

LOOK

ACKs: distorted history or education?

The appearance, or should one say the invasion, of Amar Chitra Katha comics on the market a few years ago broke the old parent-child dichotomy over comics. Till a few years ago comics were consumed by a limited audience. They were largely of the imported variety and few parents bought them willingly. This was hardly surprising considering the inane contents of the badly dated 'Archies', the absurd 'Richie Rich' or the downright gory war comics.

The coming of ACKs however changed this situation. While children devoured these colourful and well laid out picture books based on Indian mythology and history, parents were equally enthusiastic about this seemingly ideal combination of entertainment and education. Even children from highly Westernised families could now speak with authority on the Rajputs or the Ramayana. With the break-up of the joint family system, the ACKs appeared an ideal substitute for the storytelling grandmother.

So, all seems well—that is, until we begin to analyse the actual contents of these comics. There is little doubt that they are a distinct improvement on their foreign or Indian predecessors on the comic market (and a good deal better than their later indigenous imitations)—in that they are culturally closer to an Indian audience and more educative.

The problem, however, arises when we try to examine what they actually teach. They try to promote Indian culture and history, yes, but what actually comes across is in fact a largely Hindu culture and that too a Brahminical one, with all its attendant casteism and sexist, biases, and an extremely distorted view of history.

The distortion of history is most obvious, and probably

the most disturbing aspect of these comics. An eight-year-old was overheard asking his mother innocently: "Mummy, those Mughals were not on our side were they?" His only exposure to history till then had been via ACKs and it is precisely this sort of 'side taking' history that these comics seem to excel in.

It is history with a strong 'great man' bent and a decided Hindu chauvinist bias. Most stories of the medieval period are full of 'patriotic' (Hindu) kings defending the 'motherland' against 'foreign' (Muslim) rulers. In all battles soldiers are shown shouting "Allah O Akbar" or "Har Har Mahadev," as if religion were all that the battles were fought about. The 'two nation thesis' is drummed into impressionable minds from this young age.

Examples of such communal representation are rife throughout the ACK series. All Muslim rulers are firstly labelled 'foreigners,' regardless of their social or economic base in Indian society. Secondly, all Muslim kings from Allaudin to Aurangzeb are shown as oppressive, avaricious and lecherous.

In the pictures Muslims are nearly always portrayed with the stereotyped beards and a wicked lustful glint in their eyes. Khilji's economic reforms and tolerance are forgotten—what is highlighted is Allaudin's supposed lust for Padmini, which incidentally was the sole cause of his war with the Rajputs! Aurangzeb (ACK 232 'Aurangzeb and Dara Shukoh') is seen as a demented religious fanatic, solely concerned with converting one and all to Islam.

Shivaji (ACK 23)—who was

in fact as harsh as any Mughal in his treatment of the peasants—is however painted in the glorious colours of a patriot and is hailed as a 'peoples king.'

There are other interesting sidelights too, such as 'Anirudha' (ACK 65) where a princess' companion remarks "It could only have been one of the valiant Yadava race who could have disturbed my princess." Valiant race...master race...Herrenvolk, Heil Hitler and Heil Hindu ultranationalism?

Another curious aspect of these comics is that while many modern/contemporary figures have been celebrated on the covers, Gandhi is conspicuous by his absence...was he too secular for their taste? Manu would probably have greatly empathised with the ACK authors in their downright sexist depiction of women in their comics. Be it in the sphere of history or mythology, women are portrayed either as ideal wives or mothers—who sacrifice all their individuality to be of service to the dominant male figure—or else as the seducer-mistress. Polygamy among men is shown as a fact of life, but for a woman, the comics repeatedly tell us, her most important asset is her chastity, and the centre of her world her husband.

Also, what is decidedly peculiar is their pictorial depiction of women. Considering that the main consumers of these comics are children, there seems little need for the many scantily clad and voluptuously drawn female figures which adorn their pages. In such a context this type of artwork appears obscene, to say the least. We have seen



such sexism in films, advertising—but now children's comics!

Yes, of course, these are only comics—children's books and not serious historical texts. This, however, is no defence for the sort of ideas and attitudes they promote. Considering that ACKs have been and still are the steady diet that the young of the brave new world are fed, it is imperative to examine whether or not behind the facade of education the ACKs are promoting a set of values downright dangerous for modern India. It is the power inherent in the increasing popularity of these comics,

and the impressionable age of its readers which is really worrying.

