

# Colorism in Amar Chitra Katha Comic: “Ananda Math” and “Devi Choudhrani” and its Impact on Children’s Perception

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**Abstract**—This research examines the illustrations of the comic stories “Ananda Math” and “Devi Choudhrani” published by Amar Chitra Katha (ACK). ACK comics are known to promote colorism among children by depiction of fair skin being associated with those who belong to a high caste and status, a representation of beauty and goodness of the characters. Dark skin, on the other hand, is used for representing ugliness and evil and a symbol of low social status, such as dacoits and poor people. Many scholars claim this to be a result of Anant Pai’s political leanings that propagated caste discrimination and his attempt to enlighten ‘Indian children’ about the mythology and traditions of Hinduism. However, this seemed to leave a negative impact on children by making them feel insecure about their own skin tones. Thus creating binaries for deciding which color is the color of beauty/goodness and ugly/evil, and a subsequent struggle for ideal skin tone. Even though the notion of individualism and nonconformity among social sections of the society has risen, no change has been brought to the illustrations of ACK, drawn in the 1990’s. To prove this argument, a semiotic study of the illustrations in the stories mentioned above and what possible impacts it has on a child’s mind is done. Latest printed version of these comic stories is used as a primary text along with relevant journal articles and peer-reviewed material as a secondary source. This study concludes that the skin tones used in the comic still reinforce colorism among children subtly and constructs what should be socially considered as good and the bad. Binaries set in the minds of children at such an early stage of life have a long-term influence on them. Popular texts such as these may give rise to after effects of heightened body image, increased demand for beauty products and discrimination among peers. Thus there is a need for critical analysis and careful use of popular texts that have deep penetration among the society leading to long-term social issues.

**Keywords:** Amar Chitra Katha, Colorism, Child’s Perception, Children’s Literature, Caste, Discrimination

## Introduction

The difference in the skin colour of the Indians has always been there, it is not something that has emerged over time, something that has actually emerged is the discrimination on the basis of it, which was propagated through various mediums, and one such medium was children literature. Here,

the major focus will be on the comic book Amar Chitra Katha, which was founded by Anant Pai in 1967. These comic series are considered to be the foundational texts for the religious and national education for their young readers. This is one such comic, which has been read by the children of almost all generations, since the post colonial time period and it could be the possible reason why it is called “Immortal”. Even though this comic is so old, it is still being widely circulated and read. Initially, it began with the motive of making children aware about the traditions and culture of India. Later, when it became a subject for many scholars’ analysis; other aspects of this comic series came into light. However, in this research paper, I have analysed two stories published by ACK “Devi Choudhrani” and “Ananda Math” to see how caste based colorism is being carried forward through this. ACK reinforces it among children subtly through the illustrations and skin tones used for the characters that were creating binaries of ugly/beautiful, rich/poor or either of powerful/weak. To evidence the argument a careful semiotic study of the illustrations in the stories is done and all the other supporting arguments are based on the authentic secondary sources such as journal articles and thesis written on ACK along with peer reviewed material.

## Background

Among all the scholars who studied and analysed ACK, did a large amount of research on it’s ideologies, the strategies for marketing and how the illustrations were made, Karline Mclain has surpassed them all in his thesis titled “Whose immortal picture story?: Amar Chitra Katha and construction of Indian identities” in 2005, giving a much clearer picture of the ideologies followed by ACK. After Mclain, Kavitha Cardoza and Radhika Parmeswaran have worked extensively on analysing its linkage with the politics of its time, which became a reason for propagation of Hindu ideology through it and also of racism. These were the major works that has been done till now. Many other contemporaries also wrote about it, the biases it has and the way illustration

are maintaining a balance between the European style of comics and the Indian touch that the editor has given by using Raja Ravi Verma's style of calendar paintings. One aspect of the effects of these ideologies which has not come into focus is the impact that these comics create in the minds of children and how are they perceiving it that it becomes the cause of increasing colorism which automatically leads to feeling of insecurity in some and sense of superiority in others.

