

de Groot, Kees , ed. Comics, Culture, and Religion: Faith Imagined. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. Bloomsbury Collections. Web. 15 Feb. 2024. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350321618>>.

Accessed from: www.bloomsburycollections.com

Accessed on: Thu Feb 15 2024 10:50:28 sentraleuropeisk normaltid

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Comics and Religious Studies: *Amar Chitra Katha* as an Educational Comic Series

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How can comics be used in religious studies? The main example in this chapter is a comic series created for educational purposes, but it is important to note that comics not created for such purposes can be as suitable. As pointed out by Jeffrey M. Brackett, the use of comics in religious studies creates opportunities for the teacher to meet pedagogical goals and course outcomes. This is not necessarily dependent on the popularity of the specific comics used (Brackett 2015, 493) or whether they are intended for educational use. I still chose a popular comic series that has been promoted as a series with an educational value to illustrate the possibilities and difficulties that can arise in religious studies.

The series *Amar Chitra Katha (ACK)* was created by Anant Pai in 1967/1969 to present Indian religious and historical stories to children. From early on, it was used in schools, and the publishers directly promoted the series as a valuable teaching tool for educators. The publisher has recently initiated a storytelling program using these stories as part of the curriculum in Mumbai schools using principles of storytelling in the education system (India Education Diary Bureau Admin 2021). *ACK* is part of multimodal media franchises that are widely used and popular, explicitly targeting educators and branding the series as educational. If stories from the comic series are used in the regular curriculum, the narrative and visual choices in the comic series will potentially have an impact on the educational content. I will not, however, discuss whether the comic series truly had a pedagogical impact in school curricula in India, but use it to illustrate both the potential and the more problematic sides of using comics specifically targeted at education in religious studies.

I will look closely at the use of comics in education, with particular attention given to their possible functions in religious studies. Here, religion must be

understood in a broader context, comprising religious and ethical topics and direct depictions of religious themes and interpretations. I will discuss literature on comics in the classroom, specifically in religious studies, as well as literature on visual literacy and language. When discussing the *ACK* series, I have supplied additional literature on the role of the image in Hinduism.

Comics, Media, and Religious Studies

Using comics in the classroom is not a new phenomenon, and in an international setting, comics have been used in the classroom since at least the 1920s. This includes both the use of comics created for educational purposes and comics that are not created for such a purpose (Tilley and Weiner 2020, 358). One comic series intended for educational purposes that was used quite early and had a broad reach was *Classics Illustrated*, which began in 1941, and included adaptations of well-known Western literary works. In classrooms, they were used both to ease the reading of literary works and to compare with the original. “Teachers wanted to show the readers what they missed by reading the abridged comics-format version of literature” (359).

In the case of *ACK*, the comparison with the *Classics Illustrated* and similar series is quite interesting since *ACK* contains adaptations of Hindu mythology and religion. However, many *ACK* readers would not be able to read the original manuscripts and stories because they lack the required language skills. At the same time, giving visual access to mythological and religious stories may be considered especially valuable considering visual culture’s place in India and the Hindu religion. This also provides the student of Hinduism with access to adaptations of authoritative texts, even though one should read the comic issues critically as adaptations and not as authoritative texts.

Even though there is a growing literature on comics in the classroom, there is not, until now, much material covering the use of comics specifically in religious studies. Books such as *Graphic Novels and Comics in the Classroom: Essays on the Educational Power of Sequential Art* (Syma and Weiner 2013) cover a wide range of uses, such as the use of comics to teach language, multimodality, intertextuality, literature, art, history, and feminism. Other books cover subjects such as math, social studies, and science (Jaffe and Hurwich 2019). Several books and studies focus on how to use comics to improve oral skills, reading and writing, and to teach or improve literacy (Bakis 2014; Bowkett and Hitchman 2012; Jaffe and Hurwich 2019).

In *The Graphic Novel Classroom* (Bakis 2014), the author discusses comics related to religious studies. Two relevant examples are used. One is Will Eisner's *A Contract with God*; the other is Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. The classroom examples mostly focus on an analytical reading of the elements of the story, such as artwork and epilogue. Only one among the sixteen discussion points is directly related to the depiction of God or religion in the comic book: "On page 25 are three individual images separated by space from top to bottom. How is God represented on this page? Is this the kind of page you pictured when you thought you'd be reading graphic novels?" (Bakis 2014) Instead of giving space to further discussion about the depiction of God, it directs the attention toward discussion expectations on comic books themselves. When it comes to *Persepolis*, there is a question regarding the split of religious values and modernity, but mostly the attention is on *Persepolis* as a memoir and coming-of-age story. However valuable these perspectives are, the lack of discussions and questions about relevant topics for religious studies is quite indicative of the lack of such a discussion in the otherwise rich literature on the use of comics in the classroom.

