Chapter V

Conclusion

A discussion of Jawaharlal Nehru (1991), which is the last regular title published in the ACK series, may well serve as a conclusion to this dissertation as well. This is a chitrakatha that resonates with many of the central ideological themes of ACK that I have tried to investigate in my thesis – individuality, masculinity, merit, national culture, global identity and so on. During the late sixties, Anant Pai had created ACK to configure afresh a national modernity, that would be underwritten and authorized by its connection with the “unbroken heritage” of India. Such a 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 ACK narratives. Yet, in its last issue, ACK pays tribute to its ubiquitous, if unmentioned, antagonist, Jawaharlal Nehru. How does the chitrakatha deal with this figure?

Jawaharlal Nehru: The Early Days (1991)

It is worth noting 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 emphasizes their role in disseminating national modernity among the masses.

The account of Nehru’s early life is chiefly adapted from his autobiography. Yet the representation in ACK manages certain subtle translations which establish a firmer connection between its figure of Nehru and the making of a global identity in the
contemporary right-wing context. The move to hegemonize a distinctive “Indian” identity in the global arena also justifies the selection of Jawaharlal Nehru as the final title of the ACK series:

I am proud of that great inheritance that has been and is ours and I am confident that I too, like all of us, am a link in that unbroken chain which goes back to the dawn of history in the immemorial past of India. That chain I would not break, for I treasure it and seek inspiration from it.

(Cited in Jawaharlal Nehru, Introduction)

These words of Jawaharlal Nehru, extracted from his will, provide the rationale for the selection of Nehru as a sort of finale for a series that has retold many a tale from Indian mythology, legend, history and folklore. I may remind the reader of Pai’s anguish at discovering that the students of St. Stephen’s College were unable to answer certain simple questions of Hindu mythology. This, of course, led to the creation of the ACK series to teach such youth the “route to their roots”. Through the representation of Nehru, Pai foregrounds the image of the “truly” modern and culturally bipedal youth that qualify for the leadership of the nation in the globalization era:

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

The early years of Nehru are projected as formative of his leadership potential and his future role as a “man of destiny” (29). My analysis will seek to explore the manner in which the narrative celebrates the modernity and cultural urbanity of Nehru’s childhood and youth, one that would make him the “leader of the masses”. Let me begin with
Nehru's ancestry. At the beginning of the narrative, the reader is familiarized 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 brahmin scholar in society and the flexibility of movement that his "knowledge" grants him.

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" (2) till some passers-by recognize 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.

Nehru's ancestry is detailed in such a way so as to evoke the admiration of the young uppercaste middle class reader. The representation does not speak of caste in any crude manner whatsoever but merely etches out the portrait of a family that is beautiful, noble and respected down the generations, one that can make possible the production of such a hero as Nehru.
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 Jawahar’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 Westernized section of the house dominated by Motilal, and the traditional Hindu part ruled over by the women. (10)

It can be said that in the context of ACK in particular, and the hegemonic cultural representation of the globalization era in general, the fashioning of Jawaharlal’s character through the simultaneous influence of the spiritual and the material has great significance. The impact of religion on his life is one that enhances both his rational modernity and cultural rootedness. If we think about this in the context of the 80s and 90s, we begin to see its connection with the urban middle class emphasis on personality development, success and a this-worldly ethic. Religion, as we have seen in the fourth chapter, provides an identitarian fullness leading to cultural empowerment in the global context for the urban middle class and the non-resident Indians. Religion is that which enhances the modern Hindu identity in opposition to the pre-modern forces of the nation. Thus the narrative endorses Motilal Nehru’s stubborn refusal to bow to the pressures from his orthodox community and undergo the purification ceremony after his return from England. Yet each religious festival is celebrated in his household, “be it Holi,
Diwali, Id or Janmashtami” (7). Every year, on the day of Id, the young Jawahar goes to the home of Munshi Mubarak Ali, the head of staff of servants, to partake in the special delicacies.

I suggest that the 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. Since I have tried to project ACK as a right-wing narrative, I would like to dwell briefly on the continuities between Nehru (the “model secularist”) and the right-wing ideology as it is charted out in Jawaharlal Nehru. In the context of the 90s, 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 174). It is significant that the Ramjanmabhumi movement was spearheaded by leaders like L.K. Advani who publicly announced that he was irreligious and never went to temples. As I have indicated earlier, Rama, in the context of Hindu nationalism, becomes the symbol of the truly tolerant and secular nation. During an interview with me Anant Pai said that he never went to a temple unless to take care of his wife’s chappals (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 this Ashok Singhal etc [of VHP] etc are doing is a reaction to this kind of fanaticism. (22 November 1999)

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. (ibid.)

But Pai's secularism also involves a critique of Nehru's. Quoting from Sanskrit *shlokas*, he told me that while one should not tell an unpleasant truth, "just to please someone don't tell an untruth also" (ibid.).

