Sculpting a Middle Class
Sculpting a Middle Class

History, Masculinity and the
Amar Chitra Katha in India

Deepa Sreenivas
Contents

List of Photographs vii

Introduction 1

1. Comics, Scrolls, Frescos and the ‘Chitra Katha’ 43

2. History, Personality and a Pedagogy for the Present 82

3. Disciplinary Nationalism and Masculinity 111

4. The Liberalisation Years: The Theme of Merit 162

Conclusion 184

Bibliography 194

Index 204
For My Parents
List of Photographs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Krishna on Kaliya</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Khilji Hunting</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Vishnu and Hayagriva</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>Dayananada: Cover image</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Babasaheb Ambedkar: Cover image</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>Subhas Chandra Boase: Cover image</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>Dayananda’s gaze</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>A muscular Rana</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>Padmini: The ambivalent sign</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>Urvashi with companions</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>Padmini: Ideal Indian womanhood</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>Khilji’s women</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>The guru</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Chanakya chooses Chandragupta</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Chandragupta: The Masculine ideal</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>The king, the guru, the deity</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>The modern guru</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Har Har Mahadeo!</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>Ya Allah!</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>Khilji’s bafflement</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>From Karna to Kalpana</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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When I look back on the process of writing this book, I am struck by the many surprising turns it has taken. Starting out with what I thought was the fairly straightforward task of analysing a set of picture storybooks that I grew up with, I found myself making unexpected connections with the larger and complex worlds that were implicated in the making of these books, and my own cultural self. I could no longer look at the politics and history of these books as an observer; there was a simultaneous uncovering of my deepest beliefs, taken-for-granted responses and ethical perceptions.

It has taken some time to bring this book to completion, and I have been lucky to have friends who have sustained this work with their help, encouragement and critical inputs. I cannot adequately express how profoundly this work has been enriched by the friendship and intellectual presence of Susie Tharu, who supervised my doctoral project. She pushed me to think about what it meant to do Cultural Studies in India and to allow the critique of a text to play out against one’s cultural practice and location. She also helped me to shed my reluctance to address the question of the visual, which I was convinced was rightfully the domain of those who ‘knew’ art. I began to look at billboards, film posters, and murals on city walls, with a new interest — as embroiled in the life bustling around me!

My thanks to Madhava Prasad for his exhaustive comments on my chapters, adding fresh depths to the Post-Nehruvian cultural moment that I was grappling with, and also to my friend R. Srivatsan, for having done some truly insightful work on visual culture, and letting me share that excitement and verve.

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I thank Anveshi Research Centre for Women’s studies for providing me with a stimulating intellectual atmosphere and for granting me leave during the final frantic months of wrapping up this book.
Sculpting a Middle Class

I would not have grasped the criticality and energy of Amar Chitra Katha (ACK) as a cultural phenomenon if Anant Pai had not graciously spared time to talk to me at length. During those free-wheeling interviews, I began to perceive small but significant connections between the cross-currents of contemporary politics and the histories that ACK aimed to teach us.

I thank Amar Chitra Katha Pvt. Ltd. for permission to use visuals from their various issues. I would especially like to note my appreciation for the support extended by Samir Patil.

Finally, my thanks to Sreenivas for his constant support, care and involvement with my work. Shikha watched years roll by as I worked on this project, and grew up mostly on her own with remarkable patience and self-sufficiency, occasionally invading my treasured ACKs. I hope some day she will read and enjoy this book!
Introduction

Amar Chitra Katha:
The Scope of the Problem

In 1967 Anant Pai, a young Brahmin journalist from Bombay, launched a series of picture–storybooks for children. Titled Amar Chitra Katha (Immortal Picture Stories), the series retold Indian myths, history, classics, legends and folk tales. Pai had to face some disappointment initially since the sales did not pick up. There are inspiring accounts of him living on a shoestring budget and peddling his books. But like the heroes in his stories, he persevered, bringing out two new issues of Amar Chitra Katha (ACK) every month. By the mid-1970s, ACK had become a household name and was well on its way to making publishing history in India. Bookstalls everywhere — roadside magazine stands, regular bookshops and especially bookstalls in railway stations across the country — were flooded with these picture stories. Attractively produced on newsprint, colourfully illustrated and available at a very reasonable price, these chitrakathas soon became part and parcel of middle-class homes. Neighbourhood circulating libraries often stocked complete sets. A family could place an order with the newsagent and have it delivered every fortnight along with their daily newspaper. Indeed, ACK was often the only children’s reading material that a middle-class family would actually buy. Parents invariably took care to preserve copies and then had them bound into what became a sort of children’s encyclopaedia of Indian stories. It was knowledge, history, culture, national pride, recreation — all in an affordable package. Interestingly, though these books were meant for children, many of Pai’s regular readers and most enthusiastic admirers were adults.

I grew up in the 1970s, an avid reader of ACK and I can say that this was one time when parental approval coincided with the child’s own enjoyment. I hated history and barely scraped through the
examinations in that subject. It was ACK that taught me many ‘facts’ about India, its history and tradition while I consumed its exciting, vividly illustrated stories. It was ACK that gave me the idea of India that I took for granted as everybody’s idea of the country. Such was its authority that it was only a few years ago, and well into adulthood, that I began to have an inkling that all ‘normal’ Indian children might not, as a matter of routine information, know that Partha is another name for Arjuna. Or indeed that other Indian children might, as a matter of routine information, know all sorts of other things that I knew nothing about. In fact, ACK ‘naturalised’ a certain tradition and made that tradition available not as dead and distant but as alive and adventurous. I have long forgotten much of what my history books taught me, but the knowledge I gained from ACK stays with me. It continues, I feel, to play an important role in my taken-for-granted responses about what is ‘Indian’ and what is not, who is an honourable person and who is not, and so on. A friend who also grew up in the 1970s says: ‘Amar Chitra Katha is like an inoculation. You are injected once, but the effect lasts a lifetime.’ To quote another: ‘Amar Chitra Katha was something that my brother and I looked forward to at the end of the examinations. It used to enliven our long summer vacation journeys from Jaipur where my father worked as a government vet, to Hyderabad, our family hometown. The long waits at stations where we had to change trains were actually occasions to extract more Amar Chitra Kathas out of our father’s pocket.’ ACK, it can confidently be said, moulded the self-image, character and imagination of hordes of middle-class children in the India of the 1970s and 1980s.

By the later 1980s, however, there was a dip in what was beginning to look like a runaway sales chart. Sales of ACK declined. Pai believes that it is because of the rise of television and he may well be right. Falling profits forced him after 1991 to discontinue the production of new titles though he continued to keep the old ones in print. However, magically, in the latter half of the 1990s, ACK sprung into new life. The newsprint of the 1970s gave place to white map-litho paper, and the series, sporting newly designed A4-sized laminated covers, is a strong presence in the market again. The price is steeper and the books seem designed for a more upscale market. In most cities and towns, for instance, the once ubiquitous ACK has disappeared from street corner stalls and can only be found in regular bookstores, though they still continue to be found in railway bookstalls. Undoubtedly this has
something to do with the fact that since the 1990s the new, ACK-reading middle-class in India has prospered. It has also something to do with the new market that ACK is acquiring among expatriate Indians. Today, it even has a virtual life with many of its 400 plus stories available on the web and even on a mobile phone.

Rarely, however — and this is truly surprising — has a connection been made between the extraordinary rise of this genre in the 1970s, and the other great event of the decade, the now widely-discussed break-up of the post-independence consensus of the 1950s and 1960s. Historians and political commentators seem largely agreed that the late 1960s and early 1970s mark a major turning point in national life. The exuberance and hope that characterised the Nehruvian era rapidly gave way to disillusionment among various sections of society. The government had not been able to live up to its promises of social or economic justice. The centralised mechanism of planning and the developmental initiatives of the state failed to take into account the crucial particularities in the will of the people or the localised, immediate contexts of their lives. The mixed economy model proved inadequate to set the country on the path of redistribution of wealth. By the late 1960s, economic growth slackened and prices soared. Widespread disaffection led to an explosion of initiatives, both urban and rural in which marginalised sections of the society such as rural peasants and labourers, Dalits and women were actively involved. In fact, ACK emerges at a historical conjuncture when many of the resolutions that formed the basis for governance in the post-independence years had come in for questioning both from the right and from the left.

It was initially difficult to distinguish between right and left in the alliances that emerged as a result of the growing dissatisfaction of the 1970s. Yet, looking back, it seems evident that this was a decade in which a right-wing critique of Nehruvian socialism, and its proposals for a new India, began to be articulated with increasing self-assurance. Thus India was to be modern yet also ‘international’. Increasingly, this critique began also to be differentiated from left-wing demands for social changes that would make greater inroads into privilege of various kinds. As pointed out by Sanjaya Baru (1990), even as economic growth stagnated, the domestic bourgeoisie, by the mid-1970s, was already making crucial alliances with multinationals.

1 For a detailed discussion, see Chandra (2008).
and foreign capital. For this new middle-class, the welfarist commitments of the socialist government was responsible for economic disintegration and devaluation of merit. In keeping with the ethic of bourgeois individualism, it demanded a masculinisation of the self in place of special rights granted by the state to disadvantaged sections of society on the basis of caste, community or gender.

ACK’s call for a re-engagement with tradition and the attempt to rebuild a sense of confidence and pride through a backward glance at a rich and glorious past inserts itself into this demand. Pai’s attempt to refashion history, which he presents as a series of vignettes of the heroism and charisma of great men and (a few) women, into an effective pedagogic tool stands in distinct contrast to radical historiographical initiatives, such as that of Subaltern Studies, which critique the elitist basis of both colonial and nationalist historiography and foreground subaltern initiatives. In fact, one may well characterise ACK, with its accent on a moral rejuvenation of the youth by reconnecting them with their roots, as a powerful initiative of ‘regressive modernisation’, critically invested in politics of refashioning the nation. Developed at a moment, when the ‘Nehruvian’ consensus was in crisis, it articulates the hegemonic ambitions of a modern Hindu nationalism; a refined, brahminised, yet modern, masculinity emerges as normative within the discourse of ACK. It seeks to train future citizens of the nation through narratives that centre and foreground an indomitable and persevering masculinity.

This is why although Pai ostensibly began work on this series as an ‘answer’ to the western comic books that were the principal, and sometimes the only, reading material available for a middle-class

\[\text{2 'T}here is a new class that has emerged entirely in consequence of post-independence capitalist development. It is an amorphous class, ranging from bureaucrats to traders, financiers, bankers, contractors, small and medium entrepreneurs, rich peasants, non-resident Indians. But both in political and social–cultural terms it is an important class. They are producing the fodder for a cultural marketplace, they are the opinion-makers, they dominate the media, the education system, the economy, the bureaucracy, and they are articulating certain aspirations which obviously conflict with…the aspirations of the subordinate classes — the working classes and the dispossessed in the rural areas’ (Baru 1990: 56).

\[\text{3 I take this term from Stuart Hall (1988) who uses it to describe the character of Thatcherism in England. A more detailed engagement with this idea follows in a latter section.}\]
child, it would be inadequate, and indeed wrong, to regard ACK simply as an Indian version of the western genre. Similarly, it would also be inadequate to think of it as simply having captured a part of the market share of the *Tarzan* or *Phantom* comics. The scope of Pai’s project, it would appear, is quite distinct and intimately linked to the hegemonic struggles of the 1970s. Although it draws on a number of existing strands of narrative and visual representation, as I will be demonstrating in Chapter 2 through a much more detailed argument, formally and politically the chitrakatha is itself quite original and without precedent.

It may also be pointed out that the prestigious Children’s Book Trust (CBT), a state institution, founded in 1957 with the renowned cartoonist K. Shankar Pillai at its head, also made available well-designed reading material for children at an affordable price. Compared to ACK, the CBT books were more urbane and more distinctively illustrated (reflecting the influence of Shankar’s wry cartoon humour). This initiative was similar to other post-independence institutions like Children’s Film Society and Nehru Bal Pustakalaya, set up by the independent state to promote national modernity among children.4 Strangely, these books never caught the imagination of children as ACK did. One explanation might be that this was because ACK appealed to Indian children more as it chose to work closely with popular images and dealt with Indian history and myth. But one might also explain this fact, and this explanation would tie in more closely with my argument here — as a function of the distance between the top-down reformist pedagogy of the CBT books with their abstract, internationalist notions of modernity and the aggressive, historically engaged initiatives of ACK’s middle-classes in 1970s.

My attempt here is to draw on ACK to examine the modes in which this upper-caste middle-class consolidated its position in the post-Nehruvian context from the late 1960s onwards into the 1980s and the 1990s. I suggest that culture has been the major site of the right-wing’s hegemonic politics in India. Hence the tenacity of ACK as a tremendously popular and respected cultural production that spanned a period of more than 20 years. The generations of middle-class children that grew up on it during the 1970s and the 1980s.

4 See Mullapudi Sreenivasa Prasad (1998) for an extended discussion on the role of these institutions in shaping a secular national modernity.
Sculpting a Middle Class

1980s, have their ideas of citizenship and selfhood formed by it. These children, may well be called ‘Amar Chitra Katha’s children’. A critical fact to remember is that the generation over which ACK has exercised maximum influence is also the one that in the 1990s comes to constitutes the major proportion of the new globalising corporate and professional Indian middle-class.

As a cultural project, ACK’s aspiration was the rewriting of Nehruvian India. It has not only shaped dominant contemporary ideas about Indian history and tradition, brahminism and masculinity, it has also made a critical contribution in moulding many other present-day hegemonic articulations about merit, self-respect, self-improvement, hard work, and so on.

The 1970s: Ferment in Cultural Politics

In order to understand the role of ACK as a hegemonic intervention at the historical conjuncture of the 1970s — when new forms of culture and citizenship begin to remake and replace the old — it is important to take stock of the upheavals that shake up this decade.5 What was the nature of the instability inherent in the Nehruvian formation that comes to the surface during this period? What are the forms of resistance that emerge and stake claims to laying out a different politics and a different future for the nation?

This is a moment when the ideals of the freedom struggle are recalled by the subaltern masses not with the exhilaration of achievement but with a sense of disillusion and betrayal.6 But this is also the moment for the reinstatement of tradition in the cultural domain of the upper caste bourgeoisie. A seamless continuity would be posited between a

5 I am using ‘hegemony’ in the Gramscian sense here. A hegemonic class is one that has been able to articulate the interests of other social groups to its own by means of ideological struggle. In other words, the dominant group is able to present its interests as universal. In order to achieve this objective, it has to sacrifice some of its corporatist gains, and demonstrate a genuine care for the interests of the subordinate groups over which it hopes to exercise hegemony. Hegemony is the tool through which a class transforms the nature of its authority from a purely economic one to one based on moral and ethical leadership. See Gramsci (1971) and Mouffe (1979: 168–204).

6 See the introduction to Partha Chatterjee (1998a: 1–20). He cites poignant excerpts from the interviews he conducted in the 1970s with several men and
truly egalitarian Vedic past and the aspirations of a new middle-class on the road to liberalisation.

In this section I attempt to situate ACK at the interstices between the dissolution of the Nehruvian era and the appearance of a more conservative politics. However I must add that this ‘more conservative politics’ and its corresponding cultural forms (such as ACK) are not a complete abandonment of the earlier secular–modern impulse. While they manage/redirect the radical opposition to the Government into a safer terrain, they also refigure some of the most powerful ideological articulations of the post-independence state such as ‘national culture’ or ‘unity-in-diversity’.

I map the 1970s as a period that witnesses not only the reassertion of the subaltern self but also the emergence of a forceful middle-class, dislocating local struggles for justice (organised around class, caste, gender and community) onto the onward march of an indomitable self. I also look at the opposing trends in historiography that strive to grapple with this moment of ‘disaggregation’. One witnesses a move to problematise the elitist bias of nationalist historiography and fragment its coherence with voices from below, but emerging alongside is a powerful drive to cohere the nation in the unbroken narrative of the cultural unity. I locate ACK as part of the latter impulse. Finally, what conveys the charge of this phenomenon as a historically invested actor of the time is its affiliation with a range of other cultural texts that are engaged in reinstalling tradition.

The Crisis of the 1970s

‘When freedom came in the year 1947, we were so full of hope and expectation...But now we can’t free ourselves from our own brothers in our own country.’ These despairing words spoken by a grassroots level freedom struggle activist in rural Bengal of the 1970s literally sum
up the mood of that period (Chatterjee 1998a: 3). By the late 1960s, the contradictions inherent in post-independence resolutions and the Nehruvian state had started becoming apparent. Economic growth slackened and prices spiraled. Food riots took place in various parts of the country. In 1974, there was a massive countrywide strike by railway workers that was suppressed with violence unprecedented in the history of independent India.7 The countryside became the site of locally organised resistance and revolts by poor peasants and agricultural labourers, mostly belonging to the lower castes and tribal groups, against feudal modes of oppression by landlords and state officials. One such movement was in a place called Naxalbari in West Bengal.8 This shot into prominence as local organisers of the CPI(M) rebelled against the party leadership which advised them to withdraw the movement in the interest of the United Front Ministry in West Bengal. The radical factions broke away from the CPI(M) in 1969 and formed the Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist). Subsequently, Naxalite peasant movements spread in West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Bihar and Punjab and were met

7 The 1974 railway strike was a culmination of the railway workers’ longstanding dissatisfaction with harsh living conditions, low wages and long working hours. It occurred at a moment when labour militancy peaked in India. The government adopted brutal methods against the striking workers and their families to suppress the agitation. For a detailed account, see Sherlock (2001).

8 The Naxalite movement is named after a peasant uprising which took place in May 1967 at Naxalbari — located in the north-eastern corner of India in the state of West Bengal. At its forefront were armed Communist revolutionaries, who would form the Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist) two years later. Their objective, under the leadership of the 49-year-old Charu Mazumdar, was ‘seizure of power through an agrarian revolution’. The objective was to eliminate the continuing feudal system in the countryside and and to free the poor from the rule of the oppressive landlords and ensure the implementation of land reforms. They adapted the tactics of guerilla warfare to carry out acts of violent reprisal against the landlords and the state’s police force that came to the aid of the landlords, and gradually set up ‘liberated zones’ in different parts of the country.

The Naxalbari uprising was brutally crushed by the police within months, but the movement soon spread to other parts of India, and Naxalism would become an extreme political ideology to haunt India’s mainstream, ‘legitimate’ politics.

See Bannerjee (1980).
with brutal armed retaliation from the state. But the unrest surfacing through India in the early 1970s was not confined to the communists. In Bihar and, later in Gujarat, there were widespread anti-government agitations led by students inspired by Jayaprakash Narayan’s call for ‘total revolution’. For the first time since independence, in many parts of the country, women also actively participated in these movements, often demanding the inclusion of women’s issues on their agenda. The 1974 Report on the Status of Women, for example, brought to light the fact that in post-independence India women continued to be unequal in terms of their access to developmental programmes, healthcare and education, their political participation and their legal status. The government responded with all the might of its repressive mechanism to suppress these movements and finally declared Emergency in 1975, resulting in the suspension of civil liberties and imprisonment of the activists.

Political theorists like Sudipta Kaviraj have drawn on Gramsci’s concept of passive revolution to propose that, politically and economically, the Indian bourgeoisie cannot be accorded any clear supremacy because of ‘the prevalence of pre-capitalist political forms in our governance’ (1997: 51). In India, social formation is characterised by an uneven combination of different modes of production, only formally subordinated to capital. Consequently, political power is shared by a coalition of the bourgeoisie, the rural rich and the bureaucratic elite. In post-independence India, Kaviraj writes, the political order that came into power after independence did not attempt to radically transform the institutional structures of bureaucratic authority established during the period of colonial rule. The new government opted for the passive revolution of capital as it remained dependent on existing pre-capitalist form of social power to mobilise electoral support for it through landed proprietorship or caste loyalty or religious authority. It simply sought to contain the
powers of pre-capitalist dominant classes through contingent strategies of neutralisation, concession or selective attack, all these being means to keep them in the position of subsidiary allies in the reformed state structure.

The Congress, in the early 1950s, was marked by a polarisation within the party. While the faction led by Sardar Patel advocated a liberal, laissez-faire form of capitalist programme, Nehru’s supporters pushed for a state-directed reformist strategy. With Patel’s death, the reformists gained victory, but from the early years of government, because of the coalitional nature of power and the conservative state and local units of Congress governance, programmes of serious land reforms had to be abandoned. According to political analysts like Sudipta Kaviraj and Partha Chatterjee, had the Congress encouraged the mobilisation of the masses (as during the national movement) for radical social transformation, it could have countered the feudal resistance to reform. But a pivotal decision by the Nehru government was to envisage and enact its reformist programmes in a bureaucratic rather than in a mobilisational form. Commenting on the ‘welfare bureaucracy’ that formed a crucial part of the socialist government, Kaviraj asserts that the logic of bureaucratisation treated people not as subjects but as objects of the development process. Developmental strategies were premised on the assumption that there was a scientific approach to modernisation, and that planners and experts could set up schemes for the problems that people faced (Kaviraj 1997: 62).11

The policy of mixed economy adopted by the government also led to a host of contradictions. While the Second Five Year Plan (1955–60) had a mass appeal as it emphasised the development of heavy industry giving the impression that India was following the socialist path of economic development, the actual policies were extremely favourable to the private sector and monopoly houses. Evidently the fruits of independence remained confined to a miniscule group of urban and

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11 Ranajit Guha and other historians belonging to the *Subaltern Studies* group have traced the distrust and demobilisation of the masses to the formative stages of the Congress. Guha, for instance, talks about the ‘messianic tendency’ of the nationalist discourse within which ‘mobilisation was the handiwork of the prophets, patriarchs and other inspirational leaders alone, and the mobilized were no more than an inert mass shaped by a superior will’ (1992: 72).
rural bourgeoisie (Tharu and Lalita 1993: 97). In the late 1960s, the Congress government came in for severe criticism from various political factions. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) held the position that despite economic planning and the government’s periodic resolutions to support a ‘socialist pattern of society’, the country had largely developed along the path of capitalism which meant transforming feudal exploiters at home into capitalist exploiters and facilitating greater cooperation between the big bourgeois at home and the monopolist and oligopolist corporations in the imperialist countries (Hiro 1976: 135).

While the Congress during the Nehru era could never implement any radical reform that would seriously affect the conservative elements within the coalition that supported its power, it is also true that its strategy of consensus was accompanied by a project that aimed at actively using state power to transform social institutions and practices, even though such transformation was gradualist and cautious. To the representatives of proprietary classes, the mildest of agrarian or industrial reform on part of the modernising state emerged as a threat. In the words of Sudipta Kaviraj:

The Congress’s industrial policies were interpreted as the thin end of the socialist stick; land reform proposals, shamefully mild and solidly bourgeois, appeared to them as a programme of an agrarian revolution from above; the public sector, intended merely to displace the centre of control towards the state, was seen as an attack on private enterprise. For the first time, a large right-wing coalition of conservatives inside and outside the ruling party seemed to be emerging. (Kaviraj 1997: 66)

The crisis of the 1970s was also evident in the ‘cultural’ domain. Consider, for example, the move of Congress secularism. The general tendency is to look at secularism and communalism as two diametrically opposite trends. Yet increasingly it is being argued that in many ways the state-sponsored ideology of secularism provided the Hindu right with a well-made foundation. For example, the Hindu right does not pit itself against the ideal of a secular state but against those whom it terms as ‘pseudo-secularists’:

…in its most sophisticated forms, the campaign of the Hindu right often seeks to mobilise on its behalf the will of an interventionist modernising state, in order to erase the presence of religious or ethnic particularisms from the domains of law or public life, and to supply, in the name of ‘national culture’, a homogenized content to the notion of citizenship….
From this position, the Hindu right can not only deflect accusations of being anti-secular, but can even use the arguments for interventionist secularisation to promote intolerance and violence against minorities (Chatterjee 1998b: 230).

According to Ashis Nandy et al. (1995: 59), both statist secularism and Hindu nationalism have regarded religion as an ideology rather than as faith. For Nandy et al., religion-as-faith refers to a way of life that is pluralistic and tolerant while religion-as-ideology regards followers of a faith as cannon fodder for a movement that is political and non-religious. Despite their many differences, both Nandy and Chatterjee have argued that the politics of secularism and Hindu nationalism are part of the rationality of the modern state.

In the discussion that follows, I attempt a narrative of Pai’s life as well as that of Amar Chitra Katha as a cultural project in order to demonstrate how both offer ideals of individual grit and masculine strength contiguous with the conservative middle-class ideological formation that comes to the fore in the 1970s and, is more and more aggressively articulated in the 1980s and in the age of liberalisation.

The Amar Chitra Katha Phenomenon

Anant Pai probably does not know — or would not care — but he has been responsible for educating lakhs of Indian children in their own mythology by bringing their heritage to them in an easily assimilable form. I do not know of any middle-class Indian home that has not at one time or other subscribed to Amar Chitra Katha. It is a byword among children. (M. V. Kamath in The Afternoon Dispatch and Courier, January 15, 1990, cited in ‘Comments in the Press’)

The above is only one among the many accolades showered on Anant Pai extolling the pedagogic and cultural value of ACK. This also typically illustrates the aura of altruism that has surrounded Pai’s persona. It is noteworthy that ACK has always been projected as a cultural-pedagogic initiative rather than a profit-seeking venture. The series which has been rated as ‘one of the biggest success stories in

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12 Nandini Chandra, after Pierre Bourdieu, posits ACK as a ‘cultural commodity’ which tries to mask its self-interest through a pretence to stakes that are non-material (2008: 202–3).
Indian publishing’ (Gangadhar 1988: 138) is the brainchild of a man who has been described as an ‘idealistic to the core’ (Surya India, November 1980, cited in ‘Comments’) whose objective was ‘not a business but a vehicle to educate’ (Bunny Suraiya 1984, cited in ‘Comments’). I suggest that the positioning of Anant Pai as an educator and upholder of Indian values is inextricably intertwined with the ‘mythology’ of ACK as the way to one’s roots. The one does not hold without the other. Let me begin this story — quite in the ACK mode — with a quote from Morning Echo (Hindustan Times group) in a write-up in February 1978:

Life’s battles don’t always go to the stronger or the weaker man.
But sooner or later the man who wins is
The man who thinks he can.

This lyric aptly sums up the successes of many people around us who started out with nothing but an idea. Driven by it, they suffered scepticism, criticism and contempt of those who think they know better. One such personality is Anant Pai (cited in ‘Comments in the Press’).

The spirit of the above passage is shared by a small biographical account of Pai, sketched by V. Gangadhar in Reader’s Digest (1988). He locates Pai’s reverence for India’s past in his ‘traditional upbringing’ (Gangadhar 1988: 138). His is shown to be a tragic childhood, the unhappiness of which was relieved through an interest in spiritual matters, namely, the Gita. Born in an orthodox brahmin family at Karkala near Mangalore, he lost his parents when he was only three and was brought up by his maternal uncle. The young Pai was often filled with longing for his parents. When he was around nine years old, lonely and unhappy, he stumbled upon a copy of the Bhagavat Gita. He recalls: ‘I read it several times and was moved to tears’ (cited in Gangadhar 1988: 138). Having been attracted to such devotional literature, Pai taught himself Sanskrit and read the Upanishads and the epics. We are further informed that he studied Hinduism and was also inspired by Gandhi’s nationalism.

Gangadhar’s narrative strategies display a striking likeness to the modes through which ACK’s heroes are fashioned into extraordinary subjectivities. Take for example the following episode. At the age of 12, Pai moved to Bombay to live with his cousin. He
Sculpting a Middle Class

was ridiculed at the Wilson College because of his small stature, meek nature, and shabby homespun clothes. But ‘his flinty spirit flashed through when his beliefs were questioned’:

Once a professor who taught moral science said in class that ‘for Hindus, stone worship is dharma.’ ‘You are wrong, sir,’ Pai immediately protested. ‘You are equating dharma with certain religious practices, but dharma is more important than any ritual. It is the moral law; it’s what you should follow to be happy.’ The professor was speechless, and Pai became a hero to his classmates (Gangadhar 1988: 138).

Those of us who are familiar with the ACK narrative can almost imagine this sequence in panels — here is an individual who overcomes trials and tribulations on the strength of a firm grounding in tradition combined with innate courage. It is indicative of a critical factor — there lies a continuum between Pai’s persona as it has been popularly represented and the ACK enterprise; the circumstances leading to its publication, its avowed attempt to shape young minds by showing them the ‘route to your roots’ and its uncovering of mythological, historical and folk heroes and heroines.

Let me inquire into ‘tradition’ as it is shrewdly imagined by Pai, not as ritual-centred or pre-modern but as concretely engaged in shaping a normativity for the present. To start with, let us go back to the beginnings of ACK. After graduating in chemical engineering in 1952, Pai worked briefly in publishing firms in Bombay and Delhi before joining the Times of India in 1961. At that time imported comics were highly popular and the market was inundated with the adventures of Superman, Phantom, Tarzan and Captain Marvel. When the Times of India decided to print comics, Pai was given the responsibility to find out which one would be the most popular strip. He recommended Lee Falk’s Phantom on the basis of his research among potential readers, and it became a great success. But though well settled at The Times, Pai was plagued by a feeling of discontent:

Phantom, after all, was a foreign comic strip, and by now Pai was convinced that what Indian children really needed were comics that highlighted Indian themes and values (ibid.: 139; emphasis mine).

In February 1967, Pai happened to watch a quiz contest on television while visiting a bookstall in Delhi. Five students of the elite St. Stephen’s College participated in the programme but none of
them knew who the mother of Rama was. The incident struck a deep chord in Pai:

*Ramayana* is part of India’s heritage. It has given us role models and taught us values of life. So I felt unhappy. I felt more unhappy when these children could answer correctly questions on the gods on Mount Olympus — the Greek gods. That hurt me much more (Margaret 1999).

Back in Bombay, Pai asked his nephews and nieces to bring out a manuscript magazine. Titled *Family News* it contained poems, stories and articles. There was a poem on daffodils imitating Wordsworth’s ‘Daffodils’ and also a story about a boy named Robert who dreamt of going to London. Looking at the contents of this magazine, Pai was more convinced than ever that the younger generation was getting alienated from Indian culture.13

But when Pai tried to sell his idea of publishing material for children on ‘Indian’ culture, no publisher was willing to back him. Eventually, when India Book House of Bombay (IBH) offered him a small contract, Pai resigned from his comfortable job at the *Times of India*, and took up the offer. He titled the comic series *Amar Chitra Katha* — Immortal Picture Stories — and began the venture with the publication of *Krishna* in 1970.14 This was followed by *Shakuntala*, *The Pandava Princes*, *The Sons of Rama* and *Hanuman* all of which had mythological themes. This was also a time when Pai had to face a lot of disappointment as these titles sold less than 20,000 copies each during the first three years. Gangadhar evokes this phase of Pai’s life through an idiom that combines the spirit of Swadeshi enterprise with that of capitalist adventure:

Pai went to shops, restaurants and petrol pumps, urging their owners to display the series. Once, when a restaurant manager said he had no

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13 There is a strong critique of the English Studies in the 1990s that interrogates the colonial-elite bias of the study of English literature in India that centres figures like Shakespeare and Wordsworth. See Svati Joshi (1994). Pai’s criticism of the ‘Daffodils’-centred young, notably, comes from an entirely different impulse.

14 While *Amar Chitra Katha* was launched by Pai in 1967, the IBH was not willing to take the risk of starting with Indian titles right away. So they began with 10 western titles from an earlier Classics Illustrated series venture. *Amar Chitra Katha*’s first title, *Krishna*, was brought out in 1970.
tools to put up racks, Pai opened his briefcase, took out hammer and nails, and did the job himself (Gangadhar 1988: 139).

The perseverance paid off with the sales perking up, and by the late 1970s, Amar Chitra Katha, published in English, Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Assamese and Malayalam, was selling about 3.5 million copies annually. By then, the series had also started featuring non-mythological themes — history, folk tales and legends of regional heroes and heroines. *Shivaji* (1972) was the first non-mythological, historical narrative brought out in the series. It was followed by *Rana Pratap* (1972) and *Prithviraj Chauhan* (1972). By 1990, ACK had been translated into as many as 38 different Indian languages and a few foreign languages. Also, about 10,000 copies of ACK were exported every month, according to a figure quoted by Pai in 1990. Pai admits that the circulation of ACK declined progressively from 1984 onwards. In 1990, he writes a little wistfully that ‘the circulation of ACK today is 70,000 including all languages, but a time was, when in English and Hindi language we used to print four to five lakh copies (about 10 years ago) per month’ (1990). Trying to figure out the reason for this decline in circulation, he says, ‘Perhaps, this has something to do with the popularity of the T.V. and Video’ (ibid.). Also, according to him, ACK was popular among the upper and lower middle-class children, as well as among the upper-class children. A decline in the reading habits of upper-class children had affected the circulation of all children’s magazines.

The point to note is that from the very beginning, ACK has targeted children from the middle-classes. To go by Pai’s own narrative, it is the ignorance of the students of St. Stephen’s College that motivated him to start this venture. Then we have the reference to the westernised

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15 Nandini Chandra provides us with an engaged and detailed perspective on the sales and marketing history of ACK. She seems reluctant to buy Pai’s claim that television and cable were to be blamed for the decline in the sales of the series. She feels that by the late 1980s, there is a lack of imagination shown in packaging and selling the books. In 1985, the *Mahabharata* mini-series of 42 issues is brought out to coincide with the telecast of the *Mahabharata* serial on Doordarshan. Chandra claims that by adopting this new mini-series trend, ACK lost its original style of bringing out issues on randomly selected episodes rather than ‘textbook editions’. A sense of monotony and tedium crept in with the way this series was conceptualized, all the issues having been illustrated by the same artist. According to Chandra, ‘ACK conceded defeat even before the threat of the satellite media materialised’ (2008: 222–23).
contents of the magazine brought out by his nephews and nieces that so disturbed him. Gangadhar’s (1988) article too clearly points out the middle-class base of ACK. He begins by interviewing a retired civil servant in his well-appointed Bombay flat who reveals that three generations of his family have enjoyed and benefited from reading the Amar Chitra Kathas which ‘highlight the values we cherish’ (ibid.: 137).

The last regular title published in the series was Jawaharlal Nehru in 1991. It is revealing indeed that Pai cites Nehru’s respect for the ‘great inheritance’ that dates back to India’s ‘immemorial past’ as the rationale behind featuring him in the finale of a series that ‘retold many a tale from Indian mythology, legend, history and folklore’ (Introduction).

Dominant and Subaltern Historiographies

The implication of Amar Chitra Katha in the upper caste, middle class drive to endorse a sanskritised vedantic tradition as normative is thrown into sharp relief against the unrest of the 1970s when history and tradition are being challenged from the left and from the margins.

Ranajit Guha, the founder–editor and the senior-most member of the Subaltern Studies group of historians, writing about the disillusionment that set in among the youth in the 1970s — the generation born immediately after independence — says that:

Born to citizenship in a sovereign republic, they had their nationhood with all its promise already constituted for them. It was a promise that relied on the nation–state for its fulfilment. Since that failed to materialise even two decades after Britain’s retreat from South Asia, the despair that seized the younger generation in the 1970s could truly be ascribed to a disillusionment of hope’ (1997: xii).

Most statist histories of the period have dwelt on the dramatic Naxalite encounters with the apparatuses of the state and the repressive counter-insurgent measures adopted by the latter. Guha draws attention also to the fact that there was an angry questioning by the youth of all the sanctified authorities of the civil society (ibid.). Such questioning led to gestures of rebellion such as the beheading of the statue of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar in Calcutta. Guha writes:

[T]he very wildness of such gestures drove the point home, albeit scandalously, that tradition would not pass unchallenged. The tradition in
question ranged all the way from intellectual culture, such as that associated with the so-called Bengal Renaissance, to the highly valourised ideals of Indian nationalism during its encounter with the colonial regime (Guha 1997: xiii; emphasis mine).

*Subaltern Studies*, as Guha puts it, is a ‘child of its times’ in the sense that it came into existence at the historical conjuncture of the questioning of tradition and history that marked the 1970s. One of the advantages that determined its nature was the lack of institutional constraints upon the people who came together in the late 1970s; they were free to listen and record the notes of discontent raging in the society around them.16 Reminiscing about the beginnings of the project, Guha suggests that it was this ‘listening’ that made it possible for this group of intellectuals to inaugurate the first volume of *Subaltern Studies* (1982) with a critique of Indian nationalist historiography: ‘The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism — colonial elitism and bourgeois–nationalist elitism’ (ibid.: xiv). While the first kind of elitism attributed the phenomenon of nationalism in India to British administrators, culture and institutions, the second kind attributed it to Indian elite personalities, institutions, activities and ideas.

These historians challenged the ‘sacredness’ of such historiography by claiming that the domain of politics in India was structurally split into elite and subaltern:

> What clearly is left out of this un-historical historiography is the *politics of the people*. For parallel to the domain of elite politics there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups consisting the mass of the labouring population and the intermediate strata in town and country — that is, the people. This was

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16 Speaking of the group of people who initiated the *Subaltern Studies* initiative, Guha writes: ‘An assortment of marginalised academics — graduate students yet to complete their dissertations, two or three very young scholars only recently admitted to the teaching profession, and an older man stuck at its lowest rung apparently for good — it had the advantage of owing no loyalty to any department, faculty, school, or party. With no curriculum, no dogma, no official line to guide it, no professor, prophet, or politburo to watch over its every step, it was an outsider only too eager to listen to and participate in the controversies agitating the space beyond and around the temples of learning and the political headquarters’ (1997: xiv).
an autonomous domain, for it neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter (Guha 1982: 4).

*Subaltern Studies* has argued that some of the most powerful agitations of the colonial period such as the Civil Disobedience or the Non-cooperation movement followed a separate trajectory in the domain of subaltern politics outside of the agenda of the elite leadership. The subaltern participants defied the Congress high command and made these struggles their own by shifting the stress to issues of local/regional oppression and by incorporating into them traditions of popular resistance. Guha uses the evidence of subaltern politics to reject the claim of nationalist historiography that the Indian bourgeoisie played a hegemonic role in anti-imperialist struggles and hence their dominant role in post-colonial India was achieved through the consent of the subaltern classes. He introduces the concept of ‘dominance without hegemony’ to characterise the nature of the leadership of the middle-class in Indian politics. Dominant groups and their actions have also been studied in by the Subaltern Studies historians, but only in relation to their impact on the subaltern domain and vice versa.

The initiative has forced our attention, as students of politics, to that other domain of subaltern agency which traditional historiography has ignored and suppressed. It has introduced a critical dissonance into the study of history and thrown into relief the trope of personal heroism and leadership of ‘great men’ that animates statist narratives of the past.

*Subaltern Studies* initiated radical ways of conceiving the past which made possible a questioning of the ‘normative’ power relations of the present. ACK — which narrativises history as the story of great men and a few great women — on the other hand, seeks to re-install a normative politics, and its success cannot be underestimated. In fact, its impact is far-reaching because it takes history right into the domain of popular culture, and thus engages with and reshapes the commonsense of the people. It may be said that Anant Pai sets out to ‘make’ the very

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17 See Gramsci (1971). Common sense, for Gramsci, is the uncritical and mostly unconscious way in which a person makes sense of the world around her. It is the site where active consent for a dominant ideology is negotiated, but this is also the site of resistance and struggle. To give a rather commonplace example, one may profess to be ‘secular’ and rational, yet share many cultural myths through which the figure of the Muslim is constructed. For instance, a Muslim is always visualised as carrying overt and overriding signs of religion/religiousness. See Shahid Amin (2005).
Sculpting a Middle Class

hegemony in the post-Nehruvian period that Guha claims the middle-class in India lacks. Since the turn to Gramsci in the 1960s in the field of Cultural Studies, the importance of culture in organising hegemony and consent for the dominant class position has been underscored. Gramsci’s notion of hegemony is a departure from earlier Marxist traditions of conceiving ideology as totalising and subordination as static and passive. For Gramsci, a bourgeois hegemony is secured not by an obliteration of working-class culture but through its rearticulation in bourgeois culture and ideology. The dominant class must transcend some of its corporatist interests and be able to articulate the interests of subordinate groups to its own by means of ideological struggle. It is only through representing its own goals/politics as universal, that the bourgeoisie can forge strategic alliances with subordinate groups and lay claim to moral–political leadership. Thus hegemony aims at winning moral, cultural and ideological leadership for the dominant class and is distinct from economism/economic corporatism that does not go beyond immediate class interests.¹⁸

However, despite the gestures the hegemonising class makes towards other groups, it is important that its core interests remain untouched. Gramsci writes:

Undoubtedly the fact of hegemony presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised, and that a certain compromise equilibrium should be formed — in other words, that the leading group should make sacrifices of an economic–corporate kind. But there is also no doubt that such sacrifices and such a compromise cannot touch the essential; for though hegemony is ethical–political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity. (1971: 161)

The notion of hegemony has directed our attention on popular culture as a major site of political intervention. As Tony Bennett puts it: ‘In Gramsci’s conspectus, popular culture is viewed neither

¹⁸ In the words of Stuart Hall, ‘In essence, it refers to all those processes whereby a fundamental social group…which has achieved direction over the “decisive economic nucleus”, is able to expand this into a moment of social, political and cultural leadership and authority throughout civil society and the state, attempting to unify and reconstruct the social formation around an organic tendency through a series of “national tasks”’ (1980: 35).
as the site of people’s cultural deformation nor as that of their cultural self-affirmation…rather, it is viewed as a force-field of relations shaped, precisely by those contradictory pressures and tendencies — a perspective which enables a significant reformulation of both the theoretical and political issues at stake in the study of popular culture’ (Bennett 1986: xiii). Cultural institutions and practices are not simply rearrangements of an existing pattern. In a Gramscian frame, popular culture is seen as addressing the concerns and contradictions of the society even as it manages and rearticulates those to secure consent for the moral–cultural leadership of a particular social bloc. This management is never total as there are opposing pressures and alternative receptions of cultural practices in civil society. Yet the role of popular culture as a powerful tool of hegemony cannot be underestimated. As we shall see, in the context of the 1970s in India, popular cultural initiatives took a specific trajectory.

The Re-installation of Tradition

ACK was not the lone initiative seeking to reinstall tradition in the 1970s. In the domain of popular cinema, the film Mere Apne (‘My Dear Ones’, 1971) immediately strikes us as representative of such a move.¹⁹ Let me briefly refer to this film through Madhava Prasad’s insightful analysis (1998). An old widow (played by the legendary actress Meena Kumari) migrates to the city from the village. She is ill-used by her relatives but finally ends up as a kind of adoptive grandmother to a group of disenchanted, disillusioned, unemployed and ‘anti-social’ youth. ‘The woman functions as the agent of an infusion of binding affect into a world divided by class and generational conflict’ (ibid.: 166). There are several strategies which are deployed in the movement towards the resolution of the conflict in the film. One, of course, is the widow who is from an older, ‘idealistic’ generation, distanced from the ‘squabbles of the present’. Another source of resolution is the past itself, ‘the history of nationalist struggle, of which the woman serves as a reminder’ (ibid.). For example, during a conversation with the youth, the old woman recounts the events of a night when she and her husband had undertaken grave personal risk by giving shelter to a runaway freedom fighter. ‘This scene serves as a reminder of the sacrifices made in the past to produce

¹⁹ ACK’s first title Krishna was published in 1970.
the community which is now breaking apart’ (Prasad 1988: 166). In this landmark film, we find that tradition is reinvoked as the resolution to the emptiness and socio-political conflicts of the present.

Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (1993) have discussed the rise of a powerful new middle-class alongside the radical agitations and movements of the 1970s. This middle-class denounced the welfare commitments of the socialist government as having devalued merit and arrested economic growth. While it sought to centre the values of bourgeois individualism, it drew on nationalist sentiment ‘to reshape a social Imaginary in which the nation is consolidated’ (ibid.:104). A prominent trend in literary writing that registered the hegemonic politics of the new middle-class was the reappearance of the Hindu widow, valourised in Swadeshi writing. In M. K. Indira’s award-winning novel *Phaniyamma* (1976), for instance, the protagonist is an upper caste widow who observes traditional rituals in their strictest austerity and yet demonstrates the humane face of tradition when she breaks a caste taboo by assisting a lower caste woman in childbirth. Her moral authority stems neither from ‘immature’ rebellions nor from superstitious practices but a ‘deep, rational adherence to tradition’ (ibid.:109). ‘M. K. Indira turns to the Swadeshi movement as she rewrites that tradition, cutting it to the measure of the mid-seventies’ (ibid.:108). In Shivani’s ‘Dadi’ (Grandmother), published in 1979, the grandmother in an upper caste Hindu family is deeply religious and traditional and yet, when the need comes, displays more maturity and humanity than her bickering daughters-in-law. Through the way she lives her life and responds to crisis, tradition is rewritten as ‘mature good sense’ (ibid.: 76).

The ACK impulse connects with the refurbishment of tradition that takes place in the 1970s. What gives dignity and depth to its myriad depictions of extraordinary subjectivities? Many of them are born at auspicious moments (as per the Hindu calendar), and grow up in ritual-steeped families, and almost invariably influenced by the *Gita*, but have within them an inherent courage to reject reactionary ‘social’ practices. Later in this book I demonstrate how someone like Babasaheb Ambedkar — a symbol of Dalit resistance and struggle — is also negotiated into this tradition/modern ground. In one sequence, he is shown to be drinking water from a public tank in Mahar, and with this gesture of courage exorcises fear from the minds of his people, who never had the courage to do so and establish their civic equality. Indeed, the ACK series of
picture stories depicting tales from Indian mythology, history and legends, might be looked at as an attempt to recast and install in a hegemonic mode, the very heroic notion of history that the historians of Subaltern Studies sought to deconstruct.

