, with structured, clearly-marked rectangular panels and other standards of verbal-visual correspondence peculiar to the comic form (balloons, bubbles, sonic effects, commentary box etc.), would make for easy consumption by young adults (presumably) up to 14 years of age. The more ‘adult’ content (bank robbery, heist, spying, mafiosi, terrorism, drugs, revenge, and gore) of the *Indrajal* and *Super Comics* would make them dearer to a more mature audience and is less likely to be approved by parents. These two kinds of comic books, then, although formally similar (coarse pages\textsuperscript{132}, bad printing, realistic clear-line drawing smeared in flat, raw colors), presumably share a borderline audience in their adolescence.

Until the *second generation* of ACKs arrived, there was not much to distinguish among these two kinds materially (size, length, quality of printing, and availability in bookshops or ‘shelf-life’). And although there could have been a gradation between the two audiences in terms of age or social acceptability\textsuperscript{133}, such bonded clusters are impossible to sustain. Both would be available in book-shops, especially small vendors (typically, in a railway station), where the audience could browse and buy.

\textsuperscript{132} Especially in case of Indrajal Comics one could almost feel the fiber and the pages would easily become soiled, crumpled or torn at edges. The cheap look was a palpable marker of their repeatable consumability.

\textsuperscript{133} I would not say ‘gender’ in the same breath, because it is much more complicated. Both were certainly and unabashedly gendered (though not in the same way, neither was gender sensitivity anywhere nearly as common as it is now), but so say that the muscular, caped, mythical superhero Phantom was less liked by (say) 10-year old girls than the female companion of Bahadur and schoolteacher-karateka Bela would be a hopelessly unqualified observation. Neither was the Rani of Jhansi or Sultana Razia any less popular among the boys of similar age.
The comics ‘digest’ issue included in the samples presents about twenty different strips involving characters from home-bred (Jataka, Betal Panchabimsati and Birbal stories, and Diamond’s own characters Chacha Chaudhury, Billu and Pinki) to those popular all over the world (e.g. Calvin and Hobbes, James Bond, Archie-Veronica) in Bengali\textsuperscript{134}, as well as snippets of news, advertisements/promotionals and photographs more suitable to a lifestyle magazine, making it impossible to place it in any single category. The foreword by the present owner of the publishing house, Mr. Gulshan Rai of Diamond Comics, is in a league of its own. It addresses prospective readers as ordinary citizens who can ‘make it’ in their life just like the successful, famous personalities in any field: a bit of ‘superhero element’ but delivered in a crassly instrumental language. Although the professions cited are socially accepted ones, such as doctors, teachers and administrator-bureaucrats, but Rai cannot certainly be held as being conservative as any profession affording fame and money would make the grade. Again, the indicator is the material: the motley content, coarse page and poor quality of color illustrations. Rai advises patience and persistent industry and ends with a call to make ‘our’ life illustrious. The advertisements on the back cover are mostly those of magazines for competitive examinations or G.K. refresher books by an institute providing private ‘coaching’ and career consultancy. The range of consumer durables presented\textsuperscript{135} on a single page (p. 82, also the last page) is astonishing in terms of variety: a latest DVD-R player by the Japanese electronic appliances company ‘Sharp’, another high-end (priced at Rs. 150000

\textsuperscript{134} The ‘original’ would have contained stories both in Hindi and English, but this is a translated issue. Most probably the syndications are in violation of copyright laws. Rai’s USP, by his own admission, is to supply everything (acquaintance with famous stories, characters, humor, knowledge, whatever can be encapsulated in printed or graphic form in short) at a cheaper cost than other publishers at his readers’ doorstep. Predictably, such single-point populism and quality control are strange bedfellows.

\textsuperscript{135} One is not sure how to look at them, each with a photograph: as pieces of G.K., or promotional literature for gadgets and the respective companies.
about ten years back), ‘imported’ home theater system with multiple applications by a lesser known Scottish company, an ‘incinerating’ toilet for home use (called ‘Incinolet’, a Texas-based product) that uses electric heat to turn human excreta to ashes, and the latest album by the pop-soul diva Celine Dion of the ‘Titanic’ fame!

