

RAHULA SANKRITYAYAN'S JOURNEYS OF THE SELF: NATION, CULTURE, IDENTITY

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The 'self' has been an object of enquiry in the east and west since the inception of philosophy. Certain forms of literature add a phenomenological urgency to the enquiry, autobiography being the most obvious one of them. As a genre, autobiography brings into focus issues of identity and selfhood in its philosophical and historical dimensions. That this genre has enjoyed greater popularity in India only since the 19th century is an interesting sociological fact that requires a separate discussion. Since the 20th century, however, the genre has gained popularity globally and provides a rich cross-cultural corpus for theoretical analysis.

Arguably, certain historical moments provide richer soil for studying the already complex set of thematic concerns that autobiography highlights. While the genre's popularity with the hitherto marginalized, especially dalit and women writers in the 19th and 20th century, has been well-studied, my project focuses on autobiographies of some public individuals in early 20th century in India, to analyse how the genre becomes a site for the articulation of identities individual and collective. The period is one of social transition and political turmoil, when the familiar tensions between tradition and modernity, the native and the foreign, the local and the universal acquire piquancy due to the urgencies of the anti-colonial movement and nascent and conflicting versions of nationalism. Progressive agendas that look westwards collide with nativism and cultural revival,

both working towards a shared anti-colonial agenda. In the process the categories of 'east' and 'west', of native and foreign, authentic and derivative, are evoked, defined, debated, and contested. As they write their life-stories, these individuals locate themselves and help create a vocabulary of the self, while also establishing a relationship with an audience and helping define key issues that are of continued relevance in post-independence India.

The most dominant, certainly the most debated, theoretical formation within this context would arguably be that of the nation, the terms of its definition being contested on the grounds of locality—defined as language, geography, gender or a sense of the past. These contestations could take the form of rigid binaries, between the inner and outer domains, the home and the world, the male or female spheres of experience, and the indigenous or the 'imported'— in language, attire, spatial habitations, or philosophical premises. Within this binary schema, often summed up as the east-west divide, academic ventures into roads less traveled help us discern voices of great complexity. Rahula Sankrityayan's is one such voice, challenging questions of self and location in multiple domains.

Using his short but eloquent 'treatise for travelers', *Ghumakkar Shastra*, and treating this as analogous to his longer autobiographical narrative, *Meri Jeevan Yatra* (originally published in five volumes), this paper attempts to 'locate' Rahula Sankrityayan in his time and ours. His drive for self-definition, traced in detail in his life story, coincides with a powerful and focused proselytising drive for social change, shaping the dynamics of the public and the private. In his writings, the individual self as an object of observation, analysis and alteration, in keeping with a constantly evolving worldview, takes shape within a context of multiple and shifting affiliations to collectivities and communities. These include the family, religious communities, scholarly affiliations, anti-colonial political groupings, local/provincial/

regional locations articulated in terms of issues of language, all moving towards a humanism that seeks to transcend borders, geographical and discursive, even as it is richly 'local'. This polymath's life and the writing of it often juxtaposes mutually warring ideological stances and locations which sometimes get resolved in linear, teleological narratives of 'growth', and at other times, in unresolved tensions.

Locating Sankrityayan's life in the context of debates then dominant in the public domain opens up crucial questions of how an 'Indian' identity may be conceptualized. His multihued life is an enriching and somewhat unique motif in the tapestry that is India at this point. Given its range and variety, a brief biographical sketch is illuminating and necessary, as his unusual life trajectory shapes the discussion.

The Many Lives of Rahul Sankrityayan

April 9, 1893—April 15, 1963; within this almost-too-neat 70-year span, Rahul Sankrityayan lived many lives. He traveled indefatigably, wrote incessantly, changed his name thrice, and with it and beyond it, his ideological affiliations, and left behind him an enormous archive of writing that is rarely done full justice to in any one academic department. His life and work crosses a range of spatial boundaries—linguistic, disciplinary, religious, ideological—that defy easy classification. A quick recapitulation of his travels—using the word in the fullest sense of the term—indicates the analytical challenge that he poses. I will then draw upon two texts, his autobiography, *Meri Jeevan Yatra*, and his treatise on travelers, *Ghumakkar Shastra*, to bring the focus to the theme of travel as fact and metaphor.

Born Kedarnath Pandey to an orthodox Brahmin family in Azamgarh village in the state of Uttar Pradesh, he became a Hindu *sadhu* and adopted the name Baba Ram Udaar Das in 1913 at the age of 10. But the company of *sadhuis* turned him into a bitter critic of orthodoxy. By 1930, he had earned

the title and name that he died with and is known by, Mahapandit Tripitakacharya Rahul Sankrityayan. This name and title is itself a testimony to the distance he had traveled, since no part of it was his by birth. While his titles 'Mahapandita' and 'Tripitakacharya' indicated his mastery of Sanskrit and Pali texts, the first name 'Rahul' was chosen for its Buddhist antecedents (being the name of Prince Siddhartha Gautama's son) and 'Sankrityayan' was created out of the name of the 'gotra' (caste lineage) that his family belonged to. This name, of his own invention (Buddhist and residually Brahmanical in its inclusion of the caste category), bears the traces of all but the last and most powerful ideological phase in his life: the Marxist.