Visual Literacy and Language

Visual literacy can be understood as "the ability to critically read, interpret, and persuasively relay content ... through images or visual messages. It is the ability to understand an image's (concrete and inferential) message, its use of symbols, and the rationales for the artist's various compositional choices" (Jaffe and Hurwich 2019, 26). Contemplating visual elements in a frame or panel may require a certain level of visual literacy. When studying religion, visual elements and icons play an important role, which means that it is also important to have good visual literacy. Using comics in religious studies can demand visual literacy and aid in developing the students' visual literacy levels.

In the book *Worth a Thousand Words: Using Graphic Novels to Teach Visual and Verbal Literacy* (Jaffe and Hurwich 2019), there is a chapter on how to read pictures in comics, which is relevant for understanding comics in religious studies. The chapter focuses on how one can critically read an image and thereby enhance visual literacy. The use of comics in religious studies is not mentioned specifically, but if using comics in religious studies, one must be able to critically read an image. Presenting religious topics through a visual medium will be significant in understanding the topics.

Comics are written in a visual language but can comprise of both visual and written language. When reading a comic, the reader needs to pay attention to the form and how the form presents meaning. Comics are sequential and therefore the perceived connection and sequence are meaningful. The process of decoding forms, visual meaning, and sequence can be quite complex (Cohn 2013, 2, 7–8).

The content of comics is expressed visually and often verbally and, therefore, comics can aid in the comprehension of abstract and multifaceted phenomena. Several studies also indicate that “visual educational content aids memory and comprehension while making content more meaningful and accessible” (Jaffe and Hurwich 2019, 12). A comic or picture book presents the possibility of reflecting on specific content or constructing meaning and interpretations. This possibility is a distinct advantage of using a comic series where the reader can reflect and meditate on the content, making room for interpretations, and reflections valuable in religious studies.

Educational Comics and Comics in Education

Educational comics are comics created for a specific educational purpose. As the educational content is the most important aspect of these comics, there is a certain risk that purpose is valued higher than content and aesthetic experience. When using texts created for a specific purpose, it is of utmost importance to read critically, with special attention given to who has produced the text, the explicit or implicit values presented, and the use of rhetorical techniques. Some educational texts can have a certain agenda besides being suitable for educational purposes. Comics can be preaching or critical, and their creators can be purely commercially motivated, religious with a commercial agenda, or trying to present a certain conviction or worldview as more correct (Undheim 2020, 21). For example, the Kingstone comics and the Kingstone Bible Trilogy are Christian comic books and graphic versions of the bible, respectively (Kingstone Comics n.d). Kingstone comics are both religious and have issues that directly thematize Christian topics, but even though they deal with religion, the comic issues also have an outspoken mission to appear convincing on Christian beliefs and must therefore be regarded as religious comics or media. Analyzing the purpose of the text should therefore be a part of the reading itself.

Comics created for a different purpose but with content that is deemed suitable for religious studies can be used to give insights into different religions, mythologies, and ethical questions. At the same time, the use of comics

in religious studies or in general can be used to distribute, generalize, and reformulate religions and worldviews. Endsjø and Lied even argue that these expressions can create religious expressions (Endsjø and Lied 2011, 15). The mediatization of religion can take on the character of belief leading not to a new kind of religion but “rather a new social condition in which the power to define and practice religion has changed” (Hjarvard 2014, 27). The use of comics in religious studies can therefore aid in the dissemination of knowledge and simultaneously be a part of the cultural production of comics using religious expressions. Eidhamar presents a categorization of religious teaching into four categories that can be valuable in this context. Perspectives presented or used can give an outside perspective that is either personal or academic or an inside perspective that is either personal or academic. Using an outside perspective means approaching a religion one does not believe in oneself, whether this is approached personally or academically. Of course, it is also possible to approach religious studies from an inside perspective, both personally and academically (Eidhamar 2019). Comics used in religious studies can therefore be regarded as representations (Undheim 2020, 21) that can inform the reader of certain religious topics and the existence of these topics in a cultural context whether the approach is personal or academic.

The use of comics in education is by no means limited to educational comics. *ACK* is presented as an educational comic, but this might well be a marketing strategy to reach a wider audience and legitimize the use of comics in an educational source (Chandra 2008). As described earlier, the use of a comic book such as *Persepolis* might be as useful as using *ACK* in religious studies depending on the thematic context and how the comic is used.

