Chapter V

Redeem Desecration: A Retrospective Reading of
Amar Chitra Katha

Amar Chitra Katha brings to life personages and events from
the musty pages of Indian history

- Anant Pai..

Amar Chitra Katha presents complex historical facts and
intricate mythology in a format that would appeal to children.
They not only entertain, but also provide a fitting introduction to
the cultural heritage of India. In a country so vast and varied, the
series also serves as a medium of national integration, by
introducing young readers to the rich cultural diversity of the
country and highlighting the achievements of local heroes.


The Amar Chitra Katha Phenomenon

In 1969 Anant Pai, a young Brahmin journalist from Bombay,
launched a series of picture-storybooks for children. Titled Amar Chitra
Katha or Immortal Picture Stories, the series retold Indian myths, history,
classics, and legends and folk tales. Pai had to face some disappointment
initially since the sales did not pick up. On one occasion he ignored all manner of taboos by putting up a display rack in a restaurant with his own hands -- an amazing action for a white-collar worker and a Kerala Brahmin (Gangadhar 139). 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 ACK every month. By the mid-seventies, 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 and bus 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. Circulating libraries often stocked complete sets of ACK. 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.

In February 1967, Pai happened to watch a quiz contest on television while visiting a bookstall in Delhi. Five students of the famed St. Stephen’s College participated in the programme but none of them could answer a simple question like who the mother of Rama was. Says 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 12)

Pai was more convinced than ever that the younger generation was getting alienated from Indian culture. But when Pai tried to sell his idea of publishing material on “Indian” culture, no publisher was willing to back him. Eventually, when India Book House offered him a small contract, Pai resigned his comfortable job at the *Times of India*, and thus in Mumbai in 1967 ACK began publication. The first in the series of the new publication was *Krishna* published in 1969. It was followed by *Shakuntala*, *The Pandava Princes*, *The Sons of Rama* and *Hanuman*, all of which had mythological themes.

The perseverance paid off and now ACK is published in English, Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Assamese and Malayalam, selling about 3.5 million copies annually. The series had also started featuring non-mythological themes-- history, folk tales and legends of regional heroes and heroines. *Shivaji*, the first non-mythological, historical narrative brought out in the series, shows an “ideal” masculine figure who fought for the values of the “Hindu” nation and thus serves as pedagogic ideal for the
future citizens of India. It was followed by *Rana Pratap* (1972) and *Prithviraj Chauhan* (1972), the last regular title published in the series being *Jawaharlal Nehru: The Early Days* published in 1991. In portraying these heroes, ACK draws on some of the crucial modes in which a masculine Hindu ideal was articulated in nineteenth-century India.

The Indian comic industry is large and growing, with comic books in English being especially popular. ACK comics based on traditional Hindu mythological tales and historical figures seemed to sell well. They found markets not only in India, but in the West as well, among Indian immigrants (Pritchett 76). Today ACK is translated into several languages. It even has a virtual life with 384 stories available on the web site of an organization of non-resident Indians called the Hindu Students’ Council.

Rarely has a connection been made between the extraordinary rise of this genre in the 1970s and the other great events of the decade, and the widely-discussed break-up of the post-Independence consensus of the 1950s and 1960s. Historians and political commentators seem largely agreed that the late sixties and early seventies mark a major turning point in the 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 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 sixties economic growth slackened and prices soared. 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. Locally organised resistance and revolts by poor peasants and agricultural labourers, mostly belonging to the lower castes and tribal groups, in extremely backward agricultural regions where feudal modes of oppression by landlords and state officials were still rampant, led to movements such as the Naxalbari movement in West Bengal. Subsequently, Naxal movements spread in West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Bihar and Punjab and were met using brutal armed retaliation by the state. But the unrest spreading through India in the early 1970s was not confined to the communist movements alone. 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 too actively participated in these movements, often demanding the inclusion of women’s issues in the government’s agenda. 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.

ACK calls 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. The “Glorious Heritage of India,” the key slogan of the series, which appears on the cover of many of the volumes in the series, might well be contrasted with the iconoclastic student movements associated with the left-wing movements, including the Naxalbari movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Similarly, Pai’s attempt to refashion history which he presents as a series of vignettes of the heroism and charisma of great men-- there are only a few women on the “Makers of Modern India” list-- into an effective pedagogic tool stands in distinct contrast to historiographical initiatives, such as that of Subaltern Studies which critique the elitist basis of both colonial and nationalist historiography and foreground subaltern initiatives.

Drawing on Gramsci’s concept of passive revolution, political theorists like Sudipta Kaviraj have asserted 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” (A Critique 51). In India, the 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, the political order did not attempt to radically transform the institutional structures of bureaucratic authority established in the period of colonial rule. Also, it simply sought to contain the powers of pre-capitalist dominant classes through contingent strategies of neutralization, concession or selective attack, all these being means to keep them in the position of subsidiary allies in the reformed state structure. The new government opted for the passive revolution of capital as it was dependent on existing pre-capitalist forms of social power to mobilize electoral support for it through landed proprietorship or caste loyalty or religious authority.

