



Chacha Chaudhary Comics: A Template of Middle-Class Nationalism

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Abstract

Like other contemporary comics, *Chacha Chauadhary* comics was created as a ‘respectable middle class pedagogic tool’ aiming at disseminating Indian cultural ethos through short and entertaining stories interlinked by the central character Chacha Chaudhary. In its indigenous narrative layout, the comic book is semiotically loaded with the middle-class worldview. Through its visual-verbal interface, the comic book narrativizes the intricate patterns of middle-class life as representative of national culture. The paper explores how the middle class is hegemonically articulated, and the comic book is implicated in the production of ideological categories of ‘nation’ and ‘national cultur.

Keywords: Comics, Middle class, Visual culture, Nationalism

Introduction

In a sanitized form, Indian comics aim at filling the vacuum created by the disappearing grandmother’s stories. Ritu Khanduri argues that in the production and consumption of Indian comics, ‘culture’ has been a resilient organizing principle (171). Scholars like Karline McLain (2009) and Pritchett (1995) have analyzed the role of Indian comics in shaping national politics in the post-Nehruvian period. McLain approaches Indian comics as a part of public culture, as “a crucial site for studying the ways in which dominant ideologies of religion and national identity are actively created by ongoing debate” (22). The appropriation of comics is seen by Chandra as “like an appropriate vehicle of smuggling in the explosive matter without making it evident that something controversial was being done” (42). While Anant Pai, creator of *Amar Chitra Katha*, was committed to familiarizing Indian children with their cultural roots through reinventing comics based on Indian mythology

and history, Pran Kumar Sharma in his *Chacha Chaudhary* comics exploited the standard comic format to articulate the aspirations of emerging middle-class. No wonder Pran Kumar Sharma was heralded as “Walt Disney of India” by Horns in the book *World Encyclopaedia of Comics* (1983).

Subversion of American Comic Superhero

The comic book *Chacha Chaudhary* first appeared as a strip in the Hindi magazine *Lot Pot* in 1969. In the year of 1981, Diamond Comics decided to launch *Chacha Chaudhary* as comic series. In order to create life-like characters entrenched in Indian ethos, Pran took inspiration from historical figures like Chanakya who is considered a great adviser to the Indian king Chandra Gupta Maurya. To counter “the muscular, good-looking Phantom, Superman, and Batman” of Western comics, Pran, “thought of an old man, short, not very good looking and a little frail too”. So, he chose to draw Chacha in the image of “Chanakya, and gave him the power of wit”. (Alok Sharma). It is equally interesting to note that Nehru too was valorized as ‘Chacha’. As the common noun ‘Chacha’ has a range of connotations in Indian context, it functions to elicit emotional affiliation between the hero and the masses binding them together into a whole. Invoking both the historical and mythical depiction of wisdom as a possession of an old man in Indian culture, the hegemonic role of the Western young hero is transferred to the old man and the generic costume and character are appropriated in the character of Sabu. In terms of appearance and physical power, it is Sabu who resembles the American superhero but in the comic book he is seen as subordinate to the wise old man Chacha Chaudhary. In the Indian culture, adulthood is linked with aggression, impulsive behavior, and lack of reasoning and old age is linked with wisdom and rational thinking. Consequently, the young aggressive and independent hero in the American superhero comics was highly doubted by the emerging cartoonists as inappropriate for Indian children.

In the comic book *Chacha Chaudhary*, the urban middle-class values are enacted and performed through interlinked stories to naturalize the urban middle class as a national

representative, legitimizing its claim to the national culture. In the 1970s, in the absence of televisual image, comics provided an effective alternative for the middle class to transform itself into a new class with new values and norms. Scholars have analyzed the historical connections between the extraordinary rise of Indian comics in the 1970s and the historical events of the same period (Chandra 2008; McLain 2009). The tagline of the comic book series, “Chacha Chaudhary’s mind works faster than a computer” reflects the changing perception of the middle class. It points out the self-awareness of the middle class, reflecting its changed approach to politics and the state, perceiving itself as a transformed social group that now could not be deceived by the state machinery. The eponymous hero Chacha Chaudhary provides the link that connects the middle-class culture with the national imagination through his adventures, projecting his story as a national allegory. In the comic book series not only are the middle-class values are naturalized as Indian but the agitations of the subaltern groups are also subverted by projecting the national interest as the duty to be privileged over self-interest.

