ECONOMIES OF LONGING
THE SUPERHERO AS NATIONAL LEADER IN INDIA

by

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A DISSERTATION

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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My dissertation explains how Hindu right-wing political factions have drawn upon a mythologically mediated superhero iconography to conjure images — and promise the return — of a Hindu golden past. Examining the comic book *Nagraj* (1986-), the popular television series *Shaktimaan* (1990-2005), and the electoral campaign of three contemporary Indian politicians (Narendra Modi, Arvind Kejriwal, and Mamata Banerjee), I show how superhero narratives are no longer an imposition from without, but instead have transformed the very fabric of Indian culture from within.

Drawing on theorists like Bishnupriya Ghosh, Susan Stewart, Benjamin Moffit, and Gilles Deleuze, I critically examine the idea of 'screens' and 'icons' as singular or monolithic institutions and evaluate them instead as rhizomatic structures both indebted to and continuously reproducing the biases, approaches, and methodologies of their colonial past. To this unique combination of western philosophical approaches, I also add a critical evaluation of South Asian philosophical traditions like the Hindu Brahmanical thought systems of Mimamsa and Vedanta.

Within this theoretical framework, I study the superhero archetype as an icon and a tool for globalization and neo-colonialism. I argue that the globally recognizable icon of the superhero is circulated through highly localized markets of India once they have been adopted

and adapted to Indian socio-cultural contexts. These globalized icons are then re-deployed by populist political leaders as markers of the promise that their respective economic policies hold, — prosperity, economic equality, and the rise of India as a global superpower. This process is still furthered when these repackaged icons are re-sold in the international market, now as global paragons of populist leadership. Thus, the production, circulation, consumption, and re-calibration of popular icons – first superheroes, and now the superheroic-seeming political leaders – across media boundaries, create an 'economy of desire'.

My project reveals a larger cultural canvas highlighting how democratic electoral processes are influenced by the successful colonization and manipulation of popular visual narratives, both external and internal to national cultural fabrics. Ultimately, instead of focusing on immediate economic factors, my project traces a genealogical line through decades of Indian pop-cultural history, to argue for a layered causality of recent political and economic events.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When one is preparing to head to a different country, especially for a period as prolonged as that of a PhD program, one desires and prepares to *acquire* this destination, as I realized one fine summer day in New Delhi, 2016. When I found out I would be travelling to the United States, I immediately brought together — in my mind — a collection of sights and sounds, even smells and tastes, which I had accrued over the course of several years as signifiers of "America." These were scenes from Hollywood movies, images from newspapers and comic books, the sound of Backstreet Boys, Bob Dylan or Metallica, the taste of Hershey's Chocolate Syrup and dried cranberries brought by my relatives living in the States, and the distinct smell (of detergent? freshener? perfume?) that emanated from their luggage. While these signifiers of America were at times geographical and at times cultural, their aggregate was invariably corporeal — not a geographical landmark or a cultural tradition, but a body. It was a corporeal projection of desire which I believed would be fully realized at the end of the 6-year tenure of my proposed graduate program. "America", now that I look back to that moment, did not appear to me — visually, aurally or in any other modality — as the composite of cultures, traditions, places, people, histories, and politics, that is the actual United States. Instead, "America," for me, was an iconic body. This body was not mine, but that which I believed should be mine in the future. This body was clad in certain brands of clothes and accessories, walked and talked in a certain way, possessed a specific set of skills, and could easily be placed in the upper tiers of certain class-based social hierarchies. This was the "America" I wished to acquire: while it would certainly be my "America", this was only one of the several similar "Americas" that the US sells across global markets.

This aggregate of a foreign nation, its culture, its traditions, and its knowledge systems that I conjured up, is very obviously political. The very selection of specific signs as iconic

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signifiers, as well as the final corporeal sign they manifested in, were essentially a function of my personal subscriptions to cultural, ethnic, gender, economic and political aspirations, available to me living in New Delhi, India, at that time. Furthermore, these aspirations were mediated by the probable futures sold to all consumers harboring similar aspirations, in the form of a global commodity: i.e., "America." The nation I imag(e)ined as my destination, informed the citizenship I desired. In other words, this future projection of my desires was my very own personalized version of India's America, as sold every day to America's India.

I am, like countless other participants in the global cycle of constantly migrating bodies, a consumer within an economy where icons are bought and sold to sustain the production of not only goods and services whose value rests on the promises of such icons, but also other icons. Beyond the exchange of goods and services, this steady demand and supply of icons, I believe, the life blood of modern economies as well as electoral democracies. We are caught up in images that are rhetorical, multimodal, dynamic, and increasingly overwhelming of our daily lived realities. As I have continued to consume "America" through these images, both before and after migrating to the actual geographical space itself, their impact on political events and economic policies in real time has become increasingly undeniable. After witnessing two Presidential elections since arriving in the US, the second against the backdrop of a global pandemic, it is clearer than ever to me that this image-economy of marketable icons[1] influences our choice of political leaderships and economic regimes in ways that we still do not properly understand, and that we must strive to analyze further. In my dissertation, I have built upon this hypothesis to examine how visual icons create and nurture individual as well as national identities.

To be clear, this project in no way claims to speak for or track a subaltern. Instead, I focus on the accretion and assimilation of power into the very corporeality of human bodies. Icons, irrespective of their origins, are factories as well as warehouses of semiotic power. They

cannot be "marginal," but are instrumental in determining what constitutes these margins. I explore how these semiotic entities can mobilize entire nations to participate in the global trade of corporealities. How is it that such emblems of power can motivate diverse communities to accept and celebrate their position in a socio-political hierarchy which is ultimately detrimental to the interests of their members?

My dissertation is as much a personal inquiry into my own place in this global flow of labor as it is an examination of the larger "shifts" and "waves" of global politics. By reading comics, TV, cinema, and new media texts that have been influential at different moments in my life, I have treated myself as something of a test subject, in the hope of uncovering clues as to how visual media can function as cogs in a larger global machinery of corpo-formation.

This is therefore a personal project masquerading as a PhD dissertation. And it would not be possible without the support of my advisor, Dr. Ben Saunders, and members of my dissertation committee Dr. Michael Allan, Dr. Sangita Gopal, Dr. Kate Kelp-Stebbins, and Dr. Quinn Miller. I am grateful for their advice, encouragement, and helpful critique of my research. I also thank the Director of Graduate Studies at the English Department, Dr. Mary Wood, who has constantly provided me with encouragement and important advice throughout my PhD Journey.

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"What *is* seeing? You're looking but what you're really doing is filtering, interpreting, searching for meaning. The closer you look, the less you see."

— J. Daniel Atlas, *Now You See Me*

"…no form of ethics or political action can be motivated without an attendant vision of the world one wishes to forge through such ethical and political commitments."

— Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants*

"The danger with people like that [Captain America] … is that we put them on pedestals. They become symbols, icons, and then we start to forget about their flaws."

— Baron Helmut Zemo, *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*

<u>ICONS IN MOTION</u>

In 2001, summer began early in New Delhi, India. By May, temperatures had reached 105°F. As is often the practice in such hot weather, Delhi residents with access to any form of terrace or rooftop-space chose to spend their nights there, sleeping under the open sky. By the middle of the month, however, they were hurrying back indoors. The reason: an ape-like creature, who was allegedly jumping roof-walls to attack people in their sleep, leaving vicious fang- and claw-marks.

Throughout the month, both Indian and international media outlets reported several sudden and violent attacks by the mysterious creature. On May 16, CNN reported the death of "two terrified residents" when they tumbled off the roof of their home after hearing that the "ape-like attacker was nearby."[1] But neither the eyewitnesses nor the alleged victims of the attacks could provide a clear description of the creature. The encounters took place in dark alleys or unlit rooftops, in the night. The only proof of the attacks appeared in the form of deep claw-marks and gouges on the necks and arms of the victims. A report in *The Guardian*, dated May 17, helpfully compiles several, often contradictory, descriptions of the allegedly simian assailant: "between four and five feet tall, has a 'monkey like face', and strikes between midnight and 4am." The only certain fatalities were caused by fear of the creature, and not from the injuries inflicted during the alleged attacks.

The Delhi police circulated several probable sketches which also portrayed the assailant's face as that of an ape or a monkey. Amidst media frenzy and mass hysteria, the creature was soon nicknamed "The Monkey-Man" (or *kaala bandar* in Hindi, lit. 'black monkey'). Even before the attacks ended, Monkey-Man masks, stickers, and various trinkets

— all based on the police sketches — were available in the markets of Delhi as toys and novelties. Within a month of the first such occurrence, however, reported attacks became less frequent and eventually stopped altogether. The phantom ape seemed to disappear as mysteriously as he had arrived. For a brief period, in certain localities of New Delhi, *kaala bandar* merchandise remained popular, with collectors hoarding a variety of masks, T-shirts, printed kites, and mugs. But once the attacks stopped, the attraction of Monkey-Man trinkets gradually faded away.

Even as questions remain as to whether the Monkey-Man was real or a figment of mass hysteria, it was certainly capable of selling merchandise. Amidst primetime news debates on vigilantism and urban myths, these artifacts contributed to the brief iconicity of the Monkey-Man. They were both souvenirs of a mystery, as well as artifacts that made that mystery seem more tangible and real. The purchasers of such merchandise were buying a piece of popular culture, both contributing to and becoming a part of "a dense network of feelings, ideals, and fantasies" about their immediate communities in the city of Delhi.[2] They could acquire the experience of encountering the Monkey-Man, even if they had not encountered him in reality. Even if he never actually existed at all.

Eight years later, Hindi film director Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra released his film *Delhi-6* (2009). Centered around the Monkey-Man incidents, the film expanded the urban myth into an elaborate metaphor for several communal riots which took place in northern and western India during the early 90s, culminating in the 1992-demolition of the Babri Mosque. *Delhi-6* briefly refueled a Monkey Man merchandise craze driven by the film's initial promotional ad campaigns. Thus, an image which emerged from an episode of collective delusion and mass hysteria acquired another layer of cultural significations, and a greater

quality of iconicity as an emblem of more far-reaching historical and political events and contexts.

The Monkey-Man, if it at all existed, wasn't quite a superhero or a vigilante. But it exerted a mysterious fascination similar to that evoked by many fictional superheroes after their first appearances in their fictional hometowns — Superman in Metropolis, Batman in Gotham, Daredevil in Hell's Kitchen, and more. And yet, in the long run, this phantom monkey also came to emblematize a much older, explicitly political South Asian narrative and iconography of communal division. Even though it began its life as a manifestation of more inchoate anxiety, the urban myth of the Monkey Man acquired a distinct political significance. In its short life as a public icon, the Monkey-Man generated and sustained both anxieties and desires, as well as local economies, and larger national narratives. For something that may never have existed in "reality," then, the Monkey-Man ultimately had a very tangible and corporeal effect.

At the level of a burrow-sized locality in the capital of India, the Monkey-Man presents a microcosmic example of the trajectory of the culturally iconic "superhuman". The ebb and flow of cultural frenzy surrounding the phantom ape also illuminates the complex valence and socio-political currency of such icons in the contemporary world of capitalist mass-media. The Monkey-Man's brief life cycle in the immediate and local culture of certain Delhi neighborhoods exemplifies, in miniature, the workings of a larger international network of mediated images of superheroes and their expansive iconographic significance. These global icons sell merchandise, sustain economies, and make political statements, all at once. They sell nationalist ideals such as Superman's "Truth, Justice and the American way" along with material goods and merchandise. Their affective reach is corporeal even when they are pure symbols. Just as anxiety, physical injuries, and the specter of death drove the consumption of

the Monkey-Man, the marketability of these global icons is also directly proportional to the icons' impact on the human body. Just as the Monkey Man's brief myth has been rewritten by a movie into India's history of communal violence, the global iconography of the superhero too circulates within loops of cross-media production, consumption, and re-packaging, acquiring new meanings as they go. They begin to detach from their places of origin and become more global, plural, and porous. Sustained by massive corporations, these global icons and intellectual properties morph, coagulate, and end up nourishing larger economic and political discourses, far-removed from their source-cultures. They influence private choices, socio-political decisions, and economic investments across nations. Ultimately, they even come to provide basic semiotic elements within our political discourse, our communitarian ideals, and even our personal narratives of self-understanding.

While there are several iconographic systems across media which could be said to exert considerable influence in our public and personal lives, none currently has the cultural, political, or financial reach and valence as the iconography of the superhero. Indeed, since the turn of the twenty-first century, superheroes have come to enjoy an extraordinary stretch of cultural dominance, not merely in the English-speaking worlds of the United States of America, the UK, and other Commonwealth nations, but specifically in major media-consumption markets such as China, Japan, and India.

The rise in the superhero's transmedia potency has also coincided with the rise of political populism in those same geopolitical regions. While both superhero fantasies and political populism obviously predate the last two decades, since 2000, these ostensibly separate things have been both mimetic and derivative of one another. My research is therefore founded upon the proposition that the rise of political populism, and the inescapable presence of superheroes in films, television, video games, and other media are in fact interrelated

phenomena — and that if we want to properly understand either, we need to explore both through new theoretical lenses.

It's a common methodology to study the rise of populism through material socio-economic structures like changes in political regimes, the rise and fall of major economic markers like GDP and currency exchange rates, or key policy decisions. Nonetheless, I argue, the expansive iconographies of the superhero have been setting the psychological stage for the rise of a certain brand of leadership rooted in idealized fantasies of heterosexual and masculine corporeality. The superhero icon, precisely because it is such a semiotically potent entity, is also a nexus of (re)current political dreams and ambitions at a national level.

Today, thanks to a "communicative abundance" and "the increasing ubiquity and affordability of communication technologies,"[3] the most intimate and everyday exchanges of data and information "operate within heavily mediated settings in which the meaning of messages is constantly changing."[4] And as media technologies diversify and embrace multimodality, the modern consumer of media has an unprecedented opportunity to first acknowledge, then identify, and finally dissect, this link between visual-media projections of the superhuman body and the "imaginary" body of the populist political leader. My research attempts just that.

I argue that the vast system of superhero iconography is a tool for globalization and neo-colonialism. Superheroes, throughout the various peaks and troughs in their popularity, have migrated and added to several narrative genres across visual cultures in the United States, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. In my research I focus upon the example of India, where the superhero fantasy has proved particularly iconographically fecund. The globally recognizable icon of the superhero, circulated through highly localized markets of India, has been widely adopted and adapted to Indian socio-cultural contexts. These modified

icons have then been re-deployed by populist political leaders as markers of the promise of their respective policies regarding racial and ethnographic purity, economic equality and prosperity, and the rise of India as a global superpower. Next, these repackaged icons are then re-sold in the international market, now as global paragons of populist leadership. Thus, the production, circulation, consumption, and re-calibration of popular iconography — between American superheroes, Indian superheroes, and a supposedly super-heroic-seeming political leadership — across media boundaries, creates an 'economy of desire'. It's the Monkey-Man story, but playing out at a global level, across international markets, and over decades.

An intriguing aspect of this 'Monkey-Man story', whether at a local or global level, is also the mythic archetype's near-limitless ability to change — from an urban myth to a symbol, a product, and icon and ultimately an economy. Ramzi Fawaz, in one of the more influential recent accounts of the American superhero and their political meanings, talks about the superhero's "fluxability." I believe it is this fluxability which makes the superhero such an attractive commodity not only in the global markets, but especially in massive emerging consumption arenas like India.

Fluxable Archetypes

The superhero is a modern archetype.[5] It is a product of the age of mechanical reproduction. While individual superheroes can possess the qualities of one or more Jungian archetypes, each of them also belongs to the master archetype of the "superhero". Stripped of their individual origin stories, modus operandi, costumes, nemesis and sidekicks, each superhero is also a body in action. Besides all their individual special abilities, all superheroes have the power to act, to labor. Whether they have super suits, gadgets or superhuman abilities, superheroes invariably put their bodies and lives on the line. They are tireless, self-motivated, and goal oriented. Irrespective of whether an individual superhero belongs to the working class or subscribes to

a certain ideology, they are paraded as corporeal epitomes, "model bodies" for the global labor body. Even when part of organizations (Justice League, Avengers etc.), the dynamics and dialectics within such groups are shaped by their urge to toil for the greater good, trading their corporealities for abstract notions such as truth, justice, honor etc. The superhero archetype represents the human body made machine, each endowed with its own unique capabilities and load-bearing capacity. They're high-caliber service providers, constantly updated to widen the array of services on offer.

Thus, the superhero is relevant to my current research for two reasons. First, as epitomes of physical labor, these icons become ideal rallying calls for a global migration of labor. Secondly, they lay an unapparelled emphasis on corporeality. The capes, the tights, secret identities, sidekicks, supervillains, and origin stories — across deviations and exceptions, all iconic signifiers that populate the superhero iconography invariably place the body as the *locus operandi* of their identities. From highlighting the minutest contours of their perfected bodies, to exact details regarding the chemical reactions or genetic mutations which have changed their bodies into "super-bodies", the superhero iconography incessantly sells defining indices of "ideal" bodies. These idealized bodies, exclusively white, heteronormative, and American for the first several decades of the genre, have now begun to also signify idealized versions of bodies of color (both American and international), as well as queer bodies. The diversification of narratives and the representation of minority communities have juxtaposed predominantly White Western heteronormative conceptions of 'perfect bodies' onto more local desires. Therefore, not only is the superhero body a glorification of labor and the laboring body but they have also, over the past eight decades, reengineered local and global definitions of labor to fit the demands of first world economies. The transmedia presence of

the superhero iconography is thus a crucial facilitator for the global cycle of constantly migrating bodies.

Governing both these loci of the superhero's corporeality — geopolitical adaptability and the exaltation of labor — is the super-body's *fluxability*. Ramzi Fawaz, in *The New Mutants,* introduces the concept of *fluxability* as a characteristic of the postwar American superhero. He argues that the fictional demise of Superman in the comics of the 1990s, and his subsequent return as a fractured identity, transformed the American superhero from a "nationalist champion" to a "figure of radical difference mapping the limits of American Liberalism and its promise of universal inclusion."

> Rather than performing flexibility... the monstrous powers and bodies of postwar superheroes exhibited a form of *fluxability*, a state of material and psychic *becoming* characterized by constant transition or change that consequently orients one toward cultivating skills for *negotiating* (rather than exploiting) multiple, contradictory identities, and affiliations.[6]

According to Fawaz, *fluxability* was a product of the postwar American superhero's "bodily vulnerability" and "gender instability." The *fluxable* superhero resisted neoliberalism's "co-option of oppositional identities", refused to be categorized as an effective laborer, and led a "material existence in which one's relationship to the world and its countless others was constantly subjected to the questioning, transformation, and reorganization."

While I agree with Fawaz's observations and arguments in context of their effect during the Cold War era of American history, I argue that the *fluxability* exhibited by such superheroes as the Hulk, Fantastic Four, and the X-Men has been now co-opted by the very neo-liberal market it resisted. The *fluxable* bodies which defied easy definition of work-force classifications, have now been conveniently placed into character classes — tank/meat-shield, mage, strategist, ranger, smith/worker, etc. — as they accrue iconic signification through their

transmedia migrations.[7] The outliers and the aberrant have, through the process of transmedia reappropriation, now been re-integrated into the workforce as unique and specialized labor categories.

The proof that there was always a scope for such a radical reconfiguration of the *fluxable* post-war superhero lies in Fawaz's definition itself. His definition emphasizes, above all, the *potential* for flux rather than flux itself — not necessarily flux, but the presence of skills, cultivated or inherent, which help traverse flux. The postwar superhero resisted neoliberal "flexibility", refusing to suggest the presence of an "original" or "essential" state, apparent in the "flexible's" propensity to snap back. Simultaneously, *fluxability* also denies a state of constant flux. The *fluxable* isn't *in* flux but is rather poised to *enter* a state of flux; they're *able* to flux. In an era when the superhero body can be assembled and reassembled globally through collectible merchandize, 'bootleg' TV serials or comic books, and in cosplays, the superhero's *fluxability* has come to signify not so much a state of constant variability but that of a variable constancy.

This propensity for a variable constancy also facilitates the superhero's global migrations. As the superhero body migrates across boundaries of global cultures, their inherent *fluxability* helps identify them as desirable collections of iconic traits revered in the local and national imaginations of phantom ideals. Divorced from their immediate socio-political significations, these icons of resistance and critique engulf within their iconographies the same dogmatic, "hyper-individual", hetero-normative and predominantly middleclass narcissism that they had initially resisted. In fact, their global trade goes a step further in heroizing the very narcissistic nationalism they had broken with in the late 1970s and 80s. A case in point is their success in India.

In India, superheroes have been incorporated and appropriated by the nation's many popular cultures which, whether native, immigrant or interwoven, have historically favored personalities over eventualities.[8] Be it the star-centric film industries, the immortalization of individual political leaders over government policies, or the God-like reverence of individual sportspersons, the Indian populace has often invested immense cultural capital in highly visible human bodies. It's no wonder then that the superhero, within less-than 50 years of its entry in the Indian markets, has successfully established themselves as the preferred template for visualizing, imagining, and revering mythological heroes, historical legends, and political icons. Each of these pop-culture archetypes, married to the superhero iconography, is presented as an imitable template of labor corporeality. And this heightens their iconicity, their functionality as leaders and idols.[9]

However, more than any other group of public figures, the superhero's corporeal appeal seems to have found its biggest consumers in India's political leadership. Time and again, national, and local politicians have tried to portray themselves or the top leaders of their party as real-life daily superheroes. And, somewhat surprisingly, this unique genre of iconolatry seems to have delivered the desired electoral results. It is surprising because the consumption of most superhero media iterations — American comic books, Hollywood movies, or tv and web series — are limited mostly to middle and upper-middle class urban consumers. Even as the icons and emblems associated with Superman or Spiderman might percolate into rural and small-town markets in the form of cheap knockoffs, the canonical narratives and mythology associated with most American superheroes is primarily lost to a larger section of most Indian politicians' targeted vote banks.

The proficiency of the superhero iconography in connecting with common Indian masses appears especially astounding when one acknowledges, to put it in a somewhat clichéd

manner, India's diversity. The numerous linguistic traditions, visual art forms, communication cultures and indigenous iconographies notwithstanding, India also provides a vastly diverse set of socio-political challenges that any iconography — let alone individual political leaders trying to tap into such an iconography — could traverse. With vote-banks divided along lines of religion, language, caste, sub-castes, tribes, regions of domicile, levels of income etc., achieving a near-complete electoral consensus such as those achieved by the Narendra Modi-led Bhartiya Janata Party at national level and the Aravind Kejriwal-led Aam Aadmi Party at state level (among others), is a massive achievement.

Thus, to understand the American fantasy hero's efficacy in such a vastly diversified electoral arena, we must begin with a more detailed consideration the five key terms which inform the theoretical framework for the current study: populism, icons, desire, longing, and economy.

In this introductory chapter, I distill the broader ramifications of these key terms down to a finite set of key questions, which my subsequent chapters address. The following chapter explores the specific systems — global as well as local — which have nourished the rise and spread of superhero iconography as a rhetorical tool for Indian populist politicians. Then, in chapters three, four, and five, I consider this theoretical narrative of the superhero in India within a tri-part structure of cultural transmission that postcolonial theorist Peter Barry sums up as "adopt-adapt-adept." Each of these three steps corresponds to three distinct media texts — comic books, television, and New Media — through which the superhero iconography is transmitted and circulated.

Defining 'The People' for the People

Oxford English Dictionary defines Populism as, "The policies or principles of any of various political parties which seek to represent the interests of ordinary people." Merriam-Webster

defines the adjective "populist", as "a member of a political party claiming to represent the common people." However, before the populist leader can make any such claim, they must define a "people" for the very people they want to represent. This is especially true today when prominent populist leaders hail from across the political spectrum, and each claim to represent "the people."[10]

The idea of populism therefore is interwoven with the idea of the icon. While we delve more deeply into the theory of icons in the next section, it will be useful to quickly note that icons are massively accommodating signifiers which develop, over time, entire networks of signifieds. Thus, icons are culturally vibrant signs that acquire a near-universal appeal and recognizability. Populist leaders often acquire iconic significations for the people they claim to represent. Their mass appeal is both dependent on their harnessing of popular icons, as well as a multiple of their own iconicity.

Over the period of the last decade, both global and national political cultures have increasingly veered towards populist leaderships. To comprehensively map this recent mustering of populist strategies, we must look beyond immediate economic and political motivators of elections and individual electoral campaigns. Populism does not merely name an individual political style but an entire political culture, and that expansion has been enabled by the rise of dynamic icons, and their constant and instantaneous circulation through media.

As Bishnupriya Ghosh puts it: "Reassembled icons habitually surface in political crises where we witness eruptions of collective aspirations."[11] For the populist political leader, relatability is key. And global iconographies such as that of the superhero are a ready conduit for semiotic relatability and cultivating desire. As we will witness in each of the case studies in the following chapters, the populist politician would invariably posit themselves as the

"reassembled icon", thus assuming an iconicity of their own and placing themselves within the larger global iconography, to achieve the relatability it readily offers.

In a bid to account for the current political climate, Benjamin Moffit suggests we need to make three considerations for the concept of populism to evolve. These are: firstly, "to locate populism within the shifting global media landscape"; second "to move beyond purely regional conceptions of populism, and instead build an understanding of populism as a global phenomenon"; and finally, to acknowledge "populism as political style." I will however offer a few modifications to these considerations.

The first modification should be apparent by our discussion so far. Populism needs to be understood not so much as global but a 'glocal' phenomenon. This modification is required to acknowledge both the nuances unique to the specific political cultures and the brands of populism they spawn, as well as to address the larger network of traits that are increasingly apparent across global political movements and regimes. Such an approach will better reflect the 'glocalized' nature of the iconographies themselves which populist leaders emulate.

Secondly, if we are to acknowledge the extensive media networks through which iconographies such as that of the superhero circulates, as well as take into consideration the network of local and global signifiers, then we must also acknowledge that populism is no longer a political style but an entire political culture. Here by using the term "political culture" I seek to highlight how populism is no longer limited to an individual political leader's style of campaigning, which may include slogans, speeches, rallies etc. As a political culture, populism has spawned entire businesses and professions, dedicated entirely to the management and strategy of electoral campaigns, as well as post-election policymaking. Organizations and companies who choose to operate through grass-root level surveys, and even spend days living with rural and sub-urban households to gauge the political mood at the most local strata of

government, are becoming a staple of the political machinery in South Asia, Latin America, and some parts of South-East Asia.

The most important modification, however, needs to be made to Moffit's first consideration. Instead of considering entire media landscapes, populism needs to be studied in the migrations of specific iconographies from one media to another. Examining transmedia migrations of iconic corporealities, on one hand, affords us the chance to zero in on the exact aspects of iconographies that are most successfully translated into populist rhetoric. While on the other hand, it lets us pick on new and intriguing media innovations aimed at establishing a grass-root level political networks and connecting with hyper-local electorates in the absence of extensive cellular networks technology, smartphones, and internet. This is especially fruitful when studying a popular fascination with iconic corporealities in a culture of the global South, such as India.

As corollary to this modification, comes the acknowledgment that populist politics is no longer merely an exercise in establishing a leader, a political party/faction or even an ideology as the best representation of a people's needs and dreams. Populism is now an exercise in defining who or what a 'people' is to the people. Populism is not confined to ideologies, even though the most recent examples of populist leaders across the world — Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Narendra Modi in India, Donald Trump in the US, among others — generally subscribe to the political right. However, there are others like Delhi Chief Minister Kejriwal, the leaders of Podemos in Spain or the Five Star Movement in Italy, who are populist but lean left in their political ideologies. However, whether left or right, populist leaders claim themselves to be the representatives of the people, an underclass even, fighting against a 'ruling elite'. Therefore, more than ever before, it has now become important for the populist leader to redefine their people. And hence, populism is now both a literary and an economic exercise.

The populist leadership, in identifying themselves as the voice of the people, needs to first script, edit, and sell their own narrative of "the people", to the bodies they want to be seen as representing. Populism reifies one idea of "the people" over the actual diversity of peoples.

This acknowledgement in turn leads to the central question of my thesis: How do icons and dominant iconographic vocabularies help in this reification?

Dynamic Icons

The term "icon" is unusually complex, with different meanings deriving from fields as diverse as religious studies, art history, semiotics, comics studies, and professional graphic design. The various deployments of the term by writers such as Peirce, Mitchell, Gombrich, Lessing, or Burke collectively suggest the extraordinary emblematic power of some images, and the extraordinary challenge of precisely explaining or accounting for that power.[12] But the types of icon that Mitchell, Burke, Gombrich and Lessing discuss are mostly two-dimensional *static* images or *stationary* sculptures — artworks produced during the Italian Renaissance like Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* or Michelangelo's *David*. Similarly, the brand logos of Pepsi, Mercedes, Disney and McDonald's or contemporary digital communicative icons known as emojis, the fodder of so many semioticians' discussions, are also static icons. And yet, at least since the invention of cinema, we have lived in an era of "dynamic icons." Today, as 3D images travel across storage, broadcast, and new media, icons themselves move more frequently across media and geographic borders. They are no longer limited to the visual modality alone and needs an urgent revaluation and update.

As new forms of modalities rise in media and communication, icons acquire an increasing degree of "dynamicity." These "dynamic icons" are not merely images that move. They are multimodal not only because they are transmitted across multiple modes of communication, but also because the affect they evoke also requires multimodal expressions,

interpretations, and analysis. Their near-constant migration across media has complicated their inherent ontological structures. And thus, the epistemological concerns these dynamic icons generate, need to account for this constant movement of their ontology.

Several scholars, including Erwin Panofsky have used the term "icon," but they mostly refer to static images like sculptures and paintings. My own work focuses on Martin Kemp's analyses of the icon.[13] His definition of an iconic image follows.

> An iconic image is one that has achieved wholly exceptional levels of widespread recognizability and has come to carry a rich series of varied associations for very large numbers of people across time and cultures, such that it has to a greater or lesser degree transgressed the parameters of its initial making, function, context, and meaning.[14]

Kemp's definition offers three prime points of discussion. First, his use of the term "iconic image" opens up an important avenue for re-thinking the basic semiotic quality of an icon. The icon is not necessarily an image anymore. The words icon and image are not synonymous; Kemp does not use "icon" *instead of* "image." An image can be iconic, but so can be a tune, a scene, or an entire experience. This is the first step in acknowledging the mutation of the icon as it transcends beyond the boundaries of unimodal storage media to multimodal broadcast and new media. However, this acknowledgement need not deny the still overt visuality of icons. While icons today achieve their identity, iconicity, through sound and touch as well as sight, their visuality is still essential and even primary in completing their semiotic relation to their myriad signifieds. The iconicity is not limited to the visual signification of the signifier, but their visuality is definitely the first semiotic contact with the signifier's greater, more expansive iconicity. The icon, especially in the current regime of rapidly proliferating media, acquires above its own visuality a specifically mediated affect.

Secondly, "recognizability" is crucial in Kemp's definition. Recognizability is not popularity. Popularity acquires an added value of positivity, adulation, and appreciation. Recognizability can either be negative or positive; fame and infamy are both recognizability. However, while recognizability diversifies the value-implication of the icon, the idea of recognition itself is complex, and invokes further query. For instance, when one encounters an icon, what does one recognize? Do we recognize and identify the iconic signifier itself, which is merely the outer semiotic shell and/or gateway to a range of semiotic correlations? Or do we instantly recognize the several interconnected strings of signifieds (which are also signifiers) that each such icon leads to? In other words, does the icon's recognizability depend on its direct sensory affect or on its deeper, more comprehensive semiotic reverberations? Moreover, as Kemp clarifies later in the definition, the recognizability of the icon needs to pervade beyond boundaries of time and culture. This again takes away from "popularity", since popularity is essentially local and culture specific, and fades into recognizability as its geographical and cultural scope is widened. Recognizability can be achieved on a wider scale, regardless of whether the icon is popular or not. But then, does that not indicate that the icon's recognizability beyond boundaries of specific culture and time is a, if not *the*, key factor in identifying the icon as not itself but the myriad significations it encapsulates, or leads to? Does the achievement of recognizability not diversify the icon's pool of signifieds?

This brings us to a final, more essential, point of modification that Kemp's definition adds to traditional definitions of the icon. He suggests the icon needs to transcend "the parameters of its initial making, function, context, and meaning." Icons, in most prior definitions too, whether it be Mitchell's or Panofsky's, have been cited as transcending their initial signification. For instance, the flame emoji does signify fire, but that is hardly the only signification one accesses when it is used in a text message. It might signify anything from hot weather, to sensual attraction, to spicy food. The moment the icon is applied in a text – cinema,

comics, TV serial, phone message, social media posts etc. – it is no longer a self-contained sign but is rather semiotically hollow and therefore full of semiotic potential. Kemp's definition, however, indicates another, more complex transcendence – that of the medium itself. Kemp cites the images of Jesus Christ, Che Guevara, the Coca-Cola logo, the cross, etc. In each case the icon repeatedly migrates across different media. Christ's image travels from glass paintings, church effigies and illuminated manuscripts to films, posters, television serials and pop-art forms like graffities. Che's face appears on T-shirts, posters, graffities, mugs and badges. It is this process of constant migration that evolves the visual signifier into an icon. As the signifier transcends the "parameters of its initial making" and its initial "context", it does not necessarily lose its primary and traditional signified. Rather, it begins assimilating other signified, such that the *ur*-signified itself becomes a signifier, and so on, so forth. Like Roland Barthes' myth, the visual sign transforms into an unending sequence of signifiers/signifieds. Each media bestows upon the icon, its own unique set of semiotic relations, and signified/signifier chains.

In order to tackle the dynamic icon, both these foundational arguments need to be brought together — Panofsky's assertion that every image functions semiotically through three increasingly complex readings of form, conventions and internal meaning; and Kemp's claim that the medium plays a key role in evolving the visual signifier into an icon. With the proliferation of the visual image across media, as well as the diversification of media itself, we encounter an exponential rise in the sheer volume of icons in our daily lives. Emojis, brand logos, bodies of public personalities, theme music and tunes, body postures, apparels and accessories, and even specific objects like charging cables – all acquire their own unique iconicity given conducive social, cultural or political conditions, even though their semiotic modalities vary. Thus, as we acknowledge that the "recognizability" of each icon depends upon a simultaneously formal, conventional and contextual reading, we also must understand that

such readings will be infinitely complicated by the icon's medium-specific traits. Moreover if, and when, icons migrate from one medium to another, they also translate the specifically mediated qualities of its previous medium on to its new medium.

The icon that we encounter today, the dynamic icon, is thus a more media-sensitive species of Barthes' 'myth'. Not only is the icon part of a constant stream of semiotic *différance*, the bond of *différance* from one sign to another, is itself multivalent and multidirectional. Instead of being part of a unilinear function of signifier/signifieds linked through *différance*, the icon exists within a network of such functions. This means that each signifier/signified shares a bond of *différance* with several other such signifiers/signifieds at the same time, and each of these bonds is accessible to the reader of the icon simultaneously. Thus, in an icon, unlike the myth, no one sign is primary; not even the sign which is accessed first. In one of Barthes's famous examples, wrestling is the primary sign through which the viewer can access a chain of signifiers/signifieds and hence know the entire myth the primary sign is only a signifier of. On the other hand, an icon like the body of American professional wrestler Terry Eugene Bollea, better known by his ring name Hulk Hogan, is no longer the primary sign when he appears as "Thunderlips" in *Rocky III* (1982). The body is neither wholly Hulk Hogan — the primary sign for the myths of professional wrestling — nor Bollea, nor Thunderlips. The body is simultaneously a signifier of brute strength, the myths it sustains when its inside the pro-wrestling ring, as well as certain class- and race-based American identities that drive the plot of *Rocky III* in that scene. Each of these simultaneously functional and interconnected strands of signification, operating within a network of *différance*-generated signs, are in turn comprised of more such networks of signs shaped at the minutest level by the media they originated in and then migrated to. The dynamic icon therefore is multivalent at the most micro-semiotic levels, accruing and assimilating the specific semiotic needs of the media they exist

in and have formerly passed through. This means, dynamic icons derive their dynamicity not simply through movement itself but an inherent simultaneity and multivalence.

The dynamic icon's inherent simultaneity and multivalence are best exemplified in the several contradictions that characterizes it. Firstly, the dynamic image-icons are simultaneously two and three-dimensional. The noirish silhouette of Batman, lit by flashes of lightning, which appears in the opening sequence of *Batman: The Animated Series*, is visible on a TV screen and therefore neither exists in 3D space nor is tangible in its depth, height and breadth. Yet, it does capture the height, depth and breadth of the bodies it portrays, as well as the motion and placement of these bodies, and their actions in 3D space. It emphasizes not just the shape but the posture, the stature and the placement of the object *in motion*. Even while the icon itself is two dimensional, it captures and transmits a 3-dimensionality, to the viewer. Moreover, dynamic icons, like most signs, derive their iconicity not so much from their own being but from their surrounding signifiers and signifieds. This communication of their surrounding signs in the case of dynamic icons however is multimodal. It is the upward tilt of the camera, the regular flashes of lightning, the refreshing visualization of Gotham in art-deco, the dim lighting as well as the distinct background score by Shirley Walker, even though they may or may not be iconic in themselves, together cause the silhouette of Batman to gain its iconicity. In another, vastly different example, *Mona Lisa's* smile may seem iconic in itself. But, if the woman smiling in Da Vinci's painting would have been captured in a motion picture, then whether she smiled slowly or quickly, whether her head position changed, the depth of field, the camera angle, the camera movement, background music, its availability on DVD, VCD, Blu-Ray or streaming platforms etc. would have all affected and constantly transformed the iconicity of the smile. The smile's iconic nature will also be dependent on the genre and format of the motion picture itself: whether it's a feature-length film about a woman sitting in

the same position and smiling (*a la* Andy Warhol's 8-hour long *Empire*), a central scene in a short film, or a .gif etc.

Similarly, the dynamic icon is also simultaneously whole and broken. For instance, while we look at *Mona Lisa,* we select which aspect of the painting to focus, to "zoom in" at. The direction and emphasis of the camera's pan (here, the movement of our eyes) are decided by us. However, each time we look at highly recognizable icons like the Coca Cola logo or the face of Christ on TV, in films or on the web, the icon is rarely served to us in its entirety. Its broken down into close-ups and angled-shots, and arrives on screen coded in camera movements and angles, choice of lighting and background music in motion pictures, and choice of content placement on websites etc. For instance, when Captain America appears on the big screen, it is the director and Marvel Studio's prerogative whether the star on the shield will be in focus, or the wings on the helmet. Thus, depending on how the costume is designed, how the camera and lighting effects highlight the different parts of the costume will decide whether the wings will be visible at all, or will the classic comic book costume be "adapted" to highlight the central star and the stripes. No matter how iconic Cap himself is, depending on how his saga is interpreted and re-interpreted across media, the iconicity of the star, the shield, the stripes, his super-suit and the wings on his helmet will keep changing. This in turn will add or modify the iconic signification of the character himself. The dynamicity of the icon therefore is also derived from its malleability.

Dynamic icons are also beyond visual; they are simultaneously visual and non-visual. For instance, the sunrise in the opening shot of Disney's *Lion King* (1994) and the opening Zulu chants from the song "Circle of Life", together form an icon. One cannot hear the song without visualizing the particular animated sunrise, nor can that sunrise be viewed without humming or recalling at least the opening chant if not the whole song. The semiotic resonance

of the icon, in terms of the continuous series of signifieds and signifiers that it spawns, relate to both the aural affect of the Zulu chant and the visual affect of the sunrise, taken together. Similarly, in case of a solely audio icon, the tune/piece of music is invariably tied to the visuals it initially accompanied. Whether it be Childish Gambino's "This is America" or the main theme for Netflix web-series *House of Cards*, even without their original visual accompaniments will remind the reader of the themes evoked by the images it originally accompanied, i.e. a history of racist violence in US in the first instance, and power, canny politics and corruption in the latter. The sign therefore does not need to exclusively visual to achieve iconicity; and yet, the proliferation of visual media also means, the icon is still tied essentially to visuality. Often, the multimodality of the dynamic image need not exactly present a second sensory signifier in order to evoke the affect of this sense perception. The visuals of iconic dresses and costumes create the sensory affect of fabric and texture as well as color and design, in order for the viewer to truly perceive all its financial, class and socio-cultural significations. Across media, words make meaning not only verbally but visually too. For instance, the word Theatre and THEATRE will have two very different iconographic signification. And yet this difference will not be as perceptible here, as it would be if in designing a website, a magazine or a comic book; or when used in the billboards for the Chicago Theatre. Even though the visuality is central it is no longer the sole determinant of iconicity. The reader requires the text's aurality as well as its materiality to access a wider set of the icon's myriad significations.

To sum then, the dynamic icon is a) a sign among a network of signs which induces immediate recognizability in its reader; b) media-sensitive and accrues *mediated* significations as it travels from one media to another; and c) primarily visual but not necessarily so; a reader of dynamic icons can access a more comprehensive set of its significations only when, even if

they begin with the visual mode, they account for other modalities. I will proceed with this as the working definition of icons for now. Abiding by this definition, we are led to two further points of query. First, how do we now define an iconography? Also, how does the dynamic icon's constant accretion of mediated signification impact the formation and reception of iconographies?

The answer to the first question has already begun to become visible in our discussions so far. Icons function within entire networks of inter-dependent and *différance*-generated signs. These large, omniprevalent networks of signs are often called languages. Iconographies are a unique species of such networks. An iconography is a network of related icons which together generate a seemingly coherent omnibus of narratives, philosophies, inter-personal and inter-object relations, pertaining to a specific subject. Iconographies also consist of non-iconic signs — signs which are not immediately recognizable across cultures and ages for their own expansive significations but are part of an icon's network of signifiers/signifieds.[15]

Another crucial aspect about iconographies is that they are neither monoliths nor rigidly self-contained oeuvres of icons. Thus, on one hand, armors/super-suits, capes, unique insignias, origin stories, theme music, a singular definitive weakness, scientifically or magically endowed weapons and supremely powerful villains are *some* of the iconic signs which constitute superhero iconographies. On the other hand, many of these iconic signs are also defining characteristics of the high-fantasy and sci-fi genres of visual narratives. Across web-series and films today, the iconography of the superhero is both drawing from and informing texts in the latter two genres. We also encounter shared clusters of signs between two separate iconographies, each of which are thus expanded and complicated thanks to their resonances with other such iconographies. A close precedent of iconographies could be genres. In fact, it would not be wrong to identify iconographies as genres of icons. The only difference

between genres and iconographies, is while the earlier is an ontology-based collection of signifiers and signifieds, a study of iconographies has to necessarily untangle the myriad epistemologies that such a semiotic collection invariably jams into a dialogue.

The second question is far more crucial. Any iconography may consist of multimodal as well as unimodal icons and their tributary signs. Hence, within the iconography, individual icons accrue signification both synchronically as well as a diachronically. And so, every time the viewer reads an icon, they are not just accessing the visual or aural or the tangible surface of the icon but an entire plethora of visualities, auralities, and other sensibilities replicated from/in our daily lives before and after that icon was perceived. The iconicity of that icon is therefore never confined to the immediate episteme that the icon is situated in. When we consider this in the light of Kemp's definition, we realize that the recognizability of the icon is also a function of how farther it has travelled, epistemologically, from its original signification. The accretion of meanings, both from its own incarnations across other media and modes of communication as well as other icons within the iconographies it inhabits, causes strange and counteractive mutations in icons. On one hand, the icon grows heavy with the accrued baggage of its significations and its ever-expanding iconography. On the other hand, the proliferation of the dynamic icon is such that in order to remember, much less understand them, the modern consumer needs to invariably fall back on the iconographies it is associated with. And hence, as soon as the consumer receives (hears, sees, touches, feels) an icon, they have accessed not necessarily the *ur*-sign (flame emoji=fire) but the nexus of signs it is bound to through *différance.* And in doing so, the icon which the consumer achieves is also hollow. A dynamic icon therefore becomes both hollow and heavy. And being hollow and heavy, these icons inevitably give rise to desire. However, what exactly does the heaviness and hollowness of an icon entail? And how do such icons generate desire?

Desiring Bodies

Desire has been defined in both eastern and western philosophy as a force of acquisition, and therefore principally driven by lack. It is often understood as a distraction to communal as well as individual development, and a hindrance to the smooth systemic functioning of productive social machines. Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, however, claim that desire is not a purely psychological force derived from and powered by lack. Rather, they argue, desire is a real and productive force, itself driving socio-economic systems. Further, Deleuze says, "To desire is to build an assemblage, to construct an arrangement."[16] One never desires a specific object, but rather a specific arrangement of objects. Hence when someone says they desire, for instance, a trip to London, the very concept of this trip is an assemblage of objects and activities. The desire for a trip to London is in fact a desire to take a flight to London where, let's say, a month-long vacation will be spent staying with relatives, visiting the London Eye and the London Bridge, shopping, eating at the Ritz, clubbing at the Fabric, visiting nearby cities and their tourist attractions, among other things. In desiring for such an assemblage to exist, the desirer sets in motion a series of complex chains of production for goods and services. Desire creates demands and demands ensure production. Only when all these goods and services (the service of British Airways and the food at Ritz to name only two), are acquired can the desire for a trip to London be fulfilled. By desiring this assemblage, the desiring subject imagines entering a complex system of goods and services. Thus, to desire is always to desire an assemblage, to enter a collective system formed by the combination of social, economic, political, and cultural machines.

Deleuze draws from Baruch Spinoza's monism — that, simply put, everything in the world is interconnected, complex and co-dependent — to argue that desire is both a function and constituent of these inter-connections. For the current order of life and society to exist,

individual desires need to respond and connect with other individual desires. These connections and productions eventually form social wholes. In our current society, where the sheer volume of linguistic exchanges, the frequency of communication, the proximity of data and speed of information has increased in manifold ways over the past two decades, we are collectively experiencing a new stage in this Deleuzian conception of Spinoza's monism, wherein individual desires not only respond to one another, but also to the various forms of collective desires, so that the relationship of individual to collective desire is more blurred than ever before. And at the same time individual and collective desires are collated, organized, studied, coded and algorithmically re-produced, in ways that are designed to both sustain individual desire and the larger productive system of assemblages. Indeed, one way of defining modern society and its component social wholes (communities, tribes, organizations, families etc.) is as a manufactured system in which individual desires are cultivated and curated within an elaborate assemblage that sustains the collective.

The Deleuzean definition of desire overturns traditional conceptions in another crucial way. Although desire is the lifeblood of the social network, Deleuze argues that desire is not a function of need; rather needs are derived from desire. The members of a developed capitalist economy for whom basic life-sustaining needs are assumed, do not desire something because they need it; instead, they feel the necessity of certain goods and services because they desire them in the first place.

How is this concept of desire connected to dynamic icons? As I mentioned before, dynamic icons are hollow and potentially heavy — that is, capable of being freighted with multiple signifcations. Any dynamic icon, through migration from one media form to another, accrues the baggage of new significations specifically mediated by each new communicative system it inhabits. And as the icon accrues such significations, it becomes increasingly difficult

to identify its original meaning or primary signification. In other words, as the icon travels from one media to another it keeps building bonds of *différance* with other icons and tributary signs, adding them to its iconography. The icon thus becomes heavy with the weight of its expanding iconography and hollow as its *ur*-signification loses its primacy. As a result, even as the icon begins to lose a distinct unique signification of its own, it achieves a semiotic exaltation for the sheer diversity and volume of its significations AKA the iconography.

Kemp further argues that the expansion of an icon's iconography is directly proportional to its recognizability—which in turn is directly proportional to its cultural and economic value. In our increasingly logocentric societies, where the ability to generate, determine and identify meanings upholds hierarchies of power, including financial power, a wider array of signification gives an icon greater value as a marketable commodity—simply because it will appeal to a larger number of target groups and consumer bases. The recognizability of an icon increases the chances that consumer will be drawn to a product emblazoned with or associated with that icon.[17]

Moreover, as David Freeberg noted some years ago, the recognizabilty of an icon can manifest in highly visceral forms of identification and response:

> People are sexually aroused by pictures and sculptures; they break pictures and sculptures; they mutilate them, kiss them cry before them and go on journeys to them; they are calmed by them, stirred by them and incited to revolt. They give thanks by means of them, expect to be elevated by them, and are moved to the highest levels of empathy and fear.[18]

To respond to an icon can mean offering up one's own corporeality to be sculpted, shaped, aroused or soothed. Our attachments to such icons are innately desire-driven and often ritualistic. The desire these most recognizable and powerful icons inspire is thus never simply acquisitional, nor merely productive. The desire excited by such an icon can actually be both

identitarian and imperial. That is, the desirer of such an icon may want, simultaneously, to *possess* the icon and *be* the icon. (And when neither is possible, the impulse is sometimes to *beat* the icon; the reaction of fans to iconic pop-stars such as Mick Jagger in the 1960s provides a vivid instance of the phenomenon.)[19] To desire an icon is therefore to desire a connection, a relation with the icon either by possession (which includes both being as well as having) or domination. And as a result, the desire for icons is also suggestive of the relationship between the visible and the visceral, the psychological and the embodied.

Perhaps to say all this is only to be reminded that the experience of desire is bound up with our experience of identity. However, desires and identities are not the same even if they are akin. The shaping of our identities is *not* solely driven by our *own* desires. Yet, the very processes which shape modern societies at a macro-level also act upon individual identities at a micro-level. We are formed amidst and out of the constant negotiation and mediation of individual desires in recognition and relation to collective desires.

And how do we imagine ourselves, our future selves or even the spaces and societies that we inhabit or wish to inhabit? Our accommodations, our clothes, our modes of transport, our food and beverages, our jobs and careers, our relationships, and our relatives — the imag(e)ination, the visualization, of our world is centered upon our experience of embodiment. In my own case, we might say that my desire for "America" was ultimately a corporeal projection of a specific politically and culturally motivated assemblage of desired icons. The journey to "America", the acquiring of "America", began for me as a process of mapping and transforming my body, like topographical terrains; I call this "corpo-forming."

The process of corpo-forming, no matter how brief or momentary, is that exact journey from receiving (seeing, hearing, smelling, or touching) a product, via the icon, to the moment of buying or owning the product. Are there particular accessories we prefer donning? Does our

hair color change often? What about tattoos? Do we exercise and hit the gym? Who are the people we want to be seen with? What places suit best as the backdrop of our profile pictures? Everything from the way we decorate our homes to how we educate our kids is shaped by the world we imagine our body to inhabit. When we develop and decide upon certain gender, sexual, ethnic, cultural, and economic preferences, the most visual and accessible interphase of these preferences is the body. In a modern society, therefore, the process of corpo-formation is therefore that instantaneous step which bridges 'desiring an assemblage' with 'producing the assemblage'. Our identities are a function of all our desired assemblages. And so even though desires and identities are not the same, identities are constantly desired; and icons provide us with the basic blueprints of desirable identities, routed through our bodies.

