Dalits and Stereotypes: Reading the Politics of Graphic Representations in Select *Amar Chitra Katha* Comics

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ABSTRACT

As is the case with all other visual mediums, comics are saturated with ideology and are culturally mediated. The representational strategies that are used in comics are thus derived from the society from which they originate. When we read the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics from the perspective of the Dalit community, we would understand how these stories perpetuate Brahminical ideals, which are stereotyped, disregarded, and excluded from the participation of mainstream society. In the comics of Amar Chitra Katha, the dominating impulses of Hinduism are made manifest not only in the narrative and the characters, but also in the iconography and the artistic features of the storytelling. In this context, the article examines the portrayal of Dalits and indigenous people by delving deeply into the representational tactics that are utilized in "racializing" and "othering" them. The study utilizes chosen comics from the *Amar Chitra Katha* as its source material. W.T.J. Mitchell and Stuart Hall provide the theoretical foundations around which this work is built. The purpose of this research paper is to get an understanding of the cultural and social circumstances in which these comics are made.

Keywords: *Comics, Religion, Hegemony, Caste, Dalits, Representation.*

Introduction

Comics is a powerful representation medium as it offers a dynamic space to explore various themes like culture, identity and society. Its complex visual and verbal interface and its ability to fuse art and narrative make it an evocative medium. Comic Representations are important

because they reflect social and cultural values, beliefs, norms and struggles offering insights into historical events, social dynamics, and cultural phenomena, helping us better understand the past and present of human civilization. But the meaning that gets attributed to a representation comes from the culture. "Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It does involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things." (Hall15). Representation is the link between concepts and language which enables us to refer to either the real world of objects, people or events or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events (Hall 23).

As a product of culture, Comics are problematic text as their codes are often encoded with meaningful structures. Correspondingly, the images and the words that the comics rely on in their narration are the result of cultural mediation imbued with ideological meaning. Since Comics are predominantly a visual medium, they get most of the power through the visuals-the way authors construct the representation. Hence, it is essential to problematize the visuality of the comics, which leads to a richer, more critical understanding of the medium's role in storytelling, culture and communication. It also helps us to look beyond comic's surface level to explore its sociopolitical underpinnings. It is more political than verbal since most of the time, the verbal narrative complements the visual narrative.

The Relationship Between Mental and Material Image

 W.T.J. Mitchell, who focuses on the dialectic relationship of material image and mental image, underscores that 'images are ideas, they are mental images' (24). He elaborates that images are the signs that pretend not to be a sign masquerading as natural immediacy and presence. Similarly, "words are an artificial, arbitrary production of humans that disturbs the natural presence. So, these dialectics of image and the word seems to be a constant in the fabrication of signs that a culture weaves around itself" (27). According to Mitchell, "The relationship between words and images reflects, within the realm of representation, signification and communication, the relations we posit between symbols and the world, signs and their meanings" (43). Thus, the images that we see in the panels are mental images. Comic images are often perceived or decoded based on the graphic structure of the lines and shapes that underlie our perception of the drawn objects.

"Representation is a complex business and especially when dealing with difference, it engages feelings, attitudes and emotions and it engages feelings, attitudes and emotions and it mobilizes fears and anxieties in the viewer, at deeper levels than we can explain in a simple, common sense way" (Hall 226). Comics have a problematic history when it comes to the representation of minorities and ethnic groups who live on the fringes of society and whose position is historically dictated by dominant cultures. Now, the question is, why are indigenous people always drawn with the same archetype, and where does this archetype come from? This stereotypical representation of minorities can further be understood with the words of Neil Cohen, who writes ".... those drawers use similar cognitive patterns in the way they draw and those similarities constitute a shared visual vocabulary that reflects and reinforces an identity of belonging to a particular group of people" (27).