The Buddhist phase had begun with his growing distance from the Hindu reformist movement Arya Samaj, of which he was a fervent young exponent between 1914 and 1915, during which he was required to study Buddhism along with other heterodox schools of philosophy in order to counter their premises, as was the practice amongst Arya Samajis. Having already left home to start his regular travels by the year 1910, at the age of 17, it was during his visit to Nepal in 1923, followed by one to Sri Lanka in 1927, that he systematically studied Buddhism, acquiring the degrees and titles mentioned earlier. Having Urdu, Hindi, Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian and of course his native Bhojpuri already at his command, he had by now acquired a knowledge of Pali, Singhalese and Tibetan. He traveled to Tibet four times disguised as a lama by the assumed name of Chhewang, affecting madness and mendicancy to save himself from the double hazard of ruthless local bandits and the British Police, and brought back with him over 1600 Buddhist manuscripts and texts on mules, translating some of them along the way. He also visited Europe as a Buddhist missionary in 1932, during which period he declined an invitation to travel to America in the same role.

Rahula Sankrityayan's Socialist phase began in 1935,

coinciding with his visit to the USSR, where he was invited to teach Buddhist philosophy at Leningrad University by the legendary Professor Tscherbatsky, the noted Russian scholar of Buddhist logic, who held Sankrityayan in high esteem for his scholarship and mastery of his subject. He used the time well by learning the Mongolian and Russian languages. In 1937, 1944 and 1962, he revisited the USSR, the last time tragically for treatment for amnesia. In between, he returned to and traveled extensively in India, participating actively in the nationalist movement, especially in the Kisan Sabha and the Indian National Congress. His nationalist political involvement earned him many friendships and associations as well as several jail terms, which he effectively utilized to further his education and produce much of his voluminous oeuvre.

In 1939, he became a member of the Communist Party of India and remained one for nine years before having his membership revoked in 1948 for his controversial defense of the claims of Hindi, a position that was perceived to be partisan and majoritarian by fellow comrades in the increasingly communal debates around the espousal of Hindi as a national language. He rejoined the party in 1955, continuing his allegiance though focussing the last phase of his life on Buddhist teaching and scholarship. He finally settled in Darjeeling, where he passed away in 1963, the last few years of his active life rendered tragic due to a debilitating amnesia, ironic in a man who, by the time of his death, knew around 34 languages, and had written extensively, largely from memory, in at least three.

This quick sketch captures precious little indeed of Rahula Sankrityayan's significance, which can be gauged somewhat better by the variety and volume of the written and translated work he left behind in Hindi, Bhojpuri and Tibetan (he chose not to use English). These range from nine novels, four collections of short stories, an autobiography published originally in five volumes, fifteen

biographies of religious and political leaders, ranging from Vir Chandrasingh Garhwali to Mao-Tse-Tung, Stalin to Mahamanav Buddha, twelve travelogues of travels across Asia and Europe, with many through remote Himalayan states, seven collections of essays, ten translated books, and several little booklets on science, sociology, politics, philosophy, religion, and folklore in Hindi alone. In addition, there are three primers on the Tibetan language, two Bhojpuri plays, and last, but certainly not the least, fifteen volumes of classical Buddhist texts that he researched, edited, and translated.

These writings, and the life of the writer, testify to a capacity for and commitment to translation in the most basic sense of that word. One dictionary meaning of translation is 'to carry across', to transport. Sankrityayan the traveler not only transported those rare Buddhist scriptures to India physically, he also lived up to the title of translator in the more mundane sense of the term. But to carry the metaphor further, he was a translator of himself—traveling across worlds, and then translating that corpus of knowledge and experience ranging from the arcane and philosophical to the folk and everyday, into his writings for the benefit of his countrymen and women, in keeping with an ideological commitment to democratizing knowledge. This powerful sense of affiliation to the land of his birth, its civilisational depth and variety as well as its social and political future, is evidenced in his life and work. The specific contours of his journeying, the various rites of passage that go into the making of this persona whose unusual trajectory carries reverberations that are both personal and political, individual and national, bear closer analysis.