Developed at a moment when the “Nehruvian” consensus was in crisis, ACK articulates the hegemonic ambitions of a modern Hindu nationalism. It has also played a crucial role in moulding the self-images, character and imagination of hordes of middle-class children in the India of the seventies and eighties, who a generation later in the nineties constitute the major portion of the new globalising corporate and professional Indian middle class.

This new middle-class believed that welfarist commitments of the socialist government resulted in the economic disintegration and
devaluation of merit. In keeping with the ethics of bourgeois individualism, it asked for a masculinisation of the self in place of special rights granted by the state to disadvantaged sections of the society discriminated on the basis of caste, community or gender. Against this backdrop, it is crucial to note that a refined, brahmanised, yet modern, masculinity is represented as a major value in the discourse of ACK. It seeks to train future citizens of the nation through narratives that centre and foreground an indomitable and persevering masculinity.

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 representations, the chitrakatha is itself quite original and without precedent. As a cultural project, ACK’s ambition was the rewriting of Nehruvian India. It has not only shaped dominant contemporary ideas about Indian history and tradition, brahminism and masculinity but also made a critical contribution in moulding many other present-day hegemonic articulations about merit, self-respect, self-improvement, hard work and so on.
For the purpose of this study, I have chosen the following chitrakathas for analysis: Dayananda Saraswati (1976), Babasaheb Ambedkar (1979), Vinayaka Damodar Savarkar (1984), Padmini (1973), and Jawaharlal Nehru (1991).

**Dayananda Saraswati**

From the late sixties onwards, the socialist state was challenged in a big way by the proponents of right-wing ideology for “having brought the society to the brink of moral collapse, and thus in need of restitution of the authentic traditions of the Hindu nation, located in an ancient Vedic past” (Sreenivas 28). As Bruce Graham puts it succinctly:

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. (48)

Hindu nationalism owes its genesis to socio-religious movements spearheaded by high-caste Hindus, such as the Arya Samaj founded in 1875 by Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883). It pervaded the social and intellectual scenario of the late nineteenth-century northern India, and provided its uppercaste, literate society with an ethical framework, and also
with modes to develop a self-identity and a common goal. Historians agree
that the Arya Samaji ideology was foundational to the later development of
increasingly militaristic, right-wing Hindu nationalist organizations like the
Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Swami
Dayananda’s contribution has also been recognised by the leaders of these
groups, namely Lala Lajput Rai and Vinayak Damodar Savarkar
(Krishnamurti 116). Given this reputation, it is curious to see how ACK
has chosen to eulogise him. The introduction to *Dayananda* speaks
explicitly of Swami Dayanandas’ reformist stance:

Swami Dayananda was born at a time when our country was
under foreign domination. Most of the people were steeped in
ignorance and poverty. Hypocrisy and corruption flourished in the
name of religion. . . . Prejudices of creed, caste and community
had corroded the social cohesion and the wily and the wicked
were ruling the roost (Pai, *Dayananda*, inside front cover).

The message of Dayananda probably struck a deep chord through its
very ambiguity. It combined a sharp criticism of many existing Hindu
practices such as idolatry and polytheism, child marriage, taboos on widow
remarriage, and Brahmin predominance and the multiplicity of castes based
on birth, along with an equally strong assertion of the superiority of a purified
Vedic Hinduism over all other faiths-- Christianity, Islam and Sikhism. In
fact, the successor organisations to the Arya Samaj were explicit in placing the “blame” for Indian political problems at the feet of Muslims and other religious minorities. While it is true that the Arya Samaj stance for the rights of women and “untouchables” did, in some sense, lay the groundwork for Gandhi’s later projects (Pai, Dayananda inside front cover), the innocuously depoliticised way in which these reforms are depicted is suspicious. In fact, as Radha Kumar, Uma Chakravarti and others have written, reformers of this period who spoke for women were not necessarily progressive in their political beliefs (Chakravati 245). The chitrakatha narrates how Dayananda gave the sacred thread to women and Dalits.