My research is therefore focused on the 'corporeal' — the material, physical body made of flesh, blood, and bones, regularly sculpted in gyms and on running tracks, and constantly covered in, sprayed upon, and lathered by brands. This is the human body most commonly identified in the logocentric, science-driven and primarily industry-inclined markets as simultaneously labor, machinery and product. This material and physical body is also one of most iconized commodities; we might say it's one of *the* heaviest and hollowest of icons. Above all, this physical human body is the ultimate product *and* raw material, essential for the marketability of all other products. Out in the market, it is this body that becomes the standard of measurement for most other products — "the body itself is necessarily exaggerated as soon as we have an image of the body, an image which is a projection or objectification of the body into the world."[20]No matter which product we are consuming, we ultimately consume a 'model' body that these products will fit or look good upon. The full potential of all market products will be achieved only when they are applied to this 'model' body, which in turn is the full potential of our body that we are supposed to pursue. The 'model' body, the body

paramount of materiality, is the "body-made-object, and thus the body as potential commodity, taking place within the abstract and infinite cycle of exchange."[21] My research is focused on this materially producible and reproducible body.

To summarize: icons fuel desire, and desire drive production, including the production of both idealized and actual form of embodiment. However, it is possible to refine the notion of desire still further by considering the category of longing.

A Longing for Souvenirs

Within the discourse of recent critical theory, longing is a special form of desire, one which has in the past few decades gained both political and cultural currency.[22] There are two defining aspects of longing within this discourse. First, longing is understood as a temporal desire — the longing for more time, or for a particular interpretation of time, or a specific period of time. Thus, longing is both the desire for a cyclical chain of production, as well as a cyclically produced desire. Ultimately, the experience of longing hinges upon a staunch confident belief in what is real *and* true, and thus what *can be* "real" and "true." This basic formative element of longing is nostalgia, often mistaken for the entire sum of the longing-desire itself.

However, there is also the second crucial element, which though co-dependent on nostalgia, is a marketable entity of its own. Just as longing is a peculiarly metamorphosed desire, for longing to manifest, its objective icon too needs to morph into a peculiar sub-category: the souvenir. Together, the souvenir and the nostalgia it preserves and amplifies, crystalize time into a palpable, "real" and historically tangible entity. This new crystalized time will then generate further longing, thus establishing a cycle of demand, supply, and production.

Let's begin with nostalgia. As Susan Stewart puts it,

Nostalgia is a sadness without an object… which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience. Rather, it remains behind

and before that experience. Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack. Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality. This point of desire which the nostalgic seeks is in fact the absence that is the very generating mechanism of desire.[23]

Nostalgia channelizes the longing for time — more time, a particular period of time as well as a specific idea of time. The time period itself is what Jacques Derrida calls 'phantom ideals.' Nostalgia, in its yearning for a specific time-period — this phantom ideal — inevitably historicizes the mythic, extracts a singular strand from a tapestry of oral narratives as the *itihaas* (the Sanskrit word for history which literally means 'as it was').[24] In Stewart's words, the 'phantom ideal' is "utopian", a "future-past." This "pure context of lived experience", this utopia located at an invisible point of origin, is thus always-already located in a past.; and therefore, by extension, within a palpable time-space, within the linear temporality which becomes a signifier of verisimilitude and functionality. The ideal, however, *isn't* a functional entity. It does not exist; it never did. But through the psycho-structure of longing it can be made to seem that it most definitely *was*. And because it did exist in the past, we are told, this event or idea even though inexistent today has the promise of re-gaining functionality, in the future. In other words, because the ideal *was*, it now acquires the possibility of *'can be'*. This possibility of a future existence makes the ideal attractive and saleable. And this belief, in turn, fosters nostalgia – a self-facing desire which feeds off itself. Nostalgia, above all, craves for both an expansion and extension of time: expanding the 'past' aspect of this 'future-past' by extending it into a future. This phantom ideal, this 'future-past' therefore, is definitely ex-static, outside the historical time-space, the linearity of chronological time, because it neither exists in the past nor in the foreseeable future. And yet, because nostalgia, loads certain

hollowed and heavy dynamic icons with the promise of their existence in the past, this phantom-ideal manifests as a probability of the future. It thus becomes not only part of a chronology, but becomes *the* chronology, *the* history.

But how does one place or locate the human body in such an exalted phantom ideal, this ex-static future-past? In the age of mechanical reproduction, and "exchange economy, the search for authentic experience and, correlatively, the search for the authentic object become critical." The future-past, the phantom ideal, is most suited to be peddled as *the* authentic experience-object thanks to the promise of it being present at the "invisible point of origin." The phantom ideal is thus always a projection of the 'original'. In the process, the authentic experience becomes "both elusive and allusive as it is placed beyond the horizon of present lived experience, the beyond in which the antique, the pastoral, the exotic, and other fictive domains are articulated." As a result, the body that occupies this space is replaced by what is promised to be a relic but is in fact not. The future-past replaces the "memory of the body with the memory of the object, a memory standing outside the self and thus presenting both a surplus and lack of significance." This is the souvenir.

The souvenir is first and foremost an icon, irrespective of its materiality or modality. Fridge magnets are as much a souvenir as a work of historic fiction such as *Elizabeth* (1998). Both "represents not the lived experience" of the 'original' but the "secondhand experience" of their current recipient — the owner of the magnet and the viewer of the film. In fact, souvenirs are not desired because they prove events and objects to be repeatable. Souvenirs are desire because they prove events and objects to be reportable, and hence locatable within a historically linear temporality. The souvenir itself does not inspire its owner to recreate the past it represents, but it strengthens the owner's yearning for such a past, by denying the "lived experience" or original and substituting it with a mere "secondhand experience." The

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possession of the souvenir is characterized by dispossession such that, its possession "all the more radically speaks to its status as a mere substitution and to its subsequent distance from the self."[25] Stewart further elaborates,

> The souvenir… is not an object arising out of need or use value; it is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia. The souvenir generates a narrative which reaches only "behind," spiraling in a continually inward movement rather than outward toward the future. [26]

The souvenir, thus, becomes one of the most marketable varieties of the icon. It reifies unilinear time — a sequential temporality, wherein the past necessarily precedes the present, and the present is invariably followed by a future. And therefore, the future will always be indebted and rooted in the past. The history a souvenir represents is unilinear, absolute, singular, and monolithic, and cannot have multiple temporalities. The existence of the souvenir is fundamental in denying multiplicity, the cancellation of other histories besides that which the souvenir supposedly emblematizes.

And yet, nostalgia invokes a cyclical time, as we discussed earlier. Together, with the souvenir, the iconic conduit for this nostalgia, this generates the desire that is longing — a desire to return to the past, the only past, that can nonetheless re-occur in the future. This makes longing one of the most motivational forces driving a constant cycle of production and consumption. But for such a cycle to evolve into a full-blown economy, the souvenir too needs to become part of something larger — the collection.

Economies of Longing

At the most basic level, economies emerge because resources are limited but human desire is not. This results in the inevitable mismatch between demand and supply, which further creates a hierarchy of goods and services in the market; and social hierarchies emerge as a corollary to the market hierarchy.[27] Individuals, families, communities, and nations with increased

buying power are command more financial, social and political power. They thus also have greater control over the market and can therefore ensure their positions at the top remains secure. Some of the most prominent Marxist thinkers like Althusser and Gramsci have pointed out how, to maintain the larger economic status quo, not only the goods and services but the conditions of production of these goods and services must be constantly reproduced. Althusser's concept of ideology and Gramsci's theories on hegemony have been mobilized by many subsequent thinkers to analyze the ways in which that the ruling classes constantly regenerate the conditions of economic production by manipulating cultural practices, media, and social customs.

My discussions of icons and iconography keeps company with that tradition of critique, addressing the finer nuances of this very process by exploring the role of iconographically generated desire in driving larger systems of supply and demand — the desire to procure goods, spend money, rise in socio-economic stature, and even the desire to exercise the power to control one's socio-political environment through democratic electoral processes. One of the central aims of my research is to prove that, in a global economy where minted currency notes are also commodities to be exchanged and traded, desire-generating-icons are also a form of currency and potential commodities to be produced and reproduced.

However, so far, our discussions have revolved a more theoretical understanding of desire's relation to economies. We have learnt from Deleuze and Guattari that to desire is to desire an assemblage. And since desire generates demand, and demand ensures production, we have thereon reached the inference that desiring an assemblage is the first step in commencing production. The study of souvenirs, however, provides us a way of situating the assemblage in our day-to-day, most mundane, financial transactions.

Souvenir icons work best as part of a collection. The blue chiseled body of Rama, the bow and arrow, the saffron *dhoti*, the top knot, and the sacred thread are each a separate souvenir of the phantom ideal. But only together, as a collection, do they complete the iconography of an implied utopian past known as "*Ramrajya*", literally the "reign of Rama" and used in many parts of India as a metaphor for a golden era. Stewart has this to say about the "collection":

> (The Collection's) function is not the restoration of context of origin but rather the creation of a new context, a context standing in a metaphorical, rather than a contiguous, relation to the world of everyday life. Yet unlike many forms of art, the collection is not representational. The collection presents a hermetic world: to have a representative collection is to have both the minimum and the complete number of elements necessary for an autonomous world — a world which is both full and singular, which has banished repetition and achieved authority. [28]

How does the collection then inform, even sustain, economies of desire? In any economy of desire, the physical body is bound to finite, quantifiable traits — height, weight, dimensions, measurements etc. Next, these quantifiable traits are catalogued into indices of identities like those of gender, race, nationalities, economic class and, in a South Asian context, caste. Each such index helps calibrate consumer bases and target audiences for products ranging from political ideologies to music CDs to conspiracy theories to automobiles and more. At the level of assemblage, the consumer desires a specific combination of such indices. The collection however is even more specific, almost absolute. A *Star Wars* collection cannot be complete without the specific, limited-edition jumbo-size model of the Millennium Falcon, whose hatch when opened plays the exact corresponding sound from the original film trilogy. Hasbro sells this particular version of the iconic spaceship on the basis of this unique specificity. In fact, every other version of the ship that might be released in the future would be sold on their own unique specificity. Even though the collection can never be complete, and

it can encompass multiple editions and issues of the same icon, each of these edition or issue will still be unique and specific in their own way. To return to our old example, for a trip to London, while the desire to travel to the city immediately sets into production an assemblage of myriad goods and services, the consumer's "ideal trip" will include a collection of very specific brands for each of the goods and services in the aforementioned assemblage. The collection therefore is the immediate, specific, and tangible set of marketable commodities within the larger assemblage of desires.

Therefore, when peddling a phantom ideal like "*Ramrajya*", a specific iconography needs to be marketed as the souvenirs of this utopian future-past. While this collection of icons will never be complete and becomes increasingly rigid over time, the iconography however needs to be pliable enough to uphold the ideal. The fluxable corporeality of the superhero fits the bill. The superhero's propensity for a variable constancy also facilitates the global migration of their iconography as a collection of desirable labor qualities. The inherent idea of a poise, a promise towards flux, renders the superhero body simultaneously reverberant with the desirability of a first-world product as well as the acquirability of a global commodity. Thus, making them suitable icons for "Glocalization".

Glocalization: Adopt-Adapt-Adept

Glocalization is a tri-partite phenomenon. In the current era of media proliferation, global and international iconographies such as that of the superhero are imported to local markets across the world, and then recalibrated to address the immediate desires and ambitions of their immediate, even hyper-local, consumer bases. The modified icons that such a cultural recalibration generates, are thein finally re-sold on to domestic and international markets, as signifiers of the local and national community's global presence, as well as the community's desires and ambitions to rise in the global economic and political hierarchy. This is the central

economy of desire that my research addresses. Superheroes are only one of the several iconographies which owe their global reach and popularity to Glocalization. In fact, the constant production, circulation, consumption, and recalibration of superhero bodies across media boundaries and narrative genres like the Indian mythological TV serial or Japanese manga and anime, have made the superhero iconography into one of the most charged collection of icons. The recalibrated superhero body is frequently sold as souvenirs of nationalistic phantom ideals — glorified distant pasts, drawn from mythological and oral narratives and now historicized through the *fluxable* superhero body.

Therefore, I argue, that the very *fluxability* which Fawaz identifies as symptomatic of the American culture's backlash against McCarthyism, heteronormativity, state-sponsored violence, and racial discrimination has now, after almost four decades of recalibration in global and local markets, become a tool for rerouting fundamentalist ideologies of national puritanism, essentialism, and heteronormativity. I expand upon this hypothesis and the minute nitty-gritties of such a project of Glocalization through a combination of media history and case-studies, over the following chapters.

In my first chapter, I will provide a survey of the dominant iconographic systems prevalent in the Indian pop culture which laid the groundworks for an entry and assimilation of the American superhero iconographies. This chapter will focus primarily on the Amar Chitra Katha comics, Amitabh Bachchan's Angry Young Man films and the early examples of proto superheroes in Indian comics.

Next, I have structured my following three chapters around the close reading different cultural icons, across three distinct media (comic books, TV series and New Media tools like .gif, memes and holograms), and three distinct time periods (1975-1990, 1990-2005 and 2005-2020). I begin in the secondchapter with the Indian superhero comics *Nagraj*, in publication

since 1986 under the imprimatur of Raj Comics (RC). This chapter will, exemplify Barry's 'adopt' stage where the RC superhero exhibits an unquestioning acceptance and adoption of the American comic book genre conventions. In tracing the inception and reformulation of the American superhero iconographies through already established Indian iconographic templates, I assess how the character of Nagraj is the first to propose a "Matrix of Leadership" in response to the dominant political discourses of the time.

In the third chapter, which focuses on Barry's stage two — 'adapt' — of postcolonial cultural transmission, my research moves to the TV series *Shaktimaan*, originally aired on India's first family entertainment channel Doordarshan National (or DD1) between 13th September 1997 and 27th March2005, wherein the superhero archetype is adapted into a Hindu mythological iconography. This widely successful show inspired a revival of interest in Hindu rituals, myth, and practices among its young fans — thus contributing to the (re)generation of a nostalgic vision of Hindu identity through the appropriation of tropes derived from an icon of American "popular modernist" fantasy. In this chapter I explore this nationalistic revival by following the career arc of Mukesh Khanna, the producer and lead-actor of the series. Khanna continues to lend cultural authority to Hindu populist politics, to the extent of appearing at political events in costume.

Finally, my fourth chapter (corresponding to the 'adept' phase of Barry's three-part formulation), presents a comparative close reading of three contemporary Indian political leaders and their distinct campaigning styles — West Bengal Chief Minister (CM) Mamata Banerjee, Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Here, I show how all three politicians have employed popular superheroic iconography through New Media tools to win elections. I focus primarily on the GIF image and the holographic projections of Modi's speeches, Kejriwal's tweets and Banerjee's anthems. I will zero in on the broader use of super-

heroic iconography by the contemporary populist political leaders and their attempts to project themselves as "super heroic" leaders the specific communities of people they most appeal to.

The project is a close-reading of historical, industrial, and cultural processes which continuously shape and transform corporealities, especially in democratic-electoral contexts. Each of the primary texts are merely local symptoms and crucial milestones in these global processes. They help track the flow, sedimentation, and distillation of myriad iconographies into individual texts, and thus the expansive distribution network of icons and relics. Each of our chapter, therefore, begins with an introduction to our primary text and its historical context, and explores through a list of other media artifacts which are iconographic contributors to our main text, before finally offering a close-read case study of the central icon — highlighting the traits of its tributary iconographies and their impact on it. For each case study, the aim is to analyze the process whereby dynamic icons can generate new desires across geographically and culturally distinct regions, by means of a global system of exchange.

While conducting these case-studies, I have been made aware how deficient western philosophical traditions can seem in assessing South Asian socio-cultural phenomena. Therefore, in addition to a basic framework of theories from Erwin Panofsky, Bishnupriya Ghosh, Susan Stewart, Benjamin Moffit, and Gilles Deleuze, I also critically evaluate South Asian philosophical traditions like the Hindu Brahmanical thought systems of Mimamsa and Vedanta, later Bhakti and Sufi traditions, and the *Bhagavad Gita*, in their pop-cultural reiterations, such as those found in the *Amar Chitra Katha* (ACK) comic books and the 1980s and 90s Indian TV serials. Such a critical evaluation sheds light on crucial peculiarities about the rise of right-wing Hindu nationalism in India today. It is particularly important to realize that most Hindu philosophical traditions have been preserved and passed down to generations of Indian and Western scholars by Brahmins or

members of the upper-castes—a social group that corresponds today to either landed elites in rural areas or the city-dwelling middle- and upper-classes. This is also the target audience of such Hindu nationalist slogans and promises as "Hindu Economics", "Swadeshi" etc. These slogans and ideological approaches have been repeatedly used by right-wing politicians and economists to expand the connotation of "Hindutva" (lit: Hindu-ness) beyond communal politics into a functional economic and social model – a "way of life" fit for a liberalized, globalized and privatized model of economy. And therefore, when a TV serialization of the epic *Mahabharata*, "simplifies" *Bhagavad Gita* for the masses or an ACK comics waters down the idea of Karmic cycle of births and re-births, it ultimately strengthens a capitalist replication and reproduction of the human body as labor. In fact, as I found out and will go on to prove, such daily distillation of Brahmanical philosophies have over the years deeply modified concepts traditionally believed to be at the heart of Hindu familial and social ideals such as *dharma* (duty *and* righteousness), *karma,* sacrifice, desire etc.

My research, therefore, will ultimately prove that unlike the popular leftist conceptualization of the Hindu right-wing as comprised mainly of uneducated, uncouth, lumpen elements, the rise of an essentialist Hindu Brahmin-centric concept of the Indian nation has long been in the making through careful manipulation of popular iconographies by academics, media moguls and economists. Such a manipulation has in turn shaped and modified some of the most basic principles of life in households across boundaries of caste, class and region. And, finally, this process of iconographic re-education at the most grassroot levels have been going on since India's independence in1947.

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<u>INDIA'S ICONS: HISTORY, ART AND AMALGAMATION</u>

One of the most hyped Indian films of 2021 was *Thalaivii*. The title is the gender-female form of the Tamil word for "Leader."[29] Several news media outlets also translated the title as 'Leading Lady.' A dramatized biography of Tamil actress-turned-politician and Tamil Nadu's (TN) six-time Chief Minister, Jayaram Jayalalithaa, the film's biographical narrative supports both interpretations of its title. Jayalalithaa, played here by Bollywood actress Kangana Ranaut, was the youngest of 3 TN chief ministers who began their careers in the film industry, went on to achieve tremendous fame, and then managed to translate their massive fan following into votes.

The film opens with a dramatization of events that took place in the State Legislative Assembly of Tamil Nadu on March 25, 1989. In the film, Jayalalithaa, the leader of the opposition at that time, interrupts then-Chief Minister M Karunanidhi's budget speech, accusing him and his government of political malpractice against members of the opposition. Amidst counter accusations, a member of the ruling party makes snide comments against Jayalalithaa's character and relationship with her political mentor M G Ramachandran (popularly, MGR). The assembly soon dissolves into a chaos of scuffles and fisticuffs. Ranaut, as Jayalalithaa, is struck to the floor by members of the ruling party and is kicked and beaten in the midst of the brawling male members of the assembly. As she screams out in anguish, her political adversaries are shown dragging her on the assembly floor by her hair and then attempting to disrobe her as she desperately clutches on to her *saree*. From the snide comment onward, the scene is constructed to reflect popular representations of the "Disrobing of Draupadi", a central event in the epic *Mahabharata*. The prologue ends with Ranaut's Jayalalitha standing outside on one of the lower steps of the Assembly building and looking up

at Karunanidhi, as she proclaims: "Today you and your men humiliated me in the assembly the same way the Kauravas had humiliated Draupadi. She won that battle for power, and I will win this one. After all, *Mahabharata* is also known as *Jaya*. Today, I vow I will not return to this Assembly until I have been sworn in as the CM of this state."[30] Saying this, she turns and walks down the stairs in slow motion as a dramatic score, dominated by trumpets, plays in the background. Standing atop the steps, Karunanidhi (played by Tamil actor Nassar) looks down menacingly, the film clearly identifying him as its prime villain.

The scene, and indeed the film *Thalaivii* in its entirety, is notable as one of the more blatant examples of the complex cross-pollination of discourses surrounding the migrations and interactions of popular, religious, and political icons across socio-cultural arenas in India. There is of course the transposition of mythological iconography in constructing the scene as a modern-day re-enactment of Draupadi's humiliation from *Mahabharata*. The most notable semiotic clue for such signposting is the moment when Ranaut's character is first dragged by her hair and then shown clutching desperately at her *saree*. The scene is almost identical to one in BR Chopra's *Mahabharat* (1988-90), as well as other TV-adaptations of the epic, all of which have consistently featured the hair-pulling and attempted disrobing in their narratives. All these mythological series, and *Thalaivii*, drag out the moment in slow motion, accentuating the anguish of the female lead with dramatic music and agonized screams.

In reality, there exists no visual record or exact details of what happened on the assembly floor. Predictably, accounts differ according to political allegiances. While Jayalalitha and her supporters have maintained that there was an attempt to pull at her *saree*, Karunanidhi's supporters have denied the charge and countered these with allegations of injuries sustained by the CM.[31] A scuffle did break out, though, and Jayalalitha did emerge from the assembly with bruises, her *saree* and hair disheveled. Her vow on the assembly steps,

however, is the stuff of political mythology. Jayalalithaa and her party were quick to reap political mileage from these events in the run up to state elections in 1991, popularizing the moment as "*Panjaali Sabatham*" (Panchali/Draupadi's Vow), and thus also confirming the parallel with the scene of Draupadi's disrobing in the *Mahabharata*.[32]

The casting of Kangana Ranaut as the leading star of the film added another layer of iconic resonance. An actress from the northern state of Himachal Pradesh, Ranaut is often celebrated by her fans as an outsider to the Mumbai-based Bollywood industry who has found success and fame portraying strong female characters and highlighting important women's issues. In more recent years, she has also gained notoriety for her belligerent Twitter presence—lashing out at her critics, and loudly declaring support for the Narendra Modi government.

Jayalalithaa herself returned to the assembly as TN's youngest chief minister in June 1991 and went on to become the first woman CM to serve a full term. Since that time, she has often been accused of fostering a personality cult. Following her initial tenure as CM, her media clout and political iconicity grew rapidly, eventually earning her the title "Amma" (mother). Her party members and followers would prostrate themselves publicly when she passed by or appeared in rallies. And as recently as January 2021, the current TN CM has inaugurated a temple dedicated to her and her mentor MGR.

Thus, in *Thalaivii*, the role of a controversial and firebrand woman politician who began her career as an actress and outsider to Tamil politics is played by a politically active film star who has over the past few years built her brand on her status as an outspoken outsider and feminist role-model.

This migration and interaction of discourses and iconographic systems across socio-cultural arenas isn't a new phenomenon. Icons of the TV and cinema industry have long migrated to other arenas of public culture, especially politics. Jyalalithaa's mentor and Tamil superstar MGR also served as a CM of TN until his death in 1987 and is still considered one of the greatest icons of Tamil culture. In Andhra Pradesh, star of Telegu cinema N T Ramarao (popularly, NTR), went on to serve as the state's CM for seven years, over three terms. The Mumbai-based Hindi, Bihar's Bhojpuri, and Tollygunge-based Bengali film industries have all witnessed a plethora of their leading stars and actors shift to politics, often serving as members of Parliament (MP) or state legislative assemblies (MLA).[33] Also notable are TV-stars like Arun Govil and Nitish Bharadwaj, both household names in the late 80s and 90s for playing the roles of mythological Hindu heroes Rama and Krishna respectively, who went on to join the Bharatiya Janata Party and were subsequently elected as MPs.

Film and TV aren't the only vehicles for this cross-media migration. While major comic book publications like *Amar Chitra Katha* have inserted representations of iconic historical figures into their narratives, several political leaders have also hitched their wagons to the comic book industry. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India, frequently incorporated newspaper cartoons and caricatures (of himself) into his speeches — underlining his populist reputation broad appeal. In more recent times, Bal Keshav Thackeray, the former CM of Maharashtra, began his career as a political cartoonist; along with his activist persona, it was the use of his cartoons as symbols and icons for his and his party's ideologies that boosted his initial career in politics.

On a superficial level, this might sound like just another example of pushing political agendas through works of art. Afterall, pop-icons like MGR and NTR did use their films and music videos to subtly promote the political agendas of their parties; Thackeray's cartoons

were even less subtle. And yet, such iconographic migrations aren't unidimensional. As evident in our example from *Thalaivii*, historic narratives are often transformed and warped as they enter a dialectic with established iconographic scenes invoked for popular resonance (Draupadi's disrobing) and are then further complicated by preexistent medium-specific narratives (such as the star narrative of Kangana Ranaut).

What's most intriguing is how such an overlaying of narratives inevitably celebrates individual icons over and above collective organization. *Thalaivii's* critical and commercial reception notwithstanding, the very idea of hitching Ranaut's star-persona to Jayalalithaa's iconicity is symptomatic of this phenomenon. In this case both the larger cast of the film as well as the members of Jayalalithaa's political party take a back seat in the narratives within and around the film. It's the layered iconicity of "Ranaut as Jayalalithaa" that sells the product.

However, the prevalence of such iconolatry, so to speak, also seems counterintuitive in a market as diverse as India, where any sweeping assumption regarding the consumer base is often proven a gross generalization. This dissertation asks the question: how is it that certain icons have achieved a near universal appeal amongst the Indian populace? How do modern political players like Jayalalithaa, Indira Gandhi, or Bal Thackeray, despite their controversial and divisive politics, often find new valence and wider comprehension when married to established iconographic systems — such as that of superhero or mythological hero? In terms of these established iconographies, too, how have popular media texts like the *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Tinkle* comic books, or mythological TV serials like *Mahabharat* and *Ramayan,* managed to sell Hindu *savarna* narratives as normative visual representation of an entire nation to such large and diverse consumer-bases?[34] Afterall, it is a fact that Indian popular visual media has systematically effaced or stereotyped the voices and representation of minority communities including Muslims, Dalits, tribal communities, and the LGBTQ communities for

centuries; and continue to do so even today.[35] And yet, modern populist Indian politicians and their supporters find it easy to use the popular iconography of superhero narratives, Bollywood films, mythological comics and TV serials as rhetorical reference points in selling their personal brands as universal iterations of an "Indian-ness". How have such generalizing interpretations of "India" and "people", been sold so successfully to a majority of Indian people (especially the voting population), in both the political and pop-cultural markets?

I believe the answer lies in the two media forms that proved to be the earliest definers of pop-cultural iconography in post-independence India: comic books and Indian cinema. As is evident in the example of *Thalaivii*, both mythological narratives as well as the iconic currency of cinema stars continue to have a direct impact on defining populist rhetoric in Indian politics even today.

My subsequent chapters trace the growth, evolution, and dissemination of superhero iconography. But in this chapter, I will consider the two earliest iconographic blueprints that helped filter and translate a primarily American pop-cultural discourse into Indian political parlance: the mythological and historical heroes of first-generation Indian comics, and the action hero of Mumbai-based Hindi films from 70s through 80s. I will present a survey of the iconographic distillations that each of the two popular forms of visual media performed. Through this survey, it will become evident how such distillations primed creative spaces across visual media industries in India to not merely adopt and adapt foreign narratives and iconographies to indigenous mythologies, but also engineer these into glocalized souvenirs of an ideal labor-leader corporeality.

Let's begin with one of the oldest and most prominent proponents of an ideal Indian laboring body — the *Amar Chitra Katha* (ACK) comic books, founded in 1967 by Anant Pai.

One Nation, One Comics?

By the mid 1980s, ACK had established itself as *the* comic book company of India. Its meteoric rise and subsequent domination of the Indian comic book industry were driven by five key factors.

First, besides its popularity among young readers, ACK's cultural influence was rooted in its rapport with their parents. For a largely educated urban middle-class readership, by the time the eighties drew to a close, ACK comic books had been widely accepted as important educational primers for children, often in equal demand across economic classes and regions.[36]

Second, in a brilliant marketing strategy emboldened by "UNESCO's call in 1967 to use comics as a tool for communicating cultural values", Pai had begun to sell "*chitrakatha*" (lit: picture tales) as a unique style of comics indigenous to India, *a la* manga in Japan.[37] Thanks to this aggressive marketing campaign, for most parents not only were the ACKs telling the right stories, they were also using the form of comics in the right way.[38]

Third, besides the right content and the right form, ACK also had the right storyteller. Pai had acquired an iconicity of his own—we might almost think of him as a kind of Indian Stan Lee, except Pai could actually draw—and this added to ACK's appeal. He was popularly known as "Uncle Pai." His public image remains that of a thinker and educator who chose to break from the humdrum of school syllabi and educate the youth of the country about its history through art and comics.[39]

Fourth, ACK's extensive reach was fueled by the publisher's presence in Hindi, English and vernacular-speaking markets. [40] This wide market appeal, and their use of simple words and sentence structures, made them useful tools in teaching pre- and primary-school kids to read and understand these languages. More often than not, ACK comics were our first primers.

Thus, with the right content, the right form and the right storyteller, their extensive geographical reach, percolation across class strata and simple language made them the "right comic book" for pre- and primary-school education.

Ultimately though, ACK wasn't creating new tales. Nor were its images truly unique or completely indigenous to India. The folktales, histories and mythologies it presented in its comics had been told and re-told numerous times across verbal and visual media, most notably in cinema and calendar art. Ravi Varma's oleographs and Dadasaheb Phalke's early motion pictures had helped elevate Hindu mythological images into effective national idioms, with a "truly pan-national circulation as well as a national address."[41] While the former initiated what is now identified as the Indian calendar art tradition, the latter established mythological narratives as a central genre in Indian cinema. Most regional film industries had indeed registered their fair share of mythological hits much before ACK began its venture into print. Pai instructed his artists to mine these prior discourses for specific aesthetic markers, to omit others, and to combine the final collection into a singular iconographic style or brand which would invariably stress the "real"-ness of his drawn narratives.

It worked. For many readers, ACK's images appeared more "real" than the epics on screen, or on canvas. This was the fifth and most crucial factor behind ACK's popularity.

Nandini Chandra, in *The Classic Popular: Amar Chitra Katha 1967-2007,* provides a detailed analysis of ACK's composite iconography and each of its components, including Hindu calendar-art, Hindi film posters and set design, and the oleographs of 19th century painter Raja Ravi Varma. She points out that by scrupulously editing, grafting, and modulating older indigenous artistic styles, Pai's comics managed to achieve a peculiarly hybrid "realist functionality", which Chandra calls a "*bazaar* or derivative realism."[42] I believe, more specifically, Pai's comics identified the heterosexual Hindu male body, and to a lesser extent

the heterosexual Hindu female body, as the *locus operandi* for this realist functionality. To further explore this hypothesis, I will rehearse and build upon some of Chandra's salient observations, along with those of authors such as Christopher Pinney, on the corporeal aspects of ACK's *bazaar* realism.

Pai trusted "static visual media with providing an authoritative inspiration, more than film and performative genres."[43] More than Phalke's George Méliès-like special effects and magic-realism, he celebrated the power and legacy of Varma's academic realist paintings. As Christopher Pinney points out, Varma is often identified as the first to combine classical European techniques and tools, such as perspective and contrapposto, the use of oils, and verisimilitude, with Indian narratives, themes, and emotive registers. Varma thus "Romanized the Indian pencil" and introduced academic realism as a viable lens for visualizing the Hindu epics and folklores. He is often credited for solely transforming "the Indian imaginary from a realm of fantasy to a historicized realist chronotope."[44] Pai's project of educating the children of India too was hinged on presenting a historically authentic image, and therefore "found it useful to piggyback on Varma's representational/illusionistic style."[45]

By adopting Varma's academic realism as an inspiration and iconographic "predecessor" to '*chitrakatha*', ACK was also buying into the cultural capital that Varma and his art carried. Not only was he a "highly revered symbol of Hinduness", but his art also enforced the Hindu myths' historic-realist authenticity. Identifying Varma as one of *chitrakatha*'s forefathers was therefore crucial to establishing a "basic scaffolding of realism."[46] This served as the first foundational step in setting up the ACK iconography.

Pai made sure that this "basic scaffolding" was upheld by all his artists. The personal drawing styles of such major contributors as Ram Waeerkar, Pratap Mullick, C M Vitankar or Dilip Kadam did not always or uniformly aspire for verisimilitude. Some like Vitankar, who

had joined ACK after a much-celebrated stint as a painter of Hindi film posters, did heavily incorporate photorealism to their images. While the drawing style of others, like Waeerkar and Mullick, relied more on expressionist elements like dizzying motion lines and exaggerated facial features.[47] Pai insisted these individual styles, while not completely effaced, should be modulated to present a more uniform arrangement of bodies, expressions, dress and décor. ACK artists were also given express directions to prefer the Ravi Varma oleographs over all other art styles as a fundamental visual template. Hence ACK's unique variation on the Franco-Belgian *ligne claire* style, which is most famously associated with Hergé. Traditionally, *ligne claire* juxtaposes cartoon-like abstract bodies against detailed naturalist backgrounds with accurate perspective-lines. While ACK artists inherited Varma's "'frontality' and centrality of composition—a figure in the foreground against a lush mythic landscape or anonymous decorative background, with very little middle ground," —they then juxtaposed these sparsely detailed middle grounds onto the naturalist backgrounds of European *ligne claire*. [48]

The centrality of the heroic body can also be traced to the fact that ACK artists were directed to draw characters that seemed less cartoony and more realistic, so as to (em)body the golden past Pai was selling. As Chandra writes:

> The physique and bearing of the protagonist had to reveal beyond any reasonable
> doubts that he was indeed an aristocrat, a person of noble birth. This marker of birth,
> or an indelible caste identity corresponding with a particular physiognomy, was what
> constituted a realist functionality for the ACKs.[49]

But ACK's commitment to a "realist functionality" came at the cost of a visual, narrative, and cultural multivalence intrinsic to the oral traditions of the Puranas, the fables, and the epics.[50] In terms of visual iconographies, the cultural multivalence of these narratives is most conspicuous in regional and indigenous variations of style and representation. In fact, Varma's lithographs, too, were not free of such implicit multivalence. Varma arranged the

dresses and accoutrements of his characters according to traditional attires practiced in Hindu Brahmanical households from the southern states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu.[51] As a result, his paintings relocated the epic narratives away from predominantly ancient north Indian mise-en-scenes to contemporary southern settings.

Besides Varma, Pai also hailed Kolkata-based Purna Chandra Chakrabarty's graphic adaptations of the epics, *Chhobite Ramayana* (1956) and *Chhobite Mahabharata* (1960), as a major inspiration.[52] Chakrabarty arranges rounded androgynous bodies with tapering eyes in fluid tapestry-like collages instead of the western conventions of waffle-iron panels. Chandra cites several ACK artists disavowing such stylizations and, consequently, "the composite and arbitrary character of its visual construction." The disavowal also ties back to ACK's aim of attaining a pan-national address. They maintained that artistic signatures "implicit in indigenous practices" were "too clearly aligned with specific 'local' or regional traditions," and were thus "too stylized to convey a sense of a definitive past." For instance, Waeerkar was cautious to edit out the beard from a forest-dwelling Rama's face, a common marker of the character in *Patta* and *Pothi* representations. Nor was Varma's darker, slim-wasted Rama directly copied onto ACK's pages. Similarly, the nine-yard sari was replaced with "less region-specific attire."[53]

Consequently, any foundational scaffolding of realism had to be cemented by incorporating iconographic systems that were less region-specific and could provide a more defragmented visual history. Enter early American and British comic strips. The ACK artists turned to John McLusky's *James Bond*, Jim Holdaway's *Modesty Blaise*, Hal Foster's *Prince Valiant*, and the *Tarzan* and *Phantom* comics, among others. The rounded faces, darker skin tones, tapered eyes and narrow un-toned bodies characteristic of indigenous art forms were replaced with Caucasian square-jawed heroes from *Prince Valiant* or *Tarzan*, the titillating

feminine figures in *Modesty Blaise* and *James Bond,* and the "hyper-musculature of the big Hollywood hunks such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, idealized for the proportionate figure identified as the archetypal male body."[54] Within this schema, there was recognition also that a bearded Rama could pose "a real danger" invoking the Rama of Mughal miniatures, "no different from *their* Shah Jahan."[55]

In preferring a Caucasian-style mythological hero over Varma and Chakrabarty's dark-skinned round-faced heroes, ACK was therefore also cementing a Hindu fundamentalist claim that the Aryans were the bedrock of civilization on the Indian subcontinent, rather than part of a later migration. Adopting this hypothesis, the Hindu fundamentalist stakes a claim to be descended from the original or native inhabitants of India, thus distancing Hindus from "immigrant' cultures as the Greeks, Muslims, and the Europeans. By identifying the mythological hero with this Caucasian-Aryan ideal, ACK concretized what was till now an invisible point of origin for the essentialist Hindu utopia, into a historic time-space.

But even as the disavowal of region-specific art styles added to the overall realist scaffolding of the comics' iconography, there was no effort made toward photorealist accuracy, or even strongly distinguishable character features. Though the Caucasian hero-face serves as the base template, it is practically impossible to distinguish ACK's Rama from Krishna, Arjuna, or Shiva by their facial features alone—without the help of accompanying dresses and accessories like headgears, religious markings, or hairstyles such as Krishna's peacock feather, Shivaji's *tilak*,[56] Shiva's matted locks, etc. The lack of any inherent specificity, and therefore a more universal applicability of this Caucasian hero-face is also the second crucial element in ACK's overall iconography.

Scott McCloud points towards the "universal identification" and "amplification through simplification" of iconic images — an argument that Kemp also echoes.[57] This universality of

the icon, achieved through a sparsity of specific details divests the visual sign of its immediate and micro-cultural signifieds and creates a scope for the *ur*-signified to be muted or diffused within a larger nexus of signs linked via *différance*. Without the specific markers of a Bengal-based *pattachitra* eyes and face, or the Kerala-centric attire of Varma's painting, it was easier for ACK to claim their heroes to be truly Indian — both in terms of a geo-cultural generality as well as a historiographic fundamentalism, linking them to an *ur* race, the Aryans.

Thus, to sum up, the ACK artists had already identified an oral narrative and mythic chronotope as the (invisible) point of origin for an essentially Hindu *savarna* golden era.[58] By visualizing their mythological or semi-historical narratives within a scaffolding of amalgamate/derivative "comic book" realism, they then underscored a historicized realist functionality for this mythic chronotope. Next, they identified the heterosexual Hindu male body, and to a lesser extent the heterosexual Hindu female body, as the *locus operandi* for this realist functionality.

Of course, none of these maneuvers are unique to ACK. Pai's comic books were emulating numerous past representations of the Hindu mythological hero on screen, canvas or paper. They were selling the biomechanics of Hindu heterosexual hero-bodies as guidelines for *real*izing a mythic Hindu golden age. For the ACK hero to fully (em)body Pai's golden ideal, however, their remolded corporeality — a less-region specific, vaguely Caucasian super-body divested of the oral narrative's inherent cultural multivalence and history of cross-cultural pollination — would now have to be repopulated with new, more definite nationalist semiotic functions. This was achieved through two additional iconographic edits.

The artists identified the heroic body as the new *locus operandi* for signifying the abstract ideals of "Golden-Age" mythology and ideology. The stature and posture of masculine and feminine bodies developed starker, instantly identifiable differences rooted in one of the

more essentialist facets of western art and design — masculine lines and feminine curves. Within this schema of visual arrangements on screen and surface, the masculine body is drawn with square jawlines, angular noses and ears, sharp cheekbones, V-shaped torsos, and slightly elongated extremities. Structured around rigid lines, the drawn male body is broad shouldered, tall, and moves with forceful motion lines during action sequences. The feminine body, on the other hand, is drawn with rounded or soft-angular jawlines, diffused or absent cheekbones, exaggerated busts and waste-line curves, tapering limbs, and Hartman hips.[59] Consequently, the woman's body drawn with this approach appears more fluid, delicate and fragile, and therefore in need of support from the sturdier corporeality of their masculine counterpart. This approach to drawing human or humanoid bodies is both heteronormative and patriarchal. The resultant image overtly sexualizes the female body and services the male-gaze.

Meanwhile, the androgynous human forms we often encounter in indigenous art styles was increasingly compartmentalized to limited archetypes from the folklore, such as the 'royal eunuch', the 'cursed hermaphrodite', the 'miscreant cross-dresser' etc.[60]

Along with stature and posture, a similarly dissociative assemblage of costume, ornaments and weapons were brought together to adorn ACK's new hero body. Instead of narrowing down on a specific region or culture's native attires and accoutrements, ACK artists trawled through temple carvings, miniature art and textile prints to present an eclectic assemblage of visual markers. [61] This prevented the ACK hero's identification with any regional culture or historical moment, yet overwhelmingly underlined an "Indianness" rooted in history. To the Hollywood hunk's chiseled and gym-toned physique were added the *angavastra*, the halo-topped headgear called *mukut*, the *dhoti* loincloth with a crinkled front sash, and the curved-tipped footwear *jutti*, among others. Adorning the dress as well as the décor were

ornamental lines, mango motifs, and other two-dimensional patterns common to traditional indigenous art styles.

Second, the hero's face too had to be marked in its own set of "Indian" signifiers. While the Caucasian square-jawed hero provided a more uniform basic template, the artists fell back on the classical Sanskrit drama and art traditions of *rasas* and *bhavas* for distinguishing one character's face from the Others'.[62] Individual artistic signatures notwithstanding, this was achieved by exaggerated facial expressions and a meticulous arrangement of stances and postures — often mimicking the *rasa*/*bhava* representations in Indian classical dance and drama traditions. For instance, *veera rasa* or the embodiment of valor, courage, and belligerency, was depicted through an upright stature, a frequent but mellow scowl, haughty stares and, depending on the urgency of this *rasa*, dynamic motion lines. While facial expressions change according to the demands of the scene and the situation, a character's *bhava* or commanding mood are more consistent in ACK. For example, the 17th century Maratha king Shivaji might be angry, sad, or jubilant from one panel, but his dominant *bhava* is *utsaha* (heroism), the corresponding *bhava* for *veera rasa*. The characters as well as ACK's storyline for *Shivaji* would thus be characterized by frequent depictions of *veera rasa;* and the primary characters snapped back into default arrangements of postures and stature corresponding to the *veera rasa*. Similarly, while it was difficult to discern Rama from an identically blue-skinned Krishna, based on their faces and sans accoutrements, the latter would more frequently sport sly smiles and side glances as emotive markers of mischief, as opposed to the former's calm eyes and mild smiles.

Identifying characters with dominant *bhavas* and *rasas* ultimately constructs a visual register which is not only decidedly Indian in its philosophy, but also establishes a correlation of character archetypes with their corresponding aesthetic flavors. As a result, whether it be a 'cruel British officer', an 'overambitious demon king' or a 'despotic Muslim ruler', the villains

across ACK stories are marked by similar facial expressions — large angry eyes, permanent snarls, or near-constant squints signaling a scheming mind — binding them to a common emotional signature, and thus a singular archetype. Thus, over time any corporeality sporting these *bhavas* will be marked by the reader as a character of questionable moral intentions. This visual register helped lock the basic geometric corporeality of the western hero into a binary of iconographic function that has come to characterize a popular and somewhat pedestrian conception of South Asian history. Within this binary function, millennia of territorial conflicts, statecraft and imperial ambitions are reduced to an opposition between the 'Aryan-*Savarna*-Hindu-Indian-Oppressed-Native-Self' and the '*rakshasas*-dalit/adivasis-Muslims-Britishers-Colonizer-Outsider-Other.' Thus, endowed with the markers of a definitive Hindu 'Indianness', the ACK hero wages a constant war against a series of 'outsiders' — the *asuras*/*rakshasas*, the Muslims or the British — whether on the battlefield as a Kshatriya/Rajput, or through the ideological tool of religion as saints and predominantly Brahmin pedagogues preaching to the ignorant 'other'.

Thus, what stood ACK apart from its predecessors, and indeed even bolstered its *bazaar* realism, were its two final and signature moves: its open disavowal of a narrative and cultural multivalence which had otherwise been celebrated by its predecessors; and the coding the hero's corporeality into a rigid diachronic binary of 'us' vs 'them'.

Hence, while initially inspired by a Nehruvian project of national unity and integrity, Pai's 'one nation, one *chitrakatha'* dream ultimately singled out a specific socio-cultural interpretation of histories as *the* history of the Indian nation. Embodying this history was a rigidly hypermasculine, heteronormative Hindu *savarna* body. In reply to the newly verbalized demand for "human resource" that the Five-Year Plans initiated, ACK had proposed the Hindu hero body as the ideal embodiment of a united Indian workforce, a new "phantom ideal."[63] As

we'll see, superheroes like Nagraj or Shaktimaan cannot escape this bodily ideal. If anything, the rigid hypermasculinity was exacerbated with the adoption of the superhero iconography.

Brave New Heroes

By the early 80s, thanks to ACK, comic books had emerged as one of the most accessible and widely accepted forms of daily visual entertainment in most urban centers of India. They were a staple item in a day's share of newspapers and magazines; they were bought for children but read by everyone in the family. They had come to define Indian comics so completely that ACK comics were now the yardstick against which was measured what could or could not be successfully sold as comics in India. At the same time, ACK's success had created a thriving market for comics in India, and inevitably rival publishers would bid to capture the burgeoning readership. From a business as well as a creative sense therefore, disavowing the ACK iconography was both a risky proposition and a necessary first step for any new comic book publisher.

Diamond was one of the few post-ACK comic publishers to achieve the delicate balance between a conformity to the industry standards and innovation. Led by its star artist, Pran Kumar Sharma, Diamond specialized in humor comics, re-tailoring a primarily Franco-Belgian style of the "funnies", to the sensibilities of Indian middle-class households, capturing their daily realities and introducing everyday characters.

One of Pran's most famous creations is *Chacha Chaudhary*, which first appeared first in the Hindi comic magazine *Lotpot* in 1971 and was acquired by Diamond in 1981. The series chronicles adventures of a frail, diminutive old man "whose mind works faster than a computer", and his gigantic strong-man side-kick Sabu,[64] as they go about solving crime in their small fictional town. The pair is visually reminiscent of the leading duo in the *Asterix* titles. Chacha Chaudhary is often considered one of the earliest Indian superheroes. He wears

a massive red turban covering his bald pate, and a waistcoat with a double inside pockets. The red turban is similar to those worn by elders in the Jat community of Haryana, western Uttar Pradesh, and pre-partition Punjab. The waistcoat is distinctly Jodhpuri, from Rajasthan. He carries a wooden walking stick/cane and a pocket watch. The cane is his only line of self-defense when alone, and the watch becomes a recurring circumstantial gadget (propping up objects, solving time related puzzles etc.). Chacha*ji*, as he's frequently addressed, lives in an unnamed village during his *Lotpot* days but moves to an unspecified urban setting with Diamond's acquisition. Chacha*ji*'s ultimate weapon is his sharp intellect and witty rhetoric.

Another widely popular 'proto-superhero' appeared in Indrajal Comics' *Bahadur* titles. The eponymous hero was created by writer Aabid Surti in 1979. Indrajal had been, arguably, the pioneering publication for comic books in India, catering syndicated publications of DC's *Superman*, and King Comics' *Phantom*, *Mandrake*, and *Flash Gordon*, among others. *Bahadur,* their first Indian adventurer-vigilante character, was very much in the tradition of these western heroes. However, unlike his American and British predecessors, Bahadur (trans. Braveheart) wears neither a mask nor a costume and doesn't have a dual identitiy. Instead, Surti wanted to present a clear, if somewhat obvious, image of "modernity with rural roots." Thus, Bahadur wears a pair of denim jeans (modern-urban) and a saffron *kurta* (traditional-rural). Here again, Surti attempts a deliberate assemblage of iconographic markers, this time to advocate a modernity rooted in traditional values and morality.[65]

Both *Chacha Choudhary* and *Bahadur* carry prominent iconographic resemblances to the ACK hero body and are therefore crucial markers in hero's journey from the mythological dreamscapes of ACK to the fraught modernity of Raj Comics titles like *Nagraj* (which I will discuss in detail in my next chapter). Pran's "wise old man" character solves the daily problems

of the same urban middle-class families whom ACK had marked as its prime consumer households; they were Diamond's prime consumers too.

Thus, while ACK and *Chandamama's* heroes were theoretical precedents of working icons, Pran's characters created an operational blueprint for the ideal hero body that could function in their reader's daily reality. (Chacha*ji*'s adventures occur on his daily walks, on the way to the market, or while visiting the bank.) The character has mostly remained rooted in a north-west Indian middleclass household for most of its publication history, dealing with the daily moral dilemmas and crimes that such a household might have faced in the 70s and early 80s.

However, with time, increased popularity, and larger circulations, the plots became more expansive in scope. Even as the national economic conditions restricted the availability of computers to specialized research centers and in a limited capacity, the characters within the comics become aware of larger global contexts such as the Cold War and space-race. Thus, the comics constantly pit Chacha*ji*'s "faster than computer" mind against actual computers, robots, and missile-launching scientists. Each episodic narrative repeats a basic structure wherein Chacha*ji*'s conventional wisdom and common-sense clashes with new-age scientific knowledge and technological wonders, and ultimately wins.

And yet, the comics also borrow narrative elements from animal fables — a genre which ACK exclusively reserved for a more cartoony style. Besides high-tech gadgets and aliens from other planets, Chacha*ji* also encounters enchanted chickens, magic rings, and genies. By the end of each story, however, all fantastical trope and plot elements would be reconciled with the comics' essential logic of 'common sense'. In the process, the comics not only underscore ACK's argument for the "real-ness", authenticity and effectiveness of a

historically informed, primarily Hindu *savarna* knowledge system, but also lend a sense of uncertainty and unreliability to technological futures.

Because *Chacha Choudhary* was primarily a humor comic aimed at young readers, it is often easy to overlook that such a cultural investment in Chacha*ji*'s wit and wisdom also affords similar red-turban-wearing elders from Haryana and Uttar Pradesh to exercise a decisive cultural authority in the 21st century and order/sponsor/execute honor killings on basis of caste and class prejudices.[66] Also ignored is the fact that they often restrict rural and sub-urban communities directly under their jurisdiction to embrace progressive thought and social apparatuses like equal education for all, employment opportunities for women, etc, in the name of their "conventional wisdom" and veneration for traditions. Instead, as the mise-en-scene shifts from a rural setting to small self-contained urban neighborhoods in the comics, there appears a simplistic progression of character echoed by the change of vista. The transition from a rural to an urban milieu is mostly free of internal or external conflicts. Characters easily accept and re-fashion themselves to the new definitions of gender, class, religion, and caste-based rules of propriety which such a move may necessarily entail.

The *Bahadur* titles exhibit a similar suppression of cultural tensions in favor of a smooth rural-to-urban bildungsroman. Bahadur is the son of a feared dacoit from the infamous Chambal valley, and yet he is won over to the "good side" by the very police inspector who kills his father. The character's origin story is thus also a story of reform and turning the child away from revenge, towards judicious and lawful vigilantism. He is repeatedly called on to help the police, the army and fictional paramilitary forces modeled on the BSF or the CRPF,[67] as well as intelligence agencies. While based mainly in the small yet self-contained fictional town of Jaigarh, his missions take him to the wide tree-lined lanes of the national capital, the urban jungle of Mumbai, royal forts in Rajasthan as well as remote rural areas of central-

western India. The real locations bolster the contemporariness of the plots and the characters. The plots replicate structures and themes of classic detective and spy novels. Bahadur prevents the theft of priceless diamonds and destructive weapons, busts crime syndicates and attacks drug-related terrorism. Like Chacha*ji*, Bahadur also finds himself frequently confronted by "rogue science". The focus here however is more on organized crime, such that gadgets are not specifically invented for destructive purposes but are often found in the wrong hands. And so, it is up to the police or their sanctioned heroes, to bring things back to order. All in all, Bahadur is portrayed as the perfect modern citizen in a modern Indian state.

