CHAPTER-1
INTRODUCTION

I: The Indian Middle Class: A Contradictory Category

Although several scholars have attempted to define the Indian middle class, analyzing its historical emergence in the colonial period and its hegemonic role after independence yet, the term ‘middle class’ is one of the ambiguous and obscure terms which are still being defined and contested. As a result, no single definition is considered adequate to represent exclusively what the Indian middle class stands for. Any opinion about the Indian middle class is skeptically received because it is difficult to define the Indian middle class, which has been shaped by a long historical time of rapid transformations, occurring over the period of time. Debating the definition of the middle class, E. O. Wright (1985) rhetorically comments that the term middle class lends a sense of embarrassment to the scholars of class theory due to the conceptual complexity in defining the middle class. However, scholars have given a range of definitions, which seem to be contextually applicable to the Indian middle class. The difficulty of defining the Indian middle class stems from both the existence of heterogeneous elements within the middle class and due to the fact that the middle class is always in the making.

In spite of conceptual complexity, which renders any single definition incapable of accommodating all heterogeneous elements of the Indian middle class, scholars have attempted to define the Indian middle class, deploying different criteria like income level, educational background or consumption patterns. The middle class is generally defined in terms of principal demographic, economic and social characteristics. Even the singular term ‘the middle class’ has been challenged due its tendency to overlook the heterogeneous elements that characterize the middle class existence. The Indian middle class is perceived as differentiated internally to such an extent that it has come to be treated as ‘middle classes’. Due to the existence of heterogeneous elements in the social composition of the Indian middle class, it is debated that the term ‘middle class’ would stereotype the heterogeneous existence of the Indian middle class, leading to spurious conclusion about the Indian middle class. In the recent times, scholars have started using the plural term ‘middle classes’ in their analysis of the role played by the emerging social category of ‘new middle classes’ in developing new consumer societies.
A variety of public discourses about the identity and practices of the new Indian middle class have been produced over the period of time. The historical emergence of the Indian middle class in the colonial period and its socio-political role in the post-independence India have been analyzed from several perspectives. The social category of new middle classes in India has been studied from a sociological perspective by Gurchain Singh (1985), Mishra (1961) and D.L. Sheth (1999), from a consumer perspective by Leela Fernandes (2006), Mazzarella (2003) and Brosius (2005), from the perspective of media representation by Varma (1998), Mankekar (1999), Liechty (2003) and Breckenridge (1995). Andre Beteille (2001), who analyzed the middle class from a Marxist framework, argues that occupational and employment status are the two most significant criteria for defining the middle classes, though education and income are widely used. Pranab Bardhan (1984) has provided a conceptual framework as ‘bureaucratic –managerial –intellectual’ to analyze the central, self-perpetuating role that the middle class has played in the construction of hegemonic class coalition in the Nehruvian period. He points out the role of the professional middle class and white-collar workers in influencing networks of patronage through the distribution of economic resources, who, benefitted by such patronage, become “dominant propriety classes”. E.Sridharan (2004) has used combined criteria of income levels with non-manual occupational status in his analysis of the Indian middle class. There have been various attempts, claims and criteria that go into defining this ever contesting as well as emerging class.

The accumulation of the cultural capital through education and professional occupation and its political claim of public representation led to the formation of the Indian middle class in the colonial India. Aijaz Ahmad approaches the social category in terms of its political assertion and emphasizes the sections of the middle class that have played important role in politics:

Far from being mere “agents” of the ruling classes or a mere “vacillating mass”… the intermediate and auxiliary classes of the periphery occupy a strategic in the economy and politics of their countries, thus obtaining power and initiatives which make it possible for them to struggle for political dominance over other classes, including the bourgeoisie. (‘Class, Nation’44)
Ashok Rudra has defined the Indian middle class as a ruling class, “one that the policies pursued by state, objectively and in the long-run, serve to further the interests of that class at the cost of the interests of other non-ruling classes. There may be more than one ruling class and in that case we talk of a coalition of ruling classes” (143). Fernandes (2006) has emphasized the ‘newness’ of the Indian middle class in the context of liberalization. For her, the growing visibility of the new Indian middle class marks the reconstruction of national culture, representing a shift from the older ideologies of a state –managed economy to a middle class-based culture of consumption (xv). She has linked the rise of the new middle class with the emergence of consumer culture marked by the availability of new commodities and increasing role of consumption in creating social status. She argues that the new Indian middle class “represents the political construction of a social group that operates as a proponent of economic liberalization” and its newness signifies “a process of production of a distinctive social and political identity that represents and lays claim to the benefits of liberalization” (xviii). Given the conceptual complexity, stemming from the heterogeneous reality of the Indian middle class, the social category of middle class in the Indian context is not perceived as a monolithic category. As Sridharan has asserted that as the middle class is “highly fractionalized and layered,” (“The Political” 4) it is suggested that the historical processes and contemporary trends should be incorporated in any discussion of the Indian middle class. Varma also emphasizes the role of historical processes in the emergence and evolution of the Indian middle class:

There was much debate about its actual size, its consumption patterns, and the pace of its growth in the years to come. But in the general euphoria of change and anticipation what seemed to have been overlooked was that the class in question was not conjured up overnight: it had a past and a history, which preceded its great discovery as a consumerist predator. (x)

Donner and Neve also suggest that both the historical processes and temporality should be included in the definition of the Indian middle class. They contend that “middle classiness…. is as much marked by both continuities and ongoing transformations around family values, communal moralities and gender ideals as it is challenged by the influx of commodities and their appropriation” (10).
They further argue that the use of class as a noun should be avoided, as it tends to produce confusion at conceptual level. On the contrary, Deshpande suggests that the middle class should not be analyzed as a sociological category instead; it is to be taken as a proper noun as the term is used by the Indian ruling class to refer to itself (qtd. in Baviskar and Ray 7). The middle class signifies a values system and moral framework, with which the ruling class identifies, and is used as “classificatory practice” to distinguish itself from the other classes in order to stake claim to the nation. The Indian middle class derives its political power from its claim to represent the ‘common man’. It is the ideological role of articulating hegemonic values and beliefs that demarcates middle class politics. Deshpande defines the Indian middle as an ideological practice:

Middle class is the class that articulates the hegemony of the ruling bloc. It both (a) expresses this hegemony by translating the relations of domination into the language of legitimation; and (b) mediates the relationship between classes within the ruling bloc, as well as between this bloc and other classes. (Contemporary India 139)

He further adds that middle class is mainly engaged in the production and dissemination of ideologies. While the elite segment of the middle class involves in the production of ideologies, the mass fraction “engages in the exemplary consumption of ideologies thus investing them with social legitimacy” (141).