The Renewal of the Nation: The Right Road

The reinstallation of tradition is obviously enmeshed in a larger social and political context of the time. An overview of the cultural politics of the right in post-colonial India helps us to grasp the efficacy of ACK as a means of hegemony. The right’s critique of the government in the 1970s concentrated on the ‘moral regeneration of the society’ thus shifting the focus from the struggles from the margins that demanded a radical socio-economic reconstruction of society. If we examine the ambitions of the ACK enterprise (the route to your roots) against the backdrop of the right-wing politics in the 1960s and 1970s, we realise that it shares close ties with the conservative battle for popular consent in the arena of culture.

In this section I will sketch the history of the right in the post-Nehruvian moment in broad strokes, without any claims to being comprehensive. My intention is to bring to the surface those currents that have found their way into the popular commonsense of what it means to be the member of an upright, hardworking and truly modern national community. I will briefly discuss Stuart Hall’s concept of ‘Thatcherism’ as a useful tool with which to uncover the thrust of the modernity proposed by the right. ‘Thatcherism’ carries a resonance for those critiques of the Indian state that seek to replace the socialist model of interventionist modernisation with the revival of an ‘authentic Indian tradition’ as the true source and strength of the national modern. I will then look at certain selective moments/moves in the career of Hindutva that animate the foundational assumptions of cultural drives such as the ACK.

Referring to the rise of the right in the 1970s in England, Stuart Hall offers an insight that could be of interest with respect to the Indian context as well:

Culturally, the project of Thatcherism is defined as a form of ‘regressive modernization’ — the attempt to ‘educate’ and discipline the society into a particularly regressive version of modernity by, paradoxically, dragging it backwards through an equally regressive version of the past (1988: 2).
Hall is referring here to the ideological move on part of the British right to legitimise and further its agenda by urging the English to become ‘eminent Victorians’ all over again. It seeks to rebuild the present through looking back at the lost ‘glories’ of the former British Empire. Its promise to reform and revolutionise the nation, ironically, is linked with the promise to recover that lost status.

Thatcherism for Hall does not merely refer to the era of Margaret Thatcher, beginning with her electoral victory in 1978. It connotes the ideological project that comes into existence in the 1970s aiming to effect a reconstruction of Conservatism and the Conservative Party in England:

I mean the construction of a new agenda, the constitution of a new force, in British politics. Mrs. Thatcher always aimed, not for short electoral reversal, but for a long historical occupancy of power. That occupancy of power was not simply about commanding the apparatuses of the state. Indeed, the project was organised, in the early stages, in opposition to the state which in the Thatcherite view had been deeply corrupted by the welfare state and by Keynesianism and had thus helped to ‘corrupt’ the British people. Thatcherism came into existence in contestation with the old Keynesian welfare state, with social democratic ‘statism’, which, in its view, had dominated the 1960s (Hall 1988: 163).

The project of Thatcherism aimed at an ideological reversal, which simply cannot be explained within the terms of electoral swings. It meant to undo the basic rules of the welfarist settlement, the social alliances underscoring its commitments and the values which gained popular approval for it. In other words, it aimed at nothing short of a ‘profound reshaping of the social life’ (ibid.: 2). This, it tried to do, by connecting with the ordinary everyday experiences of people; by interpellating itself into their commonsense. It exploited the trauma of the loss of the colonies, and aimed at a redefinition and masculinisation of the nation in such a way that the English could once again ‘feel what it is like to be part of Great Britain Unlimited’ (ibid.: 167). Masculinist (and, of course, capitalist) ethics of hard work, grit and discipline replaced the ethics of welfarism. The rhetoric of social justice underlying the welfare state was counterposed with the image of the ‘welfare scrounger’ who ‘does not share our values’ and also by references to popular parental anxieties regarding falling academic standards and the general moral degeneration of society.
(Hall 1998: 145). In fact, Thatcherism’s most ingenious strategy would be a stitching together of dissonant themes in its discourse.20

**Hindu Revivalism: Remaking the Modern**

Hall’s explorations of the Thatcherism/modernisation bind leads us to take another look at a myth closer home: Hindu revivalism is the ‘Other’ of the Modern — it is outside the arenas of reason and commonsense.21 As Krishna Kumar puts it, when we perceive Hindutva through this lens, ‘we run the risk of ignoring those aspects of this streak [revivalism] which are not consistent with the customary understanding of the connotations of “revivalism” as a term’ (1990: 6). He further notes:

‘Opposition to modernity’ is one such connotation….On the contrary… modernity is subsumed in the philosophy of the political right in India. Neither the Arya Samaj nor the RSS were or are anti-modern as one might expect while calling them ‘revivalist’. Only, they propose a rather different political route to modernisation from the one proposed and pursued by organisations usually seen as non-revivalist or secular in the Indian context (ibid.)

One might add here that they propose the route to a different kind of modernisation as well. From the 1960s onwards, the socialist state was challenged by the right for having brought society to the brink of moral collapse. What got foregrounded was a need for rejuvenation through a revival of the hoary traditions of the nation, originating in an ancient Vedic past. As Bruce Graham puts it, and here we note a clear ideological contiguity between Thatcherism and Hindu nationalism as a cultural project:

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20. ‘Thatcherism has managed to stitch up or “unify” the contradictory strands in its discourse — “the resonant themes of organic Toryism — nation, family, duty, authority, standards, traditionalism, patriarchalism — with the aggressive themes of a revived neo-liberalism — self-interest, competitive individualism, anti-statism”’ (Hall 1988: 157).

21. ‘None of the serious political statements made by that [the Hindu Right’s] political leadership contains any advocacy of theocratic institutions; and notwithstanding the exuberance of a few sadhus celebrating their sudden rise to political prominence, it is unlikely that a conception of the ‘Hindu Rashtra’ will be seriously propagated which will include, for instance, a principle that the laws of the state be in conformity with this or that *samhita* or even with the general spirit of the *Dharmasutra*’ (Chatterjee 1998b: 229).
Hindu nationalists were determined to convert politics from disputes about party programmes into a great battle for the cultural heart of the nation, a battle in which those who believed in the corporate integrity of the Hindu community would be aligned against the forces of Islam on one side and the forces of communism on the other (Graham 1990: 48; emphasis mine).

Let me briefly outline the ideological frame of Hindu nationalism and the moves through which it consolidates its stakes in the modern. It owes its genesis to socio-religious movements spearheaded by high-caste Hindus, for instance, the Arya Samaj founded in 1875 by Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824–83). It dominated the social and intellectual scenario of late nineteenth-century northern India, and provided its upper caste, literate society with an ethical frame with which to develop a self-identity and a common goal. The message of Dayananda struck a deep chord by combining two apparently distinct strands; a sharp criticism of many existing Hindu practices (idolatry and polytheism, child marriage, the taboos on widow remarriage, and Brahmin predominance and the multiplicity of castes based on birth alone) with an equally strong assertion of the superiority of a purified Vedic Hinduism over all other faiths — Christianity, Islam and Sikhism. According to Dayananda, during the Vedic times, society was organised around varnas based on the skills and accomplishments of an individual and not around a system of hereditary endogamous castes. Such a representation of social division enabled him to read western individualist values into the traditional varna system.

He also appealed to the Hindus to reject the outward aspects of European culture but to emulate its basic values such as hard work and discipline.

Even though Dayananda held brahmins responsible for the growth of superstitions and the degeneration of Hindu society, the alternative he proposed was founded on a brahminical worldview. His Arya Samaj was founded on an inclusive philosophy — brahminism as a status based on knowledge was potentially available to everyone — yet this meant a clear identification of ‘true’ knowledge as Vedic. Dayananda’s brahminism would become a trope in ACK — animating many of its narratives and getting further endorsed in the biographies of other spiritual leaders. The introduction to Adi Shankara informs us: ‘Shankara travelled throughout India, preaching that the Self and Brahmin is one — undivided and imperishable….Shankara the
learned Brahman, bowed to the superior wisdom of a lowly out-
caste, accepting him as a Guru’ (Pai 1974a). Similarly Tales from the
Upanishads is introduced as follows: ‘Knowledge is not the privilege
of a select group. Raikva, a cart driver, is humbly approached by one
of the great kings of his time, Janashruti, with a request to impart
knowledge about Brahman’ (Pai 1987).

The Arya Samajists accused the Congress of ignoring the specific
problems and demands of Hinduism and declared that the mind of
every Hindu had to be saturated with the consciousness that he was a
Hindu and not merely an Indian. The Dayananda Anglo-Vedic (DAV)
educational institutions were started with an intention to pursue the
aims of the Arya Samaj, namely, to inculcate a sense of having a com-
mon source, a common religion and a common language among all
Hindus. Notably, this was to be combined with a study of English and
western knowledge.22

It is worth noting that it was the Arya Samaj movement that
anticipated the establishment of the Benares Hindu University
(BHU) in 1915, which was designed as a ‘modern institution with
a religio-cultural agenda’ (Kumar 1990: 10). The idea of the BHU
had been conceived as early as 1905, and the financial help required
to realise this idea had been accumulated over the years through the
collective effort of a vast network of upper caste, landed and feudal
interests spread all over the United Provinces, the Central Provinces
and Bihar (ibid.). Thus the BHU was not a government enterprise
but a community project and it became ‘the mint where the modern
cultural coinage of the north Indian plains was stamped and approved
for circulation’ (ibid.). To be educated in BHU meant to be modern
in a particular sense:

To have been educated in Benares became symbolic of a new status, that
of a ‘modern’ Indian with a cultural consciousness which no other university
could supposedly give (Kumar 1990: 10; emphasis mine).

This trajectory of the BHU may well be representative of that strand
of Hindu revivalism that was at once a rejection of the ‘modern’
which implied ‘blind emulation’ of the West and also the making of
a new modern — reformed, rational and, above all, sourced from the
Vedas.

22 For a critical discussion of Hindu revivalist education, see Kumar
Hindutva: Some Foundational Principles

The ideology of Hinduism or ‘Hindutva’ was first codified in the 1920s when Vinayak Damodar Savarkar wrote his famous *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (1923) — a foundational text in the understanding of nationalist ‘Hinduness’. This text consisted of an appeal to consolidate Hindutva in face of pan-isms such as Pan-Islamism. For Savarkar, the territory of India could not be alienated from Hindu culture and Hindu people. He recharged the national space with the ethical nuance of the Holy Land:

> The Hindus are not merely the citizens of the Indian state because they are united not only by the bonds of the love they bear to a common motherland but also by the bonds of a common blood…. All Hindus claim to have in their veins the blood of the mighty race incorporated with and descended from the Vedic fathers (cited in Jaffrelot 1996: 28).

Christians and Muslims were not part of the nation because they did not look upon India as their Holy Land.

A recurrent theme in Savarkar’s discourse was the image of the lustful Muslim male who posed a threat to the honour of the Hindu woman and consequently to the honour of the Hindu community. Tanika Sarkar writes:

> From Savarkar’s formative writings on Muslim rule in India, the stereotype of an eternally lustful Muslim male with evil designs on Hindu women has been reiterated and made a part of a historical commonsense (1995: 185).

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), heavily influenced by Savarkar’s ideology, was founded at Nagpur in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar. It aspired to become the torchbearer of martial, organised and rational Hinduism, denuded of its rituals and forms of folk worship. Even as the RSS was conceived primarily as an organisation that would introduce and spread egalitarianism in the Hindu Rashtra, its leaders based their notion of an ideal society to the *varna* system. They also propagated an idea of human perfection that was a synthesis of brahminical and *kshatriya* values. The RSS ideologue Golwalkar repeatedly censured Congress ‘for the amazing theory […] that the nation is composed of all those who, for one reason or the
other happen to live at the time in the country’ (cited in Jaffrelot 1996: 52). The RSS standpoint was that the ‘foreign’ races in Hindustan should either accept Hindu culture and language or lead a completely subordinated existence in the nation.

It would be erroneous to suggest that the philosophy of the Hindu nation underlying the philosophy of Savarkar or of the RSS is adapted into the ACK worldview; one can never fully appreciate its ‘appeal’ if one were to take that approach. However, and this is more disturbing, it tempers the idea of Hindu nation with secularism, pulling them into a harmonious articulation. Anybody, who is rational, humane and shares the ‘normative’ values of the nation, is qualified for its membership. If the Muslim is excluded/othered it is because he does not share ‘our’ norms. The epitome of the recalcitrant Muslim would be Ala-ud-din Khilji in ACK’s Padmini (Pai 1973b) — not only does he lust for the beautiful, noble and pure Rajput queen Padmini, in a damning sequence he confesses to his bafflement that she would choose to self-immolate rather than give in to his advances. The norm of virtue/purity is not accessible to the ‘invader’.

The RSS ideology also yielded patriarchal modes through which the struggles for social equality could be refigured in the rhetoric of (familial) harmony.

The principles of equality propounded by Hinduism envisages an all round harmonious synthesis….All members of family mete out equal treatment to each other and they also perform different roles…. (cited in Kapur and Cossman 1996: 241–42)

The ‘nation–family’ would become a framing trope for the organisations affiliated to the RSS, such as the Bharatiya Jana Sangh. The RSS programme for education and character building that would pave the way for the advent of the ‘new man’ who would accept the membership of the nation unquestioningly and be ‘made into a living limb of the corporate personality of society’ (cited in Jaffrelot 1996: 59) is the one that finds most resonance in the ACK. I explore this at length in Chapter 4 but for now, a brief reference will suffice. In Chanakya, the brahmin guru Chanakya chooses Chandragupta as his disciple for cleansing Magadha of its degenerate rulers and foreign usurpers. Chandragupta shown to be powerful, strong and intelligent, but there also is a docility about him. He bows to the ‘right’
(brahminical) authority and is ever ready to follow Chanakya’s orders without any questioning.

While the RSS built itself as a cultural organisation removed from electoral politics, it was instrumental in the formation of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh in 1951 as a political party that locked horns with Nehru’s socialism right from its inaugural moment. The Jana Sangh was conceived as a party which would combine the goals of cultural nationalism with electoral politics. It had a vision for the long-term importance of building a Hindu Rashtra:

[E]lectoral success is only a means to achieve the realisation of our ideals. We do have to amass popular support, but only of those who can follow our ideals and become one with our organisation. We do not simply want popular support; it must be an idealistic popular support (cited in Jaffrelot 1996: 128).

The Jana Sangh’s party manifesto contained references to the exalted motifs of Hindu nationalist rhetoric alongside lengthy analyses of concrete economic, social and foreign policies. The resolution passed by the Jana Sangh working committee after the election in February 1952 further reveals the determination of the RSS men within the party to demonstrate an orientation towards social issues. One of its resolutions declared:

The Working Committee feels that now that the General Elections are over, the workers of the Jana Sangh should take up more important work for organising a network of Jana Sangh bodies all over the country and carrying through them, constructive programmes for the cultural, social and economic regeneration of our society and for the building of a sound and stable political structure on the basis of democracy. The constructive programme shall be carried on particularly among those sections of society which need help either because they have been lacking in opportunities and resources, education, leadership, or organisation (cited in Jaffrelot 1996: 121).

A list of ‘target’ groups followed: workers, students, women, refugees, peasants and above all Scheduled Castes.

The Jana Sangh rephrased Hinduisation as ‘Indianisation’. ‘Indianisation’ connoted the cultural oneness of India. In 1960, M. A. Venkat Rao, President of the Karnataka Jana Sangh, wrote:
In Indian thought, identity of underlying reality permits variety of surface custom or even philosophical view. But the difference or diversity or variety should not oppose the underlying reality. Difference should realise its common root in the identity (cited in Graham 1990: 96).

Balraj Madhok, one of the founding members of the party and the general secretary of the Punjab unit, argued that the Congress brand of nationalism boosted Muslim separatism and befriended Communism. Its flaw was that it remained detached from the ‘ancient traditions’ of India. Thus, it was ‘un-Indian, un-Hindu, and A-bharatiya’ (cited in Graham 1990: 98). In his famous book *Indianisation* (1970), Madhok emphasised the cultural singularity of India which for him was synonymous with Hindu culture based on a Vedic philosophy. He recognised the interventionist value of history in shaping the minds of children and appealed for changes in school textbooks which, he said, distorted facts by avoiding references to India’s traditional (and Hindu) heroes and heroines in the name of secularism and the eradication of communalism. It is significant that ACK’s first issue *Krishna* is published in the same year as *Indianisation*.

The Jana Sangh, like the RSS, mapped out a social ethic which emphasised the principles of corporatism and family solidarity. It envisaged an organic society in which economically disparate social groups were integrated into a homogenised community by means of reciprocity and mutual support instead of being divided by conflict and competition. Consequently, its solution to social inequality was to hold up the institution of the joint family as a model for the organisation of firms wherein managers and workers would treat one another as kin rather than as bound by an impersonal contract. Deendayal Upadhyaya, one of the party’s chief functionaries, said in 1966:

> Let us give a new form to this concept of family. Every corporate organisation or concern should develop into a family. The labour and management should work as members of one family. To inculcate this feeling, the concern should take upon itself all the responsibilities that the old joint family took of its members (ibid.: 159).

Such a social ethic would be positioned midway between ‘the economic and social restrictiveness of caste and the unrestrained individualism of modern urban life’ (ibid.). As Upadhyaya put it, ‘the basic cause of the
problems facing Bharat is the neglect of its national identity’ shown by ‘westernised and unprincipled politicians’ (cited in Jaffrelot 1996: 124). In *Integral Humanism* (1965), Upadhyaya rejected the theory of the social contract, and all the ideas of conflict being the motor force of change, explaining that society is self-born as an organic entity.23

Thus, the Jana Sangh was mainly a party of class conciliation and cooperation, and sought to contain the idea of conflict in the rhetoric of societal equilibrium. It acknowledged the rights of the workers to form trade unions and to strike and bargain collectively. It also defended their demand for a permanent wage board and a specified national minimum wage and maintained that workers should be allowed to share the profits of the industry. However, arbitration was put forth as the best solution to industrial disputes. The Jana Sangh warned workers against playing into the hands of the communists by participating in strikes and joining trade unions which were against ‘national interest’.24

We would note a recurrence of the nation–family trope in ACK. In one of the chitrakathas I discuss later on, Jayaprakash Narayan emerges as the patriarchal figure who persuades landlords to ‘give’ some of their land to the landless poor. The radical thrust of the naxalite and peasant movements of the 1970s is written into a more feudal configuration.

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23 ‘In our concept of four castes, they are thought of as analogous to the different limbs of Virat–Purusha. [...] These limbs are not only complementary to one another, but even further, there is individuality, unity. There is a complete identity of interest, identity of belonging. [...] If this idea is not kept alive, the castes, instead of being complementary, can produce conflict. But then this is distortion. [...] This is indeed the present condition of our society’ (Upadhyaya cited in Jaffrelot 1996: 125).

24 The party’s Central Working Committee adopted a resolution regarding industrial relations in December 1958: ‘Our workers will do well to remember that their interests are perfectly identified with those of the entire nation and that any effort on their part to over-emphasise their sectional interests at the cost of the nation will only result in their isolation from the rest of the people. The interests of the workers as well as of the nation can be best served only if the former are freed completely from the evil influence of the anti-national elements and organised properly into a national federation of all the patriotic trade unions’ (cited in Graham 1990: 170).
The Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Modern Guru

I wish to conclude this section with a discussion of the ideology and practices of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) in its early phase since its inception in 1964. I do find a shared context between the cultural–intellectual framework of ACK and the VHP. ACK was launched a few years after the birth of the VHP and in the course of this discussion it would become clear that it responded to a cultural need sharply felt in the rank and file of the VHP. In the 1960s and 1970s, the VHP did not display the militant traits that have come to be associated with it since the 1980s. The stress was more on the idiom of reform and reconciliation rather than on militancy and aggression. The leadership of the VHP in its early days consisted of members of the intelligentsia, the proprietary classes, petty-bourgeoisie and the sacred–religious strata. The VHP was brought into existence by these conservative sections, discontented as they were with the mildest transformation of the country’s economy and social structure along the lines of a socialist vision:

[T]he leadership of the VHP saw religiosity as a force that could arrest the tide of ‘socialism’ which was considered to be very irresponsibly unleashed by the Congress on the masses…. The work was aimed more against Christianity which according to them represented modernisation and also against Nehruvian politics which encouraged a surge in both modernisation and ‘communism’ (Katju 1998: 36–37).

While the VHP was concerned with defending, protecting and preserving Hindu society from the ‘insidiously spreading clutches of alien ideologies’ (ibid.: 37), the context of modern times was not absent from its thoughts. Shivram Shankar Apte, the first general secretary of the VHP, said that the aim of the organisation was:

[...] to take steps to consolidate and strengthen Hindu society, to protect, develop and spread Hindu values — ethical and spiritual — in the context of modern times, and to establish and strengthen, contact and help all Hindus living abroad (cited in ibid.; emphasis mine).

My intention here is to examine the VHP’s attempt in the 1960s, to insert religion into a rhetoric of progress and modernity, and make it

appealing and meaningful in its address to the middle-classes. One of its major strategies, as Jaffrelot has pointed out, was the creation of a strata of ‘modern gurus’ (Jaffrelot 1996: 194). Swami Chinmayananda sums up this move in 1963:

A new type of swami is emerging in this country who will serve as missionaries (sic) to their own people. At this crucial time of our history, we do not need those who live in a cave and meditate (cited in ibid.: 195).

In fact, Swami Chinmayananda (1916–93) would come to occupy the role of the emblematic ‘religious guru’ who would redefine Vedantic Hinduism not just in the Indian but also in the global context. It was in Chinmayananda’s ashram, The Sandipany Academy, that the idea of the VHP was conceived. Jaffrelot writes that Chinmayananda’s success was probably attributable to the relevance of his message for the middle-class as he emphasised ‘individual growth’, ‘social concern’ alongside religion as a ‘code and conduct for every man to make life a success’ (ibid.).

Chinmayananda was born as Balakrishna Menon in Ernakulam, Kerala, into a tradition-steeped upper caste family. He went to an English medium school, but was also proficient in Sanskrit and Malayalam. In 1940, he joined Lucknow University to study English Literature and Law. While there, he was active in the Literary Club, the Debating Club, the Dramatic Society and was also on the University Tennis team. In 1945, he moved to Delhi as a journalist with the National Herald and would soon find his way into the elite circles of the city where he would be popular for his wit and eloquence. A biographer writes:

His sympathies were with the poor, but at the same time he actively participated in life of the privileged class.26

His goal would be to bring back to the folds of Hinduism the westernised middle-class who he called ‘the modern educated illiterates’ (cited in Jaffrelot 1996: 195). At this point, a rather conspicuous affinity between the ideals of Chinmayananda and Pai begins to stare us in the face. It would not be wrong to say that Madhok, Chinmayananda and Pai are located across specific impulses and different spaces but, taken together, their work gives a certain direction to history at this moment.

After a rigorous period of training in the scriptures, Chinmayananda started travelling from 1951 onwards from one big city to another, spreading Vedantic philosophy as a panacea to fight economic and spiritual degradation. An aura of iconoclasm is attached to the Swami in most biographies, as somebody who barged into the bastion of the priestly class which believed that spiritual knowledge was a prerogative that belonged to it.

The priest class, the guardians of the scriptures hearing that the young radical swami invaded their closely guarded territory, were outraged and criticised him strongly. Not only was he taking the secret knowledge to the streets by holding public lectures, but he was teaching it in English, the language of the foreigners! The priests and preachers called him a rebel and swore that God himself would tear out Swamiji’s tongue for such sacrilege.27

In 2001, ACK would represent this event in its *Swami Chinmayananda*:

Chinmayananda did not believe in ritualistic religion, and condemned discrimination based on caste and gender. His magic lay in the fact that he could convince the ‘materialistic and skeptical’ middle-class that spirituality was not a hindrance to progress. Also it was his urbane charm and dynamism that attracted the modern youth (Pai 2001: Introduction).

During an interview with me in 2003, Pai made fond references to the warmth and urbane humor of the Swami, a personal friend to him. Chinmayananda made frequent trips abroad to discourse on the Vedanta, and had a large following outside India both among Hindus and non-Hindus, and was the first one to voice the need for an organisation to preserve Hindu culture outside India. He was vocal in advocating that the knowledge and awareness of the Hindu scriptures had to be nurtured in childhood. One of the major objectives of the VHP, as laid down by him, was to enable the children of Hindus abroad ‘to have an opportunity to learn, to appreciate and involve themselves in our tradition’ (cited in Katju 1998: 43). The introduction of ACK’s *The Gita* (1977) would be written by him, where he would glowingly acknowledge the contributions of this project in educating children:

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Children especially and elders often understand better with their eyes than by their ears. Truths of life, moral values and ethical principles are more readily brought into the comprehension of the community through a demonstration of them in their daily life by the elders, parents, teachers, priests, sages and saints.

These are sad times. Such expressive demonstrators are getting really rare; very rare indeed. To that extent our youngsters have lost respect for their elders...I congratulate the publishers [of Amar Chitra Katha] for the inexhaustible service they are doing for the future through the growing children (Pai 1977a: Introduction).

The Swami’s life and teachings highlight his importance within the context of the VHP’s mobilisational moves in the 1960s. The ‘modern guru’ would give Hinduism a new face, one that would make sense in the global arena and, of course, to the modernising middle-classes. Chinmayananda’s persona gave conviction to the premise that spiritual regeneration along the lines of the Vedanta would heal the nation as socialism never could. The aim behind the formation of the VHP was, as he put it, to ‘awake(n) the Hindus and to make them conscious of their proud place in the comity of nations. Once we have made every Hindu conscious of his own identity, the Parishad has done its job and we shall feel fully rewarded’ (cited in Katju 1998: 42).

The ‘modern guru’ or the sage who comes out of sanyas to guide the moral battle of the nation will find a prominent place in ACK in several stories of saints/reformers. I will analyse this trend in Chapter 4 of this book. At one end of this spectrum is Chanakya who must leave his ashram to train Chandragupta against the debauched Nanda with no respect for the ‘fundamental order’ and, at the other end is the Gandhian-socialist leader Jayaprakash who comes out of political reclusion in the 1970s to defend the cause of the workers and peasants with a call for ‘total revolution’.

In this section I briefly discuss the principal concepts and themes that underlie Chapters 2, 3 and 4.

In Chapter 2, I examine ACK in the context of its narrative and visual intertextuality. ACK draws on various (visual) storytelling traditions of India, such as the chitrakatha or the fresco, and combines them with some of the formal features of the western comic. I contend that, in terms of form and content, it is more akin
to the chitrakatha than to the comic. We will find that even as ACK borrows from traditional visual narrative forms, it has an underlying code of realism. ACK’s realism is fashioned to be adequate to its agenda — for instance, the militarisation of the nation or the masculinisation of the nationalist subject in post-colonial India. Indian art traditions are incorporated into western illusionist mode to construct the ‘authentic’ national subject — spiritual yet martial/masculine; modern, individualist yet culturally rooted. Western realism has always been a ‘compromised’ commodity in the Indian context. For example, as Geeta Kapur (1989) has discussed, Ravi Varma did not passively reproduce the style of western academic realism but used the oil medium in combination with indigenous artistic genres to yield ‘ideal’ figures for the nationalist contest for moral ascendancy.

In Chapter 3, I deal with ACK’s use of historical/mythical material to formulate a contemporary praxis. Its history is consciously fashioned by its creator, Anant Pai, as pedagogic rather than as data-driven. He criticises history textbooks as dry, uninteresting and hence unable to capture the imagination of children. For him, history is a tool that can bring about a ‘desired change’ in society. ACK is the result of Pai’s disaffection with textbook history. In other words, he is able to envisage and tap the potential of history as a civil societal pedagogic tool in the site of popular culture.

In this chapter, I explore how the myth and the history of ACK are actively engaged in producing the modern bourgeois subject. There is a critical link between Pai’s ‘history’ and his endeavour to manage the rebellion of the youth against familial and societal authorities in the 1970s through a renewal of faith in tradition. I discuss Pai’s programme for personality development and success in a competitive world, addressed to the youth, as inalienably allied to the project of ACK. Stories of great men who overcome tremendous barriers to achieve their goal lend legitimacy to contemporary bourgeois contention that merit and hard work and not welfarist ‘concessions’ should be the means to success and advancement. My analysis reveals that ACK’s history is not about the past but serves as a ‘practical ethic’ in the present to actively produce the ‘adequate’ citizen of the modern nation. In this, ACK owes a debt to nationalist historiography in the nineteenth century. Nationalist historians like Bankim Chandra foregrounded the instructive rather than the informative potential of history. They struggled to contest the authority of the coloniser’s history that imaged
the Bengali/Hindu as effeminate, by writing a counter-history which was projective rather than merely ‘factual’. Myths, fables and various pre-novelistic traditions of India were incorporated into historical narratives to establish the superiority of the Hindu. These forms may have been considered unscientific by a positivist historian like James Mill and by Enlightenment standards; but the nationalist historian shrewdly gauged the function of history as an exercise of power and its potential as an ideological tool. Thus, myths and legends had an altogether contemporary function in nationalist history. ACK closely resembles nationalist history in fashioning a history that is cut to the measure of its responsibilities in the present.

In Chapter 4, I undertake detailed textual analysis to explore the historical affiliations of ACK’s ideal of masculine perfection. I have chosen the following chitrakathas for critique: Chanakya (1971), Dayananda (1976), Chinmayananda (2001), Jayaprakash Narayan (1980), Shivaji (1972), Lachit Barphukan (1978), Padmini (1973). Masculinity is the crucial norm through which ACK constructs its ideal of an individualist, proud, martial and Hindu nation. Within the scope of this study, I have elaborated gender primarily in the context of the masculinist worldview of the series. I trace a continuity between the disciplinary roles of modern, pragmatic gurus like Chinmayananda and the martial, brahmin sages and reformers of ACK like Chanakya and Dayananda. The latter have an allegoric function in relation to the present, irrespective of the period they belong to.

The sages and reformers of ACK have the task to set right the ‘fundamental order’ of the nation by emerging out of reclusion and entering the world of politics. Thus, Chanakya leaves the confines of his ashram when the brahminic world order is threatened by Nanda, the ‘debauched’ king of Magadha, and by ‘foreign’ invasion. He ‘chooses’ and trains Chandragupta as a disciple and manoeuvres his enthronement as the ruler of Magadha, because the latter is strong, manly, courageous and but, most of all, respectful towards the ‘right’ authority. It is ingenious how ACK presents a Gandhian–socialist figure like Jayaprakash in the manner of a guru who comes out of political sanyas for the sake of the ‘moral regeneration’ of the nation. ACK’s portrayal of Jayaprakash provides us with some vital insights into the grounds on which an alliance was made possible between him and the right in the 1970s.
ACK’s martial heroes like Shivaji are ‘ideal’ masculine figures who fought for the values of the ‘Hindu’ nation and thus serve as models for emulation. In portraying these martial heroes, ACK draws on the modes in which a masculine Hindu ideal was articulated in nineteenth century India. For instance, Bankim Chandra’s notion of anushilan is imperative for a nuanced understanding of the politics of masculinity in ACK. The theory of anushilan entailed an ascetics that combined the western discourse of progress with a practical–spiritual reading of the Gita. According to Bankim’s reading of the Gita, ideal masculinity should consist of a combination of force and mercy — force, towards the enemy and mercy, towards the subordinate.

ACK’s history is underwritten by a critique of what the right-wing has termed ‘the appeasement of the minorities’ (by Nehru’s secular government). ACK endorses aggression against those who challenge the boundaries of a ‘Hindu nation’. Its martial hero is emblematic of Bankim’s ideal of masculinity — as he defends the nation — except that now the threat to the nation is posed from within rather than without. Like Bankim’s ideal of perfection, he is depicted as ruthless towards the enemy and merciful towards the weak, the women, or the fallen soldier.

My analysis of Padmini concentrates on ACK’s construction of ‘ideal Indian womanhood’. Padmini symbolises the purity of the nation and the threat to her honour by Ala-ud-din Khilji is coterminous with a threat to the nation. The memory of Padmini’s sacrifice is, on the one hand, meant to incite the nationalist male into action against the ‘enemy’, and on the other, mark off the Muslim ‘Other’ who does not share this memory or the ‘ethos’ of the nation.

In Chapter 5, I analyse Babasaheb Ambedkar to explore how, with the advent of liberalisation in the late 1970s and 1980s, ACK focuses more and more on the ‘virtues’ of hard work, merit, manhood and grit. This chitrakatha throws into relief notions of masculinity in a bourgeois individualist context. ‘Perfection’, it demonstrates, is within, and can be achieved through the indomitable spirit and endeavour of the nationalist subject — in this case none other than Ambedkar — irrespective of ‘external’ factors like caste, gender and community.

I follow up Babasaheb Ambedkar with a reading of Kalpana Chawla (2005) as the valourisation of the self-assured global self in the twenty-first century. In the former, the symbol of radical politics is displaced.
to a safer ground, but an anxiousness to contain caste is still palpable. It must constantly prove Ambedkar’s patriotic fervour as overshadowing his ‘other’ caste aspirations. However, this sense of disquiet is barely visible in *Kalpana Chawla*. The individual self is poised on the world stage and Kalpana’s ‘achievements’ appear to be without any need of defence against the fraught questions of caste or gender.

The final chapter is a conclusion to this work.

I found (through my analysis in *Chapter 2*) that the form of ACK is more akin to the traditional form of chitrakatha in India than to the western comic. And hence I refer to it as chitrakatha as per the citation in the *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature* (Datta 1987).

My task in this study is to probe the implication of the secular, modern self and the mythologies of nation, national culture and common origin, of which ACK is emblematic. To this end, I map a trajectory in ACK — resonant with the cultural politics of Hindutva no doubt — but every now and then uncomfortably digressing into what one accepts as rational, freedom-driven, compassionate and secular, and removed from any kind of ‘fundamentalist’ worldview. It is in these moments that we glimpse the historical entanglements between the ideologies of Hindu nationalism and secularism as they have evolved in India. Hindu nationalism has posited a reformed, Vedantic ideal of Hinduism as the spiritual essence of the nation, seeking an internal, reformist response to the issue of the outcaste. Hence, in ACK, brahminism is represented as a category of ‘knowledge’, potentially available to everyone. It is to be noted that, even with secularism, ‘caste’ does not enter the domain of the political; it is primarily understood as a social issue — as that which the language/practice of politics must ‘overcome’ through modernisation and development. As for Islam, its communitarian ‘difference’ is understood as social backwardness/retrogression — one that would/should eventually be absorbed into the modern political life. Hence the Hindu nationalist–secularist consensus on the Uniform Civil Code as the ideal/universal legal norm to guide conduct, irrespective of communities. In order to be the

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28 For a nuanced discussion of the ‘outward turn’ of Hinduism seeking to address/accommodate the outcaste through the practice of ‘seva’ or service, see R. Srivatsan (2008).
30 Or, as Devji notes, partition can only be understood an upsurge of irrational, ‘communal’ violence — placing it outside ‘normality and history both by withholding rational agency from its participants’ or probing the nation’s own complicity in this event (1992: 17).
citizen of the modern nation, the Muslim must eschew communitarian affiliations — in Aamir R. Mufti’s words:

secular nationalism presents a specifically Muslim modernism with the following choice: it can either dissolve itself within the nationalist mainstream, and simultaneously give up any claim to being ‘representative’...or be by definition and (perversely) communalist, retrograde, and effectively in collusion with the feudalizing policies of imperialism; in either case, it must cease being ‘true’ to itself (1995: 84).

ACK manages to straddle the ideologies of Hindu nationalism as well as secularism by tapping into those articulations where the two are imbricated — in their validation of an unbroken national culture, and endorsement of a normative modernity which looks at difference either as a threat or as something that must adapt itself to the ‘essence’, and thereby enhance its catholicity, but must never interrogate it.31 My analysis draws into its orbit select ACK texts spread across three decades, from the 1970s into the 2000s, that uncover a genealogy of the contemporary national self — invested in a language of goals, passions, dreams, achievement, drive, urbanity, freedom, equality — in short, what it means to be both Indian and global today.

While the stories of ACK are scripted by various writers, there is clearly an overarching house policy which reflects Anant Pai’s vision and imagination of history. It is true that India Book House, like all establishments, would not have been free from internal squabbles and dissentions. The staff frequently nursed grievances against Pai’s overbearing demeanour and authoritarian approach.32 A script-writer or editor at IBH might tweak a dialogue or a character to suit her own

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31 Talal Asad (1993) is illuminating in this context. He examines the British Government’s response to the expressions of Muslim anger and distress in the wake of the publication of Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*. It defines the Muslim’s position vis-à-vis a common national culture that is unmistakably British. Muslims/immigrants can bring practices/beliefs that expand the scope of this culture but cannot question/alter its ‘essence’. The politicisation of identity or political expressions of dissent on part of the Muslim seem to radically challenge the core British values and hence are undesirable and unacceptable.

32 Nandini Chandra (2008) has detailed the internal resistances and grievances amongst the staff of India Book House against Pai’s overriding dictates.
interpretation of the story. Also, the ACK artists who came from different regions of India — Maharashtra, Karnataka, Punjab — would sometimes ignore editorial briefs to introduce little variations into the visuals that emerged out of their local practices and training. However, these dissents never took the shape of doubting or contesting the fundamental premise on which Pai’s envisioning of ACK rested — rational, Vedantic Hinduism as the foundation as well as the panacea of the modern nation. It is this conviction that contributes to the tight knit aura/truth of ACK — reflected in the interreferentiality that marks its texts, the strategies and themes that bind its opus. Hence, Pai and the ACK vision remain central to this analysis.
Comics, Scrolls, Frescos and the ‘Chitra Katha’

But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice — politics.

Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’

ACK is often loosely referred to as a comic; even Pai called it an ‘Indian comic’. But a close look at its narrative form would reveal its distinctness from the comic form as has evolved in the West, even though it shares many of the formal conventions of the latter. In terms of its intertextuality, ACK combines various pre-novelistic narrative conventions of India with some of the formalist and visual conventions of the western comic and animated art to produce an effect that is altogether unique, and is mediated through the historical contexts within which it comes into existence. ACK’s editor, as we have seen, had the declared intention to teach ‘Indian themes and values’ to the middle-class youth who were getting alienated from their ‘roots’. The narrative composition of the series significantly contributes to the production of an ‘Indianness’ that is at once modern and traditional, contemporary and ‘immortal’. The more one probes the manner in which diverse narrative traditions are combined to lend ACK its textual richness and historical complexity, the more one is convinced of its formal innovativeness and specificity. To treat it as a ‘comic’ would be to misread it. As we shall see, the series, aptly titled Chitra Katha, creates a new form taking after the chitrakatha tradition.

It may be useful to begin with a brief discussion of the western comic and its general reception by parents and educators as a genre that was trivial at its best, and morally bankrupt and violent at its worst. This throws into sharp relief the fact that ACK, by contrast, was consciously designed by Anant Pai as a respectable, middle-class pedagogic enterprise in the late 1960s. How does it negotiate the
distance between its ‘lofty’ propositions and the popular perceptions of the comic? Perhaps the clues lie in the story of its many borrowings and assimilations — the dexterity and shrewdness with which it mixes the pre-modern as well as contemporary popular/hybrid Indian visual traditions with western forms of animation to achieve a secular and contemporary effect. This chapter is an attempt to trace the many possible histories of the ACK form, but first, let us investigate the most obvious connection — the comic.

The ‘Corrupt’ Comic

What follows is a brief and selective trajectory of the comic form as it developed in the West, especially in Britain and America, aimed at foregrounding ACK’s distinctness in terms of form, content and readership.

Comics came to acquire the dubious status of cheap, non-serious trivia, especially during the 1950s, and were branded as morally corrupting by parents and teachers alarmed by the depiction of horror and violence in them. This may well have something to do with the beginnings of the comic strip and its potentially threatening subject matter. The comic strip came into existence in Britain in the 1840s as a feature in the periodical magazines and the Penny Weeklies. Comic magazines in England in the nineteenth century aimed at a national readership that was not yet developed — namely, ‘children’ from different classes. In actuality, the bulk of their readership consisted of the industrial working classes. The comic has sometimes been defined in a manner that is tautological but points to the etymology of the word: ‘a comic is what has been produced under the definition of a “comic”’ (Barker 1989: 8). In other words, it was intended to be light-hearted, non-threatening reading material for children. The emergence of the comic gains significance in the context of the campaign against

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1 I have confined this analysis to the popular conceptions about comic in the wake of the moral censure it received in the 1950s. Comics obviously have a rich and textured history. Also, as Douglas Wolk writes, ‘It is no longer news that comics have grown up. A form that was once solely the province of children’s entertainment now fills bookshelves with mature, brilliant works by artists like Chris Ware, the Hernandez brothers, Dan Clowes, and Charles Burns, discussed in a sort of tone that was once reserved for exciting young prose novelists….A character in a 2004 New Yorker cartoon spoke for a lot of people: “Now I have to pretend to like graphic novels, too?”’ (Wolk 2007: 3).
the Penny Dreadfuls in the Victorian era. The Penny Dreadfuls were serialised tales sold at a penny an issue, and were mainly consumed by the working class. These were often gruesome narratives of crime, arrests and punishments. There were also a number of anti-aristocratic melodramas and classic romances of lawlessness (Barker 1989: 99). Nineteenth century middle-class moral campaigners held the Penny Dreadfuls responsible for the moral corruption of the working-class children. They alleged that these weeklies sent evil messages to children and depraved them even as they enticed them through the fantastical and fanciful tales.

The comic book, as indicated by its name, came into existence as ‘counterposed to everything that is dangerous’ (ibid.: 8). For instance, Alfred Harmsworth, the newspaper publisher, produced Comic Cuts which were meant to be non-serious, ‘harmless’ yet attractive material for children, and were intended to counter the ‘baleful’ influence of the Penny Dreadfuls (ibid.). It is of course ironic that the comic magazine itself ended up as controversial and oppositional to the values of the middle-class. David Kunzle describes these as ‘unsentimental, irreverent, and arguably immoral [which indulged in] a flagrant violation of the moral principle, so dear to the (adult) bourgeois order, that good will triumph, obedience will be rewarded’ (1990: 4).

It is a measure of the ‘pestilent’ material published by the comic magazines that these abounded in ‘police and jails, absurd accusations and gratuitous arrests’ registering the protest of the working classes against the repressive apparatuses of the state (ibid.: 7). An issue of the Victorian comic magazine *Man in the Moon* called *How My Rich Uncle Came to Dine at Our Villa* (July–September 1848) is a portrait gallery of prisoners and presents ‘a socio-political panorama of the delinquency so feared by the lower middle-classes: there are drunkards, spouse beaters, common criminals’ (ibid.: 312). No ‘respectable’ magazine of the nineteenth century was willing to carry the comic strip.²

² ‘A rule confirms the lower-class orientation of the comic strip: the more serious, the more political, the more sophisticated the magazine, the less likely it was to carry comic strips. *Punch, Kladderadatsch*, the post-1852 *Charivari* have few….The dignified allegorical cartoons of Leech and Tenniel in *Punch* show how completely political criticism had been purified of buffoonery and grossness; and the comic strip shows, for the most part, how completely comedy and farce had been purified of overt politics’ (Kunzle 1990: 7).
Coming to the comic scene in America, critical writing has attempted to engage with the medium with seriousness and explored its ideological underpinnings. For instance, Arthur Berger tells us that *Yellow Kid*, which came into existence in 1885, was addressed to the context of a working-class audience and created a politically charged world of ‘tough, little immigrant kids and disheveled old women with sad eyes and a hopeless look on their faces’ (1973: 27). Similarly, a lot has been said about the ideological/national tasks of the super-hero comics — *Superman* (1938), *The Lone Ranger* (1939) and *Batman* (1939) to name only the most famous — giving a boost to America’s self-image in the wake of World War II.

Yet, whether in America or in England, in the popular imagination of the 1960s and the 1970s, comics never attained a respectable status. Parents and educators expressed grave concern over the bad influence of comics on young minds. George Gale wrote in the *Times Education Supplement* in 1971:

> While violence is the main feature of these children’s comics, the systematic destruction of the English language runs it a close second… [W]eek after week children are invited to laugh at people who are fat, deformed, handicapped or ugly, especially when pain is being inflicted. This is accompanied throughout by crude, ugly language. Such a regular diet can do nothing but harm children (cited in Barker 1989: 92–93).

The popular horror comics of the 1950s with their depictions of blood, gore and violence augmented these anxieties, culminating in widespread hysteria. The result was stringent censorship of comic books. The ‘spiritual crusader’ against comics was Dr. Fredric Wertham who wrote his famous *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954 linking juvenile delinquency to the practice of reading comics.3

3 To quote from the review on dust jacket of the book brought out by the Museum Press in 1955:

> Here is a book of vital importance to every parent today. It is an account of the gradual and relentless perversion of a whole generation of children through the medium of the ‘horror comic’ magazines — publications which, to the consternation of all enlightened people, are still being purveyed widely in this country.

> In these ‘horror comics,’ as a glance at the illustrations will show, vice is glorified, sadism encouraged, and murder and rape extolled in a most appalling and deliberate fashion — all under the guise of ‘entertainment’ for children (cited in Sabin 1993: 30).
The above sketch of the comic strip, albeit in broad strokes, points to the triviality, risks and moral corruption popularly associated with the genre. This is in striking contrast to the careful setting up of ACK as a respectable, middle-class, pedagogic enterprise in India. As stated in The Telegraph of 13 November 1983, ‘The appearance or should one say the invasion, of ACK comics on the market a few years ago broke the old parent–child dichotomy over comics’ (‘Comments’).

A ‘Serious’ Enterprise

ACK began with an impulse to reform and appropriate an Indian market invaded by western comics like Phantom, Superman and Tarzan in the 1960s. Pai’s business sense left him in no doubt that the market for comics was much vaster than the market for illustrated storybooks. He noted in a brochure for the India Book House:

The average sale of a comic book in India is not less than 30,000 copies, whereas the average sale of an illustrated children’s book is not more than 3,000 copies (Pai 1978).