When considering the use of comics in an educational context, it is almost unavoidable to disregard the reputation of comics in a historical context. This reputation has changed since Fredric Wertham published *Seduction of the Innocence* in 1954, in where he argued that there was a connection between reading comics and youth crime (Duncan, Smith, and Levitz 2016, 25). Still, when using comics in an educational system, prejudices concerning the value of comics might still have a certain influence. These prejudices might be both positive and negative. The use of comics in education have long been described by many teachers as motivational (Wallner 2020, 47). Even though there might be some truth to the description of comics as motivational, at least to some readers, it is problematic to describe comics as only motivational.

Creating comics in the classroom can also be used as a creative method to teach specific content. Creating such comics is closely connected to educational

comics as they both have an educational purpose. This method is a valuable tool in religious studies, as in other subjects. Making comics can be a creative outlet that furthers collaboration and integrated use of technology that can enhance the students' writing skills and other skills and subjects (Maliszewski 2013, 234, 236). Nevertheless, the writing of comics as part of religious studies will not be dealt with in this chapter.

Amar Chitra Katha

ACK was initiated by Anant Pai and is one of the most defining Indian comic series. The word *chitrakatha* means picture stories, and in large part, the term originated from Anant Pai himself. Choosing the word *chitrakatha* to describe the series might have played a part in legitimizing the comics for educational use and trying to secure it as part of India's cultural heritage.

ACK has been an important overall influence on the Indian comic industry. Even though comic books in India must be understood both as a continuation of "a larger social context of visual culture" and as part of an international comic book scene, the *ACK* transformed the comics culture by offering a series that was created locally (Stoll 2017, 88–9). In 2011, at the first Comic-Con India in New Delhi, attended by more than fifteen thousand people, Anant Pai received a Lifetime Achievement Award (93). Anant Pai and his series have both influenced the comic book scene in India and represented Hindu and Indian identity to a large readership, which is often a reason to include elements or issues from the series in religious studies.

The first publications of *ACK* started in 1967 with translations of Western illustrated classics, largely based on Western fairytales such as *Jack and the Beanstalk* and *Cinderella*, into Indian languages. The first ten issues did not sell well, and the eleventh issue, titled *Krishna*, is often considered the first issue of the series. *Krishna* was published in 1969 in English, written by the founder Anant Pai and illustrated by Ram Waeerkar. The transition from Indian languages to English was motivated by Pai's knowledge of the growing English-speaking urban middle class (McLain 2009, 25, 28). *Krishna* is a landmark in India's comic book market: "It was the first indigenous Indian comic book, created in India and featuring an Indian hero and an Indian storyline" (25). The format is quite linear, with six rectangular boxes on each page. Each comic is typically made up of twenty-eight or thirty-two pages featuring Hindu mythological and religious stories (Chandra 2008, 13).

Krishna focuses on central episodes in the life of the Hindu God Krishna, and according to Pai, the Sanskrit mythological text, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, is used as a source. McLain also points to *Harivaṃśa* and popular renditions of both *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and *Harivaṃśa* as sources (McLain 2009, 25–6). With the eleventh issue of *Krishna*, the formula for the *ACK* series was established. “The comic establishes the formula for this series by focusing its narrative on one hero who is featured on the cover and whose dramatic action centers the narrative.” (26). The story also established the biographical model that was used for the mythological narratives. “The mythological stories were told by keeping a mythic-heroic individual at the center of the narrative, and by building sequential momentum through a deliberate parsing of the mythological story into a *bildungsroman*” (Chandra 2018, 12). If one were to use the comic series as part of religious studies, it is worth noting that the established biographical model can interfere with the rendition of mythological and religious stories. Chandra has explicitly criticized *ACK* for obliterating variation both because of the format and the visual style being modelled after popular versions of stories (Chandra 2008).

In the “first” issue of *Krishna*, Pai avoided presenting miraculous events but rendered them so that it was possible to read both miraculous and scientific explanations into the scene. Later, in accordance with the rise of Hindu communalism in India’s popular culture in the 1970s and 1980s, miraculous events were explicitly depicted without ambiguity. Pai has described that he understood that readers considered the comic series as something sacred, and that *ACK* was a “legitimate source of these sacred stories” (McLain 2009, 29, 35). Because of the role of the image in the Hindu religion, “even comic book images of a deity would be considered sacrosanct by most Hindus” (31). If the stories depicted in the comic book series were understood as something sacred and as a legitimate source of sacred stories, the series can have a central position in religious education and a personal religious practice.