Beneath this veneer of modernity, however, lurks the market-tested ACK hero body. *Bahadur* operates within a similar, if not identical, dichotomous iconographic function. In an interview, Surti noted that each piece of Bahadur's clothing had "its own associations. The blue jeans indicate Bahadur's western-style modernity, while the kurta shows his affiliation to his Indian roots."[68] The dichotomous function of "us" vs "them" has now been reformulated as the facilitator of a cosmetic unification, an overt cosmopolitanism. On the other hand, without his denim jeans, Bahadur would not be discernible from any of the rangers, warriors or kings in ACK's medieval legends and fantasies. He is portrayed as a tall, well-built mustachioed young man, with a mullet. His face is identical to the Caucasian geometricity of ACK's Kshatriya warriors. He constantly snaps back to the postures and statures ACK erects as characteristics of the *veera rasa.* He *is* the ancient Hindu mythic hero, now fighting for modern causes. He is helped by the police, who are portrayed as an honest, hard-working and cohesive security force. Many of the officers are themselves crafted in the ACK hero mold. The ensemble of characters — the central hero, his trusted advisors, his wise 'queen' and his army — bring about a comprehensive replication of ACK's Kshatriya heroes and their armies, with modern paraphernalia.

Moreover, in recreating a set of ruthless and barbaric dacoits, the *Bahadur* titles mimic the facial expressions, built, statures and postures that ACK reserves for its villains. These excessively villainous dacoits often appear as exaggerations and caricatures of actual bandits living in Rajasthan, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and the Morena and Chambal regions of Madhya Pradesh. They speak of "drinking (their) enemy's blood", trample their captives under the hooves of their horses, and are frequently implied to have raped women while pillaging hamlets and villages. Riding on horses with long rifles and swords in hand, they have the same expressions of crazed anger and barbarity which ACK assigned its pan-historical chain of villains. This is not because Govind Brahmania or his son Pramod, who took over from his father as the artist for the *Bahadur* titles, were necessarily copying from the ACK artists. Rather, *Bahadur*'s conformity to dichotomous identarian extremes results from the need to subscribe to the dominant iconography. To connect with a comics readership accustomed with the glorified Hindu heroic corporeality, *Bahadur* also had to maintain a clear identifiability with the established character archetypes.

In fact, the *Bahadur* titles, in their bid to project a modern retention of values from a Hindu golden past, may have deepened the cleft between these binary functions. Even though set against the backdrop of Chambal's violent caste and class dynamics, the region's complicated history of state-sponsored banditry is effaced in favor of "a simple progression from the horrid past to a positive future." And this simple progression is ultimately projected onto a linear movement from rural squalor to urban splendor. The fictional setting of Jaigarh is "replete with the goods and leisure institutions of the Ideological State Apparatus — the world of night clubs, the Rajdhani Express, boarding schools, holiday inns, erstwhile princely estates."[69] The comics gloss over the harsh living conditions and daily violence meted out to Dalit workers in such fine cityscapes. They fail to mention the long history of violence against

Dalits and caste minorities, which turned them to banditry and caused a sudden spike in dacoit activity post-Independence. Most of the dacoits shown in comics either belong to upper-caste Hindu clans like the Thakurs and Rajputs, or are Muslims. Nor are there many references to the sexual abuse of Dalit women and their subsequent turn to dacoity.[70] There's no mention of the involvement of local police personnel, who were mostly upper caste Hindus, in enacting and abetting violence upon Dalit settlements motivated by caste-based sense of entitlement and rage. Instead, crime in *Bahadur* is motivated by "evil", an abstract dark force primarily manifesting in greed for more money and land, and a conventional narrative trope of ambition for world domination.

Simultaneously, there seems to be a push for militarization of civil society as well, reflected in the comics' fictional Citizen's Security Force (CSF), which trains young boys to take up arms and "defend the innocents." Such an organization of young civilians (often teenagers) into trained and militarized groups, which then work with the State and its apparatuses to suppress rebels and internal violence, is an eerie premonition for the formation of private militia armies like the Salwa Judum (2005-2011).[71] A logic also emerges of associating terror with smuggling and drug cartels, clearly referring to the pop cultural perception of the Mumbai-based mafias and their gang wars.[72]

Altogether, *Bahadur* proves to be a crucial premonition for an early-2000 reformulation of the parameters to gauge crime and criminality in India. Chandra provides a crucial insight:

> On the one hand, there is an increasing militarization of civil society; on the other, the sublimation of the notion of terror as a super-ordinate category, transcending the notion of crime itself. By association, this has turned the crime of simple money grabbing into a commonplace phenomenon… While Islamic terror plots or those foisted by the Maoists are seen as ultimate dangers, threatening the sovereignty of the nation, the open loot… is translated into cases of individual or even collective corruption, endemic

but not structural; so that it no longer deserves to be treated on par with anti-national crimes of terrorism. [73]

In *Bahadur*, and to a lesser extent even *Chacha Chaudhary,* the essence of "superhero-business" is therefore a fight between "good" and "evil", where the definition of "good" is routed through a concrete collection of Hindu-heterosexual-savarna reference points, while "evil" falls back on the abstract yet constantly evolving definition of the "other" in ACK. Both these early superhero prototypes invest the Hindu *savarna* body with further authority to make decisions, and act upon these decisions, on behalf of the immediate communities they serve. Even as they provide a refreshing modern foil to the mythological hero of the ACK, they were ultimately bound to the latter's rigid hero corporealities.

Meanwhile, ACK itself had begun to lose steam as the 80s entered their second half. While the growing competition from television is cited as the main cause, there's something to be said about ACK exhausting its "source of popular historical and mythological stories", as well as an internal dissent against Pai's controlling editorial style.[74] Nonetheless, ACK's biggest competition came from a rapid diversification of hero corporealities across media forms. Leading the diversified line-up was the Angry Young Man (AYM), a proletarian outlaw-archetype made famous in Hindi films during the 70s, by then-rising star Amitabh Bachchan.

Angry Young Icons

Star bodies, especially in India, often become forms, structures and conventions. They not only project a corporeality to be emulated, but frequently lay down regimes of physical work driven towards achieving this corporeality. Most importantly, the star body is often seen as the bearer of national and communitarian ambitions and ideals. Vijay Mishra adds:

> As 'complex signs embodying historical cultural and economic meanings, Bombay stars are cultural 'compromises' of a bewildering complexity'… any reading must also admit the possibility of a range of other, potentially conflicting readings. However, it

is imperative to recognize that… star narratives occupy the interstice of myth and a national icon of desire, in addition to embodying multiple sites of contested identities in modern India—of language, region, caste, class, and religion. [75]

This phenomenon can be linked to an essential aspect of traditional Indian dramatics and performance art, wherein an actor essaying a character is defined as the *pātra* (vessel) for the latter. Hence, if one were to project an ideal corporeality — the ACK hero body, let's say — it is the star's already semiotically charged mass of flesh and bones which can and had often served as a suitable *pātra*. In such cases, the star body as a *pātra*, also becomes a conduit for a gamut of emotions that the body politic experiences, or is meant to experience, as a whole at a given moment in time. One of the most prominent examples of such a *pātra* is Amitabh Bachchan and his on-screen persona of the AYM, made famous by a slew of commercially and critically successful films in 1970s and 80s.

One such film is *Deewar* (The Wall, 1975). About thirty minutes into the film, a group of dock workers are shown sitting around a bare steel table, in a workplace canteen. An old dock worker reports the death of one of their colleagues injured in an earlier scene by local thugs, when he refused to pay them protection money. As the old man speaks, the camera zooms quickly onto the face of a younger worker sitting right beside him. This second, younger worker sits with his left elbow on the table, resting his head on his closed fist. His unshaven face looks haggard and his hair messy. The top buttons of his shirt are undone, exposing his hairy chest, glistening with sweat. In sharp contrast to his bright blue shirt, which is a part of the dockworkers' uniform, thick white rope sits around his neck slung around casually like a scarf. At first glimpse it resembles a noose, resting loosely around his neck. The worker sits in silence, chewing at the butt-end of a small cigarette between his teeth. But the most remarkable features of this portrait-shot are the worker's eyes. They stare down and beyond the camera. They are locked in a fixed stare, unblinking, contemplative, and intense. There is an ever so

slight wrinkle of the brows, hardly discernible. Other than that, the face is a portrait of stoic calm, almost expression-less. But the sheer anger and heat his eyes bring to the worker's face, scorches the screen. This worker is Vijay Varma, played by Bachchan. Even as the older worker, Rahim, presents his morbid report in a casual tone, Vijay's darkening visage signals an impending storm. When Rahim stops speaking, Vijay rises up from the table, flicks the cigarette away and, as the camera smash-zooms onto his face for an extreme close-up, ends the scene with poignant dialogue: "रहीम चाचा, जो पच्चीस बरस में नहीं हुआ वो अब होगा. अगले हफ्ते एक और कुली इन मवालियों को पैसा देने से इंकार करने वाला है." ("Uncle Rahim, that which hasn't happened in the last 25 years, will happen now. Next week, yet another *coolie* will deny these goons their protection money.")

The scene presents the AYM at his most iconic. He was a new kind of protagonist for the Hindi films in 1970s. The star personality of Bachchan came to embody the inherent angst of an increasingly disillusioned generation of young urban Indians. The AYM was a manufactured hero, tailor-made to appeal to a burgeoning labor-class consistently migrating to cities like Kolkata and Mumbai since the late 50s.[76] Mishra Explains:

> …he projected (an) antiheroism … onto the figure of a subaltern hero... The rebelliousness thus synthesized reflected the disenchantment, the oppression, the hopelessness of the slum dweller who saw in Bachchan's acts of "antiheroisrn" a symbol of his or her own aspirations. The rags-to-riches theme that always paralleled the narrative of personal revenge in Bachchan's films was the imaginary fulfillment of the slumdweller's own fantasies.[77]

Previous male stars such as Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand, Rajesh Khanna, and others, were primarily romantic heroes. Their narratives were rooted in an educated upper-middle class milieu; their critiques limited to the institution of the family. For these earlier romantic heroes, "conflict was usually personalized" and they were "ultimately impotent in the face of an unjust

society."[78] Bachchan's angry rebel hero was a man of action. His emotional register could be mapped through an emphatic physical reaction. Before him, the romantic hero he displaced was idealistic and self-effacing in his myopic definitions of love and sacrifices [79]

While commonly identified by film historians as an Indian distillation of John Osborne and Kingsley Amis characters, unlike his British angry generation counterparts, the AYM of India was defined by violence — a vociferous corporal expression of his anger. He did not shy away from confrontation; rather he welcomed it, craved for it, as an outlet for his pent-up frustrations. Take for instance *Zanjeer* (1973), Bachchan's career-making movie and the debut of the AYM persona. Bachchan plays the role of Vijay Khanna, a young and honest police officer who is also a stickler for rules and laws. He is not afraid to risk his life opposing the minutest of discrepancies. However, by the end of the second act, Vijay has been charged with false allegations of bribery, stripped of his post and title, and jailed for six months. This begins the hero's slow and painful journey towards an anti-hero. Disillusioned by the system he once revered, Vijay breaks with the law and wages a one-man war against corruption and greedy industrialists who seek to increase their profits at the cost of product quality. Vijay's violent streak however is evident from the outset. In a telling scene, when taunted by Sher Khan, a local goon, that his hauteur and sense of authority are merely the byproducts of his police uniform, Vijay walks into Khan's stronghold dressed in plain clothes and engages him in a street-brawl to prove the words wrong.

In *Deewar*, a few scenes after the canteen scene, Vijay Varma has made good on his promise: he not only refuses to pay the thugs their weekly protection money but also delivers a sound beating to one of their gang members. Now the thugs hunt for Vijay, who's nowhere to be found. While it seems, he has eloped from the docks, it is revealed that Vijay had been lounging in the puruers' own den all along, waiting for the thugs' return. He greets them with

the now famous dialogue: "तुम लोग मुझे ढूंढ रहे हो, और मैं तुम्हारा इंतज़ार यहां कर रहा हूँ" (You are searching for me, while I wait for you here). Both scenes from *Zanjeer* and *Deewar* are followed by action set-pieces now revered by fans and critics alike as two of the most iconic moments defining the AYM on screen. In both instances, the two Vijays are rewarded for these acts of violence — Khanna wins the respect and friendship of Khan, while Varma earns the good graces of Daavar, a well-established businessman and mafia lord, paving the way for his rise to prosperity and notoriety.

By mid-70s the AYM had emerged as one of the most recurrent and, consequently, one of the most identifiable on-screen personas in Indian cinema. Film after film, directors and writers would recreate identical protagonists in the mold of the AYM — often with the same first name too, Vijay (trans. victory) — and unleash him onto a new socio-economic arena each time. Taken together, the entire collection of Bachchan's AYM films appears as one long experiment in determining the efficacy of the archetype against the various contemporary challenges facing the nation. In fact, the AYM persona soon galvanized into a formulaic and ritualized dramatization of a national angst. The character is decisively socialist and, often, begins his character arc as a blue-collar worker. He is a dock laborer in *Deewar*, a coal-mine worker in *Kaala Patthar* (Black Stones, 1979), a mill worker in *Kaalia* (1981) and *Lawaaris* (Illegitimate/Orphan, 1981), a railway station coolie in *Coolie* (1983) and a dockworker again in *Hum* (Us, 1991). Frequently tragic in his origins, the tortured hero then either climbs the social ladder by choosing a life of crime, or clashes with his immediate bosses — industrialists and their lackeys — through acts of self-effacing bravery. There is a ritualized replay of identical plot pointers culminating in similar trajectories for the characters' growth. The canteen scene from *Deewar*, for instance, marks a particularly poignant moment in this ritual — 'the break'. A staple narrative-ploy in the AYM films, 'the break' marks the protagonist's

decision to stop conforming with the status quo and either move against the system or away from it. It is both a moment of *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia*. The hero finally recognizes the inherent 'wrongness' of his world and decides to reverse his present condition as a cog in the wheel.

On one hand, the 'break' moment is a rite of passage in the character's growth arc, which rests the onus of action squarely on the shoulders of the working-class hero. On the other, it establishes the Hindi film hero's new-found sensitivity to 'the world outside'. In the 'break' scene from *Zanjeer*, for instance, the camera lands on an extreme close-up of Bachchan standing behind bars which, as the camera zooms out, are revealed belonging to his bedroom's windows. Bachchan stands staring glumly at the world outside. When Mala, his love-interest, tries to distract him from his melancholy by asking about what color of curtains he'd like her to purchase for their new home, his rage bursts out. He begins by agreeing with her, but the dialogue quickly turns ironic. He storms off screaming, "हाँ माला! हम ज़रूर एक ख़ूबसूरत घर बनाएंगे! और हम भूल जाएंगे कि ये घर जिस दुनिया में बना है वह कितना बदसूरत है, वहां कितने ज़ुल्म है, कितनी बेइंसाफी है! हम ये सब भूल जाएंगे! यही चाहती हो न तुम?! यही होगा" (Yes Mala! We'll surely make a beautiful house for ourselves, and we'll forget how ugly the world is in which the house exists! How cruel, how unfair! We'll forget all of it! Isn't this what you want?! Then so be it). By the end of the scene the camera's position has reversed. The bars of the window don't frame Mala and Vijay, but appear behind them, turning the domestic space into a space of captivity. The rebellious antihero feels uncomfortable, trapped even, in the security and peace of domestic life. He is torn between his promise to lead a safe and low-key life with his beloved on one hand, and his inner urge to set things right with the world outside on the other. This exacerbates his belligerency, his rage.

And this pent-up rage causes a terrifying corpo-formation, across the AYM films. Bachchan's physique came to define a new kind of masculinity: lean and haggard; tall and swaggering; his buttons undone with a full display of his chest hair; and an almost expression-less stoic face which would light-up from time to time with brilliant flashes of anger. He carried a raw, strained charm wrapped in haughty silences and long, fixed glares. In a sense, Bachchan's AYM is a walking idealized phallic symbol: tall, stiff, and virile in his repetitive dynamicity. Despite the presence of larger, buffer hero bodies on screen in Hindi cinema, it was Bachchan's AYM which became the epitome of masculinity in 70s and 80s Bollywood. Yet, Bachchan hardly ever indulges in bare-bodied exhibitions of a gym-toned corporality. His physique is closer to Clint Eastwood's "Man with No Name" and Harry Callahan personas, than the sculpted bodies of hunks like Sylvester Stallone or Schwarzenegger. As an extension of this rugged look of the street-brawler and laborer, the fight sequences in his films too were closer to scrappy scuffles. While still choreographed and performed by stunt artists, they didn't have the polish and staged feel of the high-flying martial art sequences from recent Bollywood and Hollywood action films. The AYM was never trained for a fight even though he was always ready for one. This new action hero corporeality, especially in the earlier films between '73 and '77, reflected therefore not a sculpted finesse, but the rugged strength resulting from constant physical labor.

But the AYM persona changed with the rapid success of Bachchan's films. Right from *Zanjeer*, the AYM films had remained escapist fantasies. In films like *Deewar*, the anti-hero's death and defeat squarely established him as a character to be emulated for his principles and his golden heart. His fall is the cost he pays for daring to live out the fantasies of his audience.[80] With the AYM's increasing popularity, filmmakers began to increasingly amplify the escapism of the narrative. It was ritualized into a singular formula: the wronged hero, a heroine in a

similar predicament and in need of rescuing, lengthy action sequences and an absolute villain. "Anger and revenge become rituals which, finally, destroy the idea of 'character.' Motivation is replaced by generic predictability."[81] As David Chute puts it, by mid-eighties, the AYM persona:

> … had devolved into a subaltern superhero myth in pictures like *Coolie* (1983) and *Mard* (The Man, 1985), garish big-budget cartoons aimed squarely at the groundlings. The Bachchan heroes in these films don't have to tear themselves in two in a fruitless bid to find a place in the world because they aren't really worldly beings. They are proletarian demi-gods, the sweat- stained masters of all they survey.[82]

This formulization of the AYM persona catalyzed a re-formulation of the Indian male hero-body both in comics and on screen, in two specific respects. First, the formulaic and repetitive nature of the Bachchan-AYM combination as a *pātra* ultimately shifted onus of the character away from its socialist roots to the on-screen spectacle of violence. The action set-pieces were no longer scruffy street brawls, but carefully choreographed sequences designed to capitalize on Bachchan's tall physique and his long legs. Bachchan would begin his fights with a run-up and double-legged jump kick, and then go on to punch, flip and throw his opponents around. As compared to the shove, grapple, and push style of the scuffles from his earliest AYM films, these moves presented a more dynamic and energetic display of Bachchan's corporeality. They were graduating away from scruffy street brawls to spectacular action set pieces, laying the groundwork for a new kind of fight scenes in future films and comics.[83]

The AYM put an unprecedented importance on the destructive capabilities of the male body, unlike what one had seen in the ACK comics or an earlier generation of Hindi films. The resultant hero-body was at once less rigid and more dynamic in its celebration of the male form, and yet more rooted in a heteronormative patriarchal notion of labor. His lean tall stature, long

legs, and exaggerated swagger bolstered the phallogocentric nature of his heroism. The "productive"-ness of his masculinity was emphasized in his potential to wreak havoc on the goons, and his constant urge to take on a political-economic system far more intricate and powerful than his own power-position.

In fact, this also ties into the second crucial consequence of the AYM's recurrent ritualization: a reification of conservative and patriarchal notions of how female bodies should respond to social, political and personal crisis. However, to understand the AYM films' treatment of women's bodies, one must also consider their crucial dialectic vis-à-vis anti-authoritarian discourses in mainstream Hindi cinema. The AYM persona presented a critique of the increasingly authoritarian rule of the current Indira Gandhi government, highlighting systemic corruption, the nexus of ministers and industrialists in illegal land-grabbing and international smuggling. Yet, the Vijays' fight against corruption usually targeted industrialists, businessmen, landlords and smugglers, rather than corrupt ministers themselves. Most AYM films blame the big industrialist of filling his own coffers at the expense of his workers and preventing the governments' welfare funds to reach their intended audiences. Bachchan's character hardly ever targeted the Prime Minister or governments directly. It is only in late-80s, that the 'corrupt minister' begins to distinctly feature as a prime villain archetype in Hindi action films.

In fact, Bachchan's close familial ties with the Nehru-Gandhis would have prevented Bachchan or his scriptwriters to mount a direct attack on their governments in his films.[84] Instead, the AYM films were indirectly responsible for attacking an essential aspect of Indira Gandhi's iconicity. As India's first, and so far, only woman Prime Minister, Gandhi's meteoric rise and political dominance in a male-dominated cabinet and parliament, had wide-ranging effects on the portrayal of women and women's bodies in pop culture and media. Empowered

women characters like Bela in the *Bahadur* comics, for instance, were designed not to be defined by their sexuality alone or by their efficiency in the domestic space. Rather, these were educated women developing strategies and solving problems in occupational sectors traditionally marked as the man's exclusive domain. This was, in no minor way, a ripple effect of Gandhi's success in a national politics and her charismatic personality. The AYM films, on the other hand, are deeply misogynistic and take an "antiwoman, antifeminist, and sometimes even antimother stance", to celebrate the new masculinity of its working-class hero. "The masculine domination is such that Amitabh Bachchan's films constitute a really one-actor genre whose closest counterparts are the Hollywood westerns."[85]

Again, Bachchan's heroines in both *Zanjeer* and *Deewar* are great examples of this phenomenon. In *Zanjeer*, Mala is introduced as a fiery street-performer and cutler with no discernible family or community background. She is popular with children, but tough on crooks. In her introductory scenes, she takes down a man twice her build, spewing angry abuses as she showers him with kicks and punches. By the second act however, even though the film doesn't show them formally tying the knot, she is all but Vijay's demure housewife who has been "trained" in the ways of the household by his elder sister-in-law. She now dreams of running his household, cooking for him and "sewing buttons onto your shirts." A majority of Mala's scene establishes her as the domestic foil to Vijay's call of duty. She repeatedly cites a "stable life" centered around Vijay as her prime lifegoal. The transformation is also echoed through the changes in Jaya Bhaduri's wardrobe. As a street-side performer, Bhaduri's Mala sports gypsy skirts, head bands, long dangling earrings, and an abundance of 'junk-jewelry'. As Vijay's 'domesticated' love-interest, she has lost the gaudy jewelry, and wears *saris* — a defining mark of the Hindu middleclass housewife — in mellow, muted tones. The old, fiery cutler Mala appears one last time in the climactic fight scene as the film's *deus ex machina*,

when her knife throwing skills saves Sher Khan's life. As part of the film's final resolution however, any chance for further recommencement of the cutler Mala is eliminated when, after finishing off the main villain, Vijay throws her knife into a pool of water and walks away holding hands with her. Mala's fierce belligerence, therefore, cannot be her natural persona, unlike her male doppelgangers — Vijay and Sher Khan. Instead, her fiery nature and fighting impulses must be necessarily contained within the corporeality of the meek and subservient housewife. If unleashed at all, it merely ensures the hero's safety and fulfills the film's narrative demands.

In *Deewar*, Vijay Verma's girlfriend Anita, portrayed by Parveen Babi, is an ambivalent figure. Like Mala, her narrative too begins free of familial or communitarian bonds. There's no definite corporeal marker of any religious subscription either. She meets Vijay in a bar, "where in blatant disregard to the norms of Hindi films, where only a vamp can be so forward, she approaches him wearing a slinky, sexy dress, lights his cigarette and introduces herself." Like Vijay, Anita too is an outsider, a wanton, an outcast — amply made clear by the cigarette and her "forwardness". But while Vijay's wantonness is grounded in a backstory of tragic loss and corporate exploitation, both Anita and Mala's personal losses are merely indicated and left to be assumed by the audience. Like Mala, Anita too begins as a strong self-sufficient character, but gradually transforms into a foil to highlight the intricacies of the Vijay character. She is often the immediate audience for his soul-searching monologues and his confessions. She is the proof of his "beneath-a-rough-exterior good heart", as the recipient of his mercy, love and generosity which are visualized on screen in the form of a house, implication of a sexual relationship and a regular monetary help that she receives from Vijay. This glosses over the frequent, derogatory, and not so subtle references to her profession (implied to be prostitution) from Vijay. Anita, instead of feeling "offended by (these) somewhat

offensive statement(s), …carries with her a sense of her stigma and appears to have internalized it." For her, "to be treated with contempt is less than remarkable."[86] Like Mala, the script never allows her to similarly confide her thoughts in Vijay; in a quintessential patriarchal move the script restricts her to being a vessel for both Vijay's corporeality and his emotions while never letting him share her internal conflicts; a recipient and never a donor. However, while Mala gets to change from her gypsy skirts into the housewife's *sari*, Anita treasures her mother's red *sari* as a promise for "normalcy" and assimilation back into the society that shuns her, but never lives to see the dream fulfilled. She is killed in the very scene she dons the *sari* in preparation for marriage with Vijay.[87]

The AYM persona is a reification of traditional gender equations, not only in its celebration of a hypermasculine and violent male body, but also the reduction of all surrounding bodies as mere props for the central rebellious hero. This aspect of the action hero also becomes a defining aspect for later superheroes like Shaktimaan. Most importantly, both these aspects of the new Hindi film action hero were normalized and ultimately internalized into the DNA of the comic book superhero, thanks to a narrative affinity the AYM's ritualistic recurrence has to the superhero genre.

The ritualistic recurrence of the AYM character across movies, in many ways, parallels the logic of Golden- and Silver-age American superhero comics. It's an episodic re-play of one central hero across varying social scenarios and with new villains. In other words, the Angry Young Man functioned like a superhero too. No wonder, it became a fascination with directors and script writers to pull Bachchan into an increasing number of superhero/vigilante roles in his later years — *Shehenshah* (The Emperor, 1988), *Toofan* (The Storm, 1989), *Ajooba* (The Prodigy, 1991) etc. He had debuted and perfected one superhero; why not use his immense star-

status to initiate others?[88] And Bachchan seems to have done just that; not on the silver screen though, but on the pages of Star Comics, an imprint of India Book House.

That Bachchan was already being equated with western superheroes receives proof in this recollection from Bakshi, creator of *Supremo* and the editor of film magazine *Movie*:

> One day, I saw some children playing in my building. They wanted to be superheroes — some wanted to be Superman and some Batman. But when Amitabh's name was dropped, all of them started fighting as every child wanted to be Amitabh Bachchan.[89]

And so, Bakshi came up with the idea of selling a superhero who was already famous. They wouldn't have to consistently churn out best-selling titles and issues to build a fanbase. *Supremo*'s sales were to be powered largely by Bachchan's star power.[90]

The *Supremo* titles ooze legitimacy. Famous Hindi poet, scriptwriter, and lyricist Gulzar oversaw the writing department. Bachchan reviewed and approved the final look of Supremo, after Pratap Mullick had submitted eight to ten character-designs. Star Comics left no stones unturned to hitch Supremo to the Bachchan bandwagon. The comics featured several cameos from Bachchan's usual posse of co-stars — Hema Malini, Rekha, Shatrughan Sinha, Dharmendra etc. One usually finds them hanging around Bachchan on set in the initial scenes, before he gets a call, sneaks away to his secret underwater lab, and emerges as Supremo. The comics are also riddled with references to his films: his two sidekicks were called Vijay and Anthony, based on his popular character names; he quotes famous dialogues and notes the similarity between situations in the comics and his films; and he has a pet falcon *à la Coolie*.

Secondly, Bakshi zeroed in on children as her prime target audience. Most of Bachchan's films had been rated U or U/A (unrestricted or adult supervision). But some like *Deewar* or *Don* would be doubly censored by parents thanks to the films' allusions to sex and open depiction of violence. Working under India Book House, and therefore practically a sister

publication to ACK, Star Comics decided to clean-up any bits of impropriety from the AYM and re-dressed him for the kids. Each issue either began or ended with the image of a letter from Bachchan, supposedly written in his own handwriting, and addressed explicitly to children. In the letter he lets his young readers in on a secret: Bachchan is indeed Supremo. Every narrative also begins with plain-clothed 'Amit' meeting with children for autographs, addressing them in functions, etc. The prime drivers of the narrative are children too — lost children, kids under mind control, child-trafficking etc. There's no sign of blood in the panels. While Supremo carries guns and fires them frequently, he shoots to scare or injure and never kill. His main weapon, nonetheless, is his physical strength. In terms of narrative genres, the comics are a mix of staple genres of children's magazines: action-adventure, fantasy, sci-fi and detective/crime-fighter stories. Supremo rescues alien princesses, battles dacoits of Chambal (like Bahadur), solves high-profile thefts and robberies, and even fights hijackers on airplanes.

However, it is Mullick and his team's characterization of Bachchan which completes the transition of the superstar-body into a superhero-body so seamlessly. Unlike the artists for mythological comics, Indrajal or even RC later on, Mullick and his team of artists working on *Supremo* were trying to capture a living corporality on their pages. They aimed for a near-exact verisimilitude when drawing Bachchan's face and figure. The covers mimicked the photorealism of Hindi film posters, while the modified *ligne claire* inside paid painstaking attention to the details and proportions of Bachchan's physique. Bakshi recounts that Mullick wasn't interested in movies, nor was he too familiar with his films. He had to watch several of Bachchan's films before he could begin laying out the concept art for the comics. Consequently, as a direct source for Mullick's art and art direction, the scenes from several of Bachchan's hit films find direct replicas in the panels of *Supremo* comics. For instance, in "Hijack", when Bachchan is shown lounging in his trailer, he wears lavish shirts and his iconic

bell-bottoms trousers. His butterfly-collar shirts have décolleté necklines, or have their top-buttons undone, exposing his chest-hair. The complete arrangement of the mise-en-scene, his costume and his accoutrements mimic a common pose from films such as *Don* (1978), *Deewar* and *Kaalia* where the AYM in his gangster avatar is seen similarly lounging, resting between action scenes. In the film he usually has a glass of whiskey on him; in the comics, he reads books. In "Dacoit Queen", Supremo chases bandits and engages them in a gun battle in a manner identical to the climatic scenes of *Sholay* (1975). Thus, neither the superhero nor the plain-clothed 'Amit', capture the Amitabh Bachchan behind the camera, away from the limelight or in the privacy of his home. Instead, in most panels, it's the Angry Young Man now essaying the role of Amitabh Bachchan.

The resultant hero body is both a transmedia translation as well as a reification of the hypermasculine corporeality of the AYM. The highly energetic street brawls from the films meet Mullick's dizzying motion lines, heightening the dynamicity of the body in action. Bachchan's tall stature appears even taller when it frequently breaks out of panels or is shown standing hunched in closed spaces. While ACK's need to differentiate one identical Caucasian face from another was realized through an exaggeration of facial expressions according to the *bhava* tradition, *Supremo* tones down Bachchan's face to a near-expressionlessness, replicating the AYM's stoic gaze.

Simultaneously, as a veteran of ACK comics, Mullick also channeled the basic structural templates of their hero bodies for *Supremo*. Men and women's bodies were structured on straight and curved lines depending on their gender roles. And a clear dichotomy emerges between the visual representation of heroes and villains. Thus, Supremo is not merely the AYM in a super-suit. He is also the divine hero posing as an action hero. Critical studies by Vijay Mishra and Ashwini Sharma prove that the AYM had always exhibited a natural

affinity with established archetypes and characters from Indian mythology. Mishra points out how the AYM is a modern avatar of the rebellious anti-hero Karna in the *Mahabharata* as opposed to the more traditional, idealist romantic Bollywood hero who emulate Rama from the *Ramayana.* This is not to say however that the artists were necessarily trying to fit Supremo into the ACK iconography. Rather, a general pattern of characterizing the male superhero-body persists from ACK comics through *Bahadur* to *Supremo*. For *Supremo*'s readers, while the superhero was still more clearly identifiable with the superstar, he also carried forward the lineage of an increasingly distinct archetype of the Indian superhero. Even though this was a modern hero-body, the Indian superhero appeared increasingly divine.

In Hindu mythology, most major gods and goddesses are believed to have reincarnated from time to time to rectify surges of evil in the society. One of the most renowned narratives of this reincarnation pertains to Vishnu and his ten *avatars*. And the most oft-quoted "proof" of this reincarnating divinity appears in the *Bhagavad Gita*'s chapter 4, verses 7-8:

<div align="center">

यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भवति भारत ।
अभ्युत्थानमधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजाम्यहम् ॥४-७॥
परित्राणाय साधूनां विनाशाय च दुष्कृताम् ।
धर्मसंस्थापनार्थाय सम्भवामि युगे युगे ॥४-८॥

</div>

(Whenever and wherever there is a decline in religious practice, O descendant of Bharata, and a predominant rise of irreligion—at that time I descend Myself.
In order to deliver the pious and to annihilate the miscreants, as well as to reestablish the principles of religion, I advent Myself millennium after millennium.)[91]

What is AYM if not this reincarnating messiah, a "proletarian demi-god" packaged on screen to address the desires of slum-dwelling urban labor classes in major Indian metropolises? In turn, while Supremo is also one of these several incarnations — one in a long line of Angry Young Men — he's himself a recurring presence, thus amplifying the recurrent nature of the AYM's divinity. It reifies therefore, not just the hypermasculine ideal corporeality

of the ACK hero, but also the comics' promise for the return of a golden age in the cyclicality of its ritualistic recurrence. Simply put, *Supremo* was the ACK thesis turned upside-down. Instead of claiming that the divine mythological hero was a homegrown Indian formula for the superhero, it provided narrative and iconographic proof that the superhero was a modern working-model of the divine Hindu hero. In 1997, *Shaktimaan* would provide a louder, more boisterous articulation of this thesis.

The Stage is Set

It would be wrong to claim that ACK comics and the AYM films were the only iconographic trend-setters in India between the nation's independence from British rule in 1947, and the birth of Nagraj nearly forty years later. As I have stated, any sweeping statement regarding Indian consumers and their tastes will be an over-generalization. There are two primary reasons for this: the complex diversity of regional and national media industries and visual cultures, many of whom do not receive the light of mainstream media coverage or media historiography; and the blatant disregard for under-represented voices and communities in mapping a "comprehensive" percolations of media forms and genres within the subcontinent. This project does not claim to either present any such comprehensive map of iconographic percolation or give voice to the subaltern. Again, the key question is, how have iconographies like those forwarded by like ACK comics and the AYM films managed to infiltrate such a wide range of media narratives over time?

We have already seen how ACK comics and the AYM films generated popular appeal by positing their heroes as universalized icons. In fact, even their contemporary media narratives, including comic titles like *Bahadur,* as well as regional films, were quick to jump on their narrative and iconographic bandwagons, trying to replicate their success in their respective target-markets. As we'll also see in the next chapter, the process of iconographic

adoption and adaption occurs simultaneously at global and local levels. Just as ACK and AYM were selling their own proto superheroes, they too were being reformulated for smaller, more diverse markets across India. And this is where the story of *Nagraj* begins.

*****

NAGRAJ: **SUPERHEROES ARE DIVINE**

One otherwise unremarkable morning in New Delhi, August 1999, our teacher apprehended my friends and I trading comic books in school. Within mere minutes, we were robbed of our entire collection — more than fifty comic books in total.

I was eight-years old and, by then, an avid reader and fan of comics. I received my first set at the age of four, handed down to me by my uncle. For a 90s kid growing up in one of the major urban centers of India, it wasn't uncommon to read comic books as essential primers in our pre-school education. They were passed down from parents, uncles and aunts, cousins, and older siblings, and hoarded for later generations. Often, one found these heirlooms heavily scribbled or even missing a few pages.[92] Despite the wear and tear, though, comic books remained a prized possession not just for the child but the entire family in middle-class urban households.

Nonetheless, that 'raid' of '99 confirmed something I had previously only suspected: not all comic books enjoyed high standings in the world of adults. For while our teacher did spare two titles, allowing me to keep Amar Chitra Katha's (ACK) *Ramayana* and DC's *Superman* Vol 2. #53, she saw fit to lock away the others, including a personal favorite: RC's *Nagraj*.

Ian Gordon identifies Superman as an icon. Stressing the ubiquity of the Man of Steel's media representations, Gordon remarks, "Each Superman media form is an opportunity to marry individual memory to collective memory through a narrative."[93] But Nagraj, arguably the first Indian comic book superhero, is not considered an icon.[94] While it is impossible to

deny the widespread popularity of this 1986-born wall-climbing "King of Serpents", he does not have the immense cultural currency of a Superman, even in his native India.

There is, however, another character whose iconicity within Indian and several Southeast Asian cultures does compare to and, some would argue, eclipses the iconicity of Superman. This character is Rama, the hero of the ancient epic poem *Ramayana*, and a major Hindu deity as well as a staple presence in Indian popular media, including comic books.[95] The comics-trading kids in my class held all three — Rama, Superman and Nagraj — in equal reverence. The teacher's clear preference for two of these, and aversion for the third, was thus a moment of revelation for all of us. Suddenly marked out as "obscene street literature, un-fit for children,"[96] our once prized RC and Diamond titles experienced a decisive fall from grace amongst my friends over the following few days.

Truth be told, it wasn't entirely wrong to define *Nagraj* or his RC peers as "street literature." Compared to the older and more respectable ACK, RC was something of an upstart press, whose titles were mostly found lined up on pavements in New Delhi markets or at newsstand vendors in railway stations, alongside Hindi pulp fiction novels. By contrast, the publications of ACK and *Chandamama* — comics based on Hindu mythology — were either found clipped onto clothesline ropes in street-side stalls or placed atop shelves in brick-and-mortar bookshops. Most religions practiced in India maintain a stern disapproval for the disrespectful handling or potential soiling of images of their deities, and because ACK comics carry images of gods and goddesses on their covers and insides they therefore could not be left lying on pavements.[97] Even today, ACK comics are often considered a medium of *darshan* or view-worship and remain a part of a larger category of pop-art commodities (such as illustrated calendars, trinkets, locket, etc.) which, despite their mass-production, maintain an aura of reverence.

DC and Marvel too had a secure place in *pucca* bookshops, although it was the American publications' higher cost which kept them beyond the reach of pavement-dwelling vendors. RC comics, on the other hand, thanks to their low cost and cultural reputation as 'bootlegs' or 'copies' of American superheroes, remain identified as "street literature" today.

And yet by the early 1990s, the hero of "obscene street literature", Nagraj, had brought together the iconographic vocabularies associated with Rama and Superman, the mythological hero and the superhero, into a singular super-body. Indeed, this iconographic consolidation was evidence that *Nagraj* and his RC successors were, at their core, fan creations. The Gupta brothers—the creators of Nagraj—were among the first Indian comic book creators who were also comics fans.[98]

Unlike the majority of comics creators in the US, most first-generation Indian comic artists and writers did not begin their careers as fans of pulp and genre fictions. ACK's artists and storytellers instead fashioned themselves as teachers and preservers of an 'Indian' culture. The RC superhero universe, on the other hand, resembled fan fictions. They paid homage to (or freely plagiarized from) Marvel and DC, and King's Syndicate titles such as *Phantom* and *Mandrake,* as well as to ACK. The earliest RC titles are thus marked by a fan-like propensity to splice together elements from media franchisees into new works. The RC characters have powers, origins, and secret identities akin to American superheroes, but crossover story arcs and individual issues incorporate plotlines and thematic elements from Indian epics and folk tales.[99] Evidently, like my cohort of schoolfriends, the Gupta brothers too had had an equal fascination and respect for both Indian *and* western comics and borrowed heavily from both oeuvres. This hybrid approach to creating comics made the Guptas' superheroes stand apart from earlier Indian proto superheroes such as Diamond's *Chacha Chaudhary* or Indrajal's *Bahadur*.

Moreover, as fans *and* creators, the brothers were also aware of the challenges of translating these diverse iconographic languages into new narratives. They were particularly aware of how deep-rooted the ACK iconography was in Indian visual culture, but also felt the need to distinguish themselves from that particular approach. Speaking to me in 2019, Sanjay Gupta — then-studio head of RC — said, "ACK draws the flying superhuman as gods. We could not do that. We needed to distinguish ourselves from the art style which might remind people of calendar art, temple images and holy stickers. A superhero doesn't fly like Hanuman."[100] This statement shows a clear awareness of the previously dominant iconographic technique of the Indian comics market and reveals that Gupta and his brothers saw the superhero as a way of moving Indian comics in a less familiar direction. As he went on to explain:

> The superhero is, after all, American. We had no homegrown formula for something like that. We did not know what superheroes do, how they act, how they speak, what are their relations with other characters etc. It was all from what we had seen in *Phantom*, *Mandrake* and *Spider Man*. And yet, we wanted to make an Indian superhero. It had to be *distinctly* Indian.[101]

However, Gupta's assertion that Indian comics "had no homegrown formula" for the superhero flies in the face of an oft-repeated claim by both ACK artists and the comics' loyal fans: that mythological heroes were already India's answer to and "homegrown formula" for the American superhero. In fact, Hindu mythological figures and deities are still hailed as "Indian superheroes" across multiple media projects in India today, and especially by Indian comic-book publishers. Gupta's assertions would also deny characters like Bahadur, Agniputra Abhay or Fauladi Singh a claim at being the first Indian superheroes. But perhaps more important than these arguments about cultural priority is the fact that Gupta felt that the RC

comics needed to both draw from *and* distinguish themselves from American comics *and* first-generation Indian comics alike.

What implications — in terms of narrative as well as iconographic vocabulary — does RC's propensity to emulate *yet* distance from older examples of superhero comics, hold for *Nagraj*? To answer, we must first understand the larger transformations evident in both American and Indian comics during the late 70s and early 80s.

Foreign Fluxabilities

The decades of 1960s through 80s, marked an important turn in superhero comics and superhero narratives in general, globally. By the end of the 70s, major DC and Marvel properties like *Batman*, *Superman*, *Spider-Man* and *Wonder Woman* had all garnered immense popularity transmedia figures, either in animated TV series, live action films, telefilms, or in all these formats.[102] By 80s, the production and distribution of superhero-centric TV and film series had risen exponentially both within and outside the United States, causing a rapid escalation in their global visibility and recognition.

More crucially, the decades of 1960s through the 1980s also marked a definite shift towards a more cosmopolitan roster of superheroes in both American comics. Marvel's *X-Men* run had introduced a wider range racial and ethnic types in a character-based extended narrative. With *Spider-Man* and *The Fantastic Four*, there was a focus on the frustrations of ordinary life—whether as an adolescent or in a family. They repeatedly encountered and battled failure, at a personal and intimate levels. As the X-Men and the Hulk, they were monsters and outcasts abhorred by institutions and individuals of authority. Their superpowers were frequently seen as a threat rather than a shield for the civil society, by the state and its apparatuses. Moreover, they were "notoriously bad laborers, neither capable of holding down steady jobs nor interested

in conceiving of their ethical service to the world in economic terms."[103] In sum, the superhero had ceased to be a red, white, and blue monomyth celebrating white-American nationalism.

At the same time, DC's *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985-86) — though aimed at a more conservative consolidation of its multiple narrative arcs — ended up destabilizing the internal narratives of American superhero mythology. Over the years, DC writers had created parallel Earths as plot devices and to house characters the comics giant had acquired from other companies. *Crisis* was aimed at simplifying the resulting narrative clutter and boost sales. Instead, the marquee crossover event cemented the "multiverse" approach, wherein multiple superheroes would be taken out of their individual compact worlds of recurring characters and events, plot tropes and personality traits, and pitted them in interaction with other characters and alternate versions of themselves, from across vast geographical and cosmological spaces.

Earlier, several different 'variants' of Superman existed, within the confines of their specific narrative arcs. Some of these 'variants' may or may not stand for the iconic significations which readers have come to traditionally relate with Superman. One of the Supermen might have lost his superpowers, one might belong to a different ethnic community, another could have a different sexual preference and so on. There was also the chance encounter between these variants. Now, existing within a singular shared multiverse, the frequency of these encounters increased. On a narrative level, the 'multiverse' narrative trope complimented the post-war superhero's fluxability — a variable constancy replacing constant variability.

As the multiverse brought super-bodies in contact with their alternate versions, as well as a myriad of races and cultures, a "cross-cultural encounter rather than assimilation became the primary site of political world-making in the superhero comic book."[104] Against a constant presence of the Cold War in public consciousness and popular culture, the readers of American comics were drawn to increasingly fraught narratives where it wasn't easy to paint "a stable

post-communist world dominated by American cultural and economic value."[105] The superhero body was moving away from a seamless, glorious American ideal that ultimately saved other cultures from their own flaws, and from endangerment. The superhero body could not simply demarcate and isolate foreign cultures within a nation's geographic space, into bottled cities or icy fortresses, even if these were their native cultures. Nor could they be hidden away on islands behind magical mists. Instead, as Fawaz notes:

> Postwar superhero comics facilitated "transformative encounters between strangers variously construed" on multiple levels. They depicted expanding casts of superhuman characters "negotiating the experience of otherness" within a vast cosmos, while fostering "ethical ideals" of democratic debate between creators and readers about the aesthetic and political content of superhero stories. These varied scales of engagement produced countless opportunities for developing multiple, "internally complex" solidarities—between and among comic book characters, readers, creators, and various political visions—that embodied a cosmopolitan willingness to be transformed by encounters with new worlds, bodies, ideas, and values.[106]

This "cosmopolitan willingness to transform" ushered in two distinct inferences about the American superheroes as they made their way into the hands of the Indian readers. The American superhero was no longer strictly American; the mythology had expanded, as had the pantheon. They now had the willingness to transform and transfer their allegiances. If the American superhero could be a Greek goddess or a Norse god, so could they belong to the Hindu pantheon. If, by the logic of narrative in the *X-Men* titles, genetic mutation could endow powers to Native American warriors, shamans from fictional African nations and Chinese warlords, then such powers could also be found in wonder babies left to die in the jungles of Assam (*Nagraj*). And if they were not always wearing the red, blue and whites, the American superhero might as well wear saffron, white, and green — the colors of the Indian national flag (*Tiranga*).

No wonder then, that the 80s saw two (unofficial) Indian remakes of the 1978 Hollywood film *Superman*. While the 1987 Hindi remake was a near identical copy of the storyline and even stole clips from the original, the earlier Telegu remake from 1980 depicted the titular hero not as an alien superbeing but a devotee of the Hindu deity Hanuman, who is bestowed with the monkey-god's powers when he is a child. The fascination with reinventing the American superhero therefore often manifested in the form of 'copies' — a seemingly unquestioning adoption of US comic book conventions, in the form of characters identical to established American heroes. RC is a prime example. Even today, most of their characters are identified as 'copies' or 'amalgams' of US comic heroes.[107]

Also, the superhero body was itself in transition; they displayed a willingness to transform corporeally. "The visual instability of the superhero's body across time and space negated the figure's previous iconic status as a seemingly invulnerable masculine body by proliferating countless permutations of the superhero that refused to cohere into a unified image or physiology."[108] However, while a fluxability of form was crucial for the American superhero body to cross cultural borders, a similar emancipation was complicated for the Indian comics-hero. Thanks to the gamut of iconographic vocabularies that informed their corporealities, including the golden-age ACK ideal, the Indian superhero would acquire a very different kind of fluxabilities.

Populist Reparations

By the early 80s, thanks to ACK's overwhelming popularity, a growing number of publishers had begun to print narratives identical to those in ACK. They copied ACK's page layouts, character designs, mise-en-scenes, and the basic narrative templates. This process of replication ultimately exposed cracks in the ACK iconography. Despite its disavowal of regional stylizations, the inherent multivalence of its narratives as well as the formative influences of its

artists did shine through. One such articulation of these inherent discrepancies appeared in the form of action-adventure comics. With *Bahadur* and the Angry Young Man's (AYM)[109] popularity as an added incentive, a series of late-70s and early-80s action-adventure comics such as *Agniputra Abhay*, *Fauladi Singh*, *Dynamite*, and *Manas Putra* were published by Diamond, and other new but short-lived publications like Nutan Chitrakatha, Chitra Bharti Kathamala, etc. Their titular heroes were time-displaced ancient warriors, space-adventurer cyborgs, and intergalactic cowboys. These titles responded to such early American pulp and comic heroes such as Tarzan, He-Man, and Flash Gordon — the most readily available genre of American pop-culture narratives, in a pre-liberalization era, thanks to syndication in Indian newspaper strips, and children's magazines.

But the similarity did not end in narrative, stylistic, and iconographic influences. Rather, this phase of action-adventure titles in Indian comics also replicated the American superhero comics' umbilical connection to early-twentieth-century pulp magazines. Brought out by publishers of Hindi pocketbooks, these action-adventure comics borrowed heavily from contemporary vernacular pulp as well as western genres of popular fiction. Like the genre fictions published in American pulp magazines, these comics offered titles structured around conventions of action-adventure, sci-fi, and horror narratives, and could range from sensationalist to downright lurid. Most importantly, the influence of Hindi pulp and 18th century fantasy fiction also introduced those strains of Hindu mythology and folklore which were considered too sexually loaded or kitsch by ACK. As such, the resultant hero bodies which appeared on the pages of *Agniputra Abhay* or *Fauladi Singh*, broke the mold of the rigidly structured idealized hero body that ACK promoted. The tall, well-built, but essentially naturalistic physique of the ACK hero gave way to more exaggerated musculature and

hybridization—the furs and fangs of werewolves, the shiny plastic bodies of robots and androids—paving the way for new kinds of fluxable hero bodies in RC, Tulsi, Nutan etc.

Additionally, the serialized retelling of contemporaneous narratives was also a new phenomenon in the 1970's Indian comics. While ACKs regularly featured biographies of political leaders, activists, revolutionaries, Nobel Laureates, educationists, and social workers etc., these biographies were single-issue narratives. Even when part of a collection, lives of each personality would be summed up in short narratives. They were presented as lessons in history with an emphasis on the individual's major life events and achievements. The abbreviated format required these tales to gloss over the minutia of the protagonist's daily existence and the intricacies of their contemporary social, political, and economic realities in favor of essentializing a moral and didactic tale. Therefore, in this respect too, *Bahadur* and his action-adventure peers introduced a crucial departure from the dominant narrative formats pioneered by ACK. They were some of the first comics to indulge in minutely detailed world building. With narratives spanning across 200 issues or more, the artists and writers had ample space to develop both their characters and the fictional worlds in which they were located. Often, they would add details and intricacies to the character in response to readers' letters and the queries therein.

For instance, in Diamond Digest #27, which carried the third story in the *Fauladi Singh* series, the writers and artists dedicate no less than 20 painstaking pages to explain the intricacies of Faulad's super suit and the various gadgets he uses. They detail his invulnerability down to the nasal follicles, inventing quirky gadgets such as hair-steeling-spray, bulletproof transparent facemasks, and more. Throughout this lengthy exegesis, the writers repeatedly clarify that they are offering this information in response to doubts or questions readers may have expressed in their letters. Fawaz points at the crucial role of fan letters and letters to the

editor in connecting the post-war American Superhero to the masses, and treats them as evidence that Marvel Comics, in particular, took a cosmopolitan approach to world building in the 1960s and 1970s — partly in response to the desire of fans.[110] Arguably, we a similar process evident in the response from *Fauladi Singh*'s writers and artists.