ACK is indeed packaged as a comic book and shares many of its conventions. Like the comic strip, it is a narrative in the form of a sequence of pictures, usually accompanied by text. In terms of graphics, the strips are broken into bordered panels, which help to segment action. These panels are sometimes enlarged to emphasise a dramatic moment, and may sometimes cover an entire page. The narrative text is placed in a box at the top (and sometimes at the bottom) of the panel and delineates the action portrayed therein. Dialogue appears in the form of speech-balloons, which issue from the character’s mouth. Similarly, thought is presented in think-balloons. Lettering is at times enlarged or highlighted to suggest the intensity or loudness of speech. Close-ups and angled shots, standard features in any comic book, are used to present action and characters in dramatic moments.

Douglas Wolk writes about the tendency to think of a ‘serious’ comic as not comic but something else. He cites Gloria Emerson’s review in the 16 June 2003, issue of The Nation: ‘It has never been a habit of mine to read comic books...so I was, at first, slightly taken aback by Persepolis, The Story of a Childhood, by Marjane Satrapi. But she is such a talented artist and her black-and-white drawings are so captivating, it seems wrong to call her memoir a comic book. Rather, it is a “graphic memoir” in the tradition of Maus, Art Spiegelman’s brilliant story of the Holocaust’ (2007: 12).
ACK also effectively draws on some of the features of the animated film, of which the comic strip is the forerunner. As in an animated Disney film, background is important for its visuals, especially when they depict a dramatic moment. These are the moments when a single panel may occupy an entire page. The visual background contributes to the action instead of distracting the viewer from it. For example, in *Chhatrasal*, when king Chhatrasal has a chance meeting with Prannath who is pre-destined to be his guru and guide him in his fight against the Mughals, the background is ghostly and incandescent. The whole effect contributes to the mystical sacredness of Chhatrasal’s mission.

Following the art of animation, ACK’s use of colour is meant to enhance the dramatic effect. The Disney artists had discovered early on that colours were not meant to be chosen with the simple ease of merchandising a postcard (Thomas 1958: 172). For example, red stood for strong emotion — blood, battle, fire. Similarly, in ACK, as young Chhatrasal sits under a tree, ruminating over the murder of his parents by the Mughals, the forest background is splattered with red, hinting at the revenge that is to come. The opening panel of *Padmini*, spread across a whole page, depicts the fort of Chittor and the sky beyond splashed with patches of red, serving as a charged backdrop for the silhouettes of the brave warriors of Chittor’s past. The colour plays out the verbal narrative — ‘Chittor is the soul of Rajasthan. Its history is the saga of Rajput valour’ (Pai 1973b: 1). ACK also has regular colour conventions that shore up the ‘identity’ of a character in the hegemonic scheme of things. The *asuras* (demons) are always black or brown and the *devas* (gods) are fair or blue (for instance, Rama or Krishna). Similarly characters belonging to lower class/caste and tribes are almost always of a dark complexion. The Muslim always wears green.

Clearly then, ACK does share a common ground with the comic and related art forms. Pai himself acknowledges his debt to comics in the way ACK is conceptualised. In a 1978 seminar on school education, he offered an eloquent defence of the comic as a medium of education. But implicit even in this defence is his intent to transform, in fact, to invent this medium anew in a different context so as to make it pertinent and well-respectable. ACK would not be an ‘ordinary’ comic:

In all fairness, it must be admitted that some comics could do damage to the impressionable minds of children. If there are bad comics, let us oppose them, as we oppose bad books or bad movies, but let us not frown on comics as a medium of education. Should we stop using a
tool as useful as a comic, just because it can cause harm? A matchbox is useful — a must for every house. Do we stop using it because it can cause a fire?

I think we have come a long way since the days when the law laid down that a railway engine should not move faster than four miles an hour and to ensure safety, a messenger must run ahead to warn all against the approaching engine (Pai 1979).

As we shall see, Pai is never wary of innovation and freely adapts from a range of indigenous visual and narrative traditions to build ACK’s distinct ‘Indian’ and authoritative identity. Ultimately, ‘comic’ becomes inadequate to represent his project.

A closer scrutiny of the visuals and the content of ACK reveals its entanglements with the pre-novelistic Indian visual and storytelling traditions. The question that then needs to be engaged with is how does ACK borrow from the older art traditions of India (which may be at odds with the more modern themes deployed around the individual), and yet develop codes of representation which successfully achieve an effect that is entirely contemporary and invested with a present-day agenda. It ushers in a ‘modern’ that is two-pronged — resonant with the traditional in terms of form and content, and yet framed by the concerns of masculine individualism associated with the rise of the novel and realism. As Meenakshi Mukherjee has pointed out in a groundbreaking study in Realism and Reality (1985), the early Indian writers who chose to adopt the novel form, faced a tough dilemma. The pre-novelistic narratives of India presented time as cyclic, and did not have the linear progression of a novel. Neither did they project human beings outside the social hierarchy — as individuals exercising agency. For the early Indian novelist it was a challenge to write in the new form:

In the rigidly hierarchical familial and social structure of nineteenth-century India, individualism was not an easy quality to render in literature. One of the problems of the early novelist was to reconcile two sets of values — one obtained by reading an alien literature and the other available in life (Mukherjee 1985: 7).

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5 It is only with the rise of the novel in England that one finds the hero exercising a choice and an agency distinctly his own. The epic hero’s fate is linked to the fate of his community and the romance hero’s conduct is guided by a pre-determined chivalric code (Mukherjee 1985: 4).
Sculpting a Middle Class

Mukherjee goes on to explore the complex negotiations that Indian writers in the nineteenth century had to carry out with the novel form in order to depict the workings of a society bound by feudal hierarchies and norms. They continued to borrow from pre-novelistic narrative conventions in an attempt to engage the intricacies of their peculiar social contexts and relationships.

One can say that a similar ‘borrowing’ takes place in the case of ACK to make possible a form and meaning adequate to its contemporary tasks. The very naming — Amar Chitra Katha — suggests a linkage with the katha tradition of storytelling in India. A list of the common themes narrated in a katha would comprise of the kidnapping of a girl, battle, separation and epic and puranic events. For instance, in Banabhatta’s Kadambari, written in the seventh century, there is lavish use of poetic imagination as well as elaborate and intricate constructions in relating the story. The embellishments of description sometimes eclipse the events that are being described. There is no attempt to make the description realistic and invention is valued in itself.

Looking at the lavish visuals of ACK and the marvelous tales of the beautiful women and the brave men belonging to the classics, legends, folk tales and history of India, one can easily trace a lineage to katha. The characters in western comics belong to the present and however heroic they are, they still drive cars and smoke cheroots and work in offices. Superman does contribute to the construction of America’s self-image in the time of war and the Lone Ranger fights a lone and brave battle against oppression and the destruction of the planet. But these are not heroes from the (often distant) past. The element of wonder evoked by their feats is not the same as the quaint magic of the once-upon-a-time.

Tradition and Contemporaneity

The past, it is true, is the staple of most ACK narratives, but important translations do take place to mark its contemporaneity. In katha, embellishments and inventiveness are valued in themselves, but in ACK, details of description and visual splendour are geared towards a reality effect. The visual density of a scene consisting of doors, lattices,

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6 I have derived my information regarding katha chiefly from Mukherjee (1999) and Datta (1987).
ornaments, curtains, flowers, etc., go on to shore up the authenticity of a scene and are not mere embellishments. They contribute to the mood of a scene or a character and to the physical ‘thereness’ of the event. The past is made plausible by generating a Barthesian reality effect:

[T]here would always be a corner, a detail, an inflection of space or colour to report…by positing the referential as real, by pretending to follow it in a submissive fashion, realistic description avoids being reduced to fantasmatic activity…. (Barthes 1986: 145).

The wondrous and the high-flown in ACK are always underscored by a reference to ‘reality’. Let us look at the very first issue, *Krishna* (Pai 1970b) to understand how an element of the quotidian slips into the narrative to humanise a divine character and in the process, make him more of an everyday child. To cite from the introduction:

Krishna has a particular appeal for children because he is one of them as no other divine is. Krishna the boy is mischievous; he is naughty. He has irrepressible energy for innumerable escapades. He is no prig; he is no puritan. He has divine powers. But he humanises them and remains a boy. This powerful human element is the secret of Krishna’s universal popularity. He is secular even as he is sacred, and so he remains throughout his life. That is why Krishna is a living presence to all children who have listened to the stories about him (ibid: introduction).

We come across several instances where Krishna demonstrates awe-inspiring power and yet remains a ‘child’. Unlike his playmates, he does not flee at the sight of an angry, charging bull, and instead climbs onto its back and tames him. Yet this episode is shorn of mystical sense of awe that the action of a deity must evoke. The Krishna here has an element of the boy-hero of the boys’ adventure stories in England. Let us look at the commentaries accompanying the two panels depicting the bull charging at Krishna and Krishna mounted on the back of the fierce animal, respectively:

1. As Krishna neared him, the bull snorted fiercely and charged.
2. But Krishna was too quick for him (ibid.: 17).

The tone of the commentary is not exactly that of the wonderment associated with narrations of the divine powers of a god. Similarly, when Krishna is dancing atop the hood of the deadly snake Kaliya,
we see a crowd of onlookers from the village watching him with their backs to us. But one of them turns to face the rest and says ‘What a boy!’ (Pai 1970b: 20) His expression is more of indulgent bemusement than of awe, and his tone personalised. The narrative participates in the aesthetic of wonder as much as the aesthetic of the ordinary to project the actions of the protagonist as an actualization of the innate potential of a human to its fullest rather than as miracles wrought by the divine. Its strategy invites the reader to identify with the subject of heroism.

Anuradha Kapur’s illuminating perspective on the Parsi theatre at the beginning of the twentieth century helps us to frame this ‘event’. She says that when the story is about gods and heroes from the epics, the ‘personalized tone of voice and the causality of the narrative “secularises” the event and makes the action plausible in human terms. Thus gods and heroes appear understandable to us, close to us, like us’ (1993a: 97). As the divine figures are made to resemble us, they also become figures we can identify with. We can dream of accomplishing the deeds that they accomplish.

Therefore, the gods and heroes become supermen, able to enact our desire for omnipotence. This, in some senses, is an idealization of ourselves and our possibilities…idealization is possible because it is possible to identify with the gods and heroes, and identification is possible because the mode of representation — the discourse of realism — places the figures in time and space which is secular and contiguous with our own…. (ibid.).

In contrast, when viewing the traditional icon, the devotee never aspires to emulate the action of the god. What is more, even the god is not presented in the state of acting out. The icon represents the state of completed action. Mahishasuramardini, for example, is always shown triumphant, never engaged in actual battle. Portraying a battle as it happens would place it alongside the run of everyday struggles.

Looping back to ACK, one may want to think about the implications of the remark made by Gowri Subramaniam, a Bombay housewife, back in 1988:

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7 Bankim, in his Krishnacarita, produces a Krishna who is entirely rational. He was convinced that Krishna’s figure must be emptied of all the supernatural powers ascribed to him in folklore. Instead, his actions must be put in a frame of human causality and shown as what is humanly possible. For an extended discussion, see Kaviraj (1995).
My children always played Tarzan and Superman. Once they began reading Amar Chitra Katha, they switched to Hanuman or the capture of Shivaji’s fort (cited in Gangadhar 1988: 140).

ACK obviously could offer a subject position from within which it was possible for the modern reader to identify with a divine or historical hero. It does borrow from the form, style and content of pre-modern visual traditions of India, but each of these are transmuted to yield points of identification for the modern subject.

The Chitrakatha and Amar Chitra Katha

The ‘chitrakatha’, a traditional form related to the katha, refers to a popular and ancient Indian storytelling tradition in scrolls. It involves

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8 I again draw the details about the chitrakatha form from Mukherjee (1999) and Datta (1987).
the narration of stories from *puranas* and legends accompanied by the serial unfolding of painted scrolls and panels. This form of storytelling has been known in India for a very long period and is extant in many regional variations. The storytelling consists in invocation of deities and ritual singing accompanying the display of each panel. Traditionally, many of such picture-shows happened in the marketplace and were often so absorbing that the audience lost track of the goings-on around them. The stories were narrated by wandering storytellers.

Let me draw attention to certain principal themes and formats of the chitrakatha. The Rajasthani chitrakatha consists mainly of the legends of folk heroes who fell during battle or while resisting a plundering raid. At the outset, the narrator invokes the spirit of the hero and dedicates a shrine to him. Cultic powers are ascribed to the hero during the course of the narration. One of the most famous scrolls called *Pabuji ka phad* is about Pabuji, a warrior hero of the fourteenth century and belonging to the Rajput clan of Rathods. The narrator of this story — painted on a *pata* or a scroll — is called a *bhopa* (sorcerer). The bhopa’s songs are a mixture of authentic incidents, legendary idealism, deification, cultic biases and pre-existing mythology and folklore. It is noteworthy that Pabuji, though a human hero, is deified and worshipped by certain desert communities in Rajasthan.

The chitrakatha tradition in Gujarat is linked to the Garoda caste of priests who officiate in various religious ceremonies for the lower castes. The Garodas carry picture scrolls divided into panels depicting *puranic* and local legends. Similarly in Maharashtra, the *chitrakathi* earn their living by travelling from village to village narrating vernacular legends and displaying pictures in marketplaces. In the Bengal scroll tradition, the narrator is called a *jadu patua*, again referring to a magician.

Clearly chitrakatha traditions can be found in local formats in different regions from all over India. The scrolls are firmly rooted in local mythology, beliefs and practices. Stories from the Hindu epics and *puranas* are embedded in regional particularities and dialects while local customs and deities are sanskritised. Local interpretations of the events are not just incorporated but often dominate the narration. For instance, while narrating Arjuna’s horse sacrifice or the story of Abhimanyu or of Lava and Kusha, the narrators might speak the local dialect and the characters would wear local costumes.

A scrutiny of the visuals and contents of ACK would establish that Pai’s choice to call his venture chitrakatha was indeed meaning-ful and appropriate as he borrowed episodes from the epics, legends, mythology, folklore and history of India. We know that the narrator...
of the chitrakatha is sometimes called a magician. If, for a moment, we imagine ourselves away from our present context with the easy accessibility to television, Internet and other hi-tech gizmos and, of course, the computer-animated films of today that make *Jurassic Park* look passé, we might be able to appreciate the ACK magic in the late 1960s and 1970s, for the child as much as the adult readers. Many friends and acquaintances who grew up in the 1970s, fondly recall how they were entranced by these chitrakathas. A *Reader's Digest* article (Gangadhar 1988) tells us about a retired IAS officer’s son, who has grown up to be an engineer in the late 1980s but still flips through his favourite ACKs.

But the chitrakatha got transformed in significant ways within the scheme of ACK. First of all, the audience that the series targeted differed vastly from the audience of the chitrakatha. The chitrakatha, as I have mentioned before, was traditionally narrated in public places like the market. The *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature* informs us that sometimes these narrators doubled as pickpockets and thieves. As the audience got engrossed in the performance of a narrator, another from his group might relieve them of their belongings. This detail has an obvious anecdotal charm but it also gives us an insight into the social composition of the narrators and the people who gathered in the marketplace.

In contrast, the very fact that ACK has a printed format points to the changed nature of its audience. Both its founder–editor and its readers share an upper caste and middle-class social space. We may recall here Pai’s rejoinder to his teacher at Wilson College that ‘stone worship’ could not be equated to *dharma*. In Pai’s worldview of rational, Vedantic Hinduism, local practices (as connoted by stone worship) can only appear as superstitious and primitive.9

9 For a hard-hitting subaltern critique of such ‘rational religion’, see Ilaiah (1996). Ilaiah writes, ‘What further separated a Hindu from us was the nature of the consciousness of the other world, the divine and the spiritual. For children from our castes, *Jeja* (the concept of God) is introduced in the form of the moon. As children grow up, they also get acquainted with Pochamma, Polimeramma, Kattamaisamma, Kaatamaraju, Potaraju and other deities. Among Dalitbahujans, there is no concept of a temple in a definite place or form….Every Dalitbahujan child learns at an early age that smallpox comes because Pochamma is angry….This consciousness has not yet taken the shape of an organised religion. The Dalitbahujan spirit in its essence is a non-Hindu spirit because the Hindu patriarchal Gods do not exist among us at all’ (ibid.: 6–7).
Conceived within the framework Pai’s ideal of Hinduism, ACK’s modes of address target a class that would value religion in its modern, pan-Indian/global format. The following passage brings out the ease with which ACK could blend into affluent middle-class family settings:

In the well-furnished drawing room of his Bombay flat, I. K. Nayak points to neatly bound volumes of comics displayed on the bookshelf. The retired civil servant smiles fondly. ‘These Amar Chitra Kathas have influenced and entertained three generations in our family,’ he says. ‘They highlight the values we cherish.’ (Gangadhar 1988: 137; emphases mine)

The italicised phrases highlight the trappings of the upper middle-class home that houses ACK. They also signal the chasm between the marketplace where the regional chitrakathas are narrated amidst ‘riff raff’ and the people who have bought and read ACK since its inception.

Sanitising/Standardising the Chitrakatha

Along with the shift in the class of the audience, comes a sanitisation of the chitrakatha, displacing the local and subversive performances with a pan-Indian, purified culture premised on Vedantic Hinduism.10

ACK’s goal is to address and reform the middle-class child, to insert itself into that part of her life where it perceives a ‘lack’. In a crucial move, it seeks to substitute the absent ‘grandmother’ in modern nuclear families:

The stories Amar Chitra Katha tells are stories that are a part of our cultural heritage. These stories were told in the good old days of the joint family by fond grandmothers to their grandchildren. The children of today’s nuclear families are denied this privilege. That’s where Amar Chitra Katha steps in and makes the names of Sita and Savitri, Rama and Arjuna, Akbar and Shivaji, Kabir and Tulsidas the household words that they once used to be (Pai 1978a).

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10 Take, for example, the story of Dev Narayana, a deified hero of many Rajasthani scrolls (see Datta 1987, vol. 1). One of the scrolls narrate how, when Vishnu visited a family, the wife came to worship him naked. This pleased him so that he decided to be born as her son, Dev Narayana. It struck me that such an incident just would not fit into the framework of ACK without disturbing its ‘idealism’ and ‘respectability’ while in the regional scroll, it enhances the high-flown spirit of the legend.
Has the ‘grandmothers’ always been the only source of stories and wisdom for children? We know that children would gather along with adults to watch folk forms of storytelling and theatre, such as *Ramlila, tamashas, jatras* and, of course, picture-shows or chitrakathas. Such performances do not demarcate the audience along age lines even when they include an element of bawdiness or ribaldry. I would contend that ACK, with its emphasis on a unitary national culture, chooses the figure of the grandmother as the only appropriate source of storytelling and wisdom because of its hegemonic imaging as a familial/traditional binding force. As I have discussed before, in the emblematic cultural texts of the 1970s (*Mere Apne, Phaniyamma* and ‘Dadi’) the (widowed) grandmother is brought centre stage as the force that connects tradition with modernity, and helps the present to shake off its emptiness and discontents. Not surprisingly the grandmother figure is posed as the privileged source of stories/knowledge in Pai’s scheme.

We may find some enlightening parallels in the new configuration of the child in Victorian England where the choice of ‘appropriate’ knowledge became important. Schools and other pedagogic sources of knowledge trained the child for adulthood and for the future role of good citizen, and sought to exorcise ‘inappropriate’ influences that might corrupt.¹¹

¹¹ It may help to briefly look at the formation of the modern child in the West as a separate category in order to open out the historical shifts happening in ACK — positioning itself as a suitable pedagogic vehicle for children. A series of epistemic ruptures in the mid-seventeenth century result in the constitution of childhood as distinct from the adult state in a variety of material practices. Philippe Aries (1962) proposes that the conceptual division between ‘childhood’ and ‘adulthood’ occurred as a result of the societal reorganisation that was entailed by the advent of modernity. In the context of an industrial society, the transition to adulthood through aquisition of knowledge also marked the passage into the responsibilities of the citizen. Childhood became the site for disciplinary intervention, imperative for fashioning skilled and responsible adults. One of the major philosophers of the eighteenth century, Jean Jacques Rousseau, posited the ‘natural goodness’ of human beings and believed that it could be improved/conserved through the education of children. For Rousseau, education was to man what cultivation was to plants. Later on, the Rousseauvian theorist Fredrich Froebel (1782–1852) too deployed many terms related to gardening to describe the process of the child’s education. The educator was like the skilled gardener who would provide appropriate ‘soil and climate’ to enable the child to grow towards perfection.
Books were published targeting children in particular and aiming to teach ‘correct’ values. For example, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, fairy tales became well-approved reading material for children, while at the turn of the century they were condemned for their lack of religious sentiment and irrelevance. But now fairy tales were specially printed for children even though they had been circulating in the oral tradition of storytelling since the thirteenth century. But the new-found acceptability of this material as suitable for children owes much to its standardisation in accordance with bourgeois norms aimed at teaching appropriate gender/class behaviour.\footnote{12 For a detailed discussion, see Achar (1997). She writes, ‘The new acceptability of fairy tales as reading material for younger children was due, in part, to the fact that the collected versions of these folk tales were standardised as per nineteenth century bourgeois norms. Where earlier, several versions of the same story were circulating in the oral tradition, now only one standardized version was printed/promoted, especially the ones which produced and endorsed nineteenth century English gender appropriate behaviour, which valorized marriage besides clearly demarcating private and public spaces in terms of middle class priorities’ (ibid.: 27–28).}

It can be said that a similar kind of standardisation and sanitisation of the chitrakatha takes place in ACK. The significance of this process of recasting can only be understood in the context of the larger shifts taking place in the 1970s as notions of gender, caste, culture, and religion are re-worked in the process of welding together a different idea of the nation — modern, global and with a heroic, strong, yet ethical, shared past. In ACK, an act of violence is carefully sifted from an act of masculine strength in order to draw up boundaries between the insider and the outsider, the Self and the Other. To bring in a few illustrative examples, in Rama, Shoorpanakha is attracted to the handsome Rama in the forest and freely expresses her desire for him. Rama and Lakshmana then share a male banter at her cost. But when, angry at the rebuff, she rushes towards Sita in a frightening form, an enraged Lakshmana ‘chopped off her nose and ears’ (Pai 1970a: 13). The narrative presents the act as one of just (masculine) punishment for deviant female behavior. Similarly, in Padmini, several narrative and visual clues combine to represent Ala-ud-din Khilji as an extremely cruel man in a scene where he is shown hunting in the forest. I will have occasion to discuss these strategies a little later in the chapter. Suffice it to say here that within the framework of ACK, hunting could
well be a manly and kingly pursuit in another context (involving a different [Hindu] king).

What are the legacies that ACK draws on as it endeavours to in put in place the reformed chitrakatha? How does it transform and rewrite these legacies for the modern middle-class audience? These are some of the questions I attempt to address below.

The Frescos of Ajanta: An ‘Ideal’ Legacy

Apart from the chitrakatha, ACK definitely owes a debt to some other visual storytelling traditions in India such as the frescos and murals. Pai has acknowledged the influence of the frescos of Ajanta and Ellora upon the visual conceptualisation of ACK.13 Ajanta had a crucial place in the quest for an ‘authentic’ Indian art during the Swadeshi years, a campaign led by Abanindranath Tagore. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Abanindranath’s students, Nandalal Bose and Asit Kumar Haldar, made trips to Ajanta as part of Lady C. J. Herringham’s group and copied several of the paintings. It was during this journey of rediscovery that Ajanta came to acquire the status of the archetype of India’s artistic and religious past. Abanindranath compared his students’ Ajanta trip to a ‘pilgrimage’ and hoped that it would revitalise art in modern India. In his book *Ajanta* (1913), Asit Haldar followed the authoritative classificatory canons installed by critics like Ananda Coomaraswami for Indian art history, placing the ancient above the medieval past, and Buddhist and Hindu art above Mughal art. As noted by Tapati Guha-Thakurta:

The distinctions drawn between Buddhist and Mughal painting were those between a religious art and a secular court art. Buddhist art, symbolising faith and devotion, was seen to exude a tranquil grace that was best perceived in the spontaneous flow of lines, while Mughal art was described as a product of leisure and pleasure, its ornate quality reflecting the ostentations of court life….While Ajanta and the Kailasa temple of Ellora were given the epithet of ‘classical,’ Mughal painting or the Taj Mahal, however beautiful, were seen to be lacking in that ‘epic splendour,’ ‘sublimity’ and ‘higher feelings’ of the former, which were the true definers of a ‘classic art’ (1992: 209).

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13 Nandini Chandra cites Pai’s acknowledgement of the Ajanta murals as a significant indigenous inspiration for ACK: ‘At Ajanta many paintings have short captions or verses relating to the painted themes’ (2008: 211).
We can see that the Ajanta frescos, as mediated through the nationalist grid, do carry the potential to animate and fit into the ethical format of ACK with its emphasis on ‘Indian themes and values’.\textsuperscript{14}

Also, given ACK’s explicit accent, on secularising/humanising the sacred, it is doubly significant that the Ajanta frescos serve as a visual inspiration for it. Critics have cited the unique skill of the Ajanta artist in combining the secular with the sacred:

\begin{quote}
[It was] the essence retranslated into the intense, individual, sensory experience, into strangely moving, personal, plastic expressions, moulding icons into personal portraits…. (Mitra 1971: 5).
\end{quote}

Also,

\begin{quote}
It was the urge to paint the sacred and the secular, even the profane, at one and the same time…[the Ajanta artist] needed to reflect earthly things, to see and show things from the corporeal point of view, which demanded that he gave all his creations the sharp edges and the clarity of geometrical forms. (Mitra 1971: 7)
\end{quote}

Even as one traces the continuities between the frescos of Ajanta and ACK, the critical task would be to explore the range of transmutations — of Ajanta and other traditional art forms of India — that produce the unique, hybrid realism of the ACK visuals. First, let us explore how these visuals are positioned in relation to the gaze.

\section*{The ‘Other’ in Perspective}

Perspective was not used to generate an illusionistic effect in the Ajanta frescos. As Gulammohammed Sheikh (1993) points out, these presented a world in multiple rather than singular focus. The murals were like a scroll that was revealed to the viewer through serial unfolding and necessitated ‘a scanning method corresponding to the successive

\textsuperscript{14} It may be worth noting that during the time Ajanta was inducted into the discipline of art history as the epitome of Indian art, the psychological qualities of art also came to be the most exalted dimension of Indian art. This was derivative of the Ruskinian theory that art was nothing by itself unless it conveyed ideals and emotion. ‘This view asserted itself not only in the qualities that were emphasized in a painting but also in the way the mythological or literary subject of the picture would be presented, highlighting the moral and emotional values inherent in the theme’ (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 191).
opening of spatial units as the viewer walked…. In such practices, the prolonged sequence of time involved in appraising the pictorial space is antithetical to the notion to which illusionism so faithfully adheres, of arresting a climactic moment’ (Sheikh 1993: 146). Dispersing the imagery over a stretch of pictorial space neutralises the physical centre, which is crucial to illusionistic art. The eye trained to view realistic paintings experiences a disturbing sense of flux while scanning these murals. Suggesting that this sense of flux is at its maximum while viewing tribal painting such as the Pithoro painting, Sheikh elaborates:

Indeed the physical centre is effectively neutralised by spreading the imagery all over the pictorial plane. This gives the impression of ‘floating’ to a mind conditioned by illusionistic principles. The weight of centrality, obtained through juxtapositions of vanishing point and physical and pictorial centres crucial to an illusionistic visage, is here replaced by collective equanimity of forms which lends them ease and grace (1983: 51).

Proposing that the centred point of view is dispersed in much of traditional Indian painting, Sheikh further notes that ‘the question of realism and of the degree of human content, often expected in the form of an explicit portrayal of emotions, is similarly located in the context of illusionism and its subsequent manifestations…. If a highly abbreviated form of a Pithoro image looks shorn of human content and an elaborate one of a Kerala mural looks “stylised and over-decorative,” the loss is ours’ (ibid.).

Sheikh’s insightful commentary on the narrative paintings serve as a helpful point of reference as I probe the relay between traditional paintings and the principles of illusionism in ACK. I propose that the visuals of ACK produce an effect that is closer to that of realistic painting because our vision is guided in a more centred and regulated manner, even as the grandeur and a certain stylisation of its figures come from traditional art.

While the stories are broken up into events stretching across a sequence of frames calling for a mobility of vision, a singular focus is maintained through the centrality of a figure that binds the story. This focus is achieved through various visual techniques, the most common being the close-up projection of a face. In contrast, the continuity of the epic murals in India is directed by gestures and movements rather than by the eminence of a figure or the head. To cite Sheikh again in this context:
The figures speak as much (or more) with their bodies as with their heads. The significance of the head as the crown of human anatomy to be isolated from the torso was not an idea that appealed to the indigenous sensibility which viewed the body as an indivisible whole. The Western tradition, however, in the genre of portraiture used the head as an independent unit to convey all aspects of physical and psychological conditions. By contrast the ancient Indian artist sought to transmute all forms of stress by infusing in the image a state of abiding grace. The practice ruled out facial and bodily contortions and excluded ugliness and violence from its repertory, to enforce an assertive vision of the fullness and regeneration of life. (Even the demons are somewhat redeemed, being rendered grotesque rather than diabolic.) With the absence of the requisites of portraiture, the figures did not assume roles of ‘characters’ or ‘personalities,’ but remained self-contained presences (Sheikh 1993: 152; emphasis mine).

This ‘vision of fullness’ is considerably reversed in ACK. The head, through its prominence and display of facial expressions of nobility, heroism, deviousness and diabolism, comes to be a crucial part, indicating psychological states of mind and the ‘inner essence’ of the national Self and it’s Other. Cinematic methods of close-ups, angled shots and point-of-view shots help in achieving this effect. The villain is not merely grotesque; he is diabolic. Consider, for example, the close-ups of Khilji in Padmini. We have our first glimpse of Khilji in a scene of hunting. A panel shows us the profile of a cruel and covetous Khilji, watching a herd of innocent, frolicking deer through a curtain of leaves. The scene also anticipates of Khilji’s ‘illegitimate’ desire for the chaste and innocent Padmini. The next panel consists of a close-up of Khilji’s face as he is startled by the sudden sound of music and the movement of the deer. One is struck by the carefully delineated malevolence of his eyes, his brows, his beard — all of which instantly connect with the cultural imagining of the cruel and ruthless Muslim invader.

There must admittedly be other ways of perceiving the same visuals depending upon the context of the reader–viewer. During my trip to a Kendriya Vidyalaya (run by the Central Government of India) in Hyderabad in April 2000, I met middle-class children who belonged to a different generation altogether and who were more interested in watching World Wrestling Federation (WWF) matches on television rather than in reading ACK (or other books for that matter).
When I showed these children (many of whom had never read an ACK) the visuals depicting close-ups and expressions of Ala-ud-din, some of them found him rather fascinating with his headgear and told me that he looked like a WWF wrestler. I then read them the story and showed them the visuals all over again. This time there was a half-hearted consensus that he was a ‘bad guy’. But no one really felt strongly enough against him to be able to appreciate Padmini’s ‘great sacrifice’. The children, instead, came up with very practical solutions which could have helped her without resorting to such extreme measures. For example, one of them said that she could have led Khilji on a bit and escaped when she got a chance.

What is to be noted here is that one has to be within the narrative logic of ACK to read the visuals in an appropriate/expected way. In a way, these late 1990s children of the middle-classes (unlike those who grew up in the 1970s and the 1980s) had moved away from ACK to other forms of entertainment which shaped their perception. But there is also a new effort to reintroduce ACK to the children of the globalising middle-classes — a factor that is discussed in the next chapter.

It is also true that the verbal narrative ‘fixes’ the significance of the visuals in a crucial way. Possibly that is the reason why the visuals, by themselves, could not lead the children from the Central School to grasp the depths of ‘evil’ represented by Ala-ud-din. I once narrated the story of Matsya avatar from Dasha Avatar (1978) to a four-year-old. She obviously could not read the dramatic and ideologically charged narrative of the chitrakatha and her knowledge of the events was mediated by the visuals and my matter-of-fact narration. She quite liked, against the grain of the narrative, the appearance of Hayagriva, the asura (demon) with the head of a horse, who stole the Vedas.
which fell out of Brahma’s mouth when the latter yawned, overcome by sleep. It caused her considerable confusion when Vishnu chose to slay the demon in the shape of a gigantic fish in order to retrieve the Vedas. This little girl always had an image of Vishnu as benign and lovable because of her experience of the ritual worship carried out by her grandmother and the pleasurable feelings associated with those practices, and suddenly this image clashed with that of somebody who killed poor Hayagriva for an ‘inexplicable’ reason (she could not logically perceive why Hayagriva might not possess or share something called the Vedas). No wonder that the story left the child bewildered. Such ‘bewilderment’ probably would not have happened if she was already into the narrative logic of the chitrakatha by reading the texts accompanying the visuals and interpreting them in an ‘appropriate’ way.

As Barthes suggests in ‘The Photographic Message’, the function of the text/caption that accompanies a photograph is meant to make the meaning clear, often by amplifying a set of connotations already given in the photograph, so that the message is decoded ‘properly’. The text ‘sublimates, patheticises, or rationalises the image’ (Barthes 1982: 204). The text in the narrative box of ACK similarly elaborates and ‘fixes’ the meaning of the image that it accompanies, and thus, seeks to avoid ‘narrative confusion’ on part of the reader. To quote Walter Benjamin in this context:

> For the first time [in picture magazines], captions have become obligatory. And it is clear that they have an altogether different character than the title of a painting. The directives which the captions give to those looking at pictures in illustrated magazines soon become even more explicit and more imperative in the film where the meaning of each single picture appears to be prescribed by the sequence of all preceding ones (Benjamin 1968: 226).

**Individualism, Masculinity and the Centred Gaze**

The centrality of the lofty protagonist controls the trajectory of the gaze in ACK. This centrality, is established right from the beginning, on the cover page. A close look at these covers leads one to discover points of similarity with poster art in India, a genre in which many of the ACK artists received their early training.\textsuperscript{16} Undoubtedly, there

\textsuperscript{16} Even when they were not trained poster artists, they were familiar with this art form which was a major presence Bombay which housed the nation’s
is a major debt to the art of film hoardings and posters in the construction of a persona that is larger than life and yet seductively predominant film industry. The ACK artists, many of them migrants to the city, readily accepted and adapted themselves to the range of professional opportunities available to them. For a detailed discussion, see Chandra (2008).
accessible for identification. A detour through R. Srivatsan’s illuminating discussion of film hoardings helps us to appreciate ACK’s traffic with the art of banner-posters and hoardings. Srivatsan suggests that film hoardings provide a ‘visible space that has a masculine structure’, made evident by notions of heroism and individualism that animate it and also by the modes in which the body of the film star is sexualised. The hoarding is, in fact, organised around the star’s face/body (2000: 69).

The style of hoarding composition is one that populates these vast areas with human figures that are few in number but are very large in size. When there are many human figures in the picture, there is usually one face or body that extends its force across the composition and holds it together (ibid.: 65).

Admittedly, there would be significant differences in the economics, styling and viewership of the film hoarding and ACK, but Srivatsan’s analysis of the force of the singularised face or body that spreads across the hoarding yields frames within which to place the visual representations of masculine individualism in ACK. Take a look at the cover illustrations of Dayananda, Subhash Chandra Bose, Vivekananda, Babasaheb Ambedkar or any of the hoards of other chitrakathas. The ‘towering’ figures draw us into an orbit of identification as we are stirred by their lone, relentless battle against the Other (the asura, the Muslim, or even the corrupt, ritual-steeped brahmin). These figures point to our ‘weakness’ even as they shame/incite us into heroic, ‘national’ emotions; they demand our vigilance in guarding our hard-won freedom against the ‘enemies’ of the nation.

The poster-like cover illustration is an important means through which ACK centres the individual. The charisma/heroism of the hero(ine) sutures together the narrative within the cover pages as a binding agent. In Dayananda, for instance, the reformer’s speech, action and visage coheres the story. We view corruption, poverty and decadence through Dayananda’s eyes. In one panel, our gaze follows his to condemn the heartlessness of the rich who come to the temple with sumptuous offerings for the deity, but remain oblivious

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17 Chandra (2008) deals with these specificities at length.
of the beggars lining the steps. In the next, we witness along with him, the greed of the pot-bellied brahmins who ‘exploit the people’. In yet another panel, we share Dayananda’s aversion for the ‘social abomination’ of untouchability as it is practiced by a high-caste Hindu, conspicuously wearing the marks of his caste — the sandalwood lines across his forehead, the single strand of hair at the back of his shaven head, the garland of rudraksh or sacred beads around his neck. Dayananda’s commanding point of view sums up the ‘evils’ of Hinduism for us. It also of a piece with the overarching perspective of rational Hinduism in ACK that allows us to occupy comfortable subject positions as modern, liberal (upper caste and middle-class) readers who immediately identify with Dayananda’s revulsion for ‘casteism’ and other ‘social evils’. In the well-ordered movement of the images, nothing disrupts the gaze to force us to confront our deeper implications in social inequality and injustice.

I cannot resist posing here a contrast that I think is striking — between ACK’s saint–reformer figures and Shaikh Phul — the saint portrayed in a Mughal painting called The House of Shaikh Phul (AD 1605–15). A crowd of people/onlookers carries out various acts of obeisance and chores around the saint who is immersed in digging the earth. Gulammohammed Sheikh writes:

> As we follow the directions indicated by the figures and enjoined by aspects of the environment, a microscopic spectrum of the street gathered around the uncaring saint emerges in circular configuration, virtually circumambulating him….The painting emphasises the gazes of people and the animated environment — both converging on the focal centre. The lack of reciprocation from the centre diverts them back to their places (Sheikh 1993: 148).

The visuals of Dayananda are animated by an entirely different impulse. People — the lower castes, women, the Muslim — are deployed around and find their meaning in the saint. For instance, in one panel where Dayananda is sitting on a wooden plank (Pai 1976a: 21), there is a gathering of people in front of and around him, listening with attention. Beyond that they are nondescript. At the lower corner on the right, we see two women — in fact, only their heads and part of the torso — it is almost as if they are pushed into the frame like a footnote to the main text. They are both veiled, although one of
them displays the lower part of her face and neck replete with heavy jewellery, drawing further attention to her ‘social bondage’. Strangely enough these two figures do take up considerable space in the panel and are not drawn in miniature as Dayananda’s other devotees are,
we still do not notice them instantly. Our gaze has to ‘find’ them following the reformer’s speech:

Women must be treated with equity and respect. Remember the status of women in the vedic times (Pai 1976a: 21).
The Compromised ‘Real’

The ACK images arrest the gaze on a central figure and breathe individuality into mythic or historical characters. In that sense, they move closer to the requirements of the western academic realism. But
the western realist mode as available to the ACK artist is mediated through several other histories and traditions, and straddles a range of hybrid art forms.

ACK has a real debt to calendar art and poster art — practices that entail complex negotiations with realism in its western format in order to address incumbent demands which are more local/regional/national and contingent. As Srivatsan (2000) points out, the hoarding artist replicates the way a star really looks in a film but also slips in embellishments and ornamentation which a local viewer can identify with, making the image available for his fantasy. Similarly, realism is a much-bargained commodity in calendar art. Kajri Jain points out that even when an artist comes from the J.J. School of Arts in Bombay, trained into the bias such an institution has against decoration and loudness, the foray into the world of calendar art soon teaches her/him that realism is a constantly bargained commodity as it jostles with the demands of popular taste, local traditions and the dynamics of the market for
sacred art. For example, if a calendar is painted in Sivakasi, the artists give ‘babies, gods, women and freedom fighters alike bright red lips and pink cheeks’ (Jain 1997: 79). Jain cites a laconic remark made by an artist from the north on the calendars printed in Sivakasi: ‘[E]ven if its [sic] Ramchandraji, they’ll give him Saira Bano’s lipstick’ (ibid.).

ACK participates in a similar ‘compromised realism’ in its endeavour to project an authentic pan-Indian national culture. It straddles fact and fiction, truth and display, and yet produces a world that is entirely plausible in its logic that a normative Vedantic Hinduism is the foundation of the nation as well as the touchstone for its citizenship. It projects the protagonist as the embodiment of the masculine individualist ideal, at once out of the ordinary and yet, available for the identificatory fantasies of the ordinary middle-class viewer. So, when the historical ‘fact’ of Shivaji’s short stature does not match the popular mythology of heroism, the artist must transmute the ‘real’ to make it plausible and desirable keeping in mind the demands of the narrative. Chandra (2008) writes that his chest is made disproportionately broad in comparison to his height. Similarly, Ram Waeerkar, the chief illustrator of ACK, reveals that he modelled his illustration of Rama on Ravi Varma’s Europeanised Rama and not on the bearded Rama of the pothi tradition of Maharashtra and Karnataka in which he grew up. He concedes that ‘a bearded Rama would have been more realistic considering the fourteen years he spent in Vanvasa’ (Chandra 1998: 8).

The ACK artist must produce a perfect match between the body (its stature, size and gestures) and the event/drama of heroism. Traditional iconography, on the other hand, does not have to bear such a burden. Let us take a look at traditional representations of Rama in order to understand the shifts that underwrite the ACK visuals — making this project adequate to its contemporary tasks.

Anuradha Kapur (1993b) notes that traditional iconography represented Rama as serene and smiling and always in company of Janaki and Lakshmana, with Hanuman sitting at their feet. In contrast, contemporary images of Rama (especially in the Ramjanmabhumi context) show him standing alone, heavily armored and angry. In Bhavabhuti’s famous texts of the early eighth century, Rama is almost androgynous in his lamentations when he has to send Sita away to the forest. He is described as soft as lotus and as smooth, and faints and pines for his beloved.
In traditional performative art forms like the Ramlila and Raslila, the deities' roles are played by pre-puberty boys — young, unmuscular, with androgynous looks and barely five feet tall. Such representation is 'emphatically unmasculine, at least in comparison with the way we read of masculinity today as adult, male, muscled and usually aggressive' (Kapur 1993: 86).

Kapur concludes that in traditional aesthetics, 'forms of heroism do not get locked with aggressive masculinity and prowess' (ibid.: 91). The body need not match the action in a tight fit. Thus, in a traditional painting Rama may look puny pitted against the gigantic height of Parashuram, and yet humble the latter without any interchange of violence being shown. Kapur's discussion of an eighteenth century miniature painting called 'Viradha Seizes Sita' is illuminating in this context. Viradha, the demon has seized Sita and is shown in a display of enormous power and strength. He is gigantic in stature and fierce in visage and is depicted in the middle of aggressive action. Rama, on the other hand, is puny in size when compared to his opponent, and right at the moment of confrontation is shown looking elsewhere:

In Viradha’s zone events appear to crowd in upon each other — the snatching, the challenge, the agitation; while where Ram stands there is stillness, a sort of limpidity. This stillness is created, in some measure, by Ram not looking at Viradha at all, but away from him. His gaze breaks down the possibility of converging the narrative to a focus, that of confrontation. What is signalled, instead, is a disinterestedness in the moment of violence (ibid.: 91–93).

Contemporary representations of Rama, on the other hand, carry the responsibility to represent ‘reality’ as adequate to the demands of the situation, stripped of sentimentality and idealism, determined by causality and the psychology of the character. It then becomes important to explain why a character acts in a certain way at a certain moment, or as Kapur puts it, ‘A character must be temperamentally coherent, plausible in terms of action’ (Kapur 1993b: 98). It is against this backdrop that one begins to appreciate the dilemma of Ram Waeerkar, the ACK artist. Speaking of traditional representations of Rama, he says:

I said, that is impossible, he is running after the deer. How can even he — with half closed and half open eyes run after the deer! (Laughs) It looks ridiculous! (cited in Jain 1997: 63).
And this ‘mirth’ exists alongside an alternative knowledge he himself has:

Bhagwan Krishna, Prabhu Ram…they have succeeded in fighting, but they are not fighters (cited in Jain 1997: 81).

But the heroic image in ACK has to clearly demonstrate the signs of its masculinity, and the artist must achieve this effect through the figure’s muscularity and its larger-than-life stature/aura. Waeerkar’s Rama has a lean muscular body. The child Krishna of Krishna is visually athletic and trim when we compare this image with the plump indolent Krishna of Tanjore paintings.

In order to place the shaping of the ‘real’ in ACK in a larger historical scenario, we may want to examine the embroilments of realism in the project of nationalism at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Realism, Nationalism and the Visual Discourse of Amar Chitra Katha

Referring to the use of oils and the easel format by Ravi Varma (1848–1906), Geeta Kapur (1989) describes it as the struggle of the native to gain mastery over the source of the master’s superior knowledge. Oil paint facilitates a greater hold on reality through the interplay of light and shade, perspective and the laws of framing. Yet, Ravi Varma does not replicate the style of western academic realism in a passive way; what in fact happens in his case is a ‘surrogate realism’ with definite effects in the nationalist context; in his hands ‘the past is clad not in metaphoric forms bequeathed by the conceptual pristine. The past is present clad in actual flesh and blood and costume’ (ibid.: 65). The figures from the past become contemporarised historical forms through an ingenious mixing of artistic genres and techniques. He evokes the erotic fullness and erect poise of the archetypal figures from a classical/Aryan past and imbues them with immediacy and tactility through the use of the oil medium. It is through a privileging of the ‘classical’ that he aspires for a ‘universally attractive human ideal through an Indian manifestation’ (ibid.: 71). This gesture embodies the aspirations of a counter-hegemonic middle-class, upper caste nationalist struggle against colonialism, yet, inevitably, generates ‘a discourse of cultural synthesis that will, for all its good intentions, camouflage differences and hierarchies’ (ibid.).
ACK’s figures, especially those of the women, closely resemble Ravi Varma’s female figures which the latter fashioned after Sanskrit and classical Malayalam kavya nayikas. In keeping with more modern/global notions of beauty, the ideal female figure in ACK is slimmer.
and often with a tiny waistline compared to the rounded Shakuntala and Draupadi of Ravi Varma. Knots appear at strategic places to alert the (masculine) gaze to the feminine curves. Pai’s explanation is that there was no stitching during Vedic times. One does not really know whether this is ‘true’ but surely there is more to this issue than ‘facts’ can address. Tapati Guha-Thakurta offers us some interesting insights into the transformations that the portrayal of the female body undergoes in mass-produced urban art such as calendar art. She traces the genealogy of this body to the oleographs and chromolithographs of the late nineteenth century which, in the manner of Ravi Varma, mark an engagement with modernity even as they reproduce images of traditional deities. The innovations in painting and printing techniques bring a ‘seductive tangibility’ to the image and yet, in that very moment, demands from other cultural and political locations turn that image into an ‘icon’:

While their forms were standardised and duplicated, their meanings were mediated upon and fixed by the parameters of this dominant discourse: a discourse that waxed eloquent on ‘ideal’ Indian womanhood and on its symbolic representation of ‘culture’ and ‘nation’ (ibid. 1991: 91).