ACK is influenced by both Western artistic and storytelling traditions and Indian visual and literary culture, originally being published in English. *ACK* combines mythology and mythological gods with history, historical leaders, and sacred and secular elements. Drawing from the American archetype of the superhero, the series then establishes a form of a national canon of Indian heroes. After gaining a wider audience, some of the popular issues were also published in other regional Indian languages. This allowed the publisher to reach an even wider audience. It was thus not only reaching an urban middleclass but was distributed to urban cities, small villages, and an increasing number of school

libraries. The *Krishna* issue was one of several made available in at least four languages—Bengali, Malayalam, Kannada, and Assamese (McLain 2009, 3, 44).

The *ACK* series is targeted at a quite wide age group but specifically at schoolchildren. With the recent developments, however—using YouTube and making apps—they are targeting an even wider age group and children who are not old enough to attend school. The *ACK* company Tinkle has created a junior app with an age rating of 3+ in addition to the app where one can buy comics to read online. The YouTube channel has videos based on the comic series in several languages (Amar Chitra Katha Pvt. Ltd. n.d.; 2021). What type of impact these new developments have on the comics' influence and reach in an educational context is outside the scope of this article. It is still interesting to note that the YouTube channel is active and continues to publish videos with animation stories, still pictures from the comics, and contributions from people participating in storytelling events.

Learning about Hindu religion and mythology from an academic approach these stories can be valuable for an older audience, but it is vital to have a somewhat critical approach as the stories are not neutral. Using a biographical model might make the stories more available both for unexperienced readers and those who are not familiar with the source material. There are always selections being made when creating adaptations, both story-wise and visually, which shows the importance of working with visual literacy in religious studies and otherwise.

ACK as a Source of Indian and Hindu Mythology and Culture

Since its beginning, at least 480 titles in thirty-six national and international languages have been published in the *ACK* series. *ACK* is viewed as “foundational texts for the religious and national education of their young readers” (McLain 2009, 3–4) and has played an important role for people who are unable to read the original Hindu scripture in Sanskrit and instead rely on popular media expressions. *ACK* is so influential that it has reinforced certain stereotypical representations of Hindu nationalism, (Amin 2017) being described by some as “Hindu-centric” (Mannur 2000) and as a series with a “strong ‘great man’ bent and a decided Hindu chauvinist bias” (Bakshi 1983).

ACK follows a trend in the Indian comic book market where mythological texts continuously are represented in new interpretations and renditions. This trend is so influential on the Indian comic book scene that it can be difficult

for new comic book artists to get publication deals if they do not create the same type of narratives (Rajendran 2014, 11). A tendency among mythological narratives in the Indian comic book market is that “many of these representations focus only on some aspects on the narratives they study (such as the war in the *Mahabharatha*) thus glamorizing and commoditizing that theme, and further reinforce normative and hegemonic value systems” (4). If using *ACK* in religious studies, one must pay attention to the narrative structure and the visual and narrative elements that are included or left out. Using biographical stories as sources can be problematic considering, among other things, the richness of the source material and the limited number of pages in the comic adaptations. They can be valuable sources precisely because of the accessibility, but both the use of a biographical method and the criticized representations in the comic series shows that it should not be an easy read if used in an academic context.

The image has played an important role in Hindu religion, and still does: “The images and myths of the Hindu imagination constitute a basic vocabulary and a common idiom of discourse. Since India has ‘written’ prolifically in its images, learning to read its mythology and iconography is a primary task for the student of Hinduism.” (Eck 2007, 17). *Darśan* means seeing. It refers to seeing in a religious context and is an important ritual activity. “Since, in the Hindu understanding, the deity is present in the image, the visual apprehension of the image is charged with religious meaning” (3). *ACK* was not intended for ritual worship. To avoid religious controversy, its founder Anant Pai has described how the gods on the covers originally looked away from the reader to avoid a darsanic gaze. Inside the comic books, there are still many occasions where a darsanic experience is possible. The series can therefore be understood as sacred, depending on the reader, giving space to inside perspectives, and personal approaches in religious studies. *ACK* can, along with other Indian comic books and pop-cultural expressions, both function as a sacred text and give insight into modern understandings of religion and Indian identity.

