IMMORTAL COMICS, EPIDERMAL POLITICS
Representations of gender and colorism in India

Radhika E. Parameswaran and Kavitha Cardoza

This article examines representations of skin color and its symbolic affiliations with discourses of gender, class, and caste in the Amar Chitra Katha (immortal pictorial stories) comic series, the first indigenous children’s comics to be published in postcolonial India. We draw on the concept of colorism as defined by Black scholars in the United States to explore the lessons on gender and skin color that these comics may communicate to Indian children. Our analysis shows that Amar Chitra Katha’s stories of gods, goddesses, kings, demons, and historical events associate light-skinned masculinity with divinity, strength, virtue, compassion, and upper caste status. Comic book illustrations code dark-skinned masculinity through the semiotics of violence, brutality, stupidity, bestiality, and low caste status. Fashioning a similar set of symbolic oppositions, these pictorial stories link light-skinned femininity to beauty, wholesome family life, and happiness, whereas dark-skinned femininity manifests through embodiments of grotesque physical appearance, anger, promiscuity, and deviance.

KEYWORDS children; class; colorism; comics; gender; India; mythology; representation; skin color; symbolism

Despite a growing body of research on the media landscape in postcolonial India, Indian children’s media culture continues to be underrepresented in the fields of feminist media and cultural studies. Scholarship in education, literacy, poverty, and rural development has emphasized poor urban and rural Indian children’s marginalized status, and the neglect of middle-class Indian children’s leisure practices reminds us of Mankekar’s observations on anthropology’s resistance in the past to “acknowledging the presence of dynamic cosmopolitan cultural formations in postcolonial India” (1993, p. 58). Focusing attention on middle class Indian children’s media culture, this article explores the subtle lessons on social hierarchy that popular print culture produced in India may impart to young readers. We examine representations of skin color and its symbolic affiliations with discourses of gender, class, and caste in the Amar Chitra Katha (immortal pictorial stories) comic series, the first indigenous English-language comics to be published in postcolonial India. Amar Chitra Katha comics were fashioned explicitly as pedagogic tools to entertain and educate modern Indian children about their nation’s precolonial history and religious traditions (Pritchett, 1995). As Rao (1996) notes, the production and circulation of Amar Chitra Katha comics in postcolonial India indexes the instrumental remaking of enlightened childhood and patriotic consciousness in a newly formed nation.
Amar Chitra Katha comics’ ornate illustrations, with short captions and balloons that
contain characters’ verbal communication, narrate stories that are simplified versions of
complex, original vernacular texts on mythology, folk fables, and history. The popularity of
these comics, media products that substitute for older forms of storytelling, among the
children of India’s English-speaking middle classes speaks to historical processes of
urbanization, the erosion of vernacular languages, the creation of a professional middle
class, and the replacement of extended families with nuclear families. The Amar Chitra
Katha comic series, which began publication in 1967, was the brainchild of Anant Pai, an
editor at the publishing firm India Book House, and an innovative marketer, who would
later be hailed as the “Disney of India.” Pai had realized in the mid-sixties that most middle
class Indian children knew more about England and the English Classics rather than their
own culture and history. His bold early educational marketing strategy—selling Amar
Chitra Katha comics to schoolteachers as texts that filled a serious gap in Indian children’s
curriculum—ensured its continued appeal among upwardly mobile middle class parents
(Pritchett, 1995). Pointing to these comics’ successful global travels amidst the Indian
diaspora, Kasbekar (2006) writes that the Amar Chitra Katha series has educated “whole
generations of expatriate Indian children on mythology, folklore, history, and other aspects
of Indian culture” (p. 95). There are approximately 400 titles (including special volumes and
deluxe editions) in print today that boast of laminated cover pictures and full color, and
these comics are translated into thirty-eight languages including French, Spanish, Dutch,
and Japanese. With the advent of television in the nineties, sales of these comics have
leveled, but their canonic cultural status and the publisher’s massive distribution network
may ensure Amar Chitra Katha’s longevity in the years to come (Rao, 1996).

Although the publishers of Amar Chitra Katha have professed their noble intentions
of educating children, a few studies have shown that these comics’ representations of
religion and gender are neither inclusive nor egalitarian (Hawley, 1995; Pritchett, 1995;
Rao, 1996). Most recently, McLain (2001) argues that Amar Chitra Katha comics’ reliance on
hegemonic “original” versions of epic tales upholds the patriarchal, racist, and casteist
ideologies of contemporary Hindu nationalism in India. Contributing to this strain of
critical scholarship, we are concerned in this article primarily with Amar Chitra Katha
comics’ ideological constructions of gender, class, and caste hierarchies, particularly the
ways in which light and dark skin color become symbolic vehicles to articulate a series of
oppositional concepts—virtue/vice, valor/cowardice, nobility/bestiality, beauty/ugliness,
and success/failure. Hierarchical representations of light and dark skin color, we argue, are
not marginal to the wholesome stories of love, valor, and nobility that these comics
narrate. In fact, Amar Chitra Katha’s standardized practice of using shades of pink and
brown to represent specific categories of characters and figures across its vast archive
ensures that Indian children are exposed consistently to the disturbing subtext of
“colorism” that pervades these comics’ pictorial domain.