R. K. Laxman’s ‘Common Man’ versus *Chacha Chaudhary*

A comparative analysis of R.K. Laxman’s ‘common man’ and *Chacha Chaudhary* can help us throw some light on the changing contours of the middle-class consciousness. R.K. Laxman’s ‘common man,’ who is defined as “no mere cartoon figure of fun, but everyman the soul of modern India,” remains a silent witness to all the historical events and the effects of government’s policy on the middle-class daily life (Laxman qtd. in Siegel 429). The cartoonist Laxman projects the middle class as passive citizens, suffering silently due to the inefficient state and corruption in politics and everyday life. In contrast to Laxman’s ‘common man,’ Chacha Chaudhary does not remain silent over the political scenario. Rather, he comments upon the situation, and takes an appropriate step to bring social and economic justice. Unlike Laxman’s ‘common man,’ he is not at the receiving end: he traces faults in the system, catches individual culprits, and solves the socio-economic problems.

While Laxman's 'common man' is seen as observing cynically the disintegration of the nation and the decline of ethics in politics, Chacha Chaudhary is committed to building a globalized nation and strives to cure the social evils that contaminate the Indian society. Laxman's 'common man' as a victim of the deceit of ideology, is "bespectacled" and has "a permanently bewildered look" (Laxman, *The Tunnel* 339). His silence over the political turmoil is a mockery of both the nationalist ideology and the middle-class aspirations.

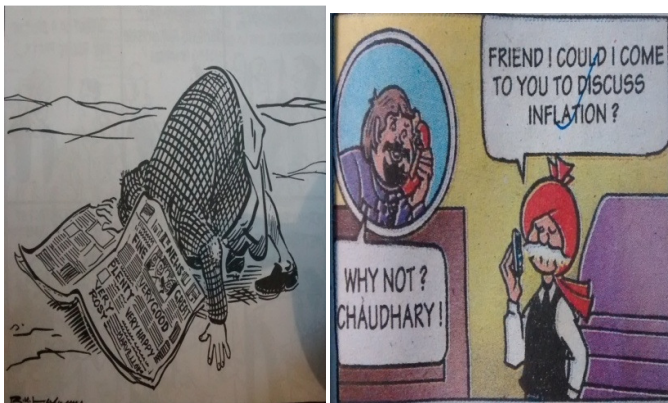
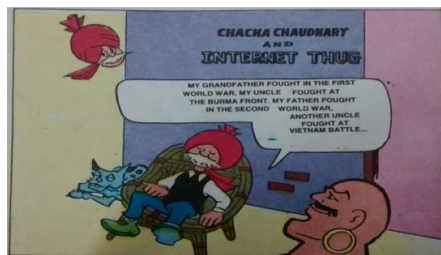


Figure 1. The icon of 'Common Man' by R. K. Laxman and Pran Kumar Sharma

His passiveness reflects the impotency of both the state and the middle class towards strengthening the process of nation-building. The voiceless existence of Laxman's 'common man' points out the hopelessness of the middle class and cynical rejection of the nationalist ideology. The suffering of being at the receiving end has been projected as a dark reality of the middle-class existence. But Pran's 'common man' Chacha Chaudhary manages to transcend the cynical outlook and asserts himself to bring required socio-political changes in the Indian society. The comic book *Chacha Chaudhary* marks the reassertion of the Indian middle class as the central agency of national transformation both economically and socially.



