Chapter 4

Reconstructing the Cultural Imaginary in *Amar Chitra Katha*

Everything in nature is lyrical in its ideal essence, tragic in its fate, and comic in its essence.

George Santayana, *Thinkexist.com*

If Karna was the yesterday’s mythological underdog who ignited the torch of fight against injustice in an unequal society then B. R Ambedkar carried this torch much further. A political leader whose primary concern was to liberate Dalits from the shackles of social oppression, he can be located at the interstices of the cultural politics that signals the transition into the 1980s. *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. In discussing the contemporary relevance of Babasaheb Ambedkar, Deepa Srinivas writes:

*ACK* endeavors 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 reservation would degrade idealism, hamper the spirit of independence and make the individual ‘soft’...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 of present times, the narrative of Babasaheb Ambedkar upholds merit, reiterates the nation as unitary, and negates the historical difference of caste that might justify the demand for a separate electorate or separate rights (166).

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 rise above the marks of their oppression of caste, community and gender. However Babasaheb never discounted the oppression of the lower caste. 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 and at each instance we distance ourselves from it.

For that, abolition of the caste system was his target. The colonial state, beyond doubt, did not wish to disturb the social status quo and hence it legitimized the caste system through various ways. On the other hand, the Congress parties, dominated by the upper caste Brahmans challenged the caste system initially but were unwilling to take up the problem of untouchability. It was M.K. Gandhi who first sensitized the Indians about the inhumaness of untouchability and subsequently challenged the oppressive caste system that legitimized the humiliation of dalits. Gandhi wanted the human beings to purify themselves from within. Dr B.R. Ambedkar made a frontal on orthodox Hinduism and worked for dalits and their self-dignity.

The narrative prepares a negotiated terrain where alliances cutting across caste lines are possible and protest can be voiced without jeopardizing the project of modernity. ACK, uninhibitedly through the narrative of B. R. Ambedkar draws attention to the taboos prevailing in large in the Indian society. Babasaheb tryst with the caste system started even before his birth and in a sense he was already enmeshed in that structure. Like all ACK heroes who are born amidst great jubilation at an auspicious hour signaling their pre-destined role to wield charisma and stand apart from ordinary masses, Ambedkar’s birth was prefigured by the blessings and prophecy of an ascetic to his father.

From an early stage Bhimrao Ambedkar found himself in the quagmire of societal discrimination and prejudices. Babasaheb’s extraordinary accomplishments are predetermined, but he must make his way through the hardships of his childhood and the struggles of his family to educate him. We recognize these struggles as necessary preconditions for him to attain his destined stature. His family has to make extreme sacrifices to get him educated but simultaneously ACK readers also recognize the exemplary modernity of the family, which substitutes the intervention of the welfare state. One does not fail to miss the message in 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" (ACK, 2). The family is presented as the site of sacrifice and the tradition that instills courage and binds one to the logic of
nation. Like any other great hero of ACK, Babasahib was similarly exposed to the tales of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* which fashioned his outlook and worldview.

What the readers come across is not a passive acceptance but an acute sense of injustice in him at each act of caste oppression that he suffers. Simple activities like drawing water from the well, travelling in bullock cart or going to a barber for a hair cut were forbidden on account of caste. Though brilliant in academics yet on account of caste he was pushed to the dark corridors of invisibility and ostracism. Like Hardy’s Jude who religiously studied Latin and Greek to gain admission into University, Bhimrao Ambedkar was denied the study of Sanskrit as the sacred language was solely the domain of upper caste Hindus and their fundamental right too. Each incident is a recognizable act of caste oppression and the modern reader recoils from the injustice embedded into them and shares Bhimrao’s bewilderment and outrage. Bhimrao’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 oppressive 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 Bhimrao’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 a rather young Bhimrao “found an oasis of affection for him in his Brahmin teacher”. It is this very teacher who changed Bhimrao’s surname from Ambadvekar to Ambedkar. In the discourse of ACK, this event has a symbolic function. It resonates with the theme that Brahmanism is a category of knowledge, potentially available to everyone irrespective of the caste he belongs to. It is also a legitimization of modern Brahmanism—tolerant, rational and egalitarian. Babasaheb is also an enactment of western individualism inflected through Vivekananda’s Vedantic conceptualization of the infallibility of the self.