Genealogies:

Tracing the roots of Sankrityayan's self-construction, in life and writing, involves taking a route via philosophy and history. Locating him within the specific history of India, especially that of the dominant public discourses at this time in India,

requires an engagement with the debates on nationalism and its varied genealogies. Indian nationalism drew upon a rich and often bewildering mix of traditions, with Gandhi's being a case of particular complexity where ideas and inputs from his own travels, physical and mental, had resulted in an attempted synthesis of east and west, tradition and modernity, continuity and change. Gandhi's deft maneuverings bring to focus the *constructive* imperative, of developing a strategy for political and psychological decolonisation. Somewhat like the Gandhian alignment with diverse streams of thought—from Vaishnava pietism to a variety of socialism—Rahula represents in his one life, in a highly compressed form, an entire generation attempting to simultaneously create and explore an indigenous inheritance and align it with a carefully selective cosmopolitanism that is a product of precisely these travels in the wider world. This pilgrim's progress takes place with the larger narrative of the India's emergent nationalism, the making of which was effected along intersecting lines across the local, the national, and the global. An entire discursive terrain can potentially be mapped through this life, where one would encounter, besides Gandhi, individuals like the socialist Acharya Narendra Dev, who when not spending jail terms (during which he translated the Buddhist treatise *Abhidharmakosha*) was teaching Buddhist philosophy at Banaras, or Bhadant Ananda Kausalyayan, a fellow Buddhist missionary whose own spiritual quest mirrors Rahula's own. One would also encounter polymaths such as D.D. Kosambi whose wide range of travels across disciplinary boundaries finds an echo in the kind of ceaseless roaming without borders that Sankrityayan undertakes, sometimes serially, as he moves from one position to the next, (a "progressive mental journey towards rationalism" as Prabhakar Machwe, his friend and associate, puts it) or sometimes, through a simultaneity, as suggested by his self created name with its mixed genealogies.

He travels from the rural hinterland of Uttar Pradesh where he is born into a family of modest means, to the kasbah (the small town called "Rani ki Sarai") where he is sent to study at a madarsa where the primary pedagogic tool was the cane wielded by a dreaded provincial schoolmaster, to the city of Banaras which he sets foot in for the first time in 1902 as a boy for his 'sacred thread' ceremony. From there he undergoes many rituals of conversion and apostasy, as he travels the world, ending with his embracing the Marxist path. Stylistically, his autobiography is derivative of the rich rural repertoire of oral traditions. He recounts the earliest memories of his childhood, of listening to his grandfather recall his adventures from his hunting trips across India in his capacity as an orderly to an English colonel. The particular *rasa* of that storytelling can be tasted in the conversational prose, peppered with ruralisms, as easily as it is with bits of Sanskrit and Urdu poetry.

But this is the limit of his rural inheritance. His difference from his grandfather's travels and narratives indicate the distance he traveled ideologically. His autobiography at this point becomes a marker of a rite of passage as he, in retrospect, indulgently criticizes his grandfather's ignorance and prejudices about the world he had encountered. One telling instance is that of his grandfather literally demonizing the images in the Buddhist caves of Ajanta by incorporating them into a Hindu myth about demons being frozen into stone. By countering and exposing this narrative of a dominant Brahmanical construction of India's past, where the heterodox Buddhist tradition is sought to be denied its very force, Sankrityayan, via his retelling of this history, performs the progressivist act of rescuing that tradition from an oblivion brought on by a hegemonic resurgent orthodoxy.

The issue of identity, so interlinked to that of language, a debate that was raging in progressive circles at the time, deserves separate space, especially since his own investment in it had serious repercussions for his scholarly and political

life. It is noteworthy that in *Meri Jeevan Yatra* as in *Ghumakkar Shastra*, his Hindi is peppered with ruralisms, mixes the 'Urdu' and 'Hindi' registers in such a way that a shloka in Sanskrit easily rubs shoulders with an oft-repeated Urdu couplet (ascribed in *Ghumakkar Shastra* to the poet Ismail Meeruthi):

*Sair kar duniya ki gafil zindagani phir kahan
Zindagi gar kuchh rahi to naujawani phir kahan*

This couplet, so central to his world view that it serves as a leitmotif in his entire oeuvre, urges the young to take heed and make the most of a brief life by traveling the world. The 'carpe diem' trope is redeployed to focus on the pleasures and rewards of 'sair', (an Urdu word that carries suggestions of leisurely wandering), and not erotic love, as in the western context. A precious and short-lived youth is best spent in this pursuit, we are told, since *ghumakkari* is an exacting vocation demanding youthful energy, while the pedagogical purpose of the enterprise (never ignored in this 'Shastra') would be rendered redundant in old age.