**Figure 2- The Middle Class as ‘Cultural Guardian’
‘Retirement News’ *Chacha Chaudhary* (Diamond Comics,
DE-253)**

In the story entitled as ‘Retirement News’ *Chacha Chaudhary* (Diamond Comics, DE-253), the middle-class leadership is projected as the maker of a powerful nation. Chacha Chaudhary announces his retirement from self-imposed job of solving both national and local social problems. As the news of his retirement spreads across the nation, the anti-nationalists hatch a conspiracy to mobilize all criminals to usurp the national wealth, online. The frightened citizens approach the middle-class hero and urge him not to leave the Indian society unprotected from criminals. At the end of the story, Chacha Chaudhary reveals that the news of his retirement was a trick to arrest all criminals. However, throughout the story, the national importance of the middle-class hero is buttressed, the middle class is projected as the ‘cultural guardian’ of the nation.

In another story entitled ‘Chacha Chaudhary and Tiranga’, *Chacha Chaudhary* (Diamond comics-1100), the nation is depicted as plagued by communal violence. The three characters, whose appearance signifies their communal identities, are depicted as suffering from communal doubts, leading to the provocation of communal violence. In the story, the state and majority both are seen as impartially working for the betterment of the Indian citizens irrespective of caste, class and religion. The communal violence is not viewed as politically motivated. Rather it is distrust between the communities that caused such riots. In the story, the nationalist discourse of ‘diversity in unity’ is articulated and the nation is projected as

innocent of such heinous crime which is seen as individual crime caused by distrust. The three characters, belonging to different communities, perceive their economic loss in business and damage of personal properties as acts of communal enmity. Provoked by their perception of their economic loss as communal acts, they transform their local street into a battlefield between different communities. Perceiving the nation in danger, the hero attempts to restore harmony in the society which he believes is disturbed by some criminal minded individual. The hero traces the criminal who has provoked the incident and reprimands the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh for distrusting each other and engendering the unity of the nation. The social political and cultural references in the discourse of nationalism work as ‘alibi’ to consolidate the dominant class view as national view. Although self-interest was central event to their political activities, yet they continued imagining themselves as nationalist, striving to consolidate the nation.



Figure 3. Restoring Communal Harmony, ‘Chacha Chaudhary and Tiranga’ *Chacha Chaudhary* (Diamond Comics–1100)

The middle-class’s fascination with patriotism and national heroes tends to coexist with its own self-interest and aspirations (Varma 1998, Brosius 2010 and Jaffrelot 2008). Through state machinery like police, the state is depicted as inefficient to cope with the anti-national activities and solve the middle-class social problems. The state is seen as taking help of the middleclass hero Chacha Chaudhary to solve national problems. Like a well-trained semiotician, he analyzes the signs and decodes them to expose the hidden truths.



Figure 4. The Indian state's inefficiency, 'Hunn the Great' *Chacha Chaudhary* (Diamond Comics, DE-832)

In the story entitled as 'Chacha Chaudhary and Scotland Yard' *Chacha Chaudhary* (Diamond Comics-739), the police is ridiculed as incapable of solving the social issue. The story begins with a robbery in a rich family which becomes viral through media. Due to widespread criticism of the state's failure to curb criminal activities, the state deploys several detective agencies including CBI, Scotland Yard to trace the criminal. The failure of these agencies to solve the mystery of robbery deepened the crisis, maligning the image of the state as 'protector and guardian' of its citizens. In the two stories entitled respectively as 'Fugitive' and 'Tear Gas' (Diamond Comics-1753), the police is caricatured as absent-minded easily deceived by the criminals. The disgraced police officers approach the eponymous hero to help them to regain their lost reputation. Symbolically the middle class is portrayed as a class in crisis due to the inefficiency of the state. The perception of the state as indifferent to the middle class is naturalized in the narrative. In several stories, the social issues are solved by the middle class itself through the timely assistance of Chacha Chaudhary and the state machinery is symbolically either absent or distrusted.