Cognitive Narratologist calls this a 'schema' - a cognitively stored pattern in the mind of the author used to draw each character. Thus, the sequential images in the comics belong to a larger vocabulary, whereas drawings are more systemic. Hence, all drawings come from the vision or from memory, which uses patterned schematic information stored in our long-term memory. This schematic representation is apparent in the comic authors' drawings. Neil Cohen observes that the same kind of graphic structure ubiquitously recurs in cartoons, advertisements and visual culture (27). This applies to the graphical representation of Dalits, which actually might be modelled upon other visual cultures like cartoons, arts and cinema. Hall extends the representation with the meaning-making process. He argues, "attempting to fix, it is the most work of a representational practice, which intervenes in the many potential meanings of an image in an attempt to privilege one" (228).

The representation politics of Indian comics can be understood by drawing parallels with Indian visual culture. According to Gary Tartakov, Dalits are invisible in the contemporary discourse and visual imagery. He writes in his introduction to his book Dalit Art and Visual Imagery (2012)

"…. How little had been written previously on the subject of India's visual imagery in relation to the caste system… though Indian tradition has perceived a vastly extensive repertoire of Brahminical visual imagery, I could recognize no obvious images of Dalits there. There was, as in the textual literature elaborate representation of the savarana castes and their favoured subjects along with an apparently thorough avoidance of representation of the subordinated castes. or, if they were there, they were hidden or occluded in a manner parallel to the treatment of them in written representation" (3).

This argument on Indian visual culture is very crucial for understanding the politics of representation in Indian Comics. Similarly, Diana L. Eck, in her book Darshan (1893), remarks, "India is a visual and visionary culture, one in which eyes have a prominent role in the apprehension of the sacred" (10). This preoccupation with portraying sacred, conveniently 'othered' Dalits and other marginalized communities who have been considered inauspicious creatures. Drawing is not merely a material image; it is a mental image. It is like a language that involves the transmission of schemas specific to culture, not something drawn randomly or from perception. So, this is why people use the graphic schemas available to them while representing. However, the problem is that in comics, it is not just one image but a sequence of images facilitated with the help of panel borders, layouts, colours, and lines. Images that we are exposed to in comics are symptomatic of the deeply felt shifts in culture and representation. Hence, every image should be read in terms of this broader question of cultural belonging and difference. The attitudes, and prejudices of a culture greatly shape the iconography of Caricatures, Cartoons and Comics.

Drawing Religion in Comics

According to Roma Chatterji, Indian mythology is often kept at the transcendental plane that we kept revisiting them (17). As Chatterji remarked, Indian comics are indebted to Indian mythology since they always go back to mythological stories for the storyline, and we also see the mythological stories getting adapted to different media, in the form of retellings. Its aesthetics aligns with the religious iconography. Khanduri, an Indian comics scholar, remarks that culture, superheroes, and mythology continue to dominate digital space since the 1960s, yet in comics we could see an extension period till the 1990s and early 2000s (171).

Amar Chitra Katha is one of the successful comic industries based in India, actively publishing from 1967 till now with more than 450 titles covering various ranges of topics based on religious legends, epics, historical figures, biographies and folk tales etc.., ACK comics is often considered as an important cultural artifact in India and played an active role in creating and re-creating comics spreading ideologies of the dominant groups. Besides that, critics have noted that Anant Pai, the founder of ACK comic, aims to imbibe cultural values to children, which is perhaps a perspective of Hinduization of Indian heritage as well as reinforcing stereotypes of Indigenous and other minority groups. ACK's Hindu Mythological comics laid the foundation for current revisits graphic fantasies like Ramayana 3392 AD (2007), 18 Days (2014), The Kaurava Empire (2014), and Simian (2014) which are some of the recent attempts