The founder of *ACK*, Anant Pai himself, answered accusations of placing Hindu religion at the forefront at the expense of other religions. He claimed that epics such as “the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were the heritage of all Indians” and adds that he since included “titles like *Babur*, *Humayun*, a title on Jesus Christ, and tried to make the series more secular.” (Pai 2000). *Babur* was the first comic book to include a Muslim protagonist (McLain 2005). Zāhīr al-Dīn Muḥammad, or Bābur, was a descendant from Genghis Khan, who invaded India in 1525–6 (Faruqui 2012). He was the founder the Mughal dynasty in the northern part of India, and Humāyūn or Nāṣīr al-Dīn Muḥammad was

his son and the second Mughal ruler in India (Spear 2022). The other Mughal rulers have also received their own issues in the *ACK* series: *Noor Jahan* in 1977 (no. 148), *Akbar* and *Shah Jahan* in 1979 (no. 200 and 204), *Jahangir* in 1980 (no. 221), and *Dara Shukoh and Aurangzeb* in 1981 (no. 231). According to Chandra, it is typical for the series that Muslims are portrayed in stereotypical terms as gruesome invaders in the comic series (Chandra 2008).

The cover photo of the issue *Babur* is quite indicative of the representation of Bābur. In the background, one can see images of what must be understood as an ongoing battle. The stories of Bābur and Humāyūn can be of value, and depicting them as invaders is not necessarily incorrect, but the problem arises if Muslim invaders are the only or most of the representations of Islam or Muslims in the series, which scholars claim to be the case (Pritchett 1995). The depiction of these invaders can also be understood as a glorified representation of war. In fact, in the introduction of the comic issue, Bābur is described as a good soldier, an able general, a wise and just ruler, and a generous person with good humor (Amar Chitra Katha 1977). In an interview with McLain, Pai commented on the use of invaders as heroes with the example of the comic issue *Akbar* (Humāyūn's son):

Yes. Take the example of Akbar. After the Battle of Panipat, Hemu was defeated. Akbar was very young, just thirteen years old, and he ordered Hemu's headless body to be hung at the gate for all to see. This is disturbing, but it is a historical fact, it can't be avoided. Yet it need not be emphasized. So I chose to have this shown in long shot, not in close-up. That way, you see, Akbar stays a hero ... This is the motto that I work under: "One must tell the truth, one must tell what is pleasant; but don't tell what is unpleasant just because it is true." In Sanskrit this is "satyam bruyāt priyam bruyāt mā bruyāt satyam apriyam." You see, Indians have a generally good view of Akbar. He was a good king, very accommodating. Not in his youth, but he changed. You know, we promote integration through *Amar Chitra Katha*. So why show bad things about Akbar—why not show that he was a good king? (interview from 2000, quoted in McLain 2005, 217)

The *ACK* series has been marketed as an accurate and authentic source on Hindu mythology and religion:

They [Pai and his team] insist that in their recasting of sacred Hindu scriptures no symbolic meanings have been altered; no new interpolations have been inserted, and no facts have been left unchecked. Parents, educators, students, and other consumers can therefore rest assured that when they purchase these

comic books, they get the real thing, only better—the “original” Indian story, now in a fun, short, and colorful format. (McLain 2009, 87)

The example clearly shows how the comic book format is used to present stories in a particular way and from a particular point of view. When the producers place themselves as an authoritative source appropriate for use in educational contexts, the series must be read critically, keeping in mind that all adaptations will add or remove something from the original. It adds to the complexity that “Hinduism is notoriously difficult to define as a unified and systematic religion due to its multiplicity of sacred texts, historical teachers, philosophies, and regional and sectarian tradition” (McLain 2009, 113). This makes the attempt to retell the Hindu stories in a unified narrative even more complex. The series, read with caution, can still be valuable in religious studies both in presenting adaptations of religious stories and myths and in giving insight into the society believing in and consuming these stories. *ACK* can be valuable in religious studies, both from personal and academic approaches.

Conclusion

Even though *ACK* is created for an educational purpose, its use in religious studies is not without its challenges, perhaps precisely because of this pronounced purpose. The editorial team has, as mentioned, described the series as an authoritative source that follows the original manuscripts closely. This means that it is important for the user of these comics in religious studies to be especially critical of the choices that have been made. These choices will be both visual and narrative. When reading a comic book as a part of religious studies, it is perhaps even more important to consider what part of the narrative is presented and from which perspective, how the characters and events are depicted, and what visual and narrative sources are used and not used. If *ACK* is used in religious academic studies—no matter if it is from an inside or outside perspective—the need for a certain visual literacy becomes apparent.

Even though the series is not necessarily a Hindu series, the stories are often presented from a Hindu perspective. As such, they give insight into both Hindu stories and mythology and Hindu perspectives, in addition to presenting narrative intended for a Hindu audience—or at least an Indian audience. The Hindu perspectives are not only present in the selected narrative but also in the visual vocabulary and how the series both avoids and gives opportunities for a

darsanic experience. Therefore, focusing on the visual aspects of the stories gives plenty of opportunities for both personal and academic approaches in religious studies.

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