In his 'Preface' to his autobiography, Sankrityayan gives us the justification for writing the account. He is, in this, following an established tradition that has at least one antecedent, in M.K. Gandhi, where the cultural specificity of the genre is posited as an issue worth debating, requiring justification. Gandhi specifically addresses an unnamed "friend's" suggestion that the genre should be eschewed due to its specific location in a western way of thinking and being, and offers the response that he is not writing "a real autobiography" (with its 'western' self-aggrandising intent) but merely a story of his experiments with truth ("Introduction", *An Autobiography*, p. ix). Sankrityayan offers a justification similar in spirit, though not concerned with the question of culture specificity:

Main barbar yeh mahsoos karta raha, ki aise raste se guzare hue doosre

musafir yadi apni jeevan yatra ko likh gaye hote, to mera bahut laabh hua hota—gyaan ke khayal se hi nahin, samay ke pariman mein bhi. Main manta hoon hi koi bhi do jeevan yatraayen bilkul ek si nahin ho saktin, to bhi isme sandeha nahin ki sabhi jeevano ko usi aantarik aur baihya vishva ki tarangon main tairana parta hai. (I had often felt that I would have gained considerably if others who had traveled this path had left their accounts—not only in terms of knowledge gained but also in terms of time. I agree that no two lives are identical, still there is no doubt that all lives have to swim in the same waters: whether internal or those of the external world. 'Prakkathan', Meri Jeevan Yatra: I, p. 1)

This is interesting not only for the use of the metaphor of the journey to describe a life, but also in the way it reconciles the principles of individuation with a sense of the collectivity of human experience. The pedagogic value of the writing comes from the latter fact: had other travelers left their accounts, he would have benefited immensely, not only in quantum of knowledge gained, but also in time saved. This dual impulse, to understand the world, and to achieve this in the most efficient manner, points to a traceable philosophical imperative in Sankrityayan's life: life is a quest for knowledge or enlightenment. This 'enlightenment,' in Rahula's engagingly cross-cultural quest, looks in both directions: east and west, and self-consciously disregards the distinction between 'high' and 'low' aesthetic and cultural traditions. While the Buddha's Enlightenment interpreted rationally lights his way, he also moves progressively towards Marxist philosophy, and in fact often deploys both as explanatory or justificatory theoretical models.

The philosophical notion of the self that underpins his writing is explicitly stated in the epigraph to his autobiography: "*Berhe ki tarah paar utarne ke liye maine vicharon ko sweekar kiya, na ki sir par uthaye phirne ke liye*" (I treat ideas/knowledge like a boat/raft for ferrying one across the stream, not as a load to be carried forever on one's head)

These words aptly measure the contours of Sankrityayan's ideological travels. Ascribed to the Buddha (the lines occur

in the *Majjhimanikaya* and recur in many Buddhist texts) as he exhorted his disciples to treat his teachings as route maps to liberation rather than ends in themselves, they remind us of the antiquity of the metaphor of life as a journey, with ideas as mere means for crossing over to the other side. The teleological thrust behind them — one *does* cross over to the other side — indicates a progressive imperative to be open to experience, to new facts and stimuli, and testifies to a philosophical notion of the self that is dynamic and at odds with static orthodox models for the self found in most religious/ philosophical traditions, including the Brahmanical/Upanishadic. The individual for Sankrityayan is in process, as a part of larger collectivities and a flowing stream of scholarly work, showing a notion of the self that is flexible, continuous, and communitarian.

This progressivism also entails a pedagogical imperative that is rather obviously stated in the Preface to the autobiography in terms of the act of writing as an investment in “our” future generations. In *Rahula*, the *national* identification, however, routinely slips into a broader *human* one as it does in *Ghumakkar Shastra*, when he states that it is imperative for the future of the human race that *ghumakkari*, the adoption of dedicated ‘aimless’ roaming, the ‘rules’ for which he delineates in great detail in the ‘Shastra,’ be taken up as a vocation by the young men and women alike.

Ghumakkar Shastra: A Treatise for the Times

Written and published for the general public in 1948, this slim volume elicited mixed responses. While according to Kamala Sankrityayan, some parents wrote angry letters to the writer blaming him for preaching a way of life that was subversive of institutions such as the family, caste taboos, and narrow parochialism, the location of this text within a pedagogical system, the informal one of guides and self-help books as well as a formal one, is declared early in the Preface to the second edition of 1957. The author notes with

approval and satisfaction that the book has gone into a second edition because of the support of young and old alike, resulting in its being institutionalised within the university system. So the advice proffered, to wander the world while youth lasts, if somewhat subversive of social convention, is yet brought firmly back within a safe frame. If it is so easily absorbed into formal pedagogic systems, the text has already become that safe thing, a classic in his lifetime, that can be read for entertainment, its provocative overstatement of its case merely a rhetorically satisfying embellishment.

The genealogy for the wanderer motif as it appears in his *Ghumakkar Shastra* is mixed. In this proscriptive and prescriptive text, Sankrityayan sets about convincing a rhetorical audience of youth and their wards of the desirability and hoary past of this way of life. "It is the highest duty" he declares, of every traveler to benefit "future generations of roamers" by putting their pens to paper. Of course, writing, like photographs, can never capture the true flavour of the experience (even the travails of travel are likened to spice in food) and therefore first hand experience is the only guarantee of authenticity. The shastras tell us, he says, tongue in cheek, that we must cultivate curiosity for that which is "*shreshtha*" (superior) and "supremely beneficial to the individual and society" (p.7) Having made his claim that wandering is this supreme activity, he sets about creating an appropriate tradition for it. One clear tradition is that of the wandering sadhu, the holy sage, the greatest of whom, he admits is the Buddha himself. Mahavira and Shankaracharya follow, as do Nanak and Dayanand Saraswati. This creed, and the language he deploys is quasi-religious, is the highest, the "only timeless, eternal creed in the world, great as the sky, vast as the ocean" (p.11), one that has been followed by leaders of all the great world religions in their hey-day.