Black scholars in the United States have been pioneers in exploring colorism’s varied
manifestations in the social and economic structures of the Black community. Among
others, Banks, a legal scholar, defines “colorism” as an insidious form of discrimination
based on skin color that affects dark-skinned Black men and women’s lives both inside and
outside the Black community (2000). Hill (2002) traces the origins of colorism to the
historical division of slave labor; light-skinned Black slaves were recruited to work as
domestic servants in the private sphere of the White master’s home while dark-skinned
Blacks were assigned to work outdoors on plantations. Sociologists have drawn our
attention to the ways in which the social capital of skin color has eased light-skinned Black men and women’s access to social and economic mobility, thus exacerbating inequalities within communities of color (Celious & Oyserman, 2001; Hall, 1995; Hall, Russell, & Wilson, 1992; Hill, 2000). Colorism, much like the standards of weight in modern beauty norms, is a gendered phenomenon that has affected Black women to a greater degree than Black men (Falconer & Neville, 2000). Hunter’s analysis of national survey data shows that light-skinned Black women had higher education, earned higher incomes, and married men of higher economic status (2002). Thompson and Keith (2001) write that Black women experience a “quadruple” oppression due to their multiple marginalities along the axes of gender, class, race, and skin color. Finally, Keenan’s (1996) analysis of popular magazines—Fortune, Black Enterprise, Glamour, and Essence—reveals that Black female models in advertisements were much lighter in skin tone than Black male models.

This article’s examination of Amar Chitra Katha comic books for children extends the insights of research on colorism in the Black community in the United States to the geographic setting of South Asia where scholars have yet to chart the historical and social dimensions of skin color discrimination. Which protagonists—light- or dark-skinned—in these simplified tales for children earn the prestige of being displayed on the cover pages? When children turn the pages of these books, how long does it take young readers to encounter a dark-skinned character? What subjective positions—with implications for power and agency—do dark-skinned male and female characters occupy within the narrative structure of these stories? How are light- and dark-skinned male and female characters embedded within the socioeconomic ladder of the caste system? Our analysis of these comics’ representations of light- and dark-skinned characters and figures emerges out of our concern for the potential ways in which such a well-regarded genre of popular literature may socialize middle class children in India and abroad into accepting colorism’s propositions on the superiority of light skin.

While Black scholars in the United States trace colorism’s internalized racism to the history of slavery, there is little work that can explain affirmatively the historical origins of skin color discrimination in India (Hall, 2003). In the absence of research that conclusively locates colorism in India within the histories of British colonialism, the Aryan conquest of the subcontinent, or the evolution of the caste system, we can only speculate here that social distinctions of skin color may be related to interwoven beliefs about light skin’s signification of superior racial, regional, and upper caste/class identities. There is very little sociological research on colorism in South Asia in comparison to the United States; however, empirical studies of the Indian diaspora in North America have pointed to the tightly knit relations between light skin color and norms of feminine beauty. Three different studies of Indian immigrants in the United States and Canada show that dark-skinned women report strong feelings of discrimination, and a majority of these women associate light skin with attractiveness and increased opportunities in the heterosexual romance and marriage market (Grewal, 2008; Rahman, 2002; Sahay & Piran, 1997).

Amar Chitra Katha’s representations of gender and colorism circulate within a larger social context of everyday media culture in India that consistently marginalizes dark-skinned Indians, especially dark-skinned women. Matrimonial classified advertisements in Indian newspapers specify routinely that prospective grooms prefer women with “fair” or “wheatish” complexions. A majority of the Indian female actors in Bollywood are light-skinned women, and the few dark-skinned women actors who have overcome the restrictive norms of skin color wear thick make-up to conceal their dark facial skin.
Interweaving colorism into a seamless package of physical attributes, the faces of Indian models in advertisements are almost universally light-skinned with smooth complexions, shining black hair, and slim bodies. The most lucrative products in the Indian cosmetics sector since 1998, a decade after India’s initial incorporation into the global economy, are chemical and herbal products that promise to reduce darkness and preserve light skin by preventing further tanning. The currency of colorism in *Amar Chitra Katha* comics thus carries a highly inflated value in the commercial and symbolic economies of the marriage, film, advertising, and cosmetics industries in India.

**Textual Analysis: Studying Colorism in *Amar Chitra Katha***

There are approximately 225 regular single issue *Amar Chitra Katha* titles in circulation today; however, the publisher, India Book House, does not carry a stock of the entire collection of their comics including bound and deluxe titles at any point in time (India Book House [IBH], personal communication, June 21, 2004). We examined the cover-page illustrations of 195 comics; the cover pages with their full-length portraits of the central protagonists are displayed prominently in bookstores and in street vendors’ stalls. Interviews with six librarians and five teachers from four private schools in the city of Hyderabad and interviews with two sales managers at India Book House branches in Hyderabad and Chennai helped us identify the books that are most popular among middle class children in these two cities. After collating a list of forty titles that each teacher, librarian, and manager recommended, we coded and read closely a set of thirty comics that appeared on each individual’s list. The *Amar Chitra Katha* series offers comics in five major categories of stories: Mythology, Teachers and Saints, Ancient Indian History, Medieval Indian History, Folktales and Legends, with Mythology leading the other categories by a wide margin. The thirty comics we analyzed included books from each of these categories—fourteen in Mythology, five in Teachers and Saints, three in Ancient Indian History, three in Medieval Indian History, and five in Folktales and Legends.

The signature flavor of *Amar Chitra Katha* as a branded, mass-produced commodity is conveyed through its stylized drawings of humans and animals and a stock repertoire of English-language script. One of the most distinctive features of the *Amar Chitra Katha* series is its familiar use of bright and boldly contrasting colors, an artistic technique that is linked to older forms of visual art (painting and enamel work) and contemporary religious calendar and poster productions (Rao, 1996). Line drawings of human and nonhuman characters in these comics are filled with brilliant and formulaic hues of colors that stimulate the senses and evoke a blend of fantasy and realism. These comics’ stories of gods and goddesses, kings and queens, princes and princesses, and birds and animals, which are set amidst ancient cities, palaces, forests, clouds, mountains, and rivers, feature shades of light pink and dark brown for humanoid figures, dark blue for high-status male gods, bright yellow for gold jewelry, and green for trees and grass.