The entire gamut of Ambedkar’s experience 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 Castes 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 students for equal citizenship.

The issue of reservations floats around in this text, never named but its spectral presence always there. We read in the introduction that Babasaheb Ambedkar told his people, “Rights are to be earned, not given away”. And ACK holds dearly to this axiom. 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 and subaltern mobilization on the other. It is true that Babasaheb refused to accept meekly this unjust treatment and that he led his people to break caste rules, yet protest is never allowed to reach to exceed the limits of civil societal boundaries or the control of the leader. Each outward struggle is also presented as an extension of the inner battle rather than as an act of subversion questioning the foundations of the social structure. Undoubtedly there are external factors and antagonists—the priestly classes, caste prejudice, superstitions and so on. Yet the major strife is within the individual. Despite attaining prestigious degree’s from foreign universities B.R
Ambedkar had to move from place to place searching for accommodation when he first arrived at Baroda. One of the panels described the situation as:

You are the new officer, aren’t you? Sorry, we have no room for untouchables (ACK, Vol 1025, 15).

The irony inherent in the statement is the fact that Ambedkar was being addressed as “the officer” and “untouchable” within the length of same sentence. His quest for shelter works on many level of interpretation. On a physical plane, it is the quest of a man looking for a roof and on the symbolical level it is quest to gain foothold in a society which leaves no stone unturned to banish individual under the grab of caste.

The callous attitude of the caste system rears its sinful fang once again when at Baroda State Service he was given a dingy corner for his work station and the peon would roll away the carpet lest it would get polluted. The outright apathy and widespread inhumanity filled B. R Ambedkar with disgust and he left Baroda for Bombay although the metropolis too was in the grip of discrimination on the basis of caste.

Fig 15. The inhuman practices which greeted Babasaheb Ambedkar even after attaining a position in society from the title “Babasaheb Ambedkar: He Dared to Fight” from Amar Chitra Katha, Vol, 611.
It was his sheer hard work and steadfast courage instead of appalling adversities and sorrows that made him stand out. B. R Ambedkar success was phenomenal. Undeterred by the crippling dogmas of Indian society he steadfastly continued his education and in 1926 returned to India from London as a barrister and with a degree in Economics. Hegel and Marx, are of the view that the slave has the greater potential to think beyond current conditions, to achieve a higher level of self consciousness and conceive and build new world. For Hegel, it is not the lord but the bondsman who will perform the historically necessary task of transcending the conditions of his/her present. It is not the bourgeoisie but the proletariat that is the universal class, the sign of the future, in the age of capital. The slave is the seed of progress- in life and crucially in thought. To quote Marx

“Through absolute fear and enforced work he… [begins] to acquire a coherent self and an enhanced consciousness of it. He can think now about what freedom means for the individual and what kind of world will enable that freedom to be.”

Meanwhile the Poona Pact, which pronounced giving more representation to the depressed classes instead of separate electorate, remained a wishful fallacy. It not only failed to deliver its objective but also vanquished the remaining cinders of hope. At a conference in Yeola, Ambedkar announced that:

“I am born a Hindu. I could not help it. But I solemnly assure you that I will not die a Hindu” (ACK, Vol 1025, 27), thus sowing the seed of conversion into Buddhism. His disillusionment with Hinduism was complete when at a conference of the Mahar Community he said— “The religion that does not recognize you as human beings…that compels the ignorant to stay ignorant and the poor to stay poor, is not a religion but a visitation”.