The Indian middle class emerged in the late 19th and 20th centuries through their active participation in the colonial projects, such as education, administration and social reforms. The educational policy was introduced as a part of the cultural politics to create a class of mediators, who could be “Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and intellect” (qtd. in Fernandes 3). They were created and trained in the ‘Western perspective’ in order to “raise up an English educated middle class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern” (Macaulay qtd. in Jaffrelot and Veer 14). The British rule transformed the structure of Indian society by producing a class of intermediaries that could serve as a link between the colonized people and colonizers. This class came to “constitute the political class which, playing the leadership role, organized the freedom struggle and led the country to her independence from the foreign rule” (Bhatia 21). In the colonial period, the term middle class implied the culture of government servants, lawyers,
doctors and employees working in private business, who tended to perceive themselves as modern, nationalist elite (Donner 2011; Ahmad and Reifed 2001). Mishra also points out the shaping role of the Western education in constructing the character of the Indian middle class in the colonial period:

These ideas and institutions of a middle class social order were imported into India. They did not grow from within. They were implanted in the country without comparable development in its economy and social institutions. The middle class which the British aimed at creating was to be a class of imitators, not the originators of new values and methods. (11)

The Indian middle class was nurtured economically by the British system in such a way that it could not develop itself into economically independent category. The structural restraints imposed by the British policy made the middle class dependent on education to gain access to economic power (Mishra 1961). Due to the British policies, the English education became a distinctive marker of the character of the Indian middle class, situating them in an ambiguous relationship with both the traditional elites and with other marginalized social groups. Nehru reflects the contradictory nature of the Indian middle class in his book Discovery of India (1946):

I was not an admirer of my own class or kind, and yet inevitably looked to it for leadership in the struggle for India’s salvation; that middle class felt caged and circumscribed and wanted to grow and develop itself. Unable to do within the framework of British rule, a spirit of revolt grew against this rule, and yet this spirit was not directed against the structure that crushed us. It sought to retain it and control it by displacing the British. These middle classes were too much the product of that structure to challenge it and seek to uproot it. (57)

As Nehru rightly suggests that the psyche of the Indian nationalists is shaped by their exposure to the Western thought through education, the inculcation of the Western values placed them in an ambivalent relationship with the West. Mesmerized by the Western culture and their modern notions of nation, democracy and citizenship, the Indian nationalists began to imagine building an independent nation,
corresponding to the Western nations. However the inculcation of the Western values produced inferior complex in the Indian people, who began to look down upon their own culture, setting the Western culture as superior to the Indian culture. To release the Indians from the agonizing sense of inferiority, they projected the spiritual India as superior to the Western material culture (Chatterjee 1993). They exploited the private sphere as a cultural weapon to fight against the colonizer. Tanika Sarkar (2001) argues that the middle class, devoid of economic and political power in the colonial India, turned to the cultural sphere to define and assert their social identity. Chatterjee also points out that the identity of the middle class rested on its cultural leadership of the indigenous people (The Nation36). In the similar vein, analyzing the emergence of middle class in the city of Lucknow, Joshi suggests that the middle class in colonial India was constituted by its role as “cultural entrepreneurs.” Shaped by the Western education, the educated class of India took the task of reforming their own culture in order to construct a modern national culture:

Western–educated Indians were quick to adopt this model[from England] to suit their own circumstances, and represent themselves as a middle class with a social, cultural and political agenda distinct from a ‘feudal’ or ‘decadent’ indigenous elite, as well as lower classes in need of disciplining or improvement.(Fractured Modernity8)

It was the cultural identity through which the middle class asserted itself politically to claim their rights in the colonized India. Scholars have pointed out that the political identity of the Indian middle class was defined and articulated through public discourses of respectability, moral regeneration and social reform (Chatterjee 1993; Joshi 2001; Sarkar 2001). The notions of respectability, moral values and particularly social reformism were based on what Joshi termed “fractured modernity” of the Indian middle class (2001). The Western modernity was inhabited as ‘a series of deprivations’ by the Indian middle class, producing a sense of inferiority which was further managed through the cultural project of social reform and moral regeneration (Sarkar 2001). The identity of the Indian middle class rested on its claim to be representative of the Indian culture, but these claims were further emphasized through reworking of cultural identities of religion, caste and gender in the public sphere. (Joshi 2010; Sarkar 2001; Sangari, 2001; Fernandes 2006)
The middle class, whose character was shaped by the British cultural and economic policies, their own ambiguous relationship with Western modernity, and their self-imposed role of representative of the Indian society, succeeded to achieve hegemonic role in the construction of national culture and formation of economic and political institutions, once independence was achieved. In the colonial period, the middle class played an important role in the freedom struggle; after independence, they assumed the role of political leadership and usurped all powers of the state, though rhetorically the villager was projected as an ideal citizen to be nurtured by the state. At the time of independence, the Indian middle class inherited an outlook, temperament and character, which shaped the nature of Indian society and defined the national political culture, without altering the traditional social hierarchies. The historically created dependency of the Indian middle class on the central agency continued even after independence, replacing the British rule with the Indian state. In the early years of independence, the state dependency was reinforced through educational policies, state employment and the state managed model of economic planning and development. The historical relationship of the middle class with the state shaped the nature of economic development. The complex relationship between the middle class and the state was further consolidated by the Nehruvian state model of economic development through a complex interplay between ideological, economic and cultural practices.

Fernandes (2006) maintains that the middle class implicitly represented the social group that served the role of central agency, which both influenced, and was the primary object of nationalist discourse of economic development and state policies. Rudolph and Rudolph (1987) also emphasize the same point, arguing that education and state employment consolidated the state–middle class relationships of patronage and dependency. Not only was the middle class dependent upon the state, but the state also required the support of the middle class to consolidate itself, underlining the central role of the middle class in implementation of the state sponsored policies. To consolidate itself and construct a national culture, the state actively encouraged the expansion of the Indian middle class and protected its interests in order to transform the middle class into a terrain for the consolidation and exercise of state power (Fernandes 22). Pranab Bardhan (1998) also argues that through easy access to the network of patronage and policies of the state, the professional middle class including
white-collar workers transformed itself into one of the “dominant propriety classes.” However, the middle class has simply not been a passive recipient of the benefits from the state. Rather, the middle class has pressurized the state through its political and social activities in the public sphere to legitimize their claims from time to time. Due to the increasing political assertion of the subaltern groups, which challenged the cultural hegemony of the middle class, the middle class began to assert itself in the civil society through assertive presence in media in order to retain their political power, leading to their dominant visibility in the public culture. The middle class created new public discourses in the public sphere in order to project itself as national representative, naturalizing its invested interests as public interests. Appadurai and Breckenridge (1995) argue that the emergence of new public cultures is crucial to the contemporary class identities.

Chatterjee (2004) has made a distinction between the civil society and political society in order to explain the hegemonic role of the ruling class in construction of political culture in the postindependence India. He argues that the ruling class exercises its power over the state through its assertion in the civil society by claiming to represent the interests of the “common man.” It is in the domain of civil society that the ruling class naturalizes its invested interests as interests of all. While the civil society connects the ruling class with the state, the political society mediates the relationship between the state and the subaltern groups. However, the ruling class manages to influence the state’s social and economic policies to retain their hegemonic power in the society. In spite of the socialist state’s bias towards the underprivileged groups, the Indian middle class has managed to retain its hegemonic power in the political culture through ‘passive revolution’ (Chatterjee1993; Kaviraj 1988). Instead of imparting equal power to the subaltern groups, the ruling class has shared power with the marginalized groups in a gradual process so that their dominance could not be challenged. Partha Chatterjee defines the Gramscean notion of ‘passive revolution’ in the Indian context as:

one in which the new claimants to power, lacking the social strength to launch a full–scale assault on the old dominant classes, opt for a path in which the demands of a new society are “satisfied in small doses, legally, in a reformist manner ” – in such a way that the political and
economic position of the old feudal classes is not destroyed, agrarian reform is avoided, and the popular masses especially are prevented from going through the political experience of a fundamental social transformation. (The Nation 211)

Under the influence of two charismatic personalities of Gandhi and Nehru, a set of distinctive values and norms were constructed and attributed to the Indian middle class, and the masses were expected to follow them in order to participate in the process of nation-building. Baviskar and Ray explain the value system attributed to the Indian middle class:

To be middle class was to inhabit a particular orientation towards modernity. It meant being open-minded and egalitarian; following the rule of law and not being swayed by private motive or particularistic agendas; being fiscally prudent and living within one’s means and embracing science and rationality in the public sphere. It demanded setting aside the primordial loyalties of caste and kinship and opening oneself to new affinities and associations based on merit, and to identities forged in the work place. (6)