However, in a characteristically 'modern' twist, he is not averse to including Christopher Columbus in this pantheon

and cites the Mongolian travelers as facilitators of the scientific revolution in the west and indeed, Charles Darwin and Marco Polo as inspired traveler who owed their discoveries to being on the move. The *ghumakkar* is the one who has made the world what it is, he says, somewhat breezily disposing of the unfortunate violence (the rivers of blood, "*khoon ki nadiyan*") that had often accompanied these traveler-settlers. Even the dovetailing of travel and the colonial enterprise receives his approval as he chides the lazy frog-in-the-well mentality of the Chinese and Indians who quite failed to inhabit the vast territories of Australia, which were "ours for the taking a couple of hundred years back", p. 3, and who now complain of over-population.

Ghumakkari is anything but a narrow-minded creed and it encourages women to travel as well as men, with the excellent example of the Buddha's inclusion of women in the *sangha* as evidence. In fact, Sankrityayan expanded the section on women *ghumakkars* on popular demand from young female readers, as his Introduction to the second edition testifies. The treatise then somberly moves on to detailing all the requisites for becoming a consummate roamer, and the list is interesting for its dovetailing of this socially subversive creed into a constructive program of benefiting the nation, and indeed all humanity.

The wanderer requires courage to withstand considerable social pressure represented above all by the family in the form of "mother's tears, father's fears, and spouse's grouses and protests." (p. 11) This is specially so in the context (as his was) of child marriage. The timid fear of modern technology is breezily dismissed — dying in a plane crash, he informs one timid co-traveller, is to achieve the highest form of death ("*yogi ki mrityu*") as death is clean and instantaneous (p. 23). The traveler must of course be financially independent, to not beg, and this requires some vocational training, best acquired by observation and social association. For men he recommends the barber's

profession (easy portability of implements helps) while women can correspondingly specialize in beauty treatments, something sure to be an employable skill wherever they go. Other vocations that he lists are also carefully chosen for their lower caste associations—carpenters, weavers, tailors, blacksmiths and goldsmiths are the potential choices. In one fell swoop, not lacking in irreverent humour, he draws a plan for undoing the caste system as it has existed in India.

Knowledge of the fine arts (especially music which has a universal language and helps break down barriers) gets the traveler an entry into the more refined circles where ever he goes, but special emphasis on the folk traditions is desirable (“*ustadi gayan*” is good but the folk is better), the flute is a good instrument to carry and can even be improvised from simple raw materials. The traveler who ventures into tribal regions needs to be careful to fully benefit from the educational and entertaining possibilities there. Of course, his main purpose should be to highlight the poverty and backwardness of the region and to hope to bring the light of modernity and progress into those lives within a context of equality, respect and a rational cultural relativism. The text here indulges in anthropological taxonomy as he lists the many tribes and their languages through the length and breadth of India. In a veiled hint perhaps at his contemporary, the anthropologist Verrier Elwin, he mentions one Englishman who married a tribal girl in order to study the forest tribe better, but declares: “Since marriage is one of the worst things that can happen to a traveler, I feel such cheap tactics (“*saste hathiyar*”) should not be used” (p.68)

The text delineates other forms of preparedness—knowledge of geography, languages, history—that the *ghumakkar* must acquire. *Ghumakkari*, he warns youth, is no escape from studies. Within its serious purview lie the laudable aims of acquiring better understanding of the nation (“*desh gyan*”), and it has inspired some of the best artists. In

fact, Tagore would not be what he is if he had not been such an indefatigable traveler.

While the analogy with Tagore could be explored further to contrast their versions of nationalism and internationalism, Sankrityayan's insistence on the local, displayed in his demonstrated devotion to Bhojpuri, for instance, gets reasserted towards the very end of *Ghumakkar Shastra* within an international context. He notes with approval a Russian friend's congratulating him on exuding the fragrance of the soil where he hails from (he is told that he carries the fragrance of the soil of his birth (*"dharti ki sugandh"*) with him wherever he goes. This *"sugandh"* (aroma), he is quick to add as a warning, can easily turn into a *"durgandh"* (stink) in the case the 'wrong' kind of *ghumakkar*, who is careless of civilized norms and narrowly parochial. (p. 129) In a typically dialectical fashion, he addresses and anticipates the pitfalls of counter-imperialist nativism, even as he approves of the individual signature of the native 'flavor of the soil' that the traveler carries.