Ambedkar’s trajectory of political success from a representative at the World Round Table Conference, to an elected member of constituent assembly, to his occupying the position of first Law Minister of independent India and subsequently the chair of the committee formed to draft the constitution of World’s largest democracy, the readers note that there has been no definitive shift in the mind set of the people. The rigid ideas about caste and untouchability were embedded in the make-up of Indian society.
His political success and popularity inspired awe among the masses but it necessarily did not translate into acceptance.

The discourse of Hinduism was so dense and cohesive that it did not allow ruptures of modernization and upward mobility to seep through it or punctuate it. The disillusionment with Hinduism, failure of Poona Pact to deliver its objective and the widespread apathy and inhumanity towards Dalit filled Ambedkar disgust. Ambedkar was aware of the fact that the Brahmans, who had a vested interest in the caste system, would not accept his suggestions and bring moral regeneration based on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. Therefore his conversion to Buddhism in 1956 ended his relentless battle with untouchability. Conversion might not be the answer to the prevailing problems as internal social hierarchy among the converts persists yet on a psychological level it gave dalits a sense of freedom from the stigma of being a polluting person.

Babasaheb Ambedkar participates in the ‘rightist’ idiom of merit which would form legitimizing basis of the anti-Mandal agitation of the 1990s. Its rhetoric is subsumed in the mythology of self-respect—in order to achieve true quality 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. It is curious that rights and duties are accrued to a homogenized/undifferentiated human self through the representation of a figure such as Ambedkar. Ambedkar does not pose rights as opposed to the idea of state intervention. In ACK, Ambedkar’s approach to subaltern politics positions him in a relationship of affinity rather than tension with the elite nationalist leadership. 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 frustrations, it is taken 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).

Kalpana Chawla- The Global Citizen

A gulf of 25 years separates the publication of Babasaheb Ambedkar (1979) and Kalpana Chawla (2005). Since the publication of Jawaharlal Nehru in 1991, very few titles have sporadically appeared mostly responding to the public/group interest
surrounding a personality at a particular point. The narrative of Kalpana Chawla, is ACK’s tribute to the astronaut at a moment when national sentiments rode high around the events of her tragic death. Kalpana Chawla is ACK’s ultimate acknowledgement of the humanist self—outside and above ‘difference’. The narrative revolves around the story of the Indian astronaut Kalpana Chawla, who was aboard the ill-fated space shuttle Columbia that busted into flames minutes before landing in 2003. In this narrative, gender is the trope through which difference is referenced, but the force of Kalpna Chawla’s personality is such that it becomes embarrassingly archaic if not morally unsound to cite social prejudice or obstacles as reasons that can block one from achieving one’s ambition or goal. It is almost as if by the time 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 narrative has been deployed around repudiation/management of caste. The narrative introduced the readers to Kalpna Chawla as one who was destined to make skies her home:

The National Highway Number One connects Karnal to the capital, New Delhi. It is the historic Grand Trunk road that connected India to the rest of the world. In more recent years, the name of Karnal has been blazed across the skies by a determined young woman called Kalpna Chawla (ACK, 1).

The narrative does signal the legacy and Indian tradition of the city—Karnal, by referring to its past as named after the legendary mythological character Karna. However this reference serves to briefly remind the reader of the ‘legacy’ of the narrative of progress that is in the process of unfolding.

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 nearby (ACK, 1).

The story of Kalpana Chawla begins when her father, Banarsi Lal Chawla is only 16 years old and he has to flee along with his family from their ancestral town—Gujranwala in Pakistan during the Partition. The family stated anew in the new city of Karnal and Banarasri Lal Chawla supported the family of twenty members by making
boxes with lids. From early on, the narrative presents the entrepreneurial skills and acumen of Banarsi Lal Chawla as inherited by Kalpana Chawla. His innovative idea of lid covered boxes helped the family to earn a living during the turbulent times of partition and later his idea of starting a tyre factory, a first of its kind in Karnal, which impacted and influenced Kalpana Chawla to its depth. Kalpana is the fourth child of Banarsi Lal Chawla who has the same streak of entrepreneurship and adventure in her and she has inherited not the legacy of pain and violence of partition but an unusual strength to cross over and get the best out of new cultures.

