Chapter II

Comics, Scrolls, Frescos and the ‘Chitra Katha’

But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics.

Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”

This chapter seeks to establish ACK as a narrative form that is distinct from the western comic even though it shares many of the formal conventions of the latter. In terms of its intertextuality, ACK combines various pre-novelistic narrative conventions of India with some of the formalist and visual conventions of the western comic and animated art to produce an effect that is altogether unique, and is charged with the historical context in which it comes into existence. In the preceding chapter, we had seen that Pai’s intent in introducing ACK was to teach “Indian themes and values” to the modern, middle class children who were getting alienated from their “roots”. In this chapter, we shall see that the composition of ACK as a narrative form significantly contributes to the production of the “Indianness” that is at once modern and traditional, contemporary and “immortal”. The more one delves into the manner in which various narrative traditions are combined to lend ACK its textual richness and historical complexity, the more one is convinced of its formal innovativeness and specificity. To treat it as a “comic” would be to misread it. As we shall see, this series is indeed aptly titled as “Chitra Katha” or Picture Stories by Pai.
I begin with a brief discussion of the western comic and its general reception by parents and educators as a genre that was regarded trivial at best, and morally bankrupt and violent at worst. I go on to demonstrate that ACK, by contrast, is consciously planned by Anant Pai as a respectable, middle class pedagogic enterprise in the late sixties. I seek to establish ACK’s debt to pre-novelistic (visual) traditions of India – such as the katha and the chitrakatha – for its wondrous stories of heroic men and women of the past and its sumptuous visuals. But I also examine the modes in which ACK transmutes traditional narrative forms to achieve a secular and contemporary effect.

I also trace the influence of the frescos of Ajanta and Ellora (which Pai quotes as a visual inspiration of ACK) on the art of ACK. My analysis reveals that the gaze is much more focused while viewing the visuals of ACK and the individual, in terms of his/her motives, psychological state of mind, and character is foregrounded. The focus on the individual and the reference to “reality” prompt me to explore the connection between ACK and the western illusionistic mode. But I conclude that ACK’s real debt is to the “hybrid realism” of contemporary Indian art forms such as calendar art or poster art. Its “realism” is fashioned as adequate to its post-Nehruvian, middle class, “national” agenda. Ultimately, I explore themes of nationalism in ACK in terms of its privileging of a classical Aryan past and its ideal feminine figures.

The “Corrupt” Comic

The following is a brief trajectory of the comic form as it developed in the West, especially in Britain and America, which would highlight the distinctness of ACK in terms of form, content and readership.
Comics have generally been dismissed as cheap, non-serious trivia by their critics, and have been branded as morally corrupting by parents and teachers alarmed by the depiction of horror and violence in them. This could well have something to do with the beginnings of the comic strip and its potentially threatening subject matter. The comic strip came into existence in Britain in the 1840s as a feature that was part of the periodical magazines and the penny weeklies. Comic magazines in England in the nineteenth century aimed at a national readership that was not yet developed – namely, “children” of intersecting classes. In actuality, the bulk of their readership consisted of the industrial working classes. The comic has sometimes been defined in a manner that is tautological but points to the etymology of the word: “a comic is what has been produced under the definition of a ‘comic’” (Barker 8). In other words, it was intended to be light-hearted, non-threatening material for children. The rise of the comic gains significance in the context of the campaign against the Penny Dreadfuls in the Victorian era. The Penny Dreadfuls were serialized tales sold at the rate of a penny an issue, and their readership consisted mainly of the working class. They contained gruesome narratives of crimes, arrests and punishment. There were also a number of anti-aristocratic melodramas and classic romances of lawlessness (Barker 99). Nineteenth-century middle class moral campaigners held the Penny Dreadfuls responsible for the moral corruption of the working class children. They alleged that these weeklies sent evil messages to children and depraved them even as they enticed them through fantastical and fanciful tales.

The comic book, as indicated by its name, was meant to be “counterposed to everything that is dangerous” (Barker 8). For instance, Alfred Harmsworth, the newspaper publisher, produced Comic Cuts which were meant to be non-serious,
“harmless” yet attractive material for children, and were intended to counter the “baleful” influence of the Penny Dreadfuls (Barker 8).

It is quite another thing that the comic magazine itself ended up as controversial and oppositional to the values of the middle class. David Kunzle (1990) describes the comic magazines as “unsentimental, irreverent, and arguably immoral....[which indulged in] a flagrant violation of the moral principle, so dear to the (adult) bourgeois order, that good will triumph, obedience will be rewarded” (4). It is a measure of the “pestilent” material published by the comic magazines that these abounded in “police and jails, absurd accusations and gratuitous arrests” (7) registering the protest of the working classes against the repressive apparatuses of the state. An issue of the comic strip Man in the Moon called How My Rich Uncle Came to Dine at Our Villa (July – September 1848) is a portrait gallery of prisoners and presents “a socio-political panorama of the delinquency so feared by the lower middle classes: there are drunkards, spouse beaters, common criminals” (312). No “respectable” magazine of the nineteenth century was willing to carry the comic strip:

A rule confirms the lower-class orientation of the comic strip: the more serious, the more political, the more sophisticated the magazine, the less likely it was to carry comic strips. Punch, Kladderadatsch, the post-1852 Charivari have few....The dignified allegorical cartoons of Leech and Tenniel in Punch show how completely political criticism had been purified of buffoonery and grossness, and the comic strip shows, for the most part, how completely comedy and farce had been purified of overt politics. (Kunzle 7)
Coming to the comic scene in America, one would assume that *Yellow Kid*, which came into existence in 1885, did address a working class audience given that its world was that of “tough, little immigrant kids and disheveled old women with sad eyes and a hopeless look on their faces” (Berger 27). But it is also true that comics like *Superman* (1938), *The Lone Ranger* (1939), and *Batman* (1939) which came in the wake of World War II boosted America’s self-image.

Yet, whether in America or in England, comics never really attained a respectable status for parents and educators who expressed grave concern over the bad influence of comics on young minds. According to them, comics induced bad language habits and incorrect usage. For instance, George Gale wrote in the *Times Education Supplement* in 1971:

> While violence is the main feature of these children’s comics, the systematic destruction of the English language runs it a close second … week after week children are invited to laugh at people who are fat, deformed, handicapped or ugly, especially when pain is being inflicted. This is accompanied throughout by crude, ugly language. Such a regular diet can do nothing but harm children. (Cited in Barker 92-93)

But what really generated widespread hysteria were the horror comics of the 1950s depicting blood, gore and violence. These comics resulted in stringent censorship for the comic books. The “spiritual leader” of the crusade against comics, Dr. Fredric Wertham wrote his famous *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) in which he linked juvenile delinquency to the practice of reading comics. Roger Sabin writes laconically, “Who better to personify the struggle against ‘American vulgarity’ than Randolph Churchill,
son of Winston” (30) and quotes from his review on the dust-jacket of Wertham’s book brought out by the Museum Press in 1955:

Here is a book of vital importance to every parent today. It is an account of the gradual and relentless perversion of a whole generation of children through the medium of the ‘horror comic’ magazines – publications which, to the consternation of all enlightened people, are still being purveyed widely in this country.

In these ‘horror comics’, as a glance at the illustrations will show, vice is glorified, sadism encouraged, and murder and rape extolled in a most appalling and deliberate fashion – all under the guise of ‘entertainment’ for children. (30)

In the above discussion of the comic strip, my main thrust has been to point out the triviality, danger and moral corruption popularly associated with the genre in the West. This is in striking contrast to the conscious setting-up of ACK as a respectable, middle class, pedagogic enterprise in India. As stated in The Telegraph of November 13, 1983, “The appearance or should one say the invasion, of ACK comics on the market a few years ago broke the old parent-child dichotomy over comics” (“Comments”).