### Analysis

Stories are part of every child's life; they listen to stories, tell stories and grow with them. Somewhere these stories make home in the unconscious mind of every child. India's biggest storytellers, ACK through its comics have played a major role in introducing a child to the traditions and helped in keeping in touch with the history in an interesting way. A childhood as we all know is the most important time when a child's brain can be set in a particular direction and this stays with him/her all their lives. Mehta has supported the argument that ACK is one of those comic books that have a huge influence in constructing the social maps in children's mind.[1] Due to their pictorial representation, it stays in the minds for a longer period of time. ACK has sold over 86 million copies, since the time it was first published in 1968. Giving an example, Mehta says that even now when he thinks about the image of Akbar, it is exactly what he has seen in the comic book that is of a red clad, mustachioed figure.[1] Similarly, many other kids, now grown ups will be still carrying the images as presented in front of them by the comic.

ACK's two of the bestsellers were the comic stories based on Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel *Ananda Matha* and *Devi Chaoudhrani*, written in 1882. These two were taken, the script was re written by Debrani Mitra, illustrations were made by Souren Roy for the ACK edition and was edited by Anant Pai. Novels were cut short and made interesting for a child reader, colourful graphics and easy to read dialogues in the bubble attracted them and help them give a basic knowledge about the people and struggle they faced in Bengal. These few benefits were some of the reasons that attracted the audience and even became a marketing strategy for increasing the sales. Anant Pai has argued that it is a medium that captures children's interest by combining visual images with the world of words. India Book House, the publishing company of the Amar Chitra Katha comic book series, in a seminar on "*The Role of Amar Chitra Katha in School Education*" organized all this, the seminar was intended to assuage common fears about comic books. (McLaine 49) [13]

The strategy of introducing the comic under the title of '*Educational comics*' turned out to be extremely successful. The target audience for selling them was not directly the kids, but parents and grandparents were influenced by such seminars, as they are the ones who select and decide what their children will read. The fear of a comic being a spoiler for a child's brain was removed. The audience of this comic

majorly were the middle-class people; at that time kids were more attracted towards the European comics such as Marvel. One of the consequence of this westernisation which Anant Pai has mentioned is a quiz contest in which he went and saw, when children participating in the competition were asked questions about India's tradition and history, they hardly knew anything whereas when they were asked question regarding Greek and other foreign cultures, they were very well aware of it. This became an inspiration for him to start these comic series. Same point he put forth in front of the parents, which they couldn't deny and thought of these comics as a best source of information for their kids. Even schools accepted these comics and kept them in their libraries for students to read. With much ease, this comic series became part of almost every school going child's life in India.

"Devi Choudhrani", is a story about a man named Bhavani Pathak, a light-skinned Brahmin who has achieved complete control of his body and mind, is a capable and wise leader of many disciples. The book also narrates the story of Prafullah, a Brahmin woman, who suffers a lot and is separated from her husband right after marriage, but manages to rejoin him at the end. On the first page of the comic story, we can see Harballah, a light skinned, rich powerful zamindar is shown thinking about Prafullah for getting his son married to her, he says:

"She is the girl for my son. Poor, she certainly is. But she is a kulin brahmin girl and they are hard to come by."

This statement made by Harballah makes it very clear that the concept of beauty is being associated with the colour and caste. As right above this illustration, the reader gets the glimpse of Prafullah and her mother. Both are light skinned characters, here one point that gets contradicted is even though they are poor but just because they are Brahmin, their skin colour is shown lighter in shade as compared to other poor characters in the comic story. In one of the scenes the men sent by Harballah, who was then her father in law, kidnap Prafullah. These men are dark brown in colour and are doing the bad deed of kidnapping Prafullah for money. These binaries which were being set according to the caste and financial condition of the person and also establishing what needs to be considered as beautiful corrupts the mind of a child who reads it. When Prafullah escapes from the hands of the kidnapers, she finds a lonely cottage where an old, light skinned man is shown on the verge of dying, since the condition of the cottage does not look good, the immediate thought that will come into the mind is that the character must be poor but soon he offers a big pot full of gold coins to Prafullah before dying, making it clear that he was not poor. Again, the binary of associating light skin colour to being rich comes to light. During the difficult years of separation from her husband, Prafullah meets the light-skinned Bhavani Pathak, who acts as a catalyst for her transformation from a simple homemaker into a strong and independent woman. One point that needs to be highlighted here is that Bhavani Pathak

