

Constructing “The Glorious Heritage of India”: Popular Culture and Nationalist Ideology in Indian Biographical Comics

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The modern history of India, particularly in the twentieth century, has been characterized by tensions between the majority Hindus and the Muslim minority. In the anti-colonial period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the antagonistic politics of religious communalism led to horrific violence both before and after the partition of India and Pakistan. The political divisions between religious and nationalist groups continue to pervade the scene of politics in India today. Communalism in India is resurrected in the right-wing, Hindu nationalist politics of the ruling BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), and the various Hindu fundamentalist groups associated with it. The BJP’s program of anti-Muslim, anti-secular Hindu nationalism is garnering a great deal of support, both in India and among diasporic Indians abroad. This paper is part of a larger work which asks why this nationalist agenda is so appealing, and considers the popular cultural mechanisms through which the ideology of Hindu nationalism circulates among Indians and in the diaspora.

In “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” Karl Marx writes that in times of crisis, people “conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle slogans and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language” (595). In contemporary India, the BJP and other Hindu nationalists are conjuring up the spirits of the earliest moments of the Indian independence movement to the service of their agenda. This conjuring is a process of ideological production, and in this era of mass technology, communication, and reproduction, it can operate in some deceptively innocuous forms of media.

Amar Chitra Katha is a series of comic books, produced in India, which anthologize “the glorious heritage of India” in more than 200 volumes of 32 colour illustrated pages.¹ These volumes retell classic and traditional folk tales, religious

¹ The “Glorious Heritage of India” is a key slogan of the series. It appears on the covers of

stories, biographies, and moments in history, and for the most part these are gleaned from a Hindu cultural, religious, and historical perspective. Marketed to parents as educational tools, the audience of the series is primarily children of the English speaking middle class in India and the diaspora. They are, however, also read and enjoyed by adults. The publishers of *Amar Chitra Katha* deny that they, or the series, have any explicit political leanings. But, as I intend to show, there is a deeply embedded system of signification and representation in the series which conforms to, or is at least complicit with, the ideology, and the iconography, of the fundamentalist Hindu right.² This system hinges on lacunae and the strategic abridgement of historical and mythical narratives in order to produce a particular ideological reading.

***Amar Chitra Katha*: History and Context**

Amar Chitra Katha, which translates as “Immortal Illustrated Story,” was begun in 1967 by Anant Pai, who is still the editor of the series. Pai has written, edited, or 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. Some are then translated into Indian languages. The series began in 1967 with *Krishna* (v. 11/501), and at its height grew to over 500 volumes. At some point in the early 1990s, the series was revamped, and now carries a whittled down catalogue of about 231 “deluxe” volumes and several special issues.³ Both new and old incarnations of the series are dominated by

many of the volumes in the series.

² While images from these comics could not be reproduced here, some of the covers, including those I discuss here, are reproduced at <http://www.exoticindiaart.com/books/Comics/>. Unfortunately, previously available on-line versions of some of the comics have disappeared from the internet. A new site, at www.amarchitrakatha.com appears to be in development.

³ Throughout his paper, I've given both the old volume numbers (11-500+), and the new numbers (501-731) whenever the comic appears in both new and old series. The new series is identifiable by the volumes' laminated covers and brightly coloured borders surrounding the cover illustration. While these new 'deluxe' run of comics are quite widely available, some libraries and collections may hold older prints identified by the old number. Where the comic exists in both series, the pages seem to have been directly reproduced, and the pagination remains the same.

depictions of Hindu myths. There are a few devoted to Sikhism and Christianity, and almost none to Islam.

Though the greatest number of volumes in the series depict religious stories and myths, for the purpose of this paper I'm going to focus on a few of the smaller group of comics based on figures and events in Indian history. I utilize these to illustrate my point that these texts operate at an intersection of history, popular culture, and ideology.

It may seem unusual to think of comic books as lessons in historical education, but their significance as a popular cultural medium is not easily dismissed. In the Indian context, *Amar Chitra Katha* takes its place among other forms of mass culture and entertainment which are significant to the visual culture of religion and nation. Visually, the series' artwork draws upon styles popularized in Hindu poster art and, I would suggest, Bollywood film.⁴ The ease of mass reproduction and the simplicity of the visual and textual narratives in comics also provides the possibility of a homogeneity in representation which is difficult to achieve in a country of one billion people. E.J. Hobsbawm, Benedict Anderson, and Walter Benjamin have all commented from differing perspectives about the significance of visual media to the formation of national identity and national politics. Though they differ in their approaches to the 'nation' itself, they would agree that print and visual media can powerfully project a singular image of the 'nation' onto a heterogeneous people.⁵

