Chapter 1

Introduction

The world is indeed comic, but the joke is on mankind.


Stories are crucial mainly because they are ubiquitous. A narrative is indisputably a resource for invention and a source for domination. This should come as no surprise—stories, after all, constitute the most extensive field of culture. How we narrate our lives, for instance, is a deep cultural structure (one important way of characterizing a culture is by the narrative models it makes available for describing the course of a life) and ones that sets limits to how we can think of our lives as well as providing opportunities for the course of a life. For Barthes narrative is almost coterminous with social actuality: “narrative begins with the very history of humanity; there is not, there has never been, any people anywhere without narrative...narrative is there, like life” (95). One thing that many theorist of narrative agree on is that the ubiquity of narrative is its most salient feature. Thus J. Hillis Miller writes:

From our earliest childhood we hear stories and learn to repeat them...As adults, we hear, read, see and tell stories all day long- for example, in the newspaper, on television, in encounters with co-workers or family members. In a continuous silent internal activity, we tell stories to ourselves all day long. Jokes are one form of narration. Advertising is another...At night we sleep, and our unconscious minds tell us more stories in our dreams, often exceedingly strange ones. Even within ‘literature proper’ the range of narrative is wide and diverse. It included not only short stories and novels but also dramas, epic, platonic dialogues, narrative poems and so on. (qtd in Certeau, 126-127).

The plethora of narratives, often in a densely truncated form suggests a massive arena of ideas, persuasively framed as stories. For de Certeau this ubiquity of stories can be recognized as a passive culture of persuasion: the great archive of ideological positions. Stories saturate the social field, but this store of persuasion that solicits our passive acceptance, is only ever a partial account of the narrative activity that is at work in culture in its fullest and most general sense.
Narrative’s most vital relationship with everyday life, is not as an ideological persuader, but more as a space for recording forms of action and for the rehearsal of potential activities. In this, narrative is a practical resource for performance and actions: it supplies a repertoire for different responses to different situations. This is not to say that some narratives are ideological and ask for our acquiescence while other narratives offer suggestions for different ways of acting: rather, the same narrative might be used in distinct, even antagonistic, ways.

Narratives cover a wide range of different practices: from oral traditions of storytelling to the playing and recounting of games; from the micro-narratives of proverbs and other forms of popular wisdom to the more elaborate telling of folktales; from condensed advertising narrative to the sprawling and expansive novel. These resources, while in many ways are different yet they share a common denominator in that they are resources that often, if not always, describe and comment on the performance of everyday practices. And they do this outside of the pressure of life. One such genre which has gained increasing popularity is of ‘Visual Narratives’ which can be best described as a combination of visuals and narrative. Visual storytelling is a phenomenon that every society is acquainted with. The term extensively used to refer to visual story-telling in recent times is “Visual Narrative”. The label “Visual Narrative” is applied in a generic sense to denote anything from an illustrated story-book to motion pictures. Far from being a trivial term, “Visual Narrative” is in reality an all encompassing idiom, it is a sub-genre of Visual Studies itself. One may not have come across a specialized filed or department called Visual Narrative but one must certainly be acquainted with terms such as Narrative Art, Visual storytelling, Pictorial Stories, Illustrated Stories, Comics, Sequential Art and Graphic Novels. These sub genre coalesce and form the broader territory of Visual Narrativity. The present research project studies one such genre of visual storytelling, popularly known as comics or graphic novels.

The proposed research project examines how the cultural imaginary in the context of India is represented, disseminated and consumed through the modes of visual/graphic/prose narratives in the comic book series *Amar Chitra Katha*, commonly abbreviated as *ACK*. The mixing-up of two mediums (verbalised and visual) opens up another dimension of narrativity which is different from the primary narratives of epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* by recreating the story as
visual representation in context of contemporary India. This project also analyses the contributions of historical and contemporary personages in the formation of cultural imaginary. *Amar Chitra Katha* (commonly referred as *ACK*) started its career in 1967, when different fractions of religion and nationalism dominated the post-independent India. *Amar Chitra Katha* is a series of comic books, which retells and reconstructs classical, traditional folk tales, religious stories, biographies and moments in history and for the most part these can be gleaned from different cultural, religious and historical perspectives. Marketed to parents as educational tools, the audience of the series is primarily children of the middle class in India and the diaspora. *Amar Chitra Katha* which translates as “Immortal Illustrated Story” was begun by Anant Pai, who was the editor of the series. *Amar Chitra Katha* has been published in more than two hundred volumes of thirty-two colour illustrated pages. Anant Pai has written, edited and supervised the production of each issue. The publisher, India Book House, claims that the series has sold more than fifty million copies worldwide. Every issue of the series is written originally in English, which continues to be its best-selling language. Most of them have been translated into other national languages. The series began with its first title *Krishna* (a narrative from Mahabharata) and at its highest grew to over five hundred volumes.

Many consider comics alien to our culture. The *chitra katha* or narrating a story through pictures is not at all new to this land. What is new in the modern-day comics are the speech balloons. At Ajanta caves we have stories from the Jatakas depicted in continuous wall paintings. We have incidents from the *Jatakas* and the life of Buddha, carved in stone in the stupas at Bharhu, Sanchi and at Amravati in Maharashtra. At Elephanta caves too scenes from mythology are shown depicted in stone. These could be considered as precursors of the modern *chitra katha*. The earliest reference to *chitra katha* so far is from Patanjali’s *Mahabhashya*. At Ajanta, many paintings have short captions or verses relating to the painted themes. Illustrated scripts like Kalakacharya Kathanaka depict something very similar to modern *chitra katha*.