However these values were selectively followed and easily sacrificed when they became obstacle in the realization of middle class interests and dreams. Dipankar Gupta also censures the Indian middle class for its deviation from the values it has claimed to represent:

Its commitment to principles of democracy is weak….it thrives on connections, family and patronage. Instead of animating public institutions, members of this class are constantly undermining them…the Indian middle class is an ardent advocate of privilege. (Mistaken Modernity 10)

In the similar vein, Varma also exposes its moral bankruptcy, its immunity to the prevailing poverty and deprivation, and qualifies the Indian middle class as ‘morally neutral to inequity’ (88). Even in the colonial period, the nationalist Aurobindo Ghosh described the Indian middle class metaphorically as “cheap Liverpool clothes, shoddy Brummagen wares,” the low-priced British imports, which according to him, killed “the fine and genuine textures” of traditional Indian society
Scholars like Joshi (2011) and Varma (1998) have contended that the notion of the middle class as progressive and liberal in its views is a myth (Baviskar and Ray 7). The politics of the Indian middle class embodies a set of contradictory values, which simultaneously manifest in both their private and public life. In the political culture, they can use simultaneously the language of reason and that of sentiment. They can emphasize the need for radical change, and advocate the preservation of the traditional values at the same time. They can hail democracy as a marker of Indian identity and support dictatorship if it opens up their future prospect (Joshi 2001). Varma (1998) has analyzed the politics of the Indian middle class from the Independence Day to the early 1990s, exposing its narrow approach to democracy, denouncing its character, as solely guided by ‘self-interest’.

Analyzing the comic book series *Chacha Choudhary*, the project aims at probing into the cultural politics of the Indian middle class to understand “how emerging middle class[es] construct themselves as cultural entities, how their cultural life essentially depoliticizes social life” (Liechty 15). The Indian middle class is ‘a never ending cultural project,’ and is a “constantly renegotiated cultural space—a space of ideas, values, goods, practices and embodied behaviors—in which the terms of inclusion and exclusion are endlessly tested, negotiated, and affirmed” (Liechty 15-16). Fernandes (2006) also asserts that the middle class is a cultural practice, a process which should be captured in its cultural practices. Recently, it is suggested that classes must be understood as sets of cultural processes rather than predetermined categories. The middle class is a trajectory of values and norms which have been historically created and reconstructed through representation in the cultural sphere. Mark Liechty (2003) also emphasizes that the middle class should be analyzed as a cultural performance. To emphasize his argument he quotes Louisa Schein: “There is no essence, origin, or reality prior to or outside of the enactment of a multiplicity of performances. It is the recurring regularity in performances that makes certain social norms acquire their authority, there aura of inevitability” (qtd. in Liechty 23).

Liechty adopts the idea of performativity from Judith Butler (1988) and applies it to the class theory, arguing that “class also is a reality, but one that exists only in its perpetual sociocultural enactment within a limiting ‘matrix of intelligibility’ ” (23). Maraget Somers’ work on processes of class and identity
formation is relevant in the discussion of class theory in which she turns to narrativity to analyze the cultural formation through stories (1994; 1997). For her, narratives are “stories that social actors use to make sense—indeed to act in—their lives” (“Deconstructing” 84). The middle class should be analyzed through its cultural performance because the middle class negotiates “a new space of cultural betweenness-between high and low, global and local, new and old ‘tradition’ and modernity—as it struggles to produce itself in cultural life, its members must experiment with a host of cultural stories that are by no means necessarily complementary” (Liechty 25). In the comic book *Chacha Choudhary*, the urban middle class values are enacted and performed through interlinked stories to naturalize the urban middle class as the national representative culture, legitimizing its claim to the national culture. Liechty (2003) and Donner (2011) have argued that the term middle class should not be taken as a bounded category. Rather, it is a process which signifies the tension between classes, stemming from contestations over symbolic boundaries, which remain contested through everyday practices. Through media representation, these symbolic boundaries are constructed, contested and differentiated. Rajagopal also asserts that media “re-shape the context in which politics is conceived, enacted, and understood” (“Thinking” 1). It is through communication that the socialization of those symbolic boundaries occurs, and the reader participates in the construction of class identity, creating his/her identity as a member of the class which is hegemonically represented. Different media forms, through representation, tend to evoke “feelings of closeness and reciprocity to unknown participants who may exist only in imagination” (Rajagopal 5).

As there is theoretical and conceptual ambiguity about the Indian middle classes, I will adopt an eclectic definition of the Indian middle class. In my research project, I will use the singular term ‘middle class’ as “an ideological construct intended to project a unity and coherence that papers over the internal contradictions and conflicts within this class/es” (Baviskar and Ray 10). Although the Indian middle class is marked by multiplicity in terms of social reality, I intend to focus on the urban middle class, which has been constructed and projected as the idealized representation of the Indian middle class in media representations. The ideological construction of the urban middle class was rested on the assumption that other segments of the middle class and other social groups would aspire to this idealized representation (Mankekar
1999; Fernandes 2006). Donner and Neve also contend that it is the urban politics through which class struggle is played out and the hegemony of the Indian middle class is established (15).

Spatial politics came to be an intrinsic component of the political identity of the new middle class, which has continually resurfaced in the middle class politics in the 20th century. The urban middle class has emerged as a central agent for revisioning of the Indian nation (Fernandes 2006). In the colonial period, the middle class emerged as an urban social category (Dobbin 1972; Joshi 2001; Fernandes 2006). The British rule deliberately created the Indian middle class as an urban social group by providing educational and employment opportunities in the metropolitan cities, like Chennai and Calcutta in order to deploy them as mediators between the British rule and the masses. Class distinctions were reinforced through spatial politics as they came to be known as ‘brown sahib’ so that they could not feel ‘fellow feelings’ with the masses. Encouraged and supported by the British system, a new class of ‘mimic men’ emerged and prospered in the urban space, marked by European life style and mannerism. Shaped by modern notions of nation, democracy and culture, this class awakened the national consciousness and launched a movement against the British rule. However, in the projection of national culture, the nationalists evoked the reformed ancient culture corresponding to the modern notions of society and culture, positioning themselves at the center of the national culture as representatives of the whole nation. The nationalists projected their own urban culture as the ideal Indian national culture to be followed by the masses. Consequently, the urban culture began to be seen as future India, in spite of projection of the rural culture as a cultural metaphor in the discourse of nationalism.

In the postcolonial India, the middle class dream of building an urban nation was contested by the socialist state. Although the Gandhian discourse of rural culture and the socialist inclination of the state constructed the village culture as essence of Indian culture, yet the ruling class indirectly pressurized the state to promote the urban culture through the economic and educational polices. Theoretically, the rural culture came to constitute the core of Indian culture in the national imaginary, but in practice the urban middle class evolved and flourished under protection of the developmentalist state.
In 1970s the middle class deviated from the socialist state and inclined towards the market to pursue its interests and aspirations. The public discourses began to focus on the urban middle class in the 1970s, marking the emergence of visual discourse of the middle class, which culminated in the age of liberalization in the 1990s. Consequently, both the socialist state’s emphasis on the villager as the representative of national culture and the Gandhian ideals of simplicity based on romanticization of the rural culture were gradually omitted in representation of the national culture. The last three decades of the Indian history have marked the unexpected disappearance of the rural India from the national imagination and public discourses, reinventing India exclusively based on the urban middle class. Fernandes also suggests that the spatialized patterns of the urban identity served as a central base for the emergence of civic nationalism and a class based construction of citizenship in the public sphere:

Political representation, in effect, became inextricably linked to an exclusionary middle class model of urban civic order. The project of urban development unfolded through familiar patterns of spatial politics, which included politics of slum clearance, crackdown on hawkers, and attempts to reinforce class-based forms of sociospatial segregation.” (18)

