ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an attempt to study Amar Chitra Katha (Immortal Picture Stories) – a popular series of picture-storybooks in India – as a cultural-political phenomenon. This series was started in 1969 by a young brahmin journalist called Anant Pai who felt that the younger generation was getting alienated from their "roots". He wanted to introduce this generation to "Indian themes and values". The stories of Amar Chitra Katha (ACK) recounted the history, myth, legends and folklore of India. Pai began the ACK venture with the publication of Krishna (1969) which was soon followed by Shakuntala, The Pandava Princes, The Sons of Rama and Hanuman – all of which had mythological themes. Shivaji (1972) was the first title in the series with a non-mythological theme.

Pai had to face some disappointment at the outset of the ACK initiative as the sale did not pick up but he persevered. There are accounts of his making rounds of shops, restaurants and petrol pumps so that he could persuade their owners to display these chitrakathas. But the sales soon perked up and after that there was no looking back for Pai. The series has been recognized as one of the biggest success stories in Indian publishing.

Colourfully illustrated, attractively designed and available at a reasonable price ACK soon caught children's imagination and, by the mid-seventies, ACK's popularity had grown by leaps and bounds. Roadside magazine stands, regular bookshops and railway bookstalls were flooded with these chitrakathas. Few urban middle class homes were complete without ACK. Children would look forward to the arrival of a new title
with anticipation. Parents took care to preserve copies of the chitrakathas and get them bound so that they could serve as a kind of encyclopaedia of Indian stories. Even those children who hated history as a subject and found it boring would eagerly devour the stories of ACK which presented history as exciting and adventurous. The generations of children who grew up on it during the 70s and 80s have their ideas of citizenship and selfhood moulded by ACK. It has contributed towards the shaping of many of the contemporary hegemonic articulations of merit, self-respect, and hard work.

ACK’s sales declined in the late eighties. Pai attributes it to the popularity of television. He had to eventually stop publication of new titles in the series after 1991 but in the latter half of the nineties, reprints of the older titles with glossy, laminated covers have once again inundated the market. However, now these are steeply priced and are available mostly in upmarket bookstores (apart from the railway stalls). Obviously this has something to do with the fact that its targeted audience – the middle class – has prospered over the last decade.

Given the exceptional popularity of ACK, it is strange that rarely has an attempt been made to study the connection between the rise of this genre in the 1970s and socio-political developments of the time which emerged in the wake of the now widely-discussed break-up of the post-independence consensus of the 1950s and 1960s. In this thesis, I try to demonstrate the significance of ACK’s emergence as a popular phenomenon at a historical conjuncture when some of the major resolutions of the post-independence state came in for questioning. The hope that marked the Nehruvian era was replaced by disillusion and discontent among people as the Congress government failed to live up to its promises of economic justice and social equality. The centralized
mechanism of planning and the developmental initiatives of the state failed to take into account crucial particularities in the will of the people or the localized, immediate contexts of their lives. The government came in for criticism by both the left and the right. There was a demand from the left for agrarian and social changes which would make greater inroads into the rights and privileges of the owners of big property. The right-wing opposition to Nehru, on the other hand, articulated its critique in terms of the "moral bankruptcy" of socialism and proposed a "spiritual revolution" that would rejuvenate the nation.

By the late sixties economic growth plummeted and prices skyrocketed. Prevalent disaffection led to an explosion of radical initiatives by marginalized sections of society, such as the rural peasants and labourers, dalits and women.

In my first chapter, which is also an introduction to the dissertation, I attempt to understand ACK in the context of the socio-political ferment of the late sixties and seventies. My contention is that the ACK initiative is linked to the rise of the powerful middle class in the seventies (as against the iconoclastic movements of the time). By the mid-seventies the domestic bourgeoisie was already going into crucial partnership with multinationals and foreign capital. This new middle class locates the cause of economic disintegration in the welfarist commitments of the socialist state and demands a masculinization of the self in place of the special rights granted by the state to the disadvantaged sections of society on the basis of caste, community or gender. Against this background, it is indeed significant that a nationalist, brahminized yet modern masculinity is represented as a major value in ACK. Through its narratives of great men
and women, it provides “ideals” for middle class children to grow up as the adequate citizens of the nation – strong, indomitable and persevering.

