Chapter 5

Conclusion

We never respect those who amuse us, however we may still smile at their comic power.

Marguerite Gardiner

As a form of public culture that has reached into the everyday lives of millions of middle-class Indian children over the past decades, *Amar Chitra Katha* has had a substantial impact on defining Indian consciousness. The influence of *ACK* extends beyond its significant reading audience. Undoubtedly *ACK*, has drawn on a long tradition of Indian visual and literary culture, and they have been influenced by the Indian nationalist period in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when popular texts and images (paintings, posters, calendar art) were employed in the struggle for independence from British colonial rule. As Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge have suggested, each new media technology in South Asia “has distinctive capacities and function, and each interact in a different way with older modes of organization and disseminating information” (1-20). It is equally an important fact that new media in India has in turn relied heavily on comic books. The production of *ACK* began in the year 1967, before satellite television had become entrenched in urban India, and these comic books have had a direct, though little-recognized, influence on this medium in India. Sales of the comic books boomed from the 1970s to the mid 1980s. But in the mid 1980s and the early 1990s, television suddenly became available throughout urban India as hundreds of transmitters were erected. In the mid 1980s, televised entertainment serials were introduced on Doordarshan, the state-run network, and the most successful one of this time was Ramanand Sagar’s *Ramayana*, which aired from January 1987 until 1988 and captured an estimate daily viewership of 40 to 60 millions, with the most popular episodes being viewed by 80 to 100 million people. *ACK* and Doordarshan were competing for the same audience, and Doordarshan appeared to be winning because of its two-fold appeal. Television had become a common household artifact. Most middle class homes were able to afford one television set per household, and television began to play a central role in redefining domestic space and time. Given the centrality of the medium in Indian household’s it was often the focus of attention.
on Sunday which is a full-holiday for most offices and businesses. Thus the choice of Sunday as the day for broadcasting Mahabharata or Ramayana was primarily driven to capture a large audience base. Further, serials like Mahabharata and Ramayana filled the slot left vacant when epics were recited orally. One reason for the declining sales of ACK was that televised serials were able to capture the ‘domesticity of home’. Therefore it was only natural that throughout the late 1980s ACK sales slid, until the producers finally stopped making new issues in 1991. Anant Pai and the other producers finally decided to stop creating new issues and focused only on reprinting bestsellers.

Merely focusing on the competitive aspect of these two media for India’s middle-class audience would be a one-dimensional approach, overlooking the interconnections between the two. Philip Lutgendork has commented on the ‘homogenization’ he sees between the comic books and the Ramayana TV serial, noting that “visually speaking, the characters and settings of the Ramanand Sagar serial look much like those of the Amar Chitra Katha comic books”. This is particularly true in the final hour long episode, which aired on Jul 31 1988, and ended the series with Rama’s coronation in a way that seems directly indebted to the comic book: where Lord Rama is seated magnificently on his throne with Sita at his side, Rama is immortalized as the ever-victorious god-king and ideal ruler.

Television producers have repeatedly turned to the ACK series as reference material for costume design, set production, and subject matter. When making the live-action serial based on the ACK comic books that aired on UTV in 1998, producer Zarina Mehta stated that the idea seemed plausible to her because the comic books are quite cinematic already, particularly in the way that they “alternate action with a lot of drama and emotion”, which makes their adaptation to television medium a relatively simple process. Mehta was inspired to undertake this project because she credits these comic books with helping her, as a Parsi, to learn mythology. She also wanted to bring that Indian heritage to a new generation.

During the making of this series, the Sagars, who produced Ramayana, and the Chopras, who produced Mahabharata, each co-produced some of the ACK TV episodes, further homogenization between these two media in their respective visions of who India’s heroes are, what they look like and what their stories are.
Like these television serials, dozens of Indian films have also been produced in the past quarter century featuring the same Indian heroes that were canonized in ACK and demonstrated the marked influence of these comic books in the ways that these heroes are envisioned and their stories are told in the digital medium. Creators of new animated cartoons and children’s internet production in India are also now turning to ACK for inspiration. Thus not only have ACK comic books been instrumental in establishing a national canon of heroes that defines what it means to be an Indian for millions of middle-class readers in India and throughout the transnational Indian diasporas, these comics have also been instrumental in disseminating the ideas of pan-India and ‘Indianness’ through other popular Indian media.