![Image](89
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Fig 16. The set-up of Super Tyres by Kalpana Chawla’s father in the remote town of Karnal from the title “Kalpana Chawla: The First Indian Women in Space” from *Amar Chitra Katha*, Vol. 736.

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 excelled in dancing as much as in ‘energetic outdoor games’ like volleyball (fig 123). She is shown to be fashionable yet not bound by sexist burden to dress up like a girl; at her sister’s wedding she wore the same dress for three days. When goes to the college, she is the only girl to wear trousers and tee-shirts. Her journey from Karnal to the Punjab Engineering College in Chandigarh to America reflected her unwavering focus on the goal to pursue aerospace engineering. At a time when her friends at Karnal pursued more conventional streams like Psychology at a provincial college, Kalpana studied aircraft propulsion, theoretical aerodynamics and fluid dynamics. As one of her
friends puts it, “Ouch! Even the names are so heavy! How can you study them? (ACK, 15)

Fig 17. Kalpana Chawla was the only women who seen in western clothing in th entire college from the title “Kalpana Chawla: The First Indian Women in Space from Amar Chitra Katha, Vol. 736.

Between all this Kalpana proved not only her academic intellect but als strength of character and a strong will power to achieve what she thought would b best for her. Time and again she provided her family and friends with example c what a woman can achieve at a time when wearing western clothes or studyin engineering or shifting base to a metropolis for better education was considered taboo and outraged certain sections of society. Kalpana Chawla comes across t readers as a woman who was aware of her potential and had the perseverance t follow her ambition as is reflected by her TOEFL and GRE score which helped he gain admission in University of Texas, Arlington, in USA. The first woman t graduate as an aeronautical engineer from the Punjab Engineering College i Chandigarh, she soon gets an offers from American academia to pursue her Master’ degree. Her dream of becoming an astronaut gets realized in 1984 when she finall attained the coveted degree in Aerodynamics. At home in her new environment, sh came to be known as K.C. among friends, the abbreviation in some way segregate her from gendered or national/racial moorings, and remodeling her as a ‘worl citizen’.

Kalpana Chawla who had always nurtured dreams of flying, finall accomplished her life dream in the USA and gets her pilot licence in 1987,
Interestingly, she also met the man who was to be her life partner later—Jean Pierre Harrison, a flight instructor, known by his initials J.P to friends. J.P and Kalpana crosses not only the barrier of caste but also that of religion and of race, but this has not been a presented as an insurmountable barrier in the narrative of Kalpa Chawla. Both Kalpana Chawla and her husband, Jean Pierre are presented as enlightened individuals, each pursuing their dreams of personal and intellectual fulfillment, 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 Kalpana could take advantage of the opportuniites that came her way. It is a wedlock that defined what a modern and equal partnership should be:

Both of them lived busy lives…Yet they found time to relax and enjoy each other’s company with good music and good friends. (ACK, 22)

Fig 18. Kalpana Chawla straddling two cultures and her equal partnership with her husband Jean Pierre from the title “Kalpana Chawla: The First Indian Women in Space” from *Amar Chitra Katha*, Vol. 736.

Throughout the unfolding of the narrative the readers note that Kalpana Chawla is straddling two cultures with ease—in fact, she recognizes this ‘doublessness’ as her staple and embraces it. She led the classic American life of outdoor adventure like scuba diving, biking on a full moon night, and flying. Yet she did not lose touch
with her Indian roots as she took lessons in Indian classical dance and also initiated her husband into Indian cooking. On her space mission abroad the Columbia, she carried her favorite music—Abida Parveen, Ravi Shankar and Deep purple.