According to Dayananda, during Vedic times, society recognised only varnas based on the skills and accomplishments of an individual and not a system of hereditary endogamous castes. He, however, recommended that people marry within their varna to maintain social order, and was primarily interested in the religious education of young women in order to prepare them to do their “duty” as “mothers of the nation” (Chakravarti 256-257). These details are absent in the ACK narrative. In the narrative Dayananda says, “For women to acquire that place of honour, they must get proper education. Give up Purdah! Give up superstitions” (21). While statements like this have contributed to the remembrance of Dayananda as a champion of women’s rights, it is important to recognize that he in fact felt that Purdah and “superstitions”
were imports from Islamic culture, which had sullied the “purity” of Hindu culture. Thus, Dayananda read western individualist values into the traditional *varna* system. He also appealed to the Hindus to reject the outward aspects of European culture and emulate their 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 option he proposed was founded on a brahminical worldview. 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 the intention to pursue the aims of the Arya Samaj, namely, to inculcate a sense of having a common source, a common religion and a common language among all Hindus. But, significantly, this was to be combined with a study of English and western knowledge.

It is not until page 26 of the 32-page comic that Dayananda establishes the Arya Samaj. “Arya Samaj” for Dayananda “means the society of virtuous men. We must all unite without distinction of caste or creed. Our objectives are to impart true knowledge, to bring about social justice and to achieve freedom from alien rule” (Pai, *Dayananda* 26). For Dayananda, Arya(n)s were those “original” Indians, practitioners of the
Vedic religion of his “Golden Age,” and the term Arya pointed towards a nationalism based on this (conjectural) linkage between cultural and religious tradition. His programme of purification, coupled with his insistence on “disciplined” procreation, borders on a eugenic procedure.

Interestingly, the Arya Samaj movement anticipated the establishment of the Benares Hindu University (BHU) in 1915, which was designed as a “modern institution with a religico-cultural agenda” (Kumar, Political Agenda 10). The idea of the Hindu University had been conceived as early as 1905, and the financial help required to realise this idea had been generated over the years through the collective effort of a vast network of upper-caste, landed and feudal interests which were spread all over the United Provinces, the Central Provinces and Bihar (Kumar, Political Agenda 10). The BHU was not a government enterprise but a community project that became “the mint where the modern cultural coinage of the north Indian plains was stamped and approved for circulation” (Kumar, Political Agenda 10). 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. (Emphasis added) (Kumar, Political Agenda 10)
Hindu revivalism was at once a rejection of the “modern” which connoted a “blind aping” of the West and in that sense nationalist (with all its ethical charge), and also the construction of a new “modern”—reformed, rational and, above all, sourced from the Vedas.

But Dayananda did in fact set forth a new “creed” in advocating “Vedic” values with strategic reforms, and it is unclear how his position on Hindu superiority over other religions could lead to a “United India.” The Arya links to the Mahasabha and later RSS movements must not be overlooked in this regard. ACK, however, appears to consciously position Dayananda in line with other nationalist heroes as primarily in opposition to British rule, and implies that his Hindu reformist agenda arises as a response to colonisation. This makes it possible for the reader to miss the Hindu-centric effects of the Arya Samaj, and its anti-Muslim sentiment.

**Babasaheb Ambedkar (1979)**

*Babasaheb Ambedkar* can be located at the cutting edge of the cultural politics that marked the 1980s. It is significant to mention that this series was republished in 1996 after the anti-Mandal agitation of the early 1990s and the subsequent resurgence of interest in Ambedkar among dalits and the backward classes. ACK’s *Babasaheb Ambedkar* attempts to cut the role of Ambedkar in Dalit politics to the measures of the nationalist project of modernity and progress.
A study of Ambedkar’s politics will reveal to us that he introduced those notes of discordance, both in nationalistic politics and in the constitution of independent India, which challenged the “Hindu” ideal of citizenship and the order of the civil society.

ACK endeavours to shift Ambedkar and his politics onto the terrain of nationalism, modernity, and enlightenment. In fact, by positioning Ambedkar as a pedagogic authority, it seeks to homogenise the claims of the uppercaste bourgeoisie that reservation would degrade idealism, hamper the spirit of independence and make the individual “soft.”

The following discussion deals with the narrative manoeuvres in Ambedkar to translate the “radicality of Ambedkar” into the “radicality” of another kind-- more manageable and recognisable within the coercive framework of nationalist elite politics. Read as an allegory of present times, Ambedkar upholds merit, reiterates the nation as unitary, and negates the historical differences of caste that might justify the demand for a separate electorate (as in 1932). In other words, the subject of humanism replaces the differential mode in which Ambedkar posited and problematised the dalit subject.

The Chitrakatha Babasaheb Ambedkar is a tribute to the triumph of the human spirit in the most adverse circumstances. It is an amazing narrative charting the march of the self on the path of progress and
enlightenment, and its attainment of that “neutral” and awesome status of the citizen available only to those who erase/raise above the marks of their oppression, such as caste, community or gender. It would be wrong to say that Ambedkar disregards the oppression of the lower castes. In fact, through a series of incidents, the narrative identifies those who perpetuate caste oppression, notifying them as pre-modern and reactionary. Their violence against the lower caste moves the middle class readers to outrage and at each step to distance themselves from it. But at some level, the violence of caste-based oppression depicted in Ambedkar makes the readers comfortable and “secular” in the sense that they distance themselves from such practices.