ACK sets up powerful modes of address by eclectically drawing upon a range of narrative traditions and histories. The ‘new’ self that it labors to put in place poses a challenge to the post-independent state but its critical thrust does not come from the revolutionary ferment of the time nor does it call for a more invigorated egalitarianism. ACK’s myth and history come to us encrypted as stories of success, self-confidence and achievement, in brief, as the new ethic of competitive individualism. The energy of Pai’s imagination lies in the way in which he refigures Carnegie (Carnegie, 1888-1955, was a pioneer in public speaking and personality development and exercised major influence on Pai) to develop a philosophy of action that would equip the middle-class adolescent/youth to step into a corporate, globalizing world, and yet retain an identity that is distinctly Indian.

Most ACK readers were simply not interested in reading about time machines or other fictionalized novelties, nor were they interested in reading about common people. Instead, they wanted to read their about formulaic heroes like the mythological god-king Rama, the historical warrior-king Shivaji, and the modern freedom fighter Bhagat Singh: heroes who battled their foes and either emerged victorious or else died bravely in the process. For the readers of these comics, this is the very formula for Indianness. And this is true not only of the Indians who read these comic books in India but also of the transnational Indians who read these comics books throughout the world.
Popular culture is often unreflectively seen as situated in mass-production and mass consumption, it is usually linked to the common culture of the streets as against “classical” or “traditional” cultures, to subaltern or working-class culture vis-à-vis that of a dominant groups. Although it is entangled in the histories of such oversimplified binaries as ‘high’ and ‘low’, ‘autonomous’ and ‘instrumental’, ‘individual’ and ‘communal’, ‘authentic’ and ‘commodified’, it has increasingly become possible to critically analyze its locus and role even though these may be continuously shifting with development in technology, production, the market, and their cumulative impact on culture and society. The explosion of the visual as perceived all around us—on billboards, calendars, posters, religious paraphernalia, print-media, and television, in restaurants and shops, on the roadside, in auto rickshaws, taxis, trucks, and buses, in bazaar and around temple—emanates from the force of urbanization of our culture in terms of technologies of image production and ways of thinking and looking.

Indian popular visual culture is often treated as a generalized and undifferentiated category assuming mass-produced images to be popular in a quantitative sense. It has been explored in relation to its engendering of nationalists strategies, religious mobility, and its role in the study of difference of gender, race, religion and power, its function in the construction of the social. Mass-produced pictures are assumed to be popular in a demographic sense, because they are produced and consumed in large numbers. Tied to this is the prevailing strategy of taking visual evidence as a sign of some underlying force. As signs, images are imputed a fullness. The full-frontal darshanic idiom mobilized the spaces first created by theatre and then by cinema and became what we might call the “dominant -class” aesthetic (Pierre Bourdieu). But ACK artists have also produced a different kind of aesthetic expressive of marginal figures who continued to be situated on the fringes of society. This marginal figure was expressed through a *katha* aesthetic rather than through the darshanic.

In a consumer society, all commodities have cultural as well as functional values. To model this we need to extend the idea of an economy to include a cultural economy where the circulation is not one of money, but of meanings and pleasures. Here, the audience, from being a commodity, now becomes a producer, a producer of meanings. This acknowledgement of popular forces inevitably brings us the
discussion of ‘semiotic democracy’. The phrase—‘semiotic democracy’ was coined by Fiske in his seminal work on media studies. Fiske defined the term as the delegation of the production of meaning and pleasures to viewers. Fiske discussed how rather than being passive couch potatoes that absorbed information in an unmediated way, viewers actually gave their own meaning that often differed substantially from the meaning intended. Subsequently this term was appropriated by other communities in the context of any re-working of cultural imagery by someone who is not the author. These popular forces “transform the cultural commodity into a cultural resource, pluralize the meaning and pleasures it offers, evade or resist its disciplinary efforts, fracture its homogeneity and coherence, raid or poach upon its terrain” (Fiske, 22). Popular culture is the art of making do with what the system provides. The fact that the system provides only commodities, whether cultural or material, does not mean that the process of consuming those commodities can be adequately described as one that commodifies the people into a homogenized mass at the mercy of the barons of the industry. Therefore, the study of popular culture should always start with “the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably inside it” (Fiske, 23).