Accounting for children’s casual browsing experiences in bookstores, we began our analysis with a simple evaluation of the covers of the 195 *Amar Chitra Katha* comics we had access to at IBH’s retail outlet in Hyderabad. We also computed the percentages of dark- and light-skinned characters and figures featured in the sample of thirty comics. We then adopted an integrative semiotic and feminist approach based in the methodological insights of Berger (2004), Goffman (1979), Jhally (1990), and McKee (2003) to explore the nuances and complexities of these comic illustrations’ visual representations. Within what
settings are different kinds of characters shown? What range of actions do dark- or light-skinned male and female characters perform? How does skin color get attached to particular kinds of male and female bodies (weight, height, size, etc.)? What social roles and occupational identities are light- or dark-skinned characters assigned? We read all thirty comics from cover to cover, coded for differences between light/pink-skinned and brown characters, and examined the meanings of pink and brown characters’ roles and actions. Like hundreds of their peers, both authors of this article grew up reading Amar Chitra Katha comics as children; our familiarity with Hindu myths and fables and our childhood immersion in the visual codes of these comics was helpful in decoding the semiotics of skin color.

**Gender and Representations of Colorism in *Amar Chitra Katha***

Our evaluation of these comic books’ covers reveals the preferential treatment accorded to light-skinned men and women, who are often cast as the chief protagonists of these stories. We found that 160 out of 195 (82%) covers of *Amar Chitra Katha* comics feature a light-skinned individual (with the exception of blue-skinned gods). Communicating their high status and narrative importance in mythological comics, the human-like figures painted in light pink on cover portraits tower over landscape and architectural features in the background. Of the thirty comic books we analyzed closely, which included a total of 960 pages, the dark brown human and animal characters (excluding male gods painted in blue) occupy only 36% (345 pages) of the total number of pages. Across the spectrum of thirty comics, the comic book titled *Soordas: The Blind Bard who sang about Lord Krishna* occupies one extreme position in the symbolic annihilation of dark skin: a reader turning the pages of this comic book would not see a single dark-skinned character. Additionally, the semiotics of light skin in *Soordas* is tethered to North Indian ethnicity, upper caste identity, intellectual and magical powers, musical genius, and royal status. *Soordas* narrates the story of a famous fifteenth century composer of devotional songs in the Brij language, and the book locates the story of Soordas in the geographic region of North India. Readers learn about the blind and poor, but highly intelligent and enterprising upper-caste Brahmin (highest caste) boy Soordas, who runs away from home because his parents neglect him. On his travels through the countryside, the bright-eyed, cheerful, and light-skinned Soordas captivates aristocrats, scholars, and ordinary citizens with his musical skills and magical powers of tracing missing children and precious objects. During the course of his life, Soordas earns the patronage of the powerful Mughal emperor, Akbar, a canonical statesman in Indian history; in all the drawings of Akbar, the light-skinned king is shown entertaining visitors at his sumptuous palace. The complete absence of dark-skinned characters in this comic reinforces the stereotype of North India as a region that is populated by light-skinned men and women, although the reality is much more complex and diverse.

At the other end of the spectrum, in direct contrast to *Soordas*, illustrations in the comic book *The Churning of the Ocean* feature the highest number of dark-skinned figures—50% of this book (sixteen pages) contains dark-skinned figures; however, none of these pages had any dark-skinned female characters. This comic narrates the story of the Devas’ (residents of the heavenly skies) shrewd ploys to secure the divine nectar of immortality buried deep in the ocean. Although the Devas seek out the help of their earthly “enemies,” the dark-skinned Asuras, to churn the ocean and thus force the urn of...
nectar to emerge, the illustrations segregate light and dark-skinned men into two mutually exclusive teams. Bunched into opposing clusters, the two groups of men stand at a distance from one another as they pull a long snake wrapped around a mountain to churn the ocean. This comic’s segregation of light- and dark-skinned figures into two different groups, with very few interactions between the groups, conveys the idea that skin color, a biological attribute, can also be a divisive social force.

As an example of one extreme end of a continuum, the comic book *The Churning of the Ocean* features virtually no dark-skinned women; nevertheless, dark-skinned female figures are marginalized across the entire sample of thirty comics we studied. Among the pages of those comics that do contain dark-skinned male and female characters (including the pages that identify animal characters as male or female), female characters painted in dark brown occupy only 15% of the total pages (sixty pages). Furthermore, the first encounter a reader is likely to have with any figures painted in brown as they turn the pages of these comics is with a male rather than a female character (90% of the pages). On evaluating separately female and male human characters’ appearances on these pages, we discovered another significant difference based in gender. Dark-skinned women represent only 15% of the entire sample of all women (with 85% of women being pink- or light-skinned), whereas dark-skinned men represent 35% of the entire sample of male characters. The symbolic meaning of dark skin’s visibility in these comics—the very privilege of gaining physical embodiment—is thus related to masculinity and femininity in different ways; dark women suffer more than twice the invisibility of dark men in these comics. Shifting our attention to the involved reader, a child who reads *Amar Chitra Katha* comics closely, we now consider colorism in relation to these comics’ representations of masculinity and femininity.