I have also attempted to trace a continuity between the ethical framework of ACK and the right’s call for “spiritual revolution” which implied a renewal of the nation through re-connecting it with its glorious, “authentic” and Hindu past. In The Hard Road to Renewal (1988), Stuart Hall refers to the ideological move on part of the British right in the 1970s to rebuild the present through looking back at the lost “glories” of the Empire. Such a move entailed a battle for hegemony in the arena of culture. Through my analysis of ACK, I seek to explore the dimensions of a similar move on part of the conservative middle class in India. During the seventies, when tradition and history were being challenged by the left and the marginalized sections of the society, ACK actively sought to re-legitimize their status. In fact, it is interesting to contrast it with a phenomenon like the Subaltern Studies volumes which drew attention to the elitist bias of nationalist history and endeavoured to foreground subaltern initiatives in various historical struggles of India. ACK, on the other hand, attempted to re-establish history as the narrative of the heroism, courage, nobility and charisma of great men and women. It carried history right into the very thick of popular culture and thus engaged with and refashioned the commonsense of people. Since the turn to Gramsci in the sixties in the field of cultural studies, popular culture has been recognized as a major site where hegemony and consent for the dominant class position is organized. My contention is that if popular culture is the site of the contest for hegemony, it is important that we give sufficient attention to a project like ACK which is crucially implicated in the making of our modernity.
In the second chapter, I explore ACK in the context of its narrative intertextuality. It draws on a number of (visual) storytelling traditions of India, such as the katha, the chitrakatha or the fresco, and combines them with some of the formal features of the western comic. I have argued that to read ACK as an imitation of the western comic would be a misreading. Instead, in terms of form and content, it is more similar to the chitrakatha than to the comic. The traditional chitrakatha is characterized by wondrous and adventurous tales and visual splendour. When we look at the sumptuous visuals of ACK and read its marvellous tales of the beautiful women and the brave men belonging to the classics, legends, folk tales and history of India, its debt to the katha and chitrakatha tradition becomes apparent. Yet these traditions are transmuted in the process of making the subject of ACK, and are reworked into the framework of bourgeois-individualism. Even though ACK borrows from traditional visual narrative forms, it is underscored by a code of realism. ACK’s realism is determined by its agenda; for instance, the militarization of the nation or the masculinization of the nationalist subject in post-colonial India. It draws on Indian art traditions even as it incorporates them into western illusionist mode to construct the national subject who is spiritual yet masculine; modern yet culturally authorized by the “authentic” traditions of India. Western realism has always been a “compromised” commodity in the Indian context. As pointed out by Geeta Kapur (1989), Ravi Varma did not passively reproduce the style of western academic realism but used the oil medium in combination with indigenous artistic genres to produce “ideal” figures for the nationalist struggle for moral ascendancy. The works of Geeta Kapur (1989), Tapati Guha-Thakurta (1991 and 1992), Kajri Jain (1997) and R. Srivatsan (2000), to name a few, have helped me to explore the “hybrid realism” of ACK.
In the third chapter, I deal with ACK’s use of historical/mythic material to formulate a contemporary praxis. Anant Pai criticizes history textbooks as uninteresting and dry and thus ineffective. He conceives of history as a civil societal pedagogic tool in the form of popular culture. The colour and magic of the chitrakatha form help him to present history as something more than dates and names of persons and places. Pai’s “history” is also linked with his endeavour to address and manage the rebellion of the youth against familial and civil societal authorities in the seventies, through a renewal of faith in tradition.

I also explore how the myth and the history of ACK are instrumental in producing the modern bourgeois subject. I discuss Pai’s programme for personality development and success in a competitive world, addressed to the youth, as inalienably allied to the project of ACK. Its stories of great men who overcome tremendous barriers to achieve their goal lend legitimacy to contemporary bourgeois contention that merit and hard work and not welfarist “concessions” should be the means to success and advancement. My analysis reveals that ACK’s history is not about the past but serves as a “practical ethic” in the present to make the adequate citizen of the modern nation. I have found it productive to trace the legacy of nationalist historiography of the nineteenth century in ACK. Nationalist historians like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya stressed the instructive rather than the informative potential of history. They sought to contest the authority of the colonizer and his notion of the Bengali/Hindu as effeminate, by writing a history which was projective rather than merely “factual”. Myths, fables and various pre-novelistic traditions of India were incorporated into historical narratives to establish the superiority of the Hindu. These forms were considered unscientific by a positivist
historian like James Mill and by Enlightenment standards. But the nationalist historian shrewdly gauged the function of history as an exercise of power and its potential as an ideological tool. For instance, Bankim Chandra and Romesh Chandra Dutt realized that a “factual” history of Bengal could not yield them images to refute the British charge that the Bengali was weak and effeminate. Hence they freely gerrymandered the indeterminate boundaries of communities to create a “national community” within the narrative. A Bengali history merged into a glorious Rajput history (for instance) in their writing. Thus myths and legends had an entirely contemporary function in nationalist history. In this sense, it is possible to trace a lineage between nationalist history and ACK.