The Criminalized 'Other' as Scapegoat of Middle-Class Morality

The nation cannot be produced without the production of both "sameness" and "difference". The presence of the 'other' serves to orchestrate the 'threatening self' only to reinforce it. The 'other' of the nation is constructed through the discourse of criminality (Gooptu 2001). These urban archetypal criminals not

only function as integral elements of the structure of the narrative but also helps consolidate the cultural hegemony of the dominant class. Sugata Nandi has argued that the term ‘goonda’, a local criminal was ideologically constructed to protect the urban middle class and illegitimate the claims of the working class over the urban space. The local criminal functions as “an imaginary figure acting as receptacles of anxieties and insecurities of certain section/s of the society at particular historical conjectures” (37-54). There are three major archetypal criminals who embody the fears and anxieties of the urban middle class and serve to define and justify the hegemonic role of the middle class in representing the nation. The three criminals Dhamaka Singh, Gobarsingh and Raka are depicted as arch-enemies of the middle-class representative hero Chacha Chaudhary who strives to protect the urban Indian society from economic and social threats posed by these criminals. The character of Raka, the main arch-enemy of the middle-class hero Chacha Chaudhary, constitutes a major thematic element of the narrative, representing all dark forces including greed, lust, revenge, violence, ambition and power. In the story entitled ‘Chacha Chaudhary and Raka’s dictatorship’ *Chacha Chaudhary* (Diamond Comics-1259), his background is explained through his conversation with another decoit Ravan. Through visual description, it is made clear that Raka was born in a working-class family and was criminal-minded from childhood. In his childhood, he was put into jail because of his criminal activities. In the comic book, Raka represents the



violent assertion and craving for power of the working class.

Figure 5. The criminalized ‘other,’ ‘Chacha Chaudhary and

Raka’s Anger’ *Chacha Chaudhary* (Diamond Comics-1491)

In the story, he is projected as enemy of the nation. To destroy the capital of India, Delhi, he hijacks an airplane and plans to drop a bomb on the Indian parliament. Throwing a bomb on Parliament is symbolically an effort to destabilize the Indian nation. Chacha Chaudhary with the help of his assistant Sabu succeeds to subvert Raka's contrivance of blowing the Indian Parliament. In another story 'Chacha Chaudhary and Raka's Anger' (*Chacha Chaudhary* Diamond Comics-1491), Raka kidnaps the Prime Minister of an unknown country and attempts to take over the charge of the country. Although the name of the country is not mentioned but a careful decoding of the panels suggest that the Prime Minister of India has been kidnapped by Raka. Raka's ambition to gain political power by spreading terror is timely detected by the eponymous hero. Eventually Raka is prevented from destabilizing the nation and is forced to leave the city.

The other two arch-enemies of the hero, Gobar Singh and Dhamaka Singh are archetypal expression of the conflict between the state and proletarian groups during 1960s and 70s. The conflict between the ruling class and proletariat constituted the major theme of the movies produced in the post-Nehruvian period (Prasad 1998). The narrative and characters in the comic book echo the cinematic expression of the conflict between the ruling class and the marginalized group, restructuring the conflict as between the representative hero and dacoit. The character of Gobar Singh is strikingly inspired by the character of Gabar Singh from the Hindi Movie *Sholay* (1975). Prasad (1998) argues that the character of Gabar Singh embodies the conflict between the middle-class-oriented state and the political assertion of the marginalized class. The political assertion of the marginalized class manifests in the form of terrorizing the ruling class and extortion of payment from the rich people.



Figure 6. Gobar Singh and Dhamaka Singh, *Chacha Chaudhary* (Diamond Comics-1615)

In the comic book, both Gobar Singh and Dhamaka Singh are seen as dacoits extorting money from the rich business man, kidnapping their children and demanding ransom. Both the dacoits represent the middle-class anxiety and fear only to be expunged by the powerful intervention of the eponymous hero. In all stories that move around the conflict between the hero and the dacoit, eventually fear is displaced: The story begins with the description of the middle class' fear, spreading from one family to another, followed by the determination of the hero to solve the crisis and finally the disgraceful exit of the dacoit. In the story entitled as 'Gas Chamber' *Chacha Chaudhary* (Diamond Comics-689), the invocation of mass massacre in the concentration camp, executed at the order of the dictator Napoleon, is exploited to vilify Gobar Singh as inhuman, illegitimate to be citizen of the Indian state. Both *Chacha Chaudhary* and Sabu are cunningly locked in a chamber filled with poison gas in order to suffocate them.