Thus, as corollary to the larger project of modernizing the Indian comic book hero, evident in *Chacha Chaudhary* and *Bahadur*, comics titles began increasingly to indulge in fictional world-building, populating these fantasy or realistic fictional universes with commonplace character archetypes. Indian comic fans could now find the mythic hero in contemporary settings, fighting for them and dealing with the same issues that they also dealt with daily — battling traffic, haggling at fruit stalls, and complaining about power outages. Characters such as Chacha Chaudhary were also eating seasonal foods and singing the latest hit Bollywood numbers. Others, such as Faulad, whose fictional realities were set in distant futures or off-planet, maintained their contemporary perspective by keeping up to date with concerns and expectations of their readers voiced in fan letters. The entry of non-superhero American and Western comic titles like *Archie* and *Tintin* into the Indian market in the late 1960s and early 70s, seems to have further highlighted the opportunities offered by fictional world-building for connecting with readers and their daily realities.

Ultimately, these modifications to the ACK style of heroic narrative laid a foundation for an emergent strain of populism. Indeed, the basic idea of creating a new breed of superheroes that did not resemble the traditional, teacher- and parent-approved narratives of the first-generation of mythological comics, suggested a democratization of Indian comic book narratives.

Meanwhile, with the decline of ACK, and the rising popularity of titles like *Bahadur* or *Fauladi Singh*, an important question arises regarding the choice of narrative and

iconographic genres made by the second generation of comic book publishers: why the superhero? Neither *Chacha Chaudhary* nor *Bahadur* ticks all the traditional boxes for a superhero. The former was a sleuth by hobby, the latter an adventurer-vigilante. None of Indrajal and Diamond's several variations on the funny, witty sleuth or the adventurer-vigilante brought together the full Mission-Power-Identity-Costume combination that Peter Coogan identifies as essential markers of the superhero. Those characters who did — Phantom, Superman and Spider-Man — had, after an initial popularity in the early 60s, taken a backseat to ACK's gods, demons and talking animals. Even with their considerable popularity, *Fauladi Singh, Dynamite* or *Agniputra Abhay* could never match the sales figures of ACK. In fact, while ACK itself might have incorporated several aspects of their iconography into their mythological tales, the superhero in capes-and-tights avatar was, and remains, a foreign import for most Indian consumers. And yet, by late 70s and early 80s a slew of new and upcoming comic publications attempted to bring back the superhero as a response to ACK's monopoly. What motivated these new comics publishers to produce superhero narratives?

The answer lies in the umbilical connection these new generation of Indian comic books shared with the Delhi-based Hindi pulp publishers. Even as the American comics were veering towards a fluxable superhero as we witnessed in the last section, the rigid corporeality that characters like Bahadur maintained through Surti and Uppal's tenure, had begun to give way to a peculiarly fluid yet excessive corporality in Indian comics as well.

Othered Mythologies

A modernization of the idealized Hindu male hero-body would not have prefaced without the rapid popularity of Hindi pocketbooks between late 70s through 80s.

> As quick reads, (the Hindi pocket) novels are not just seen as sites of leisure, but
> because of their presumably racy, melodramatic, semi-pornographic and 'illicit'

content, they are also judged morally as giving way to the readers' suppressed 'excesses'. In terms of language, too, the language of pulp has been deemed the language of the colloquial. As such, Hindi pulp particularly has also been articulated as a space where, in contrast to 'literary' Hindi publishing, the question of literariness in language has never arisen. crimes of terrorism.[111]

Pocketbooks were usually 6X4 inches in size, printed on cheap *lugdi* (pulp) paper, and could be easily carried in one's pockets. The charm of these pocketbook-pulps, therefore, lay in their portability and disposability. They were low on both financial as well as cultural investment. They were readily available on railway platforms and street-side stalls close to bus-stations and rikshaw-stands. One could carry them for a bit of light reading while travelling in trains and busses, and then sell them back to *raddiwallahs*[112] or at second-hand bookshops, often right after disembarking from the train.

Most importantly though, a majority of the comic book publications established in the late 70s and 80s began as small-scale subsidiaries under the aegis of vernacular pocket-pulps. While Manoj, Tulsi, Nutan and Raja Pocket Books were some of the leading names, numerous other smaller short-lived ventures had sprung up across northern Hindi-speaking cities bordering Delhi. Comic books printed by pocketbook publishers inherited the latter's production quality as well as their aura of cultural disposability.[113]

With a shared infrastructure for publishing comics and pulps, production costs were low, and the turnover fast. Surender Mohan Pathak, one of the most prolific writers of Hindi pulp fiction today, defines the business of Hindi pulp fiction as a "job of mass production, like assembly line, factory production."[114] This propensity to churn out several copies in a limited number of days (often less than a week), characteristic to the pulp-fiction market, also proved catalyst in the rise of a new kind of comic-book market. With an increase in the demand and popularity of these comic books, each of their overworked writers often fielded story ideas to

seven or eight issues, across five or six different publications, every week. Earlier, one had to wait to for weeks, even a month, before a new ACK title featuring a new character or a new collection of narratives became available. Now, for instance, readers could pick up an issue of Pawan Comics' *Aplam-Chaplam* instead of Prabhat Comics' *Atkal-Patkal* and find the same narrative.[115]

In most cases, comic publishers weren't aiming for quality as much as a rapid capitalization of the burgeoning demand for comics in the metros. Some of the smaller short-lived publications often produced comics with flimsy, practically non-existent bindings. The *lugdi* dissolved easily in water, and the color bleeding on their pages was often so bad that it made reading difficult for 3 to 4 pages at a stretch. In an important evolution of ACK's modified *ligne claire* style, artists further simplified the drawn image, churning out scenes with a few casual strokes and lines and eliminating all minute details from the mise-en-scene. Thus, while a vacant and less-detailed middle ground in comics like ACK and Diamond were used to highlight the corporealities of their heroes, the stylistic preference was now reified as a staple of Indian comic book art to help save ink- and paper-costs for the new publishers.

Publications like RC, Tulsi, Diamond etc. however, fared better with their material quality. In fact, RC had managed to pull ahead of its competitors by not only improving on the quality of their print and paper, but also roping in veteran comics artists and writers such as Pratap Mullick and Anupam Sinha, signaling a sustained investment in quality content. Nonetheless, they still could not escape the pulps' stigma of carrying "racy, melodramatic, semi-pornographic and 'illicit' content." The truth was, editors of this new breed of pulp-driven comics often invited writers contracted with their parent novel publications, as guest writers for their comics titles. Before founding Tulsi Pocket Books and Tulsi Comics, for instance, Ved Prakash Sharma was often invited as a guest contributor for RC titles. Sharma was one of the

biggest names in Hindi pulp fictions during the late 70s and 80s, and his contribution would be hyped for weeks in advance, driving up the sales. Thus, a percolation of narrative themes, iconographies, and even fictional worlds from pulps to comics, was inevitably constant and naturalized in this publication setup.[116]

However, it wasn't always to their disadvantage that RC found themselves tagged as cheaply produced kitsch by readers and scholars alike. The prevalent content and narrative genres of the Hindi pulp market facilitated an ease of transition between the novel and comic formats for their writers and editors alike. A majority of the Hindi pocket-pulps were spy thrillers or detective stories centered around current crime and socio-political trends across India's major cities. Many of these were modelled on the narrative drives of novels by James Hadley Chase, while some were direct translations. In both cases, these detective novels were centered around dark urban spaces like slums and low-income neighborhoods, and narrativized systemic corruption, unemployment, and sexual exploitation.

The Hindi pulp-fiction also proved to be one of the more direct links of the RC stories to the AYM narratives, injecting a few crucial elements like angry and rebellious protagonists, a preponderance of violence, and an inherent misogyny. Lastly, most of the pocket-novels were also part of a serialized narrative centered around an action-hero with super/enhanced abilities such as strength, heightened deduction skill, etc. When publishers began incepting their first comic book titles, their existent band of writers equipped their new characters with these familiar iconographies of the hero-body. Frontline RC characters such as Nagraj, Super Commando Dhruva and Doga were, under their costumes and superpowers, a familiar breed of crime fighters for the Hindi pulp readers.

Nonetheless, it is not their narrative affinity with the Bollywood action hero or the superhero genre itself which makes the Hindi pulp fiction of 1970s and 80s crucial to the

development of the Indian superhero comic. Instead, the Hindi pocket pulps were also instrumental in reviving a strain of Indian mythology usually ignored by first generation mythological comics such as ACK and *Chandamama*. When it comes to epics and folklore, as opposed to history or even semi-historical legends, comics like ACK focused primarily on ancient and early medieval narratives passed down through oral traditions. There was a wholesale neglect of late medieval and early modern narrative traditions which often incorporated aspects of West Asian, Southeast Asian and even European oral narratives.[117] These later strains of mythology were much more cosmopolitan in nature and married several elements global oral traditions to hyper-local legends and myths. And yet, given their affinity and celebration of characters like shamans, witch doctors, spirits and *aiyyars,* these narrative cycles remain disdained among Hindu purists and upholders of the Brahmin-blessed traditions of the epics, the Puranas, and the Upanishads.

A prominent culmination of these "other" mythic traditions appears in Devaki Nandan Khatri's late-19th century Hindi novel, *Chandrakanta* (1888). The novel tells the story of two star-crossed lovers from two warring kingdoms caught in a web of political intrigue and sorcery. Considered a seminal work of Hindi fantasy fiction, *Chandrakanta* was resurrected in Indian popular culture in the form of a TV adaptation (of the same name) in 1994. Much before the TV adaptation however, the novel maintained a deep influence on the Hindi pocket-pulps as well as Hindi films, inspiring narratives of therianthropes and sorcerers inhabiting the modern world and influencing contemporary social and political events. The novel is most notable for (re)introducing the concepts of *tilism* and *aiyyars* to mainstream pop culture and vocabulary.[118] In Khatri's work *aiyyars* were powerful sorcerers and shapeshifters, employed by his royal protagonists as spies, warriors, and court advisors. They always carry the *tilism* with them*,* can summon the pocket dimension at will, and derive their powers from this pocket dimension.[119]

The concepts of *tilism* and *aiyyar* are particularly affinitive to the fluxable corporealities Fawaz talks about. The *tilism*, for starters, functions as a carnivalesque space, outside the rigid *varna*-governed structure of society, wherein brigands, prostitutes, lepers, and outcasts frequently yield power and upturn the traditional hierarchies of Khatri's fantasy world.[120] Kings, high-ranking ministers, and even demi-gods can be captured, enslaved, and made to do the biding of those they subjugated outside the *tilism*. Even more fascinating is the *aiyaar's* corporeality, a veritable vessel for the *tilism*. *Aiyaars* have bodies similarly fluxable to the postwar American superhero. They frequently switch between male and female physiognomies, resisting any attempt to determine an 'original' gender or sexual orientation. They also resist demarcations of race and ethnicities, changing from demons to *apsaras* (nymphs) to *Nāgas* to humans at will. Most importantly, like the Hulk or the X-Men, they resist conventional categorizations of labor and social responsibilities.

It would seem therefore, that both the newly imported American superhero comics and the Hindi pocket-pulps, similarly undercut the ideas of rigidly structured, laboriously sculpted, symmetric corporealities. Nonetheless, the fluxability of a superhero like the Hulk or a member of the Fantastic Four, are products of science — specifically, science experiments transcending human control and structures, catastrophic accidents, and anomalies. Even the mutant gene is beyond the control of Marvel's mutant characters, and often undergoes further unforeseen mutations when attempted to be controlled. The fluxability of the *aiyaar* corporeality, on the other hand, results from studied and perfected magical skills. As Khatri's most famous *aiyaar* character, Badrinath, keeps reminding his pupils and comrades, *aiyaari* is the art of controlling, nurturing and ultimately carrying a fragment of "primordial energies, usually beyond our control."[121] Moreover, while the *aiyaar* is outside the purview of traditional labor classes, they are nonetheless staunch upholders of a social hierarchy by commanding a formidable labor-role

in Khatri's fictional monarchies. The *aiyaar,* therefore, offers a solution to the ex-stasis of the American superhero's fluxable corporealities; it provides a blueprint for integrating defiant corporealities back into the society, as functional labor categories and social classes.

As publishers of Hindi pocket-pulps and fans of both American and Indian comics, the Gupta brothers were inevitably familiar and interacting with these myriad iconographic registers for shaping heroic bodies. This familiarity is also evident in Sanjay Gupta's enthusiasm to create a "distinctly Indian" superhero. But was Nagraj truly free or even distinct from its iconographic constituents?

Ghosts of Icons Past

Within a decade of its first issue, *Nagraj* had brought together a unique assemblage of icons from popular visual media, as channeled by the Gupta brothers, to create what they believed was a uniquely Indian version of the American superhero. The superhero roster that RC eventually built, while heavily influenced by postwar American superhero comics, also incorporated aspects of Hindu myth as pioneered by ACK—alongside the *aiyaar* and crime fighters corporealities dominant in the Hindi pocket-pulps of the 70s and early 80s, and an approach to corporeality influenced by Angry Young Man iconography (Amitabh Bachchan's dynamic action hero).

RC's engagement with at least four distinct and well-established iconographic systems of Indian pop culture from the get-go, while testament to their fan-appreciation of the source materials, also mimics the genre-grafting approach evident in first-generation American superhero comics—signaling perhaps a stronger identification with the American iconographic and publication templates. This identification appears consistent with a new-found "valorization of the United States as a desirable model for imitation" promoted by the 1980s government led by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, as opposed to the pro-Soviet bent of earlier

governments under Nehru and even Indira Gandhi.[122] With the economy gradually opening-up to global market forces and liberal economic policies, the 80s also saw a noticeable pro-American shift within Indian popular cultural discourses as well. But as Suchitra Mathur has noted:

> This shift … should not be taken as an indication of the successful establishment of a neo-imperial American cultural hegemony… The *Nagraj* comics embody a negotiation between containment and resistance in an India where growing U.S. influence through a "liberalized" consumerist economy coexists with a resurgent militant nationalism allied to Hindu fundamentalism.[123]

Indeed, *Nagraj* is symptomatic of a desire to emulate a popular foreign iconographic system while simultaneously returning to the iconographic roots of Indian comics in regionally specific mythology. As we'll see, while RC's strong affiliation with Hindi pulp fiction does parallel the pulp roots of American superhero comics, it also provides proof of an iconographic amalgamation begun by Pai and ACK and thus, much older than the RC editors' immediate genre-grafts.

RC's contribution to the process is important for three reasons. RC successfully distilled the already-composite iconographic system of ACK (which presented Hindu myth in the "western" form of comics), into yet another, more complex collection of iconic vocabularies and systems, this time mediated by the rapid rise in dynamic images on TV and film screens. RC's heroic bodies visually represent a heteroglossic collection of countercultural themes responsive to the sociopolitical realities of 1970s and 80s—and responsive in particular to the political dominance and iconic status of Indira Gandhi. And most importantly, while there were several instances of a modern Indian hero body before Nagraj, RC's flagship hero was one of the first to portray a modern Indian superhero as a leader of his community.

How does that work? Each of Nagraj's Indian iconographic predecessors claimed their heroes as *the* 'ideal' laboring corporeality for India, at specific moments in the nation's history. We have already established in the first chapter how ACK comics and AYM films had both erected strong idealized heroic icons by the early 80s. Each of these leader-labor bodies had also, in their own and often contrasting ways, attempted to reformulate the superhero iconography. Characters like Bahadur exemplify how this reformulation ultimately led to homegrown action-adventure heroes. In a way, these prior visions of the hero represent a containment of the superheroic strain—responding to or drawing from the American iconography only partially. At first glance, Nagraj and his RC peers seem to be resisting this containment, embracing the western iconography in its entirety. But this is not completely true. The iconographic systems of ACK, *Bahadur*, and AYM linger on.

For instance, the ghost of Ravi Verma's "'frontality' and centrality of composition"[124] is evident in most panels of the earliest *Nagraj* issues, where RC artists follows the ACK juxtaposition of highly detailed foreground objects and characters onto a sparse mid-ground, and often inexistent backgrounds. Like ACK too, there's a propensity to not distinguish every element of an image through color. Often, despite considerably detailed ink work in the background, the intricacy is lost because the colorist paints the background in a single swathe of color – brown, yellow, or pink. Facial features like eyeballs and lips too are not always differentiated from the uniform rose beige or pale ivory of the face. This is despite the detailed and, according to Chandra, '*bazaar*-realist' ink-work differentiating each aspect of the organs. The only inked boundaries which RC colorists most consistently respect, barring the occasional color bleeds, are the drawn form of the hero's physique. Thus, above all other details in a single panel or page, the hero's body shines through as the literal centerpiece of each drawn image.

In addition, ACK's rather rigid and basic approach to layouts persists in early RC productions. Within this approach, the narrative takes precedence. Large textboxes and dialogue bubbles dominate a conventional and bland grid. Divided into strict grids, the sizes of individual panels vary not to signify the contraction and expansion of time and space but to accommodate larger blocks of text. Only in moments when the location is a major narrative element, do we get a somewhat detailed background.

Similarly, not only does Nagraj's origin story follow a similar trajectory of redemption and reformation identical to that of *Bahadur*, but he also prefigures a journey from the provincial small towns and forested rural locales to both Indian metros like Delhi and Mumbai, as well as global cities like London and New York, as signifier of character development and modernity. Like Bahadur, while Nagraj is primarily based in the fictional city of *Mahanagar* (trans. Metropolis), his successive adventures take him through real locations, centering his exploits in cities like Tokyo, San Francisco, Hong Kong etc. There are references to real world organizations and personalities such as the FBI, D B Cooper, the Triads, Yakuza, and to events such as they Kandahar plane-hijack, the activities of Mexican drug cartels, and the fall of the Berlin wall, among others. In fact, even the comics' philosophy of crime remains consistent with the worldview of *Bahadur*: sublimation of globally organized terror as a super-ordinate category transcending the idea of everyday crime, an abstract 'evil' which can only be understood in epic terms. The approach to world building also echoes *Bahadur*, where historical facts and daily realities are used as metaphors and iconic signifiers of epic, larger-than-life battles between 'good' and 'evil'. Finally, *Nagraj* — just like *Bahadur* — continue ACK's epic wars against a historically evolving yet essentially constant category of the 'other'.

Drawing from its Hindi pulp-fiction roots, Nagraj belongs to one of the most popular archetypes of *aiyaar*-therianthropes found across South Asian cultures, the *ichchhadhari nāgas*.

Beings of extremely fluid corporealities, the *ichchhadhari nāgas* — depending on which media iteration one refers to — can shape-shift from serpents to humans, change their gender and sexual orientation, and even take the form of inanimate objects. The *ichchadhari nāga* has appeared across Bollywood films and several TV adaptations of folklore and fantasy novels.[125] In popular Indian as well as Pakistani films and TV serials, it's the female *nāga* or the *ichchhadhari nāgin* who has consistently been the protagonist, centering narratives roughly around her loyalty towards her deceased *nāga* lover and her search for vengeance against his human killers. Highly sexualized on screen, the *ichchadhari nāgas* and *nāgins* are often considered personifications of dark, aberrant, or anti-social sexuality. Any *nāga/nāgin* has the ability to shapeshift into both human male- as well female-bodies, thus also adding a dimension of queerness, and in turn often relegating them to space of forbidden/dark mythology amongst Hindu middle-class *savarna* families.

Nagraj absorbs most of these micro and macro traditions of mythologies around the *ichchadhari nāga*s and builds upon it.[126] In RC's fictional universe, the *ichchadhari nāga*s are also able to slither across walls and ceilings (both in their human and snake forms), spew poisonous breath, and hypnotize with their eyes. They also have superstrength and superspeed (although only a select few *nāgas* are actual speedsters like Flash or Quicksilver). Nagraj and several of his supporting cast of *nāga* characters also have microscopic snakes living in their blood streams, acting as their immune system and biological weapons. They have the power to shoot snakes from their palms, weave them into 'ropes of snakes' and swing on them above city streets and skyscrapers, *à la* Spider-Man. Nagraj appears clad in what seems like a green tight-fitting suit, a pair of black trunks, and black boots. In a subtle but important subversion of a prominent superhero archetype, the green 'suit' is in fact Nagraj's snakeskin, complete with dorsal and ventral scales (the latter running down his chest and belly).[127] However, Nagraj's

body and face is distinctly human — he has no scales on his face, human eyes, and predominantly bipedal movement.

Some of the other characters like Saudangi, one of the many *nāgin* protagonists and recurring supporting characters, has the torso and upper body of a human, atop a gigantic serpentine tail. Characters in *Nagraj* mostly retain their gender identification when they shapeshift from serpents to human bodies: a *nāga* transforms into the body human male, and the *nāgin* transforms into a female human body. This is the first and most prominent sign that the *aiyaar*-therianthrope's fluxability has not been adopted unfiltered into the RC universe. In transforming a male serpent into a male human body, the essentiality of gender is underlined. A transition never really occurs; instead, heteronormative gender roles are amplified.

Despite the major diversions, therefore, the shadow of ACK and AYM's rigid corporealities lingers. In fact, they have now been reaffirmed by the American postwar superhero's well-sculpted gym-toned bodies. After all, even if they break form and transform in uncontrolled ways, the American superhero still transforms into an idealized corporeality, who's physical and superhuman prowess is directly signified by an aesthetic appeal. The aesthetics of a symmetric physique reifies the desirability of their fluxable corporealities. RC's superheroes not only adhere to the straight-lines/curved-lines schema, but they also subscribe to the exaggerated anatomy of the American superhero, to induce the latter's desirability. This is especially the case after Anupam Sinha, veteran of *Fauladi Singh* and *Manasputra* titles and the creator of RC's other major superhero *Super Commando Dhruva*, took over as the editor and art director of RC in the mid 90s. Under Sinha's art direction RC begins to combine the definition and detailing of human anatomy evident in Jim Lee's drawings with the excessive physiques of Rob Leifeld's artwork. Pectoral and abdominal muscles pop out, the limbs acquire

exaggerated girth, jawlines widen, and cheekbones become sharper. A heavier ink-work lends more definition to the musculature. [128]

However, while Sinha is often credited as the man responsible for keeping RC relevant, modern, and updated, the credit for RC's foundational iconographic amalgamation goes to the comic book's first art director — Pratap Mullick. Mullick was amongst a group of comic-artists who began with the ACK and then moved other, newer comics publication, becoming active agents in the amalgamation of different comic book iconographies. Chandra recalls that he and several of his ACK colleagues readily accepted paltry salaries to draw the legends and deities in these comics, considering the work as a service. In fact, most veteran ACK artists had had to work second and third jobs for sustenance, often on a project-to-project basis for newer publication houses like Star, Tulsi, Manoj, Nutan, Ganga Chitrakatha and RC. The newer publications, on the other hand, not only offered a better remuneration package for their artwork, but they also allowed these artists a greater degree of creative freedom, as compared to ACK's rigid guidelines and standards. Moreover, the new publications were especially keen on roping in established industry stalwarts to helm their art departments and become mentors to their young artists. And the talents of artists like Mullick and Dilip Kadam were in high demand thanks to their long association with the success of ACK. As a result, it didn't take much convincing for these ACK veterans to quickly switch from working on individual projects to accepting permanent positions like that of the art director at RC. And as they migrated from one comics publication to another, these artists became the prime careers of iconographies, pollinating one collection of iconic signifiers with another, piling on a sedimentation of increasingly diversified signifieds.

Mullick is a particularly prolific and important agent in this process of iconic sedimentation and distillation as he proved to be a carrier of both the ACK as well as AYM

iconographies. Speaking with me, Sanjay Gupta categorically mentioned Bachchan's AYM as the inspiration for action scenes in his comics: "A superhero cannot fight like the warriors of old; they needed to move like Bachchan*ji* did as the Angry Young Man." Mullick, who had served as the art director for Star Comics' *Supremo* titles, already had the experience of dressing the AYM as a superhero. By translating the AYM iconography onto the comic medium, and then importing the hero's dynamic rigidity onto the now newly fluxable corporeality of Nagraj, he finally closes the circle of "containment" and "resistance". What we are left with is a heteroglossic hero body.

The King Uncrowned

But what is the actual implication and impact of this corporeal heteroglossia, that Nagraj embodies? To answer, let's begin with Nagraj's origin story.

Nagraj is first introduced in RC#14 as a 'weapon of mass destruction and world domination' by his adoptive father and trainer Professor Nagmani. Nagmani presents him as a commodity for auction, to be hired by the highest bidder for a limited period. Gathered at the auction are some of the world's most notorious mafia lords and terrorists. Before the bidding can begin, Nagmani orders a comprehensive demonstration of the hero's super abilities. He is shown climbing walls, slithering across the ceiling like a snake, shooting snakes from his palms, fashioning them into ropes and swinging on them *à la* Spider-Man. He unleashes snakes into his audience, and then heals the victims by sucking out the venom from the snake bites. He also displays mastery of snake-style Kung Fu. The extensive demonstration is followed by a round of aggressive bidding which ends with one "Mr. Bulldog" hiring Nagraj for $100,000.

Bulldog runs labor-camps in the forests of Assam, one of India's north-eastern states. As Bulldog tells Nagraj on their way to the camps, people in the heavily forested valley of the (fictional) Tonk river in Assam live in small tribal communities and subsist below the poverty

line. Bulldog and his henchmen take advantage of internal conflict and poverty, employing members of the local communities as day-wage laborers in their smuggling operations and timber mills. It is important for Bulldog that the people stay poor and keep fighting amongst themselves. But in recent months a mysterious man, whom some have identified as a local ascetic, has foiled Bulldog's plans. He has unified the erstwhile quarrelling tribes into an increasingly cohesive community and made them aware of the exploitative nature of Bulldog's business. Nagraj is part of Bulldog's retaliation plan and has been brought in to destabilize the peace amongst the tribes. He is tasked with stealing an ancient idol from a sacred temple and staging the theft as an act of violation by one tribe against others. He is also tasked to find and eliminate the mysterious man. However, Bulldog's plans go awry when, after successfully stealing the idol from the temple, Nagraj is accosted and captured by the mysterious ascetic. This mystery man, who we now learn is called Baba Gorakhnath, is a powerful mystic who easily overpowers Nagraj, knocking him out with his magic. As Nagraj lies unconscious, Gorakhnath accesses his memories and the hero's origin story is revealed.

We are told that Nagraj was found as a baby at an abandoned temple by Nagmani who, on the advice of an *ichchhadhari nāga* (shape-shifting serpent), adopted him as his ward, experimented on him with the poisons from venomous snake, trained him in martial arts and performed both scientific and magical procedures to imbue him with the powers of the *nāgas*. This process included feeding Nagraj the dust of a dead *ichchhadhari nāga*'s coils. Nagmani also planted a 'capsule' in Nagraj's brain which allows him to control the now shape-shifting serpent. Gorakhnath, having found out about his captive's life via magical memory-surfing, proceeds to remove the capsule and frees Nagraj from Nagmani's mind control. Once free, Nagraj turns on his erstwhile employers, accepts Gorakhnath as his new mentor, and vows to

use his powers to take down criminal syndicates and terrorist organizations across the world. The next two issues detail his first mission, and his revenge against Nagmani and Bulldog.

Following the first narrative arc containing this origin story, each successive issue of RC centering around Nagraj, finds him actively taking on terrorist organizations, engaging with organized crimes, and unraveling secret coups in the US, UK, and India. The reach of Nagraj's adventure is truly global; and with each issue the comics compiles a cast of international characters including British and American spies, descendants of Dracula, samurais and ninjas, and of course a gallery of international rogues. Moreover, the idea of "evil" too is much more nuanced in these adventures of the globe-trotting vigilante Nagraj. Even as India entered a decade when the definition of terrorism became increasingly synonymous and then virtually inseparable from Islamic fundamentalism, *Nagraj* acknowledges the complex network of corporate investments and neocolonial geopolitics in funding and nurturing terrorist cells.[129]

Meanwhile, he also meets *tantriks*, mystics, djinns, ancient time-displaced warriors and a host of nāga characters. It is also revealed that Nagraj — the name translates to King (Raj) of Serpents (Nāga) — is the de-facto ruler of the Nāga people living on the secret, secluded island of Nagdwipa. He develops a deep romantic bond with Visarpi, *ichchhadhari nāgin* queen of Nagdwipa. With the gradual revelation of his connection with the *ichchhadhari nāgas*, who are often distrusted and reviled by the human world, Nagraj must also come to terms with his role as an ambassador between the two races. The character thus finds himself in a constant tug-of-war between the vow he took in the very first issue (fighting all forces of terrorism), and his responsibility as one of the most powerful and prominent members of a minority community. Several RC special issues (SI) like *Pralay*, *Vinaash*, *Zalzala*, *Nagraj aur Nagina* etc. have brought the cast of *nāga* heroes in direct confrontations with the human superheroes. Each time, narratives have revolved around Nagraj's efforts to make peace between the two sides by either

clarifying miscommunications or uncovering the manipulations of one or more villains from his rogue gallery.

Across crossovers and special issues, Nagraj has consistently emerged as the primary leader-figure in the RC universe precisely because of his conflicted loyalties. There are others like Super-commando Dhruv, Doga, Shakti, or Tiranga who, despite their own conflicts between duty and personal desires have displayed more consistent and conventional narratives of leadership in their immediate narrative universes and story arcs. They often echo character traits and development of leading superhero figures like Batman or even Captain America, etc.

However, Nagraj's status as the leader of the RC superhero roster echoes the status that the post-*Death* Superman has in the Justice League, and in the larger DC universe. They're the first and the most powerful amongst their peers. They're both super-human, even semi-divine, beings reshaping the world of humans by simply being present in their worlds. Superman and Nagraj's recurrently dying and re-incarnating corporealities stamp a sense of their omnipresence for the people they have vowed to protect. As the primary superheroes in their respective comics universes, they have also initiated major transformations and plot developments for the other heroes as well as the larger universe. The immense power-difference they have over the rest of the roster not only makes them more directly responsible for their super-heroic actions, but also heightens their level of threat in case they go rogue. Most importantly, like Kal-El, Nagraj's link with the *ichchhadhari nāgas* makes him an outsider and an alien. He's often on the watchlist of government agencies who, even when enlisting his help, are cautious and suspicious of his intentions.

In RC SI #365 *Atankwadi Nagraj* (Terrorist Nagraj) we witness the actualization of this fear when it is revealed that despite the removal of Nagmani's capsule, there remains a subconscious self of Nagraj which is still inclined to act as an agent for terror organizations.

This aspect of his mind can be exploited by his enemies and, in RC #365, causes him to wreck serious havoc at his own volition. Only a concerted effort by the remaining members of the Brahmand Rakshak (Protectors of the Universe, RC's version of the Avengers or Justice League), remaining *nāga* champions and Baba Gorakhnath is finally able to bring the hero back to his original self.

Thus, the hero body we witness in Nagraj displays both Bahadur's propensity to address a contemporary history of terrorism and crime, and the AYM's initiative to take on these challenges actively and violently. And yet, it also achieves heightened degrees of an *aiyaar*-like fluxability. Not only is Nagraj a carrier of *tilism*, but a host of fully sentient beings living within his body who are similarly fluxable themselves. There are not only "normal" snakes living in his bodies, which are used as tools and weapons, but also semi-divine serpents like Nagu, Saudangi and Sheetnag who are *ichchhadhari nāgas* themselves. All these corporeal inhabitants are accomplished shapeshifters too. Some sport the hood and head of a snake and human legs, while others have a human torso atop the tail of a snake.

Moreover, each of Nagraj's corporeal inhabitants also belong to a different culture and region of the *nāgas* race. They often spend days living outside Nagraj's body, develop their own distinct personalities, individual narrative arcs and subplots. They are opinionated about diplomatic relations with other cultures and national governments they help on their own. Saudangi, for instance, is a time-displaced queen of ancient Egyptian serpents and has been shown to have strong investment in the politics of West Asian and North African nations. Sheetnag is the last survivor of a small tribe of snow-dwelling nāgas from the Himalayas and frequently advocates the freewill and sovereignty of various tribal groups in India. Similarly, each of these characters develop nuanced relationships with the snake-man whose body they inhabit. While Saudangi is one of the several romantic interests of Nagraj, Sheetnag and Nagu

share a fraternal bond with him. The fact that Nagraj's body harbors such beings of fluxable corporealities and well-rounded personalities, lends an added layer of heteroglossia to the leadership values he represents or even aspires to.

The *nāgas* therefore function as an extended family, a clan. And yet, Nagraj is not merely the patriarch of an immediate family or clan, or even the leader and cultural emissary to the nāgas of Nagdweep alone. Given the cultural ties of his clan-members, his super-heroic body develops complex, often conflicted labor relations with those cultures and people that his '*nāga-sena*' (army of serpents) are emotionally or politically invested in. The King of Serpent is not just a ruler or leader of a singular minority community, but also the *literal* embodiment of the dreams and ambitions of host of other underrepresented people and cultures. His contribution to these branch cultures might not always involve a physical labor on his part but does cause a debit in his corporeal prowess and functionality due to the loss of one or more of his inhabitants *ichchhadhari nāgas*. Despite his propensity to literally swing into action every time the governments of human nations are threatened by terrorist activities or organized crime, his intimate and constant investment in traditionally 'othered' cultures, lends him a liminality in the larger RC universe quite akin to the X-Men and the Hulk in the Marvel comics.[130]

The liminality of Nagraj's hero body is but the symptom of a multi-layered and multi-pronged dichotomy. He is a snake and a human. His super-powers are a product of both science and magic. In terms of iconographies, the *Nagraj* titles recreate both the mythological iconography of ACK as well as the crime and spy-fi iconographies of American superhero titles such as *Batman*, *The Question*, *The Punisher* etc. Most importantly, the constant turmoil of the hero stuck between his two worlds, also reflects the dichotomy of his leadership matrix — a primacy of action versus the responsibilities of personal and communal history. His role as member of an elite team of (mostly) human heroes constantly clashes with his responsibility to

preserve, protect, and promote his native cultures, traditions and practices. In a post-Indira Gandhi India, Nagraj is constantly battling to balance his impulse to contain and resist.

This embattlement has led to an insightful shift in the very structure and approach to the RC universe. In 1995, at the end of RC SI #42, Nagraj is shown to be of two minds. He could stay back and rule Nagdweep, marry his long-time love-interest Visarpi and dedicate his entire life to the development of the nāga people, *a la* Black Panther in Wakanda. Or he could heed the SOS call he has just received and fly out to counter yet another terrorist attack. Nagraj chooses the latter. A few special issues later, in RC SIs #54 ("Zeher"), #57 ("Nagpasha") and #60 ("Khazana"), it is revealed that the SOS call was an elaborate plan by his enemies and leads him down a path of self-discovery. Anupam Sinha and Hanif Azhar wrote a major retcon to the initial origin story published in RC #14. It is revealed that Nagraj is in fact the lost scion of an ancient city of Nāgas, and his parents — King Takshak and Queen Lalita — were the monarchs of a powerful community of semi-divine serpents. The monarchs were killed, and the kingdom destroyed by the hero's jealous and power-hungry uncle Nagpasha, who is also set up as Nagraj's archnemesis, the 'final boss'. Nagmani and his manipulation of Nagraj is revealed to be only the third displacement of the character from his place and station of origin. As further plotlines and special issues reveal, baby Nagraj was born still and, thanks to Nagpasha's evil manipulation, let afloat on the currents of an ancient river by his heartbroken father. Later, the baby was found at the edge of a hidden island-kingdom of serpents (Nagdwipa), whose ruler treated the boy with his many magical herbs and enchantments and managed to bring him out of his coma. In the absence of an heir, the king of Nagdwipa had planned to adopt the foundling as his heir. But during a deep-set conspiracy and civil war, the child was whisked away by an evil mystic to a remote corner of the Indian subcontinent. It is here that the baby is found lying in a remote temple by Nagmani, and we reconnect with first origin story. Meanwhile,

Nagdwipa's ruler is eventually blessed with a daughter, Visarpi, the heir and present ruler of the island kingdom.

This later retcon brings Nagraj closer to the narrative of Superman. Both are let float by desperate parents facing death and destruction of a civilization. Both find themselves fighting a militaristic distant relative from their past, who catalyzed the fall of their home-worlds and are now back to reclaim or resurrect a facsimile of this past. The story arc also ends with the debut of Nagraj's alter-ego, Raj. He appears an almost identical copy of Clark Kent, complete with a blue suit, and a pair of glasses. Like Clark, Raj too takes up a job in a media organization and settles down in Mahanagar. Here, armed with the knowledge of his past he rediscovers his powers and is now more acutely aware of the rich heritage, cultures, and traditions of the *nāgas*. He reconnects with Nagdweep and his people and strives to straddle the two worlds he's caught between. For long this remained the prime continuity of the *Nagraj* narrative in RC.

However, in 2007-08, RC introduced another continuity of Nagraj called *Atankharta* Nagraj (Anti-Terror Nagraj). By 2015 it is revealed in RC IC #2547 *Kshatipurti* that Nagraj's intense emotional turmoil at the end of RC SI #42 had split the RC universe in two, giving birth to two realities with two different Nagraj. The main continuity so far, was rebranded as *Vishwarakshak* Nagraj (World-Protector Nagraj). And we find out that while *Atankharta* Nagraj too left Nagdwipa, he never went in search of his past. Rather, he dedicated his life to travelling the world and countering international terrorism and organized crime. His immediate posse of *ichchhadhari nāgas* mostly travel with him and are his associates in his job as a spy/detective. He never really reconnected with his people in Nagdweepa, nor does he form an intimate connection with other nāga cultures.[131]

What the split really accomplishes, therefore, is to skew each of the timelines towards the two contradictory leadership propensities, iconographically. Beginning with the *Kshatipurti*,

for the *Vishwarakshak* continuity, several major and minor narratives of the original timeline were retconned to immerse the narratives more thoroughly in the lore and mythology of the nāgas, tantriks, djinns and the *aiyaar* characters. The mythological iconographic elements received a boost — *dhotis* and *mukuts* returned, the mise-en-scene were dominated by medieval Hindu architectures, and the Hindu *savarna* hero was back on horses more frequently, leading armies in pitched battles. Even the *ichchhadhari nāga* characters spent more panels in their human forms, considerably reducing the visual representation of their fluxability, and reifying ACK's rigid corporealities with the sculpted hunk bodies of the American superhero.

In the *Atankharta* continuity, pitched battles were replaced with street fights, espionage, high-tech gadgets, modern weapon, and futuristic science. Set in urban mise-en-scenes, the plotlines find Nagraj interacting with versions of contemporary world leaders and political figures like Barack Obama, Angela Merkel, Saddam Hussain, etc. under fictional names. There is a distinct touch of noir and neo-noir tropes; Nagraj dons a trench coat, iconic to noir and crime fiction genres in both comics and cinema. Compared to the cleaner lines in *Vishwarakshak* storylines, *Atankharta* titles features heavier ink-work, deepening the shadows, and giving a more modern, edgier look. However, similar to the former, the nāga characters spend more time in their human form even in the *Atankharta* titles, tying them down to more rigid gym-sculpted corporealities. [132]

It is important to note that the retconned origin is woven into a splitting of timelines and hero-corporealities in the mid 2010s, *after* Shaktimaan — a superhero with monolithic leadership values and more unilinear definition of what defines a 'people' — has already re-defined the functionality of an "Indian superhero". When compared to the origin arc in RC #14, this 21st century shift gives us a clearer sense of how Nagraj performs the first step in establishing the superhero body as viable leadership corporeality. Born at a time of an intense

tug-of-war between the forces of containment and resistance, Nagraj was never really designed to achieve iconicity. The language of publication limited his circulation and popularity in the Hindi-speaking north. It's cheap printing material and high turnover rates lend the comic books an aura of disposability. Despite borrowing from three massively recognizable iconographies — the Indian mythological hero, the Angry Young Man, and the American superhero — the hero's own iconography was dominated by hyper-local and "othered" mythologies. These "othered" myths, breaking with the hegemony of a Hindu heterosexual *savarna* hero, did not offer a singular idiom for a unified India, as the first-generation comics had aimed to do. Instead, RC's treatment of these myths, through *Nagraj*, made it painfully clear that there did not exist a "unity in diversity."

And it is this break with the neo-liberal dream of a homogenous heterogeneity that also becomes crucial to understanding Nagraj's fraught "matrix of leadership."

A Matrix of Leadership

What is this "matrix of leadership" and why do we need to speak of this concept in these terms? Merriam-Webster defines Matrix as "something within or from which something else originates, develops, or takes form." In terms of its mathematical definition, Matrix means "a(n)… array of mathematical elements that can be combined to form sums and products with similar arrays."[133] When we consider icons as a heavy and hollow semiotic shell (see: Introduction), then we must also consider them — especially in context of iconic leader-labor bodies — as matrices, or semiotic shells that "originate, develop, or (give) form" to dominant values of leaderships. Iconic corporealities are therefore also "arrays" of signifieds that, when connected to other iconic and corporeal signifiers through *différance,* help nurture a system of values connected to idealized definitions of leadership.[134] The matrix of leadership are specific iconic signifiers which help nurture, *for the people*, the hegemonic definitions of ideal leaders.

I define a "matrix of leadership", therefore, as the semiotic phenomenon of grafting specific corporeal traits deemed worthy of a leader — national, regional, or otherwise — onto historically and culturally unique collections of desirable socio-political end-goals. For instance, the calm demeanor of a leader can and is often semiotically grafted onto the desirable socio-political end-goal of sound economic and geopolitical strategy.[135] While the latter variable in this equation is abstract and generalized, the former is often a very specific human trait. The association is made through of a network of iconic signifiers that link the abstract concept with the specific and the corporeal trait. The association itself is invariably post-facto. The specific honesty of Abraham Lincoln, for instance, is marked as a defining aspect of his leadership only after he had become and served as a leader. And yet, this grafting of specific human traits onto abstract signifiers of leadership values, hardly appears as subject to debate in popular culture and language. How often do we hear people debating whether calmness and composure are desirable traits in a leader? And this is where the iconic corporealities of pop-cultural figures like Nagraj or Shaktimaan or Bahadur help to serve as semiotic precedents, and therefore nurturers, of these value-loaded associations. Their narratives present references and examples for the viability of an association between an abstract virtue and a specific physical trait; for e.g., physical strength with an ability to work hard etc.

This brings us to the central question of this chapter: What associations between abstract virtues and embodied or corporeal characteristics can Nagraj — a pop culture figure with limited reach and recognition — promote?

The character's origin story reveals a critical tension at the very heart of *Nagraj*. A product of both science and magic, the titular hero is also the embodiment of a complex dialectic between "containment" and "resistance" playing out in the national politics of India during the 70s and 80s. India had recently witnessed, and was still witnessing, the rise of

several populist regional movements, some of which had swelled into violent insurgencies. In fact, Assam — the main setting for Nagraj's opening narrative arc — had emerged as ground zero for a popular movement demanding autonomy for the indigenous Bodo people in the region, even as the Gupta brothers were working on the first issue. In most cases, the dominant political response to such demands for autonomous regions, farmer's revolutions, and/or worker's rebellions, had been to "contain" prior to negotiations — and these containment measures often devolved into violent repression. In particular, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's attempts to contain popular unrest had yielded two of the most repressive and violent periods of her political career: the Emergency and Operation Blue Star (see my appended historical timeline of events). The corresponding instances of resistance — a nation-wide protest movement by students, labor unions and political opposition against Gandhi, and the separatist Khalistan movement — were therefore born of a deep sense of resentment against injustice, corruption, and government neglect.

Gandhi herself emerged as a central figure in this dialectic of "containment" and "resistance". While she had resisted immense international pressure in taking a stand for East Pakistan's fight for liberation, she had come down heavily on dissenters at home. Whether loved for her charismatic, firebrand-style leadership or hated for her heavy-handed suppression of popular dissent, within her own lifetime she had established herself as an iconic political figure. Calm and reserved in interviews but known for her highly energetic and fiery speeches in mass rallies, Gandhi's image was that of a dynamic and action-oriented leader. As one of the first Indian leaders to feature heavily in international news and interviews, especially on TV, Gandhi embodied a national ambition for global recognition.

Finally, Gandhi also embodied an interesting dialectic between historical baggage and a dynamic urge for immediate results. As a scion of the Nehru-Gandhi family and its political

dynasty, each of her actions — whether that be her economic policies or her electoral speeches — were evaluated in comparison with the long line of Nehru-Gandhi leaders before her.[136] Moreover, most of these older generations of leaders, including her father PM Nehru were renowned for their "moderate" and "pacifist" approach to politics.[137] Whereas, with Indira Gandhi, the focus shifted to immediate results. In fact, several political commentators including Ramachandra Guha have sighted this goal-oriented urge for getting fast results as a main driver behind Gandhi's imposition of the 1975 Emergency.[138]

Gandhi's rapidly growing iconicity invariably trickled down into pop-culture and mass media, including the AYM films and the *Nagraj* comics. Similar to Gandhi, and unlike later Indian superheroes such as Shaktimaan, the iconographic qualities of Nagraj are not monolithic but an embodiment of a complex and counterintuitive dialectic between "containment" and "resistance". His corporeal inhabitants — the shape-shifting *nāgas* who are also cultural ambassadors of the various communities amongst his subjects — is a case in point. The sheer corporeality of Nagraj by virtue of being composed of millions of tiny snakes and serpent-leaders is itself a constant exercise in containing and mediating the heteroglossia he literally embodies. By embodying this heteroglossic collection of opinionated serpents, Nagraj also embodies the myriad histories and cultural memories of his people, the different subcultures, their own intra-cultural relationships, and their conflicts. Such an inherent heteroglossia of ideological and iconographic narratives is often perceived as a desirable corporeal embodiment of the secularist cliché "unity in diversity", a political rhetoric essential to most appeals for socio-political stability across governments and regimes in the past.

Nagraj's utility and functionality too, whether as a terrorist or a vigilante, needs constant proof of performance: Nagmani's exhibition, Bulldog's tests, the complete supplication to Gorakhnath, and a literalization of 'swinging into action' in the final panel. The

fact that Nagraj inhabits a superhero-body concretizes this centrality of action. For an action-adventure comics centered around a superhero, the first issue features very few and only intermittent bursts of action and fight-sequences, each lasting no more than a page at a time. Instead, the comic book spends the first two acts establishing Nagraj as a voiceless laborer in the industry of crime and terror, through detailed and lengthy dialogue from the supporting characters. In most panels featuring Nagraj, he is either an observer or a silent worker, with little or no dialogue — not even thought-bubbles. Moreover, the reversal from Nagraj's status as a terrorist enforcer to an anti-terror vigilante, and the revelations about his subjugated past arrive in the third act arrive in the form of a lengthy flashback. Dynamics thus make way for archaeology; a peeling-off of the hero's constitutive layers and exploration his past.

Nagraj's "matrix of leadership", reflects complex dialectics: science versus magic, history versus dynamicity, an urge to honor and stay rooted in the past versus the need to move forward and move fast, etc.[139] As one of the closest Indian iterations of the American superhero, Nagraj is also, first and foremost, a labor. In the flashbacks, Nagraj is a mute recipient of Nagmani's experiments and treatments. Post-revelation, the hero simply switches employers— and ideologies. Across the narrative, Nagraj proves his introductory epithets: he's a weapon, a tool, a resource. Between Nagmani, Bulldog and Gorakhnath, the hero merely yields to one authority after another. The action-oriented matrix of his leadership, therefore, is re-formulated into a physical expression of labor, devoid of any true agency. As I noted above, in my comparison of Superman and Nagraj, there is also a servile propensity to appease the dominant racial and ethnic community and allay their fears of the hero's alien nature. Can we then truly list "leadership" as a major character-attribute for Nagraj?

Nagraj's efficacy as a leader stem from his uniquely amalgamated corporeality. The dialectic between "containment" and "resistance" that our hero embodies, shapes not just the

narrative aspects but also his iconography as well as publication history. As is evident in the split between the *Vishwarakshak* and *Atankharta* iconographies, the RC writers do not provide a resolution between Nagraj's fraught identities. In context of that immediate time-period (1975-90), any matrix of leadership needed to account for a sensitivity to the fraught history and traditions of the several different people living in the subcontinent. The focus, therefore, shifts towards a willingness to act swiftly and decisively —whether as a labor, a leader or both — even if that action required violence. Most importantly, *Nagraj* proved that these two propensities were often irreconcilable with each other.

A leader could not act decisively and remain a leader for all communities of people he claimed to represent. Both the Emergency and Operation Blue Star had proved the same in context of Gandhi's status as a national leader. Contrary to what her party members claimed, Indira was *not* and could never be India.[140] No singular leadership corporeality could.

For any iconographic argument to successfully make a case for a solid, unfragmented representation of the Indian people, two things had to change: the definition of 'people' and the matrix on which to base this leadership.

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CHAPTER III
SHAKTIMAAN: SUPERHEROES ARE REAL

On 26th January 2001, a 7.7 earthquake rocked the northwestern regions of India, causing massive infrastructural damage and the loss of nearly 20,000 lives. In the weeks that followed, major television, film and sports celebrities visited Bhuj, the epicenter of the quake, and its surrounding areas in Kutch, Gujarat. But none of these public figures were as rapturously received as one tall, well-built gentleman wearing red-and-gold tights. He arrived with his own crew of relief workers and volunteers to help shift debris, distribute packets of food and first aid, and offer words of encouragement to local children. This was Mukesh Khanna, the producer and the eponymous lead actor from the popular TV series *Shaktimaan* (1997-2004) — often identified as India's first superhero TV series. In the wake of the earthquake, he had taken to touring the affected areas in full costume.

Khanna's name might well have been lost in the long list of Bollywood A-listers and sports stars who thronged to the relief and rescue efforts; but his decision to don his on-screen persona while aiding in the relief work made him a center of media attention. Several national and regional news outlets framed this event as the appearance of "a real superhero" in aid of the relief workers. The epithet conflates the actor with the character and narrativizes Khanna's community service as 'super-heroic'. Praised by the then-Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, and the Prime Minister of India, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Khanna's presence in the earthquake-affected areas thus also proved to be of great PR value for the actor and the character. It added to the character's prevalent aura and authority: Shaktimaan was real and here to save the day. Never had a character from any other Indian superhero narrative made both these claims, and with such success.

By 2000, Shaktimaan had emerged as an undisputed pop-culture favorite for young Indians, especially children between ages 7 and 12. According to news reports, by 2001, several of the series' young viewers had leapt from balconies trying to imitate their favorite superhero, or self-immolated with the hope and belief that their favorite superhero will arrive in time and save them. The reports also claimed that Shaktimaan had convinced his young fans that his powers were easily attainable if they practiced yoga, prayed around sacred pyres, chanted mantras, and followed rules of general hygiene and 'good behavior'. But the sense of verisimilitude surrounding the superhero couldn't be weathered by the (now disputed) claims of injury and death that such incidents allegedly caused. For many of his fans, it was hard to imagine that Shaktimaan wasn't a real superhero living in India. Khanna's participation in the Bhuj relief work wasn't the only proof. He made several costumed-appearances in mass rallies, Children's Day-fundraisers, and other political and charity events. He was also often invited to annual school functions and co-curricular events as a special guest.