*ACK* calls for a re-engagement with tradition and the attempt to rebuild a sense of confidence and pride through a backward glance at the rich and glorious past which lies at the heart of *ACK*. Pai’s attempt to refashion history, which he presented as a series of vignettes of heroism and charisma of great men and women, into an
effective pedagogic tool stands in distinct contrasts to radical historiographical initiatives, such as that of Subaltern Studies, which critique the elitist basis of both colonial and nationalist historiography and foreground subaltern initiatives. In fact, one may well characterize \textit{ACK}, with its thrust on moral rejuvenation of the youth by reconnecting them with their roots, critically invested in politics of refashioning the nation. Developed at a moment, when the ‘Nehruvian’ consensus was in crisis, it articulates the growing concern of a nation in its making. It also seeks to train future citizens of the nation through narratives that centre and foreground an indomitable spirit of forbearance and resilience. The generation of middle-class children that grew up on it during the 1970s and the 1980s, have their ideas of citizenship and selfhood formed by it. A critical fact to remember is that the generation over which \textit{ACK} has exercised maximum influence is also the one that in the 1990s comes to constitute the major proportion of the new globalizing corporate and professional Indian middle-class. As a cultural product, \textit{ACK} has not only re-shaped dominant contemporary ideas about Indian history and tradition but it has made valuable intervention in molding ideas about Brahmanism, masculinity and many other present day hegemonic articulations, merit, self-respect, self improvement, hard work and so on.

Pai ostensibly began work on this series as an answer to the western comic books that were the principle, and sometimes the only, reading material available for a middle-class child. It would be inadequate, and indeed wrong to regard \textit{ACK} simply as an Indian version of the western genre. Similarly, it would be also inadequate to think of it simply having captured a part of the market share of the \textit{Tarzan} or \textit{Phantom} comics. The scope of Pai’s project is quiet distinct and intimately linked to the hegemonic struggle of the 1970s. For 1970s, was a crucial juncture in history when the ideals of the freedom struggle were recalled by the marginalized not with the exhilaration of achievement but with a sense of disillusionment and betrayal. This was also the moment when tradition in the cultural domain of the upper caste bourgeoisie was reinstated. A seamless continuity existed between a truly egalitarian Vedic past and the aspirations of a new middle class on the threshold of liberalization.

\textit{ACK} lies at the interstices between the dissolution of the Nehruvian era and the emergence of a more conservative politics. However, the emergence of the ‘conservative politics’ and its corresponding cultural forms (such as \textit{ACK}) are not a complete abandonment of the earlier secular-modern impulse. While they manage to
redirect the radical opposition, they also refigure some of the most powerful ideological articulations of the post-independence state such as ‘national culture’ or ‘unity-in-diversity’.

Undoubtedly 1970s was a period that witnessed not only the reassertion of the marginalized and oppressed but also witnessed the emergence of a forceful middle-class. On the other hand, the move to problematise the elitist bias of nationalist historiography and fragment its coherence with voices from below was a powerful drive to weave the nation in the unbroken narrative of the cultural unity. The implication of ACK in the upper middle class, was to endorse a sanskritised vedantic tradition as normative is thrown into sharp relief against the unrest of the 1970s when history and tradition were challenged from the left and the margins. The historical conjuncture in question challenged the sacredness of such historiography by claiming that the domain of politics in India was structurally split into elite and subaltern. ACK introduced a critical dissonance into the study of history and thrown into contrast the tropes of personal heroism and leadership of great men that often dominates statist narratives of the past. ACK which narrates history as the stories of great men and women is far reaching because it takes history right into the domain of popular culture and thus engages with and reshapes the commonsense of the masses.

ACK manages to straddle the ideologies of Hindu nationalism as well as secularism by tapping into those articulations where the two are imbricated—in their validation of an unbroken national culture, and endorsement of a normative modernity which looks at difference either as a threat or as something that must adapt itself to the essence, and thereby enhance its catholicity. My analysis draws into its orbit select ACK texts spread across three decades, from 1970s into the 2000s that uncovers a genealogy of the contemporary national self — invested in a language of goals, passions, dreams, achievement, drives, urbanity, freedom, equality— in short, what it means to be both Indian and globally.

While the stories of ACK were scripted by various writers, there is clearly an overarching house policy which reflects Anant Pai’s vision and imagination of history. It is true that India Book House, like all establishments, would not have been free from internal squabbles and dissentions. The staff frequently nursed grievances against Pai’s overbearing demeanor and authoritarian approach. A script-writer or
editor at IBH might tweak a dialogue or a character to suit his/her own interpretation of history. Also, the ACK artists who came from different regions of India—Maharashtra, Karnataka, Punjab—would sometimes ignore editorial briefs to introduce little variation into the visuals that emerged out of their local practices and training. However, these dissents never took the shape of doubting or contesting the fundamental premises on which Pai’s envisioning of ACK rested. It is this conviction that contributes to the tight knit aura of the narratives reflected in the interreferentiality that marks its texts, the strategies and themes that binds its opus. Hence Pai and the ACK vision remain central to this analysis.

ACK is often loosely referred to as a comic; even Pai called it an “Indian Comic”. But a close look at its narrative form would reveal its distinctness from the comic form as has evolved in the West, even though it shares many of the formal conventions of the latter. In terms of its intertextuality, ACK combines various prenovelistic narratives 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 mediated through the historical contexts within which it comes into existence. ACK’s editors had the declared intension to teach Indian themes and values to the middle-class youth who were getting alienated from their roots. The narrative composition of the series significantly contributes to the production of an Indianness that is at once modern and traditional, contemporary and immortal. The more one probes the manner in which diverse narrative traditions are combined to lend ACK its textual richness and historical complicity, the more one is convinced of its formal innovativeness and specificity. To treat it only as a comic form would be to misread it.

It may be useful to begin with a brief discussion of the western comic and its general reception by parents and educators as a genre that was considered trivial at its best and morally bankrupt and violent at its worst. This throws into sharp relief the fact that ACK, by contrast, was consciously designed by Anant Pai as a respectable, middle-class pedagogic enterprise in the late 1960’s. The important question at the heart of the discussion is how ACK negotiates the distance between its ‘lofty’ propositions and the popular perception of the comic? Perhaps the clues lies in the story of its many borrowings and assimilation—the dexterity and shrewdness with which it mixes the pre-modern as well as contemporary popular/hybrid Indian visual...
traditions with western forms of animation to achieve a secular and contemporary effect.