Fatehali Devji comments that "the language of disease underscores the derivative discourse of "secular" Indian nationalism in that its (communal) difficulties are viewed as unnatural departures from a universal/European ideal. Therefore the Muslim problem is created as the Asiatic failure of nationalism's enlightenment project... a failure which entails the very possibility of a nationalist coercion" (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. Given that even within the framework of secularism, the alternative identitarian politics of the Muslim (such as the refusal to be ruled by the Uniform Civil Code) does not constitute a rational political choice but becomes a subversion of the enlightenment project of the nation, a bridge
becomes possible between the ideology of the secularists and that of the Hindu nationalists.

ACK’s narrative positions itself in that consensual meeting ground between the catholicity of Nehru’s background or his secular training and the Hindu nationalist rhetoric of modernity in the globalization years. Munshi Mubarak Ali, who Nehru mentions in his autobiography, is not an alien figure in the discourse of ACK. We have already met this figure in my analysis of Dayananda. He reappears in every second chitrakatha — kindly, diffident towards the superior morality of the Hindu protagonist and pious in a non-threatening way. The modern nation seeks to weed out the Khiljis and the Aurangzebs but its image is also dependent upon the inclusion of the “docile” Muslims. 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).

Depiction of Nehru’s childhood and schooling is meant to strike a deep chord among the urban middle class readership of ACK. Notably, he is introduced to the Gita by his European tutor, Mr. Brooks, who also helps him to cultivate a love for books (some of his favourites being The Prisoner of Zenda, Don Quixote and Three Men in A Boat). The Gita, as it is translated into English by Brooks, appeals to Jawahar (as do the various western classics that he devours) but his Sanskrit teacher Pandit Ganganath Jha “did not have much success with his young student” (12). A panel depicts the traditional brahmin teacher trying to teach his student by rote:

       Now repeat after me, aham gachchami .... (12)

We then gain access to the mind of his stiff and rather tortured-looking student:
How boring! I will never be able to learn this. (12)

Jawaharlal’s derisive attitude towards the Pandit’s teaching is actually in striking contrast to his eager learning of the Gita in English from his English teacher. While in his autobiography Nehru explains this as a consequence of his inability to learn languages, the representation in ACK adds a comical dimension to the Pandit. It seems to me that the figure of Mr. Brooks is similar to Chinmayananda in terms of the appeal he holds for the urbane Nehru. “His lessons with Brooks were a total contrast” (12). The Pandit, on the other hand, loses out, both because of his incomprehensible language and his outmoded ways of teaching. This incident highlights the connection between education and rational religion for the globalizing Hindu middle classes. Brooks’ teaching of the Gita is not an anachronism; it fits well with Nehru’s reading of the western classics and carrying out experiments in a laboratory to discover scientific facts for himself. In a way, it is Jawaharlal’s training under Brooks that anticipates his entry into the hallowed portals of Harrow and then, Cambridge.

The depiction of Jawaharlal’s tenure at Harrow begins with the reproduction of an excerpt from a letter received by him from his father:

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

By quoting from this letter the narrative brings in sharp focus as well as endorses the formative role of the Public School in Jawaharlal’s life. I had earlier tried to establish the masculinity-making pedagogic roles adopted by the religious gurus of ACK. These gurus
are shown to be instrumental in preparing the pupil to take up the leadership of the nation and defend the hegemonic balance of society. It may not be off the mark to say that in 1991, the public school, as it appears in ACK, fits in as easily into the worldview of the globalizing Hindu middle class as did someone like Swami Chinmayananda. In both cases the emphasis is on a superior masculinity that is to be cultivated through the development of a healthy body and sound mind. This masculinity, in the 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. Speaking of the role of sports in public schools in the Victorian age, Nigel Townson (1997) asserts that the underlying belief was that exercise was character-forming, and promoted a manliness that was not to be confused with sexuality. In fact, it was meant to arrest the precocious development of adult male sexuality by providing a new moral and physical definition of masculinity. It is natural then that the ideological underpinnings of the public school holds an allure for the nationalist project which aims to train the uppercaste Hindu male through a channeling of physical energy in order to mould him in opposition to the “unbridled sexuality” of the Muslim or the “crass materialism” of the West.

It is Jawaharlal’s performance at Harrow (a combination of academic and sporting success) which is definitely celebrated in a mode that also heralds his future role as a leader. Proclaimed by one of his teachers as a “thoroughly good fellow” (17), we catch glimpses of his character through the eyes of his teachers. A letter, written thirty-five
years later by his housemaster, is reproduced in ACK to establish a continuum between his behaviour 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. (18)

The letter confirms the role of the public school as a site that produces responsible members of the society and disciplined masculinity. It is possible to read ACK's eulogization of the public school notion of merit and excellence (that shaped Nehru's greatness) against the backdrop of the anti-Mandal agitations of the early 1990s which swept the country. During these agitations children of the affluent administrative class and obviously products of elite schools polished shoes to protest against the policy of reservation in jobs for the lower castes. It is indeed ironic that in ACK, it is the architect of socialist India who provides the legitimation for the notion of merit that holds 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 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" (29). The narrative, leading us through Jawahar'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. (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. As Partha Chatterjee puts it:

It was ‘responsibility’ that was the feeling which determined the attitude
of the new nationalist leadership towards the peasantry. This feeling of
responsibility was not self-consciously paternalistic, for that was the
attitude, condescending and inherently insulting, of the hated British
administrator. Rather it was mediated by a whole series of concepts,
scientific and theoretical, about politics and the state, about the principles
of political organization, about relations between leaders and the masses in
political movements, about strategies and tactics. The masses had to be
‘represented’; the leaders must therefore learn to ‘act on their behalf’ and
‘in their true interests’. (Chatterjee 1986, 148)

Jawaharlal Nehru: The Early Days, I would say, is an acknowledgement of Nehru’s
centrality in the discourse of modernity in post-colonial India. But it is also a
reconfiguring of that modernity as the accent rests on the elite upbringing and schooling
of Nehru’s early days which “prepare” him for his role as the “leader of the masses”. The
narrative of Nehru’s life, uninterrupted by his socialism, mirrors and legitimizes the
hegemony of the uppercaste middle class (youth) in the 1990s – bright, charismatic,
global and qualified to lead their nation to modernity. Way back in 1969, Pai was
disappointed by the lack of knowledge about “India’s heritage” displayed by the students
of St. Stephen’s College. ACK’s commitment was to create a generation of youngsters
who would not be “handicapped” by such a “lack”. Through Jawaharlal Nehru, ACK
confidently endorses the arrival of that generation – equally empowered by their
“national” and global identities.

I have tried to demonstrate through this study of ACK, that children’s literature
has an important place at the very forefront of cultural politics. Over a period of two
decades ACK has sought to train middle class children to grow up as “ideal” citizens. We
know that it was a well-thought out initiative by its editor Anant Pai at a historical
moment when the “singularity” of the nation was being challenged by various
marginalized sections. It addressed a disgruntled younger generation that was losing its
faith in “tradition”. It also endeavoured to re-invigorate the westernized middle class
youth that was disinterested in its cultural “roots” and thus, was in danger of losing its
(future) claim to the moral-political leadership of the nation. ACK has contributed in a
major way to the formation of notions of “Indianness” that hold sway over the dominant
cultural imaginary today. It has also lent ethical conviction to the values of a globalizing
middle class that places premium on the “individual” as against the welfarist
commitments of the post-independence state.

It may look comical in retrospect but I, as a teenager, could read the books by
James Hadley Chase and Harold Robbins only on the sly (literally between the covers of
ACK) because my parents thought that those would “corrupt” me at an “impressionable” age. But, ironically, when we closely examine the dynamics of texts like ACK, designed specifically for children, we perceive how ideologically charged its “innocence” is.

ACK shows that popular culture is the crucial site where the contest for hegemony takes place. It draws our attention to the pedagogic effectiveness of history as popular culture. Pai held data-driven history in contempt and thus, designed ACK as chitrakatha – borrowing the colour and the allure of that genre. History, in ACK, emerges as an actor in the politics of the present. It hegemonizes dominant ideas of the modern and the pre-modern, the secular Self and the bigoted Other.

ACK draws attention to the investments of gender in the making of an individualist ideology. Its “masculine ideal” serves as an ethical demand on women, lower castes and other marginalized sections to “uplift” and “improve” themselves through their “inner strength” and “perseverance”. For instance, as I have pointed out in Chapter III, ACK’s individualist ideology would seem to require a “masculinization” on part of women so that they compete with men on “equal” terms instead of demanding “concessions” on the basis of their gender. Simultaneously, it posits an “ideal Indian womanhood” as represented by the figures of Sita, Vasavadatta or Padmini. These women, in terms of their sexuality and their agency, do not overstep the boundaries of uppercaste “honour”. In many ways, ACK’s balancing of the indomitable self and ideal womanhood fits in with the current hegemonic representations of women who are achievers yet home-makers. To give an example, the July 2000 issue of the upmarket women’s magazine Savvy recounts the corporate success of the U.S. based Punita Sinha.
In the same issue, a comment on Sinha, made by Sushma Swaraj, herself an articulate and efficient leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), is indeed striking:

At work I have seen Punita dressed in Western outfits, appearing like a westerner. In India, in her in-law’s place, she is dressed traditionally befitting the bahu of a conservative Indian household. I admire her for combining these two roles so effortlessly....She projects to the world the image of the new Indian woman – educated, accomplished and a high achiever professionally as against the common western view that Indian women are battered, abused and dominated by men. (17)

Today, many of those who are modern, uppercaste, middle class and Hindu might be embarrassed by and indignant at the “saffronization” of education. Yet those very people would be proud to display the bound volumes of ACK in their bookcases. What is it about ACK then that separates it from our notions of religious fanaticism and bigotry? This dissertation has been a small step in the direction of understanding ACK’s implication in our modernity and indeed our very identities as middle class individuals.

Note
1 See Partha Chatterjee’s ‘Secularism and Toleration’ in A Possible India.