After such a roller-coaster ride in the world of popular magazine addressed to an inchoate audience, we return to the issue under discussion. All the books but one presented above in the table share one feature – they are manually side-stapled paperbacks. Although the covers of the books are laminated and plastic-coated in most cases (apart from Bahadur, Chobitey Ramayan, and the NBT book) to make them look shiny and colorful on the stands, the colors in illustrations bleed on numerous occasions, due to inferior printing technology used – more specifically the loopholes in the mechanism known as ‘masking’ whereby films/transparencies are made to transfer the finished drawings on to page. Hence, often the illustrator or colorist is not at fault even though color dots erroneously overlap, slide or go out of their intended frame. This, then, is one specific technological instance that gives these comic books their particular ‘pulpy’ appeal. Only the CBT book, a paperback but of a bigger length, is stitched and then

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136 Incidentally, the digest contains a small article on improving human memory and ‘taste’ (ruchi) by Anant Pai. Diamond Comics also acquired the sole distribution rights for the Hindi ACKs but the deal was discontinued during the mid-1990s after some financial disagreements and allegations on both sides.

137 Actually the covers are heavily coated on both sides to increase the strength of material and make them smooth and glossy.

138 The dots are, of course, not visible to the naked eye especially when evenly printed on good paper but only when looked at through a magnifying glass. In many Indrajal or ACK issues, however, they are quite apparent. With second-generation ACKs, such bleeds become less visible. Diverting from the point a little, many a graphic illustration by Roy Lichtenstein turn this principle of color printing inside out – the dots come to surface as formal element rather than ‘hidden’ technological effect that impart a ‘mechanical’ smoothness and even distribution or shades of color.

139 I use the word technology here in a limited, instrumental sense to explain the material condition/s of what I call their ‘raw’ look or what Chandra characterizes, figuratively but perceptively, as their distinctive, ‘excessive’ visual form. The excess pertains at least as much to the effects of mass-scale
pasted. And as already noted, it is the only one that uses art paper, and the resultant quality of production is comparable with any decent international publication.

Another book that I do not include among the samples (because small and all-white square-shaped samples could not be taken from the pages daubed in orange color along all, i.e. three, outer lines of breadth and length) is a finely produced history book for children and adolescents, titled *This India*, written by Sheila Dhar (PLATE 1 and PLATE 2). It employs ‘natural shade’ map litho paper and uses black-white as well as color photographs, decorative patterns (often in miniature or folk art-style), illustrations and reproduction of old paintings. Designed and illustrated by A. S. Ramachandran140, the visuals are interspersed with words and sometimes the verbal text is super-imposed (keeping the visual, be it a reproduced photograph or drawn design, in ‘soft focus’) to create a mise-en-scene effect. Originally published in 1973141, this Publications Division book is largely, and strangely, unknown142.

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140 He is an artist (and erstwhile teacher of art history) of considerable achievements in various media, e.g. oil, water color and ink as well as ceramics, bronze sculpture and miniature paintings. He hails from Kerala and was a student in Kala Bhavana, Shantiniketan, under the likes of Nandalal Bose, Ramkinkar Baij and Binodebehari Mukherjee. Reproductions of his works can be seen on www.artoframachandran.com.

141 My own copy is a reprint from January, 1990. The foreword presents a reproduction of a hand-written letter by Indira Gandhi.

142 I was not aware of its existence until a chance look through the National Library catalogues in Kolkata. The reactions of my friends, colleagues as well as senior people associated with the publishing trade were no different. Being an official publication, its unfortunate fate is not really strange, on second thought. I have not seen a copy of this book anywhere to this date other than the Publications Division’s designated sales outlet.
The only organization that could have introduced innovative changes in this field, the New Delhi-based National Book Trust established ten years after independence – following Nehru’s active involvement\(^\text{143}\) – as an autonomous body under the Ministry of Education, was primarily geared to make books available at *nominal cost*. And, like many fully official/ ‘national’ bodies, it has lacked in active promotion and penetration of sales.

Growing up as a kid in the northern suburbs of Calcutta in late 1970s and early 80s, it was not possible to get hold of these books – some of them admittedly imaginative, well-written and pleasantly (though sparsely, often in two colors) illustrated and reasonably cheap – unless one traveled to the city bookstores and that too usually during book fairs.