is a Dacoit, again a contradiction, since he is a Brahmin, so even though he is a Dacoit, his skin is shown lighter than the other men who work for him and also, he is a good man who protected helpless Prafullah in the time of difficulties. Pathak instructs Prafullah on the scriptures, teaches her wrestling, and ultimately crowns her as queen of his army of rebels.

The story “Ananda Math”, celebrates the victory of the light-skinned, loyal sons of Bharat Mata, brave Indian men who defeats British imperialist in a historic battle, the opening scene shows weak and dark-skinned peasants fallen to the ground with their hands folded, begging in front of a British officer, pink in skin color, who looks down at them from an elevated chair. There’s also one other bearded man beating the poor peasant, he is dressed up as a mughal soldier working under the British regime and has a similar dark skin colour as the Indian poor peasant. Here, I would like to quote a line from Mishra’s article “India and Colorism; The Finer Nuances”:

“India has seen invasions on its territory from rulers of various parts of the world—Muslim invaders including Mughals... Though we do not find any description of prejudice by the ruling class based on skin color tone, one should keep in mind that Arab and Muslim invaders, including the Mughals, came from the Arabic and Persian Belt and had a fairer skin tone than the majority of the local Indian population.” (Mishra 730-731) [15]

The Hindu Muslim fights have sustained prejudice from both sides. Such a conflict is deepened by the way a particular religion is perceived based on physical characteristics such as face, color, type of beard, clothes or food. In these comics, the difference between groups is heightened by the color of the skin, that seems to stay in the minds of children as representation of good or bad and sharpen the need to distinguish between groups by the way one looks. For example, in the story of Ananda Math, illustrations show a group of eight dark-skinned robbers emaciated, short, and unshaven with hooked noses—in the forest trying to capture a beautiful, light-skinned woman, who screams in terror as she runs from them.

“The practice of conjoining light skin to upper caste status, powerful and wealthy men from the Zamindar community, a feudal and land-owning upper caste, is colored in pink in the comic books “Anand Math” and “Devi Chaudhrani.” (Parmeswaran et al 27) [17]

The politics of colour introduced in our lives from a very early stage, especially, through comic books and there is a probability that the illustrators did not even know what they were doing. They were unconsciously and without knowing any specific reason behind the usage of light colours for gods/good humans and dark for demons/bad humans, were forwarding the ideology of colorism to the present and the future generation. “Then we had gods’ who were always pink, demons who were always brown and dark gods who were

always represented in blue shade.” Pattanaik makes a very important remark that we in our desire to be cultured and in our aspiration to be otherworldly, chose white over black.[19]

To trace back the reason behind such an unconscious work of illustration, looking again at the history of India during the colonial time period is important. When British came and they started colonizing the Indians physically and mentally is actually when the discrimination began on the basis of colour. They distributed them as light skinned browns and the dark-skinned ones. This was because they preferred lighter skinned ones for the low pay jobs such as clerk, which was still a kind of privilege for the Indians who were staying in perished state due to poverty. They divided Indians for their self-interest but since then for them, the image of a superior and ruler became of a light skinned or extremely fair person. This ideology went on even after the independence. This tells from exactly where the discrimination on the basis of color began. It was not in the Indian tradition, nobody used to get affected by the color of their skin, and it was only after British came and divided people on such basis, being dark skinned actually started bothering people. Those 100 years of British rule left an imprint on their brain and lead to a change in the perception of Indians in many ways.