In spite of existing internal differentiations within the middle class, there is a common ground where these internal differentiations do not affect their class affiliations. The continuous contestations over urban space constitute the common thread that holds all members of the middle class together, in spite of internal differentiations. Donner and Neve also emphasize the role of common cultural and political practices that bind them together as members of the same class. They argue that the members of the Indian middle class “engage in these practices, access these institutions and produce these representations precisely because they share common aspirations and have common interests due to their class location” (17). In the similar vein, Mazzarella argues that there is a zone in which both new and old middle classes share a common cause:

the ‘new’ and the ‘old’ middle classes increasingly appear to find common cause in an urban politics of ‘livability’ – a concern, above all, with neighbourhood order, cleanliness, and decency – a politics
that loudly decries the lack of ‘civility’ that mars the modernity of the third world metropolis. (7)

As these contestations over urban space are symbolically played out, it is suggested that any attempt to analyze the middle class should focus on its manifestations in different media forms in order to capture its cultural politics (Donner 2011; Liechty 2003). Appadurai and Breckenridge argue that “national culture in countries like India is the site of an uneasy collaboration between the cultural agencies of the nation-state and the private, largely commercial agencies that dominate certain kinds of cultural production,”(6) pointing out the central role of emergence of new public cultures in the formation of class identity in India. The urban middle class is the social basis of public cultural formations. Liechty (2003) has suggested to analyze the middle class as both a performative and discursive space in order to “understand how the concept structures and enables a certain set of ‘imagined Indias’ – both utopian and dystopian – to be articulated” (Mazzarella 3). The commercial public culture is constitutive of the Indian national culture, bringing all segments of the Indian middle class into affective alignment (Dwyer and Pinney 2001). In spite of contradictions between the middle class’s socioeconomic realities and its projection of idealized middle class culture, the middle class succeeds to retain its socio-economic power in society through media representation. Through media representations, the middle class values are created and articulated to project the middle class as legitimate claimant to the nation-state. As media and the middle class are mutually constitutive, reinforcing each other’s production, a scholarly analysis of media forms like comics can help us understand the cultural politics of the Indian middle class.

II: The Evolution of Indian Comics with Reference to Chacha Choudhary Book Series

Indians comics emerged as a ‘cultural reaction’ to the dominance of foreign comics in the Indian society which were considered as inappropriate for Indian sensibility. In contrast to Western comics which were perceived as trivial, morally bankrupt and violent, Indian comics were reinvented as a ‘respectable middle class pedagogic enterprise’ in the late 1960s. Ritu Khanduri argues that in the production and consumption of Indian comics, ‘culture’ has been a resilient organizing principle (171). Scholars like Karline McLain (2009) and Pritchett and Hawley (1995) have
analyzed the role of Indian comics in shaping the national politics in the post Nehruvian period. McLain approaches Indian comics as a part of public culture, as “a crucial site for studying the ways in which dominant ideologies of religion and national identity are actively created by ongoing debate” (22). Lawrence Babb (1995) wrote in the introduction to the book Media and Transformation of Religion in South Asia that “comic books in India should be taken seriously, for they may well be among the more important channels of contact between English–educated, middle class children and South Asian religious traditions” (8). The careful appropriation of comics as a pedagogic tool to disseminate Indian values has transformed the perception of comics in the Indian culture.

The indigenous comic-creators have succeeded to change its perception from as something ‘funny’, ‘cheap entertainment’ to what Nandini Chandra (2008) calls ‘infotainment’—dissemination of cultural values in the entertaining form. Anant Pai, the founder of Amar Chitra Katha, not only recommended comics to be used as a tool to educate Indian children but also suggested to reinvent Indian comics to be used as a powerful medium to disseminate the cultural heritage of India among children. His comic book series Amar Chitra Katha (1969) represents his social mission to build “self-esteem” in Indian youth who have developed overpowering fascination with the Western culture (Chandra 2008). There is nothing comic in his comics and much emphasis has been laid on the pedagogical role of comics. His emphasis on the dissemination of ‘Indian values’ through the format of comics reflects the absence of satire and slapstick humor in these comics. Aruna Roa (2001) also contends that Indian comics emerged at the time when Indian culture was in transition and the upper middle class was anxious to hand down their cultural background to young children who were more fascinated by Western comics like Superman and Spiderman.

Indian comics can be termed as a ‘cultural intervention’ in the way Indian children were exposed to the Western culture through comics. Like Western comics and cartooning, all characters are caricatured but the ‘real effect’ is retained through the visual description of cultural background. The Indian comic creators have sanitized the form of comics by introducing indigenous forms of narration and indigenous characters, behavior pattern and cultural repertoire. In spite of Indian comics’ structural connections with the standardized form of Western comics, the scholars have pointed out its distinctiveness from the standard format of comics as
evolved in the West. In a sanitized form, Indian comics aim at filling the vacuum created by the disappearing grandmother’s stories. In the Indian context, the acceptability of comics as a serious medium owes to its standardization in accordance with middle class values and norms, projecting the middle class culture as the national culture. The appropriation of comics is seen by Chandra as “like an appropriate vehicle of smuggling in explosive matter without making it evident that something controversial was being done” (42). The appeal of comics lies in its ability to convey hegemonic meanings without any controversy. Each image is multidimensional and hence, can be too vague to be interrogated. J.S. Hawley suggests that the semantic richness of simplified form of comics should not be overlooked:

   While the comic book medium requires a fair amount of simplification, however, it does not entirely eliminate the possibility of subtlety, because it combines text and illustration and because it permits the existence of certain words outside the confines of the picture, it offers the form flexibility. (128)

Highlighting the role of particularity of comics in the way middle class values and norms are transmitted, and embedded content is perceived by the audience, leading to active alignment between class and cultural formation, Babb argues that the fluidity of comic format permits “an unprecedented degree of iconic experimentation, which in turn has generated and supported new syncretism” (6).

As scholars have emphasized that the production and circulation of various visual media require to be analyzed within the historical context in which different media forms have emerged, Indian comics emerged in the times when the discontent of the middle class was tapped into the national politics in the 1970s. The emergence of Indian comics requires to be contextualized by the middle class desire to be visible in the public sphere, which was perceived as being captured by the socialist state. In the early 1970s, when the televi-sual culture was in its infancy, the simultaneous awareness of both deficiency of local visual medium and excessive global flow of images created ‘propitious moments’ for comics, as medium, to be accepted as moving picture, a potent alternative to television. While photographic reality stresses the past, comics like television emphasize the present – reader’s immediate participation in the events depicted in the series of panels. Chandra argues that the motion of comics is more aligned with film rather than with photographic imagery.
Unlike the photographic reality that involves an awareness of what Roland Barthes says ‘having being there’, comics like film medium involves an awareness of ‘being there’ (Chandra 9). This middle class desire to be visible in the political culture can be discerned by the decisions of the Indian comic-creators to reinvent Indian comics to voice their anxieties and pass on their ‘cultural heritage’ to the next generation. McLain (2009) argues that like the proverbial Indian grandmother, who used to tell stories to acquaint children with Indian narratives and their cultural relevance, comics mark an entry point to a broader Indian storytelling traditions and folk culture.