A “Serious” Enterprise

As mentioned in the previous chapter, ACK seeks to reform and appropriate an India and an Indian market, invaded by western comics like Phantom, Superman and Tarzan in the sixties. Pai’s business sense left him in no doubt that the market for comics was much vaster than the market for illustrated storybooks:
The average sale of a comic book in India is not less than 30,000 copies, whereas the average sale of an illustrated children’s book is not more than 3,000 copies. (India Book House brochure)

At a superficial level, ACK is packaged as a comic book and does share many of its conventions. The basic ingredient of this genre is the comic strip which is a narrative in the form of a sequence of pictures, usually accompanied by text. In terms of graphics, the strips are broken into bordered panels, which help to segment action. These panels are sometimes enlarged to emphasize a dramatic moment. The narrative text is placed in a box at the top (and sometimes at the bottom) of the panel and delineates the action portrayed therein. Dialogue appears in the form of speech-balloons, which issue from the character’s mouth. Similarly, thought is presented in think-balloons. The size of lettering is at times enlarged or the letters are highlighted to suggest intensity or loudness of speech. There are close-ups and angled shots that form a standard feature in any comic book.

Pai also effectively draws from some of the features of the animated film of which the comic strip is the forerunner. As in an animated Disney film, background is important for Pai’s visuals, especially when they depict a dramatic moment. In such cases, a single panel sometimes occupies an entire page. The visual background contributes to the action instead of distracting the viewer from it. For example, in Chhatrasal, when king Chhatrasal chances upon his guru Prannath who would help him fight the Mughals, the background is ghostly and moonlit creating an incandescent effect. The whole effect contributes to the “mystical sacredness” of Chhatrasal’s mission. Following the art of animation, ACK’s use of colour is often meant to enhance the dramatic effect. For
example, the Disney artists had discovered since its early days that colours were not meant to be chosen with the simple ease of merchandising a postcard (Thomas 172). For example, red stands for strong emotion – blood, battle, fire. So as young Chhatrasal sits under a tree, ruminating over the murder of his parents by the Mughals, the background depicting a forest is splattered with red, hinting at the revenge that is to come. Similarly, the opening panel of Padmini, covering an entire page, depicts the fort of Chittor and the sky beyond splattered with patches of red, which serve as a background for the silhouettes of the brave warriors of Chittor’s past. The colour complements the verbal narrative – “Chittor is the soul of Rajasthan. Its history is the saga of Rajput valour” (1). ACK also has colour conventions that serve as pointers to both “the moral and the physical identity” of a character. The Asuras (demons) are always black or brown and the Devas (gods) are fair or blue (in case of Rama and Krishna). Similarly characters belonging to lower class/caste and tribes are almost always of a dark complexion. The Muslim always wears green.

Pai acknowledges his debt to comics and related art in conceiving a project like ACK. He offered an eloquent defense of the comic as a medium of education in a seminar held in 1978. But even in this defense what really shines through is his intent to transform, or rather to invent this medium anew in a different context so as to make it acceptable and respectable. In his inimitable way, he gets it across that ACK would not be an “ordinary” comic:

In all fairness, it must be admitted that some comics could do damage to the impressionable minds of children. If there are bad comics, let us oppose them, as we oppose bad books or bad movies, but let us not
frown on comics as a medium of education. Should we stop using a tool as useful as a comic, just because it can cause harm? A matchbox is useful – a must for every house. Do we stop using it because it can cause a fire?

I think we have come a long way since the days when the law laid down that a railway engine should not move faster than four miles an hour and to ensure safety, a messenger must run ahead to warn all against the approaching engine. (n. pag.)

So the “negative” features of the comic do not inhibit Pai. He identifies the features that make the comic a useful tool and retains those. But he is never shy of innovation and freely draws from all sources and traditions that might endow ACK with its distinct “Indian” identity. Ultimately, as we shall see, the name “comic” proves inadequate to describe a phenomenon like ACK, which is totally different from the books it set out to displace.

A closer look at the visuals and the content of ACK would suggest that it draws more on the pre-novelistic Indian visual and storytelling traditions than on western comics. It is only through a transmutation of the comic form that Pai seeks to achieve his pedagogic goal. The question that then needs to be engaged with is how does ACK borrow from the older art traditions of India (which may be at variance with the themes of individualism) and yet develop codes of representation which successfully achieve an effect that is entirely modern in that they link up with present-day agenda and concerns. It ushers in a modern that is linked to its tradition both in terms of form and content, and yet is steeped in the theme of masculine individualism generally associated with the rise of the novel and realism. The epic hero’s fate as we know, is linked with that of his
community and the romance hero’s conduct is guided by a pre-determined chivalric code. It is only with the rise of the novel that one finds the hero exercising a choice and an agency distinctly his own. Similarly, as Meenakshi Mukherjee points out in her *Realism and Reality* (1985), the pre-novel narratives in India presented time as cyclic, and did not have the linear progression of a novel. Neither did they project human beings outside the social hierarchy – as individuals capable of exercising agency. To quote:

In the rigidly hierarchical familial and social structure of nineteenth-century India, individualism was not an easy quality to render in literature. One of the problems of the early novelist was to reconcile two sets of values – one obtained by reading an alien literature and the other available in life. (7)

Mukherjee goes on to explore the kind of complex negotiations that Indian writers in the nineteenth century had to carry out with the western novel form in order to be able to depict the workings of a society which was bound by feudal hierarchies and norms. They often had to borrow from pre-novelistic traditions to be able to portray the intricacies of their peculiar social contexts and relationships.

As I have said earlier, my purpose is to explore the debts that ACK owes to various traditional art and narrative practices in India and also the transmutations that these forms undergo to produce an altogether modern effect. The very naming of ACK suggests a linkage with the katha tradition of storytelling in India. Some of the common themes narrated in a katha deal with the kidnapping of a girl, battle, separation and epic and puranic events. The twin features that mark katha are invention and wonder. For example, in Banabhatta’s *Kadambari*, there is lavish use of poetic imagination in relating
a story. The tales are wondrous and full of adventure. In *Kadambari*, the embellishments of description sometimes overshadow the events that are being described. In a katha there is no attempt to make the description realistic and invention is valued in itself.

When one looks at the lavish visuals of ACK and reads the marvellous tales of the beautiful women and the brave men belonging to the classics, legends, folk tales and history of India, one cannot but trace a lineage to katha. The characters in western comics belong to the present and however heroic they are, they still drive cars and smoke cheroots and work in offices. Superman does contribute to the construction of America’s self-image in the time of war and the Lone Ranger fights a lone and brave battle against oppression and the destruction of the planet. But these are not heroes from the (often distant) past. The element of wonder evoked by the feats of these heroes is not the same as the quaint magic of the once-upon-a-time.

**Tradition and Contemporaneity**

I have by now made a two-fold suggestion. One, ACK is more like katha in terms of the high-flown and wondrous nature of many of its tales, and two, it is unlike western comics in the sense that it very often depicts characters and events from the past rather than choosing its material from a contemporary time and space. But having made that suggestion, I would like to examine the important translations that take place to mark ACK’s contemporaneity even when its content is from the past. As I have said, in katha, embellishments and inventiveness in description are valued in themselves. But in ACK, details of description and visual splendour are meant to evoke wonder and yet are geared towards a reality effect. The visual density of a scene consisting of, for instance, doors,
lattices, ornaments, curtains, flowers etc go on to shore up the authenticity of a scene and cease to be mere embellishments. In very many ways these contribute to the mood of a scene or a character or at least, the physical “thereness” of the scene. They make the past plausible by generating a Barthesian reality effect. To quote Barthes:

...there would always be a corner, a detail, an inflection of space or color to report... by positing the referential as real, by pretending to follow it in a submissive fashion, realistic description avoids being reduced to fantasmatic activity.... (145)

The wondrous and the high-flown in ACK are underpinned by a reference to “reality”.