Atchison in section 2 of her journal says, “The visuals of the comics should not be taken lightly as history literally illustrates, the attitudes and prejudices of a culture can be greatly shaped by its caricature, and other forms of manipulated iconography. Comics serves as an artefact, the political power of artefacts is made apparent by the various measures taken by government officials, the media, and certain academics that claim that comic books are a threat to children and extension a threat to society as a whole.” [2]

Back in the post-colonial period, Anant Pai wanted to bring back the lost traditions of India and also represent the freedom struggle of Indians against Britishers, but it was only limited to Hindu religion and fight by the followers of Hinduism, that is why most of the comics are based upon Hindu mythology. His leanings and his associations with BJP could be a probable reason for propagating Hindu Ideology through the comics and also keeping Brahmins, high on the pedestal for which he chose usage of light skin shades as medium for showing their superiority. Lahiry, has mentioned about this ideology of BJP followers in 1990’s and also said that the social base of the BJP included mostly upper caste Hindus, petty traders, business people and educated people with strong likings for Hinduism. [11] Even if we look at the audience of the time this comic started, they were higher or middle-class children belonging to the same religion. All the illustration were made keeping in mind the target audience and the preferred ways in which they would like to see people from their religion, but now as the scenario and ideologies, both, have changed, not all the students who read it are from the same social strata or religion. Also, the way religion was practiced has changed; individuality is preferred in all religion,

however, if children continued to be exposed to the past reality, way forward into a socially just social structure is difficult.

Nandini Chandra's interview with Waeerkar, as mentioned by Bose in her book review, revealed that Anant Pai chose Ravi Verma style of drawing to create the warrior roman image of Ram over the south Indian image of God Ram. [4] In the article by Insaf, we find significant information about the coming of God's images in Calendar art because of the creative thinking of Raja Ravi Verma, a life was put into the images of God. There is a calendar image provided in the article of a "Cow with 84 deities", published by Ravi Verma Press and in that the cow is represented in white colour as it considered to be the "Mother Cow" in Hindu tradition, and also there is a representation of an "Asur" (Demon) in brown colour, rest all the deities are fair skinned along with Brahmin present in the image as well. [8] The presence of such distinction of colours in calendar is an evidence of the colonised minds in the post colonial time period and the editor of the comic, Anant Pai's decision of choosing it over the south Indian image of God Ram, gives a clear insight into his ideologies. As Bose said that this symbolic world of illustrations lead the young reader to associate fair, roman, upper caste Hindu features as naturally good and the bearded sharp jawed signifying the evil and lecherous. [8] This was the kind of ideology, which was being propagated through the illustrations of Amar Chitra Katha in general and can be seen in the analysis of the two stories taken for this research.

Whenever, children select a book, first thing that they will look at and make a decision to read, will be its cover or the first two to three pages. In the series published by ACK, the main covers too give a clear indication of the biases. The cover page of the comic story "*Devi Choudrani*" has the image of Prafullah, extremely fair and beautiful, and as soon as the first page is opened, we see her being described as a 'Kulin Brahmin girl', and the other comic story "*Ananda Math*" have all brave Indian men, fighting on their horses but as soon as you open the first two pages, the reader will get to see fair skinned, Brahmin men who will later fight for freedom. Parameswaran and Cardoza in their article have talked about colorism in these comics as well. They have examined the cover pages illustrations of 195 comics published by Amar Chitra Katha and read around 30 comics recommended by the librarians and schoolteachers. When they began with their evaluation of this well renowned children comic and went through the pages of those, there were less than 50 comics in which they found any dark-skinned character. Most of them had fair skinned protagonists that were the representation of goodness and beauty. These characters were always shown as living a prosperous and happy life. Whereas, when they had to represent a character that has done all the bad deeds, it is portrayed as dark-skinned person who looks shabby with big nostrils and lips bulging out. [17] Keeping in mind that reader of these books are kids,

such images immediately invoke in them a feeling of disgust and they begin to hate people who have brown skin shade. If we look at this effect in broader terms, then the reason for so many fairness products and their buyers is a result of such representations. The same kids who read this untold story of colour biasness under the cover of mythological or even historical tales, grow up to be the ones who automatically takes the concept of beauty as that of only the fair skinned ones have a right to be called as beautiful, good and are superior than others.