Scholars like Babb (1995) and Pinney (2004) have pointed out that the visual interaction in Indian culture has been performative. The spectator easily absorbs the sense of reality created by the visual object. McLain (2009) has documented in her book on ACK that how the comic book has penetrated infant reader’s sense of reality. An ardent reader of Chacha Choudhary comic book, Bhavesh Bhimani wrote about everlasting influence of the comic book on his mind in his childhood, arguing that in his childhood, he was so sure that “no matter what happens, he will be saved by Chacha Choudhary and Sabu” (“The World of Chacha Chaudhary”). Comics as a form of ‘public culture’ are involved in the construction of public spaces and political imagination which are closely linked to nationalism. Thomas Inge (1990) argues that comics can be made to serve various purposes including propaganda and social cause. Like other forms of popular culture, the book is “a child of propaganda”, and is implicated in production and dissemination of ideologies (Murray qtd. in Duncan and Smith 248-49). Comics’ vulnerability to appropriation by history is also emphasized by Scott McCloud when he describes comics as “a vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images” and each image as “a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled in” (36). In the post-independent India, comics became a visual site to reframe the Indian culture as popular culture, transforming tradition into mass media. The already existing visual codes in calendar arts and posters provided a conceptual framework to appropriate comics as what Pai termed Indian comics as ‘Chitrakatha’.

The ancestry of comics, in the Indian context, can be traced back to the ‘comic papers’ of the colonial India. The vernacular Punches provided an immediate inspiration for the production of comics. The powerful fascination with Indian comics lies in its ability to connect the reader with the pre-existing artistic forms and
traditions particularly folk storytelling forms like *Akbar and Birbal* and *Panchatantra*. Stoll (2013) argues that the *Oudh Punch* marked an entry point for creators to combine both the indigenous visual and storytelling traditions and the Western form of comics.

Although political cartoons have been very popular in the Indian culture even in the colonial period, comics were not so much in vogue. Before the 1960s comics were available in the form of imported digests and book format like *Tintin, Asterix and Obelix* and *Archie*. The comics-readership consisted only of the rich English educated children who could afford the imported costly Western comics. In the year of 1964, the newspaper the *Times of India* launched Indarjal Comics to sell the syndicated Western comics which paved way for the emergence of Indian comic book culture. The Indarjal Comics launched popular Western comics like *Phantom, Flash Gordon, Mandrake*. For the First time, Western comics were translated into the vernacular languages, and different regional versions were introduced. To cater to the widening Indian market, the Indian characters were included, and the Indian culture incorporated as background to the narrative in the popular Western comics like *Phantom*, preparing the ground for indigenous comics. The heroes like *Phantom* and *Mandrake* and *Flash Gordon* were domesticated by relocating them in the Indian culture. The increasing popularity of these Western characters encouraged the local production of indigenous comic characters.

During the colonial and the first decade of the post independent India, although Western comics with their Western cultural profuseness dominated comics – readership in the first decade of independent India, the indigenous comics began to emerge as comic strip in the daily newspapers. Influenced by popularity of political cartoons sketched by Shankar Pillai and R.K.Laxman, the young cartoonist Pran Kumar Sharma, in addition to political cartoons in the newspapers, also created comic strips for the Hindi magazine *Lotpot*. His characters published in the *LotPot* magazine marked the beginning of Indian comics. He is regarded as the father of Indian comics because his comic strips are considered as earliest example of indigenous comics. As a result, several Indian newspapers also began to publish daily comic strips, setting the stage for Indian comics to emerge. At this time, the cartoonist Pran, who was associated with newspaper *Dainik Milap*, created a comic strip *Daabu*. The indigenous comic characters became mature and sophisticated in the hands of Pran
Kumar Sharma, who introduced middle class characters inspired from everyday life. His several characters like Chacha Choudhary, Billo, Pinki, Raman and Srimatiji became instantly very popular. One of the early indigenous comic strips was *Dhabbuji* created by Aabid Surti, which published in the magazine *Dharmayug*. The indigenous characters like Azad and Shuja were created as vernacular versions of Tarzan. Bahadur was most popular among earliest indigenous heroes who featured in Indrajal Comics. He was the only indigenous hero, who successfully competed with the Western characters like Phantom and Mandrake. The character of Bahadur was inspired by a book written by Taroon Kumar Bhaduri on the dacoits of Chambal. Initially, Bahadur is seen as protecting the town of Jaiharh against dacoits, but in the latter issues, he appears like a James Bond who, along with his girl friend Bela, solves the problem of the international crime. Azad was another indigenous popular hero. The handsome officer with his girl friend is depicted as cracking down on criminals and restoring harmony in the society. The character of Azad echoes the popular movies of the 1970s, featuring policemen and dacoits.

Worried by the pernicious impact of Western comics on the young mind, Anant Pai decided to launch indigenous comics to inculcate the ‘Indian’ values in the young mind by retelling classical stories in the format of comics. His association with the *Times of India* as executive helped him to make market strategies for the production of Indian comics, which he entitled as *Amar Chitra Katha*. He launched Indian comics with indigenous characters and background to cater to the already constituted comic book readership. He adapted the already established form, style and structure of Western comics, but transformed the content, setting and characters, drawing on the Indian mythological and historical characters to teach Indian values to the culturally uprooted children. The ACK was promoted as “the route to your roots”. The ACK emerged as a nationalist enterprise to disseminate Indian values in the comic format. In terms of content and characterization, the ACK was consciously created to distinguish the Indian culture from the Western culture. The heroism of the ACK marked deviation from the Western anonymous crusader, masked figure, whose identity is his dress code, consisting of mask and underwear. The heroes of the ACK are undoubtedly larger than life, yet they are recognizable representatives of Indian culture. They all are depicted as real characters, who contributed to the Indian culture in the past in their own way. In the 1970s, both Indrajal Comics and Diamond Comics introduced the Indian super heroes, who had “selfless prosocial mission, who possess
superpowers, advanced technology, mystical abilities, or highly developed physical and/or mental skills” (Coogan 77). At the same time, the Diamond Comics launched the Indian super hero Fauladi Singh, who was a humanized robot committed to eliminate aliens.

The foundation of the Raj Comics marked a new phase in the evolution of Indian comics. The Raj Comics reinvented the American super hero genre by introducing the indigenous super heroes, loosely based on the mythical heroes of Indian culture. The super heroes, like Doga, Super Commando Dhruv and Parmanu were launched, which were the Indian versions of the American superheroes in different ways. The Indian super heroes violated freely the generic conventions in order to counter the American super heroes. Only two generic conventions e.g. ‘prosocial mission’ and ‘superpowers’ were retained to qualify the Indian heroes as super heroes. The dress code of the American super heroes was repudiated because it was perceived as inappropriate in the Indian culture. The Indian super heroes are considered as mere science fiction, and adventurous heroes than super heroes as the trademark identity of the super hero –the secret identity and iconic costume –is missing in the Indian super heroes. Murthy argues that due to overwhelming impact of Western artistic vision even on the production of comics, the Indian artists have struggled to “adopt and adapt a Western form to tell Indian stories” (2).

Although in the terms of structure, Indian comics follow the standard format of comics as has been established in the West, they draw on indigenous popular cultural traditions in terms of visualization and characterization. The native visual art and Hindi cinema have shaped the imagery of these comics. The Indian super hero seems to draw considerably upon another indigenous popular culture tradition, namely Bollywood. The decade of 1970s marked the emergence and popularity of Amitabh Bachchan as the Indian superstar, the invincible action hero, who refined the idea of heroism within popular culture through his social commitment, fighting against social evils. In 1986, the Raj Comics was launched and promoted as “the home of Indian action superhero comics.” Inspired by both the American super hero Spiderman and Indian mythology, the Raj Comics introduced the character Nagraj, endowed with super powers. The immediate success of the Raj Comics was followed by the emergence of new comics publications in the Indian market. Several comics publications, like Manoj Comics, Tulsi Comics, King Comics and Fort Comics,
launched their own versions of superheroes. This was considered as the golden period of Indian comics, marked by production of variety of indigenous comic characters. The indigenous super heroes became so popular that even the Indian cinema produced movies like Mr India (1987) and Shahenshah (1988), loosely based on indigenous super heroes. Even the image of Amitabh Bachchan as ‘angry young man’ was exploited in the format of comics, and a comic book loosely based on his movies was launched. In the 1990s, the demand of comics began to decline due to the emergence of the televisual image. The emergence of the cable television and animation has overshadowed the visual appeal of the format of comics. However, the comics-publications, like ACK with its historical and mythical stories, Diamond comics and Raj Comics, have succeeded to survive in the market, in spite of dominance of television cartoons and animations.