*Babasaheb Ambedkar* prepares a negotiated terrain where alliance cutting across caste lines are possible (for all those who hold the universal principle of liberty desire), and protest can be voiced without damaging the project of modernity.

Ambedkar’s tryst with (Hindu) patriarchy starts even before his birth. In the discourse of ACK, the birth of a son (whether it is Shivaji or Jayaprakash) is a significant event heralding great things to come. Thus, almost all ACK heroes are born amidst great jubilation, often at an auspicious hour signalling their pre-destined role to wield power and stand apart from the ordinary masses. In the case of Ambedkar, his birth is
prefaced by the blessing and prophecy of an ascetic to his father: “I bless you. You shall have a son, who will achieve worldwide fame” (Pai, Babasaheb 1).

This is the beginning of a “destinal narrative” of the steady evolution of the self (Kapur 82). This is a birth which is endorsed by the spiritual force of an ascetic, who chooses an exceptional disciple to restore social orders. As Ambedkar’s extraordinary potential is determined, and the readers are moved by the struggles of his childhood and that of his family to educate him, and yet recognise these struggles as “necessary” pre-conditions for him to attain his destined stature. For example, his family has to make extreme sacrifices to get him educated. His mother’s words for instance show the exemplary modernity of his family:

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. (2)

The family is presented as the source of necessary sacrifice and it strengthens the tradition that inculcates courage and binds one to the logic of the nation. Thus, every great nationalist hero of ACK (Shivaji, for example) is fortified by the tale 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 *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* and sang devotional songs to his family. (3)

The point here is not simply to draw a parallel between Ambedkar and Shivaji (or any other hero/ heroine of ACK), but to suggest that such a narrative within the framework of ACK has a modulating effect on every act of protest by Ambedkar that came afterwards. We remain unshaken in our faith in Ambedkar’s allegiance to the foundation of the (uppercaste, Hindu) nation even when he asserts that: “I am born a Hindu. I could not help it. But I solemnly declare that I will not die a Hindu” (Pai, *Babasaheb* 27).

As a child, Ambedkar passively accepts injustice at each act of caste oppression that he suffers. He has to sit separately in the class and cannot drink water from the pot in the school unless someone pours out water for him. He is asked to get down from a bullock cart 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. Ambedkar asks his sister:
But why? What makes us different? (Pai, *Babasaheb 7*)

She replies:

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

Bhim was not satisfied with his sister’s answers. (Pai, *Babasaheb 7*)

Every act of injustice accelerates Ambedkar’s determined growth and confirms his basic humanity.

Ambedkar “found an oasis of warm affection for him in his Brahman teacher” (Pai, *Babasaheb 7*) who changed his name from Ambadvekar to Ambedkar. In the discourse of ACK, this serves a purpose. It is symbolically akin to the sacred thread ceremony of Dayananda where he distributed the sacred thread among the members of the lower-caste in an attempt to prove that brahmanism is potentially available category if only one sheds one’s ignorance. Ambedkar addresses a group of depressed classes and says:

It is time we root 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 is fought for. (Pai, *Babasaheb 20*)

The narrative shows how he studied till 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, where he would have to
save a sandwich from his breakfast for his lunch and so on. Upendra Baxi,
in “Emancipation as Justice,” alleges that in accounts of Ambedkar’s life,
struggles of the student-scholar have not been highlighted enough in the
ACK narrative (140).

The focus of the chitrakatha is such that social inequalities are
represented as false consciousness and the onus is on the lower caste to
fight a battle within their own selves. Each outward struggle is also
presented as an extension of their inner battle rather than as a socially
subversive act. Surely there are external factors and antagonists -- the
priestly classes, caste prejudices, and superstitions. Yet, the major site of
strike is within the individual.

In an incident where Ambedkar leads a crowd of the “depressed
classes” to the municipality tank of Mahad, which has been legally open
for four years and has never been used by the people of the lower castes,
the crowd followed Ambedkar hesitantly (“Draw water from the tank? Do
we dare to do it?” (Pai, Babasaheb 21)). By one act of courage, drinking
water from the tank with his cupped hands Ambedkar makes a “miracle”
happen:
This gesture had a remarkable effect. Ambedkar had exorcised fear from the mind of his people. Thousands drank water from the public tanks and made history. (Pai, Babasaheb 21)

The incident highlights not only a remarkable victory of the individual self but also poses an interesting opposition between civil societal equality (the public tank being open to all) and vestiges of the primitive that taint the society. Incensed at being stoned by upper-caste Hindus for drinking water from the public tanks, Ambedkar’s followers say to him:

Give us word, Sir, and we shall finish them (Pai, Babasaheb 22).