Sanjay Joshi

First published in 1969, Amar Chitra Katha comics are the brain-child of Anant Pai, a devoted comics buff who has made a mission out of his work. Formerly the man behind Indrajal comics, Pai was consistently appalled by the English medium educated Indian child's lack of knowledge about his own history, religion and mythology. From the desire to bridge this gap came the idea of ACKs, and after 296 issues has slowly grown into a 'club' of sorts with

Pai at its centre.

"To me, its (ACKs) not a business but a vehicle to educate," says Pai. It is this educational role which raises important questions about distortions in the content. Pai acknowledges that initially, when he not have resources for independent research and relied on the popular versions of a tale or obscure ballads and poems, there were some errors and distortions. But today the ACK outfit has its own research facilities and strives for authenticity.

Yet Pai added hastily, "history is never correct, its jumble of names of people and places and dates. I try to bring

history to life." While acknowledging that ACKs are not the last word in history education Pai claims that he and his work will some day be remembered for helping children brought up in English schools to discover their own heritage.

Pai responds to the criticism that his works have a Hindu Brahminical bias by saying that he has strong feelings about communal disharmony and has visited riot sites to study the problem. One of the conclusions Pai arrived at about the role of juveniles in communal riots is that the educational system generates insecurities, which in turn create barriers that separate those individuals from the world and community and make them capable of violence.

From the very outset, Pai insists, one of his primary aims in the ACK project was to foster national integration. Those who criticise the comics for having a Hindu bias and negatively portraying Muslims, have not read enough ACKs, says Pai. In several editions, he adds, the ACKs have shown Hindus and Muslims cooperating and being loyal to each other. "In some editions Muslims are even shown better than Hindus" Pai adds emphatically. Balban, Shah Jehan and Jehangir are all shown as "being lovable and even Babur is not projected as a villain," says Pai.

When questioned about the grey areas of Shivaji's history and the wholly heroic portrayal in the ACK, Pai says the Maratha warrior king is deserving of such treatment because he was a "great liberal." Aurangzeb, on the other hand, was not, and "I'll never present Aurangzeb as a hero."

ACKs over-preoccupation

with religion is defended with the examples of comics, like 'Choka,' where the message is that you don't have to go to a temple to find God."

Laughing at the allegation that ACKs portrayal of women is sexist and projects the abominable code of Manu, Pai points to the ACKs on Razia Sultan and Chand Bibi where "men look like appendages.

If women by and large are portrayed in ACKs as devoutly following Manu's code, that is because they were so in that period of history. Strongly emphasising that he is not promoting those values, Pai says he cannot impose modern values on ancient tales and factually distort them.

This brings up the issue of an over emphasis on historical subjects over modern characters and situations. While some leading freedom movement leaders have been covered in the ACK series, Gandhi and Nehru are notably absent.

The ACK on Gandhi has been delayed due to the Nav Jeevan Trust's refusal to grant permission. ACK has, however, recently made a contract with the trust and will shortly publish an issue on Gandhi. Accordingly to Pai an issue on Nehru is also in the works.

For Pai, who also runs the "Partha Institute of Personality Development" and travels across the country conducting children's quiz programmes, ACKs have outgrown the stage where their importance and place can be questioned. Printed in almost every major Indian language and in several foreign languages also ACKs are here to stay.

Rajni Bakshi

Bombayman's Diary/BUSYBEE

Grinding the mill

The chief told me: "The government, millowners and Dr Datta Samant have expressed their views on the takeover of the textile mills. But nobody has asked the mill-workers how they feel about it. Go and interview a typical mill-worker."

aspects of the 20-point programme will be fostered following the decision of the industries and commerce ministries to involve the National Textile Corporation in the running of the mills?"

The worker said: "A week after the takeover was

danger of one of them being made chief minister. Otherwise which man ever gives a tea-party?" the wife said.

"I don't know about that, Mr J. C. Jain was always giving tea-parties at the Ambassador at one stage of his career and all he ever became was the

Market to Gowalia Tank on the other, which, after all, was the length and breadth of the city.

The front stalls in Strand cost five annas (about 30 paise) and the films it showed were not 15-year old Doctor repeats. The lunch buffet at

Meet Pierre Cardin

Olga Tellis interviews the king of fashion

Wonder who irons his shirts, one thought as one saw Pierre Cardin, the legendary name in fashion, surrounded by his six feet eleven and a quarter inch model-turned businesswoman Anjali Mendes and other French colleagues at the Taj Mahal. Cardin, whose empire spins out 400 million dollars a year,

their massive silk industry. China is going in a big way for exports of fashion garments and have asked Cardin to help them.

Cardin will also advise Russia on fashion and perfumes and visualises a role for himself in promoting trade of garments to from India to Russia with the Cardin label.