While Anant Pai was committed to acquaint the Indian children with their cultural roots through reinventing comics, drawing on Indian mythology and history, Pran Kumar Sharma exploited the standard comic format to reflect the problems of middle class everyday life. Pran Kumar Sharma is entitled as “Walt Disney of India” by Horns in the book World Encyclopedia of Comics (1983) for his simplified and everyday life characters. All of his characters, like Chacha Choudhary, Srimatiji, Pinki, and Raman, are middle class characters, who represent the anxiety, fear and joy of the urban middle class India. Before establishing himself as comic artist, Pran Kumar Sharma worked as cartoonist and had to struggle to get his place in the tough competition, as he had to compete with the legendary cartoonist like Shankar Pillai and R.K.Laxman. In his struggle days as cartoonist, his few political cartoons were published in newspapers including the magazine Dharamyug edited by Dharamvir Bharati. In a cut-throat competition in the field of cartooning, the cartoonist Pran Kumar wanted to create original character, something his own creation. As the field of political cartooning was already mastered by the cartoonists like Laxman, he decided to create comic characters, and the result was his first comic strip Daabu, which is considered as one of the earliest examples of indigenous characters, along with Aabdi’s Daabuji. He is said to have broken the monopoly of syndicated foreign comic strips in 1960 by creating the character of Daabu. As a comic artist, he initially worked with the Hindi magazine Lotpot for which he created his finest characters like Chacha Choudhary, Pinki, and Srimatiji. Once his indigenous characters, marked by
simplicity and their easily identification with reader’s everyday life, became popular, his comic strips began to be published in several newspapers including the regional newspapers. For the cause of national integration, he created Raman, which was released by Indira Gandhi in 1984. Out of his characters, Chacha Choudhary is the most famous comic strip, which was also acquired for the exhibition in USA. His characters are so much entrenched in the reader’s psyche that the reader tends to identify his /her childhood with his characters like Chacha Chouhdary, Shrimatiji and Biloo.

What distinguishes his characters from the Western counterparts is their resemblance with Indian middle class people. Pran Kumar said in an interview that characters should be real so that people can easily identify with them. He further emphasizes realism in comic characters:

All of them were humble and ordinary. There were inspired from the -middle-class Indian life. That made them relatable to my readers. Chacha Chaudhary for example could be your average Indian man on the road. Biloo was your teenage boy next door. The fact that there was nothing special about these characters made them memorable when their tale was told. (Mahim Gupta)

His characters and stories draw on the immediate past to teach moral values to the Indian children through comic rendering of incidents, depicting the victory of good over evil. The stories in the comic book, interlinked by the dominant presence of the hero Chacha Choudhary, are borrowed from the contemporary socio-political situations. Even his characters evolve and become well equipped to new rising situations both social and political. As the Indian nation has encountered different socio-economic problems from independence up to the present time, the stories and characters in the comic book series reflect those problems, ranging from communal violence, disintegration of the nation, terrorist threats, economic depression, inflation, poverty to rising criminal activities. Pran’s characters are always updated, and can be seen engaged in present socio-political scenario. In an interview, he expressed his desire to make his characters relevant to the present. He said that his characters “kept pace with the [changing] times. When terrorism was at its peak, the country was plagued by scandals, and bomb blasts, I introduced Sabu, who was a symbol of ultimate strength (Mahim Gupta).
The comic book *Chacha Choudhary* first appeared as a comic strip in the Hindi magazine *LotPot* in 1969. In the year of 1981, the comics publication Diamond Comics decided to launch *Chacha Choudhary* as a comic book. Since then, *Chacha Choudhary* has been published and distributed by the Diamond Comics. In the 1970s the overwhelming impact of the syndicated foreign comics created the stereotypes of superheroes as muscular, good looking and generic costume which came to be perceived by the Indian artists as inappropriate for Indian children as such visualization of violence and the Western cultural would uproot the Indian children from their own culture. In order to create characters that could acquaint children with their culture, Pran decided to create realistic characters with which the reader could easily identify. He wanted to create a character, who could be easily identified as essentially Indian, down to earhand realistic, yet powerful. To create a character, who could be convincingly Indian, embodying Indian ethos, and could break the stereotype of super hero established by American super hero comics, Pran took inspiration from the historical figure Chanakya, who is considered a great adviser to the Indian king Chandra Gupta Maurya. He himself narrated the story of creation of the character of Chacha Choudhary:

I had seen Western comics and their superheroes, the muscular, good-looking Phantom, Superman, and Batman, but I wanted to change that perception, so I thought, 'What if I break the stereotype of a comic book hero'. I thought of an old man, short, not very good looking and a little frail too, but I based him on Chanakya and gave him the power of wit. This is how Chacha Chaudhary was conceived. (Alok Sharma)

By creating an old man as a hero, who can solve any problem with his sharp mind “which works faster than computer,” he subverts the American super hero genre. Although, Chacha Choudhary is perceived as an adventurous hero, he was created as a reaction to the pernicious effect of Western super heroes on Indian readers. Pran himself expressed his cultural anxiety in the consumption of Western comics:

In those days, foreign comics had a monopoly over India. These, however, could not be understood by majority of the people as they depicted on alien culture. So, I decided to create Indian comics having our own characters and based on local themes”("Man behind Chacha Chaudhary").
The cultural reaction to the super hero genre can be discerned in the way the genre has been subverted and appropriated in creation of the character of Chacha Choudhary. Invoking both the historical and mythical depiction of wisdom as possession of an old man in the Indian culture, the hegemonic role of the Western young hero is transferred to the old man and the generic costume and character are appropriated in the character of Sabu. In terms of appearance and physical power, it is Sabu, who resembles the American super hero, but in the comic book he is seen as a subordinate to the wise old man Chacha Choudhary. In the Indian culture, adulthood is linked with aggression, impulsive behavior and lack of reasoning, and old age is linked with wisdom and rational thinking. Above all, experience is proportionately associated with capacity to take right decisions. The individualistic tendencies, without the guidance of wise people, are distrusted in the Indian context. Consequently, the young aggressive and independent hero in the American super hero comics was highly doubted by the emerging cartoonists as inappropriate for the Indian children. The comic format had to be sanitized and reinvented to produce indigenous comics. Interestingly, the form of comics, as has been standardized in the West, was used even without slight changes. The form was perceived as just a medium and hence, nothing to be worried about its impact on the Indian child but content and characterization both were scrutinized, rejected and appropriated to be culturally appropriate.

The same cultural process is discernible in the production of *Chacha Choudhary* comic book. In terms of characterization and visualization of background, the comic book *Chacha Choudhary* is closer to political cartooning than Western comics. Undoubtedly, the format is directly borrowed from Western comics, but the visualization of scene is shaped by political cartooning which has a long history in the Indian public culture. In terms of drawing scenes, its ancestry can be traced to the comic papers of the colonial India via R.K.Laxman and Shankar Pillai. The Indian cartoonists have always struggled to cope with their encounter with the Western art forms. The overwhelming influence of the Western artistic vision has produced identity crisis in the Indian artist. The new artistic vision induced by cultural encounter is perceived as both creative opportunity and colonization at the same time. Consequently, the ambivalent attitude is managed through a double process of reacting and responding, resulting in appropriation of art forms. As the Indian mind is shaped by the colonial discourse, whatever is produced in the West is unavoidably

taken as mature and superior by the Indian mind. The scholars like Chatterjee (1986) also argue that the Indian artist’ creativity is largely imitative due to overpowering impact of the colonial experience.