**Light/Dark, Divine/Demonic, and Desirable/Deviant Masculinities**

Our analysis of colorism and masculinity reveals that mythological tales deploy an array of binary oppositions to represent the physical and emotional subjectivities of light- and dark-skinned male figures. Drawing on the dualistic contrast of divine versus demonic qualities, light-skinned men are predominantly identified as Devas, human-like male figures, who live in the pristine and heavenly skies. “Devas” are the followers of the immortal king of the heavens, Lord Indra, described in the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book *Indra and Shibi* as the invincible “wielder of the thunderbolt.” The divine qualities of light-skinned Hindu masculinity in mythological comics are linked consistently to the idealized aesthetic norms of Caucasian masculinity and the positive emotional states of happiness and contentment. The Deva men in *Indra and Shibi* including the king, Lord Indra, are not only universally light-skinned, but they are also youthful, tall, slim, and muscular. The Devas’ desirable and handsome upper class manliness approximates the middle ground between the two extreme poles of emasculated/weak and hypermasculine/aggressive masculinities. These men’s clear and wide-open eyes, clean-shaven and animated faces, sharp noses, sparkling white teeth, dark curly hair beneath gold crowns, and their bodies adorned with bright gold jewelry signal their honesty, purity, cleanliness, good health, and prosperity. Illustrations that show the gentle and smiling faces of the Devas against the backdrop of sunny blue skies and green landscapes anchor light-skinned masculinity to the wholesome and innocent pleasures of pastoral life. Finally, many images represent the Devas as happy and normal subjects, men who are enthusiastic participants in the routine
social activities of family and community life. Surrounded by friends and relatives, Devas are shown eating meals, talking and laughing, organizing and attending religious rituals, and riding their horses for recreation.

Linking light-skinned masculinity to nobility and aristocratic authority, mythological tales feature a large number of light-skinned earthly kings, who sit in elaborate thrones placed on elevated platforms, as they issue commands to their ministers, soldiers, and citizens (among the twenty king characters, seventeen are fair or light-skinned). The first full-page illustration in the *Amar Chitra Katha* story of the famous king Nala and his wife Damayanti, a classic tale whose original Sanskrit text has been translated into Latin and English, portrays a light-skinned, muscular, and tall man—King Nala of Nishada—seated on a stage in an imposing golden throne. Signifying their subordinate subjectivities, two young women holding peacock feather fans stand deferentially behind King Nala. The caption to this picture reinforces King Nala’s royal status and his reputation as a benevolent ruler: “Thousands of years ago, King Nala ruled over the kingdom of Nishada. He was generous and noble and was loved by his subjects.” Similarly, the comic books *Malavika, Indra and Shibi*, and *Ramyana* contain images of fair-skinned noble kings who rule over vast territories, and readers are informed that these kings’ generosity has earned them the adoration of their citizens. The only markers of “earthliness” that distinguishes these kings’ physical appearance from the heavenly Devas are their beards or trim mustaches, with beards drawn more often on Brahmin men, light-skinned upper caste sages who are described as possessing wisdom, magical skills, and the power of direct access to gods and goddesses.

In contrast to the light-skinned Devas and kings, *Amar Chitra Katha* comics identify dark-skinned men as “Asuras” and “Rakshasas,” humanoid creatures who live on earth, a surface covered with “brown dirt,” unlike the blue heavens where the Devas reside. Although a child could interpret the words “Devas” and “Asuras” as neutral labels for different ethnic/racial groups, the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic *Aniruddha* removes all possibility for such ambiguity; the comic explains that the term “Asura” means “enemies of the gods.” Furthermore, in the everyday vernacular parlance of some South Indian languages, the term “Rakshasa” signifies an angry, corrupt, and abusive male creature whose subjectivity excludes kindness, decency, or morality. Evoking the familiar good/evil narrative binary that structures fairy tales from many parts of the world, several comic books portray the Asuras and Rakshasas as hateful villains, who have to be destroyed or captured in order to retrieve stolen precious objects, save innocent persons, or restore power to dutiful citizens. Although most *Amar Chitra Katha* illustrations represent the Devas as peaceful and serene, the very first visual image of an Asura or a Rakshasa that a child is likely to encounter in these comics is designed to arouse anxiety, disgust, and fear. Some of these first illustrations also cast dark-skinned Asuras and Rakshasas as dangerous creatures, who are the primary instigators of violence and conflict. For example, in the comic *The Churning of the Ocean*, a scattered group of light-skinned Devas rest in the woods after a tiring day of travel, but a few menacing dark-skinned Asuras leap out suddenly from behind the bushes to disrupt the quiet harmony of this scene. The caption to this illustration explains that the Asuras provoked the Devas by “taunting them” and the next illustration displays a close-up portrait of an Asura’s angry face and torso with his raised hand brandishing a huge sword.

A similar scene unfolds in the comic *Ramayana*, which narrates the epic story of King Rama, a god and an idealized masculine figure, whose virtue, strength, and generosity are
celebrated in religious literature. While prince Rama and his brother Lakshmana, handsome men painted in light pink, stand guard with their bows and arrows over a holy ritual in a wooded setting, five violent, dark-skinned Rakshasa men interrupt the holy proceedings. Three codes of representation, which are typical of many other illustrations, work together to convey the dark-skinned Rakshasas’ primordial appetite for violence in this scene: these men wield a variety of prehistoric weapons; their scowling faces, bushy eyebrows, narrow eyes, and bared mouths project anger and vicious hostility; and their aggressive words and movements suggest that they are always ready for battle rather than peaceful negotiations. The next set of illustrations showcase Rama’s bravery and his skills in archery. They depict the heroic prince quickly killing these dark, demonic men as the force of his arrows fling the chief Rakshasa, much like an inanimate object, into the depths of the ocean. Rakshasas’ verbal speech patterns further encase dark-skinned masculinity within the semiotics of violence: these men utter the words “kill,” “attack,” “pierce,” and “devour” more frequently than any other characters. Stripped of individuality and denied narrative roles (parent, friend, or child) that have the potential to invite children’s empathy, dark-skinned Asuras and Rakshasas are often described as anonymous members of collective “hordes” and “masses,” and illustrations rarely show these men conversing or interacting peacefully with family and friends.