Ambedkar replies:

No violence will help. We’ll do nothing unlawful. I have given my word that we will agitate peacefully. (22)

The narrative further informs us that Ambedkar had promised the police that he would keep his people under control and thus “he prevented a bloodbath” (Pai, Babasaheb 22).

However ACK remains silent on Ambedkar’s hostile attitude towards Gandhi and his Harijan Sevak Sangh, which according to Ambedkar “kill[s] the spirit of independence among the untouchables” (Ambedkar 267) and also on his stance at the Round Table Conferences, where he anxiously and repetitively presses the point that the depressed
classes do not demand the immediate transfer of political power from
Britain to the Indian people (Srivatsan 19).

In *Babasaheb Ambedkar* the narrative presents the voicing of those
separate grievances as a clause or a suffix to the nationalist demand for
freedom:

Thank the Depressed classes of India also join in the demand for
replacement of the British government by a government of the
people for the people. . . our wrongs have remained as open
sores and they have not been rightened although 150 years of
British rule have rolled away. What good is such a government
to anybody. (Pai, *Babasaheb* 24)

Also significant is Gandhi’s stamp of approval:

From the reports that have reached me of your speeches at the
First Round Table Conferences, I know you are a patriot of
sterling worth. (Pai, *Babasaheb* 24)

In a way, it is through the establishment of Ambedkar’s patriotic
credentials that the narrative prepares us for his demand for a separate
electorate. When the reader finally encounters this demand, its
oppositional force is subordinate to the unquestionable patriotism of
Ambedkar. ACK on Ambedkar, however, remains silent on his extremely
critical stands on Gandhi in this issue, his methods of spiritual coercion, and how Gandhi fasted to make Ambedkar withdraw his demands.

Ambedkar of ACK emerges as the nationalist leader, the individualist par excellence. As his unique and unyielding selfhood is magnified, there is simultaneous reinforcement of the category of citizenship to the exclusion of all other categories (caste, community or gender). The struggles of Ambedkar’s life are also represented as the battle for the modern nation which can be only be “corrupted” by caste-- whether it is 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 much less final and more fraught 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. (30).

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar

ACK release titled *Veer Savarkar: In the Andamans* provides a perplexing history of a nationalist hero, Savarkar-- the author of *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (1923)-- a basic text for nationalist “Hinduness.” This text consisted of an appeal to consolidate Hindutva in the 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 charged the national space with the ethical nuance of 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. (qtd. in Jaffrelot 28)

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

A crucial marker of Savarkar’s discourse was the image of the perpetually lustful Muslim male who posed a serious threat to the honour of the Hindu woman and consequently to the honour of the Hindu community, Tanika Sarkar says:

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. (185)

The ACK series begins with Savarkar’s life in London. As a young anti-colonial revolutionary, Savarkar was arrested in England and imprisoned in the Andamans for eleven years, before going on to become a
leader of the Hindu right. Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, the founder of RSS was heavily influenced by Savarkar. The RSS aspired to become the torchbearer of martial, organised and rational Hinduism, denuded of its pagan rituals and forms of folk worship. Ashis Nandy and others regard this as an attempt to marginalise the little cultures of Hinduism, which were non-masculine and non-brahmanic (65).

While the RSS was conceived primarily as an organisation that would introduce and spread egalitarianism in the Hindu Rashtra, its leaders continued to base their notion of an ideal society as one that was founded upon the varna system. They also propagated an ideal 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” (qtd. in Jaffrelot 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 minus any citizen’s rights (Jaffrelot 57).

Although in his earlier days Savarkar had been associated with socialist and antipartition activists, after his imprisonment Savarkar increasingly saw communalist Muslim organisations as the “enemy,” and his work with the Mahasabha earned him a position as an increasingly
right-wing, anti-Gandhian, and anti-Congress leader. He became a vocal proponent of a Hindu-centric state, and supported militaristic defense of “Hindu” interests in response to his perception of an increased threat from Muslims. His vehement anti-Gandhian speeches, deriding Gandhi as anti-national and anti-Hindu, were a source of inspiration to Nathuram Godse and the group of young militants who orchestrated Gandhi’s assassination.

Figure 5.1

All this, however, is not apparent in the ACK version of his life. The introduction to this series tells the readers that the text of this ACK has been drawn largely from Savarkar’s autobiography My Transportation for Life. In keeping with the issue’s subtitle, the volume devotes most of its
panels to Savarkar’s imprisonment in the cellular jail in the Andamans. The first few pages set Savarkar up as a strident young revolutionary, documenting his work in acquiring arms and training others in their use. The very first page shows Savarkar giving his associate a handgun that is concealed in a book (Figure. 5.1). The brief depiction of his life in England that follows then gives way to the narrative of incarceration. Most of the volume (pages 9-32) is entirely set within the prison where scenes of torture, abuse, suicide, and insanity abound-- something which does not ring quite true with Pai’s desire to protect “impressionable minds” from scenes of violence. Pai also dedicates a considerable number of pages to give an idea about the Andaman Islands and its inhabitants.