Khanduri (2010) has suggested how the character of Punch was appropriated, domesticated to voice the Indian problems in the case of the “comic papers” in the colonial India. The colonial versions of the British *Punch* magazine appropriated the *Punch* imagery and restructured it in the Indian context. The image of Britannia was replaced by the image of *Bharata Mata*, and Mr. Punch was transformed into a fat Hindu old man. The British Punch provided the Indian artists with an archetypal figure of Mr. Punch, a small figure appropriated as a Hindu old man (Khanduri 2009). The figure of Indian Mr Punch has been a central character to cartooning in the postindependent India. The cartoonist R.K.Laxman’s ‘common man’ is indirectly inspired by the character of Mr. Punch of the colonial version. Laxman’s ‘common man’ and Chacha Choudhary both have striking similarities with the character of Mr. Punch. Their old age and comic appearance set them closer to Mr Punch of the colonial version of the Punch magazine. Pran’s Chacha Choudary seems to be closer to Laxman’s ‘common man.’ Both are set in the same historical period of post Nehruvian India, reflecting the urban middle class insecurities, fears and aspirations as well. Even they are akin in appearance: like Laxman’s ‘common man’, Chacha Choudhary is a baldheaded old man, who has long and white moustache. Both are concerned with the plight of the Indian middle class amid political and social turmoil. What sets Chacha Choudhary different from Laxaman’s ‘common man’ is their approach to the prevailing socio-political conditions. While Laxaman’s ‘common man’ is seen as a silent witness to the situation, frustrated, yet a passive victim of the corrupted political system, Chacha Choudhary defies passive victimization, implied in the silent pose of Laxman’s ‘common man,’ and is committed to bring social justice in the Indian society. Due to overwhelming impact of political cartooning in India, the comic artist has retained the vigor and comic strain of political cartoon in the creation of the hero of the comic strip *ChachaChoudhary*.

**III.Semiotics as Research Methodology**

C.S.Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure are considered as the co-founders of modern semiotics. Semiotics can be loosely termed as a study of sign—the way signs are produced, disseminated and consumed. Saussure argues that semiotics is “a
science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable...I shall call it semiology (it will)...show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them” (Saussure 16). Semiotics is a study of signs, and signs assume forms of words, sounds, images, gestures, colors, objects and so on. Eco has given an all inclusive definition of semiotics: semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign (Eco 7). Roland Barthes also defines semiotics as an all inclusive approach to analyze the cultural objects, which carry cultural meanings:

Semiology aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all of these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not languages, at least systems of signification. (Elements 9)

Although semiotics is not a single unified methodology, yet Saussure’s theories of language have been used as a starting point for the development of semiotics as methodology. Chandler argues that semiotics is “a field of study involving many different theoretical stances and methodological tools” (4). Juan Magariños de Morentín defines semiotics as a theoretical framework and as a method of analyzing representational systems as well:

I understand Semiotics, as a discipline, as a set of concepts and operations addressed to explain how and why a particular phenomenon achieves a particular significance within a particular historical moment and what that significance would be, how it is communicated, and what are their possibilities of transformation. (qtd. in Rosa and Pievi 9)

Semiotics offers a potentially unifying conceptual framework and methodological tools to study the full range of signifying practices, which includes images, gestures, postures, dress, words, colors, objects, that constitute integral components of all art forms. David Sless emphasizes the role of semiotic approach in analyzing cultural objects:

We consult linguists to find out about language, art historians or critics to find out about paintings, and anthropologists to find out how people in different societies signal to each other through gesture, dress or
decoration. But if we want to know what all these different things have in common then we need to find someone with a semiotic point of view, a vantage point from which to survey our world. (1)

In semiotic approach, language provides the fundamental model to understand, how culture and representation work in the production of cultural identity. Semiotics as an analytical tool includes everything in its compass, that is capable of constructing and disseminating hegemonic meanings. Although Peircean semiotics is equally important, the Saussurean tradition of semiotics is comparatively more popular and widely applied in the study of cultural phenomena. Saussure’s theory of language has been widely deployed, as a foundation for a general approach to the production of meaning and identity. Saussurean semioticians have sought to identify and categorize the cultural codes and conventions which organize signs into a system. Semiotics demonstrates the complex and nuanced working of everyday practices as implicated in construction of reality. Semiotics has exposed that the popular is not so ‘low:’ it is complex and systematic, playing an important role in the identity formation, and it is complicit with existing powers structures of the dominant group. Eco defines semiotics as an analysis of representation in A Theory of Semiotics:

Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else. This something else does not necessarily have to exist or to actually be somewhere at the moment in which a sign stands for it. Thus semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth; it cannot in fact be used “to tell” at all. I think that the definition of a “theory of the lie” should be taken as a pretty comprehensive program for a general semiotics. (7)

Roland Barthes was the first semiotician, who applied semiotics to popular culture as the modified and simplified version of the Saussurean semiotics. His book Mythologies (1972) offers a semiotic analysis of French media and commercial culture. As he explains in the introduction to Mythologies: “I had just read Saussure and as a result acquired the conviction that by treating “collective representations” as sign systems, one might...account in detail for the mystification which transforms petit-bourgeois culture into a universal nature”(9).
Adding Marxist dimension to the Saussurean semiotics, Barthes noted that Saussure’s model of sign emphasizes denotation at the expense of connotation. Focusing on connotation as “fragments of ideology,” he offers a detailed account of ideological dimension of meaning in his book *Mythologies*, and in the essay “Myth Today,” he explains how signs function as ‘myth’ that is ideology hidden in ‘obvious’ and ‘natural’ meaning of cultural forms. In the Barthian semiotics, the notion of “mythology” is central to the process of deconstruction of popular culture based on Saussurean linguistic foundation. For him, a mythology is a phenomenon of everyday life that signifies “naturalization of history.” In his groundbreaking book on semiotics *Mythologies*, he puts together a series of articles written for a French Magazine in the period 1954 to 1956. These articles form an investigation into the contemporary French culture, with each one as a separate “mythologies.” In these articles on the French culture, he strives to “to track down, in the decorative display of what –goes-without –saying, the ideological abuse which in my view, is hidden” (11). He points out that that semiotics is not only concerned with social communication through signs but also concerned with the production and dissemination of knowledge through signs. In “The Photographic Message” (1977) and “The Rhetoric of the Image” (1977), Barthes explains how connotative meaning is hidden beneath denotative meaning.

John Fiske explains the distinction between denotation and connotation metaphorically: “denotation is what is photographed; connotation is how it is photographed” (91). Connotation and denotation are often described in terms of levels of representation or levels of meaning. Roland Barthes adopts the notion from Louis Hjelmslev that there are different orders of signification (*Mythologies* 124). The first order of signification is that of denotation–sign consisting of a signifier and a signified, and connotation is a second order of signification, which uses the sign of the first order as its signifier to signify something else, connecting it with wider cultural codes and themes. He argues that signs function at two levels: at the level of denotation and the level of connotation. Denotation is the descriptive level, “where consensus is wide and most people would agree on the meaning” (Hall, Representation 44). Barthes asserts that there is another level, where what is signified gets connected with wider ‘semantic field of culture.’ This second level of signification is perceived by Barthes as “general, global and diffuse. It deals with ‘fragments of an ideology’ ” (Mythologies 91-2). The Barthesian semiotics tends to
ask two fundamental questions: the question of representation and the question of the ‘hidden meanings.’ Barthes describes ideology as a secondary system based on the principle of connotation: "common domain of the signifieds of connotation is that of ideology, which cannot but be single for a given society and history, no matter what signifiers of connotation it may use" (Elements 49).

