REPRESENTING THE CULTURAL IMAGINARY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE NARRATIVES OF AMAR CHITRA KATHA

A Summary

There has always been a strong link between tradition and culture in India. In other words, culture in India has to withstand the test of time. Culture in India is the articulation of everyday life material practices. Indian culture subsumes in itself various contradictory and mutually inclusive constituents. For the purpose of present study I choose to study one such genre, that is, of comics, which can be best framed in the tradition of cultural studies. The study of graphic arts have aptly demonstrated how posters, calendar art, comic books, video cassettes, audio recordings, televised serials and films have been instrumental in transporting messages to larger audience and across greater distances.

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. 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. The project will also analyse 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 is still 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.

The present research project attempts to analyse different narratives of *Amar Chitra Katha* (both print and electronic) and how these different narratives have impacted the cultural consciousness of modern-day India. The different narratives of *Amar Chitra Katha* are more often over-lapping and share the common ground of history and mythology. The present research project is two-fold: as it would be a study from production and consumption perspective. It would take into account three different categories of *Amar Chitra Katha* comic series, mythological, historical and contemporary.

The curious thing about *Amar Chitra Katha* is that it operates most of the time in the interstices between different ideological systems, at times conflating the local with the national, at other times blending the sacred/classical with popular, ancient with scientific and history with the voice of the people. From the production perspective, the present research project will study all the sources from where *Amar Chitra Katha* had drawn its images and presented them as a model of secularism. *Amar Chitra Katha* has assimilated various different local micro traditions, disparate, disconnected cults and practices into an outline of what can be termed as ‘little tradition’. *Amar Chitra Katha* also breaks the elitist and exclusivist narrativity of the Sanskrit texts of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* by rendering characters, no matter how elite, in the comic mode. The decade of nineties and hence forth saw characters from Kalidasa’s *Raghuvamsha* and Bhavabhuti *Uttara Ramacharita* coming live across as cartoons and caricatures. The present research project will therefore seek to unravel the process of translation/transformation that goes on between the great tradition and the little tradition of Indian culture as represented in the *Amar Chitra Katha* Series. On the consumption front, the study will also focus on how *Amar Chitra Katha* foregrounds differences and contestations through cultural translation and sub-versions.