In a rare slippage the otherwise self-assured narrative reveals a weak spot when Kalpana Chawla had to give up her Indian nationality in order to become an American citizen. We are informed that “in 1990, at the age of 29, Kalpana Chawala became an US citizen”. Further Kalpana is 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” (21). The anxiety about the expatriate status of Kalpana Chawla is hinted at in subtle tones and the narrative clearly supports her case as Kalpana’s thoughts on giving up her Indian nationality are incomplete rather it is the narrators voice that completes the argument. When the question is of talent Vs national affiliations, ACK supports the former and relegated the filial affiliations to the nation to the background. Clearly the talent of the individual combined with right opportunities should not take a back because of national barriers. An individual brimming with talent and perseverance should be allowed to pursue his goal irrespective of the national boundaries.

Kalpana finally joined the famed NASA (National Aeronautics Space Administration) in 1994 to train as an astronaut.

Besides her qualification 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 (ACK, 22).

Difficult to miss here is the echo from the earlier chitrakathas of ACK, and Pai renovating of Bankim’s ideal 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.

In the biography of Kalpana Chawla, neither race nor gender ever appears as a problem in the charmed life of this outgoing achiever—hungry for knowledge as well as life’s varied experience. In its candid representation of Kalpana, gender becomes unmarked, and in that moment, unchecks class as well. It is significant that Kalpana
During the launch on January 16, 2003, some material had fallen on the tile-covered wing of the shuttle and caused a crack. At that time it was not felt to be important.

However, after 15 days in space, on February 1, a mere 16 minutes before landing time, the crack caused a fatal accident. The spacecraft broke apart over the state of Texas and the seven astronauts aboard met a tragic end.

In death, as in life, Kalpana became a true citizen of the universe.

Colour Plate 10. The Splash page and also the final panel of Kalpana chawla: The First Indian Woman in Space, showing Kalpana Chawla last message from the space shuttle, ACK Vol 736.
Chawla does not need any preferential treatment as a women, she stands equal to men in every walk of life. As a symbol of modernity rendered all the more powerful with the sense of national loss evoked by her death, she makes it ethically untenable to claim any distinguished position with respect to her class or gender. 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 (ACK, 32).

The comment in the narrative box below states: “In death, as in life, Kalpana became a true citizen of the universe, Colour Plate 10 (32). In this 2005 narrative, history/tradition rest light on its shoulders of the fun-loving, urbanc, sporty Kalpna Chawla and in this representation she is different from the nationalist subjects studied earlier on. She moves between worlds with ease and the portals of scientific knowledge (in Chandigarh, Texas and finally NASA) open to hitherto unexplored realms of wisdom. The readers can easily discern as to why she has been chosen as the icon of unusual courage, ambition and achievement that continues to inspire young people for all generations to come. Kalpna Chawla is set right in the heart of contemporary middle-class concerns—resonant with its contemporary idiom of dreams, goals, passions and achievement.

The People’s Hero—Jayaprakash Narayan

Popularly referred as JP or Lok Nayak (Hindi for People’s Hero) was an Indian activist, social reformer and a political leader. A disciple of Mohandas Gandhi and India’s indigenous critic, he remained a rebel till the very end of his life. The tightly structured narrative of Jayaprakash Narayan traverses the entire trajectory of Indian history from pre-Independence era to the formation of the Janata Dal in March 1977. The terse narrative of Jayaprakash Naarayan runs parallel to the history of modern India and touches upon vital cornerstones like the Civil-Disobedience movement, Partition of India, Naxalite movement, surrender of Chambal dacoits, Bhooan movement, the call for total revolution, state of emergency, arrest of opposition leaders, censorship on press, and finally the routing of Congress leadership following emergency. Between all these events Jayaprakash Narayan stood like a towering figure whose call to duty entails guiding the fallen, empowering the youth, protesting against the injustice and reassessing his subject position as a leader. There are
certainly moments of doubt and disillusionment with the leadership whom he trusted to deliver but at the same time his belief in the civil society and in the power of democracy coupled with the energy of youth sustains and reaffirms his beliefs.