Comics came to acquire the dubious status of cheap, non-serious trivia, especially during the 1950s, and were branded as morally corrupt by parents and teachers alarmed by the deception of horror and violence in them. This may well have something to do with the beginning of the comic strip and its potentially threatening subject matter. The comic strip came into existence in Britain in the 1840s as a feature in the periodical magazine and the Penny Weeklies. Comic magazines in England in the nineteenth century aimed at a national readership that was not yet developed—namely, ‘children’ from different 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”. In other words, it was intended to be light-hearted, non-threatening reading material for children. The emergence 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 a penny an issue, and were mainly consumed by the working class. These were often gruesome narratives of crime, arrest and punishments. There were also a number of anti-aristocratic melodramas and classic romances of lawlessness. 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 the fantastical and fanciful tales.

ACK began with an impulse to reform and appropriate an Indian market invaded by western comics like Phantom, Superman and Tarzan in the 1960s. ACK is indeed packaged as a comic book and shares many of its conventions. Like the comic strip, it 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, and may sometimes cover an entire page. The narrative text is placed in a box at the top or sometimes at the bottom of the panel and delineates the action portrayed therein. Dialogues appear in the form of speech-balloons, which issue from the character’s mouth. Similarly, thought is presented in think-balloons. Lettering is at
times enlarged or highlighted to suggest the intensity or loudness of speech. Close-ups and angled shots are used to present action and characters in dramatic moments. ACK also effectively draws on 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 its visuals, especially when they depict a dramatic moment. These are the moments when a single panel may occupy an entire page. The visuals background contributes to the action instead of distracting the viewer from it.

The fantastic and surreal in ACK are always told through a reference to ‘reality’. Popular myths about the birth and reincarnation of gods are dealt deftly and with a degree of ambivalence. Struggling with his scientific conscience and the limit of his own faith, Pai walked a fine line between presenting these events as scientifically plausible and as miraculous occurrence in the comic book. The miraculous events accompanying the birth of Krishna like the parting of Yamuna river are shown with ambiguity and the readers are left to their better judgment to decide whether it is low ebb in the current or plausible parting of the river. In the sequence of action, where Krishna lifts the Govardhan mountain on his small finger, the same technique is employed. Rather than have the sequence depicted in panels unlike the popular rendition, the narrative focuses on people reaction who stand amazed with open mouths at the sight of Govardhan mountain moving. Undoubtedly, ACK has left it to its readers to infer the nature of these events.

Noted critic Auradha Kapur while writing on Parsi theatre is of the view that the mythical stories involving gods/goddesses become personalized with a touch of human when narrated in a ‘personalized tone of voice and the causality of narrative secularizes the event and makes the action seemingly plausible in human terms. The eclectic stage of Parsi Theatre with its enchanting backdrops using the newly introduced devices of geometric perspective that tricked the eye with their vanishing points engendering the illusion of reality, and the seduction of curtains and the voluptuousness of that stage. The Parsi theatre was influenced by colonial India’s modern popular imagery that emanated from the pedagogy of the colonial art school that put value on perspective, and from the arrival of the technique of engraving, lithography, and oleography leading to mass-production and circulation of illusionistic pictures. Therefore, in the narrative of Krishna, Vasudeva’s reaction to the
parting of river or the crowd gaping at the moving Govardhan mountain makes the action look plausible and seemingly real.

ACK engagement with the older art traditions of India and simultaneous investment with the modern led to an interstice between sacred and secular. This conflict is more or less apparent in many volumes where the rational and scientific is seemingly at odds with the mythological and revered. Many critics hail ACK to be a hybridized version of American superhero comic books which are famous for establishing the archetype of superhero between the 1930’s and 1950’s. A superhero is generally one who manifests six essential features, namely, extraordinary powers, enemies, a strong moral code, a secret identity, a costume and an origin story that explains how the hero acquired his powers and set forth his motivation. In the same vein, the Indian superhero manifests all these features. In the story of Rama, Rama demonstrates extraordinary powers through his bow and arrow in his battle with his demonic enemies, as when he defeated the unconquerable Ravana. He demonstrated a strong moral code when he willingly undertook an exile for fourteen years to fulfill a vow which his father had made. He assumed a secret identity during his years spent in exile, discarding his royal attire in favor of simple costume of a renouncer, therefore disguising his true identity of a crown prince of Ayodhya. Finally, he has a unique origin story as explained in the introduction to the comic book. Thus although the comic book Rama features a superhero that is in many ways akin to Captain America yet Rama remains a god in human form and the Rama comic book is therefore not a fictitious tale of good over evil but a Hindu devotional story told through the comic book medium.

Following the art of animation, ACK’s use of color is meant to enhance the dramatic effect. The Disney artists had discovered early on that colors were not meant to be chosen with the simple ease of merchandising a postcard. For instance, the color red stands for strong emotions like battle, blood or fire. Similarly, in ACK, as young Chhatrasal sits under a tree brooding over the murder of his parents by the Mughals, the forest background is splattered with red, hinting at the revenge that is to come. The opening panel of Padmini, spread across a whole page, depicts the fort of Chittor and the sky beyond splashed with patches of red, serving as a charged backdrop for the silhouettes of the brave warriors of Chittor’s past. The color plays out the verbal narrative —Chittor is the soul of Rajasthan. Its history is the saga of Rajput valor.
ACK also has regular color convention that shore up the identity of a character in the hegemonic scheme of things. The asuras (demons) are always black or brown and the devas (gods) are fair or blue (for instance Rama or Krishna). Similarly characters belonging to lower class/caste and tribes are depicted with a dark complexion. The Muslims always wear green.

Print Technology, Colonial rule and Nationalism

The speed with which information can be transmitted across vast distances blinded us to the fact that there have been other information revolutions throughout history. In India, perhaps the most powerful information revolution was the arrival of print technology in the colonial period often used by Christian missionaries for proselytisation purposes. One aspect of this colonial representation was the rise of mechanically reproduced prints which created a new ‘iconic’ society. The most remarkable speed of iconic culture is the proliferation of visual images through mechanical reproduction, their ubiquity and universal accessibility. The new visual culture, which transcended the local and the regional and affected the elite and the ordinary people equally, helped create a new sense of nationhood. Printing, which was introduced in India by the Portuguese in Goa in 1556 to aid the Jesuits in their proselytisation, soon spread to Tamil Nadu, leading to the publication of Tamil texts. Subsequently, other European missionaries set up printing presses with the intention of publishing Biblical and Catechist literature cheaply in the vernacular and making it readily available to the Indian population in order to facilitate their conversion.