Following Ravi Varma’s style, in the new iconography of the lithographs, the images of mythic heroines are also ideal national prototypes. In the cheap mass produced prints of late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the image of the woman assumes a critical function. Her figure may be modernised and carry certain regional markers, but she is also the preserver of an all-encompassing tradition, the nurturing presence sustaining the male in his public services to the mother land, and above all, the inspirational embodiment of Bharat-Mata (ibid.: 95–96).

The female form in ACK, especially in the chitrakathas dealing with mythological or classical stories, is eroticised. These are curvaceous women — their bodies styled for a voyeuristic male gaze.19

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18 In this context, an interesting fact comes to mind. Bob Thomas points out that Disney’s slim, graceful, self-assured sleeping beauty was modelled after Audrey Hepburn, ‘a bright new personality at the time’ (1958: 56).

19 Speaking of Hollywood cinema, Laura Mulvey has famously used ‘scopophilia’ to describe the way the female figure in the screen is subjected to a curious and controlling gaze:
Take for example the opening panel of *Urvashi* (1974b). It shows *Urvashi*, the ‘celestial dancer’ in the company of her female companions in a sylvan setting. One is struck by the unabashed display of the female body, and *Urvashi* is only one example of a trend that is recurrent in ACK, especially in representing heroines from Sanskrit plays or from mythology or legends.

However, ACK heroines are ultimately ambivalent signs — they exude an eroticised aura as much as purity and innocence. This is probably most evident of *Padmini*. *Urvashi*, in the end, is a courtesan, albeit heavenly, and inscribing seduction into her body might not be entirely preposterous. *Padmini*, on the other hand, is the symbol of purity. Her elaborately kohled eyes, embellished *cholis* and curvaceous waist invite the gaze, and it would not be wrong to say that the reader participates in Khilji’s fascination with her. How, then, does she retain her purity? Her sexuality, subject to voyeuristic fascination, is also written into the politics of caste and nation. The obvious/recognisable upper casteness of her body fragments the gaze, makes her inaccessible even as she is eroticised, and renders Khilji’s desire for her ‘illegitimate’.

There is a world that separates the sexuality of Malavika, Sita or *Padmini* and that of the ‘deviant’ female figures ACK — Shoorpanakha or the hoards of nameless women surrounding the ‘debauched’ Ala-ud-din Khilji.20

‘In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy into the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.’ (Mulvey 1975: 487)

20 Ravi Varma or the lithographs inspired by him obviously do not exhaust the popular artistic resources in the nineteenth century. The Kalighat patuas (scroll painters) adopted a popular, bawdy and satiric style which lampooned the westernised, urban, middle-class society of Calcutta. These paintings depicted degenerate babus, brazen women and licentious sadhus. The bold strokes that communicated the maternal graces or lyrical beauty of Radha were also used to convey an inverted world order where the woman trampled and subjugated the man (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 21). These pictures, both in terms of their style of drawing ‘bloated’ figures and their satirical images of the middle class, could not ever be considered as a possible source of choice for the ACK artists.
As noted by Tharu and Niranjana:

In the nineteenth century *bhadralok* campaigns against Vaishnav artists, as much as in the anti-nautch initiatives in Madras Presidency, the virtue and purity of the middle-class woman emerged in contrast to the licentiousness of the lower-caste/class woman. It is a logic that continues to operate, as for instance in the cases of Rameezah Bee and the Birati rapes: the woman crying rape were ‘prostitutes’ and therefore had no
right to complain of sexual harassment. A woman’s right over her body and control over her sexuality is conflated with her virtue. So powerful does this characterisation become that only the middle-class woman has a right to purity (Tharu and Niranjana 1996: 242–43).
Several art traditions of India are brought into play in Pai’s endeavour to mould a new, viable iconography in ACK. The intertextuality of ACK produces a vibrant, hybrid effect that is altogether modern and gives credence to its position and role in the cultural sphere in the late 1960s and after. It can be best classified as a form of
visual narrative that is eclectic in its borrowings and yet is unique in itself as it seeks to train the nation’s middle-class children to develop as ‘model’ citizen–subjects of the modern nation — individualist, materially successful but also ethically and culturally rooted. In locating the ‘ideal’ of history in a ‘real’ world, the images/narratives of ACK are pressed into the making of the new Indian — proud and self-made — unhampered by the ‘constraints’ and ‘weaknesses’ of the welfare state.

The subsequent chapter further opens out the relay between ACK’s mythic/historical material and the development of ‘personality’ (of the middle-class children) — a word that is the measure of the grit, determination and charisma of the individual in a competitive world. We will find that ‘history’ retold as ‘story’ plays a dynamic role in fashioning ACK’s pedagogy for the present.
History, Personality and a Pedagogy for the Present

History and pedagogy are inextricably enmeshed in ACK. Narrative/story has a pivotal role in an enterprise that consciously foregrounds the pedagogic value of history by attempting to ‘teach through ideals’. ACK invokes a past that can insinuate a certain direction into the present. Its inspiration comes from nationalist historiography; the nationalist historian used myths and legends alongside ‘facts’ and fashioned history into a dynamic tool of politics that challenged the proclaimed superiority of the coloniser. Similarly, Pai emphasises the instructive rather than the informative potential of history. He poses the magic, colour and inventiveness of history-as-narrative against the ‘meaningless jumble of dates and names of persons and places’ (Pai 1978a). The stories of ACK serve as an elaborate practical guide for modern middle-class children in a competitive, modernising world as they play out the triumph of the individual in the most trying circumstances. There is also, as we shall see, a critical link between ACK and Pai’s prescriptions for the development of ‘personality’ — a term resonant with the modern connotations of leadership and communication skills in a corporate world. I begin by looking at ACK in relation to Subaltern Studies — a comparison probably incongruous at the first glance — given the popular ‘excess’ of the one and the academic austerity and critical rigour of the other. Subaltern Studies was initiated in the early 1980s, interrogating some of the foundational premises of the institution and discipline of history, and is marked by a strong impulse to de-narrativise its narrative coherence and authority. However, in the field of popular culture, an aggressively narrative-centred history is already in play, and has an undisturbed career of its own.

History, Narrative, Hegemony

In ‘The Small Voice of History’, Ranajit Guha’s critique of the grand narrative of history can be set off against the absolute primacy of history-as-story in ACK.
‘The Small Voice of History’ foregrounds the affiliations between the ideology of statism and the discipline of historiography — both of which have accompanied the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie in Europe. By the nineteenth century, Guha points out, the study of history came to be fully institutionalised in western Europe, and was crucial in securing ‘a stable base for the state’ (Guha 1996: 2). It became the burden of history to carry out complex negotiations between citizens and the state. History instituted the grand narrative of reason and progress, the *telos* of which was the nation-state. Guha points out that the introduction of the study of history as a ‘highly institutionalised and statist knowledge’ by the British in nineteenth century India was characterised by a ‘lack’ given the fallacy that marked its origin (ibid.: 3).

The consent which empowered the bourgeoisie to speak for all citizens in the hegemonic states of Europe was also the license used by the latter to assimilate the respective civil societies to themselves. But no such assimilation was feasible under colonial conditions where an alien power ruled over a state without citizens, where the right of conquest rather than the consent of its subjects constituted its charter, and where, therefore, dominance would never gain the hegemony it coveted so much. So it made no sense to equate the colonial state with India as constituted by its own civil society (ibid.).

Indian colonial historiography, thus underscored and authorised by statism, pre-figures the events that are to be granted the status of the historic and does not allow us to choose ‘our own relation to the past’ (ibid.).

Guha’s plea is for an engagement with the ‘small voices of history in India’ that undercut the grand narrative of the state and tell contentious stories. ‘The Small Voice of History’ renews the subalternist demand for historiography to address the politics of the people.

The ‘narratological point’ Guha makes at the end of this charged essay contains the prescription for a counter-politics in the face of the dominant trend of statism in historiography:

If the small voice of history gets a hearing at all in some revised account of the Telengana struggle, *it will do so only by interrupting the telling in the dominant version, breaking up its storyline and making a mess of its plot*. For the authority of that version inheres in the structure of the narrative itself — a structure informed in post-enlightenment historiography, as in the novel, by a certain order of coherence and linearity. It is that order which dictates what should be included in the story and what
Sculpting a Middle Class

left out, how the plot should develop in a manner consistent with its eventual outcome, and how the diversities of character and event should be controlled according to the logic of the main action (Guha 1996: 12; emphasis mine).

The move here is to deconstruct the narrative; break down its ‘orderliness’.

‘The Small Voice of History’ brings to the fore the disturbing dissonances which challenge the singularity of historical narrative. However, as one thinks about the stupendous popularity of ACK, and its sway in middle-class homes and hearts in the 1970s and the 1980s, one begins to wonder, if the centrality and efficacy of narrative as an instrument of hegemony can ever be escaped.

Hayden White has suggested that the appeal of the historical discourse lies in the fact that it makes the ‘real’ into an object of desire by imposing formal coherence upon events that are represented as real.

It was the interest in a specifically political mode of human community that made a specifically historical mode of inquiry possible; and the political nature of this mode of community necessitated a narrative mode for its representation (White 1987a: 30).1

ACK evolves a historiography that is celebratory of its narrative mode. The merits of the storytelling mode in retelling the past are emphasised over and over again by its creator, Anant Pai. Expressing disdain for data-driven history, Pai writes:

It is fun to learn history through comic books. The way it is taught now, for most children history is nothing but a list of persons and places, and meaningless dates. The comic book, however, recreates the situations and events experienced by the historical characters and tells a story. Thus Rana Pratap and Haldi Ghati are not mere names in a comic book. The

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1 White draws attention to the play between history and narrative — so central in a project like ACK. He sets up the problematic of history-as-narrative through revisiting Hegel, who sets an intimate relationship between law, historicality and narrativity. Narrativity, says White, is predicated upon a legal system and the typical agents of narrative must fight against or on behalf of this system. This leads us to believe that narrative in general, from the folktale to the novel, from the annals to the fully realised ‘history’, is invested in questions of law, legality, legitimacy, or, more generally, authority (White 1987: 13).
child can witness the incidents and participate in all that happens (Pai 1978a; emphasis mine).

In fact, there is a case to be made for ACK as a trend in historiography rather than in history in the way it configures history as pedagogy with the acknowledged intent of fashioning the civil societal individual. A serious engagement with the strength of its narratives (in) forming the ‘national–popular’ may lead us to contemplate new possibilities for a counter-hegemonic practice. As Stuart Hall suggests, ‘The only way of genuinely contesting a hegemonic form of politics is to develop a counter-hegemonic strategy’ (1980: 11). The nationalist histories of the nineteenth century are ACK’s precursors in the way they weave ‘fact’ with ‘fiction’. One notes with interest that many of the Subaltern Studies historians — Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee and Sudipta Kaviraj — have highlighted the ingeniousness of these histories.

‘Fictionalising’ the Past: The Nationalist Legacy

I need hardly tell this learned gathering that not only addition and accumulation of information, but also imbibing of anything that brings about a change in behaviour — anything that inculcates courage, patience, perseverance, a sense of fellowship, etc — is also education. Perhaps the latter alone deserves to be considered education. Chitra Katha, properly utilised, will be a powerful tool in bringing about the desired change in behaviour (Pai 1978a; emphasis mine).

ACK presents history as an unabashed narrative of heroism, courage and sacrifice. It is a counterpoint to the school textbooks which it dubs as merely informative and uninteresting. They do not leave any imprint on the child’s mind, and this defeats the very purpose of history — to

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2 ‘National–popular’ forms an important aspect of Gramsci’s idea of hegemony. A class cannot achieve hegemony if it confines itself to its class interests alone. It must ally itself with popular and democratic demands and struggles of people which do not have a purely class character, for instance, the women’s movement, students’ movements, racial struggles for justice and so on. Hegemony must have a national popular dimension as well as a class dimension. Its investment in the national–popular is what helps it to draw different social forces into a broad democratic alliance expressing a popular collective will (Simon 1982: 23–24).
charge the events of past with ethical and moral significance. Education
must bring about a desired change in behaviour, and ACK is to be
instrumental in achieving this goal. In order to understand the ambitions
of a project such as this, one has to trace its continuity with nationalist
historiography — the historical novels and romances, both important
genres of the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth century.3

The nineteenth century nationalist historian borrowed freely from
the spectacular and sensational elements in pre-novelistic narrative
forms in India, making it difficult to sift history (in its modern, positivist
sense) from myth and legend. These pre-novelistic forms, such as
dastan, kisa or tilism usually dealt with adventure, chivalry and
magic, and revolved round the achievements of a hero of extraordinary
valour.4 Meenakshi Mukherjee writes:

[A]ny past, historical or otherwise, was better than the miserable present,
and the wonder-evoking though unreal happenings of a bygone era
were an anodyne to the miseries of present existence…the framework
of history afforded the novelist a way to glorify the past, and the past,
however nebulous, meant the pre-British past: any tale of past bravery
or heroism vindicated present servitude (1985: 46).

History-writing in India in the nineteenth century, Mukherjee points
out, also borrowed from the Sanskrit literary tradition of itihasa,
which connoted a literary genre straddling both chronicle and fiction
(ibid.: 41).

In the late nineteenth century, history-writing became an exercise
in asserting the right to the narratives of the self. It was a counter-play

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3 The historical romance or the novel both demonstrate the inextricability
of politics from fiction in the history of nation-building. For an emergent
nation, the fictional form can generate a history that can give it the much-
needed legitimacy, and direct it towards a future ideal. For instance, speaking
of Latin American foundational fictions, Doris Sommer asserts that they are
‘more projective than retrospective, more erotic than data-driven’ (Sommer
1990: 84).

4 Dastan, kisa, tilism were popular forms of narrative and the cycles of legends
borrowed and adapted from Persian available in most Indian languages.
These stories usually dealt with adventure, chivalry, magic and love, and
were dominated by heroes of invincible courage. Such tales allowed freedom
to the imagination — in the fabled description of riches, passion and regal
splendour (Mukherjee 1985: 46).
of power on part of the colonised as he chose a past to strengthen a politics embedded in the present. The play of fictional consciousness in history at this moment unveils what Sudipta Kaviraj describes as ‘a world in the making, in its contingency, in its open, probabilistic form’ (Kaviraj 1995: 109). The writing of history followed two different trajectories — the real and the imaginary — the former was marked by factual research and the latter, by a fictive imagination turning to historical subjects (ibid.: 111). Ironically, many proponents of rationalism, such as, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Romesh Chandra Dutt decided to write both ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’ histories. It was in fiction that history could be configured as ‘a realm of contingency’ (ibid.: 112).

At a moment when James Mill disqualified ‘oriental fables’ from the domain of rational history, the indigenous historian inserted puranic myths, legends and romances into the historical discourse. Faced with the task of refuting the British charge of the racial inferiority of the ‘effeminate’ Bengali, Bankim Chandra found that a ‘factual’ history of Bengal would not yield for him the much-needed tools of resistance. Kaviraj writes about Bankim’s ‘dark certainty’ that ‘an academic, rationalistic history of Bengal would not provide him with what he wanted — a series of symbolic events of defiance, of great acts which this people could be exhorted to remember, and when the time came, to re-enact’ (ibid.).

So fiction writers like Bankim made use of the indeterminate boundaries of community to engender one in the very process of writing, laying the foundation for the imagined community of the nation. In Bankim’s novel, Rajsinha (1881), a glorious and masculine Rajput

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5 ‘The Europeans’ history of India arranged the events and trajectories in universal history in such a way that Indian subject to Europe–Britain appeared as a necessity of the historical world. Historical novels and historical treatises of by Indian intellectuals sought ways of saying that this was false, by showing the constructedness of this narration, denying its positivist semblance of objectivity, and asserting the contingency at the heart of the historical process. Whether a battle took place on a particular day was a matter of empirical evidence, but whether this showed European superiority was a matter of construction and narrativisation.’ (Kaviraj 1995: 111–12)

6 Sudipta Kaviraj speaks of the traditional modes of conceiving community in a language. ‘In such languages, the conceptual edges of the term “community” are fuzzily drawn.’ Societies that use these languages do not
identity merged into a Bengali identity (Kaviraj 1995: 145). The nationalist historians of Bengal welded ‘natural’ links between the ancestry of the Bengali and that of the Rajputs, Sikhs or the Marathas, the races celebrated for martial valour.7

The Immortal History

A similar gerrymandering of the boundaries takes place in ACK. A Rajput identity emerges as the ideal pan-Indian identity and the history of Rajasthan comes to stand for the ‘glorious past’ of India. To cite from the introduction to Rana Pratap:

In essence Rana Pratap’s name is synonymous to the highest order of the revolutionary patriotic spirit of India (Pai 1986).

The term ‘Rajasthan’ or ‘Rajput’ is always touched with a tone of reverence in ACK. Rana Pratap begins with ‘Rajasthan in Western India was the home of the valiant Rajputs’ (ibid.: 1). The opening lines of Padmini tell us, ‘Chittor is the soul of Rajasthan. Its history is the saga of Rajput valour.’ (Pai 1973b: 1)

In Pai’s ‘fictional’ history the boundaries of community become fluid enough to be subsumed under an ‘ideal’ national identity. Within this frame, the memory of Padmini’s ‘sacrifice’ must become the touchstone for the patriotism of every Indian, whatever region, caste or community she/he may belong to. As we shall see in the subsequent chapter, the Muslim cannot aspire to the citizenship of the nation with any legitimacy because he does not share the collective memory of which Padmini must form an integral part. Similarly, a regional Assamese hero, Lachit Barphukan becomes a ‘great hero of the nation’ through approximating the personas of Rana Pratap and Shivaji.

identify community with its modern, clearly enumerated mode, and in times of historical crisis, the indeterminate boundaries of ‘community’ are redrawn in imaginative ways. ‘[F]iction-writers used the fuzziness of this idea of a community to give their audience a community which had not existed before, by gradually conceiving a new community called the nation, or selecting the appellation of the nation for one of these communities.’ (Kaviraj 1995: 113).

7 Romesh Chandra Dutt’s Maharashtra Jiban Prabhat (1878) also illustrates how the narrative mode of fiction was able to persuade the Bengali reader to identify with a national history (Chowdhury 1998: 56).
Significantly, his story (*Lachit Barphukan*) would be published in 1978, at a moment when regional claims emerging from Assam contest the cultural/political singularity of the nation.

Ranajit Guha makes a crucial point about the passage of myth into history in mid-nineteenth century Bengal. He compares *puranic* time in the Indian context with epic time in European civilisation. Epic time stood for a past inaccessible from the present in which the author was located and invoked awe and reverence. In Europe, it was the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century which privileged the present as the centre of aesthetic and of ideology. Guha writes, ‘It was the intrusion of the present which desacralized and finally destroyed the absolute past of the epic by putting it in direct contact with reality and experience’ (Guha 1988: 34). He proposes that in the Indian context, the absolute past of the *purana* was demolished by the historical mode of narration rather than by the novel. Citing Nilamani Basak’s *Nabanari* (1852), Guha says that what makes Basak’s work significant is the fact that seven out of the nine women who are historicised by him, are characters from Hindu mythology. Through narrative and rhetorical strategies, the writer creates a secular and rationalistic effect that transforms myth into history.8

Guha’s analysis of Basak’s ‘history’ would hold for ACK as well. The ACK’s stories, even when they are from mythology, have an entirely rationalistic and contemporary frame of reference. Pai’s words are illustrative in this context:

In Indian mythology is a story of a young child, Dhruva, who wants to sit on the lap of his father. His stepmother denies him this right. He goes away from the palace and performs *tapas* for a number of years. *Tapas*...is nothing but self-denial and self-discipline. ‘There is nothing you will not be able to get, if you do *tapas* for a period of twelve years.’

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8 Sudipta Kaviraj reads Bankim Chandra’s *Krṣṇacaritra* as painstakingly effecting the transformation of Krishna from a popular folk god into an object of history. ‘He is transformed from a lovable popular figure of eroticism, excess, transgression, playfulness, a subject of both admiration and admonition, to a classic figure — calm, poised, rational, perfect, irreproachable. From the god of playful villagers and their folk festivals, a god who has to help them sort out small, everyday problems, He has been transformed into the God of a dependent nation who had to help them cross, nullify, reject, and transcend in practice the historic indignity of subjection’ (1995: 91).
said our ancestors. At the end of twelve years, Lord Vishnu appears before Dhruva and grants him all that he desires. I do not vouch for the story or even the existence of Vishnu. But this I feel that tapas, voluntarily imposed self-discipline and self-denial, develops willpower. Willpower is like a bulldozer, before which almost nothing can stand (Pai 1993b: 110).

Pai, as is evident here, has no interest in the mystical power of tapas (penance). The myth’s value lies in its instrumentality in the cultivation of ‘willpower’ that can ensure success in an era of competitive individualism. He may not ‘vouch for the existence of Vishnu’ but certainly appreciates the function of the myth in a modern context.

The mythological genre in early Indian cinema has received substantial critical attention, and like the historical novels of the nineteenth century, provides us with a parallel with which to approach the deployment of mythology in ACK. In Pai’s determination to produce comics with ‘Indian themes and values’, we detect an echo of Dadasaheb Phalke’s hope to see Indian images on the screen:

While the life of Christ was rolling fast before my eyes I was mentally visualising the gods Shri Krishna, Shri Ramachandra, their Gokul and Ayodhya….Could we, the sons of India, ever be able to see Indian images on the screen? (cited in Rajadhyaksha 1987: 48)

Phalke’s films brought together the new technological medium and the mythological content in such a way that traditional icons could be mediated into the present as symbolised by cinema.\(^9\) Pai too, we remember, was discontented with the western comics that flooded the Indian market and was motivated to press that form into showcasing ‘Indian themes and values’. We have noted earlier how he transformed the comic medium itself to centre the cultural preeminence of the upper caste, middle-class citizen–self in the 1970s.

Geeta Kapur has noted that traditionally the icon is represented through ‘frontality’ — the ‘frontality of the word, the image, the design, the performative act’ (1987: 80). ‘This yields forms of

\(^9\) Ashish Rajadhyaksha points out ‘As the social order sought to formulate itself, it sought to negotiate iconic forms and ritual articulations into generic formulation. Now gods and goddesses were the expression of new desires and coherences’ (1987: 59).
direct address; flat, diagrammatic and simply profiled figures; a figure-ground pattern with only notational perspective; repetition of motifs in terms of ritual ‘play’; and a decorative mise-en-scene’ (ibid.). Frontality demands the protocols of the non-voyeuristic gaze and rules out identification with the image on part of the viewer. In discussing the Marathi film *Sant Tukaram*, made in 1936 by Prabhat Film Company, she draws our attention to the ways in which the icon is mediated for secular effect even as there remains an element of ‘ideal alienation’ (ibid.: 86). The countenance of the actor, even as it points at something in the real world, is also a sign. The saint is a reflective symbol of the spiritual hegemony of Gandhi. There is a relay between the past and the present, the ‘ideal’ and the ‘real’. The miracles displayed by the saint are so important for the story that they are not just crucial for the advancement of the narrative but are also presented as ‘ideal prototypes of human action’ (ibid.: 91). While the question of realism is constantly negotiated in the process of juxtaposing the old with the new, it is never quite abandoned ‘since the pedagogical part of the life of a saint requires constant reference to reality’ (ibid.).

ACK features hordes of saints and reformers such as, Sri Ramakrishna, Tulsidas, Dayananda and Samarth Ramdas. A ‘miracle’ performed by the saint is always anchored to a reference in the ‘real’ world. For instance, in *Dayananda* (1976), the saint’s function is to reconstitute the spirituality of Hinduism as masculine prowess of a higher order, capable of militarising the nation against its ‘Other’. Sardar Vikram Singh, on a visit, asks the saint:

> I understand that you are a *bal brahmachari* — a lifelong celibate. Can you show us some superhuman feat of physical strength also? (Pai 1976a: 27)

Vikram Singh then takes his leave and mounts the carriage drawn by two horses, but finds that it does not move. He soon realises that Dayananda has stopped the carriage by holding on to its wheel with one hand. Vikram Singh and the bystanders are stunned and burst into ‘Swami Dayananda ki jai’. But this act, extraordinary as it is, is not represented as mystical or as a demonstration of the ‘supernatural’ powers of the Swami. It meshes with the Swami’s persona as developed in the narrative so far — muscular, strong and ready to take up the sword when required (as he does when some brahmins force him
to worship the image of Kali). The act of superhuman strength is scaffolded by the notion of martial brahminism as it is re-notated in the 1970s.

ACK pioneers a practical middle-class ethic that becomes more and more central in fashioning a global Hindu identity of the 1980s and the 1990s. As Prabha Govind, the editor of Mirror, put it in 1983: ‘Mr. Pai…provides inspiration through recounting of stories of men who achieved greatness by cutting across great barriers’ (Comments in the Press).

**Containing Discontent: Redirecting the Present**

Aimed at producing the modern civil societal individual, ACK ‘mimics’ the aesthetic traditions of the historical novels and romances of the nineteenth century. These genres had a great responsibility; pressed as they were in colonial India into the service of an affirmative nationalism meant to create in the colonised people a sense of national pride and community. Sudipta Kaviraj draws attention to the tutelary potential of Bankim’s history when he says:

> Bankim invokes the strongly mythicising, non-rationalist conception of history from the Indian tradition…[in which] fact-related criteria are relegated to the background and the imaginative, mythical element of history is brought out. According to this view, the primary purpose of history is to instruct, not inform…History was just not that theatre of what has occurred, but also of what will — the undetermined future. Societies, he had established in the *Krṣṇa-caritra*, give coherence to them through stories they tell about themselves, because people can gradually become what they believe they are (1995: 144; emphases mine).

ACK, similarly, is premised upon the pedagogic potential of history. If we accept that history is presentist — inserted into the play of power in the present — as well as projected into a desired future, what are the compulsions that drive this venture? Geeta Kapur has argued that the ‘primary function of myth is to define and sustain the specific identity of a community and that its investigation occurs at points of historical crisis when this identity is embattled’ (1987: 79). In the 1970s, ACK was engaged in building a cohering and homogenised national identity at a moment when the ‘clamour’ of subaltern protests threatened to fragment the ‘order’ of the nation.
What kind of modernity does ACK intend to put into place, coming into existence as it does in the late 1960s? What is the nature of the self it constitutes through its address? We hear a clear echo from Bankim — ‘people can gradually become what they believe they are’ — in Pai’s words: ‘If you treat an individual as he is, he will stay as he is. But if you treat him as if he were what he ought to be and could be, he will become what he ought to be and could be’ (1993b: vi).

ACK diligently draws from the realm of a ‘history’, painstakingly put together in the early nationalist moment, in order to construct an alternative self — strong, manly, enterprising, competitive (in the bourgeois sense of the word) and yet spiritual; egalitarian but not in a manner that brings it into conflict with traditional social hierarchies. The bourgeois world, in ACK, is mapped onto the traditional world in an ingenious rewriting of history that endorses the conservative/middle-class dimensions of the upsurge of the 1970s.

I had examined in Chapter 1 some of the cultural articulations through which the conservative middle class posed its critique of the Nehruvian state and its welfarist policies. A moral revolution was called for to counter ‘the path of violent Marxist style revolution’ (Jaffrelot 1996: 266). Cultural narratives of the 1970s (M. K. Indira’s Phaniyamma, for instance) represented a double move; they addressed the challenges that emerged from the women’s movement and the peasant and working class struggles but rewrote them into conservative bourgeois–individualist configurations.

Certain important changes were also happening in the world of Hindi cinema, and it maybe worth locating ACK vis-à-vis those transformations. In a study of the Hindi film, Madhava Prasad (1998) has argued that post-independence Hindi narrative cinema was ruled by a form best described as ‘feudal family romance’ — a form that stabilised during the 1950s, and was to remain unchallenged till the 1970s, when new elements were introduced, without, however, completely discarding the old form (ibid.: 30–31). The feudal family romance registered the nature of power in a ruling alliance in which the bourgeoisie was only one of the several partners. These films maintained traditional social hierarchies while assimilating certain features of the modern that did not really question the status quo. But with the widespread dissatisfaction in the late 1960s with the ‘modernised’ systems of feudal control and exploitation and the consequent peasant and working class militancy, mainstream Hindi cinema was pushed to evolve a new form. ‘Disaggregation
brought to the fore, class, gender and generational differences which the social had contained within its overarching feudal form’ (Madhava Prasad 1998: 132). While in the feudal family romance actors were carefully selected on the basis of their looks so they could fit into the roles of aristocratic and uppercaste heroes and heroines, the new narratives of the 1970s made possible the entry of the ‘ordinary’ hero in the roles of dockworker, mineworker, railway porter or the small-time crook — roles that were primarily lower class.

In drawing attention to the changes in the narrative forms of Hindi cinema in the 1970s, I intend to point to a contrasting trend in the world of ACK. While in the former, there is a move away from the splendour and display of the feudal family romance form that had dominated the scene for 20 years, at around the same time, ACK draws heavily on the aesthetic of the spectacular (styled as it is after the chitrakatha and other pre-novelistic traditions). How then does it fashion a contemporary mode of address that would connect with the young in an increasingly competitive world? I would argue that even when ACK’s material is from the past and its form ostentatiously archaic, its frame of reference resonates with and engages the anxieties of unemployed youth or the pressured and joyless world of school children; in brief, the ever-present threat of failure in an individualist competitive arena.

10 The commercial film industry met the challenge by moving towards ‘an aesthetic focussed on the mobilization-effect’ (Madhava Prasad 1998: 131). The mobilisational effect was achieved by the construction of the star persona of Amitabh Bachchan, identified with a ‘primordial anger and populist leadership qualities’ (ibid.). The Bachchan film replaced the aesthetic protocol of familial splendour in the feudal family romance. It was the means by which the industry underwent an internal transformation and gained a new identity that was capable of blending the new aesthetic possibilities thrown up in a period of crisis with fragments of the old form of romance. See Madhava Prasad (1998) for a detailed discussion.

11 But such an identificatory aesthetic or the aesthetic of the ordinary could not possibly function without posing a threat to the old order. A resolution was achieved in mainstream Hindi cinema by intensifying the auratic power of the star as the mobiliser, ‘demonstrating superhuman qualities and assuming a power that transformed the others who occupied the same terrain into spectators’ (Madhava Prasad 1998: 134). What took place was a management of social (dis)order and a displacement of its power onto the mobilising persona of the star. See Madhava Prasad (1998).
Energies Led along Safe Paths

In the 1970s, there is a questioning of the older generation by the youth — as Guha puts it — ‘the revolt of the 1970s amounted to youth calling age to account’ (1997: xii):

What came to be questioned was thus not only the record of the ruling party, which had been in power for over two decades by then, but also the entire generation that had put it in power. The young-born, like Saleem Sinai, ‘handcuffed to history,’ were eager to break away from what that ‘history’ meant for them as the legacy of a past made up of what they regarded as the utopian dreams, hollow promises, and unprincipled political behaviour of their elders (ibid.: xiii).

ACK, emerging on the eve of the 1970s, has its finger on the palpable tension brewing among the younger generation.12 Like the grandmother figure of Mere Apne, it works towards a ‘compromise between the old and the new’ as it seeks ‘a resolution of present conflicts through the restoration of links with the past’ (Prasad 1998: 167). It endeavours to guide the potentially ‘disruptive’ energies of the youth into safer channels that would prepare them for the ‘rigours of citizenship’. Remembering an incident in 1978, when he was witness to a four year old being denied admission by the principal of a school in Delhi, Pai writes impassionedly:

12 During the 1970s, some of the popular cinematic narratives address the generational conflicts of the time. Films like Mere Apne (1971) and Hare Rama Hare Krishna (1971) register the resistance to paternal and other kinds of societal authorities even as they ultimately work towards reconciliation or ‘restoration of a reformed familial bond’ (Prasad 1998: 132). In Mere Apne, a group of youth, who are familial and social misfits, turn to violence as ‘parents and college principals do not understand their idealism or the frustrations of the unemployed’ (ibid.: 166). In Hare Rama Hare Krishna, a cult movie of the 1970s, the central character, Janice, follows a self-destructive path of drugs and the hippie culture in a gesture of defiance against paternal authority. Recall the lines of the immensely popular title song of the film, sung by the young, care-a-damn, stoned out hippies, which translate as follows: ‘What did the world give us, what did we take from it; why should we care for it, what did it do for us?’ The Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema characterises this film as director Dev Anand’s ‘call for a return to nationalist Indian values’ (Rajadhyaksha and Willeman 1994: 409).
As I sat there [in the principal’s office], I could visualise the trauma of rejection felt by youngsters when their reports are not up to the expectations of their parents, when they are denied admission to courses of their choice and later, when they are denied jobs. When parents and teachers treat a student, who gets second class marks like a second class citizen, the inadequacy felt by the child can turn him towards violence or escapism (Pai 1993a: vii–viii).

Referring to another incident of violence among the youth which he witnessed in the late 1970s, he writes:

Sometime later, I had occasion to witness educated youngsters of Bombay resorting to violence. I then met and talked to many youngsters and realised that though today’s education imparts a lot of information to young minds, it does not prepare them to face life (Pai 1992: viii).

Pai critiques ‘our social system and our education system’ which ‘pump insecurity’ into the minds of children and lead them to ‘violence and escapist tendencies’ (1992: viii). This critique finally leads him to the idea of Partha — the Institute of Personality Development that he establishes in 1978 with the avowed aim to prepare and guide the modern child to face the pressures of a competitive world and emerge as the useful citizen of the nation. Partha never gained the visibility of ACK, and yet the historical relationship between the two is too critical to ignore. Speaking of the circumstances in which Partha was imagined, Pai writes:

I had wondered, how many times would that child [who was denied admission to school] have to live with rejection or at least the fear of rejection, before completing his education? The pressure on the child would be so high, particularly after he enters the ninth standard that he would have to live with a deep sense of insecurity. Would he be able to do a course of his choice? Would he easily get a job after finishing his studies? If not, wouldn’t that be a traumatic experience? Wouldn’t the create barriers in his mind just to protect himself from the haunting insecurity? Would he learn to love and help his fellowmen? Would his insecurity lead him to violence? Or would it lead him to escapist tendencies like addiction to drinks or drugs? Or would he just grow up, feeling like a second class citizen, without self-confidence, always ready to be led by others? (1992: vii–viii; emphasis mine).

Partha was established as a training ground for youngsters (in the 12 to 16 years age group) to prepare them for the struggles of life,
and to chalk out a practical guide that would help them to attain the goal of success in an increasingly competitive world. The ‘Partha Institute of Personality Development’ was advertised in various issues of ACK in the 1980s addressing parents in the following manner: ‘The world is becoming increasingly competitive….Is your child prepared for the grim battle of survival and success? Just imparting him the three R’s (Reading, Writing, Arithmetic) is not enough. It is vital that he possesses the three C’s (character, confidence, courage) also.’ The naming of the venture, Partha, another name for Arjuna, is suggestive of the way in which the child is addressed. Consider Swami Chinmayananda’s positioning of Arjuna in the introduction to The Gita in 1977:

Arjuna, a confused child of his age, is tenderly guided to rediscover in himself his own heroism. Lord Krishna expounds a healthy way of life which guarantees not only our worldly success in life, but also ensures the ultimate unfoldment of man into the total perfection of Godhood (Pai 1977a).

ACK is the true forerunner of Partha; its stories had, in fact, already anticipated and addressed the concerns of the latter. It would not be wrong to say that the series takes upon itself the pedagogic responsibility of Krishna, as described by Chinmayananda, vis-à-vis the children of the middle-class in a present context. The ACK text is resonant with the very modern bourgeois preoccupations with personality, interpersonal relations, frustration, success, failure, hard work, self-improvement, etc. Pai acknowledges the close conceptual link between ACK and Partha:

Over the years, as I delved deep into Hindu mythology and folklore to obtain titles for the Amar Chitra Katha series, I have developed a little understanding of the allegories, contained in these myths.

Shiva is the consort of Parvati, who is also referred to as Shakti. Shiva means the Auspicious or the Good. Shakti means strength. This myth conveys the great truth that only the person who is strong can be good. Conversely, the one who is weak or rather the one who thinks he is weak, cannot be good.

Say the Vedas, ‘Nayamatma balaheenena labhya.’ meaning ‘This Atman, this great Truth, will not be attained by the weak.’

I would like to expand this to mean, ‘This Atman, this Great Truth, will not be attained by those who are weak and those who think they are weak’ (Pai 1993a: vii).
Here Pai makes a critical distinction between ‘those who are weak’ and ‘those who think they are weak’. The ACK edifice is founded upon the concept of a core human potential that remains undaunted by external factors such as caste or gender. This potential is validated through the continual relay between the content of the stories that come from the past, and the pursuit of personality development and success, which relate to the present. Pai’s words are revealing in this context:

History tells us of many great men who had very humble beginnings. Chandragupta Maurya, who founded the Mauryan Empire was a person of humble origin. Shalivahana, who established a mighty kingdom, was a potter’s son! Kalidasa was a shepherd boy. Sher Shah Suri, who defeated Humayun and became the Sultan of Delhi, was the son of a horse breeder of Sasaram. Hasan, who later became a popular ruler and was known as Bahman Shah, worked on the farm of a Brahmin, called Gangu. Shivaji was the son of a petty chieftain (1993a: 11).

Cutting to the present, he continues:

In more recent times, Mafatlal Gagalbhai, who started his career working for a petty salary of about Rs.60 per month, succeeded in establishing factories and mills, which employ thousands of people. Yellapragada SubbaRow, who became the Director of Research at Lederle Laboratories, U.S.A., was not only very poor, but was also considered very dull as a child. He failed twice in his Matriculation examination.... (1993a: 11)

A traffic is set up between the past and the present, between heroes of the ACK tales and the (globally) successful capitalist entrepreneurs and bureaucrats/academics of the nation. Individuals can succeed in the global arena as long as they do not succumb to mind-debilitating weakness.

ACK and Partha, open up the scope for a politics that is projective — just like Bankim’s — they delve into the past to build a desired future. The conflicts of the social order and the discontents of the youth are displaced to a heroic self where they can be overcome through the power that lies within. The needs and desires of the individual self are to be addressed but have to be appropriately sublimated and regulated. The chitrakatha form with its inherent scope for showcasing the play of courage and heroism props the task of self-making. The grit of the ACK protagonists emerges as a potential latent in every
individual (as against the superhuman or miraculous) that can/must be tapped to its maximum in difficult circumstances. ACK’s history is just as engaged in the present as the Partha project of personality development.

In addition, the heroic protagonist of ACK is characterised simultaneously as human and psychological. The classic example is the psychologisation of the Krishna character, made evident right in the introduction. Krishna is not stripped of his childhood ‘unrestraints’ and yet goes on to become the supreme expounder of the Gita philosophy. It is another thing that the exploits of Krishna are sanitised for the consumption of middle-class children.

Probably it is the exorcising of sexuality, among other ‘disorderly’ elements one may find in local versions (we find none of the eroticism of folk religions or lower class/caste ‘vulgarity’ here) that facilitates Krishna’s passage into the more serious and well-ordered role. One may detect undertones of Freud in Pai’s introduction to *Krishna*, where he draws our attention to Krishna’s mischievous, human quality, especially when he has an acknowledged debt to the ‘western masters of psychology’ (Pai 1993a: viii). I cite the following lines from Freud to locate him within Pai’s eclectic and strategic intellectual universe:

> When educators have become familiar with the findings of psychoanalysis, it will be easier for them to reconcile themselves to certain phases of infantile development and they will, among other things, not be in danger of overestimating the importance of the socially unserviceable or perverse instinctual impulses which emerge in children. On the contrary they will refrain from any attempt at forcibly suppressing such impulses, when they learn that efforts of this kind often produce no less undesirable results than the alternative, which is so much dreaded by educators, of giving free play to children’s naughtiness….Education should scrupulously refrain from burying these precious springs of action and should restrict itself to encouraging the processes by which these energies are led along safe paths (Freud 1986: 55–56; emphasis mine).

In Pai’s *Krishna*, the child Krishna’s escapades are highlighted to present him as a ‘living presence’ to modern children. The narrative

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13 Sudipta Kaviraj (1995: 72–106) speaks at length about the excorcisation of the erotic excesses of Krishna in Bankim’s *Krşnacaritra* to render him as a severely classical and rational figure. Pai does retain the child Krishna’s ‘mischief’ but it is sanitised and throws into relief the inherent potential in every child.
of *Krishna* is performative of the sublimation by which ‘energies are led along safe paths’, in the sense that it displaces the very real problems of childhood to an area of unthreatening and yet very attractive and seductive naughtiness.\(^1\) Pai writes Freud into his design as he asserts that sexuality in an adolescent should be managed and not repressed. Addressing a young audience, he writes:

> If you get thoughts of a person/persons of the opposite sex, do not try to hide such thoughts at least from yourself. True, even the word ‘sex’ is a taboo in many families. Many parents do not like their children to read anything about sex.….There is nothing wrong in thoughts of sex or love….But just as a mass of water, without the restraints of banks can cause more harm than good, unrestrained thoughts or acts of sex can cause irreparable damage to your life. Many brilliant careers are cut short because of what is mistakenly perceived as love….Allotting a fixed time of the day to think of sex or of your sweetheart may prevent such thoughts from swamping your mind (Pai 1993a: 54).

But Freud is not all that resonates through Pai’s complex endeavour to fashion a self whose desires must be managed rather than suppressed and whose ordinariness contains the seed of the extraordinary. ACK as a pedagogic project is premised on human perfectibility, making a demand on, as much as offering a resolution to the individual to rise above his/her limitations. Implicit in this move is a displacement of social responsibility from the state to the individual. In Chapter 4, I engage at length with the individual selves of ACK to uncover the markers of caste, community or gender, rendered invisible in a discourse heavily laced with the celebration of endurance, courage, hard work and heroism.

**A Modern Anushilan**

Pai’s pedagogic endeavour is inflected by a keen perception — the parameters of human excellence are determined by contingency and context. It may help us here to cast a retrospective glance at Bankim Chandra’s idea of *anushilan*. *Anushilan*, for Bankim, meant the ‘cultivation of innate human faculties [physical and intellectual],

\(^1\) Pai told me in an interview in 1999 that Krishna was his favourite character from ACK, because he is so naughty, so full of life. He preferred Krishna’s ‘childish imperfections’ to Rama’s ‘complete manly perfection’.
harmonisation of their respective moments, and generally their development’ (Guha 1993: 3). Ranajit Guha notes that Bankim shared with Kant and the other Enlightenment thinkers the faith in the perfectibility of man. But, while for Kant, the ideal of perfectibility could not be realised in an example as the existent natural limitations would contradict the ideal, for Bankim, the ideal is firmly situated in history:

Clearly there is more to perfection than some disembodied and abstract concept of morality. It is actualised and embodied in human beings. It follows therefore that the ideal itself will no longer remain trapped in thought alone. Incorporated in experience, it will henceforth realise itself in its particular moments as defined by the coordinates of time and space — that is, by history (ibid.: 9).

Thus, in Bankim’s Kṛṣṇacaritā, Krishna is an ‘entirely historical personality’ (ibid.). He is the ethical man who serves as a model for others to emulate. Bankim challenges the universalist pretensions of western humanism by positing an ideal of humanity that is not abstract but located in the history of the colonial subject. In Bankim’s case humanism is prefigured as nationalism, giving the colonised a specific militant-spiritual Hindu identity.15

Returning to Pai and the specific contexts of the 1970s, one might say that he appropriates Bankim’s legacy as a philosopher of praxis (for an emergent middle-class in colonial India) for the venture of consolidating a masculinised Hindu bourgeois identity in the post-Nehruvian context. This identity has to be now redrawn vis-à-vis the many claims from below rather than against an opponent from outside the nation as in the colonial nationalist context. Bankim advocated the creation of a cultural ideal that combined the learning and emulation of the industries and sciences of the West alongside the preservation of the spiritual essence of Hindu culture. ‘The aim was to produce the complete and perfect man — learned, wise, agile,

15 However, as Guha points out, Bankim’s humanism in turn is armed with a quasi-universalism of its own: ‘It would claim to speak for all Indians lumped together by the sameness David Hume had attributed to all mankind’ (1993: 11). In Bankim, the ideal is that of a reformed, regenerated, purified Hinduism which pushes to the margins everything that does not meet this standard, its Other being Islam, even more than the British.
Sculpting a Middle Class

religious and refined — a better man than the merely efficient and prosperous Westerner’ (Chatterjee 1986: 67). To him, a reformed Hindu religion as the ‘basis of practical life’ provided ‘a far more adequate ethic for the modern Indian than the purely materialistic ideal of modern Europe’ (ibid.: 77).

A similar ethic animates ACK’s imaginations of an India in which the culturally empowered Hindu with a global vision replaces the subject of the welfare state. When Pai (1978) states that the aim of education should be to inculcate courage, patience, perseverance and a sense of fellowship in an individual, he re-notates — in fact, echoes — the four virtues advocated by Bankim as essential to gain power: enterprise, solidarity, courage and perseverance (Chatterjee 1986: 57).