ACK delineates the multi-layered character of Jayaprakash Narayan by bringing to the front his enduring contributions in the political arena and articulating his disenchantment with the central government, followed by his efforts to overcome the formalism and temporality of the representational format to make the practice of democracy direct, immediate and popular. The depiction of the charismatic figure against the background of a conservative politics in the post-Nehruvian era is fraught with failure and disillusionment. Yet ACK time and again reminds its reader that JP succeeded remarkably well. His ideas and work for a civil-political society that represented the general will of the people rather than the mere representation of corporatist state succeeded in building a nation and a democratic institution. Amartya Sen has long talked about the need for a new political party that stands for a combination of economic liberalism, secular worldview and good governance and JP laid the foundation of such a political party.

The narrative of Jayaprakash Narayan begins with his birth which coincided with the festival of Vijay Dasami which is celebrated with much fanfare in India. The festival symbolically represents the victory of virtue over vice and the significance of this festival is not to be missed here. In ACK’s frame of reference the conflict between Rama and Ravana has a special significance. The event of JP’s birth on Vijay Dasami is a sign for the reader to recognize him at the beginning of the narrative as a familiar authority figure exuding the same powers as that of Lord Rama and set out to destroy the evil in his long struggle.

ACK builds the authority of Jayaprakash Narayan persona by taking us through sequences demonstrating his spiritual bent of mind, his loathing for official positions and his incorruptibility. Jayaprakasn Narayan’s character is shaped through highlighting two dominant streaks: first, his aggressive opposition of British rule and English education and second, his adherence to the Gita—“the Bhagavat Gita held a special charm for him” (ACK, 3). When he leaves for his education in the United States, he carries the Gita along with him. The narrative also chronicles his revolutionary activities against the British, the physical torture and mental torment
endured by him in Hazaribagh jail and his daring escape from the jail authorities. The readers 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 his authority.

ACK in its depiction of an idealistic hero lays tremendous efforts on showcasing the individual's struggle and deprivation. The journey of Jayaprakash Narayan is no different. Having grown-up in a middle class milieu, Jayaprakash Narayan demonstrated exceptional brilliance from the very beginning. His family soon saw that streak of sparkle in him and mortgaged land in order to pay for his studies in United States. In United States Jayaprakash Narayan undergoes extreme hardship in order to pay for his studies. He did all kinds of menial jobs and went without warm clothing and food for days together. One of the panel shows a notice hung up—"No vacancy for Asians" (ACK, 11) with the back profile of Jayaprakash visible to the readers. The commentary in the box below proclaims: "Wherever he went, he was confronted with such notices" (ACK, 11).

![Fig 19. No vacancy notice as seen by Jayaprakash Narayan and his trudging on the snow in Madison from the title "Jayaprakash Narayan: A Soldier for Justice" from *Amar Chita Katha*, Vol. 693.](image)

The rampant biases and prejudices prevailing in the West are also intricately tied up with the struggle of Jayaprakash Narayan. The panel here speaks more than the commentary and hence forms an intimate relationship with the narrative as a whole. The next panel however completes the unspoken message where the readers
once again confront the back visage of Jayaprakash Narayan walking with heavy steps in snow covered terrains with trees denuded of foliage. The commentary includes:

He trudged for miles on show-covered roads looking for some job, any job—ACK, 11).

Jayaprakash Narayan failure to get a job is not a concern in the delineation of his life history as the apathy and biased attitude of the West towards Asians and immigrants. Although the silver lining was not far and soon Jayaprakash Narayan was assigned a job as Assistant Professor and completed his bachelor’s degree from Ohio in Sociology and Economics yet he had to give up his dream of going to Soviet Union to gain more knowledge.