Let us begin by looking at the depiction of Krishna in its very first issue to demonstrate how an element of the quotidian slips into the narrative to humanize a mythological character and in the process, make him more of an every-day child, closer to our present.

The introduction to Krishna reflects the impulse to humanize the mythological Krishna and endow him with a psychological dimension:

Krishna has a particular appeal for children because he is one of them as no other divine is. Krishna the boy is mischievous; he is naughty. He has irrepressible energy for innumerable escapades. He is no prig; he is no puritan. He has divine powers. But he humanizes them and remains a boy. This powerful human element is the secret of Krishna’s universal popularity. He is secular even as he is sacred, and so he remains throughout his life. That is why Krishna is a living presence to all children who have listened to the stories about him.
In the course of Krishna's story, we come across several instances when he demonstrates awe-inspiring power for a child but what is significant is the manner in which this power is humanized. Let me try and illustrate this with a couple of examples. Krishna, unlike his playmates, does not run away at the sight of an angry, charging bull, and tames him by climbing onto its back. While this episode in ACK projects the extraordinariness of Krishna, what, I feel, is absent is that mystical sense of awe that only a deity or an icon can evoke. This Krishna has an element of the boy-hero of boy's adventure stories. Let us look at the commentaries accompanying the two panels depicting the bull charging at Krishna and Krishna mounted on the back of the fierce animal respectively:

1. As Krishna neared him, the bull snorted fiercely and charged.
2. But Krishna was too quick for him. (17)

Somehow the tone of the commentary is not that of the wonderment and awe that might be involved while describing the divine powers of a god. Also, when Krishna is dancing atop the hood of the deadly snake Kaliya, we see a crowd of onlookers from the village watching him with their backs to us. But one of them turns to face the rest and says "What a boy" (20). His expression is one of indulgent bemusement rather than of awe, and his tone is personalized.

In this sense, ACK participates in both the aesthetic of wonder and the aesthetic of the ordinary to project the actions of the protagonist as a realization of the full potential of a human being rather than as completely awe-inspiring miracles wrought by a divine. This strategy invites the reader to identify with the subject of heroism. In this context, allow me a detour through Anuradha Kapur's observation on the representation of gods and heroes in Parsi theatre at the beginning of the twentieth century:
...only to find Krishna dancing on the hood of a meek Kaliya.

What a boy!

Krishna dancing on Kaliya
...what happens when the story is about gods and heroes from the epics?... The personalized tone of voice and the causality of the narrative 'secularizes' the event and makes the action plausible in human terms. Thus gods and heroes appear understandable to us, close to us, like us.

In being figures we can identify with, gods and heroes should be able to accomplish deeds that are even possible for us, that we might dream of accomplishing if we had such powers.... Therefore, the gods and heroes become supermen, able to enact our desire for omnipotence. This, in some senses, is an idealization of ourselves and our possibilities.... Idealization is possible because it is possible to identify with the gods and heroes, and identification is possible because the mode of representation – the discourse of realism – places the figures in time and space which is secular and contiguous with our own.... When viewing the traditional icon, the devotee does not act out the action along with the god. Indeed even on the part of the god there is no acting out. For the icon hypostatizes accomplished action. The narrative over, the completed deed is represented. Mahishasurmardini, for example, is always shown triumphant, never engaged in actual battle. Depicting the course of battle might explain the action and drop it into the run of everyday struggles.... If icons disallow identification, they do so precisely because of the distance they set up between viewer and the image, and it is because of this distance that the experience of wonder at completeness is possible. Realism removes precisely this distance between viewers and the figures
they view... the mythologicals of [Parsi theatre produced by Radheshyam]. .. attempt to partake of both sorts of desire, ... the desire caused by wonder and the desire caused by identification (1993a, 96-97)

Kapur extends the argument to traditional performative aesthetics, and says that in Kathakali, even when an action is represented, for instance, Bhima ripping open Duryodhana’s belly, a satin ribbon stands for blood, as what is aimed at is only an approximation of the action. In Peter Brooks’ rendering of Mahabharata, however, red paint replaces the satin ribbon, and creates an illusion of verisimilitude.

In the light of the above discussion, it is interesting to consider the remark made by Gowri Subramaniam, a Bombay housewife, back in 1988:

My children always played Tarzan and Superman. Once they began reading Amar Chitra Katha, they switched to Hanuman or the capture of Shivaji’s fort. (Cited in Gangadhar 140)

Thus, ACK successfully constructs a subject position from within which it is possible to identify with the character and the actions that are carried out by him/her. Its protagonists, however heroic or extraordinary, are still human and are offered as models that can be identified with. My fourth chapter will concentrate on how the heroes (and heroines) of the ACK are fashioned as ideals one needs to emulate in order to become the ideal subject-citizen of the nation.

The Chitrakatha and Amar Chitra Katha

Let us now consider how ACK draws from, even as it transforms another traditional form related to the katha – the chitrakatha. The term “chitrakatha” refers to a
highly popular ancient Indian storytelling tradition in scrolls. The tradition of chitrakatha as a folk art involves the narration of stories from puranas and legends accompanied by serial unfolding of painted scrolls and panels. This form of storytelling has been known in India for a very long period and is extant in many regional variations. The chitrakatha narration consists in invocation of deities and ritual singing related to each panel. Such picture-shows traditionally took place in the marketplace and were so absorbing that sometimes the audience lost track of the goings-on around them. The stories were narrated by wandering picture-storytellers.

It may be worthwhile to trace a brief trajectory of the chitrakatha. The Rajasthani chitrakatha consists mainly of the legends of folk heroes who fell in battlefield or while resisting a plundering raid. At the beginning of the narration, the narrator invokes the spirit of the hero and dedicates a shrine to him. Cultic powers are ascribed to the hero during the course of the narration. One of the most famous scrolls in the Rajasthan area is called *Pabuji ka phad*. Pabuji was a warrior hero who lived in the 14th century and belonged to the Rajput clan of Rathods in the Kolumand region of Rajasthan. His story is painted on a pata or a scroll, and is narrated by a bhopa. The word *bhopa* means a sorcerer. The bhopa’s songs are a mixture of authentic incidents, legendary idealism, deification, cultic biases and pre-existing mythology and folklore. It is noteworthy that many communities in Rajasthan, such as the camel herders, worship the deified Pabuji.

The chitrakatha tradition in Gujarat is linked to the Garoda caste of priests who officiate in various religious ceremonies for the lower castes. The Garodas carry picture scrolls divided into panels depicting gods and goddesses, narrative illustrations of various puranic and local legends. Similarly in Maharashtra, the chitrakathi are a band of
wandering storytellers, who earn their living by travelling from village to village narrating various vernacular legends and displaying pictures in marketplaces. In the Bengal scroll tradition, the narrators were called jadu patuas, again referring to a magician.

The chitrakathas are entertaining but are chiefly guided by an ethical and didactic force. Referring to the movement in scrolls and chitrakathas, Ashish Rajadhyaksha (1987) says that these are guided by an “ethical directionality” (57). The scrolls are firmly rooted in local mythology, beliefs and practices. Stories from the Hindu epics and puranas are described in regional variations while local customs and deities are sanskritized. A lot of local interpretations of the events are not just incorporated but form the basis of the story. For example, while narrating Arjuna’s horse sacrifice or the story of Abhimanyu or of Lava and Kusha, the characters sometimes wear local costumes and the narrators speak the local dialect.

If we look at the visuals and contents of ACK, we would realize that it is more appropriate to refer to it as chitrakatha than as a comic. Its stories are from the epics, legends, mythology, folklore and history of India. The narrator of the chitrakatha is often called a magician. If we, for a moment, distance ourselves from our location in our immediate present with the easy accessibility we have to television and even hi-tech gizmos like the internet and, of course, the computer-animated wonders of Jurassic Park and the many other films that followed, we might be able to appreciate the magic that may have been evoked by ACK in the late sixties and seventies, especially for its child readers. Many friends and acquaintances who grew up in the seventies, fondly recall how they were entranced by these chitrakathas. The Reader's Digest article by Gangadhar
(1988) tells us about the retired IAS officer’s son, who has grown up to be an engineer but still flips through his favourite ACKs. The stories were magical because the superb illustrations could bring to life characters and depict events like no other.