The Carnegie Route to Success

As we try to get a hold of the range of influences that shape Pai’s legacy, the head literally swims. He does manage to draw in figures as historically disparate as Bankim Chandra and Dale Carnegie into the same configuration. Pai has acknowledged Carnegie (1888–1955) as a major influence on his endeavour to hone the personalities of the young. As we know, Carnegie is a pioneer in public speaking and personality development. His fame comes from guiding people on how to become successful. His books Public Speaking and Influencing Men in Business (1931), How to Win Friends and Influence People (1936) and How to Stop Worrying and Start Living (1948) have sold millions of copies worldwide. The popularity of these books can be put down to their illustrative examples and simply phrased rules.

The motto of Partha, ‘If you believe you can, you can’, — with which Pai generally begins the Amar Chitra Katha quiz competition for school children — is an echo of the famous Carnegian line ‘Believe that you will succeed and you will’.

The vital factor in all this, however, is the play between the Gita’s philosophy of action as propagated by both Bankim and Vivekananda (we will discuss Vivekananda’s importance in Pai’s frame in a moment) and Carnegie’s programme of personality development. Pai’s words are illustrative in this context:

Throughout history, mankind has devised various techniques to lessen worry and anxiety. For example, Buddha said that since all anxiety and fear stem from attachment (kama) to persons or objects, the only
way to be free from anxiety and fear is by being free from attachment itself. In the *Gita*, Krishna has advocated a number of ways to free the mind from anxiety and fear. ‘*Work for work’s sake, Dhananjaya,*’ he tells Arjuna, ‘*and not for the sake of its fruit.*’ In another place, he says, ‘*Consider yourself to be but an instrument of the Divine Will. That can free you from worry.*’ (Pai 1993a: 55)

Notice the facility with which he switches to Carnegie:

> These are all great ideas, but are not very easy to practise, particularly when one is young. Dale Carnegie, in his book, ‘*How to stop worrying and start living*’ suggests that when you have a problem, one of the best ways to face it is by

1. imagining the worst possible consequences of the problem facing you,
2. preparing yourself for the worst, and
3. then improving upon the worst by your efforts (ibid.: 55).

Carnegie helps Pai to suture the gap between the *Gita* as a high-flown mystical philosophy and the *Gita* as a feasible ethic for the middle-class youth. Carnegian dictums like ‘*If fate hands you a lime, try and make lemonade out of it*’ or ‘*Count your blessings not your troubles*’ do have a functional value in a project that is built round the assumption that no difficulty or obstacle is insurmountable in the course of achieving excellence. Here is a Carnegian ‘basic technique’ to tackle worry:

> Get the facts. Remember that Dean Hawkes of the Columbia University said that ‘half the worry in the world is caused by people trying to make decisions before they have sufficient knowledge on which to base a decision’.

Pai proposes similar techniques to adolescents in search of success:

> In the case of a computer, a programmer is needed to reprogramme a computer which keeps answering that two plus three is equal to seven. In the case of human beings, the moment you understand thoroughly how you have been programmed, you can reprogramme yourself (1992: 8).

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However, what is to be noted is that, for Pai, ‘personality’ cannot be delinked from character, while character as an ethical entity is not one of Carnegie’s concerns. Even as Pai talks of success in a bourgeois world, he continually locates it within the moral framework of the mythological and historical content of ACK. Hanuman, for example, is strong, indefatigable, but not merely a mythical monkey; he has a function in the present. Citing the story of Hanuman that features in ACK’s *Valmiki’s Ramayana* (1975), Pai writes:

In *Valmiki Ramayana*, we read that when the monkey army reaches the sea shore, it faces the problem of crossing a hundred yojanas of sea to reach Sri Lanka. All the monkey generals gather around Hanuman and tell him, ‘Hanuman, you are the one, who CAN do it. What are a hundred yojanas to a mighty person like you? Remember, when you were but a child, you had leaped into the sky towards the sun, thinking it to be a fruit. You have just to decide and you will be able to cross this meagre distance of a hundred yojanas and reach Sri Lanka.’

As you know, Hanuman did make the mighty leap to Lanka. True, this is from mythology. I quoted this to stress the importance of right company (or recognition from fellowmen) in developing self-confidence (1992: 27–28).

ACK’s myth and history come to us encrypted as stories of success, self-confidence and achievement, in brief, as the new ethic of competitive individualism. The energy of Pai’s imagination lies in the way in which he refigures Carnegie to develop a philosophy of action that would equip the middle-class adolescent/youth to step into a corporate, globalising world, and yet retain an identity that is distinctly Indian. His task has a political scope more conspicuous in ACK than in his writings on personality development, because the former is conceived as an ethical narrative (invested with the charms of the chitrakatha) and the latter as comparatively more straightforward guides for success and achievement. This must explain the enduring strength of ACK’s cultural politics and why Partha could never even aspire to replicate its popularity.

**Vivekananda: The Legacy of Spiritual Masculinity**

Pai is aware that Carnegie’s corporate ethics must hold an appeal for the young, but he appreciates the need to temper it with a loftier ideal. He detects that possibility in the ‘spiritual masculinity’ propagated by Vivekananda. Vivekananda’s masculine ideal, on the one hand,
is opposed to the ‘sense-gratifying’ materialism of the West, and on
the other, to the ‘aggressive virility’ of Islam.\footnote{See the chapter entitled ‘Spiritual Masculinity and Swami Vivekananda’ in Chowdhury (1998).} Vivekananda strongly
believed in the value of a man-making education:

The end of all education, all training, should be man-making. The end
and aim of all training is to make the man grow. The training by which
the current and expression of will are brought under control and become
fruitful, is called education. What our country now wants are muscles
of iron and nerves of steel, gigantic wills which nothing can resist….It
is man-making religion that we want….It is man-making education all round
that we want (Vivekananda 1957: 12–13; emphasis mine).

This call for man-making religion and education of course is pro-
pelled by a nationalist politics that needs to respond to colonial
critiques of Hinduism as debased and infested with ‘social evils’ like
the caste system, child marriage, maltreatment of widows, and so
on. In Vivekananda, as in Bankim, there is a stress on uniting the de-
sirable aspects of western masculinity with a Hindu cultural identity.
However, as Partha Chatterjee notes in his discussion of Bankim, an
elitism becomes inescapable in such nationalist politics, given the
privileging of an upper caste cultural ideal (1986: 73). Thus, while
Vivekananda addresses the issue of caste oppression he also recognises
the inherent danger of anti-brahmin movements to Hindu unity. He
posits a brahminism that is not determined by birth or caste but by
knowledge, and thus, is potentially available to everyone. He cautions
the higher castes that their wellbeing now lies in helping the lower
castes to get their legitimate rights by imparting learning and culture
to them, but he also has words of advice for the lower castes:

To the non-Brahmin castes I say, wait, be not in a hurry. Do not seize every
opportunity of fighting the Brahmin, because, as I have shown, you are
suffering from your own fault. Who told you to neglect spirituality and
Sanskrit learning?….Why do you now fret and fume because somebody
else had more brains, more energy, more pluck and go, than you? Instead
of wasting your energies in vain discussions and quarrels in the news-
papers, instead of fighting and quarrelling in your own homes — which
is sinful — use all your energies in acquiring the culture which the
Brahmin has and the thing is done (Vivekananda 1989: 148).
The onus lies on the *chandala* to overcome his lot through learning the Vedas.

Vivekananda’s positing of brahminism as a norm of excellence rather than as a status related to the ‘accidents’ of birth or caste becomes an integral part of the foundation of the ACK universe. I will have occasion to deal with this aspect in more detail later, but for now, suffice it to give an example. In *Adi Shankara* (1974), an ‘outcaste’ refuses to move out of Shankara’s path as customary, and asks him, ‘What shall I move? My body of common clay or my soul of all-pervading consciousness?’ (Pai 1974a: 14). Shankara acknowledges his superiority saying, ‘He has seen the one reality in all. He is indeed my guru, regardless of his low birth’ (ibid.). The ‘one reality’ is the Vedic reality. The ‘outcaste’ ‘redeems’ himself through his knowledge of the Vedas, and in the process also re-affirms their authority.

One may recall here that Vivekananda’s philosophy serves as a central frame of reference for the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS), especially in the latter’s oppositional challenge to socialism. I find here a discernible intellectual continuity between ACK and the rightist frames of thought in post-independence India. The RSS exalts Vivekananda’s conception of the juxtaposition of ascetic and martial values in the ideal man, and advocates an organicist social harmony. It also emphasises that education and character-building are instrumental in producing the man who would readily merge his identity into that of the nation.

ACK, as a cultural-pedagogic intervention, ideologically draws on Vivekananda’s man-making mission as it shifts the accent from the interventionist state to the individual. Vivekananda uses the metaphor of a seed that contains the potential for a plant to describe the human mind:

> You cannot teach a child any more than you can grow a plant….*What you can do is not of a positive nature but negative*. You can take away the obstacles, and knowledge comes out of its own nature. Loosen the soil a little, so that it may come out easily….You can supply the growing seed with the materials for the making up of its body….And there your work stops. So with the education of the child (Vivekananda 1957: 9; emphasis mine).

In a similar vein, Pai says in his address to parents:

> Just as a tiny seed of the *nyagrodaha* (banyan) tree has within it the programme to grow into a mighty tree, so also your son (or daughter) carries within him (her) the programme to be someone (1993b: 22).
Leaving aside the obvious brahminical imagery of the above statement, it is not difficult to see the restrictive effects of such a theory of the humanist essence/core for any political imagination aimed at bringing about social justice. It endorses ‘merit’ as the legitimate basis for achievement/success (as against a policy of reservations) in the liberalisation years. In the process, privileges of caste and class that structure ‘success’ become invisible. I explore this link in my discussion of Babasaheb Ambedkar in Chapter 5.

**Spiritual Capital and the Global Self**

The question of ‘human potential’ brings us to one more unusual association — between ACK’s history and Ayn Rand, one of the most unabashed expounders of the capitalist ethics in the twentieth century. Relentless in her criticism of the welfare state, Rand says, ‘One must never seek or grant the unearned and undeserved’ (1961: 29). What she proposes instead is ‘rational self-interest’ (ibid.: 34) or ‘self-sustaining action’ (ibid.: 17). For her, the ‘trader’ is the ideal figure. Rand writes:

> …*human* good does not require *human* sacrifices and cannot be achieved by the sacrifice of anyone to anyone. It holds that the rational interests of men do not clash — that there is no conflict of interests among men who do not desire the unearned, who do not make sacrifices nor accept them, who deal with one another as *traders*, giving value for value. The principle of trade is the only rational ethical principle for all human relationships, personal and social, private and public, spiritual and material. It is the principle of *justice*. (ibid.: 34).

The values that are vitally important for Rand, reason, purpose and self-esteem (ibid.: 27), are also those that Pai endorses. However, there is also a gulf between him and Rand — the figure of the trader in its starkness does not and cannot acquire centrality in his vision. There is a critique of welfarism and a plea for individualism, but these are displaced on to another plane altogether through the invocation of ideals that carry a spiritual currency. There is a re-notation of Vivekananda’s spiritual mapping of social hierarchy, especially the...

18 See Pai’s *How to Achieve Success* (1993a), especially the chapter entitled ‘What is the Secret of Success’. 
principle that the ‘realised’ and ‘developed’ self has a responsibility to the society and comes to replace the state in moral action.¹⁹ For Vivekananda, it remains the duty of the educated upper caste individual to educate the lower castes. This relationship of the teacher and the taught, the leader and the led, hierarchised as it may be, is also fraught with notions of social/public responsibility. Similarly, in the world of ACK, compassion for and a sense of social duty towards the poor are projected as major values. The ‘connectedness’ between the ‘enlightened soul’ and the poor is a crucial for Pai; it lends moral legitimacy to his project. Thus in Dayananda, the saint declares: ‘Yoga brings peace to the yogi. How does it help the people in the careworn world outside?’ (Pai 1976a: 13). He then undertakes to spread Vedantic knowledge among the poor and the lower castes. Similarly, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (in a chitrakatha of the same name), displays grit in the face of extreme poverty and hardship and goes on to attain great success and fame. He is also shown to be forever moved by suffering humanity and working tirelessly to improve the lot of the child widows or feeding the famine-struck poor. The ACK protagonist, self-made and persevering as he/she is, has a moral/patriarchal duty towards those who are weaker. The discourse hegemonises the spiritual right of the educated and successful middle class to lead the nation even as the metaphor of the nation–family replaces the welfare ethic of the socialist state.

In the year 2000, while doing a web search on ACK, I came across a site affiliated to Global Hindu Electronic Network (GHEN), maintained by a body of non-resident Indians called Hindu Students’ Council (HSC).²⁰ The introduction to the ACK comics on this web site reads as follows:

¹⁹ Vivekananda said: ‘The well-being of the higher classes now lies in helping the lower to get their legitimate rights. Therefore, I say, set yourselves the task of spreading education among the masses. Tell them and make them understand, “You are our brothers — a part and parcel of our bodies, and we love you and never hate you.”’ See Vivekananda (1989: 146). Note that this remains a foundational influence for the RSS as well.

²⁰ HSC describes itself as follows: ‘HSC is an international forum that provides opportunities to learn about Hindu heritage through various activities, events and projects. HSC presents ample opportunities for self-development at the spiritual and professional level.’ (See http://www.hindustudentscouncil.org/aboutus.aspx, accessed 1 April 2009).
Amar Chitra Katha comics...pictorially represent the glorious cultural heritage of India. You can read one story a day the whole year. We have 384 stories right here on the web for you.

What better way to learn history than through comic books. Especially when these comic books have an editor of the stature of Uncle Pai (Mr. Anant Pai). Every Amar Chitra Katha is historically accurate, lucidly written and superbly illustrated. Whether you are five years old or fifty, after reading Amar Chitra Katha you will learn a great deal about India and its culture. We are extremely honoured that the publishers of Amar Chitra Katha, India Book House Ltd. and the editor-in-chief of Amar Chitra Katha and Tinkle magazine have chosen our site to present Amar Chitra Katha to the world.21

It is worth taking a pause here to think about the ACK journey — from the petrol pumps (where the first issue of ACK was displayed in 1970) to the NRI web page which combines a search for roots with the notion of 'becoming a part of the global village of peace, harmony and progress towards a higher human consciousness'.22 Yet if we glance back, we would discover the direction of this journey was set right at the beginning, and the late 1960s and 1970s were the crucible years for the shaping of an Indian self that comes more and more to the fore in the global contexts of the 1980s and 1990s. The Hindu Students' Council, whose web page gave pride of place to ACK in the late 1990s, interestingly translates globalisation into an 'ancient Vedantic truth', vasudaiva katumbakam (the entire creation is one family).

Significantly the HSC links its global identity to its 'Hindu' culture:

HSC presents the first and only North American and international attempt by students and young professionals like yourself to explore, discover and experience the immense treasures of the time-tested knowledge and wisdom of the great Hindu culture. Indeed, we have within our grasp the vast philosophical, spiritual, social and scientific tools of the Hindu System. Let us learn to use them for achieving excellence in personal life and to enrich our community, our environment and our world.23

And precisely for that reason, ACK finds pride of place in a venture where global and community identities are intermeshed. What is mobilised here is a new narrative of human perfection — around a possible Hindu self — scientific and achievement-oriented and yet with a deep spiritual core. No wonder then that ACK fits so easily into this story.

We would remember that ACK came into existence almost as an answer to a need felt by the VHP that children of Hindus abroad were growing up without any familiarity with Hindu culture (Katju 1998: 43). Swami Chinmayananda, in the introduction to the *Gita* (1977), was full of praise for ACK as having fulfilled precisely such a need. He had highly recommended these comics for the schools of the Chinmaya missions abroad. In the 1990s the ‘complete’ Indian self emerges with a new confidence. The culturally authorised and materially advanced Hindu also subtly becomes the bearer of public responsibility — a citizen of the world.24

As we look at the trajectory of ACK as well as the Partha programme for personality development, we cannot help being struck by Pai’s astute anticipation and nurturing of the direction that the upper caste middle class would take through the 1970s into the liberalisation years. It is this discerning judgement that helps him to pitch history into the present as an instrument of power that would ‘naturalise’ and win consent for the position of the middle-class in the post-Nehruvian era. In the next chapter, I engage closely with select texts of ACK to explore the ethical framework within which the new Indian subject is fashioned and legitimated.

24 The following words of Vivekananda on HSC’s web page define the nature of the successful, global, middle-class Hindu, doubly ‘empowered’ by the propagation of an ethical, humane tradition, ‘This life is short, the vanities of the world are transient, but they alone live who live for others, the rest are more dead than alive’, http://209.235.108.133/hsc/main.shtml (accessed 16 November 2000).
ACK sets up powerful modes of address by eclectically drawing upon a range of narrative traditions and histories. The ‘new’ self that it labours to put in place poses a challenge to the post-independence state, but its critical thrust does not come from the revolutionary ferment of the time nor does it call for a more invigorated egalitarianism. In fact, it reinforces the hegemonic formations of the earlier order even as it repudiates the governmental responsibilities and welfare commitments of the same. I would argue that what it demands is a masculinisation of the state and its subjects as a panacea to social inequalities. This masculinisation is to be achieved through a training of individuals so that they are willing to perceive their identities as a part of the singularised identity of the nation. This also involves a dismantling of the ‘soft’ policies of the welfare state on the one hand and a re-invoking of the ‘man-making’ ideals of the Hindu nationalist project on the other.

I begin this chapter with the analyses of Chanakya and Dayananda to examine the role of the guru — the emblem of martial brahminism — in training the subject of the nation. The idea of the defending a ‘fundamental order’ plays an important role in the political and cultural imaginary of the right during the 1970s. Recall in this context the right’s call for a ‘spiritual revolution’ which would re-establish the ‘order’ of the nation. A ‘spiritual revolution’ would also counter the threat to the upper caste bourgeoisie (both rural and urban) posed by the socialist ethics of the modernising state as much as by the egalitarian aspirations of the groups from below.

In ACK’s Chanakya, the guru trains his disciple — Chandragupta — to protect and maintain the brahminic order of the nation. I draw a parallel between the sage/reformer figure of ACK with the ‘modern guru’, Swami Chinmayananda to indicate that the former has an allegoric function in the present. Incongruous as it may sound, the series creatively and strategically presents the Gandhian socialist Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) in the manner of a sage who emerges out of self-imposed exile from the world of politics to re-instate the ‘moral order’ of the nation.
ACK’s Shivaji (and also Lachit Barphukan) is the ideal nationalist subject, worthy of emulation. Through a valourisation of Shivaji’s masculine destruction of the Muslim ‘invader’, ACK proposes martial action against those who threaten the boundaries of the (Hindu) nation. Lachit Barphukan, though an Assamese folk-hero, achieves a ‘national’ status as his identity is subsumed under that of Shivaji or Rana Pratap.

The spectre of the ‘invader’ surfaces yet again in *Padmini*. The memory of Padmini’s ‘sacrifice’ serves to incite the subject–citizen into a vendetta against the (Muslim) traitor who threatens the ‘purity’ of the nation and its women.

The Agentive Self

Before I move on to the texts of ACK, let me briefly consider the nature of the agentive self, fashioned in the statist narratives of post-independence years. This helps us to appreciate the revisions and mutations of this self in the later middle-class narratives like ACK that attempt to endow it with a more confident disciplinary authority.

Geeta Kapur explores the question of selfhood in post-independence cultural narratives through her reading of Satyajit Ray’s *Apu triology*. Ray’s *Pather Panchali*, she writes, ‘served to provide a gloss over the civilisational trauma caused by progress’ even as it ‘sublimated (and displaced) the threat of modernisation into a dream of autonomy’ (1993: 20). In this film, colonialism is treated as a painful but necessary rite of passage into modernity. The deaths and losses in the film do not break the protagonist Apu but underscore his steadfast evolution. What we encounter is the emergence of a transcendent yet ‘national’ consciousness/agency undeterred by both the stasis of village life and the dreariness of urban life, ready to take its place in the world. We can also see the mapping of this figure onto the sovereign self/citizen envisaged by the statist imagination of the newly independent nation.

Susie Tharu has also discussed extensively in her work how narrative and artistic regimes shape and consolidate the citizen–executive/pedagogic authorities that are entrusted with governmental and reformist responsibilities. These miraculous subjectivities are fashioned as citizens on the basis of a transcendence of distinctions based on caste, religious community, region, language or gender.

The result is a narrative form and indeed an indigenous, and in many ways different, realism and a naturalised order of things, be it in fiction
or in film, that bodies forth this executive avant-garde (experts, artists, modernisers, secular individuals) and invests it with a centrality around which a land and a to-be-governed subject-population is deployed in what emerges as their objective thereness. This avant-garde is an elect body, endowed with auratic, utopic subjectivities and entrusted with governmental responsibilities of administration, reform and development. Structurally, however, these bodies hover in a difficult yoking between their authority and their civic-human equality (Tharu 1998: 224; emphasis mine).

While these figures have important pedagogic role to play and are out of the run of the ordinary, yet as citizens, they have to be represented simultaneously as equal to every other citizen. The ‘inbetween-ness’ of these figures, that is, ‘the difficult yoking between their authority and their civic-human equality’ is to be noted because it throws into sharp relief the shift that characterises the agent/self in the 1970s narratives of ACK. ACK signals the arrival of a more competitive and aggressive middle-class, and the deployment of a predominantly disciplinary pedagogy. The authority figure is more at ease with its disciplinary authority, unhampered, it would seem, by the obligation to bear out and underscore its civic equality.

If we probe the genealogy of this nationalist subject, we would uncover its beginnings in what Partha Chatterjee (1986) calls the ‘moment of departure’ for the nationalist discourse. This was the moment when Bankim traced the concept of nationhood to the Vedic Aryan past and to those ‘events’ of history which were characterised by a demonstration of Hindu superiority over Muslims in fighting strength. Even as he evolved a polemic to confront the cultural arrogance of the coloniser, Bankim was unambiguous about the purely Hindu character of the nation. The nationalist Hindu subject in the nineteenth century emerged as what Wakankar calls the ‘ghostly double of the nationalist Indian subject’:

This was a phase in its historical trajectory when the search for origins seemed to (Hindu) bourgeois nationalist writers as the best guarantee of both the assertion of difference and the confession of sameness. Hindu spirituality, reinvested with lofty origins and anchored in the most hallowed descent of the ‘nation’, was juxtaposed to and modified by the requirements of post-Enlightenment rationality (Wakankar 1995: 47).

In the preceding chapter, I had discussed Bankim’s endeavour to counter the charge of effeminacy and otherworldliness levelled at the Bengali/Hindu by the British by evolving a theory of action called
Sculpting a Middle Class

anushilan that entailed the simultaneous cultivation of physical and mental faculties. Those who attained perfectibility through the practice of anushilan were adarsa purush or ideal men and provided ‘an ideal for others to imitate’ (Guha 1993: 7). The theory of anushilan demanded an ascetics which involved the ‘constitution of a (Hindu) nationalist (male) subject on the site of a “rational” revision of Hinduism on the one hand, and an acknowledgement of the colonising West’s hegemonic discourse of progress on the other’ (Wakankar 1995: 49).

Looping back to the times of ACK, one finds in the aftermath of the crisis of the Nehruvian state, a renewed move on part of the upper caste bourgeoisie to rebuild selfhood along the lines of anushilan. This comes as a response to the growing demand by the conservative sections of society that the nation and its history must be set ‘right’. As discussed in Chapter 1, there is an endeavour to undo the damages done by the ‘appeasement policies’ of the state (towards minorities and other groups threatening the ‘unity’ of the nation) and make the ‘new man’ the citizen of the state. The new man is the one who eagerly merges into an overarching ‘national’ identity and eschews all sub-national/extra-territorial loyalties and affiliations.

I hope to demonstrate that ACK is the emblematic and most enduring vehicle of the emergence of the new self. This self is masculinised, disciplinised but also is a disciplining norm for the nation. In the following analyses, I trace the contours of this self.

The Religious Guru and the Saint Reformer: Training the Nationalist Subject

Chanakya (1971) embodies some of the chief intellectual concerns of ACK. Its central theme is the violation of a fundamental order and its restoration through the intervention of the appropriate nationalist subject. This fundamental order anchors itself to the idea of the ancient Hindu past when the brahminic world order prevailed without disruption, and the moral core of the society was kept alive in the ashrams of the all-powerful guru. Read as an allegory, Chanakya (and many other chitrakathas of the same theme) reflects the right-wing concern over the moral collapse of the nation under the socialist regime. In Chapter 1, I had also referred to the entry of the ‘modern guru’ into the contests of the post-Nehruvian period, with the express purpose of addressing the practical concerns of the middle-class, and guiding it to achieve an empowered cultural identity.

Chanakya begins with a breakdown of the order. Alexander has invaded India taking advantage of its internal disunity. The
chitrakatha begins with a striking full page panel imaging the Greek warrier, spear in hand and in full battle gear, on a charging horse, working up swirls of dust. He is in the hot pursuit of an Indian ruler retreating from the battlefield — we can only make out an elephant and indistinct figures in the distance.

The scene then cuts to the ashram of Chanakya — a ‘brahman teacher’. Concerned about the absence of his pupils, he asks the lone student who turns up:

Why have the others not come? (Pai 1971: 2)

The student responds:

They are afraid of the enemy soldiers, Sir (ibid.).

The following panel shows close-up of Chanakya’s face — the expression of resolve, fury and determination saying as much as his words:

India must be united to get rid of the foreign aggressor. I shall work towards building a strong empire (ibid.).

This is our first glimpse of martial brahminism in this text (setting aside the cover), which is recurrently, ingeniously and ever-so-carefully honed in ACK. The boundaries of the ashram suddenly expand to occupy the battlefield of the world and the guru comes to occupy the centre of the arena of war and politics. We are left in no doubt about the power of Chanakya’s lean, muscular body, galvanised through celibacy and harsh rituals rather than diminished by them.¹ The event

¹ Similar constructions of masculinity continue to hold sway into the late 1980s. In an analysis of the popular television serial *Chanakya*, Uma Chakravarti draws our attention to a revealing sequence that poses a contrast between Chanakya’s masculinity achieved through renunciate celibacy and the Buddhist principle of celibacy that leads to escapism and emasculation. As Chanakya rushes towards Magadha to seek help against the invading Greek forces, a group of Buddhist *bhikshus* in saffron robes pass him by. Self-absorbed, frail and pallid, they are feminised in their gait and manner; heedless of their duty to the motherland at a time of conflict. Chanakya on the other hand, ‘has not merely suppressed sexual desire but has transformed sexual energy into real manliness by deploying it for national ends’ (Chakravarti 1998: 256–57).
Figure 4.1: The guru
that symbolically brings us face to face with his power is truly arresting. He is shown to be plucking off with fury the grass that hurt his feet:

This stupid grass hurts my feet. I am going to destroy it (Pai 1971: 3).

With this one masterly stroke, the narrative demolishes the notion of otherworldliness associated with the ascetic Hindu. Chanakya becomes the embodiment of the principle ‘that which comes in your way must be destroyed’. He combines the physical prowess of the kshatriya with the all-denying principles of brahminism. When he is insulted by the drunk and debauched king of Magadha, Nanda, it is also meant to shake the reader into grasping the cause of India’s fall — something must be truly awry with the nation — because the king dares to violate the moral code of the society by insulting a learned brahmin.

Read against the backdrop of the 1970s, it emerges that what truly ails the nation is not social disparities and injustice but the loss of tradition, and the loss of respect for authority, in the hands of an irresponsible ruler. To quote from the introduction to Chanakya:

According to Chanakya, the king at the time of coronation had to take an oath of service to the people. If the king misbehaved, his people had the right to remove or replace him (Pai 1971).

Sunil Khilnani’s analysis is revealing in this context. He writes that the brahminic pattern in India survived by directing its energy towards the regulation of social relationships while withdrawing from the exercise of political power:

By renouncing political power, the Brahminic order created a self-coercing, self-disciplining society founded on a vision of a moral order. This society was easy to rule but difficult to change: a new ruler had merely to capture the symbolic seat of power and go on ruling as those before him had done. India could be defeated easily, but the society itself remained unconquered and unchanged….Its identity lay not in transient political authority but in the social order (1999: 19–20).

As we read the story of Chanakya, we soon discover that while people may have the right to replace an incapable and tyrannical king, the initiative and the mode of struggle is determined by Chanakya and not by the people. What is foregrounded is not the suffering of the
people but Nanda’s insult to Chanakya, the learned brahmin, and his disregard for the ‘basic’ principle of society, symbolised by this act. We detect here an appropriation/domestication of popular discontents/initiatives — a move that has significance when read in relation to the subaltern struggles of the 1970s.

Chanakya leaves the confines of his ashram to shoulder his ‘pre-ordained’ responsibility to set right the violated order. His role is to train the nationalist subject, his chosen and ideal disciple, Chandragupta. On what basis is Chandragupta chosen? Chanakya comes to learn of Chandragupta from Shaktar, a disgruntled minister from Nanda’s court. Shaktar describes Chandragupta through three telling phrases — very brave, very intelligent and very powerful. Each of these qualities is corroborated with an action in three successive panels. In the first, his bravery is proven with him seated on horseback, undaunted, wielding the spear against a springing tiger; in the second, he proves his regard for the ‘right authority’ by holding court with learned brahmins/ascetics who pronounce him ‘very intelligent’; and in the third, clad in a loin cloth, he displays the power of his body by lifting a fellow wrestler off the ground. We would note that in Chandragupta, the power of the body and the power of the mind are integrated as prescribed by the rule of anushilan. And to top everything, he willingly assumes a submissive position vis-à-vis the guru. Chanakya declares to him:

A powerful kingdom like Magadha can free the country from foreign rule. For this Magadha needs a brave, intelligent and dynamic new king. And you shall be the new king (Pai 1971: 6).

Chandragupta’s replies:

I shall be honoured to serve my country (ibid.).

This exchange is accompanied by the visual close-ups of Chanakya and Chandragupta. The former’s forefinger points at the latter in a gesture of choosing/anointing, singling him out. Chanakya’s eyes are charged, mesmeric, zealous; Chandragupta is the supplicant — pliant, eager to let his strength be directed by the guru to help him make the nation whole again and cleanse it of internal and external ‘violators’.
In an instant his so far ‘dissociated’ body/self is set on the path to becoming the nationalist body. His duty is to restore the nation to its pristine state, uniformly Hindu and ‘unsoiled’ by foreign invasion. His masculinity is in direct contrast with Nanda’s debauchery; it combines physical prowess with spiritual control.
Chanakya’s training of Chandragupta takes on a special meaning as he means to awaken Chandragupta’s innate power, to achieve its destined goal. We once again see here the traces of the nationalist polemic on culture initiated by Bankim in his theory of *anushilan* and later on taken up by many nationalist voices/organisations such as Vivekananda in the late nineteenth century and the RSS in the twentieth century. ‘Man’ — as he is configured in Hindu nationalist rhetoric — does not need external sops to facilitate his growth; in this, he negates the subject of the welfare state — he needs to summon and channel the dormant energy within himself. The role of the teacher, as in *Chanakya*, is to arouse the power within the disciple to perfection. Chanakya’s own masculinity, heightened through total renunciation, lends a spiritual halo to his project.² He intrigues; he manoeuvres the poisoning of Nanda and his sons in the hands of their favorite maid.

² For an illuminating discussion of the power of celibate masculinity as symbolised by the Chanakya figure, see Chakravarti (1998).
servant, plans assassinations and betrayals, and yet the aura of his persona lifts all this to a plane of the pure, the heroic and the thrilling battle for the nation. Uma Chakravarti notes a similar strain in the teleserial *Chanakya* in the 1980s:

Since desperate situations are seen to require desperate solutions, Chanakya has no hesitation in using what may, by the ignorant, be regarded as *kuta niti* (crafty/devious policy) — only, in the hands of the incorruptible Chanakya it no longer remains a kuta niti but is transformed instead into a great moral instrument (Chakravarti 1998: 252).

In ACK, Chandragupta, the apt pupil, applies his power to fulfil the guru’s wishes but never demonstrates a will of his own that may threaten the order. After Nanda is killed and the power of Alexander neutralised, the guru goes back to his ashram, his mission accomplished. ‘Chanakya left active politics and went back to his ashram to teach. He wrote the book called “Kautilya Arthashastra” which even today is considered an economic and political classic’ (Pai 1971: 32). We see him in his ‘traditional role’, in front of his austere hut, his pupil before him with joined hands.³ His taut, slender frame still radiating power, but more relaxed now, Chanakya comments:

We have many disciples in the ashram, now (ibid.).

The pupil replies:

No one need fear the enemy soldiers, Gurudev. There is peace in the land now (ibid.).

Chanakya is emblematic of the numerous representations of the martial guru in ACK who come out of seclusion to save a nation on the brink of moral collapse and fragmentation. Again and yet again we encounter the trope of disciplinary nationalism wherein the guru chooses a ‘gifted’ pupil and taps his power to reinstate national order. The character of this guru is always built in careful opposition to

³ Uma Chakravarti notes that in the televised *Chanakya*, the brahmin is represented not as belonging to a social group but as *acharya* (teacher or the guru as in ACK). ‘It gives the term Brahmin a value by suggestion rather than open allusion, and more importantly, it enables the suppression of caste as a crucial institution of our society, then as well as now’ (1998: 253).
the notion of otherworldliness. He has a definite role to play in the
world and bodily renunciation and celibacy are not ends in themselves;
they are meant to strengthen and sanction his power and control over
the world.

In yet another chitrakatha titled *Samarth Ramdas* (1980), the
saint–protagonist Ramdas leaves home at a young age to follow a path
of asceticism in seeking Rama. After 12 years of harsh penance, he
finally ‘sees’ God and devotees flock to him. They also bring to him
the news of discord in the South where the poor are prey to the Sultan’s
plundering army. Filled with ‘righteous anger’, the saint is still torn
by an inner turmoil:

> I am a sanyasi. I should be detached from the joys and sorrows of the
world. Still my mind is filled with sadness. No, I cannot stay here as
a recluse. My work is among my people, be it in the South or in the
North (Pai 1980b: 14).

And then, we are informed, ‘Ramdas began his work by establishing a
string of maths’\(^4\) (ibid.). The first one is at Takali where with the help
of his first disciple, Uddhava, he installs an idol of Hanuman.\(^5\)

The chitrakatha portrays with some care Ramdas’ oscillation
between choosing a renunciate’s life and the pursual of his mission in
the world, so that when he finally chooses the latter, a saint’s ‘true call’
emerges even more clearly. After establishing the *maths*, he attempts
suicide, still averse to and traumatised by the need to bear the burden
of his ‘mortal frame’ when he has achieved the goal of realising god.
He throws himself into an icy pool but is saved by the hand of god
(ibid.: 15). As he regains consciousness, he hears a voice: ‘Your mission

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\(^4\) A ‘math’ is a religious monastery.

\(^5\) It maybe worth recalling here Hanuman’s position in a place of physical
training. Christopher Jaffrelot writes: ‘In the *shakhas* of the RSS, as in the
first political *akharas* or in the terrorist societies, participants trained in drill
with the *lathi* (a long bamboo stave) and played team games such as *kabaddi*.
Members — *swayamsevaks* — were selected in small numbers from among the
youths attending the *shakha*. They then pledged to consecrate themselves to the
RSS “with [their] whole body, heart and money, for in it lies the betterment
of Hindus and the country”. This pledge was uttered before an effigy of
Hanuman, who was already the presiding figure in the *akharas* of the region,
where he was known as Maruti’ (1996: 37).
remains unfulfilled. Once it is completed, I shall call you to me.’ He is left in no doubt that the voice was Hanuman’s and declares:

O Hanuman, I am but your humble servant. Your will shall be done (Pai 1980b: 16).

As in Chanakya, there is a powerful sequence that marks his re-entry into the world, as the ascetic–warrior. When he reaches the village of Paithan, the people there are amazed to find ‘this ascetic carrying a bow and arrows’ (ibid.: 17). The brahmins of Paithan demand that he prove his power by bringing down a bird from a tree, and he achieves this feat effortlessly with his arrow. His mission from then on is to train a band of followers to free the land of its ‘foreign’ Muslim rulers. Young men and boys are trained in martial arts and gymnastics by the disciples of Ramdas. The guru himself supervises the training centres and asks the boys to become as strong as Hanuman who could lift mountains (ibid.: 27). His chosen pupil, of course, is Shivaji (who ultimately frees the land from the Mughals). Shivaji is indomitable and yet forever prepared to follow the command of his guru. Once the ‘land is freed’, Ramdas, like Chanakya, goes back to his spiritual reclusion:

My mission has been completed. In my lifetime, I have seen an independent kingdom rise which will protect the moral values we have cherished over the years (ibid.: 30; emphasis mine).

In narratives like Chanakya and Samarth Ramdas, we witness the arrival of a brahminical authority fashioned not through an effacement of its upper caste Hindu identity but, in fact, through a proud display and affirmation of the marks it bears. Not only is the guru’s body toned/muscular, doubly powerful in its austerity, even the symbols of his religion — his saffron robe or loin cloth, his flowing beard, his shikha (the single strand of hair at the back of the head worn by a renunciate brahmin, as in the case of Chanakya) and the sacred fire or the hermitage — are all charged with the mission of cleansing the nation of its impurities/‘Others’. The guru uses the power of his celibate spirituality and the message of a nation in peril

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6 Muscular, with a grim, unyielding visage, he looks strikingly like the God he worships or the angry bow-wielding Rama of the Ramajanmabhumi movement.
to kindle the corporeal strength of his elected pupil and what ensues is a complex communion. The disciple’s body is re-energised by the

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*[The] gap between... [the] body, as the “inscribed surface of events...the locus of a dissociated self...a volume in perpetual disintegration,” and the body social or nation, could not have been bridged in this exemplary governmental manner without historically specific strategies, narratives, representations, and rhetorical ruses, without, in other words, a discourse (or discourses) of the nation’s origin* (Wakankar 1995: 46).
fervour of patriotism and his ‘spiritual masculinity’ is pitted against the degenerate ‘sensuality’ of the enemy in a moral battle. He is not a renunciate like the guru, but all his time and energy is spent in harsh physical training/battle — there are mostly no women in his life except maybe a heroic mother (Jijabai in Shivaji’s case). Hence Ramdas deploys the potent symbol of the celibate yet immensely powerful Hanuman to inspire his disciples. The discourse echoes with the teachings of Vivekananda as well:

Obedience to the Guru without questioning and strict observance of Brahmacharya — that is the secret of success. As on the one hand Hanuman represents the ideal of service, so on the other he represents leonine courage, striking the world with awe (Vivekananda 1957: 39).

Notably, in the RSS, members have to take an oath in front of the idol of Hanuman before and after each session to consecrate themselves to the organisation ‘with [their] whole body, heart and money, for in it lies the betterment of Hindus and the country’ (Jaffrelot 1996: 37).

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8 Nanda, in Chanakya, is drunken and debauched. The reference to the Muslim ‘marauder’ in Samarth Ramdas (who is not shown in any actual battle) resonates with the greed and lasciviousness associated with it.

9 Speaking of the tele-serial Chanakya in the late 1980s, Uma Chakravarti observes a similar trait: ‘In Chanakya the opposition between the protagonist and the villain is...strongly laid out as sexual opposition — the controlled, transcended sexuality of the celibate making for masculine vigour and the over indulgent sexuality of the licentious male whose masculinity has been crippled’ (Chakravarti 1998: 260).

10 Milind Wakankar traces the physical education culture to the nationalist moment in the nineteenth century, initiated by Bankim. The Hindu upper caste male body became the subject of collective reform and a response to the Orientalist portrayals of the effete Bengali/Hindu. What followed was a gradual subsumption within the regulatory structures of nationalism ‘all those heterogeneous Meyerholdian spaces, all those far-flung commons and “public arenas” in distant villages and mofussil towns where male physical culture, group exercise, men working together in traditional sports such as wrestling, stave (or lath) wielding, kabaddi, weight-lifting, and indigenous martial arts had subsisted for centuries in dispersed arenas for the display of prowess, in akhras or rudimentary gymnasia, in the grounds of small temples dedicated to martial deities, and often in the estates and under the aegis of feudal lords’ (Wakankar 1995: 48).
In this ideological context, many of the recurrent images of ACK gain added significance. Consider the cover page of *Samarth Ramdas*. Shivaji, in all his kingly glory and attire, bends down to touch the saffron-robed, muscular Ramdas’s feet, with the idol of Hanuman looking on. We see an axis of power forming along the three figures — the king, the guru and the deity, each reinforcing the power of the other. In this extraordinary configuration religion (or spirituality/brahminism), in an instant, is transformed into politics. The picture evokes, in fact, replicates, the ideological *akhara* or training centre of the RSS and the ruler now comes there (as he should/must) to learn how to rule with spiritual authority and reinstate the order.

*Chhatrasal* (1973) also has a cover picture of a similar theme. The toned and awe-inspiring figure of Sage Prannath is portrayed sitting erect in front of the flame of the sacred fire, his white hair and beard flowing, a jug of holy water beside him. King Chhatrasal, the majestic kshatriya, stands in front of him, sword on waistband and his horse in the background. The scene is set in a moonlit night in the jungle, and the effect is incandescent. We find out that Prannath has willed Chhatrasal to come to him, perceiving his need for guidance from a teacher. Chhatrasal has the ‘qualities’ that make him the ‘chosen one’. His parents were Bundela warriors who were murdered by the Mughals and he carries in him the fire of vengeance. Even as a child, he demonstrated unusual courage and nationalistic fervor when he witnessed two Mughals soldiers ‘harassing devotees outside a temple’ (*Pai* 1973a: 4).

Young Chhatrasal went blind with rage…charged the Mughal soldiers… and killed both of them (ibid.).

Chhatrasal’s sword is ‘anointed’ with Mughal blood; he is destined to ‘save the order’. In the magic visual moment on the cover, where he meets his guru, we come face to face with the moral proportions of his task. Prannath puts the stamp of spiritual legitimacy on Chhatrasal’s aggression. The spectral, electric communion between Prannath and Chhatrasal is animated by a mystical transcendence, but also donates an aura of purity and altruism to Chhatrasal’s struggle to gain control in the world of politics.

**Installing the Modern Guru**

At this juncture, it is worth taking a moment to think about the obvious and close parallels between the spiritual authority figures of
ACK and the religious gurus that emerge in the political arena of the 1960s, the ‘towering’ figure of Swami Chinmayananda epitomising this phenomenon. I have discussed the role of Chinmayananda at some length in the introductory chapter. But it may be useful to probe a bit more and see how this figure is reinforced and re-invoked in the world of ACK. Chinmayananda, as we have seen, came to fulfil the need for ‘modern gurus’ felt by the VHP since the early 1960s. As is clear in a speech delivered in 1963, he consciously fashioned himself as a ‘new type of swami’ (necessitated by a crisis in the nation) in opposition to ‘those who live in caves and meditate’ (Jaffrelot 1996: 195). Jaffrelot writes that the ‘modern gurus’, active in the VHP, preached in English and adapted their message for the urban middle class whose background they often shared. They stressed their allegiance to Vedic Hinduism rather than to any sectarian affiliations (ibid.: 195–96). Chinmayananda endorsed the right’s call for spiritual regeneration as the remedy to the ills of the nation rendered ‘morally bankrupt’ by the socialist government: ‘Let us convert Hindus to Hinduism, then everything will be all right’ (cited in Katju 1998: 42).

There is a sense in which Chinmayananda emerges as an ‘organic intellectual’ in the 1960s, not for an emerging revolutionary block, but for the re-organised middle-class claiming what it perceives as its rightful place. While he insists that all education should centre around spiritual ideals, he also proclaims that spiritualism is not inimical to material progress — it only enriches the latter. We can see how the texts of ACK closely register/re-play the role of the ‘holy man’ in a rightist politics. To cite here the words of Rajinder Singh, the erstwhile general secretary of the RSS:

Guruji (Golwalkar) believed that there were many vices in society and that the message of unity, oneness, equality and harmony could be

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11 According to Gramsci, organic intellectuals are distinguished by their function in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong rather than by their professions which may be any job characteristic of their class. ‘Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals who give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields’ (1971: 5).
Sculpting a Middle Class

conveyed more effectively if it were delivered by the *sadhus* and *sants* because people held them in greater reverence. In his opinion an organisation was required in the *dharmic* sphere which could take within its fold the various sects of Hindu society....He felt that social maladies could be eradicated more effectively through the efforts of *sadhus* and *sants*. Ordinary people like you and I may keep trying to change society but it will not make much of a difference. However, when *sadhus* and *sants* say something it is taken seriously by people (cited in Katju 1998: 41–42).

We find here yet another role assigned to the ascetic figure — that of the saint–reformer. The radical initiative is transferred from the people to the aурatic persona of the saint who alone can bring about social change. His task is to usher in ‘social harmony’ which, as I have discussed earlier, replaces the radical language of protest. The saint mobilises religion as the agent that would weld the nation together.

**The Saint–reformer**

The saint–reformer is close to our contemporary moment, implicated in the making of post-colonial subjeсthood. One might say that his relationship with the nation’s bourgeoisie is analogous to that between Chanakya and Chandragupta or between Samarth Ramdas and Shivaji. I now look at *Dayananda* (1976), a biographical narrative on Dayananda. I draw certain parallels from the biographical accounts of Chinmayananda to show the contemporaneity of the representation of this saint figure in ACK.