Even without his superhero costume, Khanna's public image had become increasingly inseparable from his on-screen persona. To counter the negative publicity garnered from the alleged incidents of death and injury, Khanna had begun airing a 10-minute educational segment at the end of each *Shaktimaan* episodes called *Chhoti magar Moti Baatein* (Minor but Major Points).[141] These short clips were structured around skits similar to educational ads and government awareness campaigns. In each skit Shaktimaan interacted with children of roughly the same age-group as his core viewership, instructing them on correcting "errant practices" in their daily lives. The lessons ranged from "Do not dip your fingers in the glass while serving water to your guests" and "Save water while brushing your teeth", to "The harmful effects of bragging about your caste". Soon, little children acknowledging their mistakes with a "Sorry Shaktimaan" was part of the superhero's mythology, and his role as a pedagogue increasingly

began to outweigh the other aspects of his character. Khanna used the segments and his public appearance to carefully craft a media image of someone truly invested in the education and well-being of children. Reaching out to help earthquake-affected children was very much a part of this media narrative. Thus, with or without his superhero costume, Khanna had managed to extend this 'superhero-pedagogue' persona beyond the screen — into annual school functions, inauguration ceremonies, fundraisers, interviews, and other public appearances — continuing to instruct his audience on 'Minor but Major points.'

The sense of Shaktimaan's palpability and presence in the lives of his young fans went beyond the boundaries of the media of his narratives. He was sold as a people's hero by his producers. The perception that he was real and present, was only the opening act of a narrative that would ultimately conflate the superheroic corporeality with populism: Khanna's superhero was a leader and mentor present in service of the future labor force of the nation. He was ready and eager to guide them when they needed him the most. The resultant matrix of leadership which Shaktimaan exudes is a product of the political climate in India during the 90s. In a decade when communal fault lines within the nation's political topography were becoming more acute, the hero's unique brand of populism would prove all too congenial to the most extreme forces of Hindu populism and ethno-nationalism.

The Matrix: Reformulations

Shaktimaan was a very different kind of superhero compared to Nagraj or any of the other comic book superheroes we were familiar with. If Nagraj was conflicted between an impulse for action and an urge to understand and re-live his history, Shaktimaan brought the two impulses together. His matrix of leadership was structured around discourses of singularity. Despite deriving its leading super-heroic corporeality from an amalgamation of several print and motion-picture iconographies, the series celebrated a monolithic superhero. Contrary to

Nagraj, Shaktimaan's corporeality resulted from an intensive rather than extensive iconographic amalgamation. In fact, rather than an amalgamation, it would be more accurate to define Shaktimaan's iconicity as a compression of iconographies into a singular icon.

However, it wasn't the hero's corporeality alone that projected a sense of coherence and singularity. In the very first episode of *Shaktimaan*, the series establishes a simplified (as opposed to complex) history and narrative for its fictional universe. The episode opens with a voiceover pontificating the narrative's location in space and time. Earth, a tiny planet in an infinite universe, has been protected since the earliest days of human civilization by a secret community of scholars and warriors called Suryaanshis (trans: born or derived from the Sun). The voiceover begins over a montage of flowers, peacocks, beautiful sunrises etc. as we are told that in the earliest days, the study and pursuit of the Vedas and Yoga helped maintain a pristine and holistic approach to life. The images of 'pristine nature' are then quickly replaced by superimposed sequences of predators hunting their prey, air and water pollution and modern warfare, as the narrator informs us that the pure and pristine lifestyle of old was "polluted" by the spread of 'darkness' (*andhera*). The montage pieces together stock videos and news footage, including clips from the Gulf War and Indian military training exercises in the Rajasthan desert from 1995. It ends with an assurance however: in every age, to counter the spreading darkness, there shall emerge a Suryaanshi champion. This is a reformulation of the cyclical myth of the *avatar* in Hindu mythology.

The end of the montage also cues a transition to an extreme wide shot of a Himalayan peak, as the chanting of Sanskrit *mantras* rises in volume and replaces both the background music and the voiceover. The camera then cuts to a scene in a cave, where a group of men and women clad in the red, yellow, and saffron of Hindu ascetics stand around the periphery of a large sacrificial pyre, watching another man perform a *yajna*. The camera slowly zooms in on

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the man in the center, revealing him to be Mukesh Khanna, our protagonist. As the *yajna* concludes, the man stands up and bows in reverence to the sages in attendance. He is tall, has broad shoulders and a well-built physique. He also looks very serious. The oldest among the sages present tells our hero that though the ritual is over, this is but the beginning of his long journey. The next step, the sage says, is the *division* of his physical being. The hero promptly steps into the roaring fire of the *yajna* pyre and is disintegrated into five orbs of light. These orbs then soar away and are subsumed into the five primary elements of nature which, according to the serial's iteration of Hindu mythology, are: fire, water, earth, air, and ether/space. Each time an orb meets with an element — the fire in the sun, the water in ocean etc. — it transforms into a digitally-animated elemental humanoid which roughly resembles Khanna's physique. Each humanoid then acquires a unique portion of the hero's ultimate super-suit — the belt from air, the boots from earth, armored wristbands from the ether and so on. With each of these animated sequences, we get the sage's commentary specifying which powers and attributes the hero's body will receive from each of the five elements. Once all the five sequences are completed, the orbs of light return to the now-extinguished *pyre* and re-assemble into the superhero body. The hero emerges out of the unlit pyre, now fully clad in his super-suit, and is showered by flowers and felicitations. The sage informs the hero that he is not only a complete *yogi* but also a complete *yoddha* (warrior) now. And its time he takes an unbreakable vow to end all evil in the world. The vow is followed by a hard cut, and we find the superhero standing atop a tall building in an undisclosed Indian metropolis, surveying the scene beneath him.

We are through the first half of the episode and yet to receive a name of either the superhero or any of the major characters introduced so far. Nor are we given the details of locations. Presently though, the hero hears commotion nearby: a few men are trying to rob a

bank. The hero swoops in and protects the policemen in the line of fire. A lone child watching all this happen from the sidelines triumphantly screams out, "That's my superhero!" This cues a telling introductory dialogue from the protagonist: "I'm no *avatar*, nor an angel. I'm the enemy of evil and a friend of righteousness. I fight crime, not criminals. If you listen to what I have to say, no harm will come to you. Please hand yourself over to the police." The robbers try to hold the child as a hostage but are ultimately defeated by the superhero and handed over to the cops. He then waves at the child and flies away. In the final scenes of the episode, Khanna's protagonist lands on a nearby street and transforms into his alter-ego, a bespectacled gentleman resembling the comic actor Jerry Lewis's onscreen persona. Waiting nearby, ready for him to pick up, are a few pieces of luggage. One of these is a briefcase labeled "Pandit Gangadhar Shastri", thus finally revealing a name for the character. As Gangadhar exits out he stumbles onto the policemen and robbers his superhero-ego helped apprehend a few scenes earlier. He loses his balance, stumbles exaggeratedly, and when he's the only one left in the frame, looks at the camera and winks. End of episode.

This introductory narrative is not Shaktimaan's entire origin story, however. In Episode 75, it is revealed that he is indeed an *avatar* (contrary to his introductory dialogue), the reincarnation of a powerful warrior-sage Satya the first Suryaanshi, who lived nearly 6000 years ago. In Episode 157, we are told that Shaktimaan was born to a brave and kindhearted Indian army major and his pious wife. After Major Ranjit Singh (also played by Khanna) and his wife Kaushalya are informed by the Suryanshis that their newborn son is destined to become the "savior of mankind", they sacrifice their lives to keep the baby alive. The baby is then delivered to a poor Brahmin family, who adopt him as their son.

Overall, Shaktimaan's introduction and origin story appears quite cheesy. Characters lack nuance. The narrative borrows from some of the most cliched plot templates of superhero

origins, including the two pairs of parents, an archnemesis who tries to kill the hero at birth, etc. As we'll explore in the following sections, the titular hero, the major supporting characters, as well as the main villain Kilvish — introduced in the first episode as the "Master of Darkness" — are primarily abstractions and iconic character archetypes. They help propagate the metaphoric nature of each overarching narrative arc. *Shaktimaan* appears iconic from the very beginning: narrative complexities are paired down to make him relate seamlessly with essential value-signifieds. In a callback to the pre-Cold War "Golden Era" Superman, these essential values of Shaktimaan very much included truth and justice, but also something else. In fact, Khanna's serial was all about a search to replace the 'American Way' with an Indian equivalent. The hero as well as his fictional universe needed to appear an uncomplicated and easily identifiable 'Indian' sign which could respond to global networks of signifiers and signifieds.

In this respect, *Shaktimaan* is much less conflicted in choosing his people. While he was part of a Secret community of ancient sages and magicians, a cult even, he not the last surviving members of an ancient race of semi-divine beings *a lā* Nagraj. He had been told by his *gurus* and mentors that he's been trained to serve and protect 'all of humanity'. There was no immediate reason to split his responsibilities and loyalties between two or more races, cultures, or ethnic groups. Moreover, Shaktimaan's sphere of influence and field of work, was staunchly rooted in India. He operated in India and had no direct international adventures.[142] Also unlike the RC roster of superheroes, the Indian-ness of Khanna's superhero needn't be 'distinct.' The goal was not to disassociate the series from all earlier iterations of an 'Indian' hero corporeality, but rather to re-emphasize the Indian-ness of the hero. *Shaktimaan* invoked the possibility of a perfected masculine Hindu subject in the present, who drew his strength from a fantasized vision of a golden past. The adopted son of a poor Hindu Brahmin family,

the fictional superhero's powers derived not from a scientific experiment or alien technology, but specific Hindu religious practices. Despite the later revelation that he was an *avatara*, his spartan lifestyle and upbringing in a poor Brahmin family were continuously evoked to reify his identity as an 'ordinary' man. This 'ordinariness' was invariably rooted in the character's identification as a Hindu, a heterosexual male, and his middle-class occupation and lifestyle. Also notable is the dual characterization of the *avatara* corporeality which, according to Hindu epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* as well as the *Puranas*, requires thorough Brahmanical training and education in order to unlock its divine potential. Thus, even though an *avatara,* Shaktimaan needs to live and learn like an 'ordinary' Hindu; he gains his near-unlimited super-abilities only after he has followed the rites and rituals prescribed by his Brahmin mentors according to ancient Hindu scriptures.

Shaktimaan is a byproduct and a symptom of the late-80s and early-90s resurrection of the Hindu mythological narrative. Much of the titular hero's brand of leadership echoes the expectations and promises made by the Hindu ACK hero towards national integration. While *Shaktimaan* overtly proposes a secular vision of an integrated nation, its narrative is situated within and responsive to the increasingly communal discourses defining Indian politics and society in the 90s. In a decade marked by a quick succession of unstable short-lived governments at the center, and a slew of prime ministers whose time in the office was often limited to mere months, a hero body unconflicted in his allegiances would have seemed attractive as a leadership template.

The superhero serial's seemingly reductive take on a globally attractive 'Indianness', like *Nagraj* in the late 80s, too responded to the dominant leadership matrices in Indian politics. For Shaktimaan, BJP co-founder Atal Bihari Vajpayee was a prime source of leadership templates. Vajpayee and Khanna held each other in mutual respect and admiration. The former

heaped praise for the latter's positive influence on children. Similarly, Khanna has been quoted across several interviews identifying Vajpayee as "the only (politician who) can lead the nation."[143] He wasn't the only one. After the failure of four governments in quick succession, Vajpayee had emerged as the safer bet for a Prime Ministerial candidate. He was a veteran of Indian politics, had been active since India's Independence movement, and was praised for his level-headed leadership in a party which till-then was mostly seen as an upstart organization of rabble rousers and communal hardliners. While such a perception of the party still exists, it is also widely acknowledged that it was Vajpayee's leadership which solidified BJP's strong neo-liberal economic outline atop a protectionist trade-policy baseline. A poet and a litterateur, Vajpayee was also regarded as a pragmatist and a tough customer in negotiations with India's international allies. His defiance of US and Chinese criticism for India's nuclear tests, and his strong resistance against the Clinton government's threats of tread sanctions, recalled Gandhi's gutsy foreign policy two decades earlier. Vajpayee also emerged as somewhat of a populist leader who, though not the man of the masses, began to embody the hopes and dreams of an educated north-India-based Hindu middle class.

Indira Gandhi's leadership was associated with a growing distrust and friction between a majority of the working population, and the bureaucratic as well as non-bureaucratic government machineries. Icons like Nagraj responding to Gandhi's leadership matrix, inevitably proved how difficult, even impossible, it was to present a solid, unfragmented representation of the Indian people in such socio-political contexts. The Vajpayee era was equally strife-ridden, and saw the rise of communal violence, cross-border terrorism, heavy militarization and military brutality in Kashmir, and a war with Pakistan. And yet, the Vajpayee government, the BJP, and the larger political right, managed to initiate a unification and de-fragmentation of the term "people", even if this de-fragmentation was in fact a reduction of the

idea of "people" into a Hindu *savarna* definition. As we will see with exploration of '*swadeshi*' later in this chapter, it was this government's acumen in manipulating media narratives which ultimately defines the dominant leadership matrices during this time. At the center of this media-manipulation was a propensity to "re-arrange history" and Mukesh Khanna was one of its staunchest proponents.

Re-arranging History

Shaktimaan, which in many ways was also a culmination and consolidation of the various roles Khanna had played in his early career, cemented his status as a mega-star of the Indian Television industry. Khanna had rapidly risen to national stardom with his portrayal of the demi-god Bhishma for B R Chopra's televised retelling of the epic *Mahabharata*, which originally ran between October 2, 1988, and July 15, 1990. Bhishma, the granduncle of warring cousins Pandavas and Kauravas, of the House Kuru, is a stoic, uber-masculine, celibate warrior who sacrifices his claim to the throne (as well as his sexual and familial desires) to protect and serve the kingdom of Hastinapur. Khanna's portrayal of the character is still highly regarded within Indian culture. During the initial run of the series, this admiration often turned to an almost religious veneration. He would be greeted with folded hands by passers-by on the streets; sometimes strangers would bend to touch his feet in an act of reverence, as if Khanna really were Bhishma. In subsequent TV and cinema projects too, the actor took up similar roles of lonely warriors, rangers, or warlocks—all of whom were supremely skilled in their arts, completely dedicated to nationalist and communitarian causes, and generally willing to sacrifice their personal pleasures for the greater good.[144] To this extent, Shaktimaan was just another version of a heroic archetype that Khanna had been playing for years, and indeed perfected. Indeed, Bhishma and the ensemble of on-screen heroes and legends that he was a

part of, played a most crucial role in shaping up not merely the shape and narrative of Khanna's superhero series, but the entire nation's take on its history.

Khanna and *Shaktimaan* were, in fact, the beneficiaries of a nearly fifteen-year-long period of development in India's television industry. By the time *Shaktimaan* made his debut in 1997, there were least three different and massively popular iconographies, which were actively shaping the demands and desires of the TV audience. The mythological narratives sold by ACK comic books had made a return with massively popular TV serials like *Ramayan* (1987-88) and *Mahabharat*. The American sci-fi, high fantasy and superhero iconographies, already adopted by second-generation comic books onto their pages, were also populating the small screens now with weekend matinee slots for Hollywood movies, and the DC and Marvel animated series syndicated on "children's hour" programs daily. Finally, the distinctly identifiable working-class action hero of the 70's and 80's Bollywood movies had become more accessible and continuously rewatched on either weekend promotions on GECs or on dedicated movie channels. However, while *Shaktimaan* would go on to incorporate elements from each of these iconographies, Khanna's own proclivity for mythological narratives as well as the genre's overall dominance on TRP ratings, ultimately locked in the American superhero and the Bollywood action hero into the old iconographic approaches of the Hindu mythological hero. Unlike Nagraj, whose corporeality continuously jostled with "containment" of and "resistance" to both the mythological and superhero iconographies, *Shaktimaan* had gone back to first generation comics in its approach at reformulating the latter.

The dominance of the mythological genre of narratives, and its corresponding iconography, within early TV programming was not coincidental. In fact, the advent of serialized narrative in TV programming occurred during an era of socio-political anxieties similar to those during the 1950s and 60s. The producers and programming directors at DD

had reacted to the post-Emergency unravelling of India's dominant political structures, in much the same way that the comic book publishers had tackled the post-Independence challenge of national integration. As Arvind Rajagopal points out, *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat,* serials based on the two respective Hindu epics, were "sponsored by a Congress-led government, in the hope that its flagging electoral fortunes might be revived with an infusion of ''Hindu vote,'' votes inspired by Hindu solidarity and its attendant exclusions."[145] Bhaskar Ghose, the Director General of Indian public service broadcaster Doordarshan from mid-1986 to the end of 1988, mentions in his memoir *Doordarshan Days*:

> Early in 1985 or thereabouts (Prime Minister) Rajiv Gandhi had written to the minister for information and broadcasting, VN Gadgil, about the kind of serials being shown on Doordarshan. The minister said that the PM had given him and the secretary SS Gill to understand that Doordarshan should broadcast serials that depicted the values enshrined in our ancient texts and philosophy, the kind of values that were contained in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. The secretary took this to mean that the PM wanted both the epics telecast on Doordarshan, and immediately shot off letters to two prominent film producers in Bombay, Ramanand Sagar and Baldev Raj Chopra (38).

Sagar's *Ramayan* and Chopra's *Mahabharat* went on to become two of DD's most famous weekly entertainment serials. In fact, in the history of Indian television, these shows remain unmatched in their popularity and influence. The two serials, which aired successively between 25th January 1987 and 15th July 1990, were renowned for emptying the streets for an hour every Sunday morning at nine.[146] Shops would remain closed, businesses were suspended, and even public transportation services would become scant. The popularity of these two series was such that they established the mythological fiction as a staple genre in Indian TV, as well as a fixture of the all-important Sunday morning slot, across multiple channels, for the next two decades.

It is notable how the Prime Minister's advice to broadcast "serials that depicted the values enshrined in our ancient texts and philosophy", were invariably tied to the two major *Hindu* epics.[147] The enthusiasm on the part of the authorities, which will later be echoed by the producers and the script writers themselves, harkens back to Pai's zealous treatment of the ACK comic books as serious projects of national integration. Sagar and Chopra, in a latter but equally tumultuous era, would embark on their own project of transforming "the Indian imaginary from a realm of fantasy to a historicized realist chronotope."[148]

Across two very different eras and media of popular visual narratives, two equally different set of artists and producers chose to create and sustain an economy of longing, by selling the same collection of souvenirs. All in the name of national and cultural integration. Pai, Sagar and Chopra were all selling *itihaas* — a utopian future-past, which was both an origin myth as well as the promised land. Their retellings of folklores, legends and epics carried the weightage of the Sanskrit word and what it promised to be: the truth.[149] Sagar's *Ramayan* capitalized on the epic's ubiquitous presence in the popular imagination, to instill a belief in the historicity of this *itihaas*. As the rising political clout of the Hindu political rightwing clearly proved, these media iterations of the *itihaas* had successfully begun to turn a belief in its possibility into a desire for its instantiation. BJP and its NDA allies were now calling the re-enactment of this ideal *itihaas* the *Hindu Rashtra* (lit. Hindu Nation). However, by the time *Ramayan* ended its initial run on the TV, the Hindu Rashtra remained a myth, far from a functional socio-economic model for election agendas. It wasn't market-tested yet. It was still to be seen how the iconic heroes represented in narratives like ACK or *Ramayan*, would or should conduct themselves in times of contemporary conflict and strife. Chopra's *Mahabharat* emerged as the clincher. Sujala Singh writes:

While the TV *Ramayana* was viewed as an occasion of "*darshan*" (view-worship) with viewers purifying themselves by bathing before, and burning incense-sticks during the auspicious hour of the broadcast, the *Mahabharata* generated debates contesting, for example, the fairness or unfairness of Krishna's wily politicking. Whereas for the former, in the traditional transference of reverence to the medium conveying the sacred message, television itself became sacrosanct, with, for example, the instances of garlanding and worshipping of the TV set in Varanasi during the last episode, the message of the latter was perceived in the context of other images on the screen – images of contemporary Indian politics… An ancient mythic history thus began to "feel" like the everyday politics which was not unconnected to the aspects of the TV adaptation.[150]

Novelist Rahi Masoom Raza, who wrote the screenplay for *Mahabharat,* affirms: "I had the task of connecting India's past with India's present."[151] The process was complete. *Mahabharat*, the TV series, wasn't the epic it retold. It was a collection of souvenirs; it was sold as a relic of an exalted and reverential past, capable nonetheless of existing within the contemporary reality. It proved *Ramayan* and ACK's *itihaas* to be both reportable and repeatable. *Mahabharat* further masked the tension inherent in the Sanskrit word — the tension between "true" and "real." The Sanskrit word gives precedence to what's true over what's real and even argues the possibility of an event being true without it being real at all. Thus, *itihaas* is not necessarily a direct translation of the western concept of history, where facts and the necessity to be 'real' takes precedence. *Itihaas* is also mythology, and especially so. *Mahabharat*, even more so than *Ramayan,* firmly shifted *itihaas* into a historio-realist chronotope.

However, an essential aspect of selling this 'real' future-past, much less at the scale of broadcasting it to a nation of billion people, is the need to identify the exact 'people' whose reality this *itihaas* will appeal to. Both *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* identified their target audience as "Indians." Neither specifically identified Hindus as their target audience.[152] In fact, across documentaries, interviews and even production-tapes, the producers of the shows would

repeatedly stress on the universality of their appeal within the Indian subcontinent. The serial's popularity in Pakistan and Bangladesh, was repeatedly evoked to stress that they appealed to an innate "Indianness" that was imagined having pre-existed the post-colonial geo-political boundaries between the three nations. And yet, the visual manifestation of this innate "Indianness" was invariably depicted through characters from mythological narratives that were identified as "Hindu"[153].

In this conflation of an "Indian-ness" with "Hindu-ness," therefore, Sagar and Chopra's mythological TV narratives, like the first generation comics before them, fed into a much older iconography of "us" and "them"/"others." Within this iconography, Devas (Vedic deities), Aryans, Rajputs, heterosexual Hindu leaders of the Indian independence movement, etc. were identified as "us", whereas the Rakshasas (demons in Hindu mythology), indigenous tribes, Muslims and later the British were, progressively throughout history, identified as the "other." However, both ACK and later the mythological TV series added yet another dimension to this much older tradition of conflating the 'Hindu' with the 'Indian': conflating the geographical with the corporeal. The post-Independence (re)integration and re-appropriation of an innate "Indianness" with "Hinduness" could not be only geographical or geopolitical. If Hindutva, the word for this universal "Hinduness" used by right wing nationalist organizations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the BJP, were to be graduated into a way of life fueling the Hindu Rashtra, then the souvenirs of *Mahabharat's itihaas* had to relate to people and not places. And so, in *Mahabharat*, the characters' bodies were identified as the most prominent router of the 'ideal' way of life. The bodies of characters in *Mahabharat* were portrayed as the physical reflection of the characters' ideals, their approaches and choices in handling strife. This importance of the body as a manifestation of character and attitude

becomes evident in the casting director's choices.[154] Ravi Chopra, BR Chopra's son and co-director of the show says in the documentary *Mahabharat ki Mahabharat* (MM):

> "Everyone has an idea what (the characters in) the Mahabharata (are) all about... You have seen them in paintings, you have seen them in comic books. So, you really know what each character is like... you want the character to be close to the image you have had of him... Here, we were looking for particular looks. We were looking for people who could look like our characters. We did not give as much importance to the acting (skills). We took the screen test from the point of view of whether the (actor) looks like the character we want him to be."[155]

It is evident that the producers are drawing from a pre-existing iconography. Consider Mimi White's deliberation on the therapeutic effect of television shows. White mentions that the underlining of the existence of an ideal body, and the possibility that this ideal can be reached, enacted episode after episode, becomes has a therapeutic effect on TV audiences. The audience is made to believe that at the end of every episode or section of episodes, a singular, ubiquitous, unquestionable ideal will prevail. It isn't the ideal itself that's therapeutic but the belief that this ideal will prevail over everything else. The aspiration of a catharsis rather than the catharsis itself becomes TV's therapy. We see this happening in *Mahabharat*, through the repeated enactment of the Hindu *itihaas,* reflected in Ravi Chopra's inclination to re-enact "the character we want him to be." This indicates that establish iconography of the *itihaas* travelling through the producers, the directors, the protagonists, and the audience.[156] Therefore, the actor too is meant to embody a character ideal, a set of signifiers belonging to the iconography which the producer-director wants to bring alive. This is further evident in phrases which the casting director, Gufi Paintal uses in MM: "baritone voice," "imposing" and "venerable" (for Bhishma and Drona), "tall," "handsome" and "an angry young man" (for Karna); and "the posture of a warrior" (for Arjuna). Even on a narrative level, the *itihaas* — which the protagonists and the characters are meant to embody — is determined by the production team and the particular

retellings of the epic they draw from. There appears then a dialectic between the actor and the character, mediated by a desired body 'ideal,' which governs the transitions between the two. *Mahabharat* thus was able to construct a visible and tangible locus of desire, linking the mundane reality of the people who watched the show, to the historicized chronotope of Chopra and his production team's preferred *itihaas*, through the body. To sum, if *Ramayana* had proved that a Hindu Rashtra *could be* because it *was*, Chopra's serial showed their audience *how* it could be: through the body.

A corollary to the construction of this locus of desire, as we witnessed with Bachchan and Nagraj as well, is the manipulation of desirable bodies into desirable postures. For instance, the scheming and cunning King of Gandhara and the maternal uncle of the Kauravas, Shakuni, played by the casting director Paintal himself, is short of stature and walks with a limp. Therefore, in most shots where Shakuni is the sole inhabitant of the frame, he stands off-center, and his shoulders are inclined in a slight forward stoop. In contrast, Khanna's demi-god Bhishma stands straight, at the center of the frame. His broad shoulders and tall physical frame are often given ample camera time, with a very slow zoom shortening the frame to a close-up. When he walks, the camera makes sure to capture his full figure, while slow tracking shots help emphasize his fast, steady strides.

Mahabharata traces the journey of Bhishma from a young teenager to an old man more than hundred years in age, living with the burden of a boon that grants him the ability to choose the time of his own death. Bhishma's tragedy lies in his complete surrender to the destiny of his nation, such that he cannot use his boon i.e., choose to die, until he is convinced that the current ruler can steer his nation to a better future. The character Khanna portrays is a self-effacingly nationalist tragic hero. Nonetheless, there are two unique decisions that Khanna makes while essaying this role, which adds a unique corporeal importance to this tragic hero.

First, whether Khanna is portraying the twenty-year-old Bhishma or the centenarian, he maintains a towering stature, walks straight and fast, with no sign of age-induced stoop or fatigue. While Bhishma is shown to become weary with age, his weariness is more emotional than physical. The character becomes fatigued, the body does not. The turmoil between his physical vitality and emotional fatigue ties to a very basic approach to health found in most middleclass Indian households even today: the path of abstention.[157] Khanna's portrayal of the supremely functional body of an ancient demigod is projected as the ultimate goal of this path of abstention. A life of complete abstinence from bodily pleasures lengthens the durability of Bhishma's body, it is implied. And yet this very abstention from sexual and familial desires, and political power, ultimately leads to the doom of the nation that he seeks to protect, thus binding his physical prowess within deep-seated emotional trauma and anxieties.

And so, Chopra's *Mahabharat* seems to also argue that the longevity of the physical body needs to complement and reflect the purity of mind and character. The series makes a strong argument that the body is shaped and mapped by a person's political, social and inter-personal choices. Thus, the crooked politicking of Shakuni is metaphorized in his short stature, premature stoop, his shaky hands, and his lurching gait — behavioral traits which again disregard the human body's response to passing time. While a centenarian Bhishma maintains the gait, stature and stride of his twenties, Shakuni walks, talks and shivers like an old man even when he is first introduced in the serial as a man in his youth.[158] Bhishma's body endures longer than any other character thanks to his complete dedication to the nation, whereas Paintal's short height, as well as the posture and gait he assumes for the role, are chosen to reflect Shakuni's selfish politics.

What we witness here is not so much the formation of a new iconography, but the translation of an established iconography from a *static* onto a *dynamic* visual medium, from

comics onto television. The translation process both adds to and exacerbates the straight-line/curved-line dichotomy for representing gender in drawn art, that we witnessed were a prime characteristic of the ACK iconography. By the time Chopra translates the straight-line/curved-line approach onto TV screens, gender representations have become so securely steeped in this dichotomy that the use of curved lines for heterosexual male-identifying characters, is immediately identified as androgyny.

In *Mahabharat*, we see this schema being translated on to the screen not only in terms of body postures, statures, and gaits but also camera angles and framing. At the very formative stages and, one can argue, for the first time in the history of Indian television therefore, body-types are being assembled and labeled on screen to be arranged according to character archetypes established on the pages of comics like ACK, Diamond, and later RC. From 1986 onwards, throughout the decade of the 90s, this arrangement of bodies was evoked again and again through the numerous retellings of mythological narratives. Tales from the *Puranas*, the *Panchatantra* and the *Jatakas* were told and re-told by different producers, reiterating this iconography of a Hindu golden past. Serials like *Mahabharat* and *Ramayan* therefore established a visual template not only for the imagination of mythological narratives and extended metaphors as a historical chronotope, but also for the exemplary indices of human bodies that can be seen as signifiers of nationalist leadership.

Khanna, a staple cast member for many such serials which followed this iconographic template, would repeatedly tap into a variety of permutations and combinations from this arrangement of physiognomic signifieds and archetypal signifiers. And hence, when he brings the superhero archetype onto the TV screens, the influence of the mythological iconography is still quite evident. However, as mentioned earlier, *Shaktimaan* is symptomatic of an era of crucial transformations in Indian political, economic, and cultural realities.

The New Hindu

In fact, *Shaktimaan* debuted right in the middle of an important transition in the stylistic and narrative approaches in India's advertising industry, which in turn was a direct response to both the rise of television as well as the changing political landscape. By 1997, the term "*swadeshi*" began to gain "new prominence" in national economic and political discourse.[159] But now, in an era where Indian markets were being rapidly liberalized and globalized, even as the NDA parties began to make *swadeshi* an ideological cornerstone for their policies, they couldn't really argue countering the flow of foreign goods and services flooding the Indian markets since 1991. The growth of sectors like Infrastructure and IT had provided much needed relief to the country's debt-burdened economy and falling back to more than fifty-year old ideological stances against foreign investments in such sectors would only have been harmful to the party's long term political goals. Instead, the party leadership realized, two radically opposed ideas had to be married together.

Yashwant Sinha, the finance minister in the Vajpayee cabinet articulated this awkward conjunction as follows:

> *Swadeshi* is pro-globalization because its pro-Indian without being antiforeign. And that's the important message from India… Therefore, swadeshi is the best means of globalization…we are not relapsing into protectionism… having recognized globalization as a fact of life we are merely saying that a calibrated approach is needed toward the process of globalization…[160]

Sinha's eagerness for globalization clearly stems from the recognition of its vitality not only to the growth of the economy but also to the success of the ruling government. In earlier economic and financial policy regimes, such as the Nehruvian Five-year model, any association of the word 'Hindu' with economy spelled out sluggish growth rates and out-of-date trading practices. Arvind Rajagopal observes,

The Indian economy, in a famous quip by economist Raj Krishna, suffered from a ''Hindu rate of growth'' for decades after Independence – a ''sluggish'' 3 to 3.5 percent per annum between 1950 and 1980, which meant, given the rate of population growth at this time, a per capita growth rate of 1.4 percent per annum.[13] Embodied in the phrase is not only the economist's old adage that growth is the chief goal of an economy, but also the self-deprecating characterization of this failure as ''Hindu.'' ''Hindu'' here was metonymic of India – ancient and out-of-date, too vast to be successfully influenced by mere mortals, and possessing in this intractability its own peculiar distinction. Yet the overriding feature of this distinctiveness was failure – its seeming incapacity to answer the needs of changing times. From being considered the glory of an old civilization, to be ''Hindu'' had become the unbudgeable burden of a backward nation attempting to be modern.[161]

And so, with *swadeshi*, BJP wanted to change the very idea of the "Hindu growth rate." BJP had been gradually accruing a sturdy political base, fit to launch Hindutva as an economically viable ideology, within its overall project of overhauling the established Nehruvian approaches to policy and their deep impact on popular culture.[162] Terms like socialism, state-control, and public sector were quickly becoming passé and secularism needed to be added to this list as equal. "Hinduism'' too had to be projected as a "repressed truth of society, released by the lifting of state controls and the mobilization of latent popular forces."[163] William Mazzarella explains:

Just as the BJP would promote Hindu nationalism as a means of releasing the innermost energies of an Indian population too long reined in by the abstractions of "pseudo-secularism," so the new consumerism pledged to liberate the consuming passions of the masses after decades of "socialism." [164]

While the project of marrying the idea of *swadeshi* and LPG received massive government support, the prime propagation of the project was carried out on the newly emergent visual medium of Television. Advertisers and TV producers had begun to realize the power of a continuous loop of images especially when employed in the project of promoting

products and ideas. The rallying call for "Made in India" became a driving force in branding and packaging. Products and services across industrial scale, sectors, and consumer bases — insurance policies, medicines, automobiles and even toothpastes — were being advertised for their value as *swadeshi*. The slogan was further popularized by an eponymous hit single and subsequent album of the same name, by Indi-pop singer Alisha Chinai. The song's popularity arguably established Indi-pop as a distinct genre of popular Indian music and Chinai its main proponent. The song, through its lyrics and music video, narrates the story of a princess whose search for a perfect partner across the world finally ends when she meets the "(heart) that's Made in India."

While we never get to see the heart itself, the video does clearly identify a "Made in India" body: the chiseled and glistening gym-toned body of Indian supermodel Milind Soman clad in the distinctly Hindu ceremonial garb of the *dhoti* loincloth. Soman is revealed, towards the very end of the video, emerging from a sealed wooden crate marked by a large red customs stamp spelling the oft-crooned words from the song. A Scotland-born Indian supermodel and TV actor, Soman was catapulted to immediate superstardom with this video, amassing a huge fan following among young urban women. More importantly however, he would later prove to be the only actor capable of posing any competition to Khanna's popularity, albeit shortly, in the business of TV superheroes. He starred in the lead role of *Captain Vyom* (1998-99), a sci-fi space adventure series similar to Star Trek, where he played the swashbuckling captain of the spaceship *Ulka* and its motley crew, roaming the galaxy on a mission to re-capture escaped space criminals.

Even as Soman shot to instant fame as the most identifiable example of the "Made in India" body, he also garnered a lot of media attention for his impeccable English and foreign education. This aspect of Soman's star persona also complemented his famous arrival in the

video: in a crate marked by stamps and icons signifying international import and foreign trade. The entire video was indeed ensconced in an iconography that stressed the global reach of "Indianness." Chinai, who plays "Princess Alisha" in the video, can be seen switching between traditional Russian and West Europe costumes,[165] and traditional Indian dresses. Similarly, even as Chinai herself is filmed against background sets clearly emulating West-European Renaissance architecture, the video is peppered with often stereotypical visual markers of Indian culture, such as Kathakali dancers, tigers, yoga practitioners and snake charmers. Moreover, according to the narrative of the song, only after she has "seen the entire world/ From Japan to Russia/ Australia to America", does Princess Alisha recognize the value of the "(heart) that's Made in India." This simultaneous cohabitation of global and Indian visual signifiers succinctly captures a driving strain in the new connotations of the *swadeshi:* the desire to create an international appeal for Indian products.

Khanna's superhero serial was no exception. In an interview to *Screen*, Khanna's goal for beginning a superhero serial is very clear. He says:

> I would watch my nephew sitting glued to the TV whenever Power Zone came on, shooting with imaginary laser guns, or operating some imaginary sci-fi gadget in his own little world. That's when it struck me that if I made *Shaktimaan* I would have a readymade audience of kids who are always most impressed with SFX tricks… In Indian mythology there are a lot of strong characters but no super-heroes. All we get to see are Superman or Spiderman, who are alien concepts. That's why I decided to create an Indian super-hero, Shaktimaan, who is born out of a yagna, and a result of all the creative energies of the universe. A superhero who can fly...disappear. [166]

Khanna's focus on special effects is interesting. In the same interview he complains that *Shaktimaan*'s special effects had failed his expectations, and how he has already fired two teams of technicians, while trying out a third one in his ambition to match the standards of films from *Superman*, *Jurassic Park* and *Terminator* franchisees. Khanna is in fact aiming for

what most ad agencies were struggling to achieve everyday: Indianizing foreign products and services; promoting a globalized economy for a *swadeshi* market. In the words of an ad campaign from Indian ad agency Mudra, it was all about marrying the "Indian soul (with an) international feel."[167]

By the latter half of the 1990s therefore, when viewed in the specific context of the tele-visuals, *swadeshi* had helped encourage the distillation and amalgamation of multiple iconographies at an unprecedented scale. Khanna's superhero proved to be such a crucial milestone in this very process, which will ultimately lead to the creation of a very specific, nationalist icon.

Popular Plastics

Mukesh Khanna's superhero serial rapidly gained nation-wide cult status. In fact, within two years of its release, the eponymous superhero's popularity had reached such heights that, I remember, most of the kids in my school owned one or another of a *Shaktimaan*-themed merchandise – mugs, t-shirts, pencil boxes, stickers etc. My personal prized possession arrived in the March of 1999, just before the festival of Holi. It was a water-gun and/or action figure in the shape of my favorite superhero. This action figure, its sinewy muscular arms and legs clearly etched out in cheap plastic, had a small hatch in its back where one could add water. And upon pushing the symbol on this miniature Shaktimaan's chest, the water would be sprayed out of two outlets in its outstretched palms. This water-spraying action figure had, in all probability, been locally made and distributed by the small cottage industries of toys and trinket makers based in the northern states of Delhi, Haryana and Punjab. In fact, there was no "official" *Shaktimaan* merchandize commissioned by the show's producers. Neither were major domestic or international toy companies like Funskool, Mattel or Fisher-Price

distributing any *Shaktimaan* collectibles, of which these locally made toys could be called a plagiarized copy.

I also remember, that in all the episodes we had seen till then, nowhere had the titular superhero been depicted spraying jets of water from his outstretched palms. And yet, it was not difficult for me as a viewer, consumer or fan, to imagine that such a power might actually exist in Shaktimaan's vast repertoire of strengths and super abilities. The water-gun action figure was a very believable miniature of the superhero we were acquainted with on-screen. Looking back now, therefore, the cheap plasticity of the action figure, seems to capture the essence of both the fictitious character, as well as the iconography he evokes.

Shaktimaan was not the Indian superhero narrative we were familiar with. Whether it be the framing narrative, the costume, or the general characterization, the titular hero did not bear resemblance to any character from the RC or Diamond repertoires. Rather, the only narrative one could remotely link him to, was that of Superman, made accessible to the Indian audience on STAR network's syndicated telecast of WB's *Superman: The Animated Series* (1996-2000). In fact, Shaktimaan, has been variedly called an Indian version, copy or bootleg of Superman. The similarities between the two characters definitely present a strong case for it: a bumbling bespectacled journalist for an alter ego; two sets of parents; a smart, highly accomplished woman journalist for a boss and colleague (Geeta Vishwas), who is also a lover and desperately tries to prove that the hero and the fool are one and the same; and an identical set of superhuman skills including flight, super strength, super speed, laser eyes, freezing breath etc.

However, there are two crucial differences in the characters' biographies which establishes *Shaktimaan* in a completely different iconographic universe. First, Shaktimaan is not an alien but a human being whom destiny has chosen to be a champion against all evil.

Second, Shaktimaan's powers do not occur because of the sun or the atmosphere's reaction on his physiognomy. In a memorable moment from Episode 43, Shaktimaan explains to Geeta that his powers are only limited by his imagination. He can travel as fast as his mind, see beyond horizons and breathe in space. The hero claims his powers are derived from his mastery over the seven spiritual Chakras and the five primary elements of creation. Moreover, unlike Superman, Shaktimaan's Kryptonite is not an elemental residue of an alien planet but the physical manifestation of "pure evil." These physical manifestations could be a massive crystal called the "*paap punj*" (lit. a mass of evil), shards of this crystal, ancient artefacts, or even the personification of 'negative' qualities like anger, violence, greed or lust.

Such a vast and undefined repertoire of superpowers lends Shaktimaan a unique sense of plasticity. His superpowers are quite blatantly used as plot devices, plot-shields and even plot-holes, evolving according to the demands of the narrative. They are what a particular episode would require them to be. Facing an invisible villain? Shaktimaan gets infrared vision. Trouble with toxic venom? Shaktimaan is immune to poison! Moreover, because the powers and capabilities of his enemies too have similarly fluid definitions, any confrontation between the superhero and his villains, is more a metaphor for the heroic body tackling the problems of contemporary society than a showdown between two specific well defined and well-rounded characters. For instance, one such villain is Kashtak, whose name translates to "one who brings sorrows." Kashtak is a re-awakened ancient king who had been locked away for centuries by an ascetic's curse, inside a sarcophagus. Kashtak carries a mythical sword, the mere touch of whose blade plunges his victims into deep sorrow. Incidentally, the cause of this induced sorrow usually manifests in the victim's deep fear of losing a close relative or family member. The prime cause of sorrow and misery in a modern Indian metropolitan society is thus invariably pinned on the breakdown of the Indian joint family. Shaktimaan's remedy comes in

the form of the "healing touch", visually depicted as warm yellow pulsating rays. As the "healing touch" is performed, the victim would invariably close their eyes and the camera would zoom in for an extreme close-up of their eyelids. The eyes would then suddenly open, followed by a sharp cut to a medium to long-shot of the family member(s) whose bereavement had caused the victim's personal misery. With this cinematic ritual complete, the lifting of Kashtak's spell was cued in by a chiming score and/or Shaktimaan's words: "And now it has ended!" This is then followed by short sermons on valuing your family members, caring for them and keeping them close. The battle between Shaktimaan and Kashtak therefore is an extended metaphor for a tussle between hope and despair, family and bereavement. The hero's powers are plastic enough to make space for such extended metaphors to play out on the screen.

The plasticity of the character and indeed the very plot, almost as if manufactured specifically to serve certain didactic utilitarian needs, is quite succinctly captured in the plasticity of the cheaply produced action figure/water-gun. For starters, like the majority of such locally produced toys and trinkets, the Shaktimaan action figure was also manufactured from recycled plastic bottles, containers, and polybags. Next, and because of the earlier aspect, the very materiality of the action figure was quite different from action figures produced by major international toy manufacturers, specializing in factory line production of such figures. The figurine itself was hollow, and therefore the overall shell was hard but brittle. And yet the recycled nature of the plastic also meant it still had a fraction of its elasticity intact, such that the plastic shell could be limitedly stretched and bent.

Moreover, the purpose of the toy, albeit specialized, was not part of a larger narrative as most action figures are. For instance, a Batman action figure from Mattel would either carry weapons or accessories to identify its relevance to a specific narrative in the DC comic books (*Batman Beyond*, or *Arkham Knight* etc.), or would be the part of a larger group of DC action

figure collectibles, all of which would pertain to particular storylines or crossover events (*Injustice: Gods among Us* or *Infinity Crisis,* for instance). This action figure on the other hand wasn't any particular avatar of Shaktimaan, or indicative of a specific story arc. Rather this was, quite comprehensively, Shaktimaan. In fact, it did not matter for the consumer and fan such as me, that the color tone for the figurine's superhero suit or the details therein did not match their on-screen version very accurately. A general approximation of the color scheme, the suit design, the central symbol, and the hairdo usually sufficed.

The controlled plasticity of the action figure is symptomatic of *Shaktimaan* peculiar place within the superhero iconography. Shaktimaan did not need to be a well-defined character. Nor did he need narratives that stimulated a character growth and development, expose cracks, or open-up possibilities for interpretation. The details did not matter. Neither the titular hero nor any of the other characters were nuanced beyond the requirements of the immediate plot. Most operated within icon-like archetypes. Not unlike the producers of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, Khanna was aiming for an array of visual icons which could embody a socio-cultural ideal.

In fact, similar to how the action figure is a hard brittle coagulation of recycled materiality, Khanna's Shaktimaan too embodies a coagulation of recycled iconographical signs — Superman, Nagraj and even Khanna's own Bhishma. A ready example of this is the opening title card of the show, where the eponymous superhero is seen standing on top of the show's title, written in stylized 3D bold lettering. Here Shaktimaan replicates what can now be easily identified as an iconic posture across visual superhero narratives. He stands straight and rigid, at the center of the frame, with his feet slightly apart and his hands resting on his waist. He looks not directly into the camera but just above as if staring into a wider space. This pose requires the actor to display the full length of his shoulder width which, thanks to the shoulder

blades/pads in Shaktimaan's costume, looks broader than they are. The pose is also a textbook example of the angular, straight-line based template for the masculine body, thus strengthening the ideas of solidity, strength, endurance, and structure associated with the male hero body. This particular pose has been used in various versions and avatars for almost all superhero characters across media, and can therefore be undoubtably recognized as a coagulated, loaded, and archaeologically weighted sign of the superhero iconography.

But this sense of iconographic coagulation also occurs because of the very medium which *Shaktimaan* inhabits; or to be more precise, the choices which the producer makes while translating the iconography from the storage medium of comics to the broadcast medium of television. When translating any two comic-book panels into motion picture, not only does each of those two single frames achieve more depth of movement, the transition from moment to moment itself acquires more frames. Unless the gutter of the comics is translated directly as a hard cut on the screen, every single comic book panel accumulates several hundred other frames depending on how long they last on the screen.

For instance, if the above-mentioned iconic pose consists of a single frame in a single panel in a *Superman* comic book, the replication of this pose on screen for the opening title card for *Shaktimaan*, will have at least 30 such frames even if it lasts only one second on screen. The title card usually lasted 30 seconds. The protracted presence of the iconic pose has no camera movement and a minimal change in the mise-en-scene (not to mention a lack of any movement from the actor in the foreground). However, in those 30 seconds the iconic pose gains the weight of 900 frames or 900 repetitions of the same sign. *Shaktimaan* performs this semiotic repetition quite frequently and at composite levels. Exact postures complete with similar setting scenes and identical dialogues are drawn from popular superhero comic books like *Nagraj* and *Super Commando Dhruva* and, when re-locating these postures and moments

from comics to TV, *Shaktimaan* adds to the semiotic weightage of each frame. Every frame *evolves* each static icon (or iconic posture) found on the pages of comics, adding both temporal and linguistic value to these icons. Given that a character like Nagraj himself is an amalgamation of several such iconographies, what we thus have is a tangible manifestation of Derrida's idea of *différance*.

However, the coagulated plasticity of the icon, like that of the small handheld idol/action figure, ensures that the performance of *différance* in this case is not linear and chronological. The meaning is not necessarily deferred through a chain of differing signs but is internally ingested into a dialectic. Therefore, the sign, as it acquires greater and greater weight of its own semiotic replication per second, loses its integrity to a constant self-referral of multiple streams of signifieds and signifiers that constitute a single such sign in the first place. Thus, as the viewer accumulates each replication of familiar icons, at a rate of 30 per second, they begin to understand Shaktimaan as less of an integral and individual sign in himself, and more of a coagulation of icons before him. The not only start to access Shaktimaan's iconographic constituents like Bhishma, Superman and Nagraj, but also Bahadur and Bachchan's Angry Young Man *through* Nagraj, and so on and so forth.

This coagulation of entire iconographies provides Shaktimaan a limited plasticity. The water gun/action figure could at one time be "*any* Shaktimaan", the "Shaktimaan who shoots water from his palms" or "*the only* Shaktimaan", and yet also embody all these significations all at once within its limitedly malleable plastic shell. Similarly, the Shaktimaan on screen is simultaneously a visual metaphor for larger universal signifiers like truth, justice, bravery etc. as well as the particularly coded sign for the modern Hindu man, the Indian superhero etc. He is also the manifestation of a current and immediate demand for a Hindu national leadership, even as he is the star Mukesh Khanna.

Any icon cannot signify just *one* of its iconographies at any given point of time. Rather, the iconicity of the icon is derived from a near constant identification of its several causal as well as resultant iconographies. The icon is after all a sign whose significations have been de-limited or freed from the limits of its *ur*-signification. However, as with the plastic figurine, when these de-limited icons are coagulated, re-shaped and galvanized through their transmedia accretion of signifiers and signifieds, they also begin to re-define the limits of their own signification. Even as the internalized signs engage in a dialectic and thus provide the icon with its iconicity, they also start demarcating a new set of semiotic limitations as it cools and settles into this brittle, barely malleable plastic shell. Over time, with constant coagulation and a prolonged repetition, the constituent iconographies are simultaneously distilled and dissolved into a solid singular icon. This resultant icon is perverse. The linguistic and temporal weight of repeated coagulation has made it averse to an identification of its own constituent iconographies. It still generates iconographies but absorbs them no more. It is no longer the resultant or only one amongst several 'deferents' in the nexus of signs. Rather, it is now a 'referent' to its pre-facto iconographies. To use the example of Shaktimaan, such an icon is no longer readily identifiable as the distilled form of ACK, DC Comics, Bollywood action movies, *Mahabharata* or other Mukesh Khanna characters. It is no longer one of the many other characters on TV and film who might all be nodes in continuous sequence of *différance* in its iconography. Rather an icon like Shaktimaan becomes a reference, a projection which reflects *back* onto the older iconographies. No longer is an icon such as this deriving meaning or signification from the older iconographies. It rather adds to their signification, enriches them with meaning. For instance, not just *Mahabharat* but the entire visual iconography it is a part of, becomes more semiotically charged for a viewer of *Shaktimaan*. This perverse icon is no longer a souvenir, but a relic — a living, functioning proof of the utopian future-past, the *itihaas*. Not only has the historicity of the icon been established now, thanks to its constant

references to other current and historical iconographies, this perverse icon has also begun to accrue a sense of functionality, thus evolving into a (non) phantom ideal.

However, there remains a final step before the marketability of this (non) phantom ideal is achieved, or it becomes a reliable enough commodity to sustain entire economies of desire. The icon's internal distillation, ingestion and coagulation of iconographies needs to also respond to and be sustained by its interaction with other iconographic entities. To pull at the metaphor of the action figure again, this implies that the figurine's materiality – brittle, limitedly malleable, hollow shell housing a small mechanism for drawing and releasing water – needs to carry an appeal for its *consumers* in context of the *other variants* available in the market. This is where the uniqueness of Shaktimaan's example becomes even more apparent. Unlike the more popular global examples of superheroes on film and TV, *Shaktimaan* has always been related to a singular star body – that of Mukesh Khanna. Even when the narrative entered other media and formats (comic books, animated series etc.), these transmedia avatars would emulate the "original" experience by either drawing a close likeness of Khanna (in comics) or having him voice the character (in animation). And therefore, to understand this last step in the making of the (non)phantom ideal marketable, we must also return to the study of a more conventional and easily identifiable system of icons: the star.

Assembling a Hero

The star — any star, in itself – is also the closest example of a fully developed system of visual signifiers and signifieds, an iconography. When we examine a star — cinema, tv and even sport stars — we invariably pre-figure their physical bodies as *locus operandi* of not only their body of works but also their relations, ideologies, belief systems, and by extension the section of society they ultimately appeal to. [168] The star's body then is not just an icon but an iconography in itself; not just one of the many icons in a system of icon-to-icon significatory relationship,

but also a network of such iconographic relations. It is both an interphase which reflects as well as the topography onto which is mapped, not so much the individual belief of the star but rather the constantly interacting economies of contrasting and/or contradicting desires of the star's many fans and followers.