to re-visit Hindu mythological works combining the fantasy elements of American and European comics.
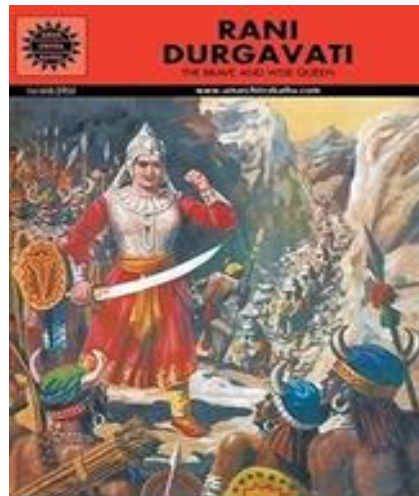
ACK's mythological titles offer a range of stories from Ramayana, Mahabharata, and other puranic texts, and are strongly criticized for upholding Brahminical Values. The image and text interface of the medium has become an appropriate medium for enacting and recasting myths. If ACK comics are read through the lens of ideology, one could see how these comics wrap up the ideology of Brahmins, the dominant group according to the Varna system. The colourful illustrations, the familiarity of the storyline and the characters that these stories have make it more appealing to the masses because, unconsciously, our perceptions are moulded with the dominant ideology, as Stuart Hall said, ideology gets naturalized in the course of time.

Racializing Dalits and Indigenous people

Ambedkar writes about the literary representations of Dalits "The literature of the Hindus is full of caste genealogies in which an attempt is made to give a noble origin to one cate and an ignoble origin to another castes." (Ambedkar 245). Nandhini Chandra, Indian Comic Scholar, observes the biased representation in ACK comics and argues that "ACK was nothing but an endeavour to get the entire history of colonization mounted onto the comic mode. There were no masked crime fighters in purple skin suits, but each issue had a superhero who attempted to wage war against foreign oppression, whether the 'foreigner' was Asura, Muslim or British" (2). This insight of Nandhini Chandra is very crucial to understanding the representational politics of ACK comics. The protagonists of Ack comics are heroes, saints from Hindu mythologies, folklore and, during Independence, freedom fighters, and later extended to regional heroes. Heroes and Heroines are portrayed with Aryan features (tall, lean, well-built, a clean body without hair, fairer in skin tone), nobility of the character and their social hierarchy is often represented through the colour scheme, which, in a way, hints at the Caste identity. So, characters were picturized according to their social ranks, which colours helped them to show the distinction.

For example, the comic book *Rani Durgavati* depicts the sacrifices and courage of queen Durgavati from the Chandela dynasty of Mahoba who took the Mughal empire with her valour and courage, who is portrayed in waging a war against her own Gond Men in which the Gond tribe men are depicted with dark, brute features, rounded body, long hair, with big mustaches and horns. Written with the historical impulse of valorizing the spirit of Rani, the tribal men

were portrayed as greedy, ruining the wealth of the nation, and Rani is trying to protect her kingdom from them.

The above picture foregrounds Durgavati as a majestic figure in the middle of a group of tribal men. The tribal men were portrayed as sidekicks to show the nobility of the queen. The queen is portrayed as fairer in Skin as she belongs to the Kshatriya varna, and Gond men are avarnas/ untouchables in the varna system. Dalits in ACK comics are portrayed with the same spirit of otherness and as inauspicious creatures.

Similarly, in the Comic book *Tales of Vishnu*, we see an untouchable guy and an Asura being portrayed with the same colour scheme as the tribe in the story Rani Durgavati in a way that arouses terror and fear. So, the representation of Asuras, Dalits, and Tribals is with the same biases; they are hairier, with ape-like features. This shows how ACK comics perpetuate exclusion and hierarchy through their representation strategies.