If *Ghumakkarshastra* is a somewhat humorous and hyperbolic plea for movement, progress and change, it rests nevertheless on a philosophical premise that he traces back to ancient Indian philosophical traditions and seeks to justify in terms of his other great ideological passion: Marxism.

The Buddhist Rahul: Issues and Continuities with Marxism

As told in *Meri Jeevan Yatra*, a multi-volume account of his various travels, literal and metaphorical, an important point in this narrative of growth is the encounter with, conversion to, and movement away from Buddhism. The scholar and the believer have to be disentangled at this point. It is also a narrative that tells of the political and social reality of an emergent nation, attempting to forge its identity as it fights colonial exploitation. It is important to remember that Sankrityayan's engagement with philosophy as such is

increasingly coloured by a growing involvement with the anti-colonial nationalist struggle, and more specifically, with a certain group which seeks to represent the rights of India's poorest, amongst them the peasants of Bihar, his chosen *karmabhoomi*. The addition of this class angle to his analysis of the ills of Indian society has a dual effect: it both draws him towards Buddhism initially and also finally takes him away from it.

For it is clear that this scholar-traveler found it necessary to travel 'beyond' Buddhism to arrive at Marxism—a philosophy and a practice that at first glance may appear to the casual observer the polar opposite of Buddhism. At the same time, his continuous and dedicated scholarly engagement with Buddhism makes him a somewhat contradictory and divided person — politically Marxist, but committed scholastically and academically to Buddhism to the very end of his days.

However, beyond these simplistic binaries lies a more nuanced Middle Way, if one may, that turns our attention to the philosophical links between Buddhism and Marxism. It is a link that this traveler in the realms of thought articulated, as he did all his shifts of belief and conviction, and his words are the best pointers to the continuities between these apparently divergent streams of thought. Indeed, it is precisely in the closeness of Buddhism to Marxism that Rahula Sankrityayana finds meaning in it. This necessarily involves an emphasis which underplays the ritual aspect of Buddhism in favour of rational 'philosophy' and logic, that teases out the *dharma's* collectivist possibilities over the individual ones, and finds value in those aspects of it that are outward-looking and socially engaged rather than inward-looking or meditative or detached. And, in so far as Buddhism has deviated historically from these 'desirables'—of being theoretically conducive to social change, collective good and rational thinking — he feels free to criticize it as an inadequate answer to contemporary problems.

His very first encounter with Buddhism, by his own telling in *Meri Jeevan Yatra*, was quite unconscious and steeped in ignorance wrought of generations of collective historical amnesia. He refers to the Buddhist statue worshipped as "Deehbaba" in his native village, its Buddhist genealogy lost in centuries of neglect. The educated Indian class's new-found appreciation of Buddhism, visible since the early 20th century, he points out somewhat sardonically, is actually a reunion with its lost soul which owes much to the academic interest of Western scholars, especially the Russians, followed by the French and the Germans. ("*Bhadant Bodhananda Mahastavir*," p. 402-3)

Beyond the "few lines" on Buddhism taught at school, it was only in 1910, when he reached Bareilly after completing his first courageous trip to Badrinath, that he received a somewhat clearer exposition of Buddhism in the form of a pamphlet. Written in Sanskrit by a Sadhu Khunnilal Shastri, it whetted his appetite for more. Later, traveling via Sarnath, he encountered some Burmese monks at prayer. Neither knowing the other's language, the monks tried to convey "something" to him by repeating the words "*chakkhu chakkhu*". In hindsight he comments on his ignorance which failed to connect to the root of that Pali word in the Sanskrit for eye ("*chakshu*") to refer to the Buddha who is also known as "*lok chakshu*". Much later, in his Arya Samaji phase, he heard more about the more liberal views of the Buddhists, which ironically had the effect of rousing this hitherto zealous Arya Samaji's curiosity about that rival faith. Subsequently, meeting the Buddhist monk Bodhananda Mahasthavir, he ventured into a serious intellectual engagement with Buddhism which took him first to Sri Lanka, and then to Tibet, bringing him in close contact with the Bhikshus Jagdish Kashyap and Ananda Kausalyayana, with whom he made common cause for the restoration of Buddhism's lost glory in the land of its birth.

For Sankrityayan, Buddhism also reinforced his favored

philosophy of "ghumakkari," a life devoted to ceaseless wandering as a way to learn and teach. In *Ghumakkar Shastra*, he considers the various religious traditions that have fostered this path; Christianity, Brahmanism, and Islam, all three acquire a greater degree of tolerance when a ghumakkar truly devoted to the path takes to these religions. But Buddhism is the "gem amongst them all," due to its radical freedom from caste-ridden purity/pollution taboos that prevent free mixing of human beings and render the traveller's enterprise difficult and sometimes impossible. It is only in the Buddhist tradition that a Mongol and an Indian face, or an Asian or a European complexion, created no possibilities of discrimination, he asserts on the basis of historical evidence. (*Ghumakkar Shastra*, p.101) Further, quite contrary to the insulating effect of the Brahminical taboos on travel across the oceans, Buddhism encourages the spread of its rational and universal message via travel through the most difficult terrains, its missionaries heroically transcending all obstacles, be they the mighty Himalayas or the Gobi desert. ("Bhadant Bodhanand Mahasthavir", in *Rahula Vangmaya- 2.2: Jeevani aur Sansmaran*, p. 403) Likening Buddha Dharma's universality to the merging of many rivers into the one ocean, he celebrates its profoundly humanistic creed: "Jaise nadiyan apne naam-roop ko chhorh kar samudra mein ek ho jaati hain, usi tarah Bauddha dharma hai." (*Ghumakkar Shastra*, p. 59)