In another story entitled 'Inside Outside' *Chacha Chaudhary* (Diamond Comics-1601), the title of the story itself notifies, Gobar Singh is projected as criminal minded, leading to his exclusion from the urban middle class society. In the story, the dacoit Dhamaka Singh sends a message to the film distributor Mani, demanding that entertainment tax must be paid to him. Through his demand of paying entertainment tax, Dhamaka is seen as challenging the state, refusing to be the object of power. Rather he claims to be the source of power and

Rather he uses the connotation of *bidi* as clue to catch the culprit. One panel depicts the scene of an urban city, introducing a proletarian politician campaigning on an elephant with his supporters and Chacha Chaudhary seems to scrutinize their movements and slogans.

In the next panel, through the conversation between Chacha Chaudhary and a local business man, it is revealed that the politician has filled his nomination papers for Lok Sabha elections and he is using his money to gain support, suggesting his criminal background. The hero's suspicion is confirmed when the politician is seen smoking the same brand of *bidi*. The character of the politician is further suggested in the dialogue between Chacha Chaudhary and him. The politician threatens Chacha Chaudhary for dire consequences if he tries to expose him. At his offensive behaviour, the hero thrashes him badly and hands him over to the police. What is important in the narrative is how the electoral system is perceived by the middle-class. Mazzarella pointed out the political perception of the Indian middle class about the rise of politicians from the rural culture: "A figure like Laloo or Mulayam embodies precisely those characteristics that are most strongly disavowed within a normative figure of middle-class respectability and probity." (16) After Independence the same peasantry came to be seen as the enemy of the nation. The Indian peasants have been portrayed as simple-minded, ignorant, volatile in temperament, superstitious and fanatical, and easily being used by the agitators against the state. Consequently, they are always "in need of being woken up to a new consciousness, being guided and led into effective political action by a nationalist organization" (159).

In the comic book, the poor are seen either as encroachers of the urban middle class space or as helpless objects of sympathy and protection. The poor are depicted mindless habitants of remote areas who are devoid of behavioral codes and aesthetic sense, easily deceived by unscrupulous individuals. In the story 'Mystery of Statue' *Chacha Chaudhary* (Diamond Comics-320), the working-class servant is seen as usurper who use criminal

activities to plunder and grab the properties and must be taken under surveillance. The middle-class and working-class are differentiated through their adherence to moral values. The widow sister of Chacha Chaudhary is depicted as a good human being, concerned with the plight of the poor people, symbolizing the *bhadralok's* behavioral codes. She trusts her servant Gabdu and treats him as a family member. On the contrary, instead of being thankful to her, the servant plans to usurp her property by forcing her to leave the house. The timely exposure of his evil designs by Chacha Chaudhary rescues the old woman.

Consumerism as New Found Virtue of the Middle-Class

Fernandes (2006) argues that the middle-class obsession of self-projection coincided with its claim to represent the public interests, which further resulted in a politics of distinction from both the state and marginalized social groups. This distinction is unfolded through new consumption practices and spatial politics in which the middle-class consumer space is projected as threatened by the marginalized groups and the state is depicted as an inefficient system. (Donner 2011) Consequently, the Nehruvian social space is replaced by the middle-class consumer space. To perpetuate itself as consumer class, the middle class has developed new discourse of urban aesthetics and theme parks that seek to remove all signs of poverty from public spaces (Fernandes 2006). The model of citizen, constructed by the austerities of Gandhian *swaraj* and Nehruvian socialism, is replaced by a new model of citizenship that embodies progress through pleasure (Mazzarrela 2003). The middle-class consumption is “about middle class production; it is in the practice of consumer regimens (from “doing fashion” to restaurant going to watching videos) that the middle class performs its cultural existence day by day” (Liechty 34).