Recognizing the educational importance of his series, Pai says that *Amar Chitra Katha* promises parents to "screen each word and picture, as they have a lasting impact on impressionable minds," and that his company need be "more a vehicle of education than a business," and it is worth considering this contention in light of some of the editorial choices I'm going to show here

⁴ See *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*, eds. Lawrence Babb and Susan Wadley (Philadelphia: UPenn Press, 1995). "Impact of 'God Posters' on Hindus and their Devotional Traditions," by H.D. Smith, and "Market Forces at Work: Religious Themes in Commercial Hindi Films," by Steve Derné, are particularly useful on these themes. On Indian film, see Sumita Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema* (University of Texas, 1993), and M. Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁵ Here, I'm thinking of Hobsbawm's *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*, Benjamin's essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," (in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Harcourt, 1968), and Anderson's *Imagined Communities*.

(Pritchett 104). Why, if the editors truly want to chronicle the “glorious heritage of India,” should they choose mainly Hindu stories and lives, if not as a reflection of a Hindu-centric nationalism? What is the reasoning behind the choice of characters in the series’s account of Indian independence? And, my larger project will ask, what effect might it have on the education and imagination of a young Indian/diasporic readership? The complexity of the editors’ choices reminds us that these distillations and abridgements of myth and history are necessarily ideological and cannot be dismissed simply as pitfalls of the medium. The limitations and challenges posed by the comic medium could facilitate as well as hinder the ambiguous political intentions of the editorial staff.

Dayananda

Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883) was the founder of the Arya Samaj, a reformist Hindu group. Historians agree that the Arya Samaji ideology was foundational to the later development of increasingly militaristic, right-wing Hindu nationalist organizations like the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh); his contribution has also been recognized by leaders of these groups, like Lala Lajput Rai and VD Savarkar (Massetos 106; Jaffrelot 14). Given this reputation, it is curious to see how *Amar Chitra Katha* has chosen to eulogize him.

The introduction to *Dayananda* (v. 120/624) speaks explicitly to his reformist stance:

Swami Dayananda was born at a time when our country was under foreign domination. Most of the people were steeped in ignorance and poverty. Hypocrisy and corruption flourished in the name of religion... Prejudices of creed, caste and community had corroded the social cohesion and the wily and the wicked were ruling the roost. (*Dayananda* inside front cover)

Florid alliteration aside, it is interesting that this first paragraph implies a causal relationship between ‘foreign domination’ (it’s unclear if this refers to the British,

or to Muslims—neither group is mentioned) and religious corruption. The introduction goes on to state:

He did not however propagate or establish a new creed or a new sect like many of his contemporaries... his main purpose behind establishing the Arya Samaj was to make people good, to rid the society of its evils and thereby build a free, strong and united nation. In fact, he prepared the psychological and social background for Mahatma Gandhi's subsequent political programmes. He was, truly speaking, one of the great builders of Modern India. (ibid)

But Dayananda did in fact set forth a new 'creed' in advocating "Vedic" values with strategic reforms, and it's unclear how his position on Hindu superiority over other religions could lead to a 'United India.' The Arya links to the Mahasabha and later RSS movements must not be overlooked in this regard. *Amar Chitra Katha* however, appears to consciously position Dayananda, in line with other nationalist heroes, as primarily in opposition to British rule, and implies that his Hindu reformist agenda arises as a response to colonization. This makes it possible for the reader to miss the Hindu-centric effects of the Arya Samaj, and its anti-Muslim sentiment. In fact, the successor organizations to the Arya Samaj were explicit in placing the 'blame' for Indian political problems at the feet of Muslims and other religious minorities.

While it is true that the Arya Samaj stance of rights for women and 'untouchables' did, in some sense, lay a groundwork for Gandhi's later projects, the innocuously depoliticised way in which these reforms are depicted is suspicious. In fact, as Radha Kumar, Uma Chakravarti and others have written, reformers of this period who advocated for women in some areas were not necessarily progressive in their political beliefs. In the bottom right frame of page 20, the caption narrates how Dayananda gave the sacred thread to women and Dalits. He also, however, recommended that people marry within their *varna* (caste) group to maintain social order, and was primarily interested in the religious education of young women in order to prepare them to do their "duty" as

“mothers of the nation” (Chakravarti 56-7).⁶ These details are absent from the comic’s biographical narrative. On page 21, in the top right frame, Dayananda says, “For women to acquire that place of honour, they must get proper education. Give up Purdah! Give up superstitions.” While statements like this have contributed to the remembrance of Dayananda as a champion of women’s rights, it is important to recognize that he in fact felt that Purdah and “superstitions” were imports from Islamic culture which had sullied the “purity” of Hindu culture.