Dayananda’s spiritual quest often overlaps the accounts of Chinmayananda’s life. In fact, certain tropes bind together the life-journeys of the historical reformers of ACK and the modern guru that emerges in the post-Nehruvian context. Dayananda, having mastered yoga in Kashi, contemplates about the value of his personal renunciation for ‘the people in the careworn world outside’ (Pai 1976a: 13). We have seen the same impulse in *Samarth Ramdas*. In a similar vein, one of Chinmayananda’s biographers writes:

Swami Chinmayananda came down from the high Himalayan peaks [after his spiritual training] to bring the knowledge of the rishis and with it the revival of moral and spiritual values in the whole nation. The need for such a direction in India’s recently won independence was urgent for
the nation was falling down from the philosophical level of the old principles of Vedanta.12

Dayananda’s personality in ACK, like that of Chinmayananda, is built in opposition to the traditional priestly class on the one hand and the otherworldliness of the yogi on the other. I had earlier referred to the hostility that the urbane Chinmayananda faced from the orthodox brahmins because he preached the Vedas in English. In ACK, Dayananda’s body, muscular and well-maintained, is set in contrast with the pot-bellied, indolent brahmin. He invites the wrath and stones of the priests by directly attacking their bastion:

Idol-worship is foolish.13 It is not sanctioned by the Vedas. All, be they women or your low castes, have the right to education and the learning of the Vedas…The so-called religious teachers want to keep you in ignorance so that they can exploit you. Don’t listen to them (Pai 1976a: 20).

Dayananda’s religion is represented as rational, in keeping with the spirit of science and progress, with an intellectual Vedantic thrust, eschewing ‘superstitions’ that breed social evils. Concomitantly there is a delegitimation of the parallel traditions that resist homo-

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12 Chinmayananda, after learning the Vedas in Uttarkashi, under the guidance of Swami Tapovan, is said to have expressed the following desire: ‘I feel the immense urge to go down to the plains and share the wealth of the holy scriptures with my fellow countrymen. I want to run down like a Ganga which nourishes and inspires with its refreshing waves’, www.chinmaya.org/html/biography.htm (accessed 14 May 2000).

13 It needs to be pointed out that not all ACK gurus denounce idol worship. As we have seen Samarth Ramdas is a worshipper of Rama and installs the idol of Hanuman in the maths. Similarly, we are told that Chinmayananda established several temples (Pai 2001: 25). Jaffrelot writes that the members of the Arya Samaj of Dayananda stressed the specificity of their relationship to Hinduism right from the beginning which they described as a degenerate form of the Vedic religion. In 1891, the members of Arya Samaj in Punjab were called upon by their leaders to declare themselves as Aryas and not Hindus for the purpose of census. ‘However’, writes Jaffrelot, ‘its ideological characteristics were such that it became one of the first crucibles of Hindu nationalism’ (Jaffrelot 1996: 17).
Sculpting a Middle Class

genization and sometimes express their recalcitrance in local forms/performances. In one sequence, Dayananda is coerced by a sword-wielding priest to worship the image of Kali. He resists and overpowers his enemy, declaring that he would never bow before ‘brute force’. Apart from the denunciation of idolatry, one can also read between the lines here an underlying critique of Kali cult with its tantrik affiliations (and also, lower caste associations). The Vedas alone, according to Dayananda, are the source of true knowledge. They are also set up in direct antagonism to the purely Eurocentric knowledge of those who propagate ‘new creeds’ (resonant with a reference to Nehru in the larger cultural context of ACK). Being the ‘original’ knowledge of the pristine nation, the Vedas alone would lead the nation to a pride of place in the world and help Indians stake their claim to a global identity. As Swami Chinmayananda declared in 1979:

awake[n] the Hindus and make them conscious of their proud place in the comity of nations. Once we have made every Hindu conscious of his own identity, the [Vishwa Hindu] Parishad has done its job and we shall feel fully rewarded (cited in Katju 1998: 42).

The following speech from Dayananda can be read into a similar conservative configuration:

Arise! Awake! Be proud of your glorious history. Let it inspire you to mould the present. Shame upon modern education which fills you with contempt for your own ancestors! (Pai 1976a: 26)

The upper caste unitary discourse of the Hindu religion and the discourse of nationalism are yoked together to produce a narrative

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14 For an insightful discussion of parallel practices of religion that involve an inversion of the brahminic deployment of myth and become strategies of protest within the traditions of the lower castes, see Ranajit Guha (1985). He writes, ‘These lower castes, many of them classified as “criminal tribes” by the colonial regime, “often preserve tribal rites, usages and myths”…[they] do not however exist in an altogether frozen state. The pull of “parallel traditions” and the pressure of upper-caste, especially Brahmanical, culture tend to assimilate and thereby transform them to such an extent that they show up as little more than archaic traces within an established Hindu idiom. For “the main work of Brahminism has been to gather the myths together, to display them as unified cycles of stories and to set them in a better-developed social framework”. However, once the syncretic wrapping is taken off, the content of many a myth can be identified as what it really is — that is, as a figure of some ancient and unresolved antagonism’ (ibid.: 2).
of belonging and alienation, the Self and the Other. Chinmayananda had advised the VHP at its inception in 1964:

There are very many ways by which we must work out our programme to rouse the individual and national consciousness in the glory and splendour of our heritage. We will have to conceive schemes and plans to start this education from the child onwards in gradual intensity until young men — stalwarts in body, balanced in mind, precise in thinking — grow up to become willing workers in this noble cause (cited in Katju 1998: 43).

Dayananda (Pai 1976a) is an example of a similar strategic deployment of Vedantic knowledge in the post-Nehruvian context. The message of social equality is relayed through, as much as, an achieved phenomenon in the persona of the Swami — the breaker of norms, the iconoclast. His prescription of the Vedas as the sole path to the spiritual regeneration of the nation is emphatically endorsed by the example of his own life. For instance, Dayananda’s decision to distribute the sacred thread to ‘untouchables’ and women is critical for the sustenance of this discourse:

All are children of god. No one should be barred from initiation on the grounds of caste and sex (Pai 1976a: 20).

This statement has a renewed meaning in relation to the demands that come up from the subaltern sections in the 1970s. The narrative addresses those demands:

You till the soil and feed the population. You wash away their dirt. And they label you untouchables. Only him I call an untouchable who is dirty in mind (Ibid.: 21).

But the remedy lies in regeneration and not in revolution. The status of the brahmin is potentially available to anyone who is willing to shed ignorance and strive for ‘knowledge’. Oppression on the basis of caste and gender is presented as a false consciousness, which can be combated by education and acts of mental courage, such as the shedding of the purdah:

Women must be treated with equality and respect. Remember the status of women in the Vedic times. For women to acquire that place of honour, they must get proper education. Give up purdah! Give up superstitions (ibid.).
Through all these preachings, the Swami’s own life is built as exemplar, making it impossible to question the premise that it is possible to battle superstitions and ‘social evils’ if one is brave enough and willing to transform oneself through the knowledge of the Vedas. I had earlier referred to Vivekananda’s call to the *chandala* to acquire the status of the brahmin through learning Sanskrit instead of resentment towards the latter. Dayananda too puts the onus on the *chandala* or the ‘untouchable’ — but in a setting where nationhood is already achieved. Defined as an intellectual category, brahminism emerges as a norm that is culturally central and authoritative, and is essential for laying claim to the status of the citizen of the nation. Dayananda in this sense challenges the welfare ethic of the state and its interventionist responsibilities in an unequal social context. The national subject must develop responsibility towards his/her own self through disciplining the body and the mind. The individual is cut to the measure of the disciplinary state.

Dayananda is also a ‘conversion narrative’, typical of ACK — and conversion may be read as one of the most fundamental modes of national disciplining. The space of the nation is never closed and yet to acquire the status of the ‘insider’, one must be ‘converted’ to the ideals of the nation, which overwrites the ideals of the Hindu upper caste bourgeoisie. Muslims, for example, can be accommodated into national subjecthood through moves that erase of their ‘other’ identity — that which is discordant, not in tune with hegemonic perceptions of the nation and its culture. We are told that ‘[d]uring his tour he [Dayananda] befriended many Muslims. He ate food given to him with love and affection by anyone. This was quite a revolutionary idea in those days’ (Pai 1976a: 27). He tells them:

The Vedas belong to the whole of mankind, for *truth is universal*. So is god. Are we not all the children of the same father? (ibid.; emphasis mine).

In response to Dayananda’s gesture of ‘inclusion’, there is a ‘voluntary’ recognition by the Muslim of his spiritual authority. When some

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15 Balraj Madhok writes in his famous *Indianisation*, ‘The primacy of Brahmin was accepted [in the Vedas] with the condition that he engaged himself in intellectual pursuit and took a vow of poverty. Intellectual superiority and not material affluence was considered to be the strong point of a Brahmin’ (1970: 42).
orthodox brahmins attempt to poison Dayananda and are arrested by a Muslim official, Dayananda entreats him to set free his enemies. The visual presents the overwhelmed Muslim **tehsildar**, tears streaming down his cheeks. He says: ‘Swamiji, you are the very embodiment of your name Dayananda’ (Pai 1976a: 22).

This indeed is an evocative example of the spiritual conversion of the Muslim, an event that re-inscribes him as recognisable, domesticated in a sentimental fashion and safe enough to be admitted into the scope of the nation.16 Only such a Muslim, as Shahid Amin (2005) has pointed out, has life within hegemonic representations of national amity and brotherhood.

We have engaged with several forms of national disciplining so far (masculinisation, brahminisation, spiritual conversion and so on) that contest the welfare ethic in the narratives of ACK. Does the disciplinary state, in the scheme of ACK, have no responsibilities/obligations towards its subjects, then? I would suggest that it does; but its commitments are placed in a completely different ethical-political frame. In the worldview of the RSS, for instance, ‘man’ is envisaged as the living limb of the corporate personality of society. We have also seen that within the ideological frame of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, the manager of a factory had a duty towards the worker, as a father would towards a child in a family. In ACK too, the self comes to substitute the state in moral action in the mode of familial responsibility. Let me discuss this trope with reference to Vivekananda (the text of which more or less follows the narrative pattern of Dayananda):

Vivekananda organised his fellow sanyasis into a dedicated band of spiritual and social workers. They nursed the sick, fed the poor and rendered help to the needy during famines and floods (Pai 1977b: 29).

We may identify this spirit of social service as one that is sought to be imbibed in the followers of organisations like the RSS as well, especially in times of natural disasters. Also consider the image of a group of **santhals** being fed by the monks of the Ramakrishna order established by Vivekananda. The **santhals** are shown squatting on the

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16 I have in mind the ‘good Muslim’ of popular films, advertisements, stories and so on.
floor to eat the food served to them, many of them in a posture of abjection. In the next panel, a monk follower asks Vivekananda:

Why do you fuss so much over those santhals? (Pai 1977b: 31).

He replies:

They are as much the children of god as you or I (ibid.).

We repeatedly come across similar acts of ‘charity’ carried out by a saint or a reformer in ACK. Embedded in these acts/images is the ideal of feudal benevolence. Events like ‘feeding the poor’ bring to the fore the feudal genealogies of the urbanising rural bourgeoisie in the 1970s.

However, one must note the processes through which a transformation of the charitable act is affected. While the image is one of feudal benevolence, the verbal narrative with its nationalist–revisionist rhetoric charges it with a different energy. The feudal subject merges into the nationalist bourgeois subject–citizen. In the process, the former is transmuted while the latter takes on dimensions of the older articulation. The masculine individualist self edges out the welfare state through establishing its organic connection with the people. It is

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17 See Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar as another example.

18 In an important study, R. Srivatsan (2008) develops a configuration of practice and theory which he terms seva (also referred to as service). Hinduisim, he says, criticised as being incapable of thinking beyond one’s caste and therefore being incapable of national rule, turns outward and seeks an internally autonomous response to the fate of the outcaste. This response takes the form of seva. In his concern for the downtrodden in the society, the sevak provided a challenge to colonial sovereignty. For instance, the ‘untouchables’ or the insurgent tribals are refigured as poor miserable beings in need of seva. Seva expresses a specific form of governmental rationality in the context of the Indian freedom movement. On the one hand, at the totalising level, marginal populations are being defined as subjects of welfare. On the other, at an individualising level, the sevak is exemplar and saviour, demonstrating the conduct and morality not only of the downtrodden, but of the middle classes themselves. He teaches the latter to be citizens. Seva provides an internal critique of what is perceived as the closed structure of caste-Hindu thought and practice. It is possible to argue that seva facilitates a way of thinking and doing suited to capitalist growth in India.
useful here to recall the imagining of the nation as family by the right as part of its challenge to the socialist state. The nation-family trope subsumes the relationship between the individual and the society, the manager and the worker, the upper and the lower castes. State responsibility is re-notated within the norms of patriarchy. As pointed out by Tapan Basu et al.:

Society is immediately identified with familiar relations, which would evidently provide the paternalist model for all other relationships, including that between rulers and ruled. Contrary to Western ideals, we are told, this is a philosophy which gives precedence to duty towards the community over individualism and materialism. Western individualism shatters family and community, Hinduism integrates them through a harmonious dharma… (1993: 32).

Chinmayananda

In 2001, ACK finally pays homage to Chinmayananda — a life that had provided a frame of reference for many of its saint figures. I have earlier delineated the Swami’s career in the context of the VHP and the conservative upsurge in the 1960s. ACK’s Chinmayananda more or less replicates that trajectory. However, I would like to draw attention to a few aspects that firmly locate Chinmayananda’s function/role not just in 1960s when he styled himself as the spiritual leader of the ‘floundering’ middle-classes, but also in relation to the corporate elite of the 2000s, firmly ensconced in their faith in the logic of ‘management’.

First of all, Chinmayananda emerges as a conduit between the ascetic and the world. He trains in Vedantic philosophy under the guidance of the austere Swami Tapovanam ‘who lives in a cowshed with a stone for a pillow’ (Pai 2001: 20). He is an ‘authority on Sanskrit, the language in which the scriptures were originally written’ (ibid.: 19). Chinmayananda reveres him but is more drawn to Shivananda, his other guru with a persona much more accessible and less severe. Driven by an urge to spread his knowledge in the world, Chinmayananda seeks Tapovanam’s guidance:

I want to share all the knowledge with people from all walks of life (ibid.: 20).

The guru displays reluctance:
No, religion and knowledge are only for those who strive for it (Pai 2001: 20).

Finally, he yields by recommending a preparatory stage; his disciple must travel through India before he makes a decision. The latter faces ‘hunger, hardship and mockery’ during his travel, but is convinced that the people need his intervention:

People all over the country are ignorant of their rich spiritual legacy. *I will reintroduce Hinduism to the Hindus* (ibid.: 21; emphasis mine).

On his return, he manages to convince Tapovanam, who gives his blessing for this task:

It’s a mammoth task. You have my blessings for this gigantic, glorious mission (ibid.).

Chinmayananda bridges the two worlds — the world of the reclusive sage who still holds the key to the ancient and true knowledge and the world of a middle-class in danger of completely forgetting their ‘legacy’. He translates the former for the latter — not just from the esoteric Sanskrit into English, but also into what comes encrypted as a recognisably management/corporate idiom. Look at the panel that shows the saffron-clad swami in front of a black board with a pointer, in front of a rapt, obviously middle-class audience. On the top of the blackboard we see an Om followed by the following abbreviations — BMI, PFT and OET. The speech text unravels the codes:

Through the instruments of BMI (body, mind, intellect) you, the *jiva*, the PFT (perceiver, feeler, thinker) contact with the world of OET (objects, emotions, thoughts).
Jayaprakash Narayan (1980)

My reading of *Jayaprakash Narayan* is an attempt to bring out the ingenuity with which the figure of Jayaprakash (or JP) is read into some of the normative articulations of ACK. This chitrakatha provides insights into the strategic if somewhat unexpected alliance that occurred between rightist parties such as the RSS and the Jana Sangh and an avowed Gandhian socialist like Jayaprakash in the early 1970s. Let me attempt a brief history of that alliance. Jayaprakash had broken away from the Congress in 1934 to establish the Congress Socialist Party. His had criticised the Congress for distancing itself from the people, and was in favour of programmes that were more struggle-oriented and broad-based. As early as 1947, he had accused the dominant sections of the Congress of being guided by capitalist ideas and had also said that its ‘declarations of social policy are merely tactical moves to placate the masses in order not to lose their support’ (Narayan 1975: 120). For Jayaprakash the transition to socialism had a different meaning:

> I should make it clear...that the overall requirements for socialism to be achieved is the existence of a well-organised, powerful, socialist party, supported mainly by workers’ and peasants’ organisations and organisations of the youth (volunteer, student, etc), and the city poor (ibid.: 123).

In 1954, disenchanted with politics, Jayaprakash had opted out of its arena. But in March 1974, he allowed himself to be persuaded to return to power as he perceived in the student movements in Gujarat and Bihar an opportunity to reinstall the principles of Gandhian politics. What is of interest to me in the context of ACK is the curious partnership formed between JP and the right in the 1970s. It demands some probing given JP’s acrid views on some of the treasured principles and concepts of the right. For example, in 1969, JP had said the following about the Hindu Rashtra propagated by the RSS:

> It [the RSS] is reported to have said in a resolution that ‘a well-consolidated Hindu society which rose above all differences of caste, sect, party or language could alone form a firm base for real national integration’.

There can be no objection to the consolidation of any community provided this does not lead to a separatist mentality, intercommunal alienation, communal politics and domination of one community, no matter how large, over another (ibid.: 418).
JP’s view on ‘national heritage’ also provides an interesting contrast to that of the RSS:

[Our national heritage] is not only a question of Muslims and Christians and others with religions of foreign origin accepting India’s ancient past as a part of their national heritage, but also of Hindus and others of indigenous religions accepting India’s medieval and recent past as a part of their national heritage….An all-inclusive Indian nation is fundamentally different from a Hindu nation….Protagonists of the first concept would look upon all citizens of India, irrespective of religion, language, etc as ‘sons of the soil’ while protagonists of the other (such as Mr. Golwalkar) would consider only Hindus sons of the soil and treat Muslims and Christians as ‘aggressors’ (Narayan 1975: 421).

There two statements signal the wide chasm in ideology that existed between the right and JP. What then were the grounds on which an alliance materialised between them during the 1970s? Political commentators have suggested that this particular connection allowed the Hindu nationalists to be associated with a respected leader — a move that would help them to integrate into a more legitimate mainline politics. It also provided an opportunity to combine with JP’s popular movement the agenda of ‘bharatiya education’.19 JP gave primacy to society over state and called for decentralisation, following the Gandhian model of village republics. For him such a demand was coterminous with a more radically conceived socialism that encouraged the participation of the people in the government.

Right-wing parties like the RSS and the Jana Sangh with their emphasis on social reform and moral regeneration as against a more fundamental political transformation could find certain resonances in JP’s state versus society rhetoric if only at a surface level.20 Also, JP’s critique of Nehru’s ‘modernism imported from abroad’ (Jaffrelot 1996: 263–64) proved useful for the right’s own agenda of ushering

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19 For example, the Chhatra Sangharsh Samiti (Student Committee for Struggle) established by the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) in Patna in February 1974 was concerned with the living conditions of students as much as with the development of ‘Bharatiya education’ (Jaffrelot 1996: 258).

20 While, for JP, social reforms were justified on purely humanitarian grounds, the Hindu nationalists saw such policies as ultimately endowing Hindu society with a new ideology (Jaffrelot 1996: 262).
in an ‘authentic’ modernity rooted in the nation’s ancient tradition and heritage.\textsuperscript{21}

Returning to the arena of politics in the 1970s, JP gave the call for ‘total revolution’ which referred to a ‘complete reform of society inspired by Gandhi’s ideals: the abolition of Untouchability and cast [sic] and, above all, an institutional transformation to make possible the primacy of society over the state, through the rehabilitation of politics at the local level’ (Jaffrelot 1996: 262). Editorials in the Hindu nationalist press lauded the demand for ‘total revolution’, linking it with their own demand for spiritual revolution which posed itself as a substitute to the ‘violent Marxist-style revolution’.

I look at ACK’s \textit{Jayaprakash Narayan} against the background of the strategic deployment of a conservative politics organised around the charismatic figure of JP in the post-Nehruvian moment. ACK’s narrative representation is allegoric of this process. The representation of JP also runs comfortably parallel to that of the saint figures I have analysed before.

In the introduction to this book, we are informed that ‘his [JP’s] was a struggle to discover what constituted justice. \textit{He was concerned with fundamental morality} and all his life was spent in illumining the truth’ (Pai 1980a; emphasis added). This sets the stage for a replay of the drama of the violation of the fundamental moral order and the consequent moral battle to reinstate it, under the guidance of the guru who must give up his reclusion. Notably, Balasaheb Deoras, who was the \textit{sarasanghchalak} of the RSS, stated in 1974 that ‘he (JP) is like sannyasis of old who remained aloof and yet did not hesitate to lead the people when the rulers went astray’ (cited in Jaffrelot 1996: 263).

ACK builds the authority of Jayaprakash’s persona by taking us through sequences demonstrating his fearless struggle against the British Government, his spiritual bent of mind, his loathing for official position and his incorruptibility. JP’s opposition of the Congress

\textsuperscript{21} JP argued that the revival of interest in Gandhi’s ideas was ‘largely due to the disenchantment that has spread over the past years with so-called socialist planning and policy-making and programming. As this disenchantment deepens, more and more of our intellectuals who had their hands [sic] in the clouds of America and Russia until now, will become conscious of their own skies under which they live’ (cited in Jaffrelot 1996: 264).
Sculpting a Middle Class

Government in during the emergency era is posed in the following terms:

Years later [after his struggle against the British Government] he was to wage a similar battle in Independent India, to re-establish democratic values. He did not fight with guns. He simply proclaimed the truth clearly and loudly. And he paid the price of a long solitary imprisonment for it. But in the final resort, only a leader who has truth on his lips can prevail against the force of brutal state power (Pai 1980a: Introduction).

Alongside JP’s Gandhian political morality comprising of truth and non-violence nestles a concern for the maintenance of an upper caste social order. Let us take a look at the opening lines of the chitrakatha:

On the auspicious day of Vijaya Dashami (11th October, 1902), there was festivity in the house of Babu Harsu Dayal in Sitabdiara. His wife, Phul Rani, had given birth to a son. The child was named Jayaprakash Narayan (Pai 1980a: 1; punctuation added).

The significance of Vijaya dashami is not to be missed. Dr. K. B. Hedgewar, one of the chief ideologues of the RSS, had chosen Vijaya Dashami for the inauguration of the organisation, this being the day on which Rama was supposed to have defeated Ravana in the epic battle between good and evil in the Ramayana (Basu et al. 1993: 12). In ACK’s frame of reference the conflict between Rama and Ravana has a special resonance. In Samarth Ramdas, for example, Ramdas arouses his followers against the Mughals by saying, ‘Just as Lord Rama fought the demon, Ravana, let us rise and fight against oppression’ (Pai 1980b: 27). Suffice it here to say that the event of JP’s birth on Vijaya Dashami is a sign for the reader to ‘recognize’ him at the beginning of the narrative as a familiar authority figure exuding the same power shared by scores of other pedagogic personas in the oeuvre of ACK.

Jayaprakash’s character is shaped through highlighting two dominant streaks: first, his aggressive opposition of British rule and

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22 Balraj Madhok writes in Indianisation: ‘Dussehra or Vijaya Dashmi is the army day of India since ages past. It is the day of victory of good over evil’ (1970: 117–18).
English education and second, his adherence to the Gita — ‘the Bhagavat-Gita held a special charm for him’ (Pai 1980a: 3). When he leaves for his education in the United States, he carries the *Gita* along with him. The narrative also tells us about his revolutionary activities against the British, the physical torture and mental torment endured by him in jail and also about his daring escape from the Hazaribagh jail. We witness the making of an auratic nationalist subject who has through his dauntless struggles earned the authority to deliver the nation from the threat of moral collapse. Each and every event narrated is carefully pressed into shoring up this authority.

Reacting to the partition of India, JP says, ‘Both elation and celebration [to mark independence] are meaningless, partition is not what we fought for’ (ibid.: 21). This evokes the trope of the ‘great betrayal’ of the nation by the Muslims. JP’s sterling ‘nationalist’ credentials combined with his ‘selflessness’, symbolised by his search for ‘the way to service as apart from that of power’ (ibid.: 23) legitimise the view that social harmony alone is the answer to the problems of the nation. In his own writings however, Jayaprakash expresses his unhappiness over the refusal on part of the landlords to meet the requirements of the land-ceiling act. Though unhappy with the ensuing violence, he also blames the government and the landowners for the rise of the Naxalite movement:

> It is not the so-called Naxalites who have fathered this violence, but they who have persistently defied and defeated the laws for the past so many years — be they politicians, administrators, landowners, moneylenders. The big farmers who cheated the ceiling law through *benami* and fictitious settlements; the gentlemen who grabbed government lands and village commons; the landowners who persistently denied the legal rights of their share-croppers and evicted them from their holdings and who underpaid their labourers and threw them out from their homesteads…. The Congress Party, although in power in the Union Government for over twenty years has failed to see at the state level that Congress governments there implemented the land reform laws passed immediately after independence (cited in Scarfe 1975: 365–66).

There is a socialist charge here in JP’s protest against an inequitable distribution system, but the ACK story frames it in a different rhetoric. There is an extended sequence of his participation in the *bhoodan* (land-gift) movement, trying to persuade the landowners to donate part
of their land to the landless peasants. The accent is on the 'change of heart' on part of many landlords as they are transformed through JP's personal 'saintliness' rather than on the unjust distribution system that calls for a radical redressal.\footnote{23} The following image gains meaning in this context — Jayaprakash lays his hand on the shoulder of a landlord in a gesture of commendation as the latter states with folded hands:

I do not possess much land. But I will be glad to give some of it to those who have none at all (Pai 1980a: 23).

A group of landless labourers look on, awe-struck by the ‘miracle’. Once again, we catch a glimpse of the saint–reformer.

The narrative does not shun the issue of the oppression of the poor tenants and labourers in the hands of the landlords. Several telling panels show Jayaprakash’s interactions with the suffering landless labourers in the village of Muzaffarpur. One of them tells him:

We were beaten up, and our houses were burnt. Our fault? We are untouchables (ibid.: 25).

The narrative also allows for a ‘resolution’ to social injustice to take shape. There is an easy continuity between the atrocities in the villages as encountered by Jayaprakash and the ‘paternal’ role played by him in getting the dacoits of the Chambal valley to surrender. Reading between the lines, one discovers that the resolution to the Chambal issue is also the desirable solution to social unrest in villages.

JP applied himself to the problems of the Naxalites and the Nagas through sarvodaya methods. \textit{But what happened in 1971 was unique, and amazed the world} (ibid.: 26; emphasis mine).

The ‘unique event’ is the surrender of the dreaded dacoit Madho Singh with a price of Rs. 1,50,000 on his head. Madho Singh comes to JP in disguise, offering to surrender provided the latter acts as an intermediary with the government. The images show us the dacoit, supplicant, touching Jayaprakash’s feet (who has his wife Prabhavati sitting beside him) and then pleading with folded hands:

\begin{footnote}{23} For a radically different treatment of the bhoodan movement and the playing out of the historical antagonism of between the landlord and peasant in that context, read noted Dalit writer Gogu Shyamala’s story ‘Tataki Wins Again’ (2009).\end{footnote}
You’re our only hope babuji (Pai 1980a: 27).

A subsequent image has Madho Singh and his followers laying down arms in a posture of submission in front of Jayaprakash as Prabhavati applies tilak on Madho Singh’s forehead:

Our activities have brought much suffering to other people. We now vow to make amends and start a new life…. (ibid.).

The figure of the naxalite merges with that of the dacoit, both shadows from the margin, the one politicised and the other criminalised. Both symbolise unrest in the countryside. The bandit maybe is more romanticised than the naxalite and more containable within a feudal articulation. But both re-figure in a romantic patriarchal discourse as ‘children to be taken care of’. Jayaprakash emerges as the patriarch who must ensure the welfare of the family. The dacoit is in the repentant/humbled/subordinated position even as JP is the benevolent father-figure with his wife by his side. The subaltern potential of subterranean social movements/revolts is thus written into the nation-family metaphor.

Ultimately, however, JP’s true authority emanates from a position that carries traces of the feudal and the modern and yet outside both configurations. His physical/mental endurance, reformist passion, concern for the downtrodden and personal incorruptibility place him among the saint figures. Like them he comes into politics at a moment of crisis and retreats once the state of emergency is over:25

24 In this regard, Madhava Prasad’s analysis of the representation of criminals in the immensely popular Sholay (1975) is interesting. He writes, ‘One of the truly astonishing features of the developing cinema culture of this period [the seventies] is the success with which criminality could be deployed as a metaphor for all forms of rebellion and disidentification’ (Madhava Prasad 1998: 155). Commenting on the character of the dacoit–villain Gabbar Singh, he further says, ‘In Sholay the dacoit figure is evacuated of all social content, has no personal history. Pitted against the legitimate rule of the landlord, his political ambitions are not supported by any manifesto, whether personal or social. The film stages the triumph of the Law over the intransigent political order of the countryside which threatens the dominant coalition’s rural partner, the landed bourgeoisie’ (ibid.: 158).

25 Pun intended. I do refer to the state of emergency is 1975 as well as the ‘moral crisis’ of the nation.
Having re-lit the torch of democracy, Jayaprakash, in the best tradition of yogis kept away from the centre of power. His only concern was to keep the torch of total revolution burning (Pai 1980a: 31).

The Nationalist Hero: Shivaji (1972) and Lachit Barphukan (1978)

My choice to examine the representation of Shivaji — as the nationalist subject perfected through the cultivation of human faculties — is mostly arbitrary except for the fact that he can be placed in the midst of the most famous among the myriad heroes whose stories are retold in ACK. Lachit Barphukan is, of course, a much lesser known figure but I will deal with his significance at a later moment.

The importance of Shivaji as a national symbol in the Hindu revivalist search for identity is well known. Shivaji is the ideal subject of disciplinary nationalism. He would be an *adarsa purush* (Bankim), ‘an ideal for others to emulate, because it is in them [in such ideal men] that perfection is concentrated in its fullness’ (Guha 1993: 7). Shivaji is both an effect and a vehicle for the kind of schooling (namely the instillation of character, patriotism and discipline) that must go into producing the body of the nationalist. He remains the symbol around which regulative structures are deployed, meant to train/inspire the bodies and minds of men and prepare them as adequate to the national task. If we look into the history of Hindu nationalism, we would find that every notable attempt to revive a common history, spirit and culture is accompanied by invoking Shivaji. Bal Gangadhar Tilak had introduced the annual celebration of the birth of Shivaji in western India to ‘nationalise the masses’ (Hansen 1999: 75). In Punjab, the militant Congress leader, Lala Lajpat Rai, who emerged as a prominent spokesman for ‘Hindu sangathan’ (the organisation of the Hindu community), regretted in his 1896 treatise called *Shivaji the Great Patriot* that his countrymen ‘had no taste for the study of history’. While they were interested in getting degrees for the study of Shakespeare, Milton and Huxley, they did not turn their minds to the great men produced by our nation (ibid.). We also know that the RSS volunteers take their vows in front of a map of undivided India, the saffron flag and a statue of Shivaji. Thomas Blom Hansen writes:

The ‘nationalization’ of Shivaji started in the late nineteenth century, and Shivaji has become a popular and clear-cut martial figure, brave, masculine and daring. As a popular metaphor for the lost strength of the
Hindus, Shivaji has proved extraordinarily useful to Hindu nationalist forces (Hansen 1999: 109).

ACK, which began with the avowed aim to teach ‘Indian themes and values’ to an alienated/westernised younger generation, obviously sees great value in Shivaji. He, for ACK, is a cultural symbol that clearly defines the self against the other; the insider against the invader.

In *Shivaji*, the Muslim is the chief threat to the idea of a unified nation. Proponents of Hindu nationalism in post-Independence India have repeatedly expressed anxiety about the ‘recalcitrance’ of Muslims to merge their identity into that of the nation. As noted by Fatehali Devji, ‘The Muslim…represents a fundamental anxiety of nationalism itself: of the nation as something unachieved’ (1992: 1). Through the late 1960s and 1970s, one witnesses a renewed cultural upsurge to consolidate a ‘Bharatiya’ or Indian identity against the threat from Islam.26 One of the major markers of the discourse of nationalism, Devji writes, is its refusal to consider ‘difference as constitutive of the nation’ (ibid.: 2). During the 1970s, the period when *Shivaji* is published, we witness a growing anxiety over the political profile of various Muslim organisations like the Jamaat-i-Islami. Some of the most prominent causes for concern are the desire on part of the Muslims to preserve the *Shariat*, the rules governing social life under Islamic law, and also the demand that Urdu be given the status of second language in North Indian states as it is the language spoken by the Muslims. In the nationalist frame of intelligibility, such demands are perceived as a potential threat of a repeat of the ‘original betrayal’ — the Partition.

Set against these currents, the contemporary function of *Shivaji* cannot be overstated. On the one hand, it beckons the nationalist (male) reader to fight for the nation and on the other, names the enemy inside the nation-space, perpetually a threat to its unity. In short, it spells out the rules for being the subject–citizen of India. This chitrakatha is an embodiment of the disciplining that is essential for cohering the nation around an upper caste Hindu identity. As Balraj Madhok put it so unambiguously in 1970:

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26 M. A. Venkata Rao, President of the Karnataka Jana Sangh unit, writes in 1960: ‘…Islam should recognize the same identity of national being in all Bharatiyas and be loyal to it and eschew all extra-territorial loyalty to Islamic society contradicting Indian loyalty’ (cited in Graham 1990: 96).
Respect for the national flag, national anthem, national language or languages, national heroes and great men, national ethos and values are part of nationalism. Aliens also can be absorbed into the national mainstream through inculcation of these feelings of oneness and identification with the national homeland, its culture and heritage (Madhok 1970: 30–31).

ACK takes it upon itself to respond to the growing demand largely from sections of the middle-classes in the 1960s and 1970s, that national heroes like Shivaji and Rana Pratap be included in the curriculum in order to inculcate nationalist feeling among children. The endeavour is to ‘set history right’ by cleansing it of ‘secular distortions’.27

The design of Shivaji’s life unfolds at the moment of his birth in the ACK text. Note how the narrative sets this event up in the charged context of foreign (Muslim) rule:

It was the 19th day of February in they year 1630. The sun was about to set, when the drums in the fortress of Shivneri, in Maharashtra, proclaimed that a son has been born to Jijabai. Her husband Shahaji was away, fighting battles for the Sultan of Bijapur. For hundreds of years the Marathas have been under the suppression of foreign rulers. At the time of Shivaji’s birth, besides the Sultan, there was the great Mughal emperor of Delhi and the Negro coastal king, the Siddhi Johar (Pai 1972: 1).

Shivaji’s training in childhood under the guidance of Dadaji Konddeo facilitates the ‘harmonious growth’ of his intellectual abilities as much as martial prowess. The other important figure in his life is his mother who narrates to him tales from the great epics, Mahabharata and Ramayana. It is she who, as the familial pedagogic source, gives him his first lessons in nationalism. Shivaji’s father serves under the Sultan of Bijapur; a fact that rankles him:

Mother, what is my duty? To fight for a foreign king by the side of my father? Or to fight for my people against the king? (ibid.: 3)

She is firm in her response:

Your duty lies in fighting for your own people (ibid.: 3–4).

27 ‘In the name of secularism, historical facts are being distorted or whitewashed to suit the ideological or political convenience of the powers that be. For example, Aurangzeb is sought to be presented as a liberal ruler….This tampering with history and removal of references to India’s traditional heroes and heroines from the text-books in the name of secularism and eradication of communalism is most impolitic...’ (Madhok 1970: 114).
Shivaji’s father remains a shadowy figure in the story. Jijabai is the guiding force behind him but she also symbolises the sovereign inner domain of spirituality, which remains uncorrupted by his father’s submission to the foreign ruler for material gain. Indeed, in the domain of the home, she emerges as a towering figure in her traditional strength and influence over her son. Her moral authority sanctifies her son’s battles against the enemy. As we shall see, it is ultimately through codes of moral sanctioning that the narrative distinguishes between violence and just war in *Shivaji*.

*Shivaji* abounds in bloodied swords and mayhem. As Shivaji captures fort after fort, he leaves a trail of death and destruction after him. Right at the beginning, his asserts his moral right over the land:

> This beautiful land is ours! These great forts should rightfully belong to us (Pai 1972: 5).

From then on, each act of aggression by Shivaji is represented as the heroic battle to recover the nation from the clutches of the ‘invader’. Consider the ghastly death of Afzul Khan, the commander of the Sultan of Bijapur, at the hands of Shivaji, who stabs him with the tiger claws worn on his fingers as they embrace during a fake truce. We are provided with a rationale for Shivaji’s act — the wily ‘invader’ would surely have stabbed Shivaji had the latter not retaliated first. However, the enemy’s last cry ‘Ya Allah!’ (in highlighted letters) is still an excessive sign, disproportionate to his ‘crime’. Its fuller sense lies in a broader cultural frame of reference where Islam is the dangerous Other — recalcitrant and unassimilable. Also, as the narrative prepares us, on his march against Shivaji, had Khan not pulled down a temple of the Goddess Bhavani and plundered and terrorised villages, justifying such vengeance? While the battle cry of Shivaji’s army ‘Har Har Mahadeo!’ (once again highlighted) is a thrilling call to liberate the nation, the enemy’s ‘Ya Allah!’ has a double function. It, on the one hand, signifies the subjugation of his faith/difference (the cry of death) yet, on the other, reflects the anxiety about his ‘intractability’ even in death.

While Shivaji’s faith affirms the ethicality of his mission, that of his Muslim enemy sanctions greed and rampage. The narrative reiterates Vivekananda’s notion of the aggressive but degraded virility of Islam,

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28 I am drawing from Partha Chatterjee’s (1993) inside/outside distinction in the nationalist context.
which encouraged the Muslim to conquer with ‘the Koran in one hand and the sword in the other’ (Chowdhury 1998: 127). Every adversary of Shivaji — Afzul Khan, Shayista Khan and finally Aurangzeb — bears marks of his religion — his beard, his apparel or his bigotry, treachery and cruelty.29 Shivaji’s chief adversary Aurangzeb has a normative status within nationalist rhetoric — he represents the ultimate recalcitrance of Islam. He remains the antithesis of the Indianisation of Islam that would assimilate Muslims into the national ethos.30 A contrast is often drawn between the Indianisation or Hinduisation of

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29 Both Hindu as well as secular nationalist discourse persistently represents the Muslim as overly religious. For instance, the Muslim male must sport a Turkish style Fez cap apart from the mandatory beard in most popular representations. Shahid Amin points out the tenacity of the image even though one rarely encounters a “Turki-topiwalla’ in real life. ‘No diversity is countenanced unless “they” appear different to “us” in the way “we” expect them to’ (Amin 2005: 9). Also see Devji (1992).

30 Even the secular critic has been wary of Aurangzeb while Akbar is representative of the syncretic impulse. As Aamir Mufti observes, in Nehru’s *Discovery of India*, conquest is typically the mode of Islam on the national soil even as he acknowledges the new ferment of ideas it brought with us, but its
The ultimate fate remains ‘absorption’. ‘For a chief characteristic of this national cultural life is precisely that it has eventually forced all invaders from the Aryans to the Mughals — and it is interesting that the Aryan Vedas become the very source of national culture, while Turco-Persian ‘Islam’ remains an interruption — to become ‘Indianised’ (Mufti 1995: 88).
Islam during the time of Akbar and the bigotedness that set in thereafter and reached its zenith under the emperor Aurangzeb (Graham 1990: 97). When Shivaji escapes from the palace of Aurangzeb, where he has been kept under a house arrest, the visuals show him as being hailed by common people and saffron-robed religious monks alike. Collapsed into this image are the two important themes of ACK — the king’s dual role as the protector of the spiritual (brahminic) order of the nation as also the ideal ruler.

Shivaji is the exemplar of ‘real tolerance’ — a combination of force and mercy. And the narrative carefully embellishes that image. All-powerful, he crushes his enemy with ruthlessness but instructs his soldiers to spare women and children and the fallen soldier. When Afzul Khan is beheaded, one of Shivaji’s generals asks him:

What do we do with the Khan’s head? (Pai 1972: 14)

Shivaji replies:

Bury it along with his body with full honours (ibid.).

The general reacts, ‘What a noble man! He doesn’t wish to dishonour a fallen enemy’ (ibid.).

Describing the nature of ‘real tolerance’ Milind Wakankar writes:

‘Real tolerance’ is almost always opposed to ‘appeasement;’ …Real tolerance would mean masculine tolerance, a tolerance like Ram’s, ready at one moment to take up arms against a foe, at another to forgive him who must remain meek and submissive, never angry and intransigent, if he is to imbibe the blessings of the deity. The logical outcome of this ethic of tolerance, now enshrined as the quintessence of the Hindu notion of civil society, is the demonisation of all that is ‘intolerant’. Hence the seeming paradox that this toleration, ‘to be secure, must then stamp out all that is not Hindu, for what is not Hindu is always intolerant’ (1995: 62).

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31 Hence the demand on part of Madhok that Aurangzeb be shown in his ‘true colours’ in history textbooks (Madhok 1970: 114).

32 Samarth Ramdas, who is Shivaji’s guru writes to him the following letter when he has established his supremacy over the land: ‘You have been just and righteous; many have taken fright, many have sought your protection. Greetings to you, O benevolent king…’ (Pai 1972: 30).
Afzul Khan, Shayista Khan and Aurangzeb are the embodiments of Islam’s intolerance. Shivaji, in contrast, defines masculine tolerance in a telling critique of the ‘spurious notion of the equality and co-existence of faiths [which] took the place of the age-old wholeness of the nation’ (Wakankar 1995: 58). Such tolerance would mean the subjugation of those who refuse to conform and benevolence towards those who submit. It is this virtue of ‘tolerance’ that makes Shivaji the popular king, the one fit to rule, or who rules with true consent. Thus in the last panel depicting his coronation, he is proclaimed a ‘people’s king’ (Pai 1972: 32).

Shivaji is the nationalist subject par excellence, the model to be followed for rightful self-defence and just war. In the context of the post-colonial nation, his importance as a symbol lies in the moral justification of aggression towards the ‘enemy within’.

The chitrakatha Lachit Barphukan (Pai 1978) follows an ideological trajectory that is parallel to that of Shivaji. But I feel it deserves our attention as it adds an important dimension to the emblematic heroic narrative through its management of a crucial difference — ‘region’ — a difference that threatens to destabilise the singularity of the independent nation. Lachit Barphukan, ACK tells us, is an Assamese hero who fought the Mughals with the same ardour, rugged courage and strategic cunning as Shivaji. Both resisted and confronted the territorial ‘invasion’ of Aurangzeb, the Mughal emperor.

Lachit Barphukan was a great general. Like Shivaji, his contemporary in the Deccan, Lachit also fought relentlessly to check the expansion of the Mughal Empire. It is unfortunate that the saga of this great son of India, who stands on equal footing with Rana Pratap and Shivaji, is little known outside his native Assam (ibid.: introduction).

While the name of Shivaji is resplendent in nationalist discourse, it remains the burden of ACK to bring to light the story of Lachit, unsung outside the folk narratives of Assam. An Assamese hero becomes the ‘great son of India’ and the narrative achieves this transformation by strategically placing him alongside familiar symbols of national pride.

The contemporary significance of this narrative may be measured against the mounting anxiety with which both centrist and rightist forces viewed the surfacing of regional loyalties and aspirations in post-colonial India. Regional assertions of identity were viewed as the attempt to destabilise the freedom and sovereignty achieved by
the Indian State through the enormous sacrifices of the nationalists. The Congress and the right-wing parties have generally shared a broad agreement regarding the status of India as a ‘monolithic society held together by an overbearing Centre’ (Rangarajan 1997: 42). In a study, Satish Poduval (2000) discusses ‘region’ in the centrist and official imagination of the newly independent Indian State. He draws our attention to the value attached to national unity by the States Reorganisation Commission (SRC) formed in 1953 by the Government of India. The SRC felt that ‘it is neither possible nor desirable to reorganize states on the basis of a single test of either language or culture’ (cited in Poduval 2000: 21). For the SRC, the security and economic aspects of the nation as a whole were paramount and questions of specific regional or local interests were secondary. The issue emerges again in the 1970s in face of the particular demands/struggles that raise head in various regions. Balraj Madhok, for instance, criticises Nehru for his ‘inept’ handling of movements of ‘regional and linguistic chauvinism’:

Had there been a strong sense of nationalism and had deliberate steps been taken to maintain the wider national consciousness at a time when linguistic and regional consciousness was running riot, the things could have been improved after the abatement of first flush of linguistic enthusiasm. But unfortunately nothing of the sort was done. Even the constitutional provisions about a common national language and common citizenship began to be neglected or tampered with, to appease certain regional leaders (1970: 39).

Further:

The very idea of country first, which is the first prerequisite of nationalism, is getting clouded. Overstress on regional issues and interests even at the cost of national interests is the logical result.

The way anti-national elements in Assam have been exploiting this regional feeling to drive out non-Assamese Hindus with a view to

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33 K. M. Panikkar, who was a member of the SRC, spelled out the task of the commission as follows, ‘To us the governing fact of our political life is the primacy of the Union, the overriding importance of the concept of a single Indian nation….It is with us only the Union that is indestructible and should be considered indestructible. It is only to the unity of India that sanctity should be attached’ (cited in Poduval 2000: 4).
strengthen their own position in that strategic area and prepare the way for its take-over by Pakistan and China at the opportune time is a warning which nationalist India can ignore only at its peril (Madhok 1970: 41).

My examination of *Lachit Barphukan* is set against the ‘threat’ of Assamese regionalism to the coherence of the nation. I suggest that this text is a hegemonic move to ‘integrate’ region into nation, where it ‘naturally’ belongs. It was published at a time when Assamese regional claims become increasingly clamourous. The agitation demanding that Assamese be made the official language of Assam peaked in the 1960s and the 1970s. During the late 1970s, Assamese regionalism turned militant against illegal immigrants and the policy of de-facto enfranchisement of non-citizens. In an interesting analysis, Sanjib Baruah (1997) looks at the singer Bhupen Hazarika’s compositions and songs as a vehicle to convey the aspirations of the Assamese people and their longing for a homeland, themes that are conspicuously absent in a singularised pan-Indian imagining of the nation.34 Hazarika’s songs from the 1950s onwards signal a fraught traffic between an Indian and an Assamese identity. There is recurrent reference to the nation as mother and yet, at many points, the territory of Assam, as against the nation as a whole, also symbolises the body of the mother. Hazarika’s songs record the losses and disappointments of the Assamese people and their disillusion with ‘nationally’ conceived notions of progress and modernity.35 They also register the need for an identitarian politics outside the

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34 ‘The modern nation state seeks a monopoly of the collective imagination of all its citizens. It would like the state-defined broad political community to be the sole repository of the poetics of a homeland and of the memories and dreams of a people — defined singularly, even if while there may be gestures towards acknowledging diversity. However, the state in India — a legatee to a subcontinental empire and the product of an anti-colonial political project — must come to terms with competing collective imaginings’ (Baruah 1997: 501).