And even though he turned towards Marxism in his later life, as late as 1956, he writes, in *Ateet se Vartaman*, of the unparalleled perfection of the Buddha in the entire history of humanity: "Sab tarah se dekhne par Buddha samantabhadra, sarvatobhadra the, ise kehne ki aavashyakta nahin. Maanavata ne apne itihas mein aisa ek hi samantabhadra purushottam paida kiya." ("Needless to say, the Buddha was a perfected human being, in all aspects. The human race has produced, in its entire history, only one such completely perfect example of a fully realized human being.")

The philosophical basis for this high regard for the Buddha lay in his appreciation of the sophistication of Buddhist philosophy, in its concepts such as *pratitya samutpada* (Dependent Origination), *kshanikavada* (Momentariness), and *anatmavada* (Theory of No-self) that could be reconciled with an atheistic, non-metaphysical, scientific, fundamentally modern understanding of phenomena. In fact, Bhikshu Jagadish Kashyap, who credits Sankrityayan with igniting his interest and faith in the Buddha, relates a telling episode that highlights his reasons for appreciating the Buddhist faith. He recalls being given a book by the young Bhikshu wherein the speaker urges his disciples to accept only that which has been proved by individual exercise of reason, rejecting the testimony of all texts, received opinion, and teachers. This was of course, as Jagadish Kashyap realized to his surprise, an episode from the life of the Buddha, an episode whose choice indicates the centrality of this aspect of the Dharma for him. ("Rahulaji: Mere Gurubhai", in *Rahula Smriti*, Ramsharan Sharma 'Munshi' and Pushpamala Jain (eds.), p. 206.)

In *Ateet se Vartaman*, 1956, Sankrityayan explicates Buddhist concepts. True to his commitment to the common man, he explains complex philosophical ideas such as the theory of Momentariness and the Middle Path in lay terms and demonstrates Buddhism's relevance to the real world. In the process, he also shows its proximity to Marxism: "*Aaj ka sabse unnat darshan—dvandvatmak bhautikavad—Buddha darshan ke kitna sameep chala aata hai. Isliye darshan ke kshetra mein Buddha ki den ko naganya maanne wale hamare tathakathit darshanik kitne bhram mein hain, yeh bhi acchi tarah samjha ja sakta hai.*" ("the most evolved philosophy of today—dialectical materialism— comes so close to Buddhist philosophy. This proves the ignorance and delusion of the so-called philosophers of today who deny Buddha's contribution to philosophical thought.")

In his essay "Buddhist Logic," published tellingly by PPH,

he further elaborates on the continuities between Buddhism and Marxism: it is easier for someone with a Buddhist background to understand Marxist philosophy, he claims, linking the dialectical method in Buddhism, its rejection of a creator god, and its human-centred approach with some Marxist ideas, though it remains for him, a Hegelian idealism, marked also by certain 'irrationalities.' And as witnessed in *Tumhari Kshaya*, his by now radical antipathy to organized religion, a primary cause of social conflict according to him, may well be linked to his refusal to identify himself with Buddhism. "*Majhabon ki beemari swabhavik hai. Uska maut ko chhor kar ilaaj nahin.*" (in *Tumhari Kshaya*, 1954) In his essay "Akbar", he clarifies his position on the matter of faith, which for him is not to be confused with culture (*sanskriti*): "*Sanskriti aur dharma ek cheez nahin hai, iska udaharan main swayam hoon. Buddha ke prati bahut samman rakhte hue bhi, unke darshan ko bahut had tak maante hue bhi, main apne ko Bauddha dharma ka anuyaayee nahin keh sakta.*" ("Parishishta-2", *Akbar*, Allahabad: 1957, p. 343). Thus while the Buddha is a figure of veneration for him, he does not align himself with the Buddhist faith. In another context, he will articulate his arguments for Hindi as a national language by appealing to the votaries of either Sanskrit or an Arabised Urdu to not confuse the issue of language, a cultural matter, with religion (Chairman's Address, Bihar Region Literary Conference, Ranchi, 1938, in *Sahitya Nibandhavalii*, pp. 29- 43)

In *Bauddha Darshan*, he uses Marxist terminology to critique Buddhism's historically status-quoist character, whereby the power of money and kingship is not challenged (soldiers and slaves not allowed to join the *sangha*, the monastic order, for instance). For the ruling classes, Buddhism becomes a serpent with its poisonous sting removed, he declares. Ramakrishna Bhattacharya, however, has challenged this perspective, counterpointing it with D.P. Chattopadhyaya and D.D. Kosambi on Buddhism's role

in challenging orthodoxy and bringing about social change, citing D.P Chattopadhyaya's theorizing about Buddhism as being a form of "primitive communism." While philosophical concepts such as the ones listed above, all very close to the spirit of rationality, receive Rahul Sankrityayan's minute attention, the next step, of applying the insights to lived experience, makes him turn to Buddhism's social and political implications.