And yet ACK transformed the traditional chitrakatha in significant ways. First of all, the audience that it targeted differed vastly from the audience of the chitrakatha. The latter, as I have said before, was traditionally narrated in a marketplace. As pointed out by the Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature, there are many references in traditional Indian literature, as to how, sometimes, these narrators doubled as pickpockets and thieves. The audience would get so enthralled by the narration that while one of the narrators told the story, another from his group would rob them of their belongings. I am citing this fact not for its anecdotal value but because it gives us an insight into the class of the narrators and the people who gathered in the marketplace. On the other hand, the very fact that ACK is printed implies the changed nature of its audience. Both the founder-editor of ACK and its readers belong to a different class altogether. As we have seen in the last section, the picture that emerges from Gangadhar’s account of Pai’s life is that of the shaping of a persona with substantial inputs from Sanskritized Vedantic sources. I would like to remind my reader of Pai’s retort to his teacher at Wilson College that stone worship was not dharma. What we detect in Pai’s worldview is a privileging of a rational, normative Hinduism as against those very many little traditions which involve rituals and practices that may appear superstitious and primitive by the standards of “rational” religion and yet may relate to the life-patterns of the majority of people in India. We can relate this worldview to the Vivekananda-Dayananda stream of Vedantic Hindutva which becomes the cornerstone of rightist Hindu ideology.
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Evidently, ACK is conceived within a framework that reinforces Pai’s ideal of Hinduism. Consequently, its modes of address target a class that would value religion in its rational, modern, pan-Indian/global format. Gangadhar’s article clearly indicates its popularity in affluent middle class and non-resident Indian families since its inception:

In the well-furnished drawing room of his Bombay flat, I.K. Nayak points to neatly bound volumes of comics displayed on the bookshelf. The retired civil servant smiles fondly. “These Amar Chitra Kathas have influenced and entertained three generations in our family,” he says. “They highlight the values we cherish.” (137, emphases mine)

I have emphasized some of the phrases to highlight the trappings of an upper middle class home that houses ACK. In the process I hope to draw attention to the distance between the marketplace where the regional chitrakathas are narrated amidst “riff raff” and the people who have bought and read ACK since its inception.

Sanitizing/Standardizing the Chitrakatha

Along with the shift in the class of the audience, comes a sanitization of the chitrakatha, which as I have pointed out earlier is achieved by projecting a pan-Indian, purified Indian culture synonymous with Vedantic Hinduism. When I was reading the story of Dev Narayana, a deified hero of many Rajasthani scrolls, I came across a mention that once when Vishnu visited a family, the wife came to worship him naked. This pleased him so that he decided to be born as her son, Dev Narayana. It struck me that such an incident just would not fit into the framework of ACK without disturbing its
"idealism" and "respectability" while in the regional scroll, it enhances the high-flown spirit of the legend.

ACK is also conceived with the middle class child-reader in mind. It seeks to substitute the absent grandmother in modern nuclear families:

The stories Amar Chitra Katha tells are stories that are a part of our cultural heritage. These stories were told in the good old days of the joint family by fond grandmothers to their grandchildren. The children of today's nuclear families are denied this privilege. That's where Amar Chitra Katha steps in and makes the names of Sita and Savitri, Rama and Arjuna, Akbar and Shivaji, Kabir and Tulsidas the household words that they once used to be. (India Book House brochure)

But the grandmother has not always been the only source of stories and wisdom for children. Children would gather along with adults to watch folk forms of storytelling and theatre, such as Ramlila, tamashas, jatras and, of course, picture-shows or chitrakathas. Such performances do not divide audience along age lines even when they involve an element of the bawdy or the ribald. My suggestion is that ACK chooses the figure of the grandmother as the only/appropriate traditional source of storytelling and wisdom because of its imaging as a familial/traditional binding force. The figure of the grandmother has a special place in nationalist writing. In the preceding chapter, we have seen how in the seventies, the (widowed) grandmother (in Mere Apne, Phaniyamma, and "Dadi") is brought centre stage as the force that connects tradition with modernity, and thus, helps the latter to shake off its emptiness and discontents. No wonder that the grandmother figure is the privileged source of storytelling for the child in Pai's schema of
things, in which modernity is valid only when it is tempered by tradition. It may not be out of place here to refer in brief to the formation of the modern child in the West as a separate category, as this may help us further understand the positioning of the grandmother/ACK as a suitable pedagogic vehicle for children.

The formation of the modern child in the West has been linked to certain epistemic ruptures in the mid-seventeenth century, which result in the constitution of childhood as distinct from the adult state in a variety of material practices. In his Centuries of Childhood (1962), Philippe Aries proposes that the conceptual division between “childhood” and “adulthood” as distinct categories occurred as a result of the societal reorganization that was entailed by the advent of modernity. In the context of an industrial society, the transition to adulthood through knowledge also marked the passage into the responsibilities of the citizen. Childhood became a site for disciplinary intervention in order to fashion skilled and responsible adults. The major philosopher of the eighteenth century, Jean Jacques Rousseau promulgated the “natural goodness” of human beings and believed that it could be improved/conserved through the education of children. For Rousseau, education was to man what cultivation was to plants. Later on, the Rousseauvian theorist Fredrich Froebel (1782-1852) too deployed many terms related to gardening to describe the process of the child’s education. The educator was like the skilled gardener who would provide appropriate “soil and climate” to enable the child to grow towards perfection.

As a result of the new configuration of the child, the choice of “appropriate” knowledge became important at this juncture. Knowledge gained from schooling and
other pedagogic practices trained the child for adulthood and for the role of the good citizen, and sought to exorcise “inappropriate” influences that might corrupt the child.

Thus books began to be published targeting children in particular and aimed to teach “correct” values. For example, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards fairy tales become well-approved reading material for children, while earlier in the century they were condemned for their lack of religious sentiment and morality and also for their irrelevance. But during the Victorian period, fairy tales were specially printed for children even though they had been circulating in the oral tradition of storytelling since the thirteenth century. This new acceptability of fairy tales resulted from their standardization as per bourgeois norms aimed at teaching appropriate gender/class behaviour.  

We can say that a similar kind of standardization and sanitization of the chitrakatha takes place in the context of ACK. But this standardization is also part of larger shifts taking place in the sixties in India in terms of the re-organization of the nation based on redefined notions of gender, caste, culture, and religion. Put in another way, the notions of both the Self and the Other undergo significant changes. For example, careful interpretations separate an act of violence from an act of masculine strength in order to mark out the Other of the nation from the Self in ACK. While I propose to deal with the modes in which masculinity is constructed in it in detail in the fourth chapter of this thesis, let me try and explain my point with a couple of brief examples. In Rama, Shoorpanakha is attracted to the handsome Rama in the forest and freely expresses her desire for him. For a moment, Rama and Lakshmana share a male banter at her cost but when, exasperated, she rushes towards Sita displaying a frightening form, an enraged
Lakshmana "chopped off her nose and ears" (13). The narrative does not present the act as one of violence but as one of just (masculine) punishment for deviant female behaviour. Similarly, in Padmini, when Ala-ud-din Khilji is hunting in the forest we get a sense of the extreme cruelty and violence latent in the man (I will have occasion to discuss the visuals as the chapter proceeds). But what is noteworthy is that even within the framework of ACK, hunting would be considered a manly and kingly pursuit in another context (involving a different [Hindu] king).