What surprises the readers most is that Pai dedicates only the last four frames to encapsulate Savarkar’s release (Figure. 5.2). His life and actions after his arrival in the mainland are not even mentioned. Only the final panel gives a hint about his subsequent political life, with a text against a tricolour background which reads “Savarkar took an active part in the struggle for freedom. He had the satisfaction of witnessing the tricolour unfurled on August 15, 1947” (Pai, Veer Savarkar 32). Nothing is mentioned of his work with the Mahasabha, his writing of Hindutva, his antagonistic relationship with Congress, or his eventual arrest, trial and acquittal on conspiracy charges regarding the assassination of Gandhi. It is interesting to note that his design for the Mahasabha flag, with the Hindu
Om symbol, swastika, and sword on a red background, which was his favoured choice over the Congress’s tri-colour is never shown and not a word is spoken about it in the series. Savarkar in a speech in 1939, states that he and his followers shall respect whatever flag is chosen freely by his countrymen as long as it is understood that his flag represents “Hindudom as a whole” (Mathur 84).

Figure 5.2

Padmini of Chittor

The legend of *Padmini of Chittor* (1973) forms a foundational myth of the Hindu nation. ACK’s *Padmini* can be read as an attempt to involve
the sacrifice of an “extra-ordinary” woman to rekindle in the memory of
the nation the threat of violation posed by the enemy within, namely the
Muslim. Padmini, the symbol of feminine heroism and spirituality,
demands the masculinisation of the self as a means to protect the purity of
the nation and its women. In the nationalist discourses of post-
Independence India, the partition of 1947 is marked as a national failure
and the Indian Muslim is permanently marked as the “Saboteurs of the
nation” suspected of extra-territorial loyalties (Sreenivas 187). The legend
of Padmini is instrumental in reawakening the subject-citizen to the
potential danger to one’s home, family and nation:

. . . the bardic legend of Padmini and Alauddin [Al-ud-din] . . .
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
experiences. Alauddin [Al-ud-din], apart from being an
archetype of the ruthless aggressors, also becomes an epitome of
a furiously libidinous Muslim. (Agarwal 35-36)

The formation of Pakistan through a partitioning of “Bharat” has been
a metaphor for the violation of the body of the pure Hindu woman. The rape
and abduction of Hindu women during the partition is regarded as a stigma upon national honour. Within the political ideology of the right this translates into a demand for greater vigilances on the part of the state so that the “rupture of the nation” is not repeated. As 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” (67). The front page of the RSS mouthpiece Organizer (Aug 14, 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. The call from the RSS in the aftermath of partition was to be alert against the “enemy within,” who did not share the nation’s great cultural and spiritual inheritance and who had his loyalties with Pakistan.

My effort will be to read the significance of Padmini in the context discussed above. To quote from its introduction:

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 Al-ud-din. But Padmini was not an ordinary woman. She faced her problems with exceptional
courage, a living example of victorious womanhood. (Pai, *Padmini* Inside front cover)

Al-ud-din Khilji is the “outsider” who threatens the values cherished by Padmini, which also stand for the normativity of the nation. The narrative depicts the clash between two value systems, one based on honour and purity and the other on greed and barbarism.

Padmini, the beautiful queen of Ratnasen, the ruler of Chittor, is coveted by the lascivious Al-ud-din. The representational strategies of the narrative render it eminently eligible to be read as the story of the great betrayal that haunts the post-partition national imaginary (Sreenivas 187). Al-ud-din, unable to gain entry militarily into the fortified Chittor, sends a message proclaiming himself as Padmini’s brother and the unsuspecting Ratnasen receives him with great honour. Al-ud-din enters the “sacred soil” of Chittor as a brother. ACK’s narration of this event is double-edged. It is a glorification of Hindu pacificism, which is contrasted with the Muslim ruler’s treachery and betrayal, and at the same time, it is a critique of the “tolerance” that weakens the nation. It is in a similar manner that post-partition Hindu nationalistic narratives laud and decry the Hindu’s nobility in the same breath. In the aftermath of the partition, the Hindu male’s tolerance is reexamined in the light of the “dishonour” wrought upon Hindu women through abduction and rape by the Muslim “traitors.” In
Butalia’s words: “It is also the tolerance-- hitherto important-- which has rendered the Hindu male incapable of protecting women.” She quotes from the *Organizer* to support her point:

> . . . while other people take pride in savage campaigns launched by their ancestors for enslavement, exploitation and forcible proselytisation 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 civilisation was felt far and wide. (Qtd. in Sreenivas 188)

In the late 1960s and 1970s this critique of the Nehruvian state’s “appeasement policies” towards the Muslim minority is renewed. These “concessions” are seen as giving impetus and encouragement to anti-nationalist parties like the Muslim league, Jamaat-i-Islami and Itehad-ul-Musalmeen that are accused of fostering “communal chauvinism” and pro-Pakistan loyalties.