Dalits in ACK comics are almost invisible as they are not eligible to be a part of the representational system. However, they can be spotted in a few scenes. In the comic book Harichandra, the Dalit character is introduced to the readers as 'chandala'. The narration inside the narration box introduces him as "Chandala who was the keeper of the cremation ground was watching the auction" (19). This reminds of the hierarchical pre-destined dogma of Varna system which locked Dalits as Outcaste preventing them from any decent job but do the odd jobs like disposing the dead bodies of corpses. The chandala is depicted as having a dark skin tone, arousing terror, and this is further intensified with a skull and a stick in his hands. This character of Chandala is brought into the story as a foil to show how fate has dragged Harishchandra, the king of Ayodhya, to a lowly status to sell themselves to a Chandala. As the story progressed, to everyone's shock, it was revealed that the untouchable character was just a ploy of Lord Indra to testify his devotion to truth.

The comic book portrays Harichandra's relentless path to truthfulness despite the obstacles that he faced. According to the Hindu social order, Khatriyas are the warriors who occupy a position second to the brahmins in the caste ladder. Harichandra though born as a Khastriya was cursed by Vishwamitra, venerable sage and lost his kingdom to him. To signify the hardships that he endured, the story shows Harichandra at a point in his life to be auctioned by a 'chandala', who is an outcast according to the Varnashrama dharma. According to Manu Dharma, Dalits are outcastes, untouchable and unseeable whose karma is to serve the other four varnas. Untouchables are asked to do odd jobs cremators; sanitary workers are some of the jobs assigned to them lacking the knowledge The simplicity of a King turned into a gypsy is portrayed by drawing him in white dhoti and with a shawl and turban but the untouchable man is visualized as dark in complexion with a bare upper body and covering the lower body with a towel like something and with a human skull on his hand. If panels are a careful choice of moments, the objects, setting and the people who are represented inside the panels are also predestined by the artists and is a conscious representational choice evolving from the culture. Depicting a Dalit as a cremator and the panels showing the burial ground where corpse burning glues Dalits to their ancestral calling with no escape from the system. This representation

ACK narratives posit a racialised discourse by polarizing the biological and bodily features of Brahmins and Minority groups in extreme opposites. So here the body functions as a site for the transmission of racialized ideology. The realistic portrayal of its characters blurs the ideological meanings imbibed in them. Thus, ACK comics, in the name of evoking Indian

sensibility, Brahminize the comic sphere. By re-connecting myths as history and modelling society based on the values displayed by the mythological characters, it evokes culture as its capital. Ack comics are characterized by their deliberate underplay of Brahminical ideology, reworking it to be acceptable to the general public.

Maintenance of social order through Representation

ACK narratives clearly showcase the centrality of Brahmins and Kshatriyas. Even devas seek the help of brahmin sages. In the comic book Dasha Avatar, the opening scenes of the comic display the end of a yuga, but before that, Lord Vishnu chooses a Satyavarata, a sage, to the next yuga along with the Saptarishis and selected samples from plant and animal species. This suggests that only a brahmin sage was chosen by God; this suggests the supremacy of Brahmins over other varnas. Similarly, in the comic book, Dasha Avatar, the panels depicting Bali's encounter with a Brahmin priest show how a Brahmin should be treated. Bali rose from the seat and offered a special seat to him, washed his feet and said " ...O holy brahman, this land of mine has been consecrated by your tiny feet." (50). This shows the supremacy of Brahmins. Bali, who is a disciple of Shukracharya was warned by him not to be fooled by the brahmin dwarf as he is lord Vishnu in disguise to play some trick on him to save devas. Sukrahtarya (a brahmin sage) cursed Bali for disregarding his advice that he "will soon lose fall from the high position." (53). Despite his advice Bali promised the brahmin priest and lost his kingdom and surrendered himself when he understood it was Lord Vishnu. Even Karna was also caught in such a position that his Guru cursed him…. Moreover, by a brahmin for killing his cow unknowingly. When Karna was at his last moment, he said, "The curse of the Brahman had not been in vain," suggesting the power of the curse of a Brahmin and their divine purity.