The Frescos of Ajanta: An "Ideal" Legacy

We have by now explored the modes in which ACK standardizes and modernizes katha and chitrakatha even as it borrows from their form and content. Let's go on to analyze ACK's debt to some other visual storytelling traditions in India such as the frescos and murals that have definitely contributed to the making of its pictures. Pai himself says that the frescos of Ajanta and Ellora were the sole inspiration behind the art of ACK. His evocation of the Ajanta art gains crucial dimensions if we try and link it to the quest for an "authentic" Indian art during the Swadeshi years, a campaign led by Abanindranath Tagore. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Abanindranath's two brilliant students, Nandalal Bose and Asit Kumar Haldar, made trips to Ajanta as part of Lady C. J. Herringham's group and copied several of the paintings. It was during this rediscovery that Ajanta came to acquire the status of the archetype of India's artistic and religious past. Abanindranath compared his students' trip to Ajanta to a "pilgrimage" and hoped that it would revitalize art in modern India. In his book Ajanta (1913), Asit Haldar followed the general classificatory canons that critics like Coomaraswami constructed for
Indian art history, by placing the ancient above the medieval past, and Buddhist and Hindu art above Mughal art. Tapati Guha-Thakurta writes:

The distinctions drawn between Buddhist and Mughal painting were those between a religious art and a secular court art. Buddhist art, symbolizing faith and devotion, was seen to exude a tranquil grace that was best perceived in the spontaneous flow of lines, while Mughal art was described as a product of leisure and pleasure, its ornate quality reflecting the ostentations of court life. While Ajanta and the Kailasa temple of Ellora were given the epithet of ‘classical’, Mughal painting or the Taj Mahal, however beautiful, were seen to be lacking in that ‘epic splendour’, ‘sublimity’ and ‘higher feelings’ of the former, which were the true definers of a ‘classic art’. (1992, 209)

We realize that Pai’s citing of the Ajanta frescos as the inspiration behind the illustrations of ACK is consistent with his ambition to focus upon “Indian themes and values”. But there is something else which is of equal importance. During the time that Ajanta was inducted into art history as the epitome of Indian art, the psychological qualities of art also came to be the most exalted dimension of Indian art. This was derivative of the Ruskinian theories that art was nothing by itself unless it conveyed ideals and emotion. “This view asserted itself not only in the qualities that were emphasized in a painting but also in the way the mythological or literary subject of the picture would be presented, highlighting the moral and emotional values inherent in the theme” (Guha-Thakurta 1992, 191).
Given ACK's conscious accent, right from its inception, on secularizing/humanizing the sacred, it is doubly significant that Pai names the Ajanta paintings as its pictorial inspiration. Many critics have commented on the unique achievement of the Ajanta artist to combine the secular with the sacred:

[it was] the essence retranslated into the intense, individual, sensory experience, into strangely moving, personal, plastic expressions, moulding icons into personal portraits... (Mitra 5)

Also,

It was the urge to paint the sacred and the secular, even the profane, at one and the same time...[the Ajanta artist] needed to reflect earthly things, to see and show things from the corporeal point of view, which demanded that he gave all his creations the sharp edges and the clarity of geometrical forms. (Mitra 7)

I feel that it is the ability of the Ajanta artist to breathe life into flat two-dimensional frontal images by an introduction of perspective that may have appealed to Pai in his search to highlight the secular in the sacred as he does in the figure of Krishna.

While it is important to hold on to the significance of the lineage that Pai forges between the frescos of Ajanta and ACK, it is equally important to explore the transmutations (of Ajanta and other art traditions of India) that go on to produce the unique, hybrid realism of the art of ACK. In the section that follows, I shall try and discuss some of those transmutations which are most striking to me, though I am handicapped by lack of formal training in the study of art.
Individualism, Masculinity and the Centred Gaze

Perspective was not used to generate an illusionistic effect in the Ajanta frescos. As Gulam Mohammed Sheikh (1993) points out, these presented a world in multiple rather than singular focus. The murals were like a scroll that was revealed to the viewer through serial unrolling and necessitated “a scanning method corresponding to the successive opening of spatial units as the viewer walked…In such practices, the prolonged sequence of time involved in appraising the pictorial space is antithetical to the notion to which illusionism so faithfully adheres, of arresting a climactic moment” (146). Dispersing the imagery over a stretch of pictorial space neutralizes the physical centre, which is crucial to illusionistic art. The eye trained to view realistic paintings gets a disturbing sense of flux while scanning these murals. Suggesting that this principle of flux is stretched to the maximum in tribal painting such as the Pithoro painting, Sheikh says:

Indeed the physical centre is effectively neutralised by spreading the imagery all over the pictorial plane. This gives the impression of ‘floating’ to a mind conditioned by illusionistic principles. The weight of centrality, obtained through juxtapositions of vanishing point and physical and pictorial centres crucial to an illusionistic visage, is here replaced by collective equanimity of forms which lends them ease and grace. (1983, 51)

Pushing the argument further in order to stress the dispersal of a centred point of view in much of Indian painting, Sheikh notes that “the question of realism and of the degree of human content, often expected in the form of an explicit portrayal of emotions, is
similarly located in the context of illusionism and its subsequent manifestations....If a highly abbreviated form of a Pithoro image looks shorn of human content and an elaborate one of a Kerala mural looks 'stylised and over-decorative', the loss is ours” (1983, 51).

I have sketched out some of Gulam Sheikh’s insights on frescos and other kinds of narrative paintings in India as a point of reference for me while examining the kind of relay that takes place between these traditional paintings and the principles of illusionism in the visual world of ACK. I would like to suggest that the visuals of ACK produce an effect that is closer to that of realistic painting so far as our vision is guided in a more centred and regulated manner, even as the grace and grandeur and a certain stylization of its figures come from traditional art. As Kajri Jain (1997) says in her discussion of calendar art, many of the calendar artists whom she interviewed were of the view that Indian art style was defined in terms of “Indian” line and decoration as opposed to “western” mass and form. The most identifiable features of their notion of Indian art were the finely drawn lines and the curvaceous, romantic nayikas with long fingers etc. While acknowledging ACK’s connection with traditional Indian art as well as realistic art with its stress on perspective and causality, one realizes that its maximum debt is to hybrid art forms such as calendar art and posters and hoardings. Put in other words, its “realism” is of a hybrid variety that can be grasped better if we try and explore its shared lineage with other hybrid forms of art in India.

Our viewing, to reiterate my argument, is much more centred in the ACK visuals. While it is a sequential art and requires mobility of vision, a singular focus is maintained through the centrality of a figure that binds the movement of the story. This centrality of
the figure is achieved through various visual techniques, the most common being the close-up of a face. In contrast, the continuity of the epic murals in India is directed by gestures and movements rather than by the eminence of a figure or the head. Allow me to quote Sheikh again in this context:

The figures speak as much (or more) with their bodies as with their heads. The significance of the head as the crown of human anatomy to be isolated from the torso was not an idea that appealed to the indigenous sensibility which viewed the body as an indivisible whole. The Western tradition, however, in the genre of portraiture, used the head as an independent unit to convey all aspects of physical and psychological conditions. By contrast the ancient Indian artist sought to transmute all forms of stress by infusing in the image a state of abiding grace. The practice ruled out facial and bodily contortions and excluded ugliness and violence from its repertory, to enforce an assertive vision of the fullness and regeneration of life. (Even the demons are somewhat redeemed, being rendered grotesque rather than diabolic.) With the absence of the requisites of portraiture, the figures did not assume roles of 'characters' or 'personalities', but remained self-contained presences. (1993, 152; emphasis mine)

We shall see that this "vision of fullness" is considerably reversed in ACK. The head in terms of facial countenance and expressions of nobility, heroism, deviousness and diabolism becomes an important part of its visuals indicating psychological states of mind and – more significantly – the "inner essence" of the national Self and its Other. The cinematic method of close-ups and angled shots and also point-of-view shots help in
achieving this effect. The villain is not merely grotesque; he is diabolic. Consider, for example, the close-ups of Khilji in Padmini. We have our first glimpse of Khilji, the villain of the narrative, in a scene of hunting. A panel shows us the profile of the cruel and covetous Khilji, watching a herd of innocent frolicking deer through a curtain of leaves. This scene anticipates Khilji’s desire for the chaste Padmini. The next panel consists of a close-up of Khilji’s face as he is startled by the sudden sound of music and the movement of the deer. We are struck by the carefully delineated malevolence of his eyes, his brows, his beard, his bared teeth – all of which contribute to his characterization as a cruel and ruthless invader.