It is not until page 26 of the 32-page comic that Dayananda establishes the Arya Samaj. Here, Dayananda’s speech bubble reads: “Arya Samaj means the society of virtuous men. We must all unite without distinction of caste or creed. Our objectives are to impart true knowledge, to bring about social justice and to achieve freedom from alien rule” (*Dayananda* 26). Here, the limitations of text in comic book form are apparent. The word “Arya” is explained in the speech bubble in one context, that of “virtue” or “honour.” But although footnotes are used elsewhere in the text, here there is nothing to explain the meaning of the word further. For Dayananda, Arya(n)s were those ‘original’ Indians, practitioners of the Vedic religion of his ‘Golden Age,’ and the term Arya pointed towards a nationalism based on this (conjectural) linkage between cultural and religious tradition. His program of purification, coupled with his insistence on “disciplined” procreation, borders on a eugenic procedure.

Veer Savarkar

Similar questions arise from an *Amar Chitra Katha* release titled *Veer Savarkar: in the Andamans* (v. 309/678). In this case, the limitations of the narrative in the text, coupled with its visual representations, provide an even more perplexing history of a nationalist ‘hero.’ V.D. Savarkar was the author of *Hindutva: Who is a*

⁶ There is a great deal of confusion around the way in which *Jati* and *Varna* have been translated variously as caste and race. *Jati* refers to an endogamous system of social hierarchy which is often referred to as caste. *Varna* generally refers to the four major ‘caste’ groups: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Sudra. ‘Untouchables,’ or Dalits, fall below the lowest group. The word ‘caste’ is frequently translated in both ways, as is ‘race.’ This leads to a great deal of ambiguity among western scholars about the exact meaning of proposals such as Dayananda’s. See Jaffrelot, 14, and S. Sarkar, “Indian Nationalism and the Politics of Hindutva.”

Hindu?, a text which continues to be integral to the Hindu nationalist project.⁷ As a young anti-colonial revolutionary he was arrested in England and imprisoned in the Andamans for eleven years, before going on to become a leader on the Hindu right. Although in his earlier days he had been associated with socialist and anti-partition activists, after his imprisonment Savarkar increasingly saw communalist Muslim organizations as the ‘enemy,’ and his work with the Mahasabha earned him a position as an increasingly right-wing, anti-Gandhian, anti-Congress leader.⁸ He became a vocal proponent of a Hindu-centric state, and supported militaristic defence of ‘Hindu’ interests in response to his perception of an increased Muslim ‘threat.’ His vehement anti-Gandhian speeches (deriding Gandhi as anti-national and anti-Hindu) were a source of inspiration to Nathuram Godse and the group of young militants who orchestrated Gandhi’s assassination.

All this, however, is not apparent in the comic book version of his life. The introduction tells us that the text of the comic, written by Subba Rao, an *Amar Chitra Katha* staffer, is drawn largely from Savarkar’s own book on his prison experience, *My Transportation for Life*. In keeping with the issue’s subtitle, the volume devotes most of its panels to Savarkar’s imprisonment in the ‘cellular jail’ in the Andamans. The first few pages set Savarkar up as a strident young revolutionary, documenting his work in acquiring arms and training others in their use. The very first page shows Savarkar giving a concealed handgun to an associate; this brief depiction of his life in England then gives way to the narrative of incarceration. Pages 9-32 of the volume are almost entirely set within the prison, where scenes of torture, abuse, suicide, and insanity abound—something which doesn’t ring quite true with Pai’s desire to protect “impressionable minds” from scenes of violence.⁹ On the final page, only the last four frames encapsulate Savarkar’s release. Of his subsequent political life, we are given only the final panel, with this text against a tricolour background: “Savarkar took an active part in the struggle for freedom. He had the satisfaction of witnessing the tricolour

⁷ See Sumit Sarkar’s “Indian Nationalism and the Politics of Hindutva” in *Contesting the Nation*, ed. D. Ludden (Philadelphia: UPenn Press, 1996).

⁸ One such socialist would be Madame Cama, the Parsi socialist who unfurled the “Free India” flag that Savakar had designed at the 1907 International Socialist conference in Stuttgart. This event is described on page 2 of the comic.

⁹ Hawley writes that in Pai’s opinion, “Children should not be exposed to scenes of violence, prejudice, sexual violence, or superstition” (128).

unfurled on August 15, 1947” (*Veer Savarkar* 32).¹⁰ Nothing is mentioned of his work with the Mahasabha, his writing of *Hindutva*, his antagonistic relationship with Congress, or his eventual arrest, trial and acquittal on conspiracy charges regarding the assassination of Gandhi.