In the light of the theory of ‘semiotic democracy’, ACK as a popular text contained forces of domination and opportunities to speak against them, the opportunities to oppose or evade structures of hegemony from subordinated, but not totally disempowered position. ACK stands as an interface between the products of the cultural industry and everyday life. ACK stems from within, from below, not from above.

Michel Foucault spoke of real places—that actually exist—as against utopias or sites disconnected from any real place. Hierarchical spatial binaries such as sacred and profane places, protected and open urban and rural, especially of the Middle ages, were his examples of real spaces that concern real life. Importantly, he also spoke of other “real spaces”, in which “all the other sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted” (Foucault, 22-27). He termed these sites heterotopias, which embody the “simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live” (ibid). The space of ACK constitutes an apt example for evoking and juxtaposing a number of spaces in a single real place, where it brings before its reader a whole series of places that are foreign to one
another. To extend Foucault’s definition to ACK which upholds the Hindu secular model and is clearly opposed to the Nehruvian model of secular bourgeois, it grants legitimacy to have a plural polity in terms of religion and sects. This new and unfamiliar global trend where apparent paradoxes such as tradition, mythology, history, and the present interlock with nostalgia, exoticism and desire points to the fact that ACK has given depth and feeling to nationality and cosmopolitanism. The heterogeneous space of ACK depicting the image of modern India emerges from the new globalized economy and comprises an eclectic assemblage of traditional Indian architectural features which further conveniently evoke the spaces of India’s past golden ages and thereby of the nation itself. This complicit intermingling go hand-in-hand with equally random accumulation of cosmopolitan and international trends in a composite space of fantasy, desire, global modernity, history, tradition and nation rolled into the search of a new democracy of consumption. Commenting on the efficacy of nations to produce such sites of contestation, Jyotindra Jain writes:

Nations are in the habit of mobilizing visual symbols, performances and spectacles to establish an identity and sustain their integrity. Though they dig, discover, and harness tradition and history in the process of nation-building, they leave a window open for a new possibilities to appropriate modernity by reinterpreting its elements to strengthen its particular objective and self/image (16).

The role of ACK in the pantheon of Indian popular culture culminates in the notion of ‘iconization’ of spaces. The cataloguing of visual symbols such as national flower, the national bird, the national animal, Mother India or Bharat Mata exemplify how the space of Indian nation is strategically consecrated in the service of the unity-in-diversity image of country. By deliberately selecting certain historical events for representation in the repertoire of ACK and by tactically putting frames of the imaginary Indian tradition, an abstract, generalized space of the Indian nation is thus dreamed up. ACK represents not only an act of centralizing the space of Indian nation within the globe but one of anointing the space as “Indian” through the mobility of image of Hindu gods.

ACK as we know played an important role in the formation of a modern subject/subjectivity and a modern community. It unified/ brought together not just the
experience of the consolidation of the physical space of the nation state but also the cultural and social spaces, as well as conjuring up the experience of a citizen ‘body’ coming into contact with other citizen ‘bodies’. The emotions, desires, and ideologies that constitute the nation and grant it legitimacy are apprehended in ACK. The insights of Benedict Anderson, Slavoj Zizek, Tom Nairn and Homi Bhabha point to the idea of the nation as a Janus-faced concept in which a number of contradictory elements coexist. Bhabha’s point in this regard is particularly important:

The boundary is Janus-faced and the problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new ‘people’ in relation to the body politic, generating other sites of meaning and, inevitably, in the political process, producing unmanned sites of political antagonism and unpredictable forces for political representation (Bhabha, 4).