In the nationalist discourse, the rural culture was romanticized as a true reflection of the Indian culture, situating the human relationships as central to the social existence. On the contrary to it, the urban culture was demonized as a reflection of the material world in which personal interests preferred over the human values. As the nation is transformed from the Nehruvian

developmentalist state to a consumerist India, the subsequent socio-economic changes are reflected in the world of the comic book series. The characters in the comic book keep pace with the changing the socio-economic transformations. In the comic book *Chacha Chaudhary*, dress codes have been aptly exploited not only to reflect the changing times but also draw class boundaries. The urban middle-class is clearly distinguished from other classes through deploying class-based dress codes. In the initial issues, Chacha Chaudhary is seen in a traditional Indian dress, *kurta*, *dhoti* and turban, representing the essence of the Indian culture or what Aurobindo Ghose termed ‘fine texture’ of traditional India (qtd. in Joshi 2010). In the later issues, he is portrayed as well-dressed gentleman, wearing Western clothes, embodying the urban middle class values. His traditional dress *kurta* and *dhoti* are replaced by the Western dress-shirt and trouser. His vest and tie further reinforce his identity as an urban middle class individual. However, his ‘Indian’ identity is retained symbolically through his turban and stick. The turban is an important identity marker in the Indian society. The turban is an important identity marker in the Indian society. In the Indian society, turban signifies *ijjat* (respect), it is a symbol of status.



Figure 8. The Sartorial Transformation of Chacha Chaudhary's Appearance

In fact, there are several stories in the comic book in which possessing and not possessing turban constitutes conflict of the narrative. Through dress codes, the class boundaries are also constructed, distinguishing the urban middle-class from the other rural masses. The rural people are depicted as religious,

ignorant and stupidly innocent, who are easily deceived by the criminals, and are unable to solve their problems. On the contrary, the urban middle-class people are seen as modern, intelligent and international in outlook, economically independent, indulging in the pleasures of commodities. While the rural people are portrayed as wearing *kurta*, *dhoti* and traditional turban, marking their rural identity, the urban middle-class characters appear as well clothed in the colorful Western costumes, suggesting their urban identity.



Figure 9. The Middle-class Consumer Space, ‘Raka on Rampage’ Chacha Chaudhary (Diamond Comics-883)

In the comic book, the street is seen as space of contestation over identity. It is the street culture where contestation over urban identity is waged and claims over urban space are contested and legitimized through narrative logic. The story begins right in the middle of the street life: shopkeepers and customers are engaged in bargaining, employees heading towards their offices; friends meet by chance and are engaged in a conversation. Through depiction of the patterns of urban middle-class routine, the its claim over the urban space is naturalized as inescapably middle-class space. Having established the urban space as middle-classspace, then the middle-class space is projected as a threatened-space, and the threat to this space is posed by the outsiders who hail from ‘nowhere’ and are determined to usurp the space. The criminal minded characters envy the prosperity and harmony of the middle-class life and attempt to seize the city by force. The subordinate groups’ claim to the urban space is projected as encroachment of the middle-class space. Their forms of protest

are seen as criminal activities and are, therefore, required to be suppressed for national security.

Conclusion

While reading the comic book, the reader enters into a semiotic domain in which all signifiers refer to the urban middle class for their semantic consumption, offering the middle-class culture as cultural prism of coding/decoding what is 'national culture.' As a potent visual medium of communication, the comic book, through its verbal-visual modalities, effectively presents the middle-class as the 'cultural guardian' of national culture, reshaping the national imaginary of the Indian state. *Chacha Chaudhary* comics consolidate a national imaginary and script a non-official but more persuasive and penetrative cultural cartography of India as a nation that is informed largely by the values and aspirations of its middle-class.

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