Print technology provided the impetus for pan-Indian nationalism by contributing to an ‘imaginary community’ that sought to transcend castes, regions, religions and languages. However, recent critics have sought to modify Anderson’s theory of print culture cementing nationalist sentiment. Such a centralizing process of imposing unity on a heterogeneous group of people led by the English-educated elite was achieved at the cost of suppressing individual differences. Thus the ‘coherent’ discourse of nationalism would always remain fragile with deep fault lines running through the national fabric. There were alternatives modes of popular resistance to colonial rule, which often forced the centre to shift its position.

The impact of print technology on modern Indian nationalism has received the attention of a number of scholars. Less known until recently is the role of visual
imagery in forging this common culture—‘an imagined community’ that shared a
common and easily understood visual language which affirmed common values and
aspirations. This was sensed by Anant Pai who was searching for a common bonding
agent in country dominated by plethora of languages. He was convinced that the
universal language of art provided that essential ingredient for creating the ‘imagined
community’ lacking in nationalist literacy efforts. Pai was conscious of the
significance of the emerging India-wide iconic culture centered on Victorian
naturalism. He completely understood that mass print more than painting and
sculpture succeeded in disseminating the new visual culture across the subcontinent
within a short space of time. There was an explosion of mechanically reproduced
images in the late 19th century which can be attributed partly to the ease of
reproduction and partly to the new modes of transport. The railway carried bundles of
popular prints across the subcontinent speedily, inexpensively and efficiently. Even
poorer Indians, living far away from their production sites were able to afford them.
The primarily impact of process of mechanical reproduction such as engraving and
lithography was to spread Western illusionist art in India. But when print makers were
able to create a market for cheap prints of Hindu religious subjects, they were
contributing to the rise of a visual culture that fed into the burgeoning nationalism at
the end of the 19th century.

Widely circulated among the western-educated in colonial India, the imported
prints of European art were routinely used by Indian artists, trained in European
academic naturalism whose roots lay in the Italian Renaissance. One of the
fascinating problems in art history is the migration of artistic motifs and styles across
cultures. Colonial art historians have viewed such transmission or ‘artistic
borrowings’, in terms of power relation between colonizer and the colonized. The use
of western art by Indian artists is frequently described in terms of slavish imitation
and as sign of inferiority. But arguably a more fruitful subject would be the actual
mode and nature of transmission across cultural boundaries. When western illusionist
art was introduced in India in the 19th century, the pro-active Raj policy of ‘inculcating
good taste’ in its Indian subjects through art schools, art societies and art exhibitions
played a significant role. By the middle of the century, as Victorian taste tightened its
grip on India, a lucrative market in European illustrated books, magazine and art
reproduction opened up. The English-literate artists in India now had access to all this
visual material, which radically altered her/his work methods as well as the perception of art itself.

As Walter Benjamin reminds us, in “principle a work of art has always been reproducible...Mechanical reproduction of a work of art, however, represents something new” (Benjamin, 220). In many ways the most interesting aspect of “the age of mechanical reproduction” in India is the great ubiquity of popular prints, an essentially colonial-urban art form. Second, in the context of India, Benjamin’s characterization of the relationship between the ‘cult value’ and ‘exhibition value’ of art objects is relevant. The mechanical reproduction of Hindu deities ushered an entirely new functions of these images not previously envisaged in the case of temple sculptures or painted icons in temples which were earlier confined to their regions in temples, pilgrims sites or homes as sacred icons, but not widely sold as commodities. Another important aspect of this is the mobility of these cult images: devotees do not now need to visit temples in order to view (darshan) them. Their circulation right across the subcontinent helped to spread illusionist art inspired by Western naturalism at all levels of Indian society. As a form of mass communication, they equally affected the elite and the ordinary people, cutting across classes, communities and regions. The great poet Rabindranath Tagore, for instance, attested in his memories to the vogue of reproduction in the Bengali Bhadralok household.

Extending this insight, Christopher Pinney points to a distinctive aesthetic and ‘new forms of visuality’ that emerges in late colonial India in which many different media—photography, theatre, chromolithography, and film—were all working together, cross-referencing each other. Therefore by paying attention to the ‘interocular’, it is possible to track how a late 19th century Ravi Varma oil painting—itself based on a colonial illustrated like Edward Moor’s Hindu Pantheon is redeployed in the context of an early 20th century theatrical performance and then moves on through ‘god-posters’ to a nationalist docu-drama of the 1980s. To extend this argument in the words of Sumathi Ramaswamy:

The power and authority of the visual in the modern India public sphere emerges from the fact that it inhabits such an ‘interocular’ or ‘intervisual’ field, overlapping, intersecting, and interlocking with other images and in conjuncture with different media, triggering associations, catalyzing
memories, rendering the unfamiliar recognizable, and frequently reconfiguring the recognizable, so that, as Pinney notes, ‘earlier images...are forever waiting to erupt in the present as they continually migrate, moving in and out of new times and changing political contexts(xvi, Introduction).

In other words, no visual image is self sufficient, bounded, and insulated; instead, it is open, porous, permeable, and ever available for appropriation.