There might admittedly be other ways of perceiving the same visuals depending upon the context of the reader-viewer. During my trip to a Kendriya Vidyalaya (run by the Central Government of India) in Hyderabad in April 2000, I met middle class children who belonged to a different generation altogether and who were more into watching World Wrestling Federation (WWF) matches on television rather than into reading ACK (or other books for that matter). When I showed these children (many of whom had never read an ACK) the visuals depicting close-ups and expressions of Ala-ud-din, some of them found him rather fascinating with his headgear and told me that he looked like a WWF wrestler. I then read them the story and showed them the visuals all over again. This time there was a half-hearted consensus that he was a “bad guy”. But no one really felt strongly enough against him to be able to appreciate the need for Padmini’s “great sacrifice”. The children, instead, came up with very practical solutions that might have seen her through the ordeal. For example, one of them said that she could have led Khilji on a bit and escaped when she got a chance.
Suddenly a melodious tune filled the jungle air.
What is to be noted here is that one has to be within the narrative logic of ACK to read the visuals in an appropriate/expected way. In a way, the late 90s children of the middle classes (unlike those who grew up in the 70s and the 80s) have moved away from ACK to other forms of entertainment which mould their perception. But as we shall see in the next chapter, an effort is on to reintroduce ACK to the children of the globalizing middle classes.

It is also true that the verbal narrative reinforces the significance of the visuals in a crucial way. I once narrated the story of Matsya avatar from Dasha Avatar (1978) to a four-year-old. She obviously could not read the dramatic and ideologically charged narrative of the chitrakatha and her knowledge of the events was mediated by the visuals and my matter-of-fact narration. She quite liked, against the grain of the narrative, the appearance of Hayagriva, the asura (demon) with the head of a horse, who stole the Vedas which fell out of Brahma’s mouth when the latter yawned, overcome by sleep. It caused her considerable confusion when Vishnu chose to slay the demon in the shape of a gigantic fish in order to retrieve the Vedas. This little girl always had an image of Vishnu as benign and lovable because of her experience of the ritual worship carried out by her grandmother and the pleasurable feelings associated with those practices, and suddenly this image clashed with that of somebody who killed poor Hayagriva for an “inexplicable” reason (she obviously could not see why Hayagriva may not possess or share something called the Vedas). No wonder that the story left the child bewildered. Such “bewilderment” would not have taken place if she could get into the narrative logic of the chitrakatha through reading the texts accompanying the visuals and interpreting them in an “appropriate” way. As Barthes suggests in his “The Photographic Message”,
Amar Chitra Katha: the Glorious Heritage of India

Babasaheb Ambedkar - Cover Illustration
the function of the text/caption that accompanies a photograph is meant to make the meaning clear, often by amplifying a set of connotations already given in the photograph, so that the message is decoded "properly". He proposes that the text "sublimates, patheticizes, or rationalizes the image" (1983, 204). The text in the narrative box of ACK similarly elaborates and "fixes" the meaning of the image that it accompanies, and thus, seeks to avoid "narrative confusion" on part of the reader. To quote Walter Benjamin in this context:

For the first time [in picture magazines], captions have become obligatory. And it is clear that they have an altogether different character than the title of a painting. The directives which the captions give to those looking at pictures in illustrated magazines soon become even more explicit and more imperative in the film where the meaning of each single picture appears to be prescribed by the sequence of all preceding ones.

(226)

Let us further explore in detail the human content or the centrality of a figure that holds the story together in ACK. The figure's centrality, I would say, is established on the cover page of the Chitra Katha. A close look at these covers led me to discover points of similarity with poster art in India, a genre in which many of the ACK artists received their early training. In fact, it owes considerable debt to the art of film hoardings and posters in the construction of a persona that is larger than life and yet tantalizingly identificatory. I would like to take a detour through R. Srivatsan's illuminating discussion of film hoardings to locate ACK's debt to the art of banner-posters and hoardings. Srivatsan says that film hoardings provide a "visible space that has a masculine structure"
(2000, 69) which is made evident by notions of heroism and individualism that animate it and also by the modes in which the body of the star is sexualized. Referring to a dominant trend in hoardings, he says:

The style of hoarding composition is one that populates these vast areas with human figures that are few in number but are very large in size. When there are many human figures in the picture, there is usually one face or body that extends its force across the composition and holds it together. (2000, 65)

Even though there would be significant differences in the economics, styling and viewership of the film hoarding and ACK, I would like to hold on to Srivatsan’s analysis of the force of the singularized face or body that spreads across the hoarding as a helpful tool for me to analyze the kind of masculine individualism that the latter propagates. We need only look at the cover illustrations of Dayananda, Subhash Chandra Bose, Vivekananda, Babasaheb Ambedkar or hoards of other chitrakathas to get a sense of what I am saying. The towering figures (towering quite literally on the cover) draw us into an orbit of identification as we empathize and are stirred by their lone, relentless battle against the Other of the Nation. These figures address our “weaknesses”, and shame us into heroic, “national” emotions; they demand our vigilance in guarding our hard-won freedom against the enemies of the nation.

Apart from the cover illustration, there are many other ways in which ACK neutralizes the decentering of the vision that is so essential to viewing frescos, murals and scrolls. First of all, it is the individual who binds together the narrative visually and otherwise. It is this individual and her/his action which lend coherence to the narration.
MATSYA AVATAR

This is my chance! I must now concentrate with all my mind and the Vedas falling out of the creator's mouth will enter mine.

The asura, Hayagriva, was alert. But Vishnu, the preserver, caught Hayagriva in the act.

The asura is absorbing the Vedas. They will be lost to the next kalpa. I must retrieve them. There are but a few days left for pralaya!
Amar Chitra Katha: the Glorious Heritage of India

Dayananda - Cover Illustration
We may contrast this form of pictorial narration with that of a Mughal painting called *The House of Shaikh Phul* (A.D. 1605-15). Gulam Sheikh points out that though there is an entire crowd of people/onlookers carrying out various acts of obeisance and chores around the saint Shaikh Phul who is digging the earth, our gaze does not remain centred on him:

As we follow the directions indicated by the figures and enjoined by aspects of the environment, a microscopic spectrum of the street gathered around the uncaring saint emerges in circular configuration, virtually circumambulating him…. The painting emphasizes the gazes of people and the animated environment—both converging on the focal centre. The lack of reciprocation from the centre diverts them back to their places. (1993, 148)

I am referring to this to highlight a contrary trend in ACK. For example, in *Dayananda*, it is the reformer whose speech, action and countenance that hold together the narrative world. We view corruption, poverty and decadence through Dayananda’s eyes. In one panel, we follow the gaze of Dayananda to encounter the heartlessness of the rich who come to the temple with sumptuous offerings for the deity, towards the beggars lining the steps of the temple. In the next, we witness along with him, the gluttony and the greed of the pot-bellied brahmins who “exploit the people”. In yet another panel that follows, we share Dayananda’s detestation of the social abomination called untouchability as it is practiced by a high-caste Hindu, conspicuously wearing the marks of his caste – the sandalwood lines on his forehead, the single strand of hair at the back of his shaven head, the garland of rudraksh or sacred beads around his neck. Dayananda’s commanding point
of view sums up the "evils" of Hinduism for us. It is also the overarching view of a narrative like ACK which assigns us comfortable subject positions as civilized/liberal (uppercaste and middle class) readers who share Dayananda's revulsion for "casteism". There is no disturbing/distracting effect in the visuals which would rupture our gaze and force us to recognize our own implication in social inequality and injustice.