As with the case of Dayananda, one wonders why Pai and his staff would choose such a complex and controversial character for an *Amar Chitra Katha* volume, and then leave untouched the most controversial facts of his life. As Pritchett comments:

No doubt this is the most tactful way to treat V.D. Savarkar, if it is necessary to treat him at all. Since other, less communally tainted nationalist leaders are available for the series to depict, why make a point of depicting a communal one—and then trying to airbrush him into blandness? (94)

To report on the lives of communalist leaders as if they were in favour of an unpartitioned and unified India seems like a strange move, unless we consider it as a moment of production of a rather specific kind of ideology—one which serves to disguise the anti-Muslim sentiments of the contemporary Hindutva movement in the garb of anti-colonial nationalism.

Jawaharlal Nehru

It is interesting in this light to compare these two to the volume on Nehru, which of the three was published latest, originally in 1991. Though the comic is subtitled *The Early Days*, there has been no volume of ‘later days’ yet released. The same is true of the volume on Mahatma Gandhi: there are early days, but no ‘later’ ones.

Nehru is structurally, visually, and narratively one of *Amar Chitra Katha*’s strangest contributions to comic book biography. It also, at twenty-nine

¹⁰ It’s interesting to note that Savakar’s design for the Mahasabha flag, with the Hindu Om symbol, swastika, and sword on a red background, was his favoured choice over the Congress’s tri-colour. In a speech in 1939, he states that he and his followers shall respect whatever flag is chosen freely by his countrymen, as long as it is understood that his flag represents “Hindudom as a whole” (Mathur 84).

pages, has the dubious distinction of being the shortest volume I have come across.¹¹ Nehru was, of course, the first Prime Minister of India. His career was not, to put it lightly, without controversy, but he is certainly a significant historical figure.

Amar Chitra Katha's volume on his life does little to describe, or even contextualize, the story of Nehru's political life. In the comic's strangely proportioned narrative, Nehru isn't even born until the fifth page. The next 20 pages are devoted to describing Nehru's early childhood and college education. Visually, these illustrations are among the most striking of the four volumes I examine here. The volume goes to some lengths to establish the degree to which Motilal's family was 'anglicized': between pages 5-10, there are several images of young Nehru in school boy uniform. In the first, where he poses with a bicycle, the caption reads, "Jawaharhalal was brought up in a lavish, westernized lifestyle" (*Jawaharhalal Nehru* 5). Other images show young Nehru riding a pony, playing with toy soldiers, and so on. In contrast, in volumes depicting other political figures like Dayananda and Jayaprakash Narayan, the protagonists are often illustrated as studiously learning Hindu scriptures as children. The volume seems to draw out Nehru's interest in western philosophy and education. In another frame on page 14, Nehru is pictured turning down an invitation from a clearly much darker skinned young boy, in favour of attending a theosophist study group. When the boy asks him to explain, Nehru responds, "Ah! You won't understand." This illustration seems to echo the Hindu nationalist perspective of Nehru as class and caste privileged, and as too much engaged with the British.

The last page of the comic, on page 29, shows Nehru in 1920, speaking to villagers outside Allahbad. Again here there is a visual contrast between Nehru and the much more darkly coloured villagers and workers, which seems characteristic to the style of the *Amar Chitra Katha* artwork. The final caption reads: "Thus began his close identification with the masses of India. The man of destiny who later became the architect of India had stepped into the arena of public life." The narrative halts here at 1920, twenty-seven years before he became India's first prime minister. It does not go on to describe Nehru's involvement with

¹¹ Given that Nehru was a prolific writer and in the public eye for most of his life, it seems unlikely that this length is due to lack of material.

the socialist caucus of Congress, his political problems, his imprisonments, or even his or his descendants' tenures as Prime Minister. It does not even hint at the allegations of corruption and elitism that surrounded him before and after partition. Instead, the remaining three pages of the volume are filled with advertisements for products of India Book House.

With this materially and narratively foreshortened volume, it appears that *Amar Chitra Katha* endeavours to avoid any details which cast Nehru in a critical light, or perhaps to make him appear as neutral as possible; an interesting contrast to the prowess and stoicism of Savarkar.