The space of ACK could be one of these “sites of meaning” incorporating “new people” but also producing sites of antagonism/conflict. Notions of citizenship, duty, as opposed to subverting the rule of law and generating angst, hatred and dissatisfaction within members of the collective community are the binary that play themselves out in the narratives of ACK. The image ACK is mobilized around a network of symbols, rituals and a shared meaning of what constitutes the idea of an Indian nation.

Popular culture in industrial societies is contradictory to its core. On the one hand it is industrialized—its commodities produced and distributed by a profit-motivated industry that follows only its own economic interests. Yet on the other hand, it is of the people, and the people’s interest are not those of the industry—as is evidenced by the number of films, records and other products of which the comics are the most famous. To be made into popular culture, a commodity must also bear the interests of the people. Popular culture is not consumption; it is culture—the active process of generating and circulating meaning and pleasures within a social system. Culture however industrialized, can never be adequately described in terms of the buying and selling of commodities. Culture is a living, active process: it can be developed only from within; it cannot be imposed from outside or above. The fear of the mass culture theorists have not been borne out in practice because mass culture is such a contradiction in terms that it cannot exist. A homogenous, externally produced culture cannot be sold ready-made to the masses; culture simply does not work like that. Nor do the people behave or live like masses, an aggregation of alienation or
one-dimensional persons whose only consciousness is false, whose only relationship to the system that enslaves them is one of unwitting dupes. Popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry. All the culture industry can do is producing a repertoire of texts or cultural resources for the various formulations of the people to use or reject in the ongoing process of producing their popular culture.

ACK shows that popular culture is the crucial site where the contest for hegemony takes place. It draws our attention to the pedagogic effectiveness of history as popular culture. Even though culture remains bound to the histories and geographies of regions of the world, there are often similarities in the way in which culture is conceptualized that offer space to ask similar questions about culture, albeit in different settings. ACK by virtue of its articulation of everyday life material practices was able to identify some fundamental assumptions about culture that are applicable to other histories and social blocs. Anant Pai held data-driven history in contempt and designed ACK as chitrakathas—borrowing the color and the allure of the genre. History, in ACK, emerges as an actor in the politics of the present. It hegemonises dominant ideas of the modern and the pre-modern, the secular Self and the bigoted other. ACK draws attention to the investments of gender in the making of an individual ideology. Its ‘masculine ideal’ serves as an ethical demand on women, lower castes and other marginalized sections to ‘uplift’ and ‘improve’ themselves through their ‘inner strength’ and ‘perseverance’. ACK’s individualist ideology would seem to require a masculinisation on part of women so that they compete with men on equal terms instead of demanding concessions on the basis of gender. The 2005 issue of Kalpana Chawla plays this out. Concomitantly, ACK also posits an ‘ideal Indian womanhood’ as represented by the figures of Sita, Savitri, and Padmini. These women, in terms of their sexuality and agency, do not overstep the boundaries of upper caste ‘honour’. In many ways, ACK’s balancing of the indomitable self and ideal womanhood fits in with the current hegemonic representation of women who are achievers yet home-makers.

Therefore what emerges is a complex modernity that is fashioned through contradictions, through the saturation of present with the past. Thus ACK is not a project that is incomplete or unfinished instead it stands for the future and looking back, over the shoulders, to the past. ACK is the dynamic suturing of past and present, a historicity that can accommodate the preset-ness of the past, and the past-ness of the
present. The national eye turned a new eye on its past culture and awoke to its sense and import but also at the same time saw its relation to modern knowledge and ideas. The recovery of the old spiritual/secular knowledge and experience in all its splendor, depth and fullness followed the flowering of this awareness along with access to the past knowledge which led to new forms of philosophy, literature, art and critical knowledge to develop. It also helped to evaluate new modern problems in the light of Indian spirit and the endeavor to formulate a greater synthesis of a multi-ethnic layered society."