The star, as an icon, is therefore dismembered immediately from its immediate signification. For instance, for the fans and followers of Bachchan, it matters not who he is but who he appears to be — an aggregate of the several on-screen roles he essays, the interviews he gives, the administrative responsibilities he has performed and the public events he attend. He is also an aggregate of all that he does not: the roles he refuses, the allegations he denies and the directors and/or films he decries. Whereas on the other hand, for stars such as Ranveer Singh or Hrithik Roshan — both instances of iconic, albeit very different, masculine bodies in a latter era — not only are their personal and family histories a constant signifier and signified of their corporeal personas, but their very corporeality is also broken down into individual significatory systems. It is the flexibility of Roshan's torso across various dance moves which become iconic representation of brand values that he may be selling — the lightness and flexibility of floaters, the boosted bass (and thump) of earphones, or the tenacity to work hard for a cricket team. The star is therefore never simply the visible physical body but simultaneously a dismemberment as well as an assemblage.

However, this simultaneous interweaving of dismemberment and assemblage for any such system of icons called a star occurs quite visibly in context of other such similar systems, other stars. For instance, the six-pack abs and ripped torso of Hrithik Roshan will incur a set of meaning contrary to, or different from, the six-pack abs and ripped torso of Salman Khan or Shah Rukh Khan or Ranveer Singh. What semiotic systems each of these similarly sculpted, gym-toned bodies or parts-of bodies incur, will be decided by the fact that they are not the

other, as much as their own socio-cultural context. In many ways, this is an extension and expansion of the basic Saussurean concept of meaning between individual signs being differential. Nonetheless, this process of semiotic differentiation is especially complicated with the star. The star is not only bound within a primary semiotic equation with stars such that they are simultaneously contributing to each other's signification, while also working towards the creation of yet another nexus of significations, i.e. a narrative. I am talking about the semiotic dynamics of a team of stars — cast of a film or TV series, or even a sports team. In other words, the semiotic dynamics between each member of the *ensemble*.

Merriam-Webster defines ensemble as "a group producing a single effect". This "single effect" is not necessarily an iconography. For example, the ensemble cast of *Mahabharat* is not really aiming to project a particular iconography but play their characters which are themselves bound to the specific iconography thanks to production decisions. However, the bodies of each of these members of the cast, as we have proved earlier, has been chosen specifically to be an ideal reflection of the iconography that the production team wishes to. Therefore, the bodies themselves exists in a complementary semiotic relation such that each is adding to the larger semiotic nexus of the iconography which they inhabit. Shakuni's stunted body adds semiotically to Bhishma's vigor, and vice versa.

Thus, even as their bodies are locked within this complementary relation, the stars themselves prove to be supplementary to each other's iconic signification. Additionally, the star persona also informs the perception of the characters themselves. To take up the example of Paintal and Khanna again, Paintal was the casting director of the show as well as someone whom the directors and producers relied heavily for organization of the set, positioning and choreography of the actors and inputs on modifying a character's dialogues during the actual filming of the show. Paintal was also one of the senior-most members of the core cast and had

had a longer career in theatre and films as compared to most other actors he recruited. All this information about the star added to the aura of the character he played. The status of Shakuni as the silent puppet master working behind the scenes, astute in his political experience and wizened with age, is cemented by the star persona of Paintal as one of the more experienced engineers of the TV serial itself.

However, while Paintal might have been a wise old paternal figure off-screen, it was Khanna's character which played that exact role on screen. Khanna's Bhishma was *the* patriarch of the dysfunctional family of House Kuru. Bhishma's most essential character flaw is the constant failing efforts he makes to hold the family together. However, over the years the star persona which Khanna had cultivated resembled that of a lone wolf. He did not marry and has no immediate offspring; he was often talked about by his co-actors as someone who's difficult to work with; he is heavily critical of the prevalent and dominant practices of both the TV and film industries; and while being part of several serials with massive ensemble star-casts, he has often played lone-wolf characters like rangers, bereft patriarchs, mysterious vigilantes and warlocks. In most of his interviews too, Khanna comes across as someone more concerned about their own image and rapport with the audience. He is overtly critical about most on-screen retellings of the epic that aired in the years following Chopra's magnum opus. Similarly, he maintains that Shaktimaan remains the only true Indian superhero, dismissing any attempts at superhero narratives by Bollywood A-listers like Shahrukh Khan or Hrithik Roshan. In many ways then, the star persona for Khanna was often diametrically opposite to the character which catapulted him to his star status.

This was also true about several other actors in *Mahabharat*. Pankaj Dheer, who is known for playing the character Karna, "was the makers' first choice for Arjun, but he refused to take up the role as he was required to shave off his moustache for it," reports Kavita Awasthi

for *Hindustan Times*. The transition in question here pertains to one of the most important ones in the epic. According to the narrative, after being defeated in the game of dice, the Pandava brothers had to spend 12 years in exile and one year incognito. During this thirteenth year, Arjuna, one of the most celebrated warriors and an uber-masculine character in popular iconographies, decided to live in the court of King Virat as Brihannala,[169] the dance teacher to Virat's daughter Princess Uttara. When Firoz Khan, the actor essaying the role of Arjuna, underwent the physical transition, the lack of a moustache was one of the prime markers of change in the character's appearance, besides a long plait of hair, a tight bodice resembling a blouse, and a visibly excess layer of make-up on the face – deep kohl-lines for the eyes, extra layers of rouge on the cheeks etc.

In the documentary MM, Dheer, with his moustache intact, is shown lounging on a recliner, as he speaks in carefully phrased and immaculately pronounced Hindi. Even when he speaks English, it is marked by a studied and careful pronunciation of each word. There aren't many hand movements. He comes across as reserved, soft-spoken yet forceful in his pronunciation. In 'behind- the-scene' action Dheer is mostly seen as a passive participant in conversations or a silent observer of the activities on the sets. Khan, on the other hand, is quite his antithesis. The moustache is absent. He comes across as a lively and energetic presence on the set — prancing around, engaged in animated conversations, waving at the camera, dancing on the sets, and crying uncontrollably on the last day of the shoot. When he talks, he does so in fluent English with a professional ease. While his English is fluent, his pronunciations are spontaneous and lacks the studied care that Dheer demonstrates, resulting in casual stutters and repetitions. This lends a sense of naturalization to his grasp of the language, which in turn reflects his Oxford education — locating him within a multicultural space. Khan's voice is notably of a higher pitch than Arjuna's and has more variations than the near-steady growl of

his on-screen avatar. Dheer however maintains the heavy, almost flat, baritone of Karna in the making of documentary.

Here, Dheer and Khan, portraying each other's arch nemesis on screen, will be recognizable to the Indian audience as signifiers of another binary. Dheer will find himself located within a function of labels including: 'son of the soil', 'grounded', 'reserved', 'rustic', 'Hindi-speaker' and 'masculine.' Khan, on the other hand, will more likely be termed 'modern', 'out-going', 'multicultural', 'English-speaker' and even 'effeminate'. As the political right adapted these on-screen iconic visualities into their daily realities, this binary will increasingly devolve into a signifiers of prevalent communal fault lines. In an eerie replication of the characters that Khan and Dheer played on screen, thousands of "volunteers (of Hindu nationalist parties) dressed to look like the television versions of Ram and his brother Lakshman, with their bows strung, posed for photographs" or climbed onto chariots waving naked swords, and marched in the Rath Yatra. [170] However, it was Dheer's reserved, Hindi-speaking "son of the soil", which would be identified as the ideal *swadeshi* heterosexual male body, encouraged to exist beyond the direct Hindutva politics of BJP, in the daily contemporaneity of a new *swadeshi* India. This was the ideal Hindu body fitted for the modern Indian society. On the other hand, if Dheer's end of the binary was to be projected as the dominant, Khan would find himself at the 'other' end. An 'English-speaking', 'multicultural' Muslim, Khan was the very 'other' which doppelgangers of his on-screen persona, Arjuna, targeted across a series of riots in the 1990s. It's not surprising then that Firoz Khan changed his name to Arjun, identifying himself with the image he portrayed. In fact, Khan is not the only one who would try to institutionalize his identification with his most famous role. Khanna, among others, too had the same idea when he named his production house Bheeshm

International and using his own still from an iconic moment of Bhishma in *Mahabharat*, as the logo of the company.

The star, given that they too are ultimately an icon even as they are an iconography unto themselves, are therefore not unlike the example of the plastic figurine — a coagulation of semiotic relationships. What makes the star body a unique kind of icons, however, is that their iconicity is not only dependent on their semiotic coagulation of visual signs but their specific impact on corporealities. In the above examples, it is evident that even as Shakuni and Bheeshma, or Arjuna and Karna, form iconic binaries on screen, such binaries are immediately counteracted upon by not only their narrative relationship with other characters in the ensemble, but also the star personas associated with them. Each of these character-icons are functioning within at least two iconographies, then: that of the individual star and that of the overall iconographic arrangement of the project. Each of the icons are an assemblage of the star, the ensemble, and the character; the persona the body carries into the project, through the project and then away from the project. In other words, how the star bodies of either of these actors are perceived are also locked in a function of their relations with, a) other star bodies as interphase of their respective characters, b) other star bodies as corporeal maps of their respective star personas; and c) their own bodies as an interphase as well as a map of their responses to contemporary sociocultural events, trends, and opinions.

In an ensemble therefore, while the body is still distinctly identified for the specific role that the narrative iconography assigns it, it's also identified as part of a larger whole accruing signification by means of its relations with other corporeal (bodies of actors, players, staff etc.) and non-corporeal (the mise-en-scene, the costume, the props etc.) icons on the visual plane. This means while characters like Bhishma, Arjuna, Karna etc. may be presented as ideal signifiers of nationalist leadership within the phantom ideal of the Hindu Rashtra represented

by *Mahabharat*, the validation of their leadership as well as the desire for such a leader's body is found in their semiotic relation with the larger group of which they are a part of. The iconicity of the star body within an ensemble is not only a simultaneous assemblage and dismemberment of its own nexus of icons, but also that of other systems with which it interacts. The iconicity of Khanna's Bhishma body is therefore an ensemble of the iconicity of other bodies which feed into his *iconographic* signification as a leader. At a most primary level, this means that when the audience connects the visual of Khanna's tall frame, broad shoulders, and brisk walk with such epithets for Bhishma as "the pillar of the House Kuru", they are also comparing with other bodies sharing the same screen space, which are not adorned with such epithets.

The Man, The Myth, The Legend

The semiotic dependency of the star on their ensemble is starkly contrasted to the kind of iconicity that Khanna carved out for *Shaktimaan.* In *Shaktimaan*, the Star body was very conspicuously posited within a definite binary. Khanna was the lead, and the rest of the cast was an ensemble. Whether it be with respect to the narrative, the iconicity or the formal choices, Khanna's Shaktimaan stood at the center of the collective, semiotically feeding off all other characters and their corresponding Star bodies. In *Mahabharat*, there wasn't a single lead but always a group of core characters, each of which could assume the role of the lead for a few minutes, an entire episode, or several episodes[171]. In *Shaktimaan*, no matter how crucial any character is, their essential identification stems from their relation to Shaktimaan.

As pointed out earlier Shaktimaan's adversaries are not well-rounded characters with deep personal motivations. Rather they are either minions of the primary Dark Lord or are driven by an ambition to spread evil in the world. Even the Dark Lord of the narrative, Kilvish, who does have a comparatively detailed backstory, is an un-complicated villain whose thirst for power has made him the lord of all evil. There is not much that differentiates the villains

from each other, except the thematic reflection of their characteristic evil traits in their costumes. Abuse of science and technology produces cyborgs, corruption is metaphorized as politicians and businessmen, sexual licentiousness is personified by anthropomorphic cat-women, and so on. The villains are important to the plot simply because they offer Khanna's Shaktimaan a new opportunity every episode to cement his ideology and reiterate his didactic messages: the integrity of the Indian joint family, clean and hygienic habits, respecting women as mothers, daughters, sisters etc., value of self-control, honesty, truth justice, etc. Kilvish, in this schema is like an evil God — an abstract and unfathomable originator of all things evil.

Similarly, core-supporting characters like Geeta Vishwas also conform to ritualized event loops. Through each story arc, the reporter would start by rooting for the hero until a particular event would lead her to doubt or get disillusioned or frustrated with him. This would be followed by an act of intense heroism by Shaktimaan which prompts her to reconfirm her faith in him, and the conventional order of the fictional universe is restored. This cycle of events might be performed within a single episode or over the length of several episodes. In this cycle, the first event would challenge Shaktimaan's ideology, while the second would re-establish why the hero's take on a specific social issue should be celebrated and conformed with. Again, in this cyclical narrative ritual Geeta's character growth is but secondary to the necessity to re-confirm faith in Shaktimaan's leadership qualities, his ideologies as well as his methodologies.

Unlike the basic Saussurean semiotics of differentiation in *Mahabharat* therefore, the signification of a character in *Shaktimaan* is not so much enriched by every other member of the character and their Star bodies, but rather by their relation to the single central character of Shaktimaan itself. In fact, as opposed to Bhishma who was *in* an ensemble, Shaktimaan's iconicity functions *as* an ensemble.

After a quick browse through his filmography, it can be argued that most of Khanna's prominent, more successful performances before *Shaktimaan*, came when he was part of a large ensemble of TV or Bollywood Stars. Even when these performances saw him in the lone-wolf and belligerent rebel archetypes, Khanna's body was only a member of a larger semiotic nexus which worked on the audience's identification of a relational logic between all bodies on screen. This changes in the very first moments of *Shaktimaan.* Within the first minute of the show's title card, the audience is presented with a superimposition of two iconic stills of Khanna. He is not riding a chariot on screen at the head of an army of similarly poised ancient commanders and thus hardly discernible in the extreme long shot, like he did in the opening sequence of *Mahabharat*. Nor is he peeking from the corners of a Bollywood poster, dwarfed by the massive mugshot of a Bollywood star. Instead, in both these iconic poses, he is front and center, in full focus of the camera. He is also the only body on screen, twice. The first such pose is a still from *Mahabharat*, which Khanna uses as the logo of his production company. This still pertains to a defining moment in Bhishma's narrative, when the young prince of Hastinapur takes a vow to never sit on the throne, marry, or sire children. This moment re-christens the young Prince Devavrata to "Bhishma" or "The Awesome One." In this still, Khanna has raised both his arms in the air with his fists clenched, and stares into the sky with grim resolve. Lightning flashes in the background, a din of thunder is heard, and within mere seconds the still is shrunk into a small circular emblem on whose circumference are written, the words "Bheeshm International." This medallion like emblem then swiftly moves to the top of the screen, diminishing as it goes, until its barely noticeable. Simultaneously, against the backdrop of space and hurtling asteroids, the bold emblazoned letters spelling "Shaktimaan" zoom out and fill the bottom 1/3rd of the screen. On top of the letters appears Khanna in his superhero suit, posing in the iconic superhero posture discussed before.

The message is clear, especially with the repeated embossing of the company's logo on the title card and the replication of Khanna's star body on this logo: this is Khanna's show. On the logo, detached from its narrative immediacy, the moment of Bhishma's awesome vow is an affirmation of not merely the iconography it has always been located in, but also the statement that *Khanna's star persona actually affirms this iconography*. In the oft-repeated title card, the star and the superhero are both present. Thus, not only do we distinctly identify the prime protagonist of the show, but we also establish a hierarchy. The thrice repetition of the Khanna-Shaktimaan icon (logo, title and Superhero posture) and its resultant commingling of Khanna's star body with Shaktimaan's superhero body makes it clear that there is only *one* lead in the narrative.

But if Shaktimaan is the lead, what then is his relationship with the ensemble of the show? That most characters in the serial derive their signification through their relation to the single central character of Shaktimaan, is complicated by the fact that Shaktimaan is not a *single* character at all, but two: the superhero and his alter-ego, the bumbling photojournalist fool. Therefore, even as he is the lead, he is also an ensemble. The most common and oft repeated visual trope of the show which sheds light on this relation is Khanna's transformation from the photojournalist Gangadhar Shastri to the eponymous superhero. Khanna's portrayal of the reporter is inspired by Jerry Lewis's iconic look from *The Nutty Professor* (1963). Complete with the disheveled haircut and bangs, the awkwardly worn glasses, the loosely fitting tweed coats and ties, and the clumsy walk, Khanna channels Lewis's on-screen persona to create a complete antithesis to the superhero character. He often fumbles, fails to shift lightest of weights, is easily scared, and the first to flee the scene, when faced with adversities. Even as the viewer may identify Gangadhar as a bootleg version of Clark Kent, the

characterization of Gangadhar also makes it easy to realize that his exaggerated failures strengthen a very particular ideation of masculinity in the serial.

However, the alter-ego 'Gangadhar' itself is a split personality. For instance, while in public, he is shown to be clumsy, attempts compulsively to appear politically correct at all times, and is easily persuaded to adhere to one or other political, cultural or philosophical ideology. Not only is he one amongst a mass of characters who are similarly vulnerable to a blind adherence of rules, he is also at times *the* on-screen metaphor for the urban-dwelling middleclass striving for political correctness, personal safety, and economic stability. He is not only part of the common masses, but also the most prominent metaphor for "the common man", in the show. On the other hand, when away from the public eye, Gangadhar shows greater control of his body. He appears composed, thoughtful, and often introspective about the reality he inhabits. His house is shown to be neatly arranged, clean and minimally decorated. He does not trip or fail in carrying out daily chores within this private space. Nonetheless, whether he is outwardly goofy or reserved, Gangadhar frequently indulges in sly, mischievous use of his superpowers, which become a common trope of hilarity in the serial.

When he is the superhero however, Gangadhar transforms into the self-confident demagogue, a leader who takes up the onus to educate these child-like masses about the "right" way of leading their lives. In fact, while Shaktimaan's prime audience both within and without the narrative are children, in a movement similar to ACK, his lessons are in fact directed towards the Indian middle-class family, through their children. This is again not inconsistent with the idea of leadership that Khanna has portrayed throughout his career so far, not in the least with Mahabharat. The early shows of Doordarshan were specifically aimed at capturing the Indian middle-class joint family. The mythological serials however targeted the children, and through them the family. Khanna is carrying forward the tradition first established by ACK

and then cemented by Chopra and Sagar's mythological serials. As Nicholas Sammond points out, "Correct the way children are raised, the reasoning goes, and you will eliminate a number of social ills."[172] The purpose of children's literature, Peter Hunt observes, is evaluated in terms of its "effectiveness for education, language acquisition, socialization/acculturation or for entertainment."[173] Grafting a projected ideal onto a narrative for children's entertainment, therefore, is a phenomenon neither novel nor obscure. Sammond says,

> …the child is the ultimate client: its requirements are generally defined according to its condition of becoming, and unlike the adult it will become, its status as citizen-in-the-making means that it can be invoked without immediate recompense. The benefits accorded to it are assigned in trust to others, and the loss of those benefits by other client groups is unassailable, so potent and virtuous is the child's social function. To make an argument for the children, for the future, is to invoke a constituency not yet arrived, the common good of which cannot be questioned.[174]

The important question then is not "whether the child is socially constructed, but *how* it is socially constructed."[175] And in this respect, Shaktimaan very clearly presents an imitable and attractive template of leadership which could inform such a social construction. However, leadership qualities are not the only aspect for which the serial provides a template.

As is evident from the examples above, through Gangadhar and other core characters, the audience is also presented with a cumulative icon, an icon which works not for or through an individual body but the collection of several bodies – the masses. Unlike a serial like *Mahabharat* or *Ramayan* where the narrative stays firmly embedded within the ruling classes of the society it depicts, *Shaktimaan* works primarily because of its continuous and reiterated affinity with the people, within and without the plot. And therefore, when one half of the dichotomous central character is presented as a metaphor for the very people the show caters to, a single body is identified as the representative of a cumulative icon commonly known as

'the masses.' This singular body is the ensemble in the sense that each character is metaphorized, represented and spoken for by him, as Gangadhar. But the body is also the ensemble because he both lends and derives signification to and from these characters. Shaktimaan is the reason why most of these characters, and their representative bodies function the way they do on screen. The central hero from whom all the other bodies on screen derive their identities and signification is therefore dichotomous, such that Khanna's body on screen is both the people and the leader. Moreover, the layered personality of Gangadhar himself adds to the metaphor of the people. Gangadhar's mischievous indulgence in his super-abilities and his propensity to be in control in his most private moments keeps reminding the audience of the "people" figure's ability to metamorphose into the "leader" figure. If Gangadhar is the "Common Man", he can also *become* the superhero/the leader. And if Shaktimaan is the superhero/the leader, then the audience is never allowed to forget that he becomes a superhero because of a common man's choice to tap into his internal powers. *Shaktimaan* actualizes the potentiality of the phantom ideal on screen, thus further evolving it into a (non) phantom ideal.

Shaktimaan cements a very peculiar notion of leadership which, as the first chapter proved, earlier media narratives like Bachchan's films and RC's superheroes had sought to counter: the identification of the leader with and as the people. In fact, it was yet another contemporaneous superhero serial which helps identify this propensity of *Shaktimaan,* more clearly. Milind Soman-starrer *Captain Vyom*, a space-adventure saga closely resembling Star-Trek, also posits a male superhero body in a leadership role. But the body as well as the role are both starkly different from Khanna's Shaktimaan. First aired in 1998, *Captain Vyom* introduces the gym-toned body of supermodel Soman for the first time on the small screen, in a big way. Although covered in a space-suit for much of the screen time, Vyom's supermodel body whenever visible on screen, presents the superhero body as a much more accessible

commodity. Firstly, in *Shaktimaan*, the shape and visuality of the body is only incidental and reflective to the powers within (acquired not through rigorous physical exercises but constant penance and Hindu religious practices).

Soman's chiseled torso on the other hand, is not merely the reflection of internalized superpowers gained through religious rituals. Rather the visible physique *is* the source of the Captain's power, such that his regularly depicted training regimes on-board the spaceship themselves become a ritualized process for replenishing physical vigor and fitness for the wary space-traveler. Moreover, the ship's motley crew, including alcoholic engineers, outlaws, and a teenage stow-away, all have an easy access to this source of power. They do not require long periods of yoga and/or other ancient religious practices. Rather, as Vyom points out several times in the series, all they need is basic physical exercise to keep them ready for the uncharted space. And as a result, we witness several of the characters working out either rigorously or casually from time to time in the series. This cancels out the exclusivity of the superhero body right away.

Secondly, the semiotic as well as power equations between each of the characters and the lead of *Captain Vyom* is often best described by a phrase used in the Indian constitution to describe the status of the Prime Minister, among his cabinet of ministers: "First among equals." The crew members of *Ulka* either belong to the margins of the society, are not conventionally seen as leadership figures (underaged, cyborgs etc.) or have dark or ambiguous pasts. Also, they do not necessarily turn to the Captain Vyom as the final word on every decision they take. Nor is Vyom the absolute moral compass or knowledge bank of the show. Unlike Shaktimaan, his powers and skills are neither infinite nor malleable to suit the requirements of the plot. Both these factors render the dynamics of this ensemble much more democratic. There is an absence of a definite binary between the lead and the ensemble. Each character is located within their

own unique narrative and iconographic context. They draw from as well as contribute to the characters signification of every other member of the crew semiotically.

Captain Vyom ran for an approximate 12 months, and 54 episodes. The saga has definite narrative conclusion, and resolution for each character. However, even with a strong start, the space-adventure sci-fi serial could not match the immense popularity of *Shaktimaan*. And this is quite revealing of the political needs and atmosphere of the country. With the failure of four governments Vajpayee had emerged as a strong leadership figure. After more than a decade, since the death of Indira Gandhi, this emergence of a strong charismatic leader catered to a very basic demand for political leadership, missing for most part of the decade of the 90s. Khanna's superhero celebrated this exact kind of leadership. The debut of Shaktimaan in 1997 as well as the validation of Khanna's artistic and social work by Vajpayee and the leadership of BJP, points towards a very crucial phenomenon. Not since Gandhi's slogan of "India is Indira", had the need for conflating the leader with the people, and the lead with the ensemble, been felt so strongly in Indian politics and society.

Shaktimaan, a coagulation of iconographies initiated and re-established by serials like *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat*, completes a very definite line of signification between the ensemble and the lead, the people, and the leader. While the leader is one of the people, he *is* also the people. Not only did Khanna manage to generate a uniquely non phantom icon — identified and celebrated for how real and current it was — but by establishing this link between the people and the leader, he also cemented the marketability of this icon.

But as we enter an era where superheroic icons crowd our screens, big and small, how do we reconcile the ideal of an unfragmented, monolithic 'people' and its leadership corporealities, with the rapidly fragmented overabundance of opinions and information on the

internet? How does superheroic leader identify with 'a people' amidst a crowd web-formed 'echo-chamber'?

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CHAPTER IV
PANTHEON: SUPERHEROES ARE EVERYWHERE

April 28th, 2019, was a long day for pop-culture fans. In the afternoon, I accompanied a group of friends to a local theatre to watch Marvel's *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). Then, in the evening, I sat down with the same group of friends to watch "The Long Night", the third episode in the 8th season of *Game of Thrones*. We were at a bar in Eugene, Oregon, where the episode was streaming live to a group of fifty or so people. By the end of the "The Long Night", all of us felt drained and exhausted. The cumulative effect of two multi-part pop-culture franchises reaching their culmination in spectacular visuals of war and conflict left us feeling overwhelmed. Both finale events had brought together iconic heroic bodies in epic CGI-fueled clashes of 'good' versus 'evil', 'light' versus 'dark,' on screen. Weeks later, after *Game of Thrones* (*GoT*) had wrapped up all the episodes in its final season, fans and critics alike would conclude that while the MCU's Infinity Stones Saga had managed to "stick the landing," the epic fantasy TV series had failed to do the same.

Meanwhile, even as I watched the epic on-screen narratives, I had my social media radar tracking another equally epic clash of iconic bodies back in India. The last season of *GoT* and the cinematic release of *Endgame* roughly coincided with the 2019 Indian General Election (April 11 to May 23, 2019). The 17th Assembly elections saw the re-election of Narendra Modi to his second term as the Prime Minister of India. Modi's 2019 victory margin was much larger than his lead in the 2014 Elections, which had already been touted in the Indian media as a 'Modi Wave'. Fascinatingly, real and reel collided when, in the run up to the 2019 election, inspired by the simultaneous ad campaigns for the upcoming MCU blockbuster, Indian Twitter and FB posts filled with posters and promotional artworks depicting major election players as Avengers. Depending on who they supported, the Twitterati painted Modi as either Thanos,

Captain America, or Iron Man. My favorite was a tweet from Tejaswi Surya, the National President of the BJP's youth wing, who photoshopped Narendra Modi into a still from *The Avengers* (2012) featuring the original line-up of the MCU's six main heroes. The image was accompanied by the words: "Energy better than Hulk. Agility better than Captain America. Heavy lifting better than Thor. Vision better than Iron man. Tactics better than Black Widow. Narendra Modi — Real hero, with the fictional ones."[176]

Several other GIFs and tweets similarly portrayed Modi's political rivals like Arvind Kejriwal, Mamata Banerjee and Rahul Gandhi as characters from the MCU films or the *Game of Thrones* series. Soon Indian fans of the two major franchises were trying to narrativize the elections as a real-life *Game of Thrones* or *Endgame*, with major political leaders substituting fictional characters in fan-made trailers and videos.

As someone simultaneously experiencing both sets of socio-cultural phenomena — the spectacular culmination of epic visual narratives on screens and a political slugfest in one of the largest democracies in the world — I couldn't help but notice the similarities in their arrangement of and attitude towards corporeality. We were looking at three different pantheons of iconic personalities arranged within narratives of "right" and "wrong" leaderships. While each of these icons responded to their own groups of "people" (whether that be their immediate posse of characters and monarchial subjects on screen, or dedicated fanbases and vote banks off screen), they also drew from each other's discourses within a network of iconographic exchanges. As we saw in the last chapter, as members of an ensemble, star corporealities engage in such iconographic dialogues on screen. Today, political icons, too, work and operate within a similar network of iconographic exchanges.

Even as we witness the rise of individual populist leaders across the world — Donald Trump in US, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Manuel Lopez Obrador in Mexico, among others —

we have also arrived in an era of cultural conglomerates. In these conglomerates, thanks to a constant exchange of iconographies across cultural boundaries through new media tools like GIFs, TikTok, OTT platforms, and social media accounts, different individual political icons and leaders are consistently drawing from and adding to a global network of populist iconography, while remaining distinct political entities within their own localized socio-political narratives. In fact, while these political leaders might not be actively encouraging such a conglomeration, their fans and critics alike are equipped — now more than ever — with the media tools capable of identifying, indeed forming, these connections.

As I have stated elsewhere, populism goes beyond political ideologies. Rather than determining whether a leader is leaning left or right, the identification of "populist" depends upon how a leader defines their "people." Nonetheless, with an overabundance of iconographic exchanges through the internet and New Media today, the visual icons of idealized bodies (?) are continuously arranged and re-arranged within narratives of "right" and "wrong" leadership. Depending on which news app sends you updates — CNN or Fox News — Donald Trump was either doing everything wrong or everything right. On Facebook or Twitter our news feed is dominated by posts that reflect, confirm, and strengthen our biases and opinions. We are trapped in opinion-echo-chambers online—frequenting our chosen discussion boards, Facebook groups, and even consuming a tailored selection of visual narratives on OTT platforms. In the fragmented narrative-scape of New Media which seemingly enforces multiplicity, how do individual leadership icons unite large sections of modern societies into a singular 'people' motivated by common goals and desires?

We saw how both Nagraj and Shaktimaan reformulated the iconography of the superhero as they wrestled with the project of identifying their "people" within their specific socio-political contexts. What iconographic materials do these older texts provide to a

contemporary idealized vision of the laboring-leader? How have these texts helped to sell unifying desires to consumers of pluralist media narratives? In the concentric echo chambers nurtured by social media narratives, how have new media narratives helped establish certain political icons as resilient and constant generators of discourses, key compilers of datapoints, and dominant algorithmic determinants?

The answer lies in understanding the development of populism through what I call the "pantheon" phenomenon. Whether it be Thanos's ecological motivation, Daenerys's messiah complex, or ab Indian politicians' appeal to representation across voter banks, we are witnessing a reformulation of the relation between "people" and "leaders", and can trace the various trajectories of this reformulation on and off our screens.

The Matrix: Redistributions

What is the "pantheon"? The word is of Greek origin (*pan* means all and *theos* means god), and literally translates to "(a temple) of all gods," or "common to all gods." In modern English usage, the Oxford English Dictionary also defines the term as "a group of particularly respected, famous, or important people."

Ancient polytheistic mythologies, like Greek, Roman, Egyptian, or Hindu, can be arranged into pantheons of deities, often hierarchized by their power and cultural importance. Modern mythologies, especially the superhero mythologies in American comics, also center around similarly hierarchized pantheons. DC has the "big three" in Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman, followed by the remaining four member of the seven primary heroes of the Justice League, and so on and so forth. Marvel's Avengers, X-Men, Fantastic 4 and other superhero teams are all separate pantheons with internal hierarchies, and yet form a larger hierarchized pantheon of Marvel heroes. In these modern superheroic pantheons, individual heroes often have their own domains — Batman has Gotham, Aquaman has Atlantis, Black

Panther rules Wakanda, Doctor Doom is in Latveria, and so on. They also either directly deal with or have more frequent connection with specific sections of the larger comics multiverses they protect.

These specific target groups, I argue, are their 'people.' These 'people' could be an actual people or nation (the Wakandans or the Amazons), a community or subculture (the Mutants), or certain class and section of the society (Spider-Man's 'friendly neighborhood' or Gotham's criminal class for Batman). Their 'people' equates to the social categories the superhero most readily identifies with or appeals to, or even tries to reform. More than one superhero can appeal to the same 'people' of course. Magneto and Cyclops are both leaders of the mutant communities, albeit opposing. And yet, inevitably, when part of larger team-ups and crossover narratives, the demands and needs of the immediate 'people' of individual superheroes mostly take a backseat to more global and macro concerns.

This interpretation of 'people' also applies to comics readerships. For instance, an avid reader of Marvel's various *Spider-Man* titles will inevitably buy other character- and team-specific titles they don't otherwise follow when reading a "crossover" event. During the Civil War narrative arc, for example, Spider-Man's individual narrative makes sense only in context of the larger pan-theon narrative of other Marvel titles. Spider-Man evolves during this event, gaining a new dimension and complexity, and thus engaging the Spider-Man readership in fannish chatter about their favorite hero's place in the larger universe.

The pantheon, then, is a *collection* of iconic heroes which, while individually loyal to their own 'people' (within and without the fictional multiverse), together function to project a unifying, macroscopic portrait of cumulative desires. To recall my introductory chapter, the pantheon is thus "the minimum and the complete number of elements (heroic corporealities) necessary for an autonomous world — a world which is both full and singular, which has

banished repetition and achieved authority."[177] More than the individual hero, it is the pantheon which generates the most productive economies of longing, by not only bringing together each individual 'people' through the representational leader-corporealities of their respective heroes, but also by making them root for the group as whole, by association.

Consequently, the pantheon is a neoliberal narrative tool. On one hand, it is not homogenous and coherent, and neither does it pretend to be so. It makes space for a heteroglossia of opinions (witness, the trope of constant bickering that mark the assembling of MCU Avengers). On the other hand, by ultimately unifying this heteroglossic collection of iconic heroic bodies within an inherently hierarchical space, the pantheon binds the participatory 'people' to a larger homogenized, reductive, and hegemonic ideology. In *Game of Thrones*, the pantheon of lords and their quest for the preservation of a unifying story, 'the realm', denies a voice to the force of nature personified in the Night King. In the MCU, a neoliberal celebration of triumphant human will ultimately delegate the advocacy of ecological balance to a "Mad Titan."

In India, the current crop of populist political leaders functions as and within an equivalent pantheon of iconic "heroic" figures. Leaders like Delhi CM Aravind Kejriwal, West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee, and PM Narendra Modi each have their distinct 'people' — both in terms of ideological definition as well as practical dedicated support bases. The interests and desires of their individual support bases often clash. And yet together, as members of India's legislative institutions at the state or national level, they represent a desire for the smooth functioning of an industrialized Hindu-*savarna* hegemonic democracy. The current populist politicians of India therefore, despite their repeated claims to be one of the 'people', are in fact the representatives of a status quo, a belief in the smooth functioning of the nation's

constitution which glosses over daily misrepresentations and ultimately denies the voices of marginalized communities in the country.

We are back to our primary question. How do these populist politicians generate mass appeal? If each of these figures responds to both a dedicated, individualized 'people' and a larger unified ideal, how does this shape their leadership matrices? Also, how does this larger ideal respond to or interact with the individual leader-body's own 'people'? To answer, let's step back to consider the development of Indian superhero iconography and its impact on the \ iconography of leadership since *Nagraj* and *Shaktimaan.*

Both Nagraj and Shaktimaan had two very distinct and clearly identifiable matrices of leadership. Their heroic bodies embodied the iconographic dialogues and discourses prevalent in their corresponding media and responded to the dominant discourse of leadership available in the Indian political arena during their specific time periods. While Nagraj was torn between an impulse for action and an urge to understand and re-live his history, Shaktimaan brought the two impulses together by acting upon an imagined history of a unified, monolithic Hindu *savarna* nation. The earlier comic-book superhero's corporeality was informed by the rigid dynamicity of Bachchan's Angry Young Man, and the *bazaar* realism of ACK comics' mythological heroes. While Nagraj was the first to adopt the post-war American superhero's fluxability into Indian narratives, his publication background, rooted in Hindi-pulp, began to integrate these defiant corporealities back into the society, as functional labor categories and social classes. The latter TV superhero, Shaktimaan, conflated the leader-corporeality with a coherent and defragmented definition of 'people', thus setting precedent for identifying the leader's corporeality as an embodiment of the dreams, ambitions, and desires of this 'people.' Thus, by the time *Shaktimaan* aired its final episode, Indian media narratives had already begun

to adopt and adapt the superhero iconography into a leader-labor corporeality functional, applicable, and relatable to the Indian audience.

Both Shaktimaan and Nagraj's identification as leaders rested on their efficacy as a labor. While Nagraj had successfully assimilated aberrant and 'outsider' corporealities as labor characteristics to be desired *for*, and in fact because of this precedence, Shaktimaan identified a divinely ordained Hindu Brahmanical hero body as the ideal labor-leader corporeality to be desired *at*. The first was a desire for attainment, the latter a desire for emulation. The earlier, you wanted on your team; the latter, you wanted to *be*.

Meanwhile, along with *Shaktimaan* and *Captain Vyom*, the popularity of Hollywood film series like Bryan Singer's *X-Men* (2000) and Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* (2002) led to a rise of variedly successful Indian superhero and action-adventure narratives on TV and film. The most notable among these were *Krrish* (2006), *Drona* (2008), *Ra.One* (2011) and *Robot* (2011). However, more than superhero narratives themselves, the superheroic iconography's impact on leadership iconography can be seen more clearly in visual narratives outside the immediate genre. Here the Angry Young Man archetype resurfaces, this time embodied by Anil Kapoor, a Bollywood star few generations younger than Amitabh Bachchan. In relation to the superhero narratives, Kapoor is most renowned for his lead role in the immensely popular 1987 film *Mr. India*. The film revolves around Arun, an unemployed street violinist who comes into possession of wearable cloaking device that renders him invisible. Still revered as a cult-classic, *Mr. India* remains one of the most famous superhero films made in Bollywood.

However, it is Kapoor's 2001 hit *Nayak: The Real Hero*, directed by S. Shankar, which exemplifies a more comprehensive adaptation of the superhero iconography to a thinly veiled commentary on the politics of communal vote banks, and instigation of communal riots practiced right wing parties like the BJP. The film tells the story of Shivaji Rao, a journalist

who has overheard and recorded the (fictional) CM of Maharashtra ordering security forces to stand down during a riot in Mumbai. Shivaji exposes the CM's corrupt practices in a live interview and is in turn challenged by the CM to take over the latter's job for a day — a possibility the Indian Constitution has provisions for. What follows is a heady mix of superhero-action and political thriller genres, as Kapoor is shown wrestling assassins in open bogs, firing corrupt government employees, and even duking it out with street thugs atop moving busses — all during his one day as the state's CM. This is the AYM now declaring an open war against the very corrupt ministers and government employees he refused to face during the 70s and early 80s.

Nayak's Shivaji brings together two aspects of desirable labor-leader corporealities exemplified in Nagraj and Shaktimaan: desire for attainment and desire for emulation. Much like Gangadhar, Shivaji is an 'ordinary' Indian, i.e., he's a middle-class Hindu *savarna* man. His rise to political power comes despite his reluctance to enter politics. And yet, when he takes over the CM's post, the political power that comes with it is translated into a superheroic corporeality on screen. In a call-back to the action-driven AYM, the new CM descends onto the street, disguises himself to uncover corrupt practices, confronts and beats up crooks with his bare hands, and in one scene, even stands atop a suspected explosive device until the bomb-squad can diffuse it. He attends phone calls and conducts meetings on the street.[178] The implication is: CM Shivaji works better because he works *amongst* the "ordinary" people he claims to represent. Thus, the 'realness' of the hero advertised in the film's title, boils down to a *bazaar*-realist claim at proximity with its consumers.

Ridiculous though it may seem to address each problem individually in India's most populated city,[179] Kapoor's "Real Hero" is in fact synthesizing the leadership matrices of Nagraj and Shaktimaan. Like Nagraj, Shivaji identifies with a specific community — citizens

of Maharashtra — through his office. As the CM, he is directly responsible for his constituents, their problems, demands, needs, and desires. He is one of his 'people', much like Nagraj was one of the *ichchadhari nāgas* he rules as the king of Nāgadweep. And yet, like Shaktimaan, his awareness and direct response on his constituents' problems also implies the conflation of their desires and needs, with his. He knows what's right for them, because not only is he one of them, he *is* them. Shivaji is not just a political representative; his corporeality is a representation of his 'people'.[180]

This multilayered 'representation' of the people by the idealized leader brings together twin aspects of desirable leadership and culturally relocates them to a decentralized and pluralist political discourse. By portraying the heroic body of the leader as both a representation and a representative of their 'people,' *Nayak* provides the last term in a developing equation between laboring and leader corporealities on Indian screens. On one hand, the leader is a laboring body which the 'nation' needs to *acquire* for a smooth functioning of its various systems.[181] On the other hand, the leader is the ideal body that laboring bodies should *emulate* and aim to become.

But *Nayak* also symptomizes a pantheonic idea of populism. Though located in Maharashtra, the plot of *Nayak* is an iconic narrative applicable to an assumed whole — India. It addresses not so much the specific intricacies of Maharashtra's politics or the precise socio-political concerns unique to the state, but a set of issues that are universally applicable to the political entity of 'India', catered specifically for a Hindu *savarna* middle class. These issues include the vague umbrella terms like "corruption" and "terrorism", sexual harassment, unemployment, and government incompetence. No wonder, the same core plot has been re-told in other regional films. For instance, in the Bengali B-movie *Fatakeshto* duology the eponymous main character played by Mithun Chakraborty, is a street thug with a conscience

and rapidly rises to become first an MLA and then the home Minister of West Bengal, displaying a similar combination of street brawls and deft political moves. In fact, *Nayak* itself is a remake of Shankar's own 1999 Tamil film, *Mudhalvan*, which locates the same core plot in Tamil Nadu. The *Nayak* narrative therefore provides a hero-corporeality which is both immediate and localized in its applications, and yet simultaneously appealing to a global ideal. This is the pantheonic leader.

As an internally aware and interactive collection of leadership icons, the pantheon redistributes the monolithic national — even global — (non)phantom ideal that a superhero like *Shaktimaan* exemplified, into more localized but similarly monolithic (non)phantom ideals operative at the level of their local 'people'. Within the pantheon, each iconic corporeality acknowledges not just others' representation of their 'people' but also their embodiment of the hopes and dreams of this constituencies. They are often ontologically at odds with each other: in terms of their ideologies, vote banks, electoral loyalties, regional and cultural affiliations, or class-, caste-, religious- or gender/sexuality-policies. And yet these localized leadership corporealities share a singular epistemological drive. The mechanics of the nation and nationality they propose is seemingly universally applicable to the desire of a 'people' larger than and cumulative of all the individual 'people's their member leaders/heroes appeal to. This apparent universality creates a simplified definition of what this whole really means and what it includes. In response to a myriad of necessities and desires constituting regional and local consumer bases as diverse as those in India, the pantheonic collection of hero-corporealities is a reassurance that the various communities and sections of the society are represented in the larger system. And therefore, the pantheon also helps cement a tradition where leader corporealities have consistently upheld the apparent wholeness and stability of democratic socio-political machineries — the Constitution, Judiciary, Legislatures, and penal codes, to

name a few — while glossing over the misrepresentation of traditionally marginalized communities and their needs and desires. In favor of a unifying narrative that invariably projects dominant leadership matrices as democratic progressive 'ideals', a pantheonic arrangement of populist icons makes it easier to gloss over marginalized voices.

We have witnessed how *Nagraj* and *Shaktimaan* similarly ideal hero-corporealities uniquely sensitive to their contemporary leadership-matrices and dominant political discourses. But these were fictional characters aimed at younger audiences, either as didactic or entertainment narratives. Both, despite their cultural resonances, are examples of media form and genre that are considered kitsch and "non-serious"; even though, both their impacts have pervaded across social demarcations like age, gender, and class. The current crop of hero corporealities that we'll study — Aravind Kejriwal, Mamata Banerjee and Narendra Modi — are the CM of India's national capital, the CM of one of its largest states, and the nation's current Prime Minister, respectively. Can we really examine the holders of daily public service and administrative posts, as texts read and analyzed within the same epistemology as characters of popular science fiction? What is the nature of these narratives after all, and do they have a similar constancy to the narratives of comic book and movie superheroes?

An Inheritance of Gloss

Iconic leader bodies often operate within their own mythologies. In this aspect they are not dissimilar to cinema stars, who appear and exist in the public eye as various narratives of growth, talent, ambition, wealth, and luxury. These individualized mythologies, centering around the political icon, incorporates from narrative conventions, plot devices, and character traits from pop-cultural narratives and iconographies that are easily identifiable by the common masses. Jayalalitha's "*Panjaali Sabatham*" is a great example. A prime impulse is to connect and relate to one's constituencies and support bases, one's people through these oft-repeated

narrative conventions. Thus, the leader, by tapping into verbal and visual registers familiar to the people they address, convey their familiarity to the latter's desires, needs and ambitions.

The perusal of pop-cultural iconography is to also tie oneself to the leadership matrices one wants to espouse as part of their public persona. Naming a political outfit, for instance, after a historical figure is not only to signify the emulation of the said figure's principles as an organization, but also as individual members of the outfit. Then there's the direct comparison of leader-corporealities with hero-corporealities. Supporters of Aravind Kejriwal often equate his rise and political success, his initial 49-day stint as Delhi CM during which he cracked-down on corruption and bribery in branches of Delhi's public institutions, and then his return to power for a full term, with Shivaji's character arc in *Nayak*, thus promoting Kejriwal as the "The Real Hero" in the film.[182] There are also instances like Tejaswi Surya's tweet and Atal Bihari Vajpayee's acknowledgement and praise of Khanna's Shaktimaan, where a politician or group of politicians highlights their affinity with a particular brand of heroism by association. The ready availability of icons whose hollo semiotics is heavy with entire narratives, such as the revolving shot of the Avengers assembling in *The Avengers* which Surya's Tweet uses*,* makes it easy to establish a more comprehensive correlation of the myth with its subscribing corporeality (Narendra Modi, in this example). Despite these examples, however, the political subscription to pop culture mythologies is hardly ever that direct. A crucial question to be asked therefore is: who is in fact initiating this subscription? Are the leaders themselves claiming to be superheroes or superheroic? Or is it primarily a support group?

If we return to the examples of Indira Gandhi, Vajpayee, or even Jayalalitha, we'll observe that the media of narrativizing is crucial to determining the proponents of such narratives. Indira Gandhi, just entering the era of Television broadcasting, found the news interview a crucial tool for constructing narratives. However, these TV interviews, often

performed on international channels like the BBC or the CNN, were clearly an outward-facing exercise, presenting her as the face and personification of India to the western political forces as well as cultural observers like journalists, political scholars, and the educated social elite of India who could afford the television set during the 1970s. The majority of her voters, Gandhi met in open fields during political rallies and mass congregations. The practice of arranging such massive rallies with attendance ranging in tens of thousands, is a legacy of pre-Independence protest and awareness rallies, which is alive and crucial to the working of India's political machineries even today. Traditionally the frequency of these rallies increases during the election season, when the leader would travel from constituency to constituency rallying for support in upcoming elections. Today these rallies are almost exclusively limited to electoral campaigns. For older generations of Indian politicians like Gandhi however, this was the prime mode of communication and connection with her support bases. For Gandhi and her peers, they were occasions to articulate a continued connection with their core constituencies and support bases, even when the elections were over, and they had won. News reports of massive turnouts and thunderous applause and cheers were also clear signals to Gandhi's political opponents as well as her supporters across the nation that she had the people behind her. A third, and often underestimated medium for connecting with her people, was the government-operated All India Radio. With the radio-set available across demographic and geographic reaches, Gandhi's speeches and addresses to the nation reached directly to the people she wanted to connect.

The three media reflects Gandhi's intricate straddling of the forces of "resistance" and "containment" we discussed in Chapter 2. It also shows how her leadership corporeality was constantly being manipulated and re-presented according to her changing audiences. She appeared calm and collected, sitting with an upright posture, keeping her arms either on her

lap, or resting on a table holding up her chin, and her eyes would lock in a constant and penetrating gaze on her interviewer during the BBC and CNN interviews. Her measured sentences were delivered in erudite and polished English, and with a slight smile, which would often appear slightly sarcastic when responding to criticism against her or counter-critiquing western political regimes. The Indira Gandhi of mass rallies however was completely different. She would take on a much more dynamic corporeality, raising her fists, and punctuating her speeches with energetic hand movements. Her delivery itself would be more forceful, and in Hindi or English depending on which region of the country she was rallying in. She would also include phrases from local languages and dialect to doubly accentuate her connect with the local populace. The radio broadcast, in the absence of a direct visual register, captured a more formal demagogue personality, delivering speeches in formal or official Hindi.

Vajpayee offers a very different take on this necessary straddling of the corporeal reformulations. His career as PM goes hand-in-hand with the rise of television as a household good in India. Quite literally, his visibility on broadcast media increases. Both his foreign trips as well as domestic political rallies were brought directly to living rooms. Vajpayee was a poet and public speaker at home. He appeared measured yet jovial and maintained a conversational ease when interacting with Indian media in interviews or press conferences. In rallies, his Hindi poetry shaped his speeches, full of direct barbs and sharp criticism of his detractors. His most enduring and popular characteristic as public speaker — amply caricatured by mimic artists and comedians — were his long pauses between sentences. These pauses are also often marked by shut eyes, as if he needed to think and meditate before speaking. This corporeal performance added to his image as a thinker and an intellectual. He appeared as one of the more measured and thoughtful members of the then-nascent BJP, which was frequently represented in news media as a party of rabble rousers and aggressive rightwing ideologues demanding a Hindu

nation. His interactions with foreign leaders however highlighted his core nationalist ideologies, reifying a "son-of-the-soil" image similar to Pankaj Dheer's appearance discussed in the last chapter. Vajpayee appears uncomfortable in his role as India's global ambassador, outside South Asia. Either choosing to speak in Hindi, with the help of a translator, or reading out of a prepared script, Vajpayee retains his composure but loses the freedom and hauteur of the poet he is otherwise so keen to brandish in his domestic interactions. In the UN or interacting with the leaders of G8 nations, he is visibly uncomfortable — accentuated somewhat by his age — in performing important protocols.

Not that this discomfort takes away from his overall leadership corporeality; in fact, he is a proud nationalist in his outward-facing interactions. When addressing crucial agendas, including nuclear sanctions, he prefers sticks to his educated and well-polished 'poet's Hindi', which helps him re-assume his emphatic and forceful public speaker avatar. This further helps strengthen his defiant stand against political pressure from the US government, the UN and the NATO, in the matter of nuclear testing.[183] Most importantly, Vajpayee garnered much praise in the international press for willing to move past hostilities after the 1999 Kargil War and initiate peace talks with Pakistan; ultimately the though the talks failed to achieve a breakthrough as both Vajpayee and Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf refused to negotiate their stance on Kashmir.

Gandhi and Vajpayee might seem to have a similar matrix of leadership, in their strong stance at a global level and a populist appeal at home. Yet, they are important foils to each other for their personal relation to the concept of 'people'. Gandhi was the scion of the Gandhi-Nehru family, a powerful and influential family of leaders and ideologues since the late 1800s. Vajpayee had begun as a student volunteer for the rightwing organization the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), had been arrested during the Quit India Movement, and had gone

on to hold several ministerial posts across governments, gradually climbing the rungs in Indian politics. Gandhi represented an old guard — an elite political class — which during her time as the PM signified stability and reliability but saw a rapid fall from grace through her and her son's term, and finally in today's politics when the Gandhi-Nehru family draws major criticism for nepotism and incompetency. Vajpayee's narrative on the other hand represents an emergent leadership matrix, especially with his emphasis on economic policies promoting *swaraj* and "Made in India". He spearheaded a government that redefined "Hindu Economics" and oversaw the inception in popular media of the idea that "Hindutva" was a way of life rather than a fascist political ideology. Vajpayee's leadership matrix therefore represented, not the common people as it has been built up to appear, but the 'common Hindu' — a middle-class Hindu *savarna* and heteronormative corporality celebrated for its racial and ethnic purity, as well as its propensity to rise to leadership roles through labor.