The situation has not changed much to this day and possibly for worse. While the children’s literature business has gone up in volume and quality, NBT’s only claim has been to reiterate the fact they were the pioneers in this whole enterprise of promoting

\(^{143}\) Three other national bodies that came up simultaneously with NBT are still important players in the field of disseminating public education and setting a ‘taste’ for literature: the Sahitya Akademi, NCERT and the Publications Division under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.
‘non-texts’ among kids to protract a healthy balance to the drudgery of school curriculum\textsuperscript{144}.

The NBT has a special wing devoted to children’s literature called NCCL (National Center for Children’s Literature or Rashtriya Bal Sahitya Kendra) that was set up in 1993, following the recommendations of the Education Commission in 1987 during Rajiv Gandhi’s prime ministerial tenure. That, and the lesser known Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children, a voluntary body set up in 1981 by K Shankar Pillai of Children’s Book Trust, are the two registered bodies dedicated only to children’s literature functioning in India at present\textsuperscript{145}. Both these organizations conduct periodic and annual events and competitions where children participate (storytelling, illustration), take part in international book fairs, hold seminars or book fairs themselves and do small but regular promotional activities in the field\textsuperscript{146}. The CBT, a publishing house that continues to receive active government support in terms of financial and other favors, is a tad more professionally run\textsuperscript{147}.

\textsuperscript{144} My views are based on the interviews that were carried out in the NBT office (located in Vasant Kunj, south Delhi) in September, 2009, as part of my field study connected to the present research project. During the same period I also visited the Children’s Book Trust office in central Delhi and conducted interviews.

\textsuperscript{145} Shankar, as he is usually known, started his career as a political cartoonist and was known to be close to the Congress party and the Nehru family that has been the seat of elite political leadership since independence. He closed down his famous magazine titled Shankar’s Weekly in 1975 and focused on promotion of children’s literature. The CBT was set up the same year as NBT. The CBT also hosts a museum of dolls personally collected by him over the years and is still visited by children accompanied by their parents.

\textsuperscript{146} The NBT, for instance, has a few vans that travel throughout the country function as mobile libraries. They also have a Readers’ Club (Pathak Manch) that especially look to involve rural children by supplying books and organize playful competitions (quiz, drawing, mime) centered around the (medium of the) book.

\textsuperscript{147} They have a fully functioning library where children’s illustrations (especially those awarded in competitions) are carefully preserved and exhibited. The ‘Association’ is, as per the information supplied on the website, the Indian section of the International Board of Books for Young People (IBBY), a non-profit organization based in Switzerland, having participants from 69 other countries.
The NBT and CBT were fortunate to own their own publishing units. Especially the latter had a large infrastructure dedicated to a relatively small number of books (and later a monthly magazine), and only for children\textsuperscript{148}. The TOI presumably used their influence to obtain an additional amount of newsprint for Indrajal Comics and virtually monopolized the comics business before ACK made inroads. IBH being a large importer of foreign books as well as a publisher of magazines, coffee-table books, fiction and non-fiction, had a fair idea of the market and set their printing preferences accordingly. Manoj, Raj and Diamond were also publishing houses of similar kind, though much smaller in terms of volume and investment. These three publishers deal in the trade category called Pocket Books, more or less coterminous with small-sized, cheap paperbacks, originally meant to be carried inside the pockets of a long coat\textsuperscript{149}. The topics cover a wide range starting from dime novels to spirituality books to alternative medicine, and the paradigmatic case of this business principle is, to my mind, illustrated by Diamond Comics. The present owner inherited the family business (now in its third generation) that hailed from Lahore during the colonial period, had to survive in the fiercely competitive \textit{bazaar} economy typical of north India since the nineteenth century, and make the most of it by every

\textsuperscript{148} Now CBT makes considerable fortune by renting out the press to other publishing houses (interview with Naveen Menon, a senior writer with CBT and the editor of their magazine, ‘Children’s World’, September 22, 2009).