The correspondence between education, social status, wealth, and the consumption and classification of images are not quite as straight forwarded in post colonial India as they appear to be in Bourdieu’s class-based European mapping. What complicate the situation are the rogue element of religions, and the continuing relevance of ritual and devotional frames of valuing images that do not necessarily correspond to those of the aesthetic. It is evident from even the most cursory observation that calendar icons now form an integral part of contemporary religion, particularly Hinduism, and that they are used by a vast majority regardless of class or education. Continuing the discussion forward the research studies done by Kajri Jain in the field of bazaar art details the epistemological constraints imposed by the terms of aesthetic judgment in a postcolonial field where the ‘modern progressive mind’ is valorized in opposition to a backward-looking ‘mythological’ imagination. To quote her words:

These epistemological constraints derive....from the post-Enlightenment historical narrative of the supersession of the sacred by the aesthetic. A series of German scholar from Hegel through Walter Benjamin to Hans Belting have described how the aesthetic, exhibition value, and the work of art have taken the place of the sacred, cult value, and the icon. In a footnote to the “Artwork” essay Benjamin quotes Hegel on the transition from “the stage of reverence of work of art” to a “more reflective” relationship, as he in turn maps the secular-cultic opposition onto a public-private spatial axis, distinguishing between the exhibition value of the public, mobile work of art and the “cult value” of the ritual object anchored in its sacred space (6).

From the point of view of modern aesthetic, in the age of the work of art, ACK as a sacred icon would be either a thing of the past or inhabit cultic spaces concealed from public view. The limited options available with the readership of ACK, accommodates
the sacred-secular imagery within the schemata of taste and judgment. ACK can be aligned with the interested affections of the ‘taste of sense’ and thus with ‘low culture’, or they can be relegated to the past by categorizing it as ‘classical’ or ‘ethnologized by subsuming it under the ‘folk’ or ‘traditional’. This derivation of the imagery of ACK is not without problems as the discourse of taste and judgment has no place for religious icons. In other words, there is no artistic evaluation in a situation of ritual darshan simply because there is little place for critique when it come to gods. It is for this matter, we hardly find any critique of the gods drawn out graphically in ACK.

This new realism is therefore neither part of the sacral economy of the Hindu temple gaze or darshan nor part of the purely narrative momentum of a secular readership, since there is also a mutual locking of gaze between deity and spectator as in calendar art. This in-between-ness enables us to see even the godly as appealing without compromising its sanctity. For instance, artist Yusuf of ACK, casted Mira and Krishna in an androgynous cast, making them look like teenage lovers. But this appeal is implicitly palpable that it deflects the surreptitious gaze that ACK occasionally elicits.

Why Comics?

Comics deal with two major communication devices, words and images. Admittedly this is an arbitrary separation. But, since in the modern world of communication they are treated as independent disciplines it seems valid. Actually, they are derivatives of a single origin and in the skillful employment of word and images lies the expressive potential of the medium. The mixing up of two genres is not new. Their juxtaposition has been experimented with from earliest times. The inclusion of inscription employed as statements by the people depicted in medieval paintings was generally abandoned after the 16th century. Thereafter the efforts by the artists who sought to convey statements that went beyond decoration or portraiture were confined to facial expressions, postures, and symbolic backdrops. The use of inscription reappeared in broadsheets and popular publication in the 18th century. Now the artists who dealt in story-bearing art for the mass audience sought to create a gestalt, some cohesive language, as the vehicle for the expression of a complexity of thoughts, sounds, actions and ideas in a sequenced arrangement separated by boxes.
This stretched the capabilities of simple imagery. In the process the modern narrative art form, which we call comics evolved.

Imagery as a Communicator

Comprehension of an image requires a commonality of experience. This demand from the sequential artist’s an understanding of the reader’s life experience if his message is to be understood. An interaction has to be developed because the artist is evoking images in the minds of both parties. The success or failure of this method of communication depends upon the ease with which the reader recognizes the meaning and emotional impact of the image. Therefore, the skill of the rendering and the universality of form chosen is critical. The style and the appropriateness of technique becomes part of the image and what it is trying to say. In ACK, Vol No 542 titled Draupadi: The Dusky Firebrand, Fig 2 the humiliation and caste inferiority felt constantly by Kama on being rejected by Draupadi is summed up as “You should not have humiliated me so, Draupadi”, the speech bubble stops short of any elaboration but the tense situation is revealed to the reader’s eyes by showing Draupadi’s side profile taken from rear angle and an anguished looking Kama who has been the child of cruel destiny. In more than one ways, ACK brings the situation clear to the mind’s eye through fine detailing of imagery than by speech or comment narrative.

Timing

The phenomenon of duration and its experience—commonly referred to as “time”—is a dimension integral to sequential art. In the universe of human consciousness, time combined with space and sound in a setting of interdependence where conceptions, actions, motions, and movements have a meaning and are measured by our perception of their relationship to each other.

The immersion of humans in their individual lives in a sea of space-time, a large part of the learning is devoted to the comprehension of these dimensions. Sound is measured audibly, relative to its distance from us. Space is mostly measured and perceived visually. Time is more illusory: we measure and perceive it through the memory of experience. In primitive societies the movements of sun, the growth of vegetation or the changes of climate are employed to measure time visually. Modern civilization has developed a mechanical device, the clock, to help measure time
visually. The importance of this to human beings cannot be underestimated. Not only does the measurement of time have an enormous psychological impact, but it enables us to deal with the real business of living. In modern society one might even say that it is instrumental to survival. In comics it is an essential structural element.

Critical to the success of a visual narrative is the ability to convey time. It is this dimension of human understanding that enables us to recognize and be empathetic to surprise, humor, terror, and the whole range of human experience. In this theatre of our comprehension, the graphic story teller plies his art. At the heart of the sequential deployment of images intending to convey time is the commonality of its perception. But to convey ‘timing’, which is the manipulation of the elements of time is achieve a specific message or emotion, wherepanel becomes a critical element.

In the narrative titled Bheesma, Vol 534, Colour Plate 2, the mighty patriarch takes eternal vow of celibacy and his sincerity is attested by the gods who shower flowers from the heaven while there were resounding echoes of ‘Bheesma’, ‘Bheesma’ meaning one who has taken a terrible oath. The intensity of the sacrifice and steadfast adherence to his vow for all the times to come cannot afford to have second thoughts. Therefore the illustrators have dedicated a full page to Bheesma action of taking the celibate vow. The depiction of Devavrath, henceforth known as Bheesma, is achieved through showcasing of meek and the mighty. Bheesma, stands at a little distance from the crowd while in front of him people stand awestruck and amazed with Satyavati and her father standing with folded hands in a gesture of obeisance. The divine intervention in the form of heavenly echoes and flowers raining from the heaven conveys that Bhessma would keep his vow at all cost.