In the fourth chapter, I have undertaken detailed textual analysis to explore the historical dimensions of ACK’s ideal of masculine perfection. I have chosen the following chitrakathas for engaged analysis: *Chanakya* (1971), *Dayananda* (1976), *Jayaprakash Narayan* (1980), *Shivaji* (1972), *Lachit Barphukan* (1978), *Padmini* (1973), *Babasaheb Ambedkar* (1979) and *Jawaharlal Nehru: The Early Days* (1991). As I have mentioned before, masculinity is one of the crucial values through which ACK constructs its ideal of an individualist, proud, martial and Hindu nation. Within the scope of this thesis, I have elaborated gender primarily in the context of the masculinist worldview of ACK. I have traced a continuity between the modern, pragmatic gurus like Chinmayananda and the martial, brahmin sages and reformers of ACK like Chanakya and Dayananda, and their role in disciplining the nationalist subject. The latter have an allegoric function in relation to the present. Their duty is to set right the “fundamental order” of the nation emerging out of reclusion and entering the world of politics. Thus,
Chanakya leaves the confines of his *ashram* when the brahminic world order is threatened by Nanda, the “debauched” king of Magadha and by “foreign” invasion. He “chooses” and trains Chandragupta as a disciple and maneuvers his enthronement as the ruler of Magadha, for the latter is strong, manly, courageous and yet respectful towards the “right” authority. It is ingenious how ACK presents a Gandhian-socialist figure like Jayaprakash in the manner of a guru coming out of political *sanyas* seeking the “moral regeneration” of the nation. In a way, ACK’s portrayal of Jayaprakash provides us with some insights into the grounds on which an alliance was made possible between Jayaprakash and the right in the seventies.

ACK’s martial heroes like Shivaji are “ideal” masculine figures who fought for the values of the “Hindu” nation and thus serve as pedagogic ideals for the future citizens of India. In portraying these martial heroes, ACK draws on some of the crucial modes in which a masculine Hindu ideal was articulated in nineteenth-century India. For instance, Bankim Chandra’s notion of *anushilan* has been useful for me to understand the politics of masculinity in ACK as well. The theory of *anushilan* entailed an ascetics that would lead to the harmonious development of physical and intellectual faculties. Bankim combined the western discourse of progress with a practical-spiritual reading of the *Gita*. According to Bankim’s reading of the *Gita*, ideal masculinity should consist of a combination of force and mercy – force, towards the enemy and mercy, towards the subordinate.

My analysis of *Padmini* concentrates on ACK’s construction of “ideal Indian womanhood”. Padmini symbolizes the purity of the nation and the threat to her honour by Ala-ud-din Khilji is represented as a threat to the nation. *Padmini* demonstrates how the
"virtue" of the uppercaste woman serves as instrumental in the demonization of the Muslim, and by extension, lower caste (men and women) and feminists. The memory of Padmini’s sacrifice is meant to incite the nationalist male into action against the "enemy".

In ACK, we find that there is an undercurrent of the critique of what the right-wing has termed "the appeasement of the minorities" (by the Nehruvian state). Instead, ACK endorses aggression against those who challenge the boundaries of a "Hindu nation". Its martial hero is emblematic of Bankim's ideal of masculinity – as he defends the nation – except that now the threat to the nation is posed from within rather than without.

Through my analysis of Babasaheb Ambedkar I have sought to explore how, with the advent of the liberalization years in the late seventies and eighties, ACK focuses more and more on the "virtues" of hard work, merit, manhood and grit. Babasaheb articulates notions of masculinity in a bourgeois individualist context. "Perfection", it demonstrates, is within, and can be achieved through the indomitable spirit and endeavour of the nationalist subject, irrespective of "external" factors like caste, gender, and community.

The final chapter is a conclusion to the dissertation.

Though ACK is regarded as children's literature and hence as an "area of innocence", my dissertation seeks to place it at the cutting edge of cultural politics.