Amar Chitra Katha’s illustrations of Asuras and Rakshasas encourage young readers to view these men as not only threatening and violent, but also as repulsive, subservient, and subhuman creatures. Unlike the slim and muscular light-skinned Devas, the Rakshasas, painted in dark shades of brown, are depicted as large men with wide torsos and bulging muscles that signify their brute strength and lack of desirable sexuality. Many of the subordinate Rakshasas, rarely identified with specific names, are scattered randomly across the landscape as they wait for directions from leaders, and their vacant eyes signify their inferior mental capacities. Ironically, even positive illustrations of dark-skinned creatures’ leaders reinforce light skin’s superiority. In the case of the brown Vanaras, the half-human and half-monkey tribes, the chief commander, Hanuman, resembles his subordinates in every way except that he is light-skinned and Ravana, the king of the Rakshasas in Sri Lanka, is also painted in light pink even though he belongs to the same ethnic community as his dark-skinned subordinates. In contrast to the predominantly clean-shaven Devas, Rakshasas and Asuras sport long and curly mustaches, they have large hooked noses, and in an infantilized mode of representation, subordinate men display their potbellies with a complete lack of self-consciousness. Other representations of Asuras’ coarse bodies, such as illustrations of their dense chest hair and hairy arms, construct these earthly, dark-skinned male figures as starkly different from their refined, light-skinned heavenly counterparts.

Amar Chitra Katha’s demonic illustrations of dark-skinned masculinity also evoke the racialized semiotic codes of historic popular culture representations of Black men in the United States. In the comic book Hanuman, Ravana, the villainous ten-headed Rakshasa emperor of Sri Lanka, has just wounded the noble King Rama’s younger brother Lakshmana. Filled with sorrow over his brother’s imminent death, Rama dispatches his trusted commander, the half-monkey and half-human god Hanuman to search for special medicinal herbs that grow on a distant mountain. Unfortunately, Ravana, the Rakshasa emperor, spots Hanuman flying through the wind in search of the special herbs. Ravana then summons his subordinate Kalanemi and commands him to kill Hanuman, thus aborting Rama’s mission to save his brother. The word “Kala,” which forms the first half of
Kalanemi’s name references the color “black” in Hindi, the national language, which is spoken widely in parts of North India. Drawings of Kalanemi’s face align him symbolically with the world of grotesque subhuman creatures. He has a large hooked nose, thick eyebrows, and his dilated pupils and bulging lips painted in deep pink align his image with the “Sambo” stereotype of Black men in early twentieth century children’s comics and television programs in the United States. Solidifying Kalanemi’s resemblance to the “Sambo” stereotype, the story represents him as a comical coward, who carries out his master’s commands obediently.

Finally, illustrations of warfare in mythological comics represent dark-skinned men as worthless and easily disposable objects. Clever and strong light-skinned gods and humans destroy the less intelligent Rakhasas instantly, and young readers are rarely given the opportunity to witness family members or friends mourning these men’s deaths. Towards the end of the comic Hanuman, after the light-skinned monkey god Hanuman locates the medicinal herbs on a mountain, he decides to carry the entire mountain back to Rama to save time. In the midst of Hanuman’s successful return flight towards Rama, a group of seven Rakhasas—with lion faces and human bodies—painted in dark brown, unexpectedly swoop down on him. Mustering the power of his divine strength, the confident monkey god wraps his long tail around the seven brown-skinned Rakhasas to hurl them towards the ground; his victims’ bodies hit the surface with a thud and they die instantly.

Colors of Caste, Class, and Masculinity

In the animated social world of Amar Chitra Katha, dark-skinned men and women, without any exceptions, are assigned lower positions in the socioeconomic hierarchy of caste and class. Across our sample of thirty comics including Indra and Shibi, Valmiki, Balarama, Ramayana, Soordas, and Urvashi, clever and light-skinned Brahmin men play the roles of saints, scholars, sages, and kings’ appointed advisers. In the hegemonic interpretation of the caste system, Brahmin men were assigned the occupational tasks of religious and intellectual work: learning, teaching, praying, performing rituals, writing, and counseling rulers. For example, in the comic book Devi Choudhrani, Bhavani Pathak, the light-skinned Brahmin man who has achieved complete control of his body and mind, is a capable and wise leader of many disciples. The book narrates the story of Prafulla, a Brahmin woman, who suffers the adversity of forced separation from her husband, but manages to rejoin him at the end. During the difficult years of separation from her husband, Prafulla meets the light-skinned Bhavani Pathak, who acts as a catalyst for her transformation from a simple homemaker into a strong and independent woman. Pathak instructs Prafulla on the scriptures, teaches her wrestling, and ultimately crowns her as queen of his army of rebels.

Similarly, the comic book Raman of Tenali narrates stories of the clever, light-skinned Raman, a Brahmin man who uses his sharp wit to become a court jester in a legendary king’s palace. Continuing the practice of conjoining light skin to upper caste status, powerful and wealthy men from the Zamindar community, a feudal and land-owning upper caste, are colored in pink in the comic books Anand Math and Devi Choudhrani. In Ramayana and Mahbharata, the princes and kings of the Kshatriya community, aristocrats and “natural” warriors, are all light-skinned with the exception of the god Krishna, whose body is painted in blue. Finally, as a consequence of Amar Chitra Katha comics’ consistent
linking of skin color to caste and class, light-skinned men earn the prestige of being community leaders. As commanders, chiefs, ministers, counselors, and rich property owners, these men exhibit their agency as autonomous subjects, who have the power to direct others’ lives, and thus to shape the nation’s history.