Read against this backdrop, Al-ud-din’s arrogant rhetoric to the betrayed Ratnasen serves as a pointer to the misplaced faith that leaves one’s women and one’s nation vulnerable to the enemy:

> Keep your nobility to yourself. Now I shall have Padmini with your cooperation. (Pai, *Padmini* 22)
Despite his nobility and high ideals, King Ratnasen emerges as a weak character. 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* by entering the fire along with other Rajput women in order to escape dishonour. As she says:

No sacrifice is too big to save one’s honour! (Pai, *Padmini* 22)

Padmini, in the nationalist imagination, becomes the symbol of great sacrifice and exceptional heroism but more than anything else, she is the rallying cry for greater vigilance on part of the upper caste Hindu male. The memory of her sacrifice is meant to incite him into action to protect the “threatened” nation and prove himself adequate to challenge of its citizenship. As Kumkum Sangari writes about such incitement of male honour through the voice (or, in this case, the memory) of a woman:

. . . there 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 woman 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. (877).

Those who do not share the collective memory of Padmini’s sacrifice are rendered the other of the nation. Citizenship, for the Indian who is a Muslim, becomes an “impossible” institution. The bewildered reaction of Al-ud-din to Padmini’s *Jauhar* forms the significant final panel of the narrative. He asks Raghav Chetan, a traitor from Ratnasen’s court:

But why did they kill themselves? (Pai. *Padmini* 32)

Raghav Chetan’s reply proves revealing:

Your Majesty! You will never understand. (Pai. *Padmini* 32)

Through this narrative move, Padmini places not only Al-ud-din but also Muslim women (and by extension lower caste women and feminists) outside the orbit of the nation. Al-ud-din does not understand the logic of Padmini’s sacrifice because he has never witnessed a similar code of honour among his own women. The chastity of a woman, so naturally and unquestionably supreme within the value system of a Rajput like Ratnasen, is an alien concept to Al-ud-din. Images of the voluptuous women in various poses of debauchery and servility surrounding Khilji bear testimony to this. As the virtue of the upper-caste Hindu women becomes the norm of the nation, other women are banished from the domain of
“ideal Indian womanhood” which would justify their rights over their bodies and foreground their alternative identities.

**Jawaharlal Nehru: The Early Days**

A discussion of *Jawaharlal Nehru: The Early Days* (1991) -- the last regular title published in the ACK series, may well serve as a conclusion to this chapter as well. Though the ACK series is subtitled *The Early Days*, there have been no volumes of “later days” yet released. *Nehru* is structurally, visually, and narratively one of ACK’s strangest contributions to comic book biography. It also has the dubious distinction of being the shortest volume in the list of ACK biographies. Nehru was, of course, the first Prime Minister of India. His career was not, to put it lightly, without controversy, but he is certainly a significant historical figure.

This chitrakatha resonates with many of the central ideological themes of ACK that I have tried to investigate in this thesis-- individuality, masculinity, merit, national culture, global identity and so on. During the late sixties, Anant Pai created ACK to configure a fresh national modernity that would establish and authorise its connection with the “unbroken heritage” of India. Such modernity, he thought, would prepare middle-class youth to take on their central role in the nation. Throughout my argument, I have tried to posit that Nehruvian socialism and the developmental state are a kind of hidden counterpoint to the narratives of ACK.
This volume on the life of Nehru does little to describe, or even contextualise, the story of his political life. In the strangely proportioned narrative of the series, Nehru is not even born until the fifth page. Most of the panels in the volume are used to describe Nehru’s early childhood and college education and to show the grandeur of his palace and the degree to which Motilal’s family was “anglicised.” In a panel Nehru poses with a bicycle, as the caption reads: “Jawaharlal was brought up in a lavish, westernized lifestyle” (Pai, Jawaharlal 5). There are several images of a young Nehru in school uniform. This also suggests how western education was received by the Nehru’s. In those times only a few could attend schools. The images in other panels show a young Nehru riding a pony, playing with toy soldiers, and so on.

It is worth mentioning that the narrative in this chitrakatha ends 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 to provide a showcase for Nehru’s privileged upbringing and elite educational background in a mode that addresses the urban middle classes and emphasises their role in disseminating national modernity among the masses.