Ideological Construction and Comic Book Narrative Form

The three major historical figures I've looked at thus far provide us with some striking contrasts and provocative questions. The biographical narratives of these comic books perform what Marx calls "tricks" of ideology.¹² If we are to take these examples and read them against these tricks, we may begin to answer some of the questions I've identified here. Historical narrative by way of biography seems to be an optimal forum in which ideology can be created; the comic book form appears to facilitate that because of the abridgments, omissions, and simplifications required by the medium itself. A review of these tricks should uncover some propositions about *Amar Chitra Katha's* role in the production of ideology.

Trick one is that "One must separate the ideas of those ruling for empirical reasons, under empirical conditions and as empirical individuals, from these actual rulers and thus recognize the rule of ideas or illusions in history" (Marx 175).

While of the three men I have discussed here, Nehru has the highest national profile, all are significant political leaders. Certainly, in the emerging and often revisionist historiography of Hindu nationalism, these 'founding fathers' take on the role of leaders in history. However, though they were all committed to the nationalist project, they had very different ideas of what the 'nation' should be. In order to narratively connect them together within the series, these differences are

¹² Marx discusses the three tricks of ideological construction in *The German Ideology* (in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed Tucker, 175).

suppressed. Thus, the ideas of Aryan majoritarianism, Hindutva, and Gandhism respectively are extricated to varying degrees from the representations of these lives. Dayananda is a reformer, Savarkar a young man unjustly imprisoned, Nehru a westernized intellectual. But in none of these comics do we really see any reference to these leaders' political beliefs. Rather, at least in the case of the former two, they are portrayed as heroes of mythic proportions.

Trick two is to find the “mystical connections” between the ideas thus separated from the people who think them. Separated out of the empirical historical context in which their thinkers think them, these varying ideas about the nation's identity are homogenized through *Amar Chitra Katha*, until their common thread is revealed to be a concern with ‘nationhood.’ Despite the fact that they differ wildly on how such a nationhood should be conceived, it is this point which earns them a place in *Amar Chitra Katha*'s version of India. While the logical, empirical connections, as Marx writes, are already there—these men were part of the same milieu of Indian politics—the kernel at the centre of their ideas, ‘the nation,’ is what binds them together in comic book form.

The third trick, Marx writes, is to

remove the mystical appearance of this “self-determining concept” it is changed into a person—“self-consciousness” —or, to appear thoroughly materialistic, into a series of persons, who represent the “concept” in history, into the “thinkers,” the “philosophers,” the ideologists, who again are understood as the manufacturers of history, as the “council of guardians,” as the rulers. (175)

to change the idea back into ‘a person,’ to imbue it with ‘self-consciousness,’ agency, to associate it once again with the ideologues themselves. Here is the place in which *Amar Chitra Katha*'s project is illuminated. The biographical narratives of these comic books perform precisely this third trick: to turn ‘the nation’ into a series of personages, “Makers of Modern India,” or “Indian Revolutionaries,” and, ultimately, part of the larger pantheon of heroes constructed by the series as a whole. Removed of the actual details of their analyses, lives, and work, these figures can become precisely what *Amar Chitra Katha* would like them to be: comic heroes for the children of an independent Indian nation.

But this nation is a rather specific one: the fathers of the nation are largely Hindu; devoid of the specific context of Hindu nationalism, and the communalist violence and hatred associated with it, these men become 'air-brushed' heroes of a united India. However, in comic book form, Savarkar certainly seems more exciting and heroic a 'personage' than Nehru. The construction of narratives allows for a privileging of some heroes over others.

With these representations, the "real enemy"—the British—is clearly marked, and the history of communalism itself obscured. *Amar Chitra Katha* thus plays a role in the transformation of Hindu nationalist ideology from an anti-Muslim to an anti-British one. While Pai himself has taken pains to be seen as without a political agenda, then, it appears that the series itself cannot help but have one. His choices of strategic abridgment and inclusion point back repeatedly to the larger ideological construction of 'the nation.' The series bills itself as representing "the glorious heritage of India." That India is carefully constructed so that the ugliness of Hindu fundamentalist nationalism is diligently avoided. Thus sanitized, nationalist "pride" becomes ideologically safe and accessible to young people—and this opens a door to the fundamentalism of which we now see such an increase.

But if the crisis of which Marx writes of in "The Eighteenth Brumaire" is made evident by the increasing anti-Muslim hostility of India's right-wing BJP government, the tension of war between India and Pakistan, the bloodshed at the site of the Babri Masjid/Ramjanmabhumi temple, last year's massacres in Gujarat; then *Amar Chitra Katha* is one popular cultural mechanism among many that can facilitate Hindu nationalists' "conjuring up" of the history of the independence movement to serve as the 'comic' face of an increasingly fundamentalist agenda.

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