Just as mythological comics represent dark-skinned demons as savage subhumans, historical comic books equate dark-skinned masculinity with low caste and low class status. Short and thin dark-skinned men perform menial tasks (sweepers, workers, and shepherds) and follow orders subserviently, and they rarely symbolize the qualities of intelligence, honor, strength, generosity, and bravery. One scene in a comic book shows a tall, fair-skinned man, a supervisor and manager, standing over a large group of dark-skinned male employees seated on the floor of an artillery factory as they build cannons. In the story of *Ananda Math*, which celebrates the victory of the light-skinned Santaans, a band of brave Indian men who defeat British imperialists in a historic battle, the opening scene shows weak and dark-skinned peasants fallen to the ground with their hands folded in a gesture of defeat as a British officer looks down at them from an elevated chair. Other *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books’ pictorial repertoire of dark-skinned males shows these men as lazy cowherds; simple and rustic village men; deceptive strangers who transform into demonic Asuras; stupid peasant boys who lack intelligence; and subordinate guards and soldiers who serve as minor props in the story.

Unlike the civilized light-skinned kings and Brahmin men, who know how to protect and cherish women, dark-skinned men treat women in a rough and crude manner. In the same story of *Ananda Math*, illustrations show a group of eight dark-skinned robbers—emaciated, short, and unshaven with hooked noses—in the forest trying to capture a beautiful, light-skinned woman, who screams in terror as she runs from them. In the book *Devi Choudhrani*, a band of dark-skinned male thieves break into a woman’s home when she is sleeping at night and then kidnap her. Even in a story that tries to teach children a lesson about not discriminating against low caste Indians, the representation of Chandalas, men from the untouchable community, only reinforces their marginality as social outcasts. *Amar Chitra Katha* comic illustrations of Chandala men portray them as large and very dark-skinned men with facial hair and big noses. Uttanka, the Chandala man in the short story *Indra, Krishna, and Uttanka*, is painted in a much darker shade of brown than the other dark-skinned figures in the comic. He is bulky and tall and his dull eyes and lopsided smile suggest mental abnormalities. He wields a huge sword, wears a necklace of skulls, and carries a begging bowl as a number of emaciated dogs circle his feet.

**Light/Dark, Beautiful/Ugly, and Desirable/Repulsive Colors of Femininity**

*Amar Chitra Katha*’s mythological and historical comic series rarely show women, regardless of skin color, as independent or assertive leaders. On comic covers that feature both men and women, women are coded clearly as subordinate to men. For example, the comic *Ramayana* features the principal character of Sita, wife of Lord Rama and a widely admired model of virtuous Hindu femininity, on its colorful cover portrait. A light-skinned Sita stands one step behind and below her tall husband painted in blue. She wears white flowers in her hair and around her neck, and her expression conveys serenity and happiness even though she is assigned a lower symbolic position. Many illustrations of women in these comics conform to Goffman’s description of the “Ritualization of Subordination,” a representational practice that captures the ways in which women’s
physical poses in images can signal their lower status (Goffman, 1979, p. 40). In *Amar Chitra Katha* comics, women stand on a lower level than men, women sit in chairs while men stand over them, women look up at men, and men encircle women with their arms, thus signaling their right to protect their wives, mothers, and sisters.

Illustrations embed women painted in pink in fulfilling social networks of family and friends. Light-skinned, aristocratic young women lounge outdoors in pairs and in small groups against the backdrop of blue skies, mountains, and rivers; they enjoy the companionship of other men and women in lush indoor gardens and courtyards of palaces; they play musical instruments, paint, and read; and finally, they tend to their husbands, children, and extended families. Light-skinned female protagonists have close women friends, who support and nurture each other, and these friends do not hesitate to rescue them from danger. *Amar Chitra Katha* stories portray light-skinned women as loyal and loving wives: Damayanti in the comic *Nala and Damyanti* and Sita in the comic *Ramayana* endure great hardship to stand by their husbands during difficult times. Although the light-skinned women in *Amar Chitra Katha*’s mythological comics are shown more often as traditionally feminine—demure and pretty—rather than independent and strong, they are nevertheless invested with the positive qualities of contentment, intelligence, compassion, loyalty, and capacity for love.

On comparing light and dark-skinned female figures, light-skinned women, much like their male counterparts, have a higher status in the class and caste hierarchy, and comic book narratives construct these women’s beauty as dazzling and overpowering. Captions explain that light-skinned women are divine goddesses and apsaras (heavenly dancers); queens and princesses; and pampered and cherished wives, daughters, and sisters of kings and princes. Pink-colored women in the comic books *Urvashi*, *Malavika*, *Ramayana*, *Bhagawat*, *Vinayaka*, and *Aniruddha* are youthful with curvaceous bodies, and these women have long, braided black hair, clear pale skin, large eyes, and smiling faces. These women are usually dressed in ornate gold jewelry, strapless bikini style tops, and flowing garments that reveal their midriffs. Young light-skinned women’s spectacular and unblemished beauty in the visual images of mythological and historical comics evokes a fantasy world of feminine perfection that caters to the male gaze. Reinforcing the visual codes of these illustrations, captions in these comics use the words “slim,” “fair,” “comely,” “beautiful,” “virtuous,” and “lovely” to describe light-skinned women. In the comic book *The Churning of the Ocean*, as the Devas and Asuras work together to force the urn of nectar submerged in the ocean to rise to the surface, a young, light-skinned woman emerges unexpectedly from the ocean—the caption notes that she is “graceful, beautiful, and effulgent” and that she has earned the gods’ and demons’ goodwill due to the power of her beauty.