The ideals of nationalism and service to nation is what ACK has tried to portray through the narrative of Jayaprakash Narayan who after seven years in United States returned to India to serve the nation under the guidance of Gandhi, Nehru and Vinoba Bhave. Reacting to the partition of India, Jayaprakash Narayan stated: “Both elation and celebration are meaningless; partition is not what we fought for” (ACK, 21). This evokes the trope of the ‘great betrayal’ of the nation by the British. Jayaprakash Narayan sterling ‘nationalist credentials combined with his selflessness’, symbolized by his search for the way to service as apart from that power legitimize the view that social harmony alone is the answer to the problem of the nation. The partition which was viewed as betrayal gains momentum under the consideration that Jayaprakash Narayan all along fought for the rights of minority and those on the fringes of society.

It was a revolutionary speech by Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad that made him drop his English-medium school education and subsequently refused going to England to pursue his higher education.

Fig 20. Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad exhorting students to give up English Education from the title “Jayaprakash Narayan: A Soldier for Justice” from Amar Chita Katha, Vol. 693.
He refrained from using violence as tool to attain freedom for the country but was time and again disappointed by the ideals of leadership in command. It was an unjust and inequitable distribution system which made Jayaprakash Narayan participate 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 Jayaprakash’s personal ‘saintliness’ rather than because of unjust distribution system that calls for a radical redressal. 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 posses much land. But I will be glad to give some of it to those who have none at all” (*ACK*, 23).

The narrative does not shun the issue of the oppression of the poor tenants and labourers in the hand of the landlords. Several telling panels show Jayaprakash interaction with the suffering landless labourers in the village of Mizaffarpur. One of them tells him:

We are beaten up, and our houses burnt. Our fault? We are untouchables (*ACK*, 25).

The narrative also allows for a resolution to social injustice to take shape. There is an easy continuity between the atrocities in the village as encountered by Jayaprakash and the benevolent 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 Naxalite and the Nagas through Sarvodaya methods. But what happened in 1971 was unique, and amazes the world (*ACK*, 26).

The unique event is the surrender of the dreaded dacoit Madho Singh with a price of 1, 50,000 on his head. Madho Singh comes to Jayaprakash Narayan in disguise; offering to surrender provided the latter acts as an intermediary with the government. The image show us the dacoit, supplicant touching Jayaprakash’s feet (who has his wife Prabhavati sitting beside him) and then pleading with his folded hands—“You are our only hope babuji” (*ACK*, 27). A subsequent image has Madho Singh and his
followers laying down arms in a posture of submission in front of Jyaprak: Prabhavati applies tilak on Madho Singh’s forehead.


The figure of the naxalite merges with that of the dacoit, both shadows the margin, the one politicized and the other criminalized. Both symbolize uni the rural countryside. The bandit may be more romanticized than the naxalit more containable within a feudal articulation. But both re-figure in a ror patriarchal discourse as children who had been led astray. Jayaprakash Nar: emerged as the patriarch who must ensure the welfare of the family. The dacoit repentant/humbled/subordinated position even as Jayaprakash Narayan i benevolent father-figure with his wife by his side. The subaltern potent subterranean social movements/revolts is thus written into the nation-1 metaphor.

Ultimately, the true authority of Jayaprakash Narayan emanates fr position that carries traces of the feudal and the modern and yet outside configurations. His physical/mental endurance, reformist passion, concerns f: downtrodden and personal incorruptibility place him among the saint figures them he comes into politics at a moment of crisis and retreats when the st emergency is over. Notably, Balasaheb Deoras, who was the sarassanghchalak RSS, stated in 1974 that “he [JP] is like sannyasis of old who remained aloof a: did not hesitate to lead the people when the rulers went astray” (qtd in Srinivas,
The Architect of Modern India—Jawaharlal Nehru

The reader is introduced to the impeccable pedigree of Nehru in a tone of unceaseless admiration. 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. The narrative celebrates the modernity and cultural urbanity of Nehru’s childhood and youth, setting the course for him to become the ‘leader of masses’ one final day.