35 ‘For instance a song (composed by Hazarika in 1954) celebrates the founding of the first university in the state in 1954 — an institution that evoked much hope about the future. The song is a good example of the promises of modernity that accompanied the early years of India’s Independence from British rule….Unfortunately universities in India and the “Third World” rarely fulfil such expectations. Except for token gestures, research agendas and teaching priorities shaped by a global and pan-Indian academic culture have little room for such “provincial” dreams’ (Baruah 1997: 505).
framework of nationalism as in this line of a song, ‘If you become a crippled limb in the world’s body, the world will not love you for that’ (Baruah 1997: 506).

The very stirrings and discontents that Hazarika evokes so movingly, are also the ones that get addressed and drawn into the idiom of nationhood in Lachit Barphukan. The chitrakatha is also about Assamese land, pride and love of freedom. However, it responds to the cultural sub-nationalism of the Assamese by reinstalling in the national cultural mainstream an obscure regional figure like Lachit and granting him a pride of place beside Shivaji and Rana Pratap. Lachit Barphukan inserts itself into the Assamese people’s struggle to exorcise the sense of powerlessness generated through their experience of marginalisation by reviving the memory of cultural heroes.36 It recalls a time when the Assamese, under their able general Lachit, rose to declare their sovereignty against the Mughal army of Aurangzeb. The narrative is set in the later part of the seventeenth century when Assam has witnessed several ‘invasions’ by the Mughal army. Aurangzeb’s general Mir Jumla has conquered and occupied Saraighat. Lachit is then a general under king Jayadhwaja Singha, and his indignation at the news of the Mughal occupation echo those of Shivaji:

My land under Mughal heels! Oh, the shame of it! But one day, I will have my revenge (Pai 1978a: 4).

King Chakradhwaja Singha later chooses the brave and patriotic Lachit as the royal commander to lead his forces against the Mughals. In the first phase of the battle of Saraighat, Lachit succeeds in flushing out the Mughal army from the fort of Itakhuli. His final battle is against Ram Singh, the Mughal commander-in-chief, and the two armies fight on the plains to the south of Alaboi Hill. At one point the Assamese are routed by the Mughal cavalry and Lachit himself

36 One of Hazarika’s songs composed in 1968 goes as follows: ‘We Assamese are not [culturally] poor. In what sense are we poor? We had everything and we have everything, but we don’t know it and we don’t take stock of it’ (Baruah 1997: 506). Baruah links this with rise of the spirit of Assamese nationalism. Hazarika, a cosmopolitan cultural figure and a national figure, cannot remain unconcerned with Assam’s fate even at the risk of being accused of provincialism.
falls seriously ill. Ram Singh and his army advance towards Itakhuli on boats on the river Brahmaputra. Lachit rises from his sick bed to take command and his presence has an electrifying effect on his army. Familiar with naval warfare, a much smaller Assamese army on six armed boats forces the Mughal army to retreat.

As for their skill in warfare, Lachit and Shivaji are struck from the same mould. Lachit’s battle strategies recall those of Shivaji’s — he relies on guerilla techniques and cunning. For instance, he directs his soldiers to pour water into the muzzles of the cannons of the enemy army at night. The Mughal soldiers find them to be useless the next morning and Lachit wins a decisive victory. If Shivaji is known as the ‘mountain rat’ among the Mughals for his agility in mountainous regions, Lachit is the ‘cunning Assamese’. Both Shivaji and Lachit are ruthless in crushing the enemy and yet follow the strict code of masculine honour. When the Mughal enemy flees from Lachit’s onslaught, his soldiers seek permission to pursue them and capture the booty. But in a true display of ‘real tolerance’, Lachit says:

Let’s not tarnish the fair name of our king and our country by plundering fugitive soldiers (Pai 1978c: 31).

The story of Lachit forces the non-Assamese (culturally ‘central’) reader to cast a glance towards a part of the nation that is marginal in the discourse of nationalism. But this look of recognition/identification takes place in a mode that lacks the ambiguity of Hazarika’s songs, expressive of an unresolved tension between Assam and the nation. In ACK, Lachit is ‘Assam’s man of destiny’ but also the ‘great son of India’, and the two identities are seemingly in harmony. When Lachit speaks of Assamese honour, he echoes Shivaji, the icon of nationalism. Ultimately it is Lachit’s resistance of Aurangzeb, the archetypal foe of the nation, that completes his transition from a regional hero into a national hero. The trope of the ‘common enemy’ binds region and nation and makes invisible the specific historical grievances of the former. As in the words of the SRC: ‘Nobody is going to be hurt unless India is hurt’ (cited in Poduval 2000: 23).

It might be interesting to examine Lachit Barphukan against the formation of ‘region’ as a category in independent India. Satish Poduval (2000) maps a history of the frenzied manoeuvres that take place in the period following August 1947 to draw the former princely states and separate territories that formed part of the British empire into the boundaries of the nation-state. He notes that ‘region’
Sculpting a Middle Class is an integral part of the imaginative geography of the nation that is constituted within a discourse of belonging and alienation, inclusion and exclusion. Hence the demagogues of the newly independent nation like K. M. Panikkar chose to evolve a national history predicated on the one hand, on an ‘all India economic thinking’ and, on the other, on ‘an equally aggressive cultural policy which aimed to reveal/devise the fundamental unity of the nation by promoting the “Sanskrit tradition” which “provided all Indias with a cultural background”’ (Poduval 2000: 8–9).37

Lachit Barphukan can be located within the impulse to singularise the nation in terms of its territorial and imaginative unity. ACK rescues Lachit from regional obscurity to present him as a national icon. But, for this, he must be remade in the image of Shivaji (or Rana Pratap). He is caught in a relationship of dependence — *Lachit Barphukan* is both a recognition and a management of region/Assam.

The curious character of the ‘making’ of the Indian nation begins to stares at us in the face here — region must be integrated, but the Muslim is forever posited as a ‘residue’ signaling the indeterminacy of the nation.

### Padmini: Ideal Indian Womanhood

The legend of Padmini of Chittor is a foundational myth of the Hindu nation. ACK’s *Padmini* (1973) reinvokes her sacrifice in an attempt to retrieve for our collective memory the threat of the enemy within, namely the Muslim. It connects with the nationalist discourse where Padmini, the symbol of feminine heroism and chastity, has been instrumental in reawakening the subject–citizen to the potential danger to one’s home, family and nation:

> [T]he bardic legend of Padmini and Alauddin...has acquired the status of historically authentic event not only in what is called popular perception but also among the articulate middle class intelligentsia. The transformation of a legend into a historical event gives a fair indication of the historical perspective which is imposed upon scattered pieces of experience. Alauddin, apart from being an archetype of the ruthless aggressor, also becomes an epitome of a furiously libidinous Muslim (Agarwal 1995: 35–36).

37 Poduval points out that the master narratives of the nation are not uncontested but there are several texts that ‘transgress the decreed homogeneity of the nationalism-from-above’ (2000: 9). Hazarika’s songs would be demonstrative of that transgressive impulse.
The formation of Pakistan through a partitioning of ‘Bharat’ has served as a metaphor for the violation of the body of the pure Hindu woman as much as of the nation and the Indian Muslim permanently marked as the ‘saboteur of the nation’, with extra-territorial loyalties. Narratives of rape and abduction of Hindu women during the partition have been repeatedly deployed around the theme of national honour. Urvashi Butalia writes, ‘The Indian state was regularly assailed for its failure to protect its women and to respond to Pakistan, the aggressor state, in the language that it deserved’ (1995: 67).38

Ramya Sreenivasan, through a nuanced engagement with rich historical material, has drawn attention to the multiple narratives of the Padmini legend that have been in circulation since the sixteenth century. The earliest known version is Malik Muhammad Jayasi’s Padmavat (1540) in Avadhi, a Sufi mystical adaptation of the heroic romances that were popular in the literary traditions in North India, portraying the dangerous quests undertaken by princes to court and marry women of legendary beauty. These romances follow a different convention and cannot be characterised as narratives of confrontation between the Hindu and the Muslim. Between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, the Rajput nobility belonging to small kingdoms in Rajasthan patronised narratives that valorised the great heroism displayed by Rajputs in defending their queen and their land against Alauddin Khalji. James Tod’s Annals and Antiquities of Rajastan (1829–32) refurbished the pre-colonial Rajput traditions, of which the story of Padmini formed a part, within a colonial perspective. Tod fitted the story into the general pattern of medieval Indian history, which was organised around the major trope of conflict between the righteous and brave Hindus and the treacherous and idol-breaking Muslim invaders.

The new middle class of colonial Bengal produced many Bengali versions of the Padmini legend and, significantly, these followed Tod’s narrative in their celebration of the beautiful, virtuous queen who chose to immolate herself to protect her chastity against the lustful and unethical Alauddin. Sreenivasan proposes that the multiple narratives of the Padmini legend in circulation in different contexts were used

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38 The front page of the RSS mouthpiece Organiser (14 August 1947) consisted of the map of the country superimposed with the figure of a woman lying on it (obviously representing ‘Mother India’) with one of her limbs severed, and Nehru holding the bloody knife responsible for it.
to mobilise specific kinds of community for political purposes. It is remarkable that Bengali narratives of Padmini in the colonial period chose to adapt from Tod’s version of the legend. ‘The authors of this refashioned narrative read the legend as exemplifying Rajput and now “Hindu” patriotism in the face of “Muslim” conquest; this reinterpretation was achieved by erasing an alternative tradition of narratives about Padmini’ (Sreenivasan 2007: 14).

I read ACK’s *Padmini* as an allegory of the post-colonial times, playing out the ‘irreconcilable difference’ of the Muslim. Its genealogies can easily be traced to the nineteenth century nationalist/Bengali retellings of the legend. The story is introduced as follows:

In the history of India, Padmini of Chittor holds a very prominent position. She was a perfect model of ideal Indian womanhood. The values cherished by her were threatened by Ala-ud-din Khilji, the mighty Afghan king of Delhi. A lesser woman would not have been able to face Ala-ud-din. But Padmini was not an ordinary woman. She faced her problems with exceptional courage, a living example of virtuous womanhood (Pai 1973b).

Ala-ud-din Khilji is the ‘outsider’ who threatens the values cherished by Padmini, which also stand for the norms of the nation. The narrative depicts the clash between two radically opposed value systems. One is based on honour and purity, and the other on greed and excess. Padmini, the beautiful queen of Ratnasen, the ruler of Chittor, is pursued by the covetous Sultan of Delhi, Ala-ud-din Khilji. Realising that it would be a tough task to gain entry militarily into the well-fortified Chittor, Khilji sends a message to Ratnasen proclaiming himself as Padmini’s brother. A rather guileless Ratnasen receives him with great honor. Ala-ud-din enters the Chittor as a brother (just as the Muslim remains in India proclaiming himself a brother but with concealed loyalties to Pakistan). ACK’s projection of Ratnasen is double-edged. It is a glorification of Hindu pacifism, a contrast to Muslim ruthlessness and deviousness, yet at the same time, a critique of a ‘tolerance’ that weakens the nation. The narrative unfolds as the story of the great betrayal that haunts post-partition national imaginary. In the aftermath of partition, ‘Hindu tolerance’ is subjected to a critique in narrations of the rape and abduction of Hindu women by the Muslim ‘traitors’. Urvashi Butalia sums up the feeling, ‘It is also the tolerance — hitherto
important — which has rendered the Hindu male incapable of protecting his women’.  
In the late 1960s and 1970s this critique of tolerance takes a definitive shape — the Nehru government’s approach to the Muslim minority is viewed as a policy of ‘appeasement’. This approach is seen as providing encouragement to parties like the Muslim League, Jamaat-i-Islami and Itehad-ul-Musalmeen that are branded as anti-national and engaged in fostering ‘communal chauvinism’ and pro-Pakistan loyalties.

Allow me to read the following episode from Padmini against this backdrop. Ratnasen permits Khilji to see his ‘sister’ Padmini but only in a mirror. He is besotted and later abducts his host in a bid to force Padmini to come to him. In response to his taunts, the captive Ratnasen says:

I could have done the same to you. But we are not treacherous (Pai 1973b: 22; emphasis mine).

To which, Khilji responds:

Keep your nobility to yourself. Now I shall have Padmini with your cooperation (ibid.; emphasis mine).

Ala-ud-din’s derision could as well be directed towards those with the ‘misplaced trust’ that the Muslim could actually form part of the nation. King Ratnasen, noble as he may be, emerges as weak. He is definitely not in the league of Shivaji or Rana Pratap. The real heroism of the story belongs to Padmini. When defeat is certain, she decides to commit jauhar or immolate herself along with other Rajput women of the palace in order to escape dishonour. She declares:

No sacrifice is too big to save one’s honour! (ibid.: 29)

Padmini, in the nationalist imagination, becomes the symbol of purity and sacrifice but more than that, the rallying cry for greater vigilance

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39 She quotes from the RSS mouthpiece, Organiser, to support her point: ‘While other people take pride in savage campaigns launched by their ancestors for enslavement, exploitation and forcible proselytization of their brother human beings, India, pregnant with the wisdom of her illustrious seers and true to her hoary culture, remembers only the key days of her glory when the impact of her glorious civilization was felt far and wide’ (Butalia 1995: 68).
on part of the upper caste Hindu male. The memory of her sacrifice is meant to incite him into action on behalf of the nation-in-danger. Kumkum Sangari writes of the incitement of male honour through the voice (or, in case of ACK’s Padmini, the memory) of the woman:

[T]here is an obsessive re-enactment and reclaiming of male honour [through such incitement], which first plays on male fears of dispossession as well as on women’s anxieties, by displaying all Hindu women as past and future victims of sexual violation, and then equates male sexual honour with the projected Hindu Rashtra itself. ‘Masculinity’ acquires a single axis of social determination. The ability of Hindu men to protect their women, in a single universalisation of the claim to martial valour, becomes the basis of their right to self-government and their claim to monopolise a nation (1993: 877).

Those who do not comprehend the ‘meaning’ of Padmini’s sacrifice are outside the spiritual essence of the nation. In the final panel, a bewildered Khilji stands in front of the last smouldering flames of fire that consumed Padmini and her companions, and muses:

But why did they kill themselves? (Pai 1973b: 32)

The words of Raghav Chetan, himself a traitor from Ratnasen’s court, prove revealing:

Your majesty! You will never understand (ibid.).

Padmini places not only Ala-ud-din but also Muslim women (and by extension lower caste women and feminists) outside the orbit of the nation. Ala-ud-din cannot understand the logic of Padmini’s sacrifice because ‘honour’ does not seem to characterise the women of his community. The only Muslim women in the chitrakatha are those who entertain Khilji, in various poses of debauchery/servility. As the virtue of the upper caste Hindu woman becomes the norm of the nation, other women are banished from the domain of ‘Indian womanhood’ that would legitimate their claims over their bodies and foreground their alternative identities.40

The memory of Padmini’s sacrifice is a touchstone for one’s right to the space of the nation and citizenship. A young Atal Behari Vajpayee, veteran Hinduideologue, wrote this poem in high school, later published in 1988 in the hawkish pamphlet Angry Hindu! Yes Why not:

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I am the son of the brave, there are many jauhars hidden in me; ask the sons of Akbar, whether they remember Mina Bazar?

Do they remember the raging fire in the fort of Chittor?

When thousands of mothers attained martyrdom by burning themselves. This fire which I have nurtured in every vein of my body is not one which can ever be put out,

If it suddenly erupts in the form of a revolution, it will hardly be a surprise (cited in Nandy et al. 1995: 55).
The Liberalisation Years:
The Theme of Merit

By the late 1960s the emergence of certain new trends in ACK coinciding with the arrival of a confident, hegemonic middle-class with international interests can be discerned. I have already discussed the failures of the Nehruvian project of egalitarianism that increasingly come to the fore by the mid-1970s. Crucial alliances took place between the Indian bourgeoisie and the international forces of capitalism. These alliances, one could say, were a reversal of the commitments that were made by the leadership of the independent nation to the people in 1947. Nehru’s government had promised to ensure economic independence and establish a self-reliant and secular society. It had also pledged to wage an economic struggle against the forces of imperialism on the one hand and the forces of feudalism on the other. But by the mid-1970s, Sanjaya Baru notes, crucial compromises were being made with pre-capitalist as well as imperialist forces:

[O]n the one hand pre-capitalist forces are asserting themselves economically, socially and politically, and therefore culturally, and on the other hand, because of the inability of the domestic bourgeoisie to ensure a fairly high rate of growth, or an adequate rate of growth, it is being forced to go into collaboration with multinationals, with foreign capital, making significant concessions to get it (1990: 55).

One encounters a growing endeavor on part of the upper caste middle-class to free the private sector from tight government control and to liberalise imports.

With the onset of liberalisation, the new assertive middle class locates the root of all evil in the welfarist policies of the state that it claims breed corruption, backwardness and a weakening of the individual. In other words, the ‘concessions’ from the state do not allow the self to achieve its full stature, or, as R. Srivatsan puts it,
The Liberalisation Years: The Theme of Merit

‘the unbearable fullness of Man as Citizen’ (Srivatsan 1996: 6). The upper caste and masculinist middle-class would increasingly seek new forms and images of Indianess which would represent its interests as universal. This involves the setting up of an infallible core human self (with integrity and resolve as its hallmarks) and the representation of class, caste, gender and community as incidental. The status of the citizen is to be achieved only through the transcendence of these ‘incidental’ attributes.

Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana offer an incisive critique of the humanist self:

The notion of the ‘human’ as it appears in political theory, and more importantly in humanist common sense is inextricable from what has been termed the metaphysics of substance. Framed by this metaphysics, the human appears as a substantive base that precedes and somehow remains prior to and outside of structurings of gender, class, caste, or community. In liberal political theory, it is this human core that provides the basis for legal personhood…. Even across significant political and theoretical divides, the notion of a human essence that remains resolutely outside historical or social coding continues to operate as ‘common sense’. It is not difficult to see that these theories, and their politico-legal derivatives, actually produce what they claim to recognise…by basing the rights of the individual on the fiction of a substantive human core, the law creates that core, or more precisely, a core-effect; the idea of alienation gains force only as it measures itself against a human fullness…. (1996: 235).

The ‘human core’ is mapped on to the image of the citizen–subject who becomes the ‘bearer of rights’. ‘This imaging, (a) articulated gender, caste and community (and initially even class) only in the realm of the

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1 In an incisive reading of the film Bharateeyudu (1994), Srivatsan writes about its protagonist Senapati, who resolves to root out corruption from the system — something that the state fails to do. ‘Senapati is Man, individual par excellence…. He expresses with every fibre of his being, the agony of the mundane Indian who cannot rise to the universal status of Man. With his representation, Bharateeyudu (Senapati) as the only fully emancipated one (witness his global citizenship and at-homeness in foreign environs), seeks to bring within his compass, the varied elements of the society he addresses. Senapati as Citizen is the desirable superstate beyond the weakness of the actual state apparatus’ (1996: 6).
social; (b) marked these as *incidental* attributes of a *human* self; and, (c) rendered invisible the historical and social/cultural structuring of the subject of politics’ (Tharu and Niranjana 1996: 236).

In the middle-class critiques of the interventionist state, the citizen–self is evoked again and again as the ideal. Special rights granted to the backward classes of the society are now articulated as ‘concessions’. The opposition to the policy of reservations culminated in violent country-wide protests when Prime Minister V. P. Singh announced in August 1990 the decision to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission to substantially increase the reservations for the Backward Castes and the Scheduled Classes and Tribes in government service and public sector jobs. Students belonging to the middle-classes voiced their protest in the language of meritocracy. Reservations, the anti-Mandalites said, would hamper the progress of the nation by breeding inefficiency in the public sector. It is notable that the language of meritocracy is underscored by that of egalitarianism, and equality is envisaged as that which is achieved by ‘a transcendence or a repudiation of caste, community and gender identifications’ (ibid.: 238).²

From the late 1970s, one increasingly encounters cultural representations of autonomous and agentive selves wrestling with difficult circumstances on the strength of their innate courage and determination. This agentive self is fashioned through the rhetoric of liberal humanism but also draws on a nationalist imaginary. This self — upper caste, middle-class and Hindu — takes over the responsibility from the state to restructure the society in its own image and to battle corrupt and pre-modern forces and, hence, is invested with disciplinary responsibilities.³

² Gopal Guru (2002 and 2005) has offered stringent critiques of the corporate class’s logic that its idea of social justice are produced by the conditions of the market and not by caste or community. He points out the historical disadvantages as much as present inequalities that have barred Dalits from opportunity structures.

³ See Tharu and Lalita’s discussion of the emergence of the middle-class widow as an authority figure in the late 1970s. Discussing Binapani Mohanty’s ‘Asru Anala’ (Tears of Fire), they write that this narrative ‘places the responsibility of restoring order and decency to a society… on a lower-caste widow and working woman, Ketaki. In order to preserve the dignity and independence that she has struggled to earn she must rise to the heroic
The new ‘Indian’ subject makes an aggressive bid for equal footing with the western humanist subject, and takes its due place in the new world order. The idea of the nation is re-mobilised in terms of its Vedantic legacy but this only serves to reinforce its global identity:

[I]n the Hindu nationalist appellation, this alternative universalism is no longer a critique of the West, but rather part of a strategy to invigorate and stabilise a modernising national project through a disciplined and corporatist cultural nationalism that can earn India recognition and equality (with the West and other nations) through assertion of difference (Hansen 1999: 231).

The discussion of the ACK stories would have familiarised us with many of the trends of disciplinary nationalism that were inaugurated in the late 1960s and 1970s. I wish to discuss Babasaheb Ambedkar (Pai 1979) in relation to its specific relevance to the context of economic liberalisation and globalisation marking the onset of the 1980s. I do not propose that it inaugurates radically new themes in ACK but only that it marks the logical telos of the route that ACK has followed since its inception.

**Babasaheb Ambedkar:**

Inaugurating the Citizen–Self

*Babasaheb Ambedkar*, coming as it does in 1979, can be located at the interstices of the cultural politics that signals the transition into the 1980s. Its significance is reiterated by the fact that it is republished in 1996 after the violent anti-Mandal agitations of the early 1990s and the subsequent resurgence of interest in Ambedkar among dalits and the backward classes. ACK’s *Babasaheb Ambedkar* cuts the figure of Ambedkar to the measure of the nationalist project of modernity and progress and, in the process, displaces its subaltern charge.

demands the narrative makes on her. She must replace the state in avenging the lumpens who rape and murder a young girl who dares to raise her voice against them. Drawn into her mission and activism are not only others like her who labour to eke out a living, but also an old brahmin who provides water for poor passersby in the hot summer sun and a young middleclass woman activist’ (1993: 109).
A historical engagement with Ambedkar’s politics will tell us that he introduced those notes of discordance, both in nationalist politics and in the Constitution of independent India, which forever contest a homogenised (Hindu) ideal of citizenship. The language of merit and idealism that was used to counter the reservation policy in the 1990s echoes the rhetoric of moral condemnation and consternation that greeted Ambedkar when he demanded a separate electorate for the Depressed Classes in the Round Table Conference of 1932.4

ACK endeavours to shift Ambedkar and his politics on to the terrain of nationalism, modernity and enlightenment. Through positioning Ambedkar as a pedagogic authority, it negotiates consent for the claims of the upper caste bourgeoisie that reservations would degrade idealism, hamper the spirit of independence and make the individual ‘soft’.

In the discussion that follows, I investigate the narrative manoeuvres in Babasaheb that translate Ambedkar’s radicality into a ‘radicality’ of another kind — more manageable within the framework of nationalist elite politics. Read as an allegory for present times, Babasaheb upholds merit, reiterates the nation as unitary, and negates the historical difference of caste (or, by extension, community or gender) that might justify the demand for a separate electorate (as in 1932) or separate rights. In other words, the subject of humanism replaces the differential mode in which Ambedkar posited and problematised the Dalit subject.

Babasaheb Ambedkar is a tribute to the triumph of the human spirit in the most adverse circumstances. It charts the march of the self and its attainment of the ‘neutral’ and awesome status of the citizen, accessible only to those who successfully erase/rise above the marks of their oppression — of caste, community or gender. However, it would

4 Nehru’s view of the Round Table Conference in his autobiography is emblematic of the nationalistic reaction to it — ‘It was all jobbery — big jobs, little jobs, jobs and seats for the Hindus, for the Moslems, for the Anglo-Indians, for the Europeans; but all the jobs for the upper classes — the masses had no look-in. Opportunism was rampant, and different groups seemed to prowl about like hungry wolves waiting for their prey — the spoils under the new constitution. […] No one thought in terms of independence, of real freedom, of a transfer of power to a democratic India, […] Was it for this that India had struggled so manfully? Must we exchange this murky air for the rare atmosphere of fine idealism and sacrifice?’ (1936: 106).
be utterly mistaken to suppose that Babasaheb discounts the oppression of the lower castes. In fact, through a series of incidents, the narrative identifies those who perpetuate caste oppression, casting them as pre-modern and reactionary. Their violence towards the lower castes stirs outrage in us (the middle-class readers) and at each instance, we distance ourselves from it. But the violence of caste-based injustice depicted in Babasaheb never really implicates a reader (like me); at no point, do I see someone like myself who is ‘secular/liberal’, endorsing such atrocities, and do not need to question my very (com)position as an upper caste middle-class (wo)man and the privileges that go with it:

Professing secularism enables a displacement of caste (and also community) from the middle-class sphere, so that it gets marked as what lies outside, is other than, the middle-class (Tharu and Niranjana 1996: 239–40).

As we shall see, Babasaheb prepares a negotiated terrain where alliances cutting across caste lines are possible (for all those who hold the ‘universal’ principle of liberty dear) and protest can be voiced without jeopardising the project of modernity. Let me begin with the events surrounding Ambedkar’s birth.

Babasaheb’s tryst with (Hindu) patriarchy starts even before his birth and in that sense, he is always already enmeshed in that structure. By now we must be familiar with the fact that in the discourse of ACK, the birth of a son (be it Shivaji or Jayaprakash) is a meaningful event heralding great things to come. Thus, almost all ACK heroes are born amidst great jubilation at an auspicious hour signalling their pre-destined role to wield charisma and stand apart from the ordinary masses. In the case of Ambedkar, his birth is prefaced by the blessings and prophecy of an ascetic to his father:

I bless you, you shall have a son, who will achieve world-wide fame (Pai 1979: 1).

This then is the beginning of a ‘destinal narrative’, the steadfast journey of the self — only that this self is marked off as Hindu at the outset — sanctioned by the spiritual force of the renunciate.

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5 I am borrowing the term from Geeta Kapur (1993), a term she invents to mean destiny and destination at the same time. She uses it to describe the steady evolution of the self (Apu’s in Satyajit Ray’s trilogy) in face of loss of collective ties and social fragmentation.
Babasaheb’s extraordinary accomplishments are (pre)determined, but he must make his way through the hardships of his childhood and the struggles of his family to educate him. We recognise these struggles as ‘necessary’ preconditions for him to attain his destined stature. His family has to make extreme sacrifices to get him educated but we also recognise the exemplary modernity of this family, which substitutes the interventions of the welfare state. Note his mother’s words:

Let’s call him Bhim — a name befitting one destined to be great. We will give him everything he needs, even if we have to starve (Pai 1979: 2).

The family is presented as the site of sacrifice and the tradition that instills courage and binds one to the logic of the nation. Thus every great nationalist hero of ACK (Shivaji, for example) is exposed to the tales of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* in childhood. It is interesting that Ambedkar, a rallying cry for radical Dalit politics, is fashioned in the same manner:

He [Ambedkar’s father]…read stories from the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* and sang devotional songs to his family (ibid.: 3).

My point is not simply to mark out the parallels between Ambedkar and Shivaji (or any other hero of ACK), but to suggest that such narrative manoeuvres fix his character within the ACK frame of intelligibility and contain every act of protest by Ambedkar that comes afterwards. We would remain unshaken in our faith in Ambedkar’s basic loyalty/allegiance to the foundation of the (upper caste, Hindu) nation even when he asserts that ‘I am born a Hindu. I couldn’t help it. But I solemnly declare that I will not die a Hindu’ (ibid.: 27).

More about Bhimarao’s childhood — what we witness is not a passive acceptance but an acute sense of injustice in him at each act of caste oppression that he suffers. Bhim has to sit separately in the class. He cannot drink from the water pot in the school unless some is poured out for him. He is asked to get down from a bullock cart

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6 Family emerges in a very different way in dalit narratives. It is true that an entire family has to do domestic and menial work and pool together all its resources in order to educate just one child, but this also underwrites a scathing critique of the state and its failure to deliver the goals of social justice. See Limbale (2003) and Murali Krishna (2004).
when the driver comes to know that he is an untouchable. He is stoned by the brahmins for drawing water from the village well, and so on and so forth. As I have said before, each is a recognisable act of caste oppression and the urban(e), middle-class, modern reader recoils from them, and shares Bhim’s bewilderment and outrage. He asks his sister:

But why? What makes us different? (Pai 1979: 7)

She responds:

I don’t know. That’s the way it has been always (ibid.)

‘Bhim was not satisfied with his sister’s answer’ (ibid.) Bhim’s bewilderment is a sign of his questioning mind, his refusal to accept things as they are. Each obstacle that he encounters is classified as premodern and irrational. Every act of injustice accelerates his determined growth and confirms his basic humanity. The narrative’s investment in the humanist essence is such that historical markings of Bhim’s caste-self are inconceivable within its scope.

The story is also about alliances, not simply of the ones forged among the lower castes but also those that cut across caste lines, among all those who endorse the modern. So young Bhim ‘found an oasis of warm affection for him in his brahmin teacher, Ambedkar’ (ibid.). It is this teacher who changes Bhim’s surname from Ambadvekar to Ambedkar. In the discourse of ACK, this event has a symbolic function. It resonates with the theme that brahminism is a category of knowledge, potentially available to everyone irrespective of the caste he belongs to. It is also a legitimisation of modern brahminism — tolerant, rational and egalitarian.

*For example, in Adi Shankara, we are told that ‘Shankara, the learned Brahman, bowed to the superior wisdom of a lowly outcaste, accepting him as Guru’ (Pai 1974a: 14). The outcaste refuses to move out of Shankara’s way, as was customary, saying ‘What shall I move? My body of common clay or my soul of all-pervading consciousness?’ Shankara then acknowledges his superiority by saying, ‘He has seen the one reality in all. He is indeed my guru, regardless of his low birth’ (ibid.). The one reality obviously refers to Vedic reality. The outcaste symbolically attains brahminism through his knowledge of that reality.*
Babasaheb is also an enactment of western individualism inflected through Vivekananda’s Vedantic conceptualisation of the infallibility of the self. Upendra Baxi notes that the accounts of Ambedkar’s life have not concentrated enough on his struggles as a student–scholar. Recalling Ambedkar as the ‘voracious reader, a hard-working student and a polymath’ (Baxi 1995: 125), he says:

This Ambedkar is almost altogether forgotten; this ideal model of a first generation learner; this incomparable pupil and an exalted figure in the nationalist movement has been robbed of his exemplarship. Even as opportunities for university education have grown very substantially, the methods of study and dedication which Ambedkar displayed as a student do not provide any more for the bulk of Scheduled Caste students a model of excellence….Privations and deprivations did not deter this fourteenth child of humble Mahar parents; indignities and humiliations inflicted on him only spurred him to achieve high levels of academic excellence….’ (ibid.: 125–26).

Be that as it may, ACK’s Babasaheb seems to belie that trend. We tour through the whole gamut of Ambedkar’s experiences as a student — the struggle of his family to educate him, his lonely studies at two in the night in the crowded one room in which his family lived in Bombay, his endless hours of toil at the British Museum Library in London when he would have to save a sandwich from his breakfast for his lunch and so on. But each of these incidents, while tugging at our heartstrings also shores up our faith in the humanist self. Ambedkar is, in fact, held up as a ‘model of excellence’ for the Scheduled Caste students but in such a way as to hegemonically construct their backwardness as a state in need of ‘meritorisation’ and self-improvement rather than of reservations. The ‘miraculous subjectivity’ of Ambedkar as it is fashioned in Babasaheb is entrusted with the responsibility to prepare/discipline the dalit student for ‘equal’ citizenship.8

The issue of reservations floats around in this text, never named but its spectral presence always there. We read in the introduction that

8 In contrast, Gopal Guru chalks out an alternative politics for dalits. He writes that the ‘new dalit sensibility will progressively seek to delink personal from social and will organise thought and action around the social self rather than individual self’ (2000: 133).
Babasaheb told his people, ‘rights are to be earned, not given away’. Ambedkar is also shown addressing a group of depressed classes in 1927 with the following words:

It is time we rooted out of our minds the ideas of high and low. We can attain self-elevation only if we learn self-help and regain our self-respect. Liberty is never gifted away; it has to be fought for (Pai 1979: 20).

_Babasaheb Ambedkar_ participates in the ‘rightist’ idiom of merit which would form the legitimising basis of the anti-Mandal agitations of the 1990s. Its rhetoric is subsumed in the mythology of self-respect — in order to achieve true equality one must fight, not ‘beg’ for concessions. The strategic and selective deployment of Ambedkar’s life/politics in ACK strikes a jarring note when considered against some of Ambedkar’s extremely radical assessments of power:

That the social status of an individual itself often becomes a source of power and authority is made clear by the sway which the Mahatmas have held over common man…. (Ambedkar 1991: 44).

It is curious that rights and duties are accrued to a homogenised/undifferentiated human self through the representation of a figure such as Ambedkar. Because, if we scrutinise Ambedkar’s conception of right, we uncover in it a radical challenge to the middle-class polemic of equality. Ambedkar does not pose rights as opposed to the idea of state intervention. Upendra Baxi writes:

Departing fundamentally from the liberal paradigm of rights and justice, Ambedkar sought to accomplish two unusual results. First, his theory of rights was addressed more to civil society than to the state; rights do not just appear as constraints and limits on the power of the state. Rather, they emerge as legal entitlements casting corresponding obligations on the members of civil society; rights, atypically, in Ambedkar’s

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9 It is interesting to note how this rhetoric echoes a commonsense straddling various public discourses. The editor of the magazine _The Week_ writes in its 16 January 2000 issue, ‘Instead of creating more quotas, the government would do better to look at whether the existing quotas have actually helped improve the lot of the groups it is meant to benefit. And whether it has changed their social standing in any way. At the end of the day, will these quotas do anything to make a Dalit welcome in an upper caste house?’ (ibid.: 74)
thought legitimate an interventionist state, even the dominant colonial formation… Ambedkar’s essential juristic strategy was to innovate jural relations: the depressed classes had a right, and the state a duty, to eradicate obdurate discriminatory practices in civil society; and the state had the power and members of civil society were under a liability to have their ‘cultural’ practices redefined. In other words, the state has a power coupled with duty to which the rights of the depressed classes corresponded (Baxi 1995: 143–44).

Yet for ACK’s Ambedkar, ‘rights are to be earned not to be given away’. Not unlike the saint reformers of ACK, he is imbued with disciplinary responsibilities to train the masses for their civil societal responsibilities. Such disciplining would work through a repudiation of welfarist mediation on the one hand (rights are to be earned) and subaltern mobilisations on the other. It is true that ‘Babasaheb refused to accept meekly this unjust treatment [which his community faced as untouchables]’ (Pai 1979: Introduction) and that he led his people to break caste rules, yet protest is never allowed to exceed the limits of civil societal boundaries and/or the control of the leader. Each outward struggle is also presented as an extension of the inner battle (to overcome fear through courage) rather than as an act of subversion questioning the foundations of the social structure. Surely there are external factors and antagonists — the priestly classes, caste prejudice, superstitions, etc. Yet the major site of strife is within the individual.

Let us consider the incident when Ambedkar leads a crowd of the depressed classes to the municipal tank of Mahad, which has been legally open for everyone for four years and yet has never been used by any member of the lower castes. The crowd follows him hesitantly, ‘Draw water from the tank? Do we dare do it?’ (Pai 1979: 21). But, through one gesture of courage, drinking water from the tank with his cupped hands, Ambedkar makes the ‘miracle’ happen:

The gesture had a remarkable effect. *Ambedkar had exorcised fear from the minds of his people.* Thousands drank water from the public tank and made history (ibid.; emphasis mine).

This is not only the remarkable victory of the individual but also stages the critical opposition between civic equality (the public tank being open to all) and vestiges of the premodern that still linger in and corrupt the social fabric. Rights are about claiming one’s equality as laid down by the law. And caste belongs to the domain of the premodern/social.
Incensed at being stoned by upper caste Hindus for drinking water from the public tank, Ambedkar’s followers say to him:

Give us word, sir, and we shall finish them (Pai 1979: 22).

Ambedkar replies:

No violence will help. We’ll do nothing unlawful. I have given my word that we will agitate peacefully (ibid.).

The narrative further informs us that ‘Ambedkar had promised the police that he would keep his people under control. Thus he prevented a bloodbath’ (ibid.: 22). Ranajit Guha’s analysis of the role of the elite leadership in the nationalist movement helps us to put in perspective this act of disciplining. Critiquing Gandhi’s theory of leadership, Guha writes that it amounted to a

‘formula to dissolve the immediacy of mobilisation in the subaltern domain, and open up a space for the nationalist elite to interpose with its own will, initiative and organisation in order to pilot the political activity of the masses towards goals set up by the bourgeoisie’ (1992: 111).

In ACK, Ambedkar’s approach to subaltern politics positions him in a relationship of affinity rather than tension with the elite nationalist leadership that Guha talks about. He controls his people and their actions so that they do not ‘degenerate’ into mobocracy — ‘an ugly word greased with loathing, a sign of craving for control and its frustration, it is lifted directly out of the lexicon of elitist usage as a measure of the distance between those on the side of order and others who are regarded as a threat to it’ (ibid.: 7). The strategic function of Ambedkar in ACK (as pedagogic/ordering authority) strains against the grain of Ambedkar’s distrust of the leader as the ‘saviour’:

By the time of the Round Table Conference, the Untouchables had become completely self-reliant and independent. They were no longer

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10 Shahid Amin too analyses the impulse in nationalist history to immunise Indian nationalism from the violence of Chauri Chaura and to disregard the subaltern content of this event, while merely marking it as the unfortunate incident that made Gandhi withdraw his non-cooperation movement in a gesture of remorse and disgust. See Amin (1997).
The passage conveys Ambedkar’s distrust of the paternalistic mode of control. His conception of the Untouchables’ rights remained a stubborn challenge to that of Gandhi and the leading Congress leadership.

However, in the ACK text we meet a curiously ‘docile’ Ambedkar, diffident in his dealings with Gandhi and the Congress leadership. Take, for example, Ambedkar’s demand for a separate electorate. R. Srivatsan reads this demand as oppositional to the upper caste national leadership’s projection of freedom from British rule as their prime goal. Such a perception, for Ambedkar, ‘made invisible the entirely different bondage under which the oppressed classes lived, most of which were enforced by the institutions of caste privilege’ (1996: 21). Ambedkar’s position at the Round Table Conference reflects his resistance to cite freedom from colonial rule as the sole aspiration of the oppressed castes.11 At the Round Table Conference, Ambedkar anxiously and repetitively presses the point that the depressed classes do not demand the immediate transfer of political power:

Prime Minister, permit me to make one thing clear. The Depressed Classes are not anxious, they are not clamorous, they have not started any movement for claiming that there shall be an immediate transfer of power from the British to the Indian people. They have their particular grievances against the British people and I think I have voiced them sufficiently to make it clear that we feel those grievances most acutely. But, to be true to the facts, the position is that the Depressed Classes are not clamoring for the transfer of political power (Ambedkar 1991: 66).

11 In a speech delivered in 1936, Ambedkar addressed the ideology of the Congress that political reform should precede social reform. He said, ‘Are you fit for political power even though you do not allow a large class of your own countrymen like the Untouchables to use public schools? Are you fit for political power even though you do not allow them to use public streets? Are you fit for political power even though you do not allow them to wear what apparels and ornaments they like? Are you fit for political power even though you do not allow them to eat any food they like?’ (1991: 44).
Ambedkar, as is apparent in the above passage, struggles to emphasise the peculiar grievances of the depressed classes without clubbing them with the demand for transfer of power. But in the ACK text, the voicing of these separate grievances are only a suffix to the nationalist demand for freedom:

The Depressed Classes of India also join in the demand for replacing of the British Government by a Government of the people and for the people...our wrongs have remained as open sores and they have not been righted although 150 years of British rule have rolled away. What good is such a Government to anybody? (Pai 1979: 24)

Also significant in this frame is Gandhi’s stamp of approval:

From the reports that have reached me of your speeches at the first Round Table Conference, I know you are a patriot of sterling worth (ibid.).

Gandhi’s recognition of Babasaheb’s patriotic credentials prepares the ground for his claim for a separate electorate. When we finally encounter this demand, its oppositional charge is diluted by the indisputable national spirit of Ambedkar. He rather meekly capitulates to the ethical pressure exerted on him by Gandhi’s fast unto death that this demand be withdrawn, and the story that is left untold is his bitter critique of Gandhi’s stand and his methods of spiritual coercion.12

Ambedkar of ACK emerges as the true national leader, and as citizen par excellence. As his unique and unyielding selfhood unravels, there is a moral consolidation of the category of citizenship to the exclusion of all other categories (caste, community or gender). The story of Ambedkar’s struggles also underwrites the struggle for the modern nation, and caste can appear in this narrative only as a blight — whether articulated as discrimination or as demand. The words of Ambedkar as he presented the draft of the constitution to the Constituent Assembly, chosen to be quoted in ACK, efface that other domain of politics which made the idea of nation forever fraught, and yet to be achieved, for him:

And I appeal to all Indians to be a nation by discarding castes which have brought about separation in social life and created jealousy and hatred (Pai 1979: 30).

The narrative smooths out those ‘discordant’ notes of Ambedkar’s politics (as also the Constitution drafted by him) — in configuring the rights of the lower castes — as it foregrounds his modernity and his ‘merit’. Babasaheb Ambedkar is reinscribed into those hegemonic articulations which the Dalit (youth) of today has to wrestle with and negotiate at every point in a competitive and privatised nation-space.

Right from its inception, the individual has been the focal point of ACK — organised around concepts of grit, determination, or power. With Babasaheb Ambedkar, the theme of individualism (inevitably) gets more and more connected with ‘merit’ — the commonsense of the liberalisation era. Merit is mapped on to the subject of humanism; what s/he can achieve on the strength of hard work and personal struggle, unconditioned by the constraints of caste, gender or community. One can only marvel that the ultimate rationalisation of merit is so ingeniously written into the figure of Babasaheb Ambedkar.

With the onset of liberalisation, the breakdown and inefficiency of the public sector is increasingly linked to the reservation policy and the logical resolution seems to be to allow meritocracy take the place of reservations. Tharu and Niranjana make a striking point:

After the self is marked upperclass/uppercaste, the process of marking… becomes invisible. The recomposition of the middle class, the secular class that stands for the nation is thus predicated on the redeployment and othering of caste (1996: 239).

A similar process of erasure takes place in Babasaheb (following other heroic tales of ACK). The self is posited as upper caste/elite — the marks of its identity re-enforced through the event/rituals surrounding birth, its disciplinary authority, the symbolism and language through which it asserts itself. Yet, in the same gesture, this self is set loose from all ‘incidental’ ties; emptied of any ascriptive content.

Subaltern biographies/critiques have repeatedly questioned the ‘neutrality’ of merit. They have demonstrated that merit makes invisible the historical advantages a person has, the ease with which s/he can access domains of learning and opportunity on the strength of her caste and privilege. See Guru (2002 and 2005). In a poignant narration, dalit writer Bama recalls her childhood faith that she could overcome the marks of her caste by excelling in studies. But at the slightest hint of mischief or childlike exuberance on her part, her teachers fall back on casteist abuse. This book (like many others of its kind) stands testament to the alienation if not downright humiliation that dalits suffer in school and other public institutions. See Bama (2004).
Kalpana Chawla: The Global Citizen

A gulf of 25 years separates the publications of Babasaheb Ambedkar (1979) and Kalpana Chawla (2005). The ACK series’ final regular title Jawaharlal Nehru was published in 1991, and since then, a few titles have sporadically appeared, mostly responding to the public/group interest surrounding a personality at a particular point. I looked at Babasaheb Ambedkar as illustrative of the theme of personal excellence, rearticulated in the language of merit.14

Why do I choose to follow up Babasaheb Ambedkar with Kalpana Chawla? The latter is a special title published in 2005, obviously motivated by the desire to pay tribute to the astronaut at a moment when national sentiments ride high around the event of her tragic death.