ACK manages to establish a firmer connection between the figure of Nehru and the making of a global identity in the contemporary right-wing
context, subtly. In contrast with the volume depicting other political figures like Dayananda, Savarkar, and Jayaprakash Narayan, the protagonists are often illustrated as studiously learning Hindu scriptures as children. The volume seems to bring out Nehru’s interest in western philosophy and education. In one of the frames Nehru is pictured turning down an invitation from a clearly much darker skinned young boy, in favour of attending a theosophist study group. When the boy asks him to explain, Nehru responds, “Ah! You won’t understand” (Pai, Jawaharlal 9). (Figure.5.3) This illustration seems to echo the Hindu nationalist perspective of Nehru as class and caste privileged, and as too much engaged with the British. 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, Jawaharlal Introduction) His ancestry is detailed in such a way as to evoke the admiration of the young upper-caste, middle-class reader.

The early years of Nehru are projected as formative of his leadership potential and his future role as a “man of destiny” (Pai, Jawaharlal 29). At the beginning of the narrative, the reader is familiarised with 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. While Nehru’s aristocratic lineage is impressed upon
the reader, s/he also accepts the “natural” standing of a brahman scholar in society and the flexibility of movement that his “knowledge” grants him.

Figure 5.3

There is another incident narrated in Nehru’s autobiography that finds a prominent place in the chitrakatha devoted to him. 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 stopped 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. So convinced are they that they refuse to pay heed to the brother’s protest that “We Kashmiris also have such fair
skins” (Pai, Jawaharlal 2) till some passers-by recognising the brother-
sister duo and save the situation. One might look at the recounting of this
incident as a mere anecdote and yet it establishes the racial superiority of
the Nehru clan, the fair skin being a measure of one’s Aryan descent.

While the narrative establishes Nehru’s non-plebeian credentials at
the very beginning through descriptions of his lineage, his “modern”
upbringing and schooling equally help in carving out his persona as the
future leader of the nation. From the beginning 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. The narrative
informs us:

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, Jawaharlal 10)

It can be said that in the context of ACK in particular, and the hegemonic
cultural representation of the globalization era in general that the
fashioning of Nehru’s character through the simultaneous influence of the
spiritual and the material has great significance.
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 will 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 as held by Manjari Katju in *The Early Vishwa Hindu Parishad: 1964 to 1983*. 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. While the VHP was concerned with defending, protecting and preserving Hindu society from the “insidiously spreading clutches of alien ideologies,” the context of modern times was not absent from its thoughts (qtd. in Katju 37).

The ACK narrative carefully maps out a ground on which the ideologies of the secularists and the Vedantic spiritualism of Hindu nationalists meet without conflict. It is also crucial that by doing so it appropriates the international aura of Nehru’s persona into the project of building a modern nation with cultural authority. In the context of the
1990s, the middle class support for Hindutva stemmed less from any devotion to Rama than from a desire for modernity and equality with other nations of the world (Hansen 27). It is significant that leaders like L. K. Advani who publicly announced that he was irreligious and never went to temples spearheaded the Ramjanmabhumi movement. As indicated earlier, Rama, in the context of Hindu nationalism, becomes the symbol of the truly tolerant and secular nation. In an interview with Anant Pai, Deepa Sreenivas notes that Pai never went to a temple to take care of his wife’s sandals (which she would have to leave outside). He added:

But then I don’t mind anybody going to the temple. I want the freedom of thought and expression. Whereas [among] Muslims, it is considered his duty to kill a person who believes in idolatry. [There is] no other religion which enjoins upon you to war and to kill. So you see in the 21st century . . . because education will not make a difference to this thing [sic]. What Ashok Singhal [and other leaders of VHP] is doing is a reaction to this kind of fanaticism. (Sreenivas 217)

However, Pai is also quick to distance himself from Singhal in a mode that reveals to us his affinity with a secularism that is akin to Nehru’s:

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. 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 [sic].

(Sreenivas 218)

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 context of India, would have to be defined in opposition to lower-caste masculinity and Muslim masculinity. In a way, 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.

_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, _Jawaharlal_ 29). The narrative, leading us through
Nehru’s distinguished background and schooling, comes to a smooth and natural closure at the end of the title:

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. (Pai, Jawaharlal 29)

The above concluding lines of the chitrakatha sum up the nature of elite responsibility towards the masses-- one that could be visualized within the framework of a liberal education (that is underscored by merit) and “ordered” forms of political action that preclude subaltern initiatives.
Notes

1  There is a great deal of confusion around the way in which *Jati* and *Varna* have been translated variously as caste and race. *Jati* refers to an endogamous system of social hierarchy which is often referred to as caste. *Varna* generally refers to the four major “caste” groups: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Sudra. “Untouchables,” or Dalits, fall below the lowest group. The word *caste* is frequently translated in both ways, as is *race*. This leads to a great deal of ambiguity among western scholars about the exact meaning of proposals such as Dayananda’s. Also see S. Sarkar, *Indian Nationalism and the Politics of Hindutva*.