The story begins with Raj Kaul, Nehru’s ancestor, an eminent Sanskrit and Persian scholar, who decided to come down from the valley of Kashmir to the plains of Delhi and is granted a house and several villages by the Emperor of 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 Kasmiris also have such fair skins” (ACK, 2) until some passer-by recognize 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 the 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.

Fig 22. The colonial rulers narrow interpretation of fair-skin as that of pre-dominantly English from the title “Jawaharlal Nehru: The Early days” from Amar Chitra Katha, Vol. 700.
While the narrative established Nehru’s non-plebeian credentials through description of his lineage, his ‘modern’ upbringing and schooling equally helped in carving out his role as the future leader of the nation. We encounter 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 aunt told him many stories from the Indian mythology.

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

It can be said that in the context of ACK in particular, and the hegemonic representation of the middle-class in the globalization 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. To quote Deepa Srinivas, “Religion, 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” (186).

Therefore, the readers learn about 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” (ACK, 7). Ever year on the day of Id, the young Jawaharlal goes to the home of Munsi Mubarak Ali, the head of staff of servants, to partake in the special delicacies. ACK 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. He makes an appearance in other volumes of ACK—a kindly figure, 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 Aurangzeb but also through the inclusion of the ‘docile’ Muslim. The irony of the situation is that, as Fatehali
Devji says, “this typically archaic, idealized 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”(9). The narrative of Jawaharlal Nehru 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.

Fatehali Devji comments that “the language of disease underscores the derivative discourse of ‘secular’ Indian nationalism in that its 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 (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. And it is in these very articulations regarding Hindu/Muslim/Indian that one glimpse the affiliations between the secularist and the Hindu nationalists.

Depiction of Nehru’s childhood and schooling is meant to stirle a deep chord among the urban middle-class readership of ACK. Religion played an important role in his formation yet in its deeply rational and modern representation; there is an embedded criticism of 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. The Gita, as translated into English by Brooks, appeals to Jawaharlal. Notably, his Sanskrit teacher Pandit Ganganath Jha “did not have much success with his young student (ACK, 12). A panel depicts the orthodox Brahmin teacher trying to teach his student by rote learning: “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 explained his disinterest in Sanskrit as a consequence of his
inability to learn the language. ACK presented the figure of 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. 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 in with Nehru’s training in the Western classics or his experiments in laboratory to discover scientific facts. In fact, it is Jawaharlal Nehru’s tutelage under Brooks that anticipates his entry into the hallowed portals of Harrow and then, Cambridge.

Fig 23. Nehru’s difficulties to learn Sanskrit and easy identification with English language from the title “Jawaharlal Nehru: The Early days” from *Amar Chitra Katha*, Vol. 700.

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 this world and perhaps the world to come. It is not a question of providing for you for I can do that in a single years’ income. It is a question of making a real man of you which you are bound to be… (ACK, 16).

These lines are indicative of the formative role to be played by the Public School in a life such as Jawaharlal’s. The man-making pedagogic roles adopted by families, societies and religious gurus often form an important ingredient of ACK framework which further become instrumental in preparing the pupil to take up the leadership of nation and defend its order. 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’ (ACK, 17), we catch hints of his character which was to unfold in future. The letter written by his headmaster 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 (ACK, 18).

The public school 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 against the backdrop of the anti-Mandal agitation of the early 1990s which swept the country. During these agitation children of the affluent administrative class and obvious products of elite schools revolted 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 liberalization 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 stress him in the face and yet fills him with a sense of responsibility that his education has prepared him for. The narrative, leading us through Jawaharlal’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 has 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 (underscored by merit) and ordered forms of
political action that preclude subaltern initiatives.