"Fantasy is a normal part of the development of the child's personality, as he experiments with his needs within the reality available to him. The important imaginary companion frequently personifies conflicts between idimpulses and superego, with associated trends of aggression and guilt, or feelings of rejection, inferiority, and loneliness." (Bender, P. 223-224) [5]

Children while reading the comic identify each and every character either with himself, his parents or siblings or some other feature of his interpersonal relationships. They might relate to the character in terms of its relation with the others or by his physical appearance such as way of dressing or the color of the skin. The heroic technique of the comic strips, on the other hand, forces the child to identify himself either with the one who is attacked by the aggressor, or with the aggressor himself, we think that the child just reads the story, whereas, the experts say that the child connects with each and every character whether it is bad or good. When a child read the comic stories in Amar Chitra Katha he/she would identify himself with any of the one character. In the case of the analysed stories, there is a possibility of a child comparing himself either to Bhavani Pathak or Devi Choudhrani (Prafullah). If a child likes the hero/heroin of the comic, it is obvious that he/she would try to look like them in every way. The problem in this case will occur when the skin color of the character they are trying to associate with is not similar to theirs but to the person portrayed as a bad or ugly human being such as dacoits or poor peasants.

At the beginning children ask adults to read comics for them, then as they grow up, they take it in their own hands and whenever they don't understand anything, they'll point it out and ask, "What is he/she saying?" or "who she/he is?" similarly, in Amar Chitra Katha, as mentioned earlier all the characters are represented in colours such as brown, blue and white. It depends a lot on the parents how they describe these characters to their children. If they tell them that these brown characters are the bad and ugly ones and the white ones are the supreme, as mentioned in the stories analysed above, the heroes are all white, representation of beautiful women in a similar color, only the Dacoits or kidnappers are in dark colors, then for these children who read them and most importantly 'See' them, these colours will automatically become the basis for defining ugly and beautiful, bad and good and so on, all the negatives will be associated with the

dark colours. As the child grows up, he/she will hardly turn back to the story, but the connection that they made between the story and reality fuses, and fiction becomes the reality in adulthood.

A. ACK has remained one of the most recommended comic books in schools, and it even gains support from the Government. Unlike, other comic books it is said to be beneficial and has no harm. Ellenburg and James, mentions the fact that comics have been proven very useful in making children understand the concepts and especially it was helpful for deaf children. [6] Whereas, Witty and Sizemore has a complete different argument based on an experiment they did in a classroom, they say comics have no educational benefits. The experiment included kids who were good scorers as well as average scorers and almost all of them read comics. [20] Here, the point of concern becomes not the result that comics do not have educational benefit but the discrimination ACK is coming with. The spread of Hindu ideology along with colour biases becomes a threat to the unity as well as individual confidence and respect.

### Conclusion

Caste is given a color, and if not, then the social status becomes a reason for giving a fairer shade to character, these binaries in the comic strips are capable of creating a divide among children from the very beginning and is taken along in the unconscious mind throughout their lives. Children might forget any history lesson learnt in school but colors and images seen by them, stays in mind for a longer period of time. There is so much work done stating the biases ACK and its editor has, but no changes are made to the illustrations. They are still the same and are being sold in the big bookstores as well as available in the libraries creating an impact over children, across the country. Comic stories, which are meant to inspire the kids, are paving way for a life full of insecurities and complexities, and becomes one of the reasons for increased importance given to body image and the need for beauty products.

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