In his insightful analysis of a cover photo in the magazine Paris Match, he demonstrates how the interplay of denotation and connotation conceals the ideological meaning. At denotative level, the cover photo of the magazine depicts a young black soldier, saluting the French flag, but at the secondary level of signification, the cover photo signifies the idea of French imperialism. For him ‘myth’, that is hidden ideological meaning, serves the function of naturalization (Mythologies 45-6). Myths function to naturalize the dominant cultural and historical values, attitudes and beliefs as entirely natural, self-evident, timeless, common sense and thus, objectively true reflections of “the way things are.” He asserts that myths serve the ideological interests of the bourgeoisie: Bourgeois ideology . . . turns culture into nature (S/Z206). The Barthesian semiotics has been applied to the study of popular culture by several scholars like Stuart Hall (1997), Danesi (2002), Berger (2010), Fiske (1982) and others. The Barthesian semiotics not only has provided a simplified framework but also made it politically relevant in the face of raising voice against the deep penetration of the combined ideology of consumerism and bourgeoisie culture. The awareness of our identity as constructed through representation in popular forms has reinforced the study of representational systems. Stuart Hall (1997) has emphasized the role of semiotics specifically the Barthesian semiotics in exposing the ideological meanings concealed in the different forms of popular culture. Chandler also points out the relevance of semiotic approach in his book Semiotics: the Basics:

Semiotics can help us to realize that such notions are created and maintained by our engagement with sign-systems: our sense of identity is established through signs. We derive a sense of self from drawing upon conventional, pre-existing repertoires of signs and codes which we did not ourselves create. (235)

The goal of the Barthesian semiotics as a method is to explain the process through which a particular world view is constructed and naturalized as ‘common sense’. The semiotic approach as developed by Barthes should demonstrate the
political relevance of a particular utterance and its capacity to attribute ontological existence to its referent. Semiotics provides “an approach and ensemble of instruments that situate it as a precise and effective method for explaining the processes of production, communication and transformation of the meaning in the field of social sciences” (De Morentin 105). Berger also points out the importance of semiotic approach in analyzing cultural production of meaning. He argues that “semiotic theory offers is an explanation of how people find meaning in their everyday lives, in the media they consume, and the messages they receive from marketers and advertisers in contemporary commercial culture” (11).

In the early 1960s another well-known French semiotician Jean Baudrillard continued the Barthesian semiotics and exposed the consumerist ideology through his semiotic analysis of the consumer culture. Jean Baudrillard in his book The System of Objects (1996) combines semiotics, Freudian psychoanalytic theory and Marxism in a unique blend to analyze the consumer culture. Semiotic approach demonstrates the working of a hidden ideology in a particular text, making us aware of what seems to be “obvious”, “natural”, universal, and permanent is ideologically constructed and implicated in the cultural politics of the dominant social group. Stuart Hall has suggested and demonstrated the Barthesian semiotics as one of the most relevant approaches to study popular culture in his book, Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices (1997). In the first chapter, he has explained the semiotic approach in detail along with Foucault’s discourse analysis. He regards Barthes’ book Mythologies (1972) as a path breaking text in terms of the analysis of the “intersection of myth, language and ideology” (66). In his book, he has applied the Barthesian semiotic as a methodology to expose the nexus between culture and power, and culture and ideology. His analysis of popular culture is informed by the Barthseian semiotics because “commodities are also cultural signs. They have already been invested, by the dominant culture, with meanings, associations, social connotations” (55). He applies semiotics to a range of cultural practices as “signifying practices” which are implicated in the production of knowledge, intersecting with power. In the book Understanding Media Semiotics, Marcel Danesi, argues that the Barthesian semiotics can be very useful tool to analyze different media forms because “all mass media texts and genres are grounded in connotation, since they are
designed to generate culturally –significant meanings‖(36). In his explanation of the Barthesian semiotics as a comprehensive approach to analyze popular culture, Danesi focuses on the Superhero comics, exposing its hidden cultural meanings. He skillfully elaborates semiotic approach through his analysis of Superhero Comics:

The interpretation of Superman as an 'imaginary heroic figure' is known instead as connotation. This can be defined as a meaning that has a particular 'cultural history behind it' - i.e. it can only be understood in terms of some signifying order. In connotative terms, everything about Superman has an historical dimension to it. (36)

The comics theorist Thierry Groensteen’s *The System of Comics* (2010) is well know semiotic analysis of comics in which Groensteen has elaborated an exclusive semiotic theory of comics which he terms as “neo semiotics”, that is all inclusive of all semiotic stances and theoretical concepts. In contrary to the traditional method of breaking the panels of comics into basic elements, he has championed the semiotic analysis of comics, as a language, as interdependence of images to produce cultural meaning. Defining comics as a language, he rejects any analysis which tends to reduce comics to a group of components. He argues that it is the space between panels where relationships of articulation are constructed. The space between panels is termed as a gutter, which is filled by the reader’s imagination. To read the successive panels as a story, the reader has to draw on his knowledge of cultural codes and imaginatively participates in the construction of the narrative. He argues the same in the introduction:

I do not assume that the question of existence or nonexistence of visual signs is central in the analysis of the language of comics. I especially want to establish that the most important codes concern larger units, which are already highly elaborated. In this case, these codes govern the articulation, in time and space, of the units that we call “panels”; they obey criteria that are just as much visual as narrative—or, more precisely, discursive. These two orders of preoccupation sometimes superimpose themselves to the point of indistinction. (11)
The space between the panels is the site where culture is articulated. Echoing Barthesian semiotic analysis, which suggests analysis of the image in terms of totality, he suggests the application of macro-semiotic to the study of comics:

We will not arrive at a coherent and thoughtful description of the language of comics by approaching them on this level of detail and incorporating a progressive enlargement. On the contrary, we need to approach from on high, from the level of grand articulations.(11)

Originally published as the “‘semiotic forms’” collection, the book The System of Comics situates the medium of comics into the field of semiotics and analyze the structure of comics as a system of signs. In his book, Groensteen exclusively focuses on poetics of the format of comics, elucidating how meaning is constructed and communicated through the components of comics. However, his exclusive emphasis on communication of meaning through panels tends to overlook the role of ideology in production and circulation of meaning through the language of comics. Nevertheless, Groensteen’s analysis of the functioning of panels can help us understand the dissemination of ideological meaning through the format of comics.

Throughout the thesis, I will use the semiotic approach as elaborated by Roland Barthes in his book Mythologies (1972) to analyze how the urban middle class culture is hegemonically codified in the production of the comic book series Chacha Choudhary. In the subsequent chapters, the Barthesian semiotics will serve as a paradigm to decode what Barthes has termed “mythologies”, constructed and disseminated through the culturally codified panels of the comic book series. In the second chapter, I intend to explore how the urban middle class culture is represented as national culture, leading to the marginalization of the other classes. The third chapter focuses on the consumer identity of the urban middle class and reconstruction of the categories of citizen and ‘common man’ through the discourse of consumerism. In the fourth chapter, I attempt to trace the historically constructed stereotypes of the Muslim community and their manifestation in the public sphere, which is considerably shaped and dominated by the Hindu community. The last chapter includes the conclusion of my research project along with a brief summary of the chapters.

Note: As the title of the primary text Chacha Choudhary contains several spelling variants such as Chowdhary, Chaudhary and Choudhary, I will refer to the title ‘Chacha Choudhary’ approved by the joint research board, Panjab University.