If the visuals of ACK can be considered realistic as they arrest the gaze on a central figure and breathe individuality (or should one say individualism) into a mythic or historical figure, can we then entirely club this realism with western academic realism? The answer would have to be no. As I have indicated before, it draws a lot from hybrid arts like calendar art and the art of posters and hoardings, which carry out complex negotiations with realism in its western sense in order to address incumbent demands which are more local/regional/national and contextual. Thus, as Srivatsan points out, the hoarding artist replicates the way a star really looks in a film and yet slips in embellishments and ornamentation which a local viewer can identify with enough for it to form part of his fantasy. Similarly, realism is a much-bargained commodity in calendar art. Kajri Jain points out that even when an artist comes from the J.J. School of Arts or any other school of fine arts in the country, trained into the bias these schools have against decoration and loudness, a foray into the world of calendar art teaches her/him that realism is constantly bargained over in keeping with popular taste and the dynamics of the market for sacred art. So if a calendar is painted in Sivakasi, the artists give "babies, gods, women and freedom fighters alike bright red lips and pink cheeks" (79). Kajri Jain quotes a laconic remark made by an artist from the north on the calendars printed in Sivakasi:
...even if its [sic] Ramchandraji, they'll give him Saira Bano's lipstick... (79)

ACK participates in a similar "compromised realism" in its endeavour to project an authentic pan-Indian national culture. It straddles fact and fiction, truth and display, and yet produces a world that is entirely plausible in its logic of a normative Vedantic Hinduism being the basis of the nation and the touchstone for its citizenship. Ram Waeerkar, the chief illustrator of ACK, admits that he modeled Rama upon Ravi Varma's Europeanized Rama and not upon the bearded Rama of the pothi tradition of Maharashtra and Karnataka in which he grew up. He concedes that "a bearded Rama would have been more realistic considering the 14 years he spent in Vanvasa" (cited in Chandra).

Similarly, in Pai's own version, the artist who drew Shivaji, absolutely refused to draw him in conformity with his short stature of 5 feet and 3 inches as Shivaji was a superhero for him.

What then is the nature of ACK's realism? I hope that the foregoing discussion would have alerted us to the nature of the masculine, individualistic ideal it represents. Such an ideal, even while portraying an icon or a deity, partakes in a realism that makes the icon available to our identificatory fantasies by allowing the ordinary middle class man a glimpse of the full realization of human possibilities. In a double move, the icon has to be a class apart and out of the ordinary and yet secular, coherent, believable. Hence Shivaji's stature does not gel with the notion of masculinity that ACK projects and thus the visual realism transmutes the "real" to make it plausible and, if I may add, desirable.

Put in another way, the plausibility (and the desirability) springs from a tight fit between body and the event to achieve an effect of masculinity. I feel that a brief outline of
Anuradha Kapur’s study of the changing iconography of Ram may help elucidate the point that I am making.

Kapur (1993b) says that traditional iconography represented Rama as serene and smiling and always in company of Janaki and Lakshmana, with Hanuman sitting at their feet, as against contemporary images of Rama (especially in the Ramjanmabhumi context) which show him standing alone, heavily armoured and angry. Also referring to traditional literature such as Bhavabhuti’s famous texts dating back to the early eighth century, Kapur notes how the Rama in these texts is almost androgynous in his lamentations when he has to send Sita away to the jungle. He is described as soft as lotus and as smooth, and faints and pines for his beloved.

Referring to traditional performative aesthetics such as Ramlila and Raslila, Kapur points out that the deities are played by pre-puberty boys who are young, unmuscular and androgynous in their looks and are barely five feet tall in stature. Such representation is “emphatically unmasculine, at least in comparison with the way we read of masculinity today as adult, male, muscled and usually aggressive” (1993b, 86).

But what I find pertinent to my reading of ACK is Kapur’s assertion that in traditional aesthetics of both performance and painting, “forms of heroism do not get locked with aggressive masculinity and prowess” (1993b, 91). Citing a variety of examples from traditional performative, narrative and visual arts, Kapur establishes that in these the body need not match the action in any tight fit. Thus, in a painting Rama may look puny pitted against the gigantic height of Parashuram, and yet humble the latter without any interchange of violence taking place. In this regard, Kapur’s description of an eighteenth century miniature painting called “Viradha Seizes Sita” is indeed revealing:
Viradha, a demon, seizes Sita and is shown holding her in the crook of his arm. On his trident are impaled eight tigers and the head of an elephant: trophies that signal enormous strength. He seems to have been depicted in mid-action, in mid-stride even, as if he has, just this moment, snatched away Sita....In size Viradha is much larger than Ram; and he is very fierce in tooth and claw. Ram is to the left of the picture and Lakshman is placed just behind him....Ram points towards Viradha but looks at Lakshman, as if wondering, or asking a question, or seeking confirmation....In Viradha's zone events appear to crowd in upon each other—the snatching, the challenge, the agitation; while where Ram stands there is stillness, a sort of limpidity. This stillness is created, in some measure, by Ram not looking at Viradha at all, but away from him. His gaze breaks down the possibility of converging the narrative to a focus, that of confrontation.

What is signalled, instead, is a disinterestedness in the moment of violence. (1993b, 91-93)

What we see here is a narrative world where action and event do not match. The behaviour of the body need not respond in any one-to-one way to a specific moment in the story.

Contemporary representations of Rama, on the other hand, Kapur points out, are marked by an endeavour to represent "reality" as adequate to the demands of the situation, stripped of sentimentality and idealism, determined by causality and the psychology of the character. It then becomes important to explain why a certain character
is acting in a certain way at a certain moment. "A character must be temperamentally coherent, plausible in terms of action" (1993b, 98).

In the same light, one can understand the dilemma of Ram Waeerkar, the artist of ACK:

I said, that is impossible, he is running after the deer. How can even he—with half closed and half open eyes run after the deer! (Laughs) It looks ridiculous! (Cited in Jain 63)

And this despite an alternative knowledge that he himself has:

Bhagwan Krishna, Prabhu Ram...they have succeeded in fighting, but they are not fighters. (Cited in Jain 81)

We also understand why the ACK artist would have found it so unthinkable to draw Shivaji as short in stature. Because the image here has to represent a form of masculinity that is defined in terms of muscularity and is larger-than-life in terms of its individuality and resoluteness. So when we look at the picture of ACK’s Rama, we are struck by his muscular body and the same is true of the Krishna (of Gita). The child Krishna of Krishna is visually athletic and trim compared to, for instance, the plump indolent Krishna of Tanjore paintings.

I have discussed above how ACK borrows several techniques from the aesthetic traditions of India and transmutes them to achieve an effect that gains meaning in the context of the endeavour from the late sixties onwards to legitimize a masculinized, uppercaste, Hindu self as the "true" citizen of the nation. Since ACK is a visual narrative, I have tried to analyze the intertextuality of the visuals in some detail. As I have proposed that the ACK visuals attempt to achieve an effect that is realistic, I would like to wind up
this discussion with an attempt to understand the nature and function of realism in a nationalist enterprise, since this would provide us with important insights into ACK as a visual genre.