A comic becomes ‘real’ when time and timing is factored into the creation. In music or in other forms of auditory communication where rhythm or ‘beat’ is achieved, this is done with actual length of time. In graphics the experience is conveyed by the use of illusions and symbols and their arrangement.

*Framing Speech*

The balloon is a desperation device. It attempts to capture and make visible an ethereal element: sound. The arrangement of balloons which surround speech—their position related to each other, or to the action, or their position with respect to the
speaker, contribute to the measurement of time. They are disciplinary in that they demand cooperation from the reader. A major requirement is that they be read in a prescribed sequence in order to know who speaks first. They address our subliminal understanding of the duration of speech.

Speech balloons are read following the same convention as text (i.e. left to right and top to bottom in western countries) and in relation to the position of the speaker. The earliest rendering of the balloon was simply a ribbon emerging from the speaker’s mouth—or as brackets pointing to the mouth. But as the balloon form developed, it too, became more sophisticated and its shape no longer just an enclosure. It took on meaning and contributed to the narration.

As balloons became more extensively employed their outlines were made to serve as more than simple enclosures for speech. Soon they were given the task of adding meaning and conveying the character of sound to the narrative. Inside the balloon, the lettering reflects the nature and emotion of the speech. It is most often symptomatic of the artist’s own personality (style), as well as that of the characters speaking. Emulating a foreign language style of letter and similar devices adds to the sound level and the dimension of the character itself. Attempts to provide dignity to the comic strip are often tried by utilizing set-type instead of the less rigid hand lettering. Typesetting does have a kind of inherent authority but it has a mechanical effect that intrudes on the personality of free hand art. Its use must be carefully considered because of its effect on the ‘message’ as well.

To illustrate the purpose of speech balloons, the ACK titled *Jayaprakash Narayan: A Soldier for Justice*, Vol No, 693, Fig 19 serves as an apt example. The exotation by Mullana Abdul Kalam Azad to give up English education showed the side profile of the leader with a multitude of crowd thronging to listen to his speech.

*Framing Time*

Albert Einstein in his Special Theory (Relativity) stated that time is not absolute but relative to the position of the observer. In essence the panel (or box) makes that postulate a reality for the comic book reader. The act of paneling or boxing the action not only defines its perimeter but establishes the position of the reader in relation to the scene and indicates the duration of the event. Indeed, it ‘tells’ time. The
magnitude of time elapsed is not expressed by the panel *per se*, as an examination of blank boxes in a series quickly reveals. The imposition of the imagery within the frame of the panels act as the catalyst. The fusing of symbols, images and balloons makes the statement. Indeed, in some application of the frame, the outline of the box is eliminated entirely with equal effect. The act of framing separates the scenes and acts as a punctuator. Once established and set in sequence the box or panel becomes the criterion by which to judge the illusion of time.

In *ACK*, temporal or discursive contexts can affect one's engagement with the image. Artists and illustrators have different frames of value drawn on each of these images. Firstly, there is an aesthetic frame, or following Bourdieu, a frame of distinction, within which the artist sets the character. Second, there is ethical frame, whose employment leads him to adopt a physical posture of respect towards the image. The ethical frame can be specified in terms of a ritually mediated relationship with sacred images. Each of the frames is deployed in a slightly different register.

In modern comic strips or comic books, the device most fundamental to the transmission of timing is the panel or frame or box. These lines drawn around the depiction of a scene, which acts as a containment of the action, segment or action, have one of their functions the task of separating or phrasing the total statement. Balloons, is another containment device used for the entrapment of the representation of speech and sound, but also useful in the delineation of time. The other natural phenomena, movement or transitory occurrences, deployed within the perimeter of these borders and depicted by recognizable symbols, become part of the vocabulary used in the expression of time. They are indispensable to the story teller, particularly when he is seeking to involve the reader. Where narrative art seeks to go beyond simple decoration, where it presumes to imitate reality in a meaningful chain of events and consequences and thereby evoke empathy, the dimension of time is an inescapable ingredient.

Both of these critical devices, panels and balloons, when enclosing natural phenomena, support the recognition of time. J.B Priestly, writing in *Man and Time*, summed it up most succinctly "...it is from the sequence of events that we derive our idea of time." Time is critical to the emotional elements in the plot. The problem was that a simple statement of time would not suffice. It would be too specific. It would
mitigate the reader’s involvement. A ‘time rhythm’ that is very believable had to be employed. To accomplish this, a set of commonly experienced actions are used. The number and size of the panels also contribute to the story rhythm and passage of time. For example, when there is need to compress time, a greater number of panels are used. The action then becomes more segmented, unlike the action that occurs in the larger, more conventional panels. By placing the panels closer together, we deal with the ‘rate’ of elapsed time in its narrowest sense.

The shapes of the panels are also a factor. On a page where the need is to display a ‘deliberate’ meter of action, the boxes are shaped as perfect squares. Where the ringing of the telephone needs time (as well as space) to evoke a sense of suspense and threat, the entire tier is given over to the action of the ringing preceded by a compression of smaller (narrower) panels. In comics, timing and rhythm are interrelated.