\textsuperscript{149} The company named ‘Pocket Books’, a wing of Simon and Shuster, is not to be confused with this term. The now well-known company Penguin specialized in this business of producing paperback editions of fiction at an affordable price (after buying copyrights) worldwide.
The particular book-product is actually secondary, even accidental, or at best a catalyst between production (printing-binding-packaging) and sales. The Pai-style sense of vocation is quite an alien idea here, even an intellectual’s illusion.

ACKs were printed in an intaglio printing process known as (roll-fed, as distinguished from sheet-fed) rotogravure, one of the fastest processes in the business. It is also used for newspaper photo features to magazines and product packaging. ‘Gravure’, as it is sometimes referred to in short form, is an industrial printing process especially suited for illustrated books or magazines having a high print-run, often in excess of 1 million copies. This particular technology originated in Europe during 1930-40s. Before that, the most widely used technique was relief printing or letter-press printing using wood-blocks (later metal blocks) that used a direct printing method. The main disadvantage of relief or letter-press printing was the time taken for detailed preparation of a type foundry (storage for moveable types of different sizes, and one such set for every language/script) and regular wear-and-tear of these types because of direct contact or friction with paper during printing. The intaglio method avoided such complications by engraving onto a cylindrical image carrier or image cells that rolled in a rotary or ‘wave’ system. Also, the cells could be adjusted according to the amount of ink to be used for a particular printed

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150 The Raj Comics (or Raja Pocket Books) office (that double up as studio and warehouse) is rather exceptional in showcasing large wall paintings of scenes depicting their superheroes such as Nagraj or Commando Dhruv, or scenes from those comics. No other business houses that I visited, including IBH/ACK, are (at least apparently) nearly as passionate about the comics form.

151 A common practice during the late 19th and early 20th century among trained studio artists, at least for those who could afford it, was to have their works printed in Germany.
product. It afforded speed, evenly spread colors and better resolution – gravure can imprint 200-250 dots whereas one gets a maximum of 65-120 dots per square inch in case of direct printing. However, the images, including the letters and ‘solids’ (perspectives in case of ACK), are always printed in dots that are often visible to the naked eye. Another way of making the print run cost-effective as production increased because of translations (this aspect of profit was directly proportional to the number of languages) was to have all the colored portions of each and every copy of a particular ACK issue printed at one go. Then once the translated scripts came in, the only task left was to change the Key (Black) cylinder to print the dialogues in different scripts. That gave IBH-ACK team a greater control over production too – the only task was to find distributors in different areas.

The advantages – speed, uniform quality, adjustability and cost-effectiveness – of this process far outran the finer demands of a tutored and specialized readership, thus making it an automatic choice for a product like ACK (and other comic books) that aim at attracting a large middlebrow audience. We will end with a few surmises as to the nature and extent of role played by technology in deciding the issues of reception. For one, the standardization of books as reading material and cultural product shored up a qualitatively different ‘taste’. This new category of literature was marked by its ‘accessibility’ in more than one sense. It was made available at one’s convenience, cheap, and offered instant gratification to anyone who was literate. The enjoyment could be
repeated and renewed with the same guarantee – that was the peculiar ‘appeal’ of this literature. For a young reader, the somewhat ill-printed colorful visuals of ACK had certain magical lure – it laid out the battle cry of a charging cavalry in medieval Rajasthan or a gigantic demon gobbling up puny humans. But much as it (re-)presented events from history and mythology in naturalist details, the power of print was totalizing. There was nothing that it would not fit within its terms of (re-)presentation, nor anything outside. It would be relevant to recall what Benjamin says, or shall we say predicts, about the power of industrial reproducibility of artwork: that apart from dispelling the aura, it brings about a change in the *mode of sense-perception itself*. It is an *aesthetic* change also in this sense.\footnote{As Benjamin points out, the word ‘aesthetic’ applies in two senses: first, as to the status as art-object, and as sense-perception – the etymological sense.} It is hard to whether ACK or similar popular graphic material, read by generations of youngsters whose constitution constantly kept changing, had such an effect.\footnote{The story might alter considerably if and when the same story-materials, made available in digital media, catch the imagination of the present generation of youngsters. But till now the print versions continue to dominate the animations of ACK or Tinkle characters as well as dramatic representation on television (with human actors).} But the comics form, a particularly advanced form in print technology, certainly marked a defining moment in the recent history of popular children’s stories in India.