Realism, Nationalism and the Visual Discourse of Amar Chitra Katha

Referring to the use of oils and the easel format by Ravi Varma (1848-1906), Geeta Kapur (1989) describes it as the struggle of the native to gain mastery over the source of the master's superior knowledge. Oil paint facilitates a greater hold on reality through the interplay of light and shade, perspective and the laws of framing. Yet, Ravi Varma does not replicate the style of western academic realism in a passive way; what in fact happens in his case is a "surrogate realism" (61) that achieves definite effects in the nationalist context: in his hands "the past is clad not in metaphoric forms bequeathed by the conceptual pristine. The past is present clad in actual flesh and blood and costume" (65). Thus, in Ravi Varma's paintings, we find that the figures from the past become contemporarized historical forms through an ingenious mixing of artistic genres and techniques. He evokes the erotic fullness and erect poise that was imagined to characterize the archetypal figures from a classical/Aryan past and yet imbues them with immediacy and tactility through the use of the oil medium and the laws of perspective. It is through a privileging of the "classical" that he aspires for a "universally attractive human ideal through an Indian manifestation" (Kapur 1989, 71). The motives behind such privileging become clear in the context of a counter-hegemonic middle class, uppercaste nationalist struggle against colonialism but this also inevitably generates "a
discourse of cultural synthesis that will, for all its good intentions, camouflage differences and hierarchies” (Kapur 1989, 71).

It is notable that ACK’s figures, especially those of the women closely resemble Ravi Varma’s female figures which the latter fashioned after Sanskrit and classical Malayalam kavya nayikas. If anything, the ideal female figure in ACK is slimmer and with an “enviable” waistline than the rounded Shakuntala and Draupadi of Ravi Varma and thus more in keeping with modern notions of beauty. Knots appear at strategic places to alert the (masculine) gaze to the curves of the figure. Pai’s explanation is that there was no stitching during Vedic times. Yet maybe there is more to it. Tapati Guha-Thakurta offers us some interesting insights into the transformations that the portrayal of the female body undergoes in mass produced urban art such as calendar art. She traces the genealogy of this body to the oleographs and chromolithographs of the late 19th century which, in the manner of Ravi Varma, mark a disjunction with tradition and an encounter with modernity:

If the changes in painting and printing techniques gave the image a new seductive tangibility, a parallel accretion of religious, mythic, aesthetic, social and political values transformed the same image into an ‘icon’…. While their forms were standardized and duplicated, their meanings were mediated upon and fixed by the parameters of this dominant discourse: a discourse that waxed eloquent on ‘ideal’ Indian womanhood and on its symbolic representation of ‘culture’ and ‘nation’. (1991, WS-91)
While realism lent the female figures a surface gloss and materiality, the form and typology remained distinctly Indian. These lithographs of the late 19th century followed Ravi Varma’s fashioning of a new iconography wherein the images of mythic heroines became ideal national prototypes. Though these figures were individualised and carried regional markers they were intended to project a pan-Indian stereotype:

In the new urban art forms of modern India, the woman’s form had undergone a striking metamorphosis, posing a new configuration of the ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’. While its form was ‘modernised’, the concepts and ideals it signified always harked back to ‘tradition’ – to Hindu mythology, Sanskrit literature, regional customs or Indian values and ethics. Over the late 19th century and early 20th century (in cheap mass produced prints) such pictorial representations of woman coincided with a new powerful set of equations made by nationalist discourse between ‘tradition’ and ‘femininity’, between the ‘nation’ and the mother goddess…. Women were designated special roles in the nationalist project – as preserver of age-old customs and rituals, as embodiments of religiosity and virtue, as upholders of domestic order and stability, as nurturing mothers, faithful wives and devoted daughters, all sustaining the male in his public services to the motherland… also as inspirational figure of Bharat-Mata rousing her ‘sons’ to action…. Their subjectivity – their actual struggles and identities – continually receded before their idealised symbolic presence. (Guha-Thakurta, 1991, WS 95-96)
I have discussed the dynamics of Ravi Varma's illusionistic paintings, the lithographs of the late 19th century in Bengal, and also the urban popular art of the 20th century at some length to suggest that western academic realism is renotated in these paintings, especially in drawing the figure of the woman, to create an effect that is simultaneously nationalist/classical and modern. The fleshing out of the woman's body augmented her erotic allure and yet her sexuality was constantly legitimized and contained by her role as wife, mother or goddess.

ACK's realism draws its inspiration in a major way from the above mentioned transmutations that took place in nationalist art in the late nineteenth century. The female form, especially in those chitrakathas dealing with mythological or classical stories, say, of Malavika, or Sita, or Padmini, is highly eroticised and yet there is a world of difference between them and the "deviant" female figures in ACK. The brazen, "deviant" women are, for example, Shoorpanakha or the hoards of women waiting on the "debauched" Ala-ud-din Khilji. The classical heroine, on the other hand, is a polyvalent sign emitting both purity and sexuality. This is where we see traces of the Ravi Varma legacy transmitted via popular urban art to the ACK visuals. The choice of Ravi Varma or the lithographs inspired by him as a source for the art of ACK cannot be looked upon as an innocent choice. There are alternative traditions available within the art of 19th century itself. One needs to only cite the Kalighat pats (scroll paintings) for instance. The Kalighat patuas (scroll painters) adopted a popular, bawdy and satiric mode of painting which lampooned the westernized, urban, middle class society of Calcutta. These paintings depicted degenerate babus, brazen women and licentious sadhus.
WELL THEN, PADMINI SHOULD BE IN MY HAREM.

AND CHITTOR UNDER YOUR RULE.
In Kalighat paintings, the same bold flowing lines that expressed the maternal graces of Yashoda or the lyrical beauty of Radha were also used to express the violence of a reversed world order of the woman trampling and subjugating the man. A striking example is a painting where the traditional iconography of Kali standing astride Shiva is superimposed on a picture of a mistress trampling her lover, to give a sharper edge to the theme of the rapacious courtesan. (Guha-Thakurta 1992, 21)

Yet these pictures, both in terms of their style of drawing 'bloated' figures and their satirical images of the middle class, simply could not have fitted into the schema of ACK.

To sum up, several art traditions of India are brought into play in Pai’s endeavour to mould a new, viable iconography in ACK. But the intertextuality of ACK produces a vibrant, hybrid effect that is altogether modern and linked to its positioning and functionality in the late sixties and after. ACK can be best classified as a form of visual narrative that is eclectic in its borrowings and yet is unique in itself as it seeks to train the nation’s middle class children from the late sixties onwards to develop as “model” citizen-subjects of the modern nation – individualist, materially successful but also ethically and culturally hegemonic. In locating the “ideal” of history in a “real” world, the images/narratives of ACK are pressed into the making of the new Indian – proud and self-made – unhampered by the “restraints” and “weaknesses” of the welfare state.

The subsequent chapter further opens up the relay between ACK’s mythic/historical material and the development of “personality” (of the middle class
children) – a word that is the measure of the grit, determination and charisma of the individual in a competitive world. We will find that “history” retold as “story” plays a dynamic role in fashioning ACK’s pedagogy for the present.

Notes

1 I have derived my information regarding katha and chitrakatha chiefly from Sujit Mukherjee’s *A Dictionary of Indian Literature* (1998) and *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature* (Datta 1987).

2 For a hard-hitting subaltern critique of such “rational religion”, see Kancha Ilaiah (1996). Ilaiah writes, “What further separated a Hindu from us was the nature of the consciousness of the other world, the divine and the spiritual. For children from our castes, *Jeja* (the concept of God) is introduced in the form of the moon. As children grow up, they also get acquainted with Pochamma, Polimeramma, Kattamaisamma, Kaatamaraju, Potaraju and other deities. Among Dalitbahujans, there is no concept of a temple in a definite place or form…. Every Dalitbahujan child learns at an early age that smallpox comes because Pochamma is angry…. This consciousness has not yet taken the shape of an organized religion. The Dalitbahujan spirit in its essence is a non-Hindu spirit because the Hindu patriarchal Gods do not exist among us at all” (6-7).

3 See *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature* (Datta 1987), vol.I.

4 For a discussion, see Mullapudi Sreenivasa Prasad (1998).

5 For a detailed discussion, see Deeptha Achar (1997).
In this context, an interesting fact comes to mind. Bob Thomas (1958) points out that Disney's slim, graceful, self-assured sleeping beauty was modeled after Audrey Hepburn, "a bright new personality at the time" (56).