**Genealogy of Images in ACK**

ACK freely dappled with innovation and incorporated new artistic and indigenous elements in its fold to build its composite ‘Indian’ identity. A closer scrutiny of the visual and the content would enable the readers to decipher its pre-novelistic Indian visual and storytelling concerns. Deepa Sreenivas, suggested that a linkage with the “katha” tradition lie at the foundation of ACK. The insertion of the word “katha” as in *Amar Chitra Katha* denotes strong ties with the oral tradition of storytelling prevalent in ancient India. For instance, in Banabhatta’s Kadambari, “there is lavish use of poetic imagination as well as elaborate and intricate construction in relating the story. The embellishments of description sometimes eclipse the events that are being described. There is no attempt to make the description realistic and invention is valued in itself”(Sreenivas, 50). The lavish panels of ACK replete with bold and daring feats accomplished by the heroes with beautiful and chaste women belonging to the classics, folk tales and history of India, one cannot fail to trace its connection to the “katha” tradition of India. The past, it is true, is the staple diet for most of ACK narratives but important translations take place to mark its contemporaneity. In ‘katha’, embellishments and inventiveness are valued in themselves, but in ACK, details of description and visual splendor are geared towards a reality effect. The visual density of a scene consisting of doors, lattices,
ornaments, curtains, flowers, and so on, go on to shore up the authenticity of a scene and are not mere embellishments. They contribute to the mood of a scene or a character and to the physical impact of the event. The past is made plausible by generating a Barthesian effect:

There would always be a corner, a detail, an inflection of space or colour to report...by posting the referential as real, by pretending to follow it in a submissive fashion, realistic description avoids being reduced to fantasmatic activity. (qtd in Sreenivas, 51)

The shift in the images involves a significant metamorphosis—we see the ‘fleshing out’ of gods and goddesses, the ‘animation’ of gestures, the dramatization of episodes and the location of scenes within plush palaces and luscious landscapes. The flattened pictorial space acquired the rounded feel of flesh and muscle. The technique of lithography, with its scope for shading and subtle tonal gradation, contributed particularly towards a three dimensional effect. The biblical image of Madonna and the dead Christ seemed to have provided the formula for the figure of the grieving Savitri cradling Satyavan’s body as she pleads for his life before a huge brawny personage of Yama. The single dramatic shift of light running through the dark forest draws on the chiaroscuro technique of European painting, while the ghostly apparitions in the dark seem reminiscent of scenes of the Last Judgement. Another picturesque forest scenery, staging the scene of Nala abandoning Damayanti in the woods, revealed the art school training in antique study. The Venus-like image of a half-draped, sleeping Damayanti, in his picture, is matched by an array of images of angels, cherubs and ‘oriental cupids’ in other mythological scenes.

Picture which so clearly emulate European imagery and technique, assumed their own local, ironic overtones. The new ‘realistic’ mode lent itself, particularly, to a kind of humanization and domestication of divinity. The sentimentalized role of a daughter, transformed into a wife and mother, was now integrally woven into the iconography of Durga. So we have gushingly emotional scenes of Durga’s wedding, her home-coming with her children and her departure for her husband’s abode, cast within a set of all too familiar rituals and tearful sentiments. Alongside, these pictures also suggested a marked loosened and dilution of ‘realism’, as it was accommodated within the framework of a popular iconography. Recent studies on painting and
cinema have opened up our awareness of the mutations involved in the process of the Indian import of western technology and British academic art. The rigors of life study began to clearly take second place to the tactile glitter of jewellery and costumes and the grandeur of settings.

Staking their claims to realism only in the shading and rounding of forms, these gaudy chromolithographs provide vivid examples of the fantasized exuberated colors and landscapes in such mythic scenes. Mass visual culture had come to be pervaded by a taste for ‘realism’. At multiple levels, advances in printing techniques and trappings of the western academic style are ingrained into local practices to dramatically overhaul the nature of urban commercial art.

Raja Ravi Varma’s oleographs combined ‘real’ and ‘aesthetic’ in delineating the images of bodies, expressions, dress, décor and landscape. The iconic power of Ravi Varma rests on the facts that he is identified as the first to use oils and perspective, and also the first to Romanise the Indian Gods and therefore enabled Indian Gods to reach the domestic confines of Indian household. In India, the reawakening of the human sensorium went hand in hand with the insertion of mass-produced images. Importantly all Hindu deities experienced a cultural transposition from the space of devotion into the space of representation (print and electronic). This relocation involved movement from sacralized spaces to domestic space. The visual detailing of Rama in ACK is modeled on a clean shaven hero who conforms to Raja Ravi Varma style of painting which Romanised Indian gods rather than cast them as androgynous figures, as depicted in the traditional pantheon. However Raja Ravi Varma does not replicate the western academic realism in a passive way rather

..the past is present clad in actual flesh and blood and costume. The figures from the past become contemporarised historical forms through an ingenious mixing of artistic genres and technique. He evokes the erotic fullness and erect poise of the archetypal figures from a classical/Aryan past and imbues them with immediacy and tactility through the use of oil medium.(qtd in Sreenivas,74)

The pictorial model popularized by the Calcutta Art Studio, with its interplay of the ‘realistic’ and ‘mythic’, of ‘high art’ and popular iconography, would receive a new boost in the pauranic paintings of Travancorean artist Ravi Varma (1848-1906).
With the artist’s struggle for self-education in European art techniques; his legendary mastery of the secrets of academic oil painting, jealously guarded by other court painters of Travancore, his perfection of the prized art of realistic portraiture, that provided his first lucrative source of patronage and renown, his branching out, initially into gender studies of ‘Indian women’ and then into subjects of Indian mythology. In all this Ravi Varma epitomized the evolution of the ‘modern’ in Indian art. His career stands at privileged point in Indian art history, at a heightened moment of the conjunction of tradition and modernity, encapsulating it. It symbolized the point at which the changing world of indigenous court painting in colonial India merged with new trends in patronage, professionalism and commercial success. It signified the emergence of the individual artist with the full status associated with the term, distinguishing it clearly from the position of court, ‘company’ or ‘bazaar’ painter. Through his choice of genre, his career also signified the articulation of a conscious ‘India’ identity in painting, within a changed and modernized stylistic context.

Particularly enamored by the neo-classical paintings of two French Academy artists of his time, Boulanger and Bouguereau, Ravi Varma drew heavily on their pantheon of nude Venuses and Psyches and their allegorical images of Chastity and Charity. Garbed in elaborate Indian costumes, and placed within a mythic narrative as Shakuntala, Damayanti or Draupadi, these images with the same coy expression and guileful mannerism, were transformed into much-admired ‘devis’ of Hindu legends. The representation of women must have posed a critical challenge in the artists’ project. The challenge lay in mediating images that were ‘western’ in conception and ‘life-like’ in appearance, to make them meaningful as ‘Indian’ mythic and cultural symbols.