Several comics represent light-skinned women’s beauty as a visual spectacle that has the power to command the male gaze. These women’s physical appearance inspires men to worship them, and sometimes, men’s dazed admiration for these light-skinned women becomes the driving force behind the story’s narrative. In the comic *The Churning of the Ocean*, the powerful god Vishnu decides to help the Devas distract the demons after they seize the special urn that holds the nectar of immortality. The god Vishnu transforms himself from a man into a light-skinned, slim, and beautiful woman—described in the book as Mohini, a “bewitching enchantress”—to entice the demons to forget about the nectar. Mohini is successful in distracting the Asuras from protecting the special urn. These gullible men, who become “intoxicated” with Mohini’s beauty, hand over the nectar of
immortality to her without any protest; the pictures show the Asuras looking stunned as they approach Mohini and beg her to distribute the nectar to her “humble and adoring slaves.” One full-page illustration in the opening scenes of the comic book *Urvashi* captures the handsome King Pururuvas’ expression of amazed appreciation for the beauty of the young, light-skinned celestial dancer Urvashi. Similar scenes in other comic books—*Malavika, Nala and Damayanti, Ramayana, Arjuna*, and *Mahabharata*—portray the instantaneous, visceral impact of light-skinned women’s beauty on the men they encounter. In these illustrations, kings, princes, and gods stand in the background with their wide eyes transfixed in admiration as they gaze upon these women.

Despite their overall marginalization, some dark-skinned Asura and Rakshasa men in *Amar Chitra Katha* comics manage to occupy narrative roles that showcase their humanity and leadership (as kings, commanders, warriors, and team members); however, the handful of dark-skinned women who register a feeble presence in *Amar Chitra Katha* comics do not win the same modest allowance for any mode of sympathetic representation. When dark-skinned women are featured in mythological comics, the illustrations represent them as even more repulsive than dark-skinned men. Unlike the light-skinned women aristocrats and heavenly dancers, dark-skinned women are shown as domestic servants, low status companions, ignorant and illiterate rural women, and evil/demonic hypermasculine figures. Among the thirty comics we analyzed, the *Ramyana* contains some of the most visually explicit illustrations of dark-skinned women. When prince Rama and his brother set out on their travels with sage Vishwamitra, they encounter Tataka, the fearful Rakshasi. These illustrations depict Tataka as a huge, menacing, and dark-skinned monstrous creature that roams in the forest and preys on innocent victims. Her protruding teeth with fangs, thick eyebrows, uncombed hair, large breasts, and vicious facial expressions code her as ugly, wild, and bestial, in effect, she embodies the repulsive and savage “other” of civilized, light-skinned women, who are coveted by both dark- and light-skinned men for their beauty. Snarling and making angry guttural sounds, Tataka approaches the light-skinned prince Rama with her arms upraised in a threatening manner, but the brave Rama manages to kill her easily.

The next set of illustrations in the *Ramayana* that contain images of a dark-skinned woman further reinforces the ideological links among light skin color, beauty, youth, and sexual desirability. One day, while Rama, his brother, Lakshmana, and his wife, Sita, carry on a conversation under a tree in the forest, outside their picturesque ashram (dwelling), a Rakshasi, whom the caption identifies as Shoorpanakha, spots Rama and fixes her eyes lustfully on his handsome body. Shoorpanakha, the Rakshasi, appears old and dark-skinned with a sagging body and wrinkled face, hands that resemble animal claws, bushy eyebrows, and hair that is painted in an unflattering shade of bright red. Whereas light-skinned women in the *Ramayana* are represented as modest and virtuous daughters, wives, and mothers, the dark-skinned Shoorpanakha is cast in the role of a strange and promiscuous woman, who cannot control her sexual appetite for men. Planning to seduce Rama, Shoorpanakha calls on her magical powers to disguise herself as a beautiful human female figure. She transforms herself from a dark-skinned, old, and bestial woman into a young, light-skinned woman with long dark hair, a slim body, graceful posture, and a welcoming smile. Unfortunately, Shoorpanakha’s plan to seduce Rama fails. Intervening in the midst of the seduction ruse, Lakshmana cuts off Shoorpanakha’s ears and nose to punish her—she turns into her original ugly, dark-skinned embodiment and runs screaming from the scene. These graphic illustrations of Shoorpanakha’s violent...
humiliation communicate two symbolic messages related to femininity and colorism: bestial, dark-skinned women become beautiful when they acquire light skin (along with other physical attributes) and dark-skinned women, who express inappropriate sexual desire for handsome, light-skinned men will earn severe punishment for their immoral transgressions. In McLain’s (2001) analysis of the Ramayana, she writes that Amar Chitra Katha comics avoid or soften extreme acts of violence perpetrated on good characters, but they represent explicitly the mutilation of grotesque women, who display unseemly sexual appetite, wander alone without male protection, and dare to “proposition strangers” (pp. 35–36).

**Conclusion: Gendering Colorism and Coloring Gender in Amar Chitra Katha**

The goal of this article’s critique of gender and colorism in Amar Chitra Katha comics was to document, describe, and interpret the less obvious tales these “educational comics” may narrate to Indian children about dark- and light-skinned male and female characters. Echoing the ways in which early twentieth century children’s comic books and Disney films in the West have sustained racism, our analysis shows that Amar Chitra Katha comics participate actively in the cultural production of colorism—skin-color based hierarchy—in India. Visual and linguistic representations in these comics conjoin light or fair skin color to representations of divinity, beauty, virtue, agency, fulfillment, and achievement. Narrative illustrations of masculinity and femininity in these comics code dark skin through the disturbing semiotic codes of primordial violence, deviance, stupidity, and bestiality. The scarcity of representations that foreground dark-skinned figures’ ordinariness, namely, their relative exclusion from the roles of friends, parents, siblings, and spouses implies that dark-skinned characters may interpellate Indian children only through alienating discourses of otherness. These comics’ perpetuation of skin color hierarchy in India intersects with varied global discourses of colorism that have marked the resilient boundaries of gender, ethnicity, class, and race in such locations as the Caribbean Islands and Puerto Rico (Cabezas, 2004; Mohammed, 2002; Quinones Rivera, 2006).