I choose this text to grapple with the surfacing of a new vein of confidence, one might even call it a disturbing calm, and concomitantly trace the beginnings of this thrust to the foundational fictions of ACK, especially those like Babasaheb Ambedkar, poised on the brink of liberalisation. Kalpana Chawla is ACK’s ultimate acknowledgement of the humanist self — outside and above ‘difference’. This is the story of the Indian astronaut Kalpana Chawla, who was aboard the ill-fated space shuttle Columbia that burst into flames minutes before landing in 2003. In this text, gender is the trope through which difference is referenced, but the force of Kalpana’s personality is such that it becomes embarrassingly archaic if not morally unsound to cite social prejudice or obstacle as reasons that can block one from achieving one’s ambition or goals. It is almost as if by the time this story is written, discussions around the question of privilege have become immaterial and irrelevant. And this is a critical shift because despite the centrality that ACK has accorded to the pedagogic authority, its narratives have been deployed around an anxious repudiation/management of caste. As we have seen, its protagonist must make gestures to lower castes and hold out his spirituality as inclusive and available to all. But Kalpana Chawla seems to set a new more inner-focused course. To cite from the introduction:

14 There are many other stories in the 1980s that reenact the principal trends of enterprise, courage and achievement that I have focused on so far, firming up imaginative structures within which the ideas of merit and liberalisation could be housed. Jawaharlal Nehru is one such, and I will examine it in the following chapter.
Kalpana Chawla grew up in Karnal, Haryana, nurturing a dream to fly among the stars. With razor-sharp intellect, determination and hard work, she turned her dreams into reality and became the first woman astronaut from India.

Passionate about flying, Kalpana never allowed any hurdles to come in the way of charting and challenging a career [sic] for herself. The journey from Karnal to Chandigarh to America was long and hard, but Kalpana soon reached her goal of becoming an aerospace engineer. As she said, ‘I never thought while pursuing my studies, or doing anything else, about being a woman. I pretty much had my dreams, like anybody else, and I followed them’ (Pai 2005: Blurb).

The narrative does signal the Hindu past of the nation once in the beginning following a recognisably ACK tradition:

Nestled on the banks of the Yamuna river is the small town of Karnal. Although this town may be just a little dot on the map of India, it manages to etch its place in the history of the nation in a myriad little ways. Named after Karna, the legendary hero of the Mahabharata, Karnal also has the historic battlefields of Panipat and Kurukshetra near by….In more recent years, the name of Karnal has been blazed across the skies by a determined young woman called Kapana Chawla (ibid.: 1).

However this reference serves to briefly remind the reader of the ‘legacy’ of the narrative of progress that is in the process of unfolding. We will not come by religion again in this text except in its recoded global avatar of work/passion/drive:

‘Religion is something which gives you peace of mind,’ she [Kalpana] said. ‘And to me flying brings peace and satisfaction. So flying is my religion.’ (ibid.: Blurb)

Kalpana’s father Banarsi Lal Chawla is only 16 when he has to flee along with his family from their ancestral home in Pakistan during the Partition. They have to start from the scratch in the new land. But Banarsi Lal has a streak of entrepreneurship and adventure, so the family soon prospers. Kalpana is the fourth child born to Banarsi Lal. Her inheritance from her father is her strength to cross over and get the best out of new cultures.
The narrative carefully presents Kalpana as not tied down by any gender norms. She is the first girl in her school to have bobbed hair. She excels in dancing as much as in ‘energetic outdoor games’ (Pai 2005: 9) like volleyball (a panel shows her as the only girl among a group of rambunctious boys). She can be fashionable yet not bound by sexist burden to dress up; at her sister’s wedding she wears the same dress for three days. When she goes to college, she is the only girl to wear trousers and a T-shirt.

Her journey from Karnal to the Punjab Engineering College in Chandigarh to America reflects her unwavering focus on the goal to pursue aerospace engineering. At a time when her girlfriends at Karnal pursue more conventional disciplines like psychology at a provincial college, Kalpana studies aircraft propulsion, theoretical aerodynamics, fluid dynamics. As one of her friends puts it, ‘Ouch! even the names are so heavy! How can you study them?’ (ibid.: 16)

The first woman to graduate as an aeronautical engineer from the Engineering College in Chandigarh, she soon gets an offer from the

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15 Psychology has a reputation of being a popular subject among women, especially in provincial towns of India.
University of Texas, Arlington, on the strength of her score in the TOEFL and GRE tests.\textsuperscript{16} She gets a degree in Aerodynamics in 1984. Soon at home in her new environs, she comes to be known as K. C. among friends, the abbreviation in some ways cutting her loose from gendered or national/racial moorings, and remaking her as a world citizen. Note her reaction upon arriving in Texas: ‘A strange class, strange town, strange country…but this is what I want to do most of all’ (Pai 2005:18).

Kalpana, who had always nurtured dreams of flying, finally learns flying in the US and gets her pilots license in 1987. She also meets the man who is to be her life partner later — Jean Pierre Harrison, a flight instructor — J. P. to friends. In marrying J. P., Kalpana crosses not only the barrier of caste but also that of religion and of race, but this never so much as surfaces as an issue in ACK. K. C. and J. P. are enlightened individuals, each pursuing their dreams of personal and intellectual fulfilment, and that is what brings them together. Theirs is an exemplary marriage, with Jean Pierre supporting Kalpana through her exciting career, even resigning from jobs to shift base from one state to another so that his wife could take advantage of the opportunities that came her way. It is a marriage that defines what a modern and equal partnership should be:

Both of them led busy lives. Yet they found time to relax and enjoy each other’s company with good music and good friends (Pai 2005: 22).

Throughout, we see Kalpana straddling two cultures with ease — in fact, she recognises this ‘doubleness’ as her staple and embraces it. She leads the classic American life of outdoor adventure — scuba driving, biking, and flying. But she also pursues her interest in Indian classical dance. On her space mission aboard the Columbia, she carries her favourite music — Abida Parveen, Ravi Shankar and Deep Purple.

In a rare slippage, the otherwise self-assured narrative betrays an anxiety with respect to Kalpana’s expatriate status. We are informed that ‘in 1990, at the age of 29, Kalpana became an American citizen.’ Kalpana is then shown musing, ‘I have to give up my Indian nationality but….’ The commentary in the narrative box steps in, in a somewhat self-conscious manner, ‘It was a necessary step for her to follow her dream.’

\textsuperscript{16} The TOEFL and GRE tests that are imperative for getting into an American university form an essential part of the contemporary middle-class youth’s ambitions and signal how ‘success’ is envisaged today.
Kalpana finally joins the famed NASA (National Aeronautics Space Administration) in 1994 to train as an astronaut:

Besides her qualifications and experience, Kalpana had the qualities that NASA looks for in an astronaut: character, courage, integrity, intelligence, stamina, team spirit, and a strong will to succeed (Pai 2005: 22).

Difficult to miss here an echo from the many earlier chitrakathas of ACK, and Pai’s renotating of Bankim’s ideals as enterprise, solidarity, courage and perseverance. The setting has shifted from myth-as-history to the present global moment; but the trajectory emerges as perfectly logical, following a linear path of progression towards a predetermined goal.

Kalpana, once again, is at home at NASA, popular and friendly — ‘Kalpana was a popular teammate even in the ground office’ (ibid.: 30). Neither race nor gender ever appear as a problem in the charmed life of this outgoing achiever — hungry for knowledge as well as life’s varied experiences.

The biography poignantly ends with a panel showing Kalpana’s email from the ill-fated Columbia:

‘The path from dreams to reality does exist. May you have the vision to find it, the courage to get onto it and the perseverance to follow it.’ — Kalpana (ibid.: 32).

The comment in the narrative box below is, ‘In death, as in life, Kalpana became a true citizen of the universe’ (ibid.).

In this 2005 narrative, history/tradition rests light on the shoulders of the fun-loving, urbane, sporty Kalpana and in this, she is different from the nationalist subjects that we have met earlier. She moves between worlds with ease, and the portals of (scientific) knowledge (in Chandigarh, Texas and finally NASA) open to her magically. We can see why she is chosen as the icon of ‘unusual courage, ambition and achievement that will inspire young people for all time to come’ (Pai 2005: Blurb).

But if we stop following the logic of this story for a moment, we glimpse another story — in its taken-for-granted, innocuously scattered

17 Please refer back to Chapter 3.
details. Kalpana’s grows up in an affluent middle-class setting. As a child, she is treated to a glider ride by her father. Her brother is a member of a local flying club — a hobby that not many can afford. Whenever she has to take an ‘unconventional’ step, such as joining the Engineering College in Chandigarh or going abroad, her family may take some time before coming to terms to it; but the lack of financial resources or familial responsibilities are never in the picture. When she has almost given up on the US university seat because her passport cannot be arranged on time, her father magically produces the required documents. When she finally leaves for abroad, her brother accompanies her to settle her down during the initial days. And so on.

I do not draw attention to these details in a bid to downplay Kalpana’s achievement, but to make visible the structures within which successes such as hers are nested. These are also the structures of privilege/support that remain invisible in a language of meritocracy. Dalit critics have struggled to bring to the fore modern forms of inequality as much as the historical disadvantages that have made it almost impossible for dalit students from entering the IITs or IIMs. Dalit biographers have drawn attention to the reality that familial struggles for survival are inextricable from marginalised childhoods. Also, students from dalit communities are constantly subjected to humiliation and discrimination in school as well as in institutions of higher education.

Yet in the representation of Kalpana, gender becomes unmarked, and in that moment, unmarks caste as well. It might be useful to refer briefly to the histories that animate this representation; endow it with depth and substance. Mary E. John (2000) has argued that historically the issue

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19 M. Muralikrishna, in an autobiographical account, writes poignantly about what it means for dalit children to stay in school — of the exceptional support and sacrifice on part of their families. He had to do hard physical work alongside everyone else in his family, both inside and outside home, in order to eat, to have shelter and to go to school. Yet, school was a forbidding place for him — identified with extreme abuse from the upper caste teachers but also with the utter absence of any interactions, frames, symbols that would endorse his life and the considerable struggle it took for him simply to come to school. See Murali Krishna, 2004.
of equal rights for women has always come from a privileged upper caste location and posed in opposition to the political claims of the lower castes and minorities. She traces this particular articulation to the Round Table Conferences of the early 1930s. At this time the upper caste women active in organisations like the Women’s Indian Association (WIA) or All India Women’s Conference (AIWC) had backed off from presenting any demand to the British Government for special electorate or nominated seats for women as they sensed it would also endorse the political claims of ‘untouchables’ or minorities.20

Touching on more recent history, upper caste middle-class women who participated in the anti-Mandal agitations in the early 1990s were clear that they were against reservations or even the provision of reserving seats for women in public transport. Tharu and Niranjana write that these women projected themselves as ‘citizens’ and not as gendered beings. Yet, ‘the representation in the media of their well-nourished faces, and fashionable bodies visually defined the lower castes as the Other. The photographs of the anti-Mandal women suggested that caste (read lower caste) is defined against “women”, and against the assertive and articulate humanist–feminist subject’ (Tharu and Niranjana 1996: 240).

Against this backdrop, it is significant that Kalpana Chawla does not need any preferential treatment as a woman; she stands equal to men in every walk of life. As a symbol of modernity (rendered powerful, charged with the sense of national loss evoked by her death) she makes it ethically untenable to claim reservations of any kind. Kalpana Chawla is set right in the heart of contemporary middle-class concerns — resonant with its contemporary idiom of dreams, goals, passions and achievement.

20 Mary E. John (2002) points out some of the fundamental anomalies inherent in the claim that women strive for equal rights based on ‘merit’ alone. Referring to the Round Table moment, she writes, ‘Women’s organisations were caught in contradictory proclamations of the “unity of all women”, the sameness of their condition, and so on, even as they effectively “reserved” for themselves — urban, educated, modern and progressive — the right to represent Indian womanhood. These claims to unity had to be maintained, moreover, in the face of the loss of Muslim women’s membership, and the effective disavowal of distinct political rights to the “untouchables”’ (ibid.: 3827).
Conclusion

A discussion of Jawaharlal Nehru: The Early Days (1991), which is the last regular title published in the ACK series, may serve as a conclusion to this study as well. This chitrakatha works with many of the central ideological themes of ACK that I have tried to investigate so far — individuality, masculinity, merit, national culture, global identity and so on. In the late 1960s, Anant Pai had created ACK to imagine afresh a national modernity — underwritten and authorised by its connection with the ageless cultural legacy of India. Such a modernity, he envisaged, would prepare the middle-class youth to take on their central role in the nation. All through my analysis, I have tried to posit Nehruvian socialism and the welfare state as a the hidden antagonist that the ACK narrative has to shadowbox with. Yet, in its last issue, ACK pays tribute to its ubiquitous, if unmentioned, counterpoint, Jawaharlal Nehru. How does it deal with this figure?

Jawaharlal Nehru: The Early Days (1991)

Let me note at the outset that this chitrakatha ends at the point when Nehru’s political career begins. His socialist ideals are not a matter of debate in this issue, indeed they are not referred to. What the chitrakatha does is showcase Nehru’s privileged upbringing and elite educational background in a mode that addresses the urban middle-classes and centres their role in disseminating modernity among the masses.

The account of Nehru’s early life is chiefly adapted from his autobiography. At the same time there are subtle translations which establish a firmer connection between the figure of Nehru and a viable global identity in the contemporary context.

I am proud of that great inheritance that has been and is ours and I am confident that I too, like all of us, am a link in that unbroken chain which goes back to the dawn of history in the immemorial past of India. That chain I would not break, for I treasure it and seek inspiration from it. (Cited in Pai 1991: Introduction)
These lines, quoted from Nehru’s will, are used to justify the selection of Jawaharlal Nehru as the finale for the series.

I may remind the reader of Pai’s anguish at discovering that the students of St. Stephen’s College were unable to answer certain simple questions on Hindu mythology. This, of course, led to the creation of ACK to redirect such youth to the ‘route to their roots’. In the ‘Nehru’ persona, Pai images the ‘truly’ modern and culturally bipedal youth who can qualify for the leadership of the nation in the globalisation era:

The volume traces the ancestry of Nehru and dwells over the early years of his life that helped shape this great man of destiny (Pai 1991: Introduction).

The early years as well as a ‘lineage’ of Nehru are projected as formative of his leadership potential and his future role as a ‘man of destiny’ (Pai 1991: 29). The narrative celebrates the modernity and cultural urbanity of Nehru’s childhood and youth, setting the course for him to become the ‘leader of the masses’ one day.

Let us begin with his ‘ancestry’. The reader is introduced to the ‘impeccable pedigree’ of Nehru in a tone of unconcealed admiration. The story begins with Raj Kaul, Nehru’s ancestor, an eminent Sanskrit and Persian scholar, who decides to come down from the valley of Kashmir to the plains of Delhi and is granted a house and several villages by the Emperor Farukhsiar. The event reiterates the prestige/position of the traditional brahmin scholar in the ACK oeuvre and the flexibility with which he can adapt to new surroundings on the strength of his knowledge.

Another incident from Nehru’s autobiography finds a prominent mention. When his great-grandfather flees Delhi with his family to escape the aftermath of the revolt of 1857, one of his uncles escorting his sister is intercepted by some British soldiers. Given the girl’s fair skin and chestnut hair, they take her to be an English girl who is being kidnapped. They are so convinced that they refuse to pay heed to her brother’s protest that ‘We Kashmiris also have such fair skins’ (ibid.: 2) until some passers-by recognise the brother–sister duo and save the situation. The story undoubtedly has an appealing anecdotal value, but it also quietly establishes the racial superiority of the Nehru clan, the fair skin being the measure of an Aryan descent. In detailing
Nehru’s descent, there is no obvious reference to caste but the portrait that emerges is of a family that is fair-skinned, beautiful, noble and respected down the generations.

While the narrative establishes Nehru’s non-plebeian credentials through descriptions of his lineage, his ‘modern’ upbringing and schooling equally help in carving out his role as the future leader of the nation. We see Nehru’s personality absorbing two parallel streams of influence in his house. On the one hand, he is exposed to the ‘British’ discipline and deportment of his father, and a series of governesses teach him at home. On the other hand, his mother and aunts tell him many stories from Hindu mythology.

Two cultures existed side by side; the Westernised section of the house dominated by Motilal, and the traditional Hindu part ruled over by the women (Pai 1991: 10).

It can be said that in the context of ACK in particular, and the hegemonic representation of the middle-class in the globalisation era in general, the fashioning of Jawaharlal’s character along the twin axes of the spiritual and the material has great significance. The impact of religion on his life is one that enhances his rational modernity. Religion, as I have discussed in Chapter 4, provides an identitarian fullness facilitating cultural authority in the global context for the urban middle-class and non-resident Indians. It is not otherworldly, but, in fact, marks off the modern Hindu identity from the pre-modern elements that corrupt the nation.

So we learn of Jawahar’s father, Motilal Nehru’s stubborn refusal to bow to the pressures from his orthodox community and undergo the purification ceremony after his return from England. However no religious festival goes unobserved in his household, ‘be it Holi, Diwali, Id or Janmashtami’ (ibid.: 7). Every year, on the day of Id, the young Jawahar goes to the home of Munshi Mubarak Ali, the head of staff of servants, to partake in the special delicacies.

ACK’s narrative inserts itself into that consensual meeting ground between the catholicity of Nehru’s background and his secular training and the cultural nationalist rhetoric of modernity. Munshi Mubarak Ali, the benevolent Muslim from Nehru’s childhood, is not an alien figure in the discourse of ACK. We have met this figure in Dayananda. He makes an appearance in many a chitrakatha — kindly, acknowledging the moral authority of the Hindu protagonist and
pious in a non-threatening way. The Hindu/Indian modernity asserts itself in double-edged fashion — through the denunciation of the Khiljis and the Aurangzebs but also through the inclusion of the ‘docile’ Muslim. And yet, the irony of the situation is that, as Fatehali Devji says, ‘this “typically” archaic, idealised “good” Muslim does not exist, which is to say he transforms all real Muslims, all Muslims who are not part of historical romance, into “bad” Muslims’ (Devji 1992: 9).

I suggest that this text is a careful mapping of the terrain where the ideologies of secularism and Hindu nationalism overlap. Through this manoeuvre, it appropriates the international aura of Nehru’s persona into its own project.

Let us explore a bit more the continuities between Nehru as the ‘model secularist’ and a more conservative ideology in this biography. Critics have pointed out that the middle-class support in the 1990s for Hindutva stemmed less from any devotion to Rama than from a desire for modernity and parity with other nations of the world (Hansen 1999: 174). I had discussed the notion of ‘masculine tolerance’ in the preceding chapter; Rama, in the context of Hindu nationalism, appears as the symbol of the truly tolerant and secular nation. It is significant that the Ramjanmabhumi movement was spearheaded by a leader like L. K. Advani who publicly acknowledged that he was irreligious and did not visit temples. Similarly, Anant Pai revealed a rather charming personal detail in an interview with me — he did not worship in temples but sometimes accompanied his wife so he could mind her footwear that had to be left outside. He added:

But then I don’t mind anybody going to the temple. I want the freedom of thought and expression (Pai 1999).

Continuing in the same vein, he reveals a secularist bent:

So far as I am concerned, I think it is not my job to create barrier between one man and another, one child and another (ibid.)

In the same breath, he offers a critique of secularism as well:

I try all my best to see that…suppose, even Akbar for example, he mercilessly beheads Hemu and hangs the head [in the battlefield] even then I don’t want to go against history, at the same time, I tone down that. I don’t show the picture of that head (ibid.).
He then quotes from a popular Sanskrit *shloka* to explain that that while one should not tell an unpleasant truth, ‘just to please someone don’t tell an untruth also’ (Pai 1999).¹

Fatehali Devji comments that ‘the language of disease underscores the derivative discourse of “secular” Indian nationalism in that its [communal] difficulties are viewed as unnatural departures from a universal/European ideal. Therefore the Muslim problem is created as the Asiatic failure of nationalism’s enlightenment project…a failure which entails the very possibility of a nationalist coercion’ (1992: 2). Within the discourse of ACK, as we have seen, a Hindu/universal identity is fashioned always in opposition to the fundamental bigotry and intolerance of the Muslim. But even within the framework of secularism, the alternative identitarian/communitarian politics of the Muslim (such as the resistance to be ruled by the Uniform Civil Code) cannot ensue from rational political choice but becomes a subversion of the enlightenment project of the nation.² And it is in these very articulations regarding Hindu/Muslim/Indian that one glimpses the affiliations between the secularists and the Hindu nationalists.³

Depiction of Nehru’s childhood and schooling is meant to strike a deep chord among the urban middle-class readership of ACK. Religion plays an important role in his formation yet in its deeply rational and modern representation, there is an embedded criticism of Islam and subaltern/local religious practices. Nehru is introduced to the *Gita* by his European tutor, Mr. Brooks, who also helps him to cultivate a love for books (some of his favourites being *The Prisoner of Zenda*, *Don Quixote* and *Three Men in A Boat*). The *Gita*, as translated into English by Brooks, appeals to Jawahar. Notably however, his Sanskrit teacher Pandit Ganganath Jha ‘did not have much success

1 Gyan Prakash draws attention to the fact that BJP’s quarrel was not with secularism as connoted by church-state separation or equal protection for all religion. ‘It does not seek to establish a theocratic state but one no longer prepared, unlike the secular-liberal state, to “tolerate” the Muslims as “minor” subjects of the Hindu nation….I am suggesting that the BJP is not against the desire to keep the state free of religion but with the principle that secularism requires the “toleration” of minorities. In this sense, its project takes the process of minoritisation to its logical extreme by seeking to expunge the minorities altogether from national life’ (2007: 178).


3 I borrow this formulation from Devji (1992).
with his young student’ (Pai 1991: 12). A panel depicts the orthodox brahmin teacher trying to teach his student by rote:

Now repeat after me, aham gachchami…. (ibid.).

We see a stiff and rather tortured-looking student, with this on his mind:

How boring! I will never be able to learn this (ibid.).

Jawaharlal’s derisive attitude towards the Pandit’s teaching is in striking contrast to his eager learning of the *Gita* in English from Mr. Brooks. While in his autobiography Nehru explains his disinterest in Sanskrit as a consequence of his inability to learn languages, ACK presents the Pandit as something of a caricature. On the other hand, the figure of Mr. Brooks carries traces of Chinmayananda in terms of the appeal he holds for the urbane Nehru. ‘His lessons with Brooks were a total contrast’ (ibid.). The Pandit loses out, both because of his abstruse language and the outmoded ways of his teaching. This Brooks/Pandit binary evokes the bind between education and rational religion in the imaginary of the globalising middle-classes. Brooks’ teaching of the *Gita* is not an anachronism; it fits right in with Nehru’s training in the western classics or his experiments in laboratory to discover scientific facts. In fact, it is Jawaharlal’s tutelage under Brooks that anticipates his entry into the hallowed portals of Harrow and then, Cambridge.

The recounting of Jawaharlal’s tenure at Harrow begins with an excerpt from a letter from his father:

In you we are leaving the dearest treasure we have in the world and perhaps the worlds to come. It is not a question of providing for you for I can do that in a single year’s income. *It is a question of making a real man of you which you are bound to be….* (ibid.: 16; emphasis mine).

These lines are indicative of the formative role to be played by the Public School in a life such as Jawaharlal’s. I have spoken of the man-making pedagogic roles adopted by the religious gurus of ACK. They are instrumental in preparing the pupil to take up the leadership of the nation and defend its order. It would not be off the mark to say that in 1991, the British public school, as it appears in this ACK, blends in as easily into the worldview of the globalising
Sculpting a Middle Class

Hindu middle-class as does someone like Swami Chinmayananda. In both cases the emphasis is on a superior masculinity that is to be cultivated through the development of a healthy body and sound mind. This masculinity, in the Indian context, would have to be defined in opposition to lower caste/Muslim masculinity. The character-forming role that sport and physical exercise played in British public schools is replicated in the schools of the RSS and in the Chinmaya educational institutions. Speaking of the place of sports in public schools in the Victorian age, Nigel Townson (1997) writes that the underlying belief was that exercise was character-forming, and promoted a manliness dissociated from sexuality. In fact, it was meant to arrest the precocious development of adult male sexuality by providing a new moral and physical definition of masculinity. It is natural then that the ideological underpinnings of the public school would hold an appeal a post-colonial nationalist project invested in the image of the upper caste Hindu male in opposition to the ‘unbridled sexuality’ of the Muslim on the one hand and the ‘gratuitous materialism’ of the West on the other.

Jawaharlal’s performance at Harrow (a combination of academic and sporting success) also heralds his future role as a leader. Proclaimed by one of his teachers as a ‘thoroughly good fellow’ (Pai 1991: 17), we catch glimpses of his character through the eyes of his teachers. This letter, written by his housemaster, is reproduced in ACK to suggest a continuum between his life at the public school and his later vocation in politics:

Nehru was a nice boy...quiet and very refined. He was not very demonstrative, but one felt there was great strength of character...he worked well and seldom (almost never) gave any trouble (ibid.: 18).

The public school then is a site that produces responsible members of the society and disciplined masculinity. It is interesting to read ACK’s eulogisation of the public school notion of excellence (that shaped Nehru’s greatness) against the backdrop of the anti-Mandal agitations of the early 1990s which swept the country. During these agitations children of the affluent administrative class and obvious products of elite schools polished shoes to protest against the policy of reservation in jobs for the lower castes. It is indeed ironic that in ACK, it is the persona of the architect of socialist India that legitimates the idiom of meritocracy holding sway in the liberalisation years.

_Jawaharlal Nehru_ ends with Nehru’s emergence as a ‘natural leader of the peasant masses’, when he really comes into his own. The disparity
between his privileged existence and their impoverished life stares him in the face and yet fills him with a sense of responsibility that his education has ‘prepared’ him for.

Jawaharlal visited their villages, for the first time in his life, he was exposed to their miserable poverty; heard the tales of sorrow and toil…. The diffident boy who paid a fine [in Cambridge] rather than speak in public, spoke now to the villagers without a trace of consciousness' (Pai 1991: 29).

The narrative, leading us through Jawahar’s distinguished background and schooling, comes to a smooth and natural closure:

Thus began his close identification with the masses of India. The man of destiny who later became the architect of modern India had stepped into the arena of public life (ibid.).

These lines sum up for us the character of elite responsibility towards the masses — within the framework of a liberal education (underscored by merit) and ‘ordered’ forms of political action that preclude subaltern initiatives. As Partha Chatterjee puts it:

It was ‘responsibility’ that was the feeling which determined the attitude of the new nationalist leadership towards the peasantry. This feeling of responsibility was not self-consciously paternalistic, for that was the attitude, condescending and inherently insulting, of the hated British administrator….The masses had to be ‘represented’; the leaders must therefore learn to ‘act on their behalf’ and ‘in their true interests’ (1986: 148).

_Jawaharlal Nehru: The Early Days_, I would say, is an acknowledgement of Nehru’s centrality in the discourse of modernity in post-colonial India. But there is also a careful ordering of that modernity. The accent rests on the elite upbringing and schooling of Nehru’s early days which ‘prepare’ him for his role as the ‘leader of the masses’. The narrative of Nehru’s life, uninterrupted by his socialism or even the discontents/failures of that socialism, mirrors and endorses the hegemony of the upper caste middle-class (youth) in the 1990s — bright, charismatic, global and qualified to lead their nation to modernity.  

ACK’s _Jawaharlal Nehru_ has shades of the same dilemma that Sarvepalli Gopal faces in writing Nehru’s biography. See Partha Chatterjee (1997).
1969, Pai was disappointed by the lack of knowledge about ‘India’s heritage’ displayed by the students of St. Stephen’s College. ACK’s commitment was to create a generation of youngsters who would not be ‘handicapped’ by such a ‘lack’. Through Jawaharlal Nehru, ACK confidently announces the arrival of that generation — equally empowered by their ‘national’ and global identities.

I have tried to demonstrate through this study of ACK, that while it may be loosely branded as children’s literature, it has played a key role in cultural politics. Over a period of three decades ACK has sought to train middle-class children to grow up as ‘ideal’ citizens. We know that it was a well-thought out initiative at a historical moment when the ‘singularity’ of the nation was being challenged by various marginalised sections. It addressed a disgruntled younger generation that was losing its faith in ‘tradition’. It also endeavoured to re-invigorate the westernised middle-class youth that was disinterested in its cultural ‘roots’ and thus, was in danger of losing its (future) claim to the moral–political leadership of the nation. ACK has contributed in a major way to the formation of notions of ‘Indianness’ that hold sway over the dominant cultural imaginary today. It has also lent ethical conviction to the values of a globalising middle-class that places premium on the ‘individual’ as against the welfarist commitments of the post-independence state.

It may look comical in retrospect but I, as a teenager, would read the novels of James Hadley Chase and Harold Robbins only on the sly (literally between the covers of ACK) because my parents thought that those would ‘corrupt’ me at an ‘impressionable’ age. Yet, ironically, a close examination of ACK, designed specifically for children, reveals how ideologically charged its ‘innocence’ is.

ACK shows that popular culture is the crucial site where the contest for hegemony takes place. It draws our attention to the pedagogic effectiveness of history as popular culture. Pai held data-driven history in contempt and designed ACK as chitrakatha — borrowing the colour and the allure of that genre. History, in ACK, emerges as an actor in the politics of the present. It hegemonises dominant ideas of the modern and the pre-modern, the secular Self and the bigoted Other.

ACK draws attention to the investments of gender in the making of an individualist ideology. Its ‘masculine ideal’ serves as an ethical
demand on women, lower castes and other marginalised sections to ‘uplift’ and ‘improve’ themselves through their ‘inner strength’ and ‘perseverance’. For instance, as I have pointed out in Chapter 3, ACK’s individualist ideology would seem to require a ‘masculinisation’ on part of women so that they compete with men on ‘equal’ terms instead of demanding ‘concessions’ on the basis of their gender. In 2005 Kalpana Chawla plays this out. Concomitantly, ACK also posits an ‘ideal Indian womanhood’ as represented by the figures of Sita, Savitri, Vasavadatta or Padmini. These women, in terms of their sexuality and their agency, do not overstep the boundaries of upper caste ‘honour’. In many ways, ACK’s balancing of the indomitable self and ideal womanhood fits in with the current hegemonic representations of women who are achievers yet home-makers. To give an example, the July 2000 issue of the upmarket women’s magazine Savvy celebrates the corporate success of the US-based Punita Sinha. A comment on Sinha made by Sushma Swaraj, herself an articulate and efficient leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), is striking:

At work I have seen Punita dressed in Western outfits, appearing like a westerner. In India, in her in-law’s place, she is dressed traditionally befitting the bahu of a conservative Indian household. I admire her for combining these two roles so effortlessly….She projects to the world the image of the new Indian woman — educated, accomplished and a high achiever professionally as against the common western view that Indian women are battered, abused and dominated by men (Swaraj 2000).

In the early 2000s, the NDA government was accused of ‘saffronising’ education and there was much controversy around the Hindu revision of the History textbooks of the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). It can be safely said that many belonging to the modern middle-class were indignant at the ‘saffronisation’ of education. Yet those very people would most likely be the ones to display the bound volumes of ACK in their bookcases, or buy the glitzy Mahabharata series or Pai’s personal favorites of one hundred chitrakathas as gifts for children/grandchildren or even for themselves. What is it about ACK then that separates it from our notions of religious fanaticism and bigotry? This critique has been a small step in the direction of understanding ACK’s complicity in our modernity and indeed our very identities as middle-class individuals.
Bibliography


Sculpting a Middle Class


Index

ACK see Amar Chitra Katha (ACK)
adarsa purush 114, 144
Adi Shankara 26, 106, 169
Advani, L. K. 187
AIWC see All India Women’s Conference (AIWC)
Ajanta by Asit Kumar Haldar 59
Ajanta, frescos of 59–60
akhara 122, 126
All India Women’s Conference (AIWC) 183
Amar Chitra Katha (ACK) 3; aesthetic traditions of historical novels 92;
appeasement of minorities 39; calendar and poster art associated with 71; as children’s encyclopedia of Indian stories 1; ‘chitrakatha’ and 53–56; colour conventions used in 48; compared with CBT books 5; ‘compromised realism’ in 70–74; conflicts of social order and 98; crisis of 1970s 7–12; in cultural politics 6–7; depiction of female form in 76–77; dominant and subaltern historiographies of 17–21; effect of television on sale of 2; emergence of new trends in 162; features of animated film incorporated in 48; Hindi cinema and 93; historical affiliations of 38; ideologies of Hindu nationalism and 41; ideology of VHP and 33; as ‘Indian comic’ 43; on Indian history and myth 5; individualism, masculinity, and centrality of protagonist in 64–70; influence: among children 5; of frescos of Ajanta and Ellora 59–60; in middle-class family 56; intellectual concerns 114; market share against western comics 5; meaning of 50; myth and history 104; ‘mythology’ of 13; and parent–child dichotomy 47; pedagogic and cultural value of 12; phenomenon of 12–17; philosophy of Savarkar and RSS 29; popularity among upper and lower middle-class children 16; publishing of Krishna 31; realism, nationalism and visual discourse of 74–81; re-engagement with tradition 4; in relation to Subaltern Studies 82; role in: Hindu revivalism 25–27; ‘moral regeneration of society’ 23; re-installation of tradition 21–23; story of immortal history 88–92; styling and viewership of film hoarding and 66; teachings: of ‘Indian themes and values’ 145; through ideals 82; as traditional form of chitrakatha 40; tradition and contemporaneity of 50–53; use of historical aspects 37; against western comics 47
‘Amar Chitra Katha’s children’ 6
Ambedkar, Babasaheb Bhimrao 22, 165–76
Angry Hindu! Yes Why not by Atal Behari Vajpayee 161
Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan by James Tod 157
anti-brahmin movements 105
anti-Mandal agitations 165, 171, 183, 190
anushilan 39, 100, 114, 118, 120
Apte, Shivram Shankar 33
Index

Aries, Philippe 57
Arya Samaj 25, 26, 27, 129
ashram 34, 36, 38, 115, 118, 121
Asuras (demons) 48
Aurangzeb (Mughal emperor) 146, 148, 150, 151, 154, 155
‘authentic Indian tradition’ 23

Babasaheb Ambedkar (ACK) 39, 66, 107, 165–76
Barphukan, Lachit 88, 89, 112, 144, 151–56
Baruah, Sanjib 153
Batman (comics) 46
Baxi, Upendra 170, 171
benami settlements 141
Benares Hindu University (BHU) 27
Benjamin, Walter 64
Bennett, Tony 20
Berger, Arthur 46
bhadralk, campaigns against Vaishnav artists 78
Bhagavat Gita see Gita
Bharatiya Jana Sangh 29, 30, 31, 137; ideology of 133; party of class conciliation and cooperation 32
Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) 193
Bose, Nandalal 59
brahminical values 28
brahminism 26, 40, 92, 117, 169; and principles of Vivekananda 106
Butalia, Urvashi 157, 158

Captain Marvel (comics) 14
Carnegie, Dale 102, 103
cartoon humour 5
‘casteism’ 67
caste oppression 105, 167, 168, 169
CBT see Children’s Book Trust (CBT)
Chakravarti, Uma 121, 125
Chanakya (ACK) 29, 38, 111, 114, 117, 118, 123
Chanakya (guru) 29, 30, 38, 117, 118, 123, 128; as ‘brahman teacher’ 115; as martial guru in ACK 121; training of Chandragupta 36, 120
Chanakya (teleserial) 121
chandala 106, 132
Chandragupta 29, 36, 38, 98, 111, 118, 119, 120, 121, 128
Chase, James Hadley 192
Chatterjee, Partha 10, 85, 105, 113, 191
Chattopadhyay, Bankim Chandra 37, 39, 87, 93, 102, 113; idea of anushilan 100, 120
Chawla, Kalpana 177–83
Chhatrasal (ACK) 48, 126
Children’s Book Trust (CBT) 5
Children’s Film Society 5
Chinmayananda (ACK) 35, 38, 135
Chinmayananda, Swami 34–35, 97, 110, 127, 128, 130, 135–36
chitrakatha 36, 43, 85; and Amar Chitra Katha 53–56; sanitising and standardisation of 56–59
‘chitrakathi’ 54
Columbia 177, 181
comics 44–47; of ‘Indian themes and values’ 90
‘communal chauvinism’ 159
Communist Party of India (Marxist) 8, 11
computer-animated films 55
Congress secularism 11
Coomaraswami, Ananda 59
‘corrupt’ comic 44–47
‘Dadi’ by Shivani 22, 57
Dalit 22, 166, 168, 176, 182
Dasha Avatar 63
dastan 86
dayananda (ACK) 38, 67, 69, 91, 108, 111, 128, 131, 132, 186
Dayananda Anglo-Vedic (DAV) educational institutions 27
Deoras, Balasaheb 139
Depressed Classes 166, 171, 172, 174, 175
Devas (gods) 48
Devji, Fatehali 145, 187, 188
dharma 14, 55, 135
Disney film 48
‘dominance without hegemony’ 19
Don Quixote 188
Dutt, Romesh Chandra 87

Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature
40, 55
encyclopedia, of Indian stories 1
Europeanised Rama 72

Family News 15
‘feudal family romance’ 93, 94
freedom struggle, story in ACK 6
frescos, of Ajanta and Ellora 59–60

Gale, George 46
Gangadhar, V. 13, 17
Gita 13, 22, 35, 39, 97, 102, 103, 110, 188, 189
Global Hindu Electronic Network (GEN) 108
Govind, Prabha 92
Graham, Bruce 25
‘great son of India’ 151, 155
Guha, Ranajit 17, 19, 85, 101, 173
Guha-Thakurta, Tapati 59, 76

Haldar, Asit Kumar 59
Hall, Stuart 23, 24, 25, 85
Hansen, Thomas Blom 144
Hanuman (ACK) 15
Hare Rama Hare Krishna (film) 95
Harmsworth, Alfred 45
Hazarika, Bhupen 153, 154
Hedgewar, Keshav Baliram 28, 140
Hindi cinema: ACK and 93; changes in narrative forms of 94
Hindu mythology 89, 97, 185, 186
‘Hindu nation’ 39
Hindu nationalism 4, 12, 26, 40;
impact of ACK on ideologies of 41
Hindu Rashtra 25, 28, 30, 137, 160
Hindu revivalism, role of ACK in 25–27
Hindu sangathan 144
Hindu Students’ Council (HSC) 108
Hindutva 25; foundational principles and ideology of 28–32
Hindutva: Who is a Hindu? by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar 28
The House of Shaikh Phul 67
How My Rich Uncle Came to Dine at Our Villa 45
How to Stop Worrying and Start Living by Dale Carnegie 102
How to Win Friends and Influence People by Dale Carnegie 102

illusionistic art 61
India Book House (IBH) 15, 47
‘Indian comic’ 43
Indian history and myth, story by ACK 5
Indianisation by Balraj Madhok 31
Indian nationalism 18, 188
‘Indian themes and values’ 43
‘Indian womanhood’ 39, 76, 156, 158, 161, 193
Integral Humanism by Deendayal Upadhyaya 32
Itehad-ul-Musalmeeen 159
itihasa 86

jadu patua 54
Jamaat-i-Islami 145, 159
James Tod’s Annals and Antiquities of Rajastan 157
Jana Sangh see Bharatiya Jana Sangh
jatra 57
fauhar 159
Jawaharlal Nehru: The Early Days (ACK) 17, 177, 184–92
Jayaprakash Narayan (ACK) 38, 137, 139
John, Mary E. 182
Jurassic Park (film) 55

Kadambari by Banabhatta 50
Kalpana Chawla (ACK) 39, 40, 177–83
Kapur, Anuradha 52, 73
Kapur, Geeta 37, 74, 90, 92, 112
Karnataka Jana Sangh 30
Kautilya Arthashastra by Chanakya 121
Kaviraj, Sudipta 9, 10, 11, 85, 87, 92, 99
kavya nayikas 75
Khilji, Ala-ud-din (Sultan of Delhi) 29, 39, 58, 62, 78, 157, 158
Khilnani, Sunil 117
kissa 86
Krishna 15, 31, 51, 74, 99, 100
Krṣṇacaritra by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay 99, 101
kṣatriya values 28
Kumar, Krishna 25
Kunzle, David 45

Lachit Barphukan (ACK), 38, 112, 151, 153, 154, 155, 156
Lachit Barphukan (nationalist hero), 144, 151–56
laissez-faire, form of capitalist program 10
The Lone Ranger (comics) 46, 50

Madhok, Balraj 31, 145, 152
Mahabharata 146, 168
Malik Muhammad Jayasi’s Padmavat 157
Mandal Commission 164
Man in the Moon 45
maths 122

Menon, Balakrishna see Chinmayananda, Swami
Mere Apne (film) 21, 57, 95
Mill, James 38, 87
Mirror 92
‘modern educated illiterates’ 34
‘modern gurus’ 33–42, 126–28
Morning Echo 13
Mufti, Aamir R. 41
Mukherjee, Meenakshi 49, 86
Muslim League 159
Muslim modernism, and secular nationalism 41

Nabanari by Nilamani Basak 89
Nandy, Ashis 12
Narayan, Jayaprakash 9, 32, 36, 38, 111, 137–44
‘national culture’ 7
National Herald 34
Naxalite peasant movements 8, 141
Nehru Bal Pustakalaya 5
Nehruvian socialism 3
Niranjana, Tejaswini 163

Pabuji ka phad 54
Padmavat by Malik Muhammad Jayasi 157
Padmini (ACK) 38, 39, 48, 58, 62, 88, 112, 156, 159, 161
Padmini of Chittor 156–61
Pai, Anant 1, 4, 5, 12–17, 19, 37, 43, 84, 108; affinity with Swami Chinmayananda 34; ‘basic technique’ to tackle worry 103; determination to produce comics with ‘Indian themes and values’ 90; ideal of Hinduism 56
‘panacea’ 35
The Pandava Princes (ACK) 15
pan-Indian national culture 72
pan-Islamism 28
Partha Institute of Personality Development 97
Sculpting a Middle Class

Patel, Sardar 10
Pather Panchali film by Satyajit Ray 112
Penny Dreadfuls 45
Phalke, Dadasaheb 90
Phaniyamma by M. K. Indira 22, 57, 93
Phantom (comics) 5, 14, 47
‘The Photographic Message’ 64
Phul, Shaikh 67
Pillai, K. Shankar 5
Pithoro painting 61
Prannath, Sage 126
Prasad, Madhava 93
The Prisoner of Zenda 188
Prithviraj Chauhan (ACK) 16
‘pseudo-secularists’ 11
Public Speaking and Influencing Men in Business by Dale Carnegie 102
puranas 54
puranic myths 87
Rai, Lala Lajpat 144
Rajasthani chitrakatha 54
Rajsinha by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay 87–88
Rama 58
Ramayana 15, 140, 146, 168
Ramdas, Samarth 91, 122, 123, 125, 126, 128
Ramjanmabhumi movement 187
Ramilia 57, 73
Rana Pratap (ACK), 16, 88
Rand, Ayn 107
Rao, Venkat 30
Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) 28, 29, 30, 106, 125, 137, 144, 190
Rasila 73
Ray, Satyajit 112
Reader’s Digest 13, 55
Realism and Reality 49
‘real tolerance’ 150, 155
‘regressive modernisation’ 4, 23
religious guru 34, 114–26
Robbins, Harold 192
RSS see Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)
rudraksh 67
Ruskinian theory 60
‘saffronisation,’ of education 193
saint–reformer 128–35, 142
Samarth Ramdas (ACK) 122, 123, 126, 140
The Sandipany Academy 34
Sangari, Kumkum 160
Sant Tukaram (film) 91
sanyas 36
Saraswati, Swami Dayananda 26
Sarkar, Tanika 28
Savarkar, Vinayak Damodar 28, 29
secular nationalism, and Muslim modernism 41
Seduction of the Innocent 46
‘Shakuntala’ 15, 76
Shariat 145
Sheikh, Gulam Mohammed 60–66
Shivaji (ACK) 16, 38, 112, 145, 147, 151
Shivaji (nationalist hero) 144–51
Shivaji the Great Patriot by Lala Lajpat Rai 144
shloka 188
Sholay (film) 143
Shoorpanakha 58, 77
Singh, Rajinder 127
Singh, Sardar Vikram 91
Singh, V. P. 164
‘The Small Voice of History’ by Ranajit Guha 82–84
‘social abomination,’ of untouchability 67
social ethics 31
‘social evils’ 67, 105, 132
‘socialist pattern of society’ 11
‘The Sons of Rama’ 15
‘spiritual masculinity,’ as propagated by: Samarth Ramdas 125; Vivekananda 104
spiritual revolution 111
Sreenivasan, Ramya 157
Srivatsan, R. 66, 162, 174
Subaltern Studies 4, 17, 18, 19, 23;
ACK in relation to 82
Subhash Chandra Bose (ACK) 66
Subramaniam, Gowri 52
Superman (comics) 14, 46, 47
‘surrogate realism’ 74

Tagore, Abanindranath 59
Tales from the Upanishads 27
tamashas 57
tapas (penance) 89–90
Tarzan (comics) 5, 14, 47
Tharu, Susie 112, 163
‘Thatcherism,’ concept of 23, 24, 25
Three Men in A Boat 188
Tilak, Bal Gangadhar 144
tilism 86
Times of India 14, 15
Townson, Nigel 190

tribal painting 61
Uniform Civil Code 40, 188
‘unity-in-diversity’ 7
untouchability: abolition of 139;
‘social abomination’ of 67
Upadhyaya, Deendayal 31
Upanishads 13
Urvashi (ACK) 77

Vajpayee, Atal Behari 161
Valmiki Ramayana 104
Varma, Ravi 37, 72, 74, 76
varnas 26, 28
Vedantic Hinduism 34, 42, 55, 56, 72
Vedantic philosophy 35, 135
Vedic Hinduism 26, 127
VHP see Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP)
Vidyasagar, Ishwar Chandra 17, 108
Vijaya dashami 140
‘Viradha Seizes Sita’ 73
Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP)
35; ACK and 33; ideology and
practices of 33; need for ‘modern
gurus’ 127
Vivekananda (ACK) 67, 133
Vivekananda, Swami: positing of
brahminism 106; spiritual map-
ing of social hierarchy 107;
‘spiritual masculinity’ propagated
by 104; teachings of 125; theory
of anushilan 120; value of man-
making education 105

Waerker, Ram 72, 74
Wakankar, Milind 150
‘welfare bureaucracy’ 10
Wertham, Dr. Fredric 46
White, Hayden 84
Women Indian Association (WIA)
183

Yellow Kid 46
yogi 129