 In the same comic book when Karna tried to learn Brahmastra (a powerful weapon that can kill a mass of people), he was rejected by Drona (a teacher of Pandavas and Kauravas) and said to him that "the Brahmastra is only meant for brahmanas and high-born Kshatriyas. I cannot teach it to you- a charioteer's son" (8). This informs how knowledge is meant only for Brahmins, and shudras were restricted from learning. To quote another incident, in the comic book Tales from Upanishads, King Janashruti wanted to learn the knowledge from a brahmin cart driver Raikva, but he was rejected for not being humble and exercising his power as a king. Janashruti was allowed to learn only when he went and bowed his head at the feet of the brahmin. This shows how ACK narratives maintain the hierarchy of the caste/varna system. In the comic Book Sudama, the brahman man was portrayed as pure, innocent, poor, and noble,

who renounced all the worldly pleasures that even Krishna washed his feet. Likewise, in the comic book Krishna and Jarasandha, when Arjuna, Krishna and Bheema went to the court of Jarasandha to have a battle with them, Jarasandha was hesitant to fight with them as he says, "how can I, the king of kings, lift a weapon against a brahman" (23).

Representation is a modus operandi of producing and exchanging 'shared meaning' between the members of a culture with its choice of language, i.e. signs and codes that stabilise the meaning. Hall defines stereotyping as" reduces people to a few, simple essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature" (257). 'Stereotyping' is one such cultural code and representational practice that fixes and circulates the intended meaning. The schema of stereotyping and othering Dalits and Indigenous people originates from the notion of caste and the practice of casteism, which Ambedkar defines as a State of mind, a disease of mind. Grading the nobility of the characters through colour schemes symbolizes the graded inequality of the system that glues and separates people in different ways. Further, it also reflects the disorganized society in terms of caste and how it deprives people of enjoying fellow feelings. As Isabel Wilkerson rightly said, "Caste is the bones, race the skin." (26) The shared cultural meaning signifies that grading people with different colour schemes symbolizes their social ranks and unequal status. As Stuart Hall said, "cultural meanings are not only 'in the head', they organize and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and consequently have real, practical effects." (8) So, comics as a circuit of culture produces and circulates the meaning that is shared in the common cultural space.

This racialized representation practice not only essentializes, reduces and naturalizes the stereotyped features, but it also displays a covert tendency to exclude or expel everything that does not fit, which is different. "Stereotyping as a signifying practice is central to the representation of racial difference." (Hall 257). Dalits and Indigenous people by reducing them to mere signifiers of dark complexioned, muscular like negroid features is reductive and results from the ideology of caste, which functions on the concept of principle of purity and pollution.

Conclusion

Stereotyping is a key element in the exercise of symbolic violence inflicted on minorities as they are "more rigid than the social boundaries" (Hall 258). It divides the normal and the acceptable from the abnormal and the unacceptable by excluding and expelling everything different. It is a strategy of closure against foreigners, intruders, and minorities, which is a part

of the process of racial purification, as its rigid symbolic boundaries of stereotypes mediate the ideology of the caste system in the representational practices. Further, they help maintain social boundaries and constitute the identity of social groups. In short, the cultural production of ACK comics symbolically reflects the social exile of Dalits and Indigenous people who are ostracized from mainstream society. ACK comics symbolize the gross inequalities of power between the groups, where power is directed against the marginalized, who are the subordinates. ACK comics exemplify the complex dialectics of power and subordination through which Dalit and indigenous identities have been culturally constructed.

Though the caste system itself is discriminatory, stereotyping altogether facilitates the binding or bonding of people who belong to the same social class, "where power is usually directed against the subordinate or excluded group" (Hall 258). Since "the social status of an individual by itself often becomes a source of power and authority" (Ambedkar 227). In the context of Dalit representation, this symbolic and cultural oppression of Dalits exercised by the dominant castes. Thus, stereotyping hints at the unequal power relations among different social groups. The power in representation, the power to mark or assign and classify; of symbolic power; of ritualized expulsion of Dalits.

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