Endorsing the publisher’s claims, Amar Chitra Katha comics may teach Indian children lessons about morality, religion, and history; however, these colorful stories of gods, demons, kings, queens, and animals also distill the symbolic meanings of skin color’s relationship with hierarchies of caste, gender, and class for young readers. Negating the subversive potential of alternative accounts of folk and mythological stories in India, Amar Chitra Katha comics’ version of colorism contributes to the maintenance of a simplistic order of caste and class, the fourfold occupational system of varna (color), which places Brahmins (intellectuals and priests) first, Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors) second, Vaishyas (merchants and traders) third, and Shudras (servants) fourth. These comics’ conflation of light skin with power and upper caste status disavows the historical complexity of caste, labor, and occupational status on the ground and it promotes prejudice against lower caste and lower class Indians. Such symbolic representations of colorism in children’s media in postcolonial India legitimize the regulatory power of class and caste structures even as the Indian state has enacted policies to reduce caste inequality.

As outlined in the introduction, research in the United States has illuminated colorism’s intersections with patriarchy and internalized racism: Black women endure greater social penalty than Black men for the burden of dark skin. Amar Chitra Katha
comics have the potential to convey a similar message to Indian children about colorism’s differential policing of masculine and feminine subjectivities. Dark-skinned male characters in these comics are unlikely to invite children's empathy, but we argue that colorism inflicts greater damage on the social construction of femininity. Despite their trademark violence and less than desirable bodies, dark-skinned male figures earn some visibility, and they organize collectively, supervise armies, and mobilize their agency as leaders and warriors. The relative invisibility of dark-skinned women in these stories denies them the basic currency of public life and social existence. Dark-skinned women’s feeble bid for representation in these comic illustrations is juxtaposed with a narrow set of illustrations that portray them as monstrous, angry, devious, and immodest—illustrations thus code dark-skinned femininity as repulsive and hypermasculine. In the end, *Amar Chitra Katha* comics’ linking of light skin and feminine beauty plays into the patriarchal ideology of upper caste Hinduism, which constructs women as symbols of the purity of caste and as reproductive vehicles to enforce the caste system’s biological boundaries.

Indian children’s exposure to ideologies of colorism in postliberalized India is embedded within the contexts of skin-lightening cosmetics’ rising sales; the recent proliferation of global media images of Whiteness; and the rise in militant Hindu nationalism. As McLain (2001) notes in her recent work on *Amar Chitra Katha* comics, the retelling of Hindu mythology and Indian history in these stories mirrors the exclusionary impulses of right-wing Hinduism. Rajagopal’s (2001) work on Indian state television foregrounds the ways in which the sentimental and nostalgic ambience of mythological narratives can be mobilized to serve the political interests of India’s Hindu religious majority. Interviews and focus group research with Indian children would shed more light on the impact of *Amar Chitra Katha*’s representations of gender and colorism on its readership. Finally, interviews with illustrators, editors, and marketers would illuminate the commercial and creative imperatives of distribution, retailing, marketing, and artistic practices that guide the epidermal politics of gender and colorism in these comics.

**NOTES**

1. Drawing on the historical links between slavery and colorism in the United States, skin color prejudice in India may be related to British colonialism and its ideologies of White supremacy. A second explanation for the genealogy of colorism in India could take us back deeper into the ancient history of the settlement of the subcontinent. According to the myth of Aryan superiority, strong, light-skinned tribes from Central Asia (Eurasia) invaded India around 1500 BC and moved steadily from the northern region to the southern region. With the advantage of fire, horses, chariots, technological skills, and sophisticated military strategy, the powerful and more civilized Aryan race (also considered to be the progenitor of the Caucasian race) is believed to have conquered the Dravidians of South India, indigenous tribes of “primitive, dark-skinned, and phallus worshipping peoples” who were driven further south into the peninsula (Gordon, 1996, pp. 62–63). Finally, a third and closely related explanation for colorism in South Asia locates skin color prejudice within the rigid occupational hierarchy of Hinduism’s caste system, a prescriptive model for a large-scale division of labor that the Aryans introduced to India. However, it is important to note that sociologists and historians have disputed both the legitimacy of caste as a skin color-based system of
socioeconomic classification and the veracity of the Aryan theory of racial conquest (Mazumdar, 1989).

2. It was difficult to obtain the exact number of Amar Chitra Katha titles that have been published so far. Three different types of catalog listing the titles provided three different numbers for the total estimate of titles. We relied on the latest catalog from 2004. Our assessment of 225 for regular titles excludes special bound issues, forthcoming titles, laminated superior paper titles, and regional classics.

3. This comic book representation of a demon king as a light-skinned man suggests that colorism does not always relate seamlessly to dualistic constructions of good and evil. Ravana occupies an ambivalent subject position in Hindu mythology. In some South Indian versions of the Ramayana, Ravana is represented as an erudite scholar, a talented musician, a skilled warrior, and a pious devotee of Lord Shiva. Amar Chitra Katha’s assignation of a light skin tone to Ravana may reflect comic book producers’ acknowledgment of this demon king’s complicated cosmology in India.

4. One of the most popular gods in Hinduism’s pantheon, Krishna, is also painted in blue in the comic Aniruddha. We speculate, however, that the unique blue color of these gods’ bodies may serve the primary function of symbolizing their status as principal gods rather than signaling their proximity to dark-skinned characters.

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Radhika E. Parameswaran is an Associate Professor in the School of Journalism, Indiana University, Bloomington, USA. Her recent publications have appeared in *The Handbook of Critical Indigenous Methodologies, Communication, Culture, and Critique, Critical Studies in Media Communication, Popular Communication*, and *Communication Review*. Her research interests include South Asia, postcolonial media studies, feminist cultural studies, and qualitative methods. She thanks the editor for her support and anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments. E-mail: rparames@indiana.edu

Kavitha Cardoza is a senior reporter at WAMU Public Radio in Washington, DC, USA. Her research interests include South Asia, children and media, and health communication. Her 2002 publication in *Contemporary South Asia* examines parental controls over children’s television viewing in India.