An even more drastic divergence from Gandhi's leadership matrix was exemplified by Jayalalitha. If Gandhi was the ruling elite, Jayalalitha was the outsider, who had managed to garner a massive support base in Tamil Nadu's politics for nearly three decades. In Jayalalitha's identification as 'Amma' (mother) too, we see her appeal away from a ruling political class: as their 'mother' she was a protector as well a member of the masses. Her media narrative was uniquely catered through giant cut-outs and posters hung at every crossroads, outside railway stations, cinema halls, commercial hubs, and major marketplaces. While the use of posters and pamphlets weren't unique to Jayalalitha's promotional campaigns, the sheer size and scale of 12- or 15-feet tall hoardings and posters sold a specific leadership corporeality. Not only did they advertised her work as a politician, but also harked back to her much celebrated presence in Tamil cinema. They were a reminder of her constant presence in the lives of Tamil people even before her political debut, through her films. They helped locate and reify her iconicity

outside her political ideologies and thus free of her decisions or career as a politician. These giant-sized Jayalalithas populating the state's prominent as well as remote areas and thoroughfares, sold to her 'people' a dichotomous corporeality: she was larger than life and yet omnipresent in Tamil culture; *the* 'Amma' who was a matriarch to her people and yet one of their own.

Thus, the icons Jayalalitha, Vajpayee or Gandhi aren't the actual flesh-and-blood corporealities, but the visual projection of what these corporealities are made to represent. These public icons make the common voter forget that the leaders do not — and cannot — in fact represent everyone, precisely because they derive their electoral popularity from selective core constituencies and dedicated support bases. In fact, *Nayak* does provide an interesting, albeit brief, commentary on this aspect when the Maharashtra CM confesses, that the people involved in the riots had either directly voted for him or were a major source of electoral labor. He cannot act against either of these vote banks and thus orders the police to stand down and watch as the riot unfolds. By highlighting the leader's leadership matrices, public icons shift our gaze away from the basic divisive nature of vote-bank politics, which splits political leader's allegiances amongst 'people'. Instead of the myriad negotiations and discrepancies such split allegiances create at a policy-level, the icons highlight an array of abstract leadership qualities which make them appear universally and uniformly appealing to not only their 'people' but the several 'peoples' consuming different corporealities in the pantheon. This focus on iconic signifiers propagates a culture of gloss wherein the needs and demands of specific 'peoples' are ultimately subsumed and stratified in favor of the demands of a whole, the unified phantom ideal that the pantheon upholds. By ignoring daily policy negotiations, which inevitably can only service one group of peoples more than others, such an iconolatry re-effaces the voices of the marginalized. It reformulates the idea of the 'people' for the people.

As we saw in the examples above, this reformulation is mediated by the form, format, and platform these icons appear in. In Gandhi, Jayalalitha and Vajpayee's cases, we saw the different media forms, genres, and platforms on which they appeared presented a diversified yet unified set of leader corporealities. All three of the leaders were seen in very different lights across their media appearances, but these different facets of their personalities complimented each other, consolidating a dynamic corporeality. This is markedly different from the current batch of populist political leaders and their media presence.

Dance of Democracy

With a steady and near constant consumption of public icons — stars, politicians, sports leaders, public personalities — mediated by their social media accounts, fictionalized OTT narratives, news app updates, and carefully engineered media-based promotional campaigns, it is nigh impossible today to access them without the narrative which they sell. As voters we are only aware of the public icons and not the people behind them; it is impossible to even separate the two and confidently argue that there is a person behind the icon. Thus, while the increasingly pantheonic arrangement of leadership corporealities promotes a heteroglossia of ideologies and demographic representations, as voters we ultimately subscribe to coherent multimedia narratives that drive a 'monoglossiac' homogeneity of institutionalized structure — a smooth functioning of democratic processes. This monoglossiac narrative must gloss over a diversity of voices, to promote a unity of vision, a singularity that all people can believe in with equal conviction. While this tendency for selling monoglossiac narrative is evident even in the media management of leaders of Gandhi Vajpayee, the use of new media tools by current populist politicians have radically made their various media narratives supplementary rather than complimentary to one another. This will become clearer in the following three examples.

In the 2014 Assembly Elections, the BJP's prime-ministerial candidate Narendra Modi, could address live crowds at nearly 100 locations simultaneously, even seemingly appearing out of the thin air. Using 3D hologram projections, Modi addressed close to 1000 public meetings (10 to 12 instances of 100 shows each), besides the 185 rallies he attended in person. The party had spent major capital in installing technical set-ups that live streamed up to 40x40x35ft projection cubes of Modi speaking on how he would usher in "*achhe din*" (good days) for India. While most of these set-ups were installed in assembly halls and auditoriums, a few attempts were made for such similar projections in the middle of crowded Delhi markets or daises erected in open fields. The holographic projections were streamed across major metropolitan hubs including Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Ahmedabad, and Kolkata. In another corollary campaigning strategy, Modi's campaign managers had countered the opposition's snobbish remarks on Modi's origin as a "lowly *chaiwallah*" (teaseller), by hosting public events called "*Chai pe Charcha*" (Discussions over Tea). Close to a 1000 tea stalls across 300 cities were connected via video conference, wherein Modi would appear sipping tea on a giant screen and respond to selected questions posted on his official campaign websites as well as a few live (pre-screened) queries. Each such event would be organized at a particular tea stall and focus on specific topics like "Good Governance", women's safety, and farmer suicides. The events were streamed live on the candidate and party's social media handles, official YouTube channels as well as TV news channels. It was a multi-media event that further stressed the narrative of Modi's connection with the masses, as counter to his prime opposition candidate Rahul Gandhi (Indira Gandhi's grandson).[184] Leading with the slogan "*Abki Baar Modi Sarkaar*",[185] Modi's campaign had been buoyed by a news-media frenzy. Most news channels had debated and declared that the election was clearly marked by a "Modi Wave". Primetime debate narratives shifted from a critical enquiry of the various candidates' policies and approaches, to how they planned to counter this "Modi Wave". The simultaneous

appearances of the electoral candidate in multiple places — over *chai* and as holograms — further solidified the narratives this frequent mention of the "Modi Wave" sought to sell: Modi was inevitable and omnipresent.

A year later, during the 2015 Delhi Chief Ministerial Elections, the Aam Aadmi Party led its campaign with roadshows and election rallies. Mostly driven by street performances, the campaign was centered around a jingle "*Paanch Saal Kejriwal*" (Five years for Kejriwal). Composed by Bollywood music composer Vishal Dadlani, the highly catchy tune was both a response to Modi's *"Abki Baar Modi Sarkaar"* as well as a reminder that Kejriwal had to quit office after 49-days during his first stint as Delhi's CM. Kejriwal, who had criticized Modi for spending millions of rupees on election campaigns the year before, resorted to unique campaigning strategies. Loudspeakers were fitted on to auto-rickshaws, strung onto trees in busy marketplaces, and on tube stations, blaring out the party's campaign jingle. Local theatre groups and campaign volunteers staged Hindi street-plays or *nukkad natak* in markets and busy city centers like Connaught Place, Chandni Chowk, Khan Market, etc. Volunteers painted their bodies or strung posters around their necks, parading the streets as "human posters". Auto Rickshaw drivers were enlisted as volunteers for distributing pamphlets. Kejriwal also held roadshows, marked by flash mobs and sloganeering. Kejriwal's narrative was in fact very similar to that of Modi's — portraying himself as one of the common people — but more suited to the specificities of his election manifesto. Campaigning against corruption and corporate exploitation of small businesses, Kejriwal appealed to the blue-collard workers and small business-owners. While overtly, it seemed, his campaign relied solely on volunteers, much of the organization was conducted on and recorded onto social media platforms. AAP forwarded audio recordings of Kejriwal's 'messages', the jingle and even the important points of its election manifesto through mass SMS-es. The narrative was, AAP (the party's name literally translating to 'Common people's party'), wanted to connect to the common masses in their

language, over media easily available to them. Most importantly, it was a narrative where Kejriwal had shifted role from a political activist who couldn't run the Delhi government for more than 49 days, to a political leader intent on finishing a full term for the sake of Delhi's people.

Mamata Banerjee's three terms as the Bengal CM has also seen her change roles; not in terms of the ministries she presided over but the epithets that popularized her. At the beginning of her political career, she began to be popularly called *didi* (Bangla for elder sister). While this is still the most popular epithet for the Bengal leader even today, the latest state elections held in West Bengal, between 27 March to 29 April 2021, saw her switch roles from elder sister to the daughter (*beti*) of Bengal. Prashant Kishore, one of the most prominent political strategists in India today, and the man in charge of shaping Banerjee's campaign in the 2021 election, had this to say about the "repositioning of Mamata from *didi* to *beti*":

> When you call someone *amma* (mother) or *didi* (elder sister), you are looking
>
> for a provider, a protector. She will take care! Instead, this time we said no,
>
> she's the daughter (of Bengal). She's under attack and you need to stand by her
>
> side. Hence the slogan "বাংলা নিজের মেয়েকেই চাই" (Bengal wants its daughter).[186]

In each of these cases, the election campaigns were designed by Prashant Kishore, and his team of political strategists at the Indian Political Action Committee (IPAC). What is particularly telling is that IPAC collected extensive data on the division of voters in each election booths along lines of caste, class, and gender, thus strategizing which candidate should be made to contest constituencies. And yet, despite a ground level strategy which claimed to have considered the diverse profile of their local population, cultures, infrastructural resources, in each of the above cases, the narrative of an entire political party, even faction, revolved around the narrative of their leading candidates. The question that arises then, were these

candidates then merely the selling face of an industrialized production of consensus? Or were these central corporealities the sole conduits of their people's hopes?

It is evident that each of the leader-corporealities were formulated around a singular focus on reformulating their 'people'. For Modi, the idea was to preempt a majority. The message was: Modi had already won, and the election was a formality. In the midst of his extensive tours across swing states and major constituencies, Modi was still present and speaking to his own 'people' through these holograms and Chai-talks. Even in the face of accusation that such elaborate campaign strategies were both wasteful and symptomatic of Modi's reliance on big corporate donors, the ingenuity of these campaign strategies was sold as the candidate's ability to adopt and turn criticism into narrative stratagems, his commitment to connect, and his capacity for labor.

For Kejriwal, the appeal lies in the opportunity to complete unfulfilled promises. He had led the AAP to a minority government in a hung parliament in 2013. In that election, their prime electoral promise had been the tabling of an anti-corruption legislature. But the AAP government couldn't table the bill thanks to opposition from the Congress party as well as the BJP, who prevented a consensus in the assembly for tabling the bill. A frustrated Kejriwal resigned from his post after 49 days, earning major criticism from media as well as his supporters for being a quitter. However, his jingle-based campaign turned the tides in his favor during the 2015 re-elections. The jingle's appeal/promise for five complete years were both a challenge to the people as well as an apology. It challenged his supporters to garner enough votes for him so he may achieve an undisputable majority in the Delhi assembly. The apology was for quitting after 49 days. However, amidst all of these, the narrative still centered the laboring corporeality of Kejriwal. Kejriwal was willing to work harder; he was willing to return and rectify his short comings. It was again the central iconicity of a common man-turned

political activist-turned leader who was willing to take on the two older and more financially powerful political parties, on behalf of his 'people'.

Finally, for Banerjee, the focus of the narrative is, in fact, not on the changing of roles, but the re-identification of the central icon as a member of the middleclass Indian family. In an election where it seemed the BJP was coming in strong to finally end the 10-year rule of Banerjee's Trinamool Congress (TMC) in the state, the appeal for protection was not an undercutting of the superhero corporeality as a protector. Instead, it was re-establishing the leader corporeality as a labor corporeality through an appeal to their vulnerability. In fact, Kishore's appeal to the Bengali people to come and aid their daughter came wrapped in an anthem titled "*Khela hobe*" (Game On!). Thus, the call for aid and support was ultimately a challenge to Banerjee's 'people', to reaffirm a belief in their strength by protecting her.

By now the idea of the superheroic corporeality has been so thoroughly subsumed into Indian political-corporealities, that even such overtly gimmicky appeals to a super heroism of the leader seems naturalized into the electoral rhetoric. It has now come to designate specific semiotic implications not in terms of superhero narratives, but political performances mounted on broadcast and new media geared towards warning the voter's trust. In each of the above examples, while its amply clear that the leadership corporeality therefore has reassimilated the fluxability of postwar superheroes towards a propensity to adjust and evolve from one electoral discourse to another, a crucial question remains. How has the pantheonic approach to icons helped process them through a data- and algorithm-driven media scape?

Icons in Data

I propose two tentative answers. Firstly, we can consider the new media propagation of icons as an extension of the broadcast and print media-based narrative structures. While politicians like Gandhi and Vajpayee were seen in very different lights across their media appearances,

and yet consolidated into a dynamic corporeality, the iconicity of leaders like Modi or Kejriwal repackage a singular monolithic iconicity through diverse media forms and formats. Thus, a leader like Kejriwal will not offer different corporealities across his media appearances. It is important that his linguistic diction, his iconic muffler-clad and sweater-wearing common man costume and his colloquial Delhi-Hindi, remains constant whether he appears in press conferences, rallies, interviews or even comedy sketches. In fact, the jingle too should repeatedly invoke this very corporeality of the leader. But equally important is the diversification of how this icon is transmitted. If Kejriwal remains in his iconic corporeality across media iterations, it reifies a belief in the constant functionality and efficiency of the ideals he represents.

My second answer ties back to my initial observation about a similarity between the pantheonic arrangement of iconic corporealities on screen — in *GoT* and Marvel's Infinity Saga — and off it. With the advent of OTT platforms and long-running stream-able series, our consumption of media narratives like the *GoT* is often caught-up in a near end-less process of world building. We are constantly teased with revelations, while continuously exploring nooks and crannies of the fictional world we so voraciously consume. New institutions like the Iron Bank and the Faith Militant are introduced, which further populates and adds verisimilitude to these fictional worlds. From season to season, as world-building expands, narrative finality is perpetually delayed. This delay in the 'end' extends the middle.

In the age of the new media, we are obsessed with the middle. Richard Allen claims that the new media tools are eroding Aristotle's story-telling model of the beginning, middle, and end.[187] For both storage and broadcast media, visual and verbal narratives have largely remained contained events. For a long time television narratives too had followed the beginning-middle-end structure, with each episode working as self-contained stories.

However, with OTT offerings, being an audience isn't a temporary state but a life-long experience with momentary pauses in between. Thus, the optimal stories for the new media function on an extended middle or an infinite stage of development.[188] Jay David Bolter explains the consumer's deep investment in this extended middle as a state of 'flow', wherein the consumer of media is so "involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great coast, for the sheer sake of doing it."[189] Its therefore hard to have a satisfactory end to a series like *GoT*, and not feel that certain aspects were hurried and half-done. The MCU films aren't much better when it comes to the idea of extended middles. The larger cinematic world building is quite similar, with minute details on technological and magical artefacts gradually revealed, minor characters slowly developing into more important roles, and the more microscopic aspects of races, regions and cultures developing extended narratives and backstories. However, the MCU is still loyal to a beginning-middle-end structure, within its individual films as well as the larger narrative phases. With the recent spate of series on Disney Plus, and the introduction of the multiverse, the fact that these individually contained narratives are a part of a larger 'extended middle', is becoming more apparent.

But what implication does this phenomenon of extended middle have for our current populist political leaders in India? Elections have always been a matter of spectacle in the nation. With the advent of the television at first, and then new media platforms, the visuality of this spectacle has increased manifold. With each election, the narratives surrounding each political leader is played and replayed across media platforms. The spectacular nature of the elections directs the voting consumers to invest more in these narratives, and the resulting iconocities of the leaders, rather than the policies they are proposing or their plans for implementing these proposals. This preoccupation with the spectacular narratives is yet another

symptom of the new media's emphasis on the "extended middle" — a leadership narrative which also suits the pantheonic hero-corporealities. Icons like Modi offers the promise of continuity when he renews his iconic narrative across jingles, towering holograms, comics books, video-streamed discussions and ultimately, even a Bollywood film. It emphasizes not the political or ideological end-goals of the leader but the repeated performability of the electoral process itself.

The media-specific performability of new media tools like GIFs adds to this sense of continued performance. GIFs, for instance, are highly compact generators of icons. They, on one hand, isolate a specific moment of motion picture and repeatedly perform this moment rapidly within a very short period of time, until the image loses its specific *ur*-signification and becomes hollow. By isolating the motion picture from its surrounding connotations, the GIF thus opens up the possibility of countless simultaneous narratives. It turns a minute part of a larger narrative into a whole narrative in itself, expansive in its significations and cross-cultural references. On the other hand, the GIF isn't a clip from a larger motion picture at all, but a limited selection of still frames painted with time delays, forming what seems like a looping video clip. In this sense it is similar to our example of *Shaktimaan*'s opening superhero pose, a coagulation of icons and iconographies heavy with references as well as *différance*. However, in case of a GIF, which is inevitably found embedded in social media narratives — posts, tweets, 'stories' — this instantaneous production of icons gives aid to a continuous and protracted performability of their iconicity. Tejasvi Surya's GIF of Narendra Modi standing among the Avengers, in a continuous loop of the already iconic revolving-shot of the superheroes, not only accrues its own iconicity as a 'Modi GIF', but repeatedly performs this iconicity across social media narratives — re-Tweets, forwards on WhatsApp, GIF archives,

etc. The consumer of this GIF (whether as a supporter or as critic) is happy exploring the various narratives this compressed icon can be used in to add to Modi's iconicity

The GIF is but one example. Readily rewindable and streamable video content, infinitely forwarded Tweets and posts, as well as easily accessible media archives such as a Google image search inevitably protracts the performability of public icons. Thus, the icon, when performed repeatedly through a stream of data transfers across media platforms, creates an infinitely 'extended middle'. The data-coded icon is an epitome of dynamicity and performance. The oldest cat GIFs will continue to add or create meaning whenever embedded in conversations. This new, infinitely dynamic icon will never *not* generate meaning. Thus, if we were to consider this in tandem with our first answer, the monolithic and iconic leadership corporealities of Kejriwal or Modi present easily recognizable and relatable narratives permanently locked in a performance of promise. The desire for attaining or even emulating this leadership corporeality is satiated not by the actual attainment of their leadership goals, but by the infinite deferment of this achievability into a future. As consumers of these new dynamic icons, we are fascinated by their performance of effort. We are most happy when we consume this perennial loop of performance, the narrative that our leaders are making an effort towards achieving their promised goals. The promise of return to a phantom ideal past ('Make America Great Again' or '*Achhe Din*') is projected forward into a phantom ideal future.

Moreover, combining both these answers, we also acknowledge a shift of focus on to the performance of corporealities, rather than the performance of organizations and structures. Replacing the primacy of conventional and Constitutional networks of regulations, institutions and structures, the human body itself has emerged as the nexus of national desires and identities. It is the human body, sculpted to respond to specific iconographies, which defines 'people' for people. However, this human body is now also a being of data. Modi's targeted

speeches or Kejriwal's roadshows are entirely scripted based on hard data gathered by political strategists like Prashant Kishore, who not only quantify the desires of each social communities and regional constituencies into translatable numbers, but they also help determine how these data will then be translated into a specific icon. The superhero iconography, which has by now been deconstructed into piecemeal semiotic triggers that invoke their signifying functions without directly referring to a particular character or group of characters, is utilized as only one of the languages for translating this data into icons. The fluxable corporeality of post-war superheroes have now assimilated traditionally marginalized 'people' into dominant definitions of desirable labor traits. And it is this newly assimilated corporeality that we consume in a constant performance of promise. In

We need to still determine though, in context of social media, the mechanics of how databases themselves initiate corpo-formations. So far, we have only scratched the surface in terms of the sheer diversification of media platforms and formats through which leadership corporealities constantly reify their own iconicities. The future stages of this research will need to look at three specific aspects of this debate. First, we need to explore a media theory that can sufficiently define and describe the interaction of icons in data. Next, we need to distinguish whether databases themselves are inadvertently shaped by iconographies, or if iconographies appear more consolidated and tangible thanks to readily accessible databases. Or does it work both ways? Finally, how do algorithms extract the desired data from limited echo-chambers to help construct icons which can then appeal to desires across contradictory and conflictive echo-chambers?

In a world where icons are constantly mediated, multiplied and re-iconified instantaneously by the endless loop of GIFs and streaming services, the intimacy of customizable ringtones, and the rigid cataloging of frequently updated listicles, superheroes

truly are everywhere. People with diverse socio-cultural identities, even from marginalized communities, have inevitably identified certain corporealities as superheroic. However, despite the abundance of such corporealities, the superhero iconography has largely failed to amplify voices and desires of communities traditionally unheard and repressed. Instead, it has become a tool in re-solidifying dominant narratives, and hegemonic definitions of 'nation', 'people', 'leader' and 'labor'. These (non)phantom ideals have such entrenched grips on popular media narratives, that we must disentangle the very idea of icons to further understand their construction and codification in data.

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Appendix A: A Timeline of Key Events

1967	Anant Pai founds *Amar Chitra Katha*, India's first major comic book publication, with a focus on historical and mythological narratives.
1973	Director Prakash Mehra's film *Zanjeer* introduces the "Angry Young Man" persona of Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan to the world.
1975	25th June: State of Emergency declared across India by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.
1977	21st March: The Emergency ends; the Janata Party, an amalgam of several political factions opposing Gandhi's regime, forms the first non-Congress government.
1980	The Janata Party-led government fails to complete the full five-year term and Indira Gandhi returns to power with a decisive victory.
1982	Doordarshan, autonomous public service broadcaster owned by the Information and Broadcasting Ministry of India, begins national transmission with the launch of its premier flagship channel Doordarshan National or DD1. The Asian Games are telecast in color.
1984	1st to 10th June, Operation Blue Star: Gandhi orders military strike on Sikh insurgents in Punjab's Golden Temple. 7th July: First general entertainment serial *Hum Log* (We, The People) launched. 31st October: Gandhi gunned down by her Sikh bodyguards. 1st to 4th November: Organized pogrom against Sikhs across major cities.
1986	*Nagraj* debuts in Raj Comics' Issue#14.
1987‑1990	25th January 1987, primary run of Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan* begins; it concludes on 31st July 1988. 2nd October 1988, BR Chopra's *Mahabharat* begins its primary run; concludes on 15th July 1990
1990	For the months of September and October, the Bharatiya Janata Party organizes the *Ratha Yatra*, a religious rally running from the western coastal town of Somnath to the northern town of Ayodhya, with a projected rout of 10,000 kilometers.
1991	Government under PV Narasimha Rao initiates the liberalization of Indian economy. Major overarching changes include the reduction in import tariffs, deregulation of markets, reduction of taxes, and greater foreign investment. Doordarshan broadcasts live telecast of the Gulf War, in color.

1992	The Babri Mosque in Ayodhya is demolished by activists supporting BJP and its allies, sparking massive riots across the country; more than 250 lives are lost in the Mumbai Riots. MTV and the BBC are among the major international broadcasters to enter the Indian cable TV market. Zee TV, India's first private-owned TV channel goes on air, with technical assistance from Hong Kong-based STAR TV.
1993	A series of 13 bomb blasts in Mumbai, planned and executed by Mafia boss Dawood Ibrahim with aid from Al Qaeda and Lashkar-e-Toiba in retaliation for the demolition of the Babri Mosque, causes 317 fatalities
1995	Supreme Court of India declares that airwaves are public property and should be therefore free from government control.
1997	On 13th September, actor Mukesh Khanna debuts in his superhero serial *Shaktimaan*
1998	In May, India conducts a series of five nuclear bomb test explosions in Pokhran and declares itself a 'Nuclear Power'.
1999	India and Pakistan enter a nearly 3-month long armed conflict in the Kargil district of Kashmir. The Kargil War aggravates communal tensions in India.
2001	Earthquake in Bhuj, Gujarat, measured at 7.7 on the Richter scale. Death toll exceeds 35,000. Mukesh Khanna pitches in with relief work. On 13th December armed terrorists affiliated to Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed attack the Indian Parliament.
2002	A train carrying Hindu Pilgrims and activists to Ayodhya is burned in Godhra, Gujarat on February 27. 58 lives are lost, triggering a massive anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat, which claims 1044 lives, and more than 2,500 are injured. Then Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, is accused of inciting and condoning the violence.
2004	Congress-led United Progressive Alliance rides to victory. Dr. Manmohan Singh is sworn in as Prime Minister.
2006	Facebook and Twitter arrive in India.
2008	US President George W. Bush signs into law a nuclear deal with India, ending a three-decade ban on US nuclear trade with Delhi. The 2008 Mumbai attacks (often called the 26/11 attacks) kill 174 people, including 9 of the 10 terrorists from Lashkar-e-Taiba, an Islamic terrorist organization based in Pakistan. India decides not to attack Pakistan in retaliation.
2011	After 34 years of Left Front Government, Trinamool Congress and Congress alliance come to power in West Bengal. Mamata Banerjee is CM.
2014	Narendra Modi elected as Prime Minister of India.
2015	Arvind Kejriwal defeats candidates of the two most powerful national political parties to become Delhi's CM.

2016   Netflix launches in India.

APPENDIX B: DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Rama   Legendary warrior, king of the ancient Indian Kingdom of Ayodhya and the hero of the ancient epic *Ramayana*. He is worshipped as a deity among modern Hindus and is known for being the upholder of *dharma* — the ancient Hindu way of righteous living. His reign, *Ramarajya*, corresponds to a golden age in Hindu mythology. There are many movies, comic books and television series dedicated to his life, his battles with the demon king Ravana, his wife Sita, and his friend and devotee Hanuman, the monkey god. All the characters in Rama's story are deities in their own right and are worshipped as such across India. His image is also packaged and sold on the religious commodity market, in the form of lockets, talismans, calendar arts, small portable idols and greeting cards; and his deeds are invoked on a daily basis as metaphors, similes and parables across most Indian languages. Ironically, many religious riots, pogroms and human right violations have been justified in the name of Rama.

Bhishma   An ancient warrior, demi-god and the granduncle to Pandavas and Kauravas in the epic *Mahabharata*. Like Rama, Bhishma has also been portrayed depicted many times on TV, movies, animated features and of course comic books. But in most texts created before the 1987 TV-serial based on the epic, Bhishma is a supporting character. The success of the TV series, and the acclaimed performance of actor Mukesh Khanna in the role, elevated Bhishma to a more primary status. Dialogue and details of Khanna's performance are often cited in casual conversations and across media retellings, making Khanna's version of Bhishma a significant cultural reference point.

Superman   An alien from the planet of Krypton who (as an effect of exposure to the Sun of Earth) possesses God-like powers, including super-strength and flight. He lives on Earth as journalist Clark Kent, in the fictional American city of Metropolis. He is often described as the first American comic book superhero, debuting in Action Comics #1 (1938), and is one of the most recognizable examples of the superhero archetype in all media, featured in radio shows, animated TV series, live-action TV and movies since the 1940s. A global commodity marketed in the form of action figures, T-shirts, and countless other items of merchandise, Superman and his chest symbol are among the most recognizable visual icons in the world. His image and name can also function as a nationalist symbol, allegorical emblem, and philosophical concept.

Indira Gandhi   The third Prime Minister of India, and the daughter of the first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Immensely charismatic, she was often compared with the UK Prime Minister and Conservative leader Margaret Thatcher, with whom she also had a strong friendship. In her two stints as India's PM, she played a

major role in the division of Pakistan and the formation of Bangladesh; declared a 21-month National Emergency during which most civil rights were suspended and many human rights violations were committed; oversaw major economic "reforms"; and launched an offensive against Sikh separatists. This last policy was a spur to her assassination, but Indira Gandhi remains an iconic leader in India: invoked time and again in contemporary political speeches, cinema, TV series and comic books, as well as everyday conversation.

The Angry Young Man An action hero archetype in Hindi films, primarily popularized by Hindi film superstar Amitabh Bachchan in the 1970s. The Angry Young Man (AYM) is disillusioned by the promises of existing social structures, and is a rebel if not always an outlaw. He is characterized by angst, smoldering anger and a general disregard for social courtesies. The archetype began as a cinematic phenomenon, but was latter adapted and reformulated for comic book and TV narratives. Even after Bachchan drifted away from this character archetype, the AYM was the dominant template for the Bollywood action hero through the late-80s and early 90s.

Nagraj The first superhero created by Raj Comics, Nagraj is a terrorist-turned-vigilante with the powers of snakes. Nagraj rapidly rose to become one of the most popular Indian comic book superheroes in the late 80s and early 90s. Although never the start of a TV show or film, he image has been merchandized and continues to sell T-shirts, posters, badges, etc. Nagraj is most notable for being one of the first successful examples of an Indian superhero fashioned on the templates created in the USA by DC and Marvel.

Shaktimaan A superhero created for television in the 1990s who has mastered the five elements of nature through yoga, and possesses god-like powers, including super strength, super speed and flight. Marketed as "India's first Superhero", this pet project of Mukesh Khanna, *Shaktimaan* was instantly popular with young urban Indians between in the seven-fifteen age-range and enjoyed an eight-year run on Indian TV screens. While the hero's presence in the commodity and collectibles market remains low, he has also featured in several comic titles, first under Diamond and then Raj Comics. Shaktimaan has also featured in animated TV serials and an animated movie. He remains a frequently evoked cultural touchstone in India.

Captain Vyom A swashbuckling space-captain in charge of a crew of misfits tasked to hunt down escaped intergalactic prisoners. Played on the small-screen by Scotland-born Indian supermodel Milind Soman, Vyom was a contemporary and competitor of *Shaktimaan*, briefly rivalling the latter in popularity. Vyom, however, lasted only 3 years on TV and his popularity fizzled out once his eponymous TV show was cancelled.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee	The 10th Prime Minister of India, the first to lead the rightwing Bharatiya Janata Party to an electoral victory at the center and the first non-Congress PM to serve a full five-year term in office. Praised by his admirers for having brought back strong charismatic leadership to the nation's political center, almost 15 years after the assassination of Indira Gandhi. Indeed, Vajpayee is often compared to Mrs. Gandhi for his defiance of diplomatic pressure from China and the US, his robust domestic economic policies, and the successful completion of nuclear tests which made India a full-fledged nuclear state during his time in office.
Narendra Modi	The 14th and current Prime Minister of India, known for his boisterous personality, frequent foreign trips, radical economic "reforms," and massive following on Twitter. He has also been widely condemned by his critics for his narcissism, and for securing his own position by inciting and promoting hatred and intolerance between India's Hindu and non-Hindu communities.

APPENDIX C: A HISTORICAL SURVEY

I

New Delhi, 1986. Publication house Raja Pocket Books, led by founder-owner Rajkumar Gupta, launched its first superhero title *Nagraj* in issue #14 of its new-born comic book imprint Raj Comics (RC). The superhero was conceptualized by Gupta's three sons — Manoj, Manish and Sanjay. They are part of a generation of Indian comics creators who were also fans of the medium. They would go on to trigger and shape the rapid rise of a new set of visual icons to cultural prominence. The demand for newer media narratives, approaches and iconographies was a direct result of essential changes that the nation's political and social structures had undergone in the last two decades. *Nagraj* was almost instantly identified by its readers as a "derivative" of several Marvel and DC superheroes, as well as recent Bollywood action heroes. The character's urbane vigilantism fused with elements of sorcery and the occult, soon emerged as the distillation of a new national angst, much to the jubilation of its readers. For the first time in nearly forty years, an Indian comics publication had experimented with dominant media iconographies. Comics fans responded vociferously. Even as the advent of television will deal an irrecuperable blow to the nation's well-established regional and national comic book markets in the next few years, sales soared in what is now regarded as the last hurrah for the industry.

The Indian comic book industry had taken flight forty years ago, in 1947. Children's magazine *Chandamama* published its first issue the same year India gained independence from British colonial rule. *Chandamama*, originally published in Telegu by noted filmmakers B Nagi Reddy and Aluri Chakrapani, featured serialized cartoon strips and comic-pages along with short stories and articles dedicated to readers between 6 and 15 years of age. Over the next one decade, publications such as these, which specifically identified children as their target audience, quickly rose to prominence. With the formal adoption of the Indian Constitution in 1950, the essential structure of India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's socialist policies increasingly came to be rooted in a sustainable and long-term definition of socio-economic development. Including the interim years between 1946 and 1952, Nehru held the Prime Minister's office for the first 18 years of India's existence as an independent nation. Hence, the four governments that he helmed, inevitably channeled into policy his ideals of national unity, parliamentary democracy, industrialization, Fabian socialism, development of the scientific temper, and non-alignment in the Cold War. The Nehru governments made it clear that nation-

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building was not an over-night project. They introduced an economic policy structured on the 'Five-Year Plan' approach, wherein the developmental schemes for each specific economic sector were scheduled across successive five-year periods. The very skeleton of the Five-Year plans appealed to a potentiality rather than an immediacy of development. And therefore, the younger generations were quickly recognized as the real clientele of Nehru's dreams. Moreover, the Plans also introduced the phrase 'Human Resource' into the national lexicon, now marking the common citizen as national capital in need of careful nurturing.

Simultaneously, with the integration of more than 500 princely states, the ongoing political restructuration in Kashmir and Hyderabad, and the debate around appointing Hindi as the national language, the question of national integration acquired an added urgency. The nation's political leaders encouraged the dissemination of a set of signifiers which could create an ideal whole, a cumulative 'history' – a singular coherent idea to be celebrated and revered by one and all. The nation was in need, they decided, of a narrative its myriad communities could rally around as a united being. The Constitution itself was promoted as such a central rallying point, a binding document, by the Indian National Congress which remained the dominant political party at both national and state levels till the late 1970s.

These two overarching tendencies in national politics and economy, fueled the meteoric rise of Indian comic books from the 50s through 70s. Comic strips and short comics increasingly became a staple in children's magazines during the 1950s. In 1964, editor and comics-creator Anant Pai worked with the *Times of India* group to bring out *Indrajal Comics*, a children-focused comic book imprint which became popular for its syndicated publication of several King Features characters like Phantom, Mandrake, Flash Gordon etc. However, Pai pushed for locally produced comics narratives, recounting stories from folklores, the *Jatakas* and the *Panchatantra*, to ultimately replace these foreign syndicated titles. When the *Times* group replaced the local comics section with educational content instead, Pai left *Indrajal* and sold his idea to India Book House (IBH), thus giving birth in 1967 to what proved a game changer for the Indian comic book industry: *Amar Chitra Katha* (trans. Immortal Picture Tales, ACK). Driven by Pai's agenda to educate the youth about India's "rich cultural history", ACK popularized the mythological, folklore and historical genre of comics. Meanwhile, soon after Pai left, *Indrajal* began publishing the *Bahadur* series. A detective, strongman and adventurer, Bahadur (lit. brave as an adjective, or braveheart as a qualitative noun) is often acknowledged as India's first homegrown comic book superhero.

By the end of the 70s, both ACK and *Indrajal* had established a sizeable market for comic books in India. Meanwhile, beginning early 1970s, a new wave of western comics publications spear-headed by *Archie* comics had begun to trickle into the Indian markets. The earliest buyers and readers of most foreign titles were not children from middle-class families but the younger family members of upper-class globe-trotting social elites – bureaucrats, industrialists who frequently travelled abroad, sportspersons, members of the entertainment industry etc. American comic books including Marvel, DC titles and *Asterix,* and the Belgian bestseller *Tintin*, were first brought to India in the suitcases of primarily upper-class Indians travelling back from foreign holidays or job-postings abroad. On the other hand, several American comic strip characters like *Nancy*, *Beetle Bailey*, *Peanuts* and *Doonsburry* had begun to make their syndicated debuts in leading English daily newspapers. Thus, ACK's success as well as a stream of foreign titles, helped catalyze a comics revolution. Numerous indigenous and regional comic book publishers rose in quick successions, trying to capture the burgeoning market. Diamond Comics, begun in 1978, proved to be the most popular, impactful and resilient of this lot. In fact, Diamond's success with humor comics pushed several monthly comics magazines like *Champak* and IBH's *Tinkle* to specialize in this genre.

However, by the late 70s, India had yet again entered a period of tremendous political upheaval. The nation's most prominent political entity, the Indian National Congress, had split in 1969. After being expelled from her own party while still in power as the third PM of India, Indira Gandhi, had led an exodus of young Congress leaders. Her New Congress or Congress (R), with a new-found socialist agenda of raising employment rates, alleviating poverty and nationalizing banks, defeated some of the most influential political leaders from the old Congress party or Congress (O), and cantered to a landslide victory in the 1971 general elections. Within months of her electoral victory, Gandhi won ideological and military battles in the international front. In the face of heavy pressure from Richard Nixon's US government and repeated threats of severe trade sanctions from both China and the US, Gandhi threw India's military weight behind East Pakistan in the latter's war for liberation from West Pakistan. With a resounding military victory in December over Pakistan, and the subsequent creation of a new nation state in the east (Bangladesh), Gandhi quickly emerged as a gutsy and firebrand leader in South Asia. She also nationalized 14 banks overnight and dissolved private annual allowances for the head of erstwhile princely states, making her government appear one of the most decisively socialist regimes since Nehru's first cabinet. By the end of 1973, however, thanks to her war-time expenses, the global oil crisis and a spell of droughts across the country, India was facing high inflation rates, a rise in unemployment, and rampant

corruption even in grassroot-level governments. Gandhi experienced a rapid decline in her influence and popularity. In 1974, students, labor unions and farmers began massive protests across northern and central-western India. They were led by activist and pre-Independence-era leader Jayaprakash Narayan. On 12 June 1975, the Allahabad High Court declared Indira Gandhi's 1971 victory void on the grounds of electoral malpractice. This caused the largely union-driven protests to rapidly galvanize into a nation-wide political movement that demanded the resignation of Gandhi.

In retaliation, Gandhi declared a National Emergency that would run for 21months from 1975 to 1977 and become an excuse for brutal human-rights violations and crackdown on free speech. Newspapers were heavily censored, political opponents were jailed and a mass forced-sterilization campaign was initiated. After the Emergency was lifted, the Janata Party, a coalition of several political factions opposing Gandhi's regime, formed the first non-Congress government at the center. This marked the first instance since independence that distinctly Hindu right-wing political parties had emerged as crucial players at the national level. However, by 1980, the Janata government fell prey to factional infighting and Gandhi returned to power with an overwhelming majority. In 1984, riding a crest of global and domestic popularity, Gandhi conducted a full-scale military strike (Operation Blue Star) on Sikh insurgents hiding in the Golden Temple at Amritsar, Punjab. The move was highly criticized for bringing violence to the most sacred site of Sikh worship. Months later, in an act of retaliation, she was gunned down at the gates of her residence by her Sikh bodyguards. This, in turn, led to brutal anti-Sikh riots, the same year.

Through the decades of 70s and 80s, insurgencies such as those by the Sikh separatists in Punjab, Maoist guerrillas in several central and eastern states, Bodo separatists in the north-eastern state of Assam, as well as major and minor communal riots across the country, had put civilian lives at risk. Four wars in as many decades had dented relations with neighbors Pakistan and China. Nehruvian socialism, which promised to combine the ideals of an all-inclusive welfare state with economic progress, had largely proved a failure. The rural to urban migration of a laboring underclass, a rapid rise in unemployment, and the increasing rate of crime and corruption, were increasingly cobbled together into a convenient narrative for electoral manifestoes. Thus, by the late 1980s, India's socio-political portrait lay fractured, giving rise to a brand of politics rooted in religious vote banks.

Popular visual media responded promptly to this rapid transformation in the country's socio-political landscape. In 1973, Hindi film director Prakash Mehra's *Zanjeer* (The Chain)

marked the debut of the Angry Young Man. The film starred Amitabh Bachchan in a career-defining role of a young idealistic police officer, who ultimately becomes disillusioned with the deep-seated corruption across social institutions and decides to break with the law. Bachchan would go on to portray similar anti-heroes throughout the 70s and the 80s, in one box office hit after another. Films like *Deewar* (1975)*, Trishul* (1978)*, Kaala Patthar* (1979), *Shakti* (1982) etc. saw Bachchan repeatedly don the part of the wronged working-class hero disillusioned and discontent with rampant corruption, deprivation, unemployment, violence and apathy of the society. Inspired by the British New Wave films, as well as Hollywood film genres such as the gangster, the western and film noir, these films would go on to redefine the action hero archetype across popular media. In fact, Bachchan's identification with the action hero was so absolute, that he soon had a comic book title dedicated to him, published by IBH's Star Comics. According to these comics, Bachchan was a Bollywood actor in his day job and a superhero called Supremo, in secret.

Meanwhile, India had been heading for an economic crisis. By early 1980s, the nation's imports had swelled. In the run up to the Gulf War, India's oil import bills rapidly piled up, exports slumped, credits dried up, and its foreign exchange reserves could barely finance three weeks' worth of imports. In a bid to ease the dire financial strain Gandhi, and later her son Rajiv, the sixth PM, had begun to gradually liberalize certain sectors of the economy, including the telecommunications and software industries. As a result, even in the earliest years of Indian TV, American movies and TV programs had already started to make their way into Indian cinema halls and onto its airwaves. Syndicated telecasts of 1967 animated *Spider-Man* series and the 1940s *Superman* animated short films produced by Fleischer studios, were among the most viewed media imports accessible to the Indian audience. In fact, it is these animated films and TV shows which ultimately inspired the RC founders to invent characters like Nagraj.

As the decade of the 80s came to a close therefore, India was poised to turn over a new leaf – culturally, economically and politically. By '89, the World Bank and IMF refused to issue further economic assistance unless India mortgaged its gold reserves and opened up its economy to foreign companies and markets. This paved the way for the 1991 Indian Economic Reforms, which liberalized the nation's economy. India's television industry, among other sectors, received a massive boost. Meanwhile, the sales for first-generation comic books like ACK began to slowly decline as mythological serials took over Sunday-morning TV. It was the newly founded RC that led the comic book sales with a slew of new superhero titles, most of which built upon an amalgamated hero archetype of the Angry Young Man and the

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American superhero. In the wake of Bachchan's success, the Bollywood action film genre had already begun to lean towards superhero and vigilante narratives, and the iconicity of the male hero body was undergoing a sea change. There were no less than six Indian superhero films between 1985 and 1990, across various regional film industries. Notable among these were Bachchan's *Shehenshah* (1988), *Superman* (1987) which was an unofficial Indian remake of the 1978 Hollywood film, and the massively successful *Mr. India* (1987) which also introduced a novel strain in the Angry Young Man archetype.

Lastly, we were also entering a decade which will witness the sharpening of communal tension in the country, devastating terrorist attacks and the meteoric rise of the Hindu political right wing. Most of these socio-cultural movements came to be invariably centered around television and its unprecedented power to shape the public consciousness — a phenomenon we will explore in the second section.

II

New Delhi, 1997. Mukesh Khanna launched the superhero TV series *Shaktimaan* on the then-premier general entertainment channel, Doordarshan National (DD1). *Shaktimaan* aired on Saturdays at 11:30 am, with repeat episodes at 10:00 pm Tuesdays. Khanna, most famous for playing Bhishma in BR Chopra's *Mahabharat* (1987-89), billed the titular superhero Shaktimaan as India's first. As with Raj Comics nearly a decade ago, *Shaktimaan* made fundamental changes to dominant definitions Indian hero corporealities, while reviving some of the of the markers that RC had challenges or undercut. Soon a massive following of loyal fans would catapult *Shaktimaan* to a cult status. Even when financial constraints and decreasing profitability cut short the series in 2005, the franchise would carry on in short, animated TV series, comic books and in constant colloquial references. While it is rarely evaluated as such, *Shaktimaan* was in fact a turning point in the history of Indian television.

The rise of a television industry in India is a more recent phenomenon, coinciding almost with the advent of internet. Indian audiences were introduced to a scheduled television broadcast only in 1965. It took more than seventeen years for Doordarshan, the state-owned public broadcaster to finally begin national broadcasting in 1982. The same year, color televisions were launched in the Indian market. The live telecast of the Independence Day ceremonies on 15th August and the Asian Games later that year were some of the first programs to be broadcast in color. In 1984, Doordarshan began airing its first general entertainment narrative television series, *Hum Log*. Since 1965, Doordarshan had only been able to broadcast

a daily news bulletin and an educational program for farmers. With *Hum Log*, Doordarshan rolled out a series of general entertainment serials throughout the decade of 80s, all of which have, since their original runs, garnered cult status in Indian pop culture. The most prominent among these early serials were Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan* (1987-88) and BR Chopra's *Mahabharat* (1988-90). In fact, these later two serials were such massive hits, that in a movement quite identical to the history of India's comics industry, they would inspire a large fraction of the earliest TV serials to tap into historical and mythological narratives, targeting the Indian middleclass urban family as their prime audience.

In the late 80s, Rajiv Gandhi's government took important measures to ensure a widespread distribution of the TV show Even when television sets were only within the purchasing reach of the comfortable classes, they became the center of communal gatherings in homes and in more public areas, providing entertainment for viewers from a wide variety of backgrounds wherever and whenever there was electricity.

By the beginning of the last decade of the 20th century, therefore, India's television industry was poised to metamorphose into a cornerstone for major social, cultural, and political transitions in India. In 1991, in the face of mounting economic crisis and a near-bankruptcy, India had to sign a bailout deal with the International Monetary Fund. And to meet the requirements for this deal, the then Congress government led by P V Narsimha Rao implemented radical economic reforms, liberalizing the country's economic policies with an aim to draw in more foreign and private-sector investment. These came to be known as the LPG (Liberalization-Privatization-Globalization) reforms. While Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv had begun to gradually open India's markets to private players during their successive terms as PM in the late 80s, the LPG reforms opened the flood gates for global private enterprises to the broadcasting industry, across both its production and distribution sectors. The entry of MNCs into the manufacturing and home appliance markets, for instance, meant that the television set itself was no longer produced exclusively under public sector enterprises and became more readily available across social classes. Secondly, the entry of domestic private companies as well as foreign direct investment meant that Doordarshan was no longer the only TV-channel broadcaster. In 1991, Doordarshan had live broadcasted the Gulf War. In 1992, Hong Kong-based STAR (Satellite Television Asian Region) TV entered the Indian market, with a direct investment in India's first private-owned TV broadcaster, Zee Telefilm's general entertainment channel Zee TV. Simultaneously, STAR also introduced five international channels, including two of its own – MTV, BBC, Prime Sports, Star Plus and Star Movies – to

the Indian broadcasting space. All of these channels operated 24X7 programs. In 1995, in a landmark judgement by the Supreme Court of India, airwaves were declared as a public property and therefore free from government control. As a result, by late 90s, CNN, Discovery, Cartoon Network, HBO, and Fox had all made their way onto the Indian airwaves. Regional private-sector broadcasters would crop up rapidly to offer their own bouquet of channels aimed at vernacular-speaking regional audiences. This ensured that locally generated content received an unprecedented exposure to international visual cultures and narratives.

During the same period, popular science fiction movies and TV series from the United States and the United Kingdom, including animated adventures starring Marvel and DC superheroes and other super-powered characters, had found their way into syndicated program slots on privately-owned Indian TV channels. Simultaneously, the homegrown Hinglish serials on DD2 (Doordarshan Metro), Zee, Sony, and Star Plus produced local derivatives of popular global TV genres like sci-fi, sitcoms, soaps, thrillers, horror, reality, and countdowns. Finally, Bollywood films had become even more accessible to a wider audience thanks to their frequent inclusion on weekend TV programs. Every weekend, during fixed timeslots in the afternoon and late-evening, films from mostly 1970s and 80s would be premiered on TV, often with month-long promotions beforehand. Moreover, programs like *Chitrahaar* (1982-present) presented song-clips from movies in a countdown format, thus feeding a constant loop of scenes from popular Hindi films to the TV audiences.

Meanwhile, the Congress government which had brought in the liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991, found itself voted out of power by 1996. It was then followed by four short-lived governments between June 1, 1996, and October 10, 1999. Two of these four governments were formed by the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), under Atal Bihari Vajpayee. BJP was only the most prominent amongst a bevy of rightwing political parties which have started to rapidly gain political clout post-Emergency. In 1999 the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) of political parties, under Vajpayee's BJP, was finally able to muster enough votes to attain a complete majority in the Parliament and managed to maintain a stable government for a full five-year term till 2004. By the end of the 90s however, the country's political and economic topography had undergone a sea change.

From 1990 onward, as the BJP and its NDA allies began to position themselves as a viable alternative for Congress and its United Progressive Alliance (UPA), they needed a policy framework with a scope larger than such vehemently communal issues as the demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, and the building a temple in its place for the Hindu god Rama.

They needed to stretch the signification and vitality of 'Hinduness' or Hindutva beyond the politics of communal electorates. This is when the term *swadeshi*, meaning "of one's own country", last used as a rallying cry during India's struggle for independence in the 1930s, gained new prominence in both economic and political discourses. During the era of India's struggle for independence, an entire political movement had been built around the term, by M K Gandhi. This series of protests saw the burning of British-manufactured goods and boycotting any foreign-made goods from local markets, in favor of home-made commodities. Vajpayee's government, in reviving the term, married *swadeshi* with the LPG reforms through their manifestos, public speeches, and their policies. This would prove a major step in linking Hindutva with a viable economic policy platform. But it was the industries centered around the newly rising medium of television which really became the flag bearers of this concept: advertising agencies, TV producers and programming management on the private TV channels.

Not only were consumer goods being advertised for their Indian (*swadeshi*) origin and global appeal, but TV series also began to rapidly adopt western TV genres to Indian themes and narratives. In fact, as the reach and scope of the medium increased, television began to play a major role in shaping the current political and economic realities. The demolition of the Babri Mosque in an organized national anti-Muslim march in 1992 was broadcast live on national TV. This not only helped catapult the Hindu fundamentalist rightwing to an unprecedented political prominence, but also flamed communal outrage causing massive riots to break out across the country. Moreover, as news shifted from hourly bulletin slots on Doordarshan to private-owned 24X7 news channels, India was hit with a barrage of coverage on terrorist bombings in Mumbai, Delhi, Hyderabad etc.; reports of separatist violence as well as the Indian military's human right violations in the Kashmir Valley; cross-border terrorism and the Kargil War in 1999; and Vajpayee's peace efforts with Pakistan President General Parvez Musharraf. Communal riots and tension between Hindus and Muslims had flared up both before and after the Partition, but it was in the 90s, that islamophobia truly took on a new meaning in India and painted the Muslims as the absolute other, to be feared and despised for their alleged violent intents. Also, during the 90s (1995 precisely), India was introduced to the internet — the driver of events in our next section.

III

New Delhi, 2014. Narendra Modi took oath as the 14th Prime Minister of India. Three years earlier in 2011, Mamata Banerjee had been sworn in as the Chief Minister of West Bengal, and a year later in 2015, Arvind Kejriwal would take up the same post in Delhi. Together these

three leaders have emerged as the leading political movers and shakers in India through the 2010s. But while each have brought in some major policy changes in terms of both economic parameters and social requirements, it is their inevitable presence in mainstream media and their propensity to use new media as an election tool that ensured their re-elections for second and, in the case of Banerjee, third terms in the office. Each have accrued a substantial iconicity in their respective constituencies and are frequent shapers of political and cultural discourses in India as well as its neighboring countries today. Most importantly their engagement with popular culture and substantive presence on social media, make them vibrant topics of discussions for a younger generation of Indians. Stand-up comedy, comedy skits, caricatures, memes, and GIFs find all three as their staple subjects.