In a similar vein, the women in ACK have coy expressions and guileful mannerism. The images of Sita, Draupadi and Shakuntala are direct replicas of Raja Ravi Varma. They appear as voluptuous flesh and blood women with curvaceous bodies. Shakuntala appears as wrapped in romantic dream when glancing back at her lover, Dushyant, under the pretext of picking a thorn from her feet. This gesture, invites the readers to place this scene within an imagined sequence of images and events. This visual also “reflects the centrality of the ‘male gaze’ in defining the feminine image. Though absent from the pictorial frame, the male lover forms a pivotal point of reference, his gaze transfixes Shakuntala...into ‘desired’ images,
casting them as lyrical and sensual ideals" (Thakurta, WS 94). The combined core of
religious/mythic imagery in ACK lay at the heart of its appeal. The circular flow from
‘western’ to ‘Indian’ from the ‘real’ to ‘iconic’ through Ravi Varma oleographscharted out the route through which this new ‘high art’ passes into mass art and
became a potentially saleable formula.

Both in style and in the range of pictures—pictures of deities and mythological
episodes, portraits of national heroes and nationalistic leaders (Shivaji, Tilak, Ranade)
and studies of women—display deeply influence of Ravi Varma’s oleographs which
set the precedents of the modern ‘calendar-art’ trade. They laid the groundwork of a
pictorial genre that was to be easily standardized in oleographs prints, pirated in
multiple, distorted versions, and replicated by other art-school-trained artists of
Bombay and Calcutta.

The allegorical use of the female form in a wide range of ACK iconography
provides an interesting parallel. Studying a multifaceted body of feminine
representation, from classical Greek and Christian myth and its pantheon of
goddesses, through the medieval personification of virtues to modern-day public
monuments like the Statue of Liberty or the idealized figurines of Justice and the
Republic on the Paris streets, a recent research studies investigate the central issue of
the divergence between such ‘symbolic’ and ‘actual’ orders in society. Further, the
studies recognize the difference and divergence that empowers these representations
and makes the female figure an ideal vehicle for allegory, as well as conveying
meaning far beyond its immediate presence.

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. The intervention of western models and
representational techniques, and the mediation of indigenous cultural or iconographic
references, had jointly shaped this new visual image. Its passage from exclusive oil
painting to cheap mass-produced prints brought many transmutations, but also gave it
the fixity of a ready-made formula. Over the late 19th and early 20th century, such
pictorial representation of women coincided with a new powerful set of equations
made by nationalist discourse between ‘tradition’ and ‘femininity’, between the
‘nation’ and the mother-goddess. In the struggle against colonialism, women has their
designated special roles in the larger nationalist project—as preservers of age-old
customs and rituals, as embodiment of religiosility and virtues, as upholders of
domestic order and stability, as nurturing mothers, faithful wives and devoted
daughters, all sustaining the male in his public service to the motherland.

Drawing on Oriental formulations on India, Indian nationalism constructed a
set of polarities between the public and the private, the material and the spiritual, the
home and the world, through which it demarcated its alternative sphere of power and
autonomy. All these polarities were premised on this privileged ideal of Indian
womanhood. Like the painted image, the ideal passed on from the exclusive terrain of
art, literature and nationalist thought into popular consumption leaving its firm
imprint on social values and attitudes. The picture of women lodged themselves at the
centre of this spreading ideology, reinforcing it and in turn reinforced by it. While
they forfeited the special aura surrounding the single, ‘work of art’, the multiple mass-
produced images of women thrived on the more open continuous exchange of
meaning and significations in society.

The female figure had emerged as the centre-piece. Whether as goddesses,
mythical heroines or social models of ideal mothers, wives, the figure was realized
with brush and paint into real-life credibility. Yet, simultaneously, it was also
rendered ‘iconic’ through some ritualised gesture and role, and through overlapping
layers of religious, aesthetic, social or nationalistic evaluations. The process has been
termed as one of ‘resacralisation’, where the rise of modernity, instead of separating
the secular from the sacred, draws the two into a new synthesis. There was a
continuous interchange of the religious and secular, the mythic and real in the way the
images of women were presented and their meaning generated across a wide spectrum
of patrons and consumers. The contemporisation of the ‘past’ in these mythological
pictures—the dramatization of select episodes from ancient legends with the kinds of
costumes and settings that were part of both the artists and viewers contemporary
experience—was of critical importance. Therefore, Savitri in the Calcutta Art Studio
lithographs, or Shakuntala, Damayantis or Draupadi’s in Ravi Varma paintings
appeared like tangible ‘real’ women, in much the same way as the Lakshmi and
Saraswati in today’s calendar pictures assumes the faces of Bollywood actors.
Taken together, Ravi Varma’s images of women fulfilled various ends. They figured as the core emblems of classicism and tradition in the artist’s reconstruction of a classical past in his mythological paintings; they embodied the supreme romantic emotions of love, longing, separation and bereavement within this rescripted classical canon. They also stood as models of certain socially constructed ‘feminine values’, like motherhood, fidelity, self-sacrifice or religiosity.

A closer look at a selection of the artist’s paintings, ranging from individualized studies to mythic character-types, reveal the circular flow of meaning and the accretion of layers of signification.

By its own admission ACK has owes a debt to the frescos and murals of Ajanta as an ideal source for visual storytelling. Anant Pai has repeatedly acknowledged the influences of the frescoes upon the artists who visited the caves of Ajanta in search of ideas. Images and visuals of ACK direct the viewers gaze towards efforts to strike a balance between a technological advanced form and historical content. According to Pai, the speech balloons are the only new feature of the modern comic. (Nandini Chandra, 211).The frescoes of Ajanta, as mediated through the nationalist grid, carry immense potential to be animated and situated into the ethical format of ACK with its continual emphasis on “Indian themes and values”. Also, given the fact that ACK is explicit in its ideology on secularizing and humanizing the sacred and mythological, therefore it becomes significant that Ajanta frescoes and murals served as a visual inspiration for the creators of ACK.