The rise of these three politicians, especially in context of their major new media influence is presaged by a marked shift in India's global interactions. After LPG, the fall of the Soviet Union, and a major uptick in Indian immigration to the United States, the US media and cultural narratives began to exert a far greater pull over India's popular culture. We have had frequent visits by US presidents in the last two decades, including Bill Clinton in 2000, George Bush in 2006, Barack Obama in 2010 and 2015, and Donald Trump in 2020. Each of these visits were marked with displays of lavish hospitality. India is also one of the largest consumers of Hollywood movies, right after China. With the introduction of Facebook and Twitter in 2006, the young Indian population became more in sync with the global, and especially American, cultural forms and narratives.

Simultaneously, the rise of the Indian Anti-Corruption Movement in 2011 and major public protests against the 2012 Delhi gang-rape and murder, also highlighted the power of social media and new media platforms in political activism, opinion-making, and awareness generation. Mamata Banerjee and Aravind Kejriwal emerged as two of the most identifiable faces emerging from such mass protests and then translating this mass support into votes in electoral politics. Consequently, with the 2014 election it became imperative for major national political parties to harness the power of social media as a campaign tool, used to generate consensus not among young consumers but also influencing mainstream news media narratives.

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APPENDIX D: LIST OF IMAGES AND MEDIA

Images are not included in the dissertation document. All media can be found on a digital archive at: https://economiesoflonging.wordpress.com/.

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NOTES AND CITATIONS

¹ Marketed daily on our smartphones and other devices as well as on the big screen and on murals, in paintings, graffities, advertisement boards and in most, if not all, visual media available to us. Always, constantly.

Introduction: Icons in motion

¹ "'Monkey man' fears rampant in New Delhi." CNN. New Delhi. 2001.
https://www.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/south/05/16/india.monkeyman/. Accessed 18th August 2019.

² Fawaz, Ramzi. *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics.* Postmillennial Pop. New York: New York University Press, 2016. 22.

³ Moffitt, Benjamin. *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*. Stanford University Press, 2016. 5.

⁴ Keane, John. "Life after Political Death: The Fate of Leaders after Leaving High Office." *Dispersed Democratic Leadership: Origins, Dynamics, and Implications*. 2009. 279–98.

⁵ The aim of the current research is to focus on the superhero's obvious celebration of an ideal corporeality, and I do not intend to provide a new, concrete-seeming definition of the superhero. There are several major works of scholarship which have tackled the definitions of superhero and analyzed which works and which do not. Nonetheless, for all future purposes, I will use Peter Coogan's following definition as a loose point of reference:

> Superhero. A heroic character with a selfless, pro-social mission; with superpowers—extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills; who has a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically express his biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero); and who is generically distinct, i.e. can be distinguished from characters of related genres (fantasy, science fiction, detective, etc.) by a preponderance of generic conventions. Often superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret.

Coogan, Peter. "The Definition of the Superhero". Eds. Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester. *A Comics Studies Reader*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009. p77.

⁶ Fawaz, Ramzi. *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics*. New York University Press, 2016. p 11.

⁷ Here articulated as gaming categories for character functionalities.

⁸ India is no way the only culture to experience this infatuation with larger-than-life corporealities. And yet, India does experience a unique political affect of such hero-worship.

⁹ Afterall, the superhero's idealized, yet fluxable, corporeality for labor is bound to have found currency in a nation which has one of the world's largest and youngest working population

¹⁰ While Barrack Obama and Donald Trump are both populists and can equally stake a claim at representing the "common people" of the USA, they in fact stand for very different definitions of the "American people."

¹¹ Ghosh, Bishnupriya. *Global Icons: Apertures to the Popular*. Duke University Press, 2011. 5.

¹² Which the current research too indulges in.

¹³ In the panoply of prior discussions of the icon, two prior scholars anchor my own work. The first is Erwin Panofsky, whose theories on the reading of images provide an epistemological basic for the study of icons. Panofsky identifies three overlaying meanings to each image: "the primary or natural meaning", "the secondary or conventional meaning" and "the intrinsic meaning or content." The first, Panofsky says, is "apprehended by identifying pure forms…; identifying their mutual relations as events" and finally by perceiving the immediate effect of such "expressional qualities." Thus, Panofsky establishes the pure formal aspects of images as artistic

motifs. These motifs are then subjected to a secondary reading based on historical, religious, philosophical, and cultural conventions, specific to the context of that image's production. And finally, the third stratum of meaning is derived when these underlying artistic motifs, now weighted with conventional interpretations, "reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion — unconsciously qualified by one personality and condensed into one work." For Panofsky, the first reading is pre-iconographical whereas the second is iconographical. In other words, the primary meaning of the image, drawn from the study of its form, pre-exists contextual interpretations informed by conventions of histories and cultures. It's the reading of "pure forms" in context of "conventions" that finally helps place the image in a system of iconography

Panofsky, Erwin. *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*. Icon Ed, 1972.

[14] Kemp, Martin. *Christ to Coke: How Image Becomes Icon*. Oxford University Press, 2012. p3.

[15] Ultimately, iconographies are rhizomatic myths. They are local and immediate linguistic rhizomes, wherein any icon can be connected to another, via tributary signs. Iconographies are non-hierarchical; no one icon is more important than the other. Each icon is replaceable within the iconography, and thus the iconography functions on the principle of asignifying rupture.

[16] Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari Félix. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Continuum, 2004. 34.

[17] Here and henceforth, the word 'product' implies both actual market commodities as well cultural values, political stances, and ideological arguments.

[18] Freedberg, David. *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*. University of Chicago Press, 1989.

[19] Either by destruction or supersession i.e., iconoclasm or iconodulism. However, both of these are ultimately a mode of enriching the icon.

[20] Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. 1st pbk. ed., Duke University Press, 1993. 133.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Allison J. Pugh's book *Longing and Belonging: Parents, Children, and Consumer Culture* (2009), and the essay by Michael J Wohl et al, "Days of Future Past: Concerns for the Group's Future Prompt Longing for Its Past (and Ways to Reclaim It)" are few of the important works which highlight this increasing cultural currency of longing.

[23] Stewart. 23.

[24] The interpretation of *itihaas* as history fails to translate the tension between "true" and "real" that the Sanskrit word inherently evokes. The exact translation of the word – "as it was" – often acknowledges what's true over what's real and even highlights the possibility of an event being true without it being real at all. This discussion will take primacy in our second chapter.

[25] Stewart. 29.
[26] Ibid.

[27] See *Development as Freedom* (2009) by Amartya Sen.

[28] Stewart. 151-152.

Chapter 1: India's Icon

[29] '*Thalaiva'* is the male-gender form.

[30] Vijay, A.L. *Thalaivii*. Mumbai. Zee Studios. 2021. (4:50 - 5:30). My translations.

[31] According to the archives of Indian daily *The Hindu*, Jayalalithaa alleged, "They all concentrated on me and directed blows on my head. Throwing the podium, the bell on the Speaker's table, big pads and bundles of budget

papers, books, and whatever missiles they could lay their hands on. I felt giddy and almost fainted. When party MLAs tried to escort me out, a DMK Minister caught hold of my saree and pulled it. This resulted in the safety pin on the shoulder giving way and causing bleeding injuries. The saree was torn." This account too is not as dramatic as the depiction in the film.

[32] This author is aware of the delicate nature of the events and does not wish to downplay the heinousness of violence committed on the floor of a state legislature, much less against a woman. The given analysis is mainly to show how the iconographic translations in fact also transform narratives on screen.

[33] One of the most (in)famous among these career shifts is Bollywood megastar Amitabh Bachchan's short-lived and controversy-riddled stint as an MP for the Indian National Congress.

[34] According to Wikipedia, *varna* literally means type, order, color or class and was a framework for grouping people into classes, first used in Vedic Indian society. It is referred to frequently in the ancient Indian texts. The four classes were the Brahmins (priestly people), the Kshatriyas (also called *Rajanyas*, who were rulers, administrators and warriors), the Vaishyas (artisans, merchants, tradesmen and farmers), and Shudras (laboring classes). Communities which belong to one of these four *varnas* or their sub/branch castes are called *savarna*. Those who do not belong to any *varna* were called *avarna*; this includes tribal communities as well as the Dalits and "untouchables."

[35] While all three identity-based communities intersect, the case of misrepresentation is perhaps most acute for Dalits, tribal and those communities who are traditionally deemed "untouchable" by *savarna* and forward castes. A thorough examination of the mis- and/or non-representation of Dalits in popular visual media, is beyond the scope of the current research. However, several articles shed light on the details of Dalits and the politics of media representation. These include:

Fonseca A.F, Louca J, Bandyopadhyay S, and Manjaly J. "Caste in the News: A Computational Analysis of Indian Newspapers." *Social Media and Society* 5, no. 4 (2019).

Ashwini Deshpande. "How India's Caste Inequality Has Persisted—and Deepened in the Pandemic." *Current History* 1 April 2021; 120 (825): 127–132.

And these studies by Oxfam India, PEW Research and World Inequality Database:

https://www.oxfamindia.org/sites/default/files/2019-08/Oxfam%20NewsLaundry%20Report_For%20Media%20use.pdf.

https://wid.world/document/n-k-bharti-wealth-inequality-class-and-caste-in-india-1961-2012/

https://www.pewforum.org/2021/06/29/attitudes-about-caste/

[36] The Indian comic book market in 1960s through 70s primarily catered to an educated urban middle-class readership. In these households, still enamored with visions of Nehruvian family values, the parents mostly decided what recreational activities their children enjoyed and closely controlled which books and toys they bought or received as gifts. Such a stringent control often extended to the child's late teenage years. This is still true in large sections of the Indian society, especially in second-tier urban centers and rural areas. However, there is a general trend away from such a strict control and deep involvement of the parent in the child's life. Thus, to reach the child, it was necessary to woo the parents. By the 1980s, ACK had been successful in doing just that. As west-originating consumer goods like refrigerators or television sets, and iconographies like those of Hollywood films, began to percolate major metropolitan markets, middle-class urban households tried to cling on to what they believed were 'essential Indian values.' For these households, the ACK titles, IBH's monthly humor supplement Tinkle and children's magazines like Sandesh and Chandamama were seen as tools for inculcating in their children these core values of a unified, family-oriented, golden Indian past. (A phantom ideal carefully manufactured by both the Indian political leadership as well as the leading figures in popular entertainment to help in the project of National integration.)

[37] Chandra, Nandini. *The Classic Popular: Amar Chitra Katha, 1967-2007*. Second impressioned. New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2013. 5.

[38] Pai's strategy was so effective that, not only is the term a common replacement for "comics" in several regional and national publication names, many comics scholars and archivists in India still use '*chitrakatha*' to denote not

a specific brand or publication but Indian comics as a whole. Several subsequent regional comic book and children's magazine publications too have added '*chitrakatha*' as a substitute for the word comics in their titles. More immediately, this connotation of '*chitrakatha*' added ballast to one of ACK's oldest claim: not only was their content rooted in an "Indian culture and tradition" but, Pai claimed, the medium too had deep historical and cultural roots. He cited, across interviews, indigenous art traditions like *madhubani* and *pothi*, Mughal miniatures, medieval south-Indian temple sculpture and the works of Raja Ravi Varma as the stylistic predecessors and inspirations for '*chitrakatha*'. Pai's promotional maneuver reminds one, in retrospect, of Scott McCloud's rhetoric move in the first chapter of *Understanding Comics* (1993). Pai was lending legitimacy to a medium usually dismissed as low street literature, by locating it within a lineage of older, more respected, familiar, and somewhat similar artforms.

Karline McClain throws more light on his: "…producers also recognized that in order to sell these comic books to more parents, they would have to overcome the common prejudice that comics were intellectually inferior products that at best were a waste of time and money and at worst could seriously hamper a child's education and intellectual development…In February of 1978, a seminar on "The Role of Chitra Katha in School Education" was held... Many school principals attended, and the Union Minister of Education, Dr. Pratap Chandra Chunder, was the chief guest. In his inaugural address, Dr. Chunder dismissed the notion that comic books were a Western medium by pointing out India's long history of the combined use of text and image to tell stories. Referring to the Ajanta murals with their verses, illuminated manuscripts, and scroll paintings, he explained that '*chitrakathas*' (picture stories) were indeed a truly Indian medium and could be used to disseminate Indian culture."

McLain, Karline. *India's Immortal Comic Books: Gods, Kings, and Other Heroes*. Contemporary Indian Studies. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. 49.

[39] In fact, Pai was only the latest in a series of 'uncle' figures propagated across Indian popular cultures and echoed such American icons as "Uncle Walt" Disney. These popular 'uncles' were painted as genial old men, each simultaneously an educator, a storyteller, a mentor, and a father figure who was less of a disciplinarian or an authority and more of a fun friend. Disney Studio's marketed persona for its founder, "Uncle Walt", would interact with children during interviews, studio tours and even surprise them on their visits to Disneyland. And yet, he was also a wizened old storyteller explaining behind-the-scenes magic of Disney animation in documentaries. Uncle Pai was like Uncle Walt — storyteller, artist and genius — but he was also the direct inheritor of Chacha (Uncle) Nehru's legacy, after Nehru's passing in 1964. He was widely acclaimed "as the only man to have filled the void left behind by Chacha Nehru, since he too fits the role of a universal favorite among children." (Chandra, 29) Pai took the moniker rather seriously and would go on to milk his popularity through fan clubs, letters to his readership and school-visits. Later, his role as the new favorite 'Uncle' of India was also ratified by PM Atal Behari Vajpayee and several other leaders of the BJP.

The first Prime Minister of India is till today considered to be one of few political figures of the country much beloved to children. Apart from his strong advocacy for a universal right to education and healthcare for all children social and class barriers, Nehru frequently held meet-and-greets with children, toured schools, and instituted financial aids for the under-privileged child in India. While MK Gandhi is the Father of the Indian Nation, the universal acknowledgement of Nehru as a genial old father figure especially in his later years earned him the title of Chacha (father's younger brother, and thus the younger uncle). This image of Nehru was so influential that after his death, India stopped celebrating Children's Day on the UN designated 20th November and instead celebrates it on 14th November, Nehru's birth anniversary.

[40] Doctor, Vikram. "The Return of the Mythological Heroes," *Businessworld* (June 7, 1997), 38.
In fact, Raj Comics too enjoys a deeper percolation of local markets thanks to the use of Hindi as their prime language of publication. Even today, when India's overall comic book sales have shrunk to a mere shadow of its past reach, RC still maintains a comparatively stronger grip on sub-urban and rural markets in northern India. But this also restricts them to the primarily Hindi-speaking northern and north-western states. In contrast, by the mid-80s, ACK was selling "around 60,000 copies in English, 25,000 in Hindi, 8,000 Assamese, and 6,000 each in Kannada and Bengali, every month. At the same time, a cheaper, digest-size Malayalam version, printed as a franchise by the Malayala Manorama group, sold 140,000 copies." Their Hindi presence in the north and the west, and their English editions in the south and the east covered any gaps in ACK's regional language offerings.

Not to mention international sales in Bahasa, French, German, Japanese, Serbo-Croat, Spanish and Swahili. Moreover, the official circulation figures capture only a fraction of the comics' actual reach. In a pre-television and pre-globalization era ACKs were a precursor to trading cards and action figures, at the center of trade-based exchange circles among school and neighborhood friends. Often, these trade circles would also culminate into comic book clubs and even large community collections. And members of such clubs or trade circles did not collect ACK comics because they were the "right comic book." The marketing wooed our parents; the images captivated us. Notice, however, the omission of Urdu — a language often exclusively but somewhat inaccurately associated with Islam — as one of the languages of publication.

[41] Chandra, 94.
In 1894, the Ravi Varma Fine Arts Lithographic Press established in Girgaum, Mumbai, had boosted the mass production and distribution of Varma's oleographs, which depicted moments and characters from classical Sanskrit poetry, the Puranas and the epics. Nearly two decades later, the first Indian feature-length film, Dadasaheb Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), also presented a motion-picture retelling of mythological stories surrounding the eponymous king, a mythic ancestor of Rama.

[42] See Chandra, Nandini. "Signatures of Excess", in *The Classic Popular* (2013). 85-149.
Chandra provides a detailed anatomy of the ACK iconography, listing the influence of tribal and regional art forms, Hindi film poster art and early children literature.

[43] Chandra, 86.

[44] Pinney, Christopher. *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India*. London: Reaktion Books, 2009. 61.

[45] Chandra, 87.

[46] Chandra 85

[47] Chandra, 96-97.
There were also the likes of Ravi Paranjpe and Pulak Biswas whose art "consciously subverted all principles of realism." Both Paranjpe and Biswas were offered only a couple of titles.

[48] Jain, Kajri. *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art*. Objects/Histories. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. 35.

[49] Chandra, 93-94.

[50] See Ramanujan, A. K, Vinay Dharwadker, and Stuart H Blackburn. "Three Hundred Rāmāyaṇas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation". *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*. Oxford India Paperbacks. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004.
Ramanujan provides a survey of the *Ramayana's* myriad culture-specific retellings, highlighting each variation to character, event or plot across regions of South and Southeast Asia.

[51] Varma hailed from a baronial family in the erstwhile princely state of Travancore (present day southern Kerala).

[52] "Chhobite" translates to "in images", thus *Ramayana in Images* etc. Chakrabarty's works belong to the Bengal School of Art, which traces its roots to painters Abanindranath Tagore and his disciple Jamini Roy. Typical to the Bengal school, Chakrabarty drew heavily from Bengali folk art, Mughal miniatures, and the east-Indian cloth-based scroll painting style of *Pattachitra*.

[53] Chandra, 94.

[54] Chandra, 102. Also, "This was almost in reaction to the feeling that it was difficult to distinguish between male and female bodies in traditional illustrations."

[55] Chandra, 88. "Their" refers to the othered identification of Muslims.

[56] A vermilion mark on the forehead, a sacred religious marker to some castes and sects amongst Hindus.

[57] McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*. New York: William Morrow/HarperCollins, 2008. 28-37.

[58] According to Wikipedia, *varna* literally means type, order, color or class and was a framework for grouping people into classes, first used in Vedic Indian society. It is referred to frequently in the ancient Indian texts. The four classes were the Brahmins (priestly people), the Kshatriyas (also called *Rajanyas*, who were rulers, administrators and warriors), the Vaishyas (artisans, merchants, tradesmen and farmers), and Shudras (laboring classes). Communities which belong to one of the four *varnas* or classes are called *savarna*. Those who do not belong to any *varna* were called *avarna*; this includes tribal communities as well as the Dalits and "untouchables."

[59] Named after Butch Hartman, whose animated drawings often used these features, Hartman hips refer to a particular style of drawing women's bodies in animation, such that they usually had a small bustline, a very narrow waist, narrow shoulders and very wide hips often accompanied by large buttocks.

[60] The impact of these limited and myopic archetypes will become more evident in our discussion of the Hindu hero-body on screen, in the next chapter.

[61] Chandra also points to *Pracheen Bharatiya Vesh-Bhusha* (Ancient Indian Attires) by Dr Moti Chandra, as "the directory on the costumes and jewelry of ancient India to which Pai officially subscribed." Pai provided Moti Chandra's work as a catalogue for how particular dresses were worn, emphasizing the exactness of knots, folds and flows for each piece of the attire. Chandra indicates that the catalogue was also influential, along with Peter O'Donnell's illustrations for *Modesty Blaise*, in producing the sexually suggestive and titillating women's corporeality on display in the ACK.

[62] Drawn from the ancient Sanskrit treatise Natyashastra (c. 200 BCE to 200 CE), the rasa/bhava theory forms the basis for several art-forms native to the subcontinent, including dance, music, theatre, painting, sculpture, and literature. Rasas denote the aesthetic flavor of the art form. They are the emotive output for the mental state or bhavas of the character(s), the author(s) or both. Each art form, and their subsequent genres and styles, use the human form in different ways to embody the rasas and express bhavas.

[63] With the current emphasis on religious and communal sentiments in Indian electoral politics, this might seem like a common fundamentalist strategy today. Nor was this a unique ideological maneuver in political arenas of the 1970s. The deftness and decisiveness, however, with which Pai cemented his Hindu Brahmin bias through a primarily children's comics was unprecedented, and its effects far-reaching.

[64] He is in fact a giant alien from Jupiter.

[65] He is also accompanied by his girlfriend Bela, who is shown as a student with diverse research interests, formidable martial arts skills and often becomes the major plot-catalyst for highlighting the central issues of the stories. Its implied that Bela and Bahadur are in a live-in relationship, and any reference to a prospect of marriage is usually brushed away in the vein of light, casual comments and off-handed jokes. While Bahadur cares for Bela and is often concerned for her safety, he is never her shining knight or she his damsel in distress. Bela often emerges as the torchbearer of a strong, self-reliant and decisively modern Indian womanhood.

[66] The most recent examples include an array of "honor killings" in the decade of 2010s sanctioned and perpetrated by hyper-local governments like Khap Panchayats.

[67] Central Reserve Police Force and Border Security Force, both primary paramilitary forces in India

[68] Rao, Aruna. "From Self-Knowledge to Super Heroes: The Story of Indian Comics". Ed. By John A Lent, *Illustrating Asia: Comics, Humor Magazines, and Picture Books*. Consumasian Book Series. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001. 37-63.

[69] Nandini Chandra, "Comic Realism", Hard News, 2021, https://web1.hardnewsmedia.com/2010/09/3680.

[70] The most famous examples of which was Phoolan Devi whose gang massacred 22 Thakur men in a caste and gender-based revenge killing.

[71] According to Wikipedia, "Salwa Judum (Purification Hunt in Gondi language) was a militia mobilized and deployed as part of anti-insurgency operations in Chhattisgarh, India, aimed at countering Naxalite violence in the region. The militia, consisting of local tribal youth, received support and training from the Chhattisgarh state government. It has been outlawed and banned by a Supreme Court order but continues to exist in the form of Armed Auxiliary Forces, District Reserve Group and other vigilante groups. The use of Salwa Judum by the government for anti-Naxal operations was criticized for its violations of human rights and poorly trained youth for counter-insurgency roles."

[72] See Zaidi, S. Hussain. *Dongri to Dubai: Six Decades of the Mumbai Mafia*. New Delhi: Lotus Collection, 2012.

[73] Chandra, 2021.

[74] Rao, 47.

[75] Mishra, Vijay. *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire*. New York: Routledge, 2002. 126.

[76] Nehru's developmental policies, with a focus on the growth and centrality of the public sector and a goal of nation-wide industrialization, had created a large working-class population. Mumbai, then-Bombay, became an important focal point in this inter-state migration of labor, leading to a rapid growth of slums in the city. It was the fantasies of this cinema-consuming milieu, that writers Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar (together known as the scriptwriter duo Salim-Javed) were hoping to capture.

[77] Mishra, 128.

[78] Sharma, Ashwini "Blood, Sweat and Tears: Amitabh Bachchan, Urban demi-god". Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim, eds. *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men.* Enskede: TPB, 2000. 172.

[79] The Bachchan hero is productive…The sense of achievement conveyed had great audience appeal in the 1970s. The idealism of romance was superseded by the pragmatism of violence. Unlike the more 'passive', romantic heroes, the Bachchan hero externalizes his own alienation from the cruel materialist world through anger, action and revenge. In this persona, masculinity became far less ambivalent and much more active and achieving. (Sharma, 172.)

[80] Compared to *Zanjeer*, for instance, two later films — *Ardh Satya* (Half-Truth, 1983) and *Shool* (The Spike, 1991) — capture the persona of the angry earnest police inspector battling a corrupt system, with much greater efficacy. Both films painstakingly explore the inconsistencies in the archetype's defining principles as well as the two heroes' individual character-flaws which makes the archetype a less-than-ideal role model or champion for the subaltern. Moreover, in both cases the leading actors playing the archetype – Om Puri and Manoj Bajpayee – were recognized, at that point in their acting careers, as character-actors in art-house or independent cinema rather than mainstream film stars.

[81] Mishra, 138.

[82] Chute, David. "The Big B: The Rise and Fall and Rebirth of Bollywood Superstar Amitabh Bachchan." *Film Comment* 41, no. 2 (2005): 50–56.

[83] Take for instance the flip-and-kick stunt action, a crucial addition to the AYM fight scenes. This was, mostly, a rope-supported stunt which, while lasting no more than a second on-screen, captured the entire body of the character. The flip-and-kick involves a comprehensive exercise of legs, arms, the core and the shoulder muscles. It captures the entire body in a well-orchestrated effort which has a direct and violent impact on the immediate oppressor-figure — mostly personified as large, well-built goons. There's a clear and unapologetic emphasis on the human form's concerted capability at destruction. Stunts such as these, heightened not only the spectacle of the AYM's rebellion against the status quo, but also the affect of such an on-screen rebellion. It was no longer enough to put the criminals in jail. For all one knew, the jailors themselves might be in cahoots with the villains or incompetent to contain them altogether. Afterall, the AYM himself frequently escapes the law. Instead, the spectacle of the fight sequence provided a much more cathartic form of justice.

[84] Amitabh Bachchan is the son of renowned Uttar Pradesh-based Hindi poet Harivansh Rai Bachchan. The Bachchans still are close to the Nehru-Gandhi family. The scions of both families were close childhood friend and, after the death of Indira Gandhi in 1984, Amitabh even took a break from acting to contest and win elections, supporting his friend and future Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, Indira's son.

[85] Mishra, 138.

[86] Gangoli, Geetanjali, "Sexuality, Sensuality and Belonging: Representations of the 'Anglo-Indian' and the 'Western' Woman in Hindi Cinema." Raminder Kaur and Ajay J Sinha eds. *Bollyworld: Popular Indian Cinema through a Transnational Lens.* New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006. 154.

[87] Anita's tragedy is subsumed in the tragedy of Vijay's life and death. One can't help feeling that Vijay's death may not have been inevitable, but Anita's was… It is not inconsequential to the theme of the film that Anita dies at the very point when her hopes for a life as a wife and a mother seem to be close to realization. Her profession and her blatant sexuality have to be punished by the script, her importance to the hero as an emotional support notwithstanding. Anita's devotion to Vijay cannot prevent her from remaining a marginal and marginalized figure in the film. (Gangoli,155)

In fact, Anita's character and sacrifice for Vijay is overshadowed by his mother. Anita dies in Vijay's arms, but Vijay dies in his mother's. Vijay's entire character arc is fueled by his thirst to provide his mother with "all the happiness in the world." As Gangoli puts it,

Within this paradigm, the long-suffering mother in Deewaar represents the true Indian/Hindu woman, whose sexuality is subsumed in her love for her children. The ambiguous and sexually charged character of Anita, despite her end, is perhaps not meant to evoke a similar sympathy. (Gangoli, 156)

[88] Another crucial factor behind the rise of superhero films during the 80s and 90s, was the immense popularity of *Mr. India* (1987), wherein Anil Kapoor's portrayal of an invisible superhero also added an important twist to the archetype of the Angry Young Man.

[89] N. Patcy (2009) 'Remembering Amitabh, the Supremo Superhero', www.rediff.com/movies/slide-show/slide-show-1-pammi-bakshi-on-supremo/20091110.htm. Accessed: June 23, 2014.

[90] While the exact date of their publication is not known, Bakshi mentions that the production had begun not too late after the release of *Coolie* in 1983. The date is important. *Coolie* is particularly infamous for a fight sequence between actor Puneet Issar and Bachchan, during which the latter suffered had a near-fatal injury. Bachchan's hospitalization and tryst for life attracted much media attention, garnering a wave of sympathy. Media outlets reported widespread mourning, special rituals and prayers across places of worship, and a massive blood-donation campaign which reportedly yielded close to 60 bottles of blood from nearly 200 donors. Subsequently, Bachchan's miraculous recovery and quick return to the sets of *Coolie* further cemented his reputation for invincibility.

[91] A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, trans. *Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is: With the Original Sanskrit Text, Roman Transliteration, English Equivalents, Translation, and Elaborate Purports*. Seconded. Juhu, Mumbai, India: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 2015. 224-226.

While the Prabhupāda translation is often considered one of the more authoritative ones, it has given way to a more secular interpretation in popular media, including the ACK *Bhagavad Gita*, which interprets *dharma* and *adharma* as righteousness and unrighteousness respectively, instead of religion and irreligion. Thus, in this interpretation, the *sloka* would be translated more on the lines of:

"Whenever there is decay of *righteousness*, O Bharata,
And there is exaltation of *unrighteousness*, then I Myself come forth ;
For the protection of the good, for the destruction of evil-doers,
For the sake of firmly establishing righteousness, I am born from age to age."

However, the more orthodox, Hindu fundamentalist readers have stuck to the former interpretation, thus reifying the xenophobic view that other religions — especially Islam — are *adharma* or unrighteous.

Chapter 2: *Nagraj*

[92] While my current project doesn't address this discussion, there's much that can be written about how intimate a place these comics sometimes held in the lives of the earlier generation of readers. One could find, confessions of early crushes, crushing heartbreaks, telling identification of the reader with specific characters, and inter-generational conversations. An example: "Dear (elder brother), thanks for equipping me with a life-supply of blackmail material. I assure you they will be put to their optimal use. With love, your now all-knowing (younger brother)" (Transl. from Bengali, p 5. *ACK Rabindranath Tagore*, passed-down edition).
In case the flow of the communication is confusing, comics were often passed on to younger siblings and then returned to the original owner, who would then pass it on to some other relative. The circulation of ACK picture-tales were multidirectional and multi-generational.

[93] Gordon, Ian. *Superman: The Persistence of an American Icon*. Comics Culture. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2017.

[94] Nor is Bahadur, the other claimant for the title. Supremo too is a derivative of Amitabh Bachchan's star iconicity, and not quite an icon in himself.

[95] The character's status as a major Hindu deity, as well as a legendary ancient king, makes him comparable to such Western icons as Jesus Christ and King Arthur. The character has also acquired immense political

significance even for Indians who do not follow the Hindu religion, or do not subscribe to the particular sects and beliefs centered around Rama. Plus, several tribal communities in central and eastern India identify him as a major villain in their mythology, and an example of colonialism and cultural subjugation of indigenous tribes and races by the Aryans.

[96] That's a direct quote from the note my teacher wrote, informing my parents about the incident.

[97] This is also true about Buddhist, Christian and Islamic icons in India, as well as most pieces of paper with images or words printed on them. While it's not uncommon for roadside vendors to display books on pavements, in most cases religious books and printed media carrying images of deities are either placed on make-shift shelves or atop other books to avoid contact with the bare sidewalk.

[98] Across several media interviews, Sanjay Gupta mentions the immense influence comics have had on his and his brothers' childhood, stressing on how each of them were, first and foremost, fans.
Some of these can be found here.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCq4HmtEt30

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lRqMMuQlmYs

Harchandani, Kishan, Alex Horvath, David Connor, and Jonathan Upton. "Exclusive Interview of Sanjay Gupta: Comics Is My Life, I Am Comics." Culture POPcorn, April 7, 2018. https://culturepopcorn.com/sanjay-gupta-interview-raj-comics/.

[99] RC characters such as Parmanu and Tiranga have been often identified with DC's Atom and Marvel's Captain America/Union Jack respectively, while major RC story arcs like *Panchanag* and *Nāgayana* borrow heavily from the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*.

[100] Sanjay Gupta (Studio Head, RC) in discussion with the author, July 21, 2019.

[101] Ibid.

[102] Their popularity was so widespread, it gave rise to films like *3 Dev Adam* (Turkey, 1973), which openly flouted copyrights claims and portrays Captain America fighting a villainous Spider-Man on behalf of the people of Turkey. With films like *3 Dev* and *Ultraman* (Japan, 1967), the superhero narrative had not only crossed international boundaries but even delivered cult-status hits for their respective cinema cultures.

[103] Fawaz, 39

[104] Fawaz, 53.

[105] Fawaz, 53.

[106] Fawaz, 50.

[107] Nagraj (Superman/Spiderman), Super Commando Dhruva (Nightwing/Winter Soldier), Shakti (Wonder Woman/Captain Marvel), Parmanu (The Atom/Atom Smasher), Tiranga (Captain America/Union Jack), Inspector Steel (Judge Dredd/Robo Cop), and Fighter Toads (Ninja Turtles).

[108] Fawaz, 54.

[109] Amitabh Bachchan's action-hero persona

[110] Fawaz, 41.
[111] Mandhwani, Aakriti. "From the Colloquial to the 'Literary': Hindi pulp's journey from the streets to the bookshelves". Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay et al, eds. *Indian Genre Fiction: Pasts and Future Histories. Studies in Global Genre Fiction*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019. 189.

[112] Collectors of scrap and old newspapers, magazines and stationaries. Often, the pocket pulps and early RC comics were picked up by the *raddiwallahs* are dumped into paper-recycling vats as fodder for more *lugdi* paper, making the copies of earliest RC issues rare and collectible commodities today. However, a steady stream of old comic books has also made their way to second-hand-book sellers in major book markets like the popular College

Street market in Kolkata. And only recently, have these sellers of second-hand books begun to recognize the value of old comics issues as collectibles. I was able to recover a copy each of four issues of *Nagraj* at a trumped-up rate of ₹200-250 each. And yet these prices were nowhere near the exorbitant rates found on eBay or Reddit auctions where prices for the same issues can range anywhere between ₹4000 and ₹15000.

[113] With practically the same publication and distribution infrastructure, most comic titles brought out by these Hindi publishers were pushed into the market as illustrated side-reads for their bestselling pocket-pulps before the comics could gain popularity and develop a dedicated readership of their own. In fact, local street-stall sellers in my neighborhood wouldn't mind giving away the first few issues of a new superhero title for free with a purchase of one or more pocket-pulps of the same imprint, to their regular customers or to cover for loose change.

[114] 'Surender Mohan Pathak — Blaft Interview,' *blaftpubs* YouTube. 11th May 2021. www.youtube.com/watch?v=G86OqWiYNm8.

[115] Both titles, which sounded similar too, were in fact serialized narratives of a similarly witty and mischievous duo of teenage boys, who solved problems with their cunning and charm. The characters were practically identical except in their names.

[116] The seepage of narratives was therefore especially prominent in Tulsi Pocket Books and Tulsi comics. Sharma's two subsidiary publication constantly exchanged characters and even fictional realities. Sharma wrote for and edited both the pocket novels and comics division. In fact, Sharma's clout and craftsmanship became key in developing Tulsi as a major competition to Raja Pocket Books and Raj Comics.

[117] With the Indian subcontinent's substantial geographical presence on the Silk Route, a series of succeeding South Asian cultures and socio-political system have exported and imported their narratives for ages. Thus, for instance, the *One Thousand and One Nights* borrows strongly from Buddhist and early Medieval Vedic animal fables and folklore. Similarly, by the early modern era, Central Asian and East-European elements of sorcery, shape-shifting and political intrigue were added to indigenous folk and fable narratives. Late-Vedic and Buddhist stories of divine and semi-divine serpentine deities (the Nāgas), nature spirits (the Yakshas) and reverent ghosts (the Vetālas) meet Ayyars, djinns and Fereshteh of Persian and Arabic folk traditions. Legends of magically endowed *fakirs* and mystics in local and micro-traditions meet Jain, Buddhist and South Indian Hindu narratives of *siddhas* (perfected beings) and *sadhus* (sages). The result is a rich tapestry of mostly local and regional mythological narrative cycles about *ichchhadhari nāgas* (shape-shifting serpents), divinely blessed warlocks and their direct involvement in the court politics of minor medieval and late-medieval kingdoms, which are not often included in the revered canons of Hindu Puranic and Vedic mythological narratives.

[118] Both terms are found in central Asian cultures predating Islam but acquired a new currency across narrative traditions in the Islamic Golden Age (c.8th to 14th centuries CE). While *tilism* refers to an alternate dimension of reality created by magic, the word *aiyyar* originally referred to travelling warriors or rangers, and later took on the connotation of warlocks.

[119] Distant echoes of pocket-dimension-wielding sorcerers can be found littered across global pop cultures. Some of the most popular examples include: Doctor Who and TARDIS, the current iteration of Wanda Maximoff and Dr. Strange in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Dr. Fate in DC comics, *Asura's Wrath* etc.

[120] Khatri's fictional world is structured around predominantly feudal societies. The narratives mainly revolve around members of the ruler class. The working class is grouped within a faceless crowd referred to as "royal subjects" and used as plot devices. Instead, traditional social outsiders like criminals, prostitutes and the diseased gain more prominence. Especially important are the *aiyaaras* and *vishkanyas* — parentless female *aiyaars* and "poison-maidens" who have been raised from their birth as assassins and royal bodyguards, and systematically fed with poisons and venoms to increase their immunity to these substances. These figures often appear as overtly sexualized women characters, and are similarly ex-static to Khatri's fictional feudal societies as the royal courtesans.

[121] Khatri, Devki Nandan. *Chandrakanta*. Diamond Pocket Books, 2020. 89.

[122] Mathur, Suchitra, "From Capes to Snakes: The Indianization of the American Superhero". Mark Berninger et al eds. *Comics as a Nexus of Cultures: Essays on the Interplay of Media, Disciplines and International Perspectives*. Critical Explorations in Science Fiction and Fantasy, 22. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2010. 179.

[123] Mathur, 179-80.

[124] Jain, Kajri. *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art*. Objects/Histories. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. 35.

[125] Their mythology is loosely derived from the Nāgas, a race of semi-divine beings mentioned in the Vedas and the Puranas, who are at times heroic and at times villainous, serving as crucial plot devices in the major epics, classical Sanskrit plays as well as the folklores. Nāgas are minor deities in Buddhism as well as Hinduism and are worshipped in several regions and cultures of India. They also frequent the pages of ACK comics. The ichchadhari nāga, however, is a regional distillation of the mythology surrounding the Nāgas. As opposed to the depiction of Nāgas as semi-divine deities and protectors of sacred treasures in the *Jātakas* or the *Panchatantras*, local and regional folk traditions often confuse them with Yakshas (trickster forest spirits) or evendjinns, transforming them into dark, mysterious creatures who would rather stay away from the human world but can bring terrible vengeance when rattled out of their seclusion. This galvanization of Nāgas into ichchadhari nāgas was hastened by their depiction and eventual christening in mainstream cinema.

[126] The extended universe of RC also incorporates the localized superstitions, beliefs and lore around figures like Tantriks (practitioners of esoteric Hindu and Buddhist traditions, but equivalent to followers of black magic and voodoo in popular media narratives), Yetis, etc.

[127] Thus, the only piece of clothing Nagraj wears are the pair of black trunks, and black boots.

[128] Several of Sinha's creations and additions to RC roster heroes, including *Bhediya*, *Bhokal*, *Adig,* and *Doga* echoes prominent character traits, superpowers and narrative arcs of Image and Dark Horse titles like The Savage Dragon, Spawn, Hellboy, etc. It will be safe to assume that by early to mid 90s, Indian comics artists are aware of Image and Dark Horse.

[129] The comics also do not define terrorism as an evil distinct from organized crime syndicates and drug cartels. There is a clear sense of an interconnectedness, a shared economy.

[130] A recent run of RC special issues — RC SIs #2480 *Order of Babel*, #2485 *New World Order*, #2518 *World War* and #2524 *Veergati* — enacts this scenario. Nagraj is (apparently) killed by his own nāga allies when they think he has chosen to protect the humans and sacrifice the nāgas, only to realize later that he was trying to save both the races.

[131] There are other variants of Nagraj, most notable of which is the Naraknashak or the Hell-Destroyer Nagraj. This variant however belongs to a different dimension altogether, as compared to Atankharta and Vishwarakshak which belong to two different timelines but the same dimension. While the scope of the current research doesn't touch upon this aspect, much can be explored in a comparative analysis of Naraknashak and Image comics' Spawn. In fact, RC shows an increasing propensity move away from the DC and Marvel superhero to the Image superhero as it moves into the 1990s.

[132] In both continuities, RC's women too inherit the ACK corporealities, amplifies through the western superhero iconography. This is best exemplified in the character of the *nāgin*. Scholars Like Karlene McClaine and Chandra have repeatedly described the representation of women's bodies in ACK comics as "ACK's calendar girls" or the "ACK pinups". In ACK, mythological heroines were shown as "fluid creatures" who could "easily cut across the private and public domains." Thus, leaves, vines, trees and small animals would invade the interiors, whether actually or in the forms of motifs, while the outdoors would be arranges with the symmetry of a drawing room, whenever the heroine(s) was the sole occupier of a frame. This arrangement of space bolstered as well as complimented the fluidity of the women's bodies on display. Indoors, the curved lines governing the mythological woman's bodies would be highlighted by framing them against a background constructed to classical angular perspectives and inhabited by rigid geometric shapes. Outdoors, she is shown clinging to creepers of boughs, smiling demurely, such that her need for support from creepers underlined the flimsy, delicate nature of her own coporeality. The 'warrior woman' figure, like the Queen of Jhansi — a leader in the Revolt of 1857 by India's princely states against the East India Company — is seen riding horses, armed, and armored, and postured around the same geometric template as that of the *veer rasa* exuding ACK hero. However, it's made amply clear that this is not her natural habitat. Despite describing her as a born warrior, ACK emphasizes her interest in dance, music and "helping her mother with duties of the household."

In ACK, warrior women like Saudangi, Visarpi and Nagina, like Bela in *Bahadur*, are allowed a modicum of modernity. They are independent women running multinational corporations as well as drug cartels, ruling kingdoms as well as hunting down criminals. Drawn with broader shoulders, and more defined muscles, their

corporealities mimic the upright, even rigid, postures of the ACK heroic male. They appear more powerful than the ACK heroines. They're constantly thrust into action sequences, retracing the dynamic motion lines of the action hero. And yet, they are ultimately the "ACK pin-up" reincarnated, with exaggerated hips and busts and slimmer waists. Their clothes are are drawn on the lines of, and yet are more revealing than, the nymphs, goddesses and 'epic beauties' featured in ACK.

[133] "Matrix Definition & Meaning." Merriam-Webster. Merriam-Webster. Accessed April 20, 2022. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/matrix#:~:text=Definition%20of%20matrix,is%20the%20matrix%20of%20peace.

[134] This second mathematical definition will prove especially helpful when thinking of the icon's translation into data, in our final chapter.

[135] A current example of this specific grafting is S. Jaishankar, the Minister of External Affairs for India, whose calm yet firm response to an Al-Jazeera journalist's question regarding Russian oil imports, at the recently concluded India-US 2+2 meeting, has been widely hailed across news and social media as a signifier of his sound strategic mind for geopolitics.

[136] Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the father of the Indian nation and the central figure of India's struggle for independence, was not part of this family; even though he was a friend of the family.

[137] Nehru's long tenure as PM was marked by a focus on planning for the future rather than immediate results.

[138] Guha, Ramachandra. *India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy*. Ecco Press, 2019. 972. Post-Gandhi, India's voting public has increasingly elected leadership bodies which appear to be more goal oriented, reflect an immediacy of purpose and are less plan oriented.

[139] As we can see, many of these dialectics also inform the iconicity of Indira Gandhi.

[140] In one of the most infamous instances of sycophancy, D K Baruah, one of Gandhi's staunchest supporters and the then-President of the Indian National Congress, had proclaimed in 1974 that "Indira is India, and India is Indira", in support of her decision to implement a national Emergency.

Chapter 3: *Shaktimaan*

[141] It was at first called "The Body is a Temple: Few minutes with Shaktimaan", and focused primarily on introducing the audience to good health-habits.

[142] Although he did get congratulated by the American president from time-to-time when he has prevented global (and mostly astronomic) calamities. The US president remains faceless and nameless, and his congratulations is conveyed in the serial mostly through the Indian news media.

[143] https://zeenews.india.com/home/shaktiman-mukesh-khanna-to-campaign-for-narendra-modi_34318.html

[144] A few of his notable roles include: in *Chandrakanta* (1994) as Janbaaz, warlock and itinerant knight dedicated to the kingdom of Naugarh; in *Mahayoddha* (1996) as Virat, ranger and later commander in chief dedicated to the kingdom of Sundergarh; and in *Yug* (1995) as Darshan Lal, a London-educated lawyer who sacrifices a successful career and returns to India to fight for the nation's independence from the British empire.

[145] Rajagopal, Arvind. *Politics After Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public.* Cambridge University Press, 2001. 35

[146] Sagar's *Ramayan* was aired from 25 January 1987 to 31 July 1988, while Chopra's *Mahabharat* was aired from 2 October 1988 to 24 June 1990.

[147] Ghose, Bhaskar. Doordarshan Days. Penguin, Viking, 2005. 38.

[148] Chandra, Nandini. *The Classic Popular: Amar Chitra Katha*, 1967-2007. Second impression ed., Yoda Press, 2013. 14.

[149] The word's literal translation being "as it was."

[150] Singh, Sujala. "The Epic (on) Tube: Plumbing the Depths of History. a Paradigm for Viewing the Tv Serialization of the Mahabharata." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1997. 82

[151] Chopra, BR, et al. *Mahabharat ki Mahabharat.* BR films. 1997. 16:28.

[152] In fact, both these serials aired in a relatively grey era of television history (late 1980s), when the idea of target audiences wasn't and could not be as crucial a factor in TV programming as it is today, primarily because the actual television set was not as widely owned as it would be even by 1994-95. In fact, both *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* were notorious for being viewed in a large group, such that entire localities and villages would congregate around a single television set every Sunday to watch these serials. The TV set was a novelty and anything on it was a spectacle.

[153] This would not have been very difficult to pull off, especially in an era when the ideas of religious-based identities were only just beginning to radically alter. The qualifying adjective "Hindu" had regional rather than religious roots. "The word for a 'river' in Sanskrit is *sindhu*. Hence *sapta-sindhu* meant '[the land of] the seven rivers', which was what the Vedic *Aryans* called Punjab. The Indus, to which most of these seven rivers were tributary, was the *sindhu par excellence*; and in the language of ancient Persian, a near relative of Sanskrit, the initial 's' of a Sanskrit word was invariably rendered as an aspirate – 'h'… and *sindhu* is thus *Hind[h]u*. When, from Persian, the word found its way into Greek, the initial aspirate was dropped, and it started to appear as the route 'Ind' (as in 'India', 'Indus', etc.). In this form it reached Latin and most other European languages. However, in Arabic and related languages it retained the initial 'h', giving 'Hindustan' as the name by which Turks and Mughals would know India. That word also passed on to Europe to give 'Hindu' as the name of the country's indigenous people and of what, by Muslims and Christians alike, was regarded as their infidel religion" (Keay, 83).

However, in 20th century when the dominant connotation of the word is religious, it might be reckless to assume that an old, and largely forgotten connotation can be invoked in favor of a secular narrative.

[154] In other words, who or what Bhishma, Arjuna, Krishna, etc. were, was determined by the actual physical body of the actors who portrayed these characters.

[155] Chopra, BR, et al. *Mahabharat ki Mahabharat.* BR films. 1997. 19:54

[156] Ibid. 20:14

[157] It is seen as less of a philosophy and more of a common sense in most Indian households, across religious and caste boundaries too, that abstinence prevents the general wear and tear of the physical body. Thus, abstinence from both physical and sexual pleasures, as well as the pleasures of power and wealth, is often cited as the key to living a long and tireless life. Bhishma's tirelessness and long life is often presented as proof of this "common sense." The familial "common sense" is also derived from ancient Sanskrit scriptures on health and medicine, including *Atharva Veda* and the *Sushruta Samhita*; and is one of the several such daily conjectures symptomatic of a pop culture distillation of ancient Sanskrit treatises.

[158] Khanna himself was 29 years old when the show began, while Paintal was 44. However, in *Mahabharata* Paintal's character Shakuni is decades younger than Bhishma.

[159] Mazzarella, William. Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India. Duke University Press, 2005. 5.

[160] Ibid. 6.

[161] Rajagopal, Arvind. *Politics After Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public.* Cambridge University Press, 2001. 35.

[162] Three socio-political phenomena had boosted this process: the popularity of serials like *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat*; the rise of the support for a religion based political movement like the Ram Temple issue from a local concern to a national debate; and the coincidence of the turn in the nation's economic policy with the rise of "Hindutva" in mainstream politics

[163] Rajagopal, Arvind. *Politics After Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public*. Cambridge University Press, 2001. 36.

[164] Mazzarella, 14.

[165] Including a blonde wig at one point.

[166] Interview with Mukesh Khanna, for *Screen*, 2003.

[167] Arathoon, Marion, "Think Indian in Global Terms" *Economic Times*, 1996.

[168] Primarily because the star's iconicity is dichotomous and needs a physicality on which to map on the visuality it promotes and propagates. star driven media therefore are the most crucial iconographic clusters to study the translation of any iconography from a purely visual semiotic signification to an actual corporeal imprint.

[169] Like many before him mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik describes Brihannala as a eunuch-transvestite in *Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don't Tell You*. While this is the most recurring 'definition' of the character across retellings, this is not the only one. Brihannala has been variously depicted as Arjuna 'dressed in drags', a transvestite, a transgender or even a transsexual.

[170] Rajagopal, Arvind. *Politics After Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public*. Cambridge University Press, 2001. 30.

[171] This is to say that the narrative would change perspective, and cinematography would adjust accordingly to employ formal choices that centers one character and then another.

[172] Sammond, Nicholas. 2006. *Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the making of the American Child: 1930-1960*. Durham: Duke University Press. 3.

[173] Sammond, 14.

[174] Ibid. 4

[175] Ibid.

Chapter 4: Pantheon

[176] Surya, Tejaswi. Twitter Post. May 12, 2019, 2:44 AM (PDT).
https://twitter.com/tejasvi_surya/status/1127509862072537089?lang=ar-x-fm

[177] Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. 1st pbk. ed., Duke University Press, 1993. 151-152.

[178] Traffic rules be damned!

[179] With a population of 12 million.

[180] Also noteworthy is the name of the lead character. In context of Maharashtra, Shivaji is the name of legendary 17th century Maratha king and general, a cultural icon and symbol of communal pride for the Marathi people.

[181] It is no wonder that in its target on corruption, flawed policy decisions, and systemic incompetence, Nayak also re-iterates a neo-liberal concern with the smooth functioning of a society securely resting on democracy and free-market forces.

[182] *Nayak* is often noted for its narrative similarity with actual historical events occurring after the film's release. The fictional CM of Maharashtra has an uncanny resemblance to the mannerisms and political profile of then-Gujarat CM Narendra Modi. Identical to a key scene in the film, Modi too would walk out of a live TV interview when confronted with his alleged role in stoking communal violence (in this case, the Godhra Riots of 2002).

[183] It was under his government that India became a nuclear power.

[184] Rahul Gandhi was derided as a "*shehzaada*" (prince) by Modi and his supporters. He was criticized for a lack of political acumen and disconnect with the 'real India', while the INC was accused of nepotism for centering their organization around members of the Nehru-Gandhi family.

[185] This time, (vote for) Modi's government.

[186] IndianExpressOnline. "BJP Wants More than Your Vote and That's the Problem: Prashant Kishor." YouTube. YouTube, March 28, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYlHyimd7nA&t=5s.

[187] Allen, Richard J. "Beginning, Middle, End of an Era: Has Technology Trumped Aristotle?" *Journal of Film and Video 65,* no. 1–2 (2013): 9–22. https://doi.org/10.5406/jfilmvideo.65.1-2.0009.

[188] This is true about several video games as well, where one is infinitely building and exploring worlds, solving side quests, or playing through level after level trying to build up strong player profiles.

[189] Bolter, Jay David. "How the Videogame Aesthetic Flows into All of Culture." *Wired*. Conde Nast, May 7, 2019. https://www.wired.com/story/how-the-videogame-aesthetic-flows-into-all-of-culture/.