Significantly, his writings on Buddhism do not emphasise the practitioner's Buddhism, in so far as practice is seen to imply psychological "inner work" through meditative practice, for instance. He focuses, much like Ambedkar, on the political implications of Buddhist ideas. The following excerpt from his essay "*Buddha Aur Gandhi*" illustrates this point rather well:

...there we are not specially concerned with the issue of which philosophical concepts the Buddha contributed to the stream of human thought. Come, let us focus on his [views on] humanism, love, universal brotherhood, and generosity. Some people hold the wrong view that Mahatma Buddha was an individualist concerned with individual liberation alone. However, this view is deluded. He was not an individualist. One incident from his life proves this point. Once his foster-mother Prajapati Gautami presented him with a piece of cloth woven by herself. He responded by saying that it would be more fitting for her to give that cloth to the sangha (the community of monks) instead, as the sangha is greater than any individual. His bodhisattva ideal, according to which one sacrifices oneself over infinite births for the benefit of others, is not an individualistic ideal. (in *Rahula Vangmaya*, p. 426, translation mine)

Rahula Sankrityayan's mode of address here as elsewhere is public ("Come", he says to the reader, including her in the thought process) and focuses on the least arcane, the most universally and easily understood, of the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha is for him a realist-humanist:

He wants the good of all beings—'*sabbe satta bhavantu sukhi tatta*'.

But he was not a passive dreamer. He was a realist. Thus when he instructed his disciples to set out to work, inspiring them to propagate the dharma, he did not say to them they should direct their efforts to the good of all beings; rather he said that they should travel far and wide for the good of the many ("*bahujan hitaya, bahujan sukhaya*"). He knew, that the good of the many is sometimes contrary to the interests of some. Society is divided along opposing interests. In his view, the way primitive man consumed worldly goods was the ideal mode of consumption. (*ibid*, translation mine)

As the above excerpt clarifies, for Sankrityayan, Buddhism's significance lies in its proximity to ideals of an egalitarian social order that did not shy away from the practical problems of making such an order a concrete reality. Poised at the junctures of history that he was, and having first taken *sanayas* in the Hindu tradition and then having been and Arya Samaji nationalist, Buddhism was for him the next point of arrival, easier for him to accept with his growing disinclination for belief in a Creator. As Bhadant Anand Kausalyayan points out, like the Triveni at Prayag, his philosophical growth had three major stages, marking his shift from soul-affirming theism to soul-denying atheistic idealism to the final one of atheistic materialism (in *Rahul-Smriti*, p.211, quoted in Sharma, p.50.)

The seeds of this philosophical shift can be found in the earlier quote from his writing. His distinction between 'the good of all' and 'the interests of some' serves to highlight the centrality of class conflict. This growing conviction was fed no doubt by his involvement in the Kisan Andolan (Peasant's Struggle) of feudal Bihar, a sub-struggle within the larger national freedom struggle, a move that turned him away from the mainstream Congress movement, which he found riddled with elitism, especially in Bihar, where one of the worst oppressors of poor peasants, a feudal landlord, was an elected Congress candidate. As he declares in his autobiography, the 1917 revolution in Russia had had a profound impact on him.

His move from Buddhism to Marxism is thus logically consistent with his politics of worldly emancipation. It is the socially transformative potential of Buddhism, premised on a scientific causality, a dynamic ontology, of *anatmavada*, and *pratityasamutpada*, which links with the dialectical view of history and the open-ended optimism about the human capacity for change that he finds so attractive about Marxism. Of course, he could say on occasion that "Buddhist philosophy is not the culmination (*poorak*) of Marxism, neither is Marxism that of Buddhist philosophy. Each age has its own issues, which it is the work of its thinkers to understand. Marxism is the philosophy of our times. One that has changed half the world." (at a seminar organized by 'the Marxist Club,' recalled and quoted by Sharma, p. 103, no date given, translation mine).

And yet for him Buddhism provided a satisfying model of Indianness, one that reconciled the demands of change and progress with continuity and rootedness: *Kaashi tak pahunchne mein Ganga ka vahi jal nahin reh jaata, jo Gangotri mein dekha jaata hai, to bhi Ganga ka apna ek vyaktityva hai*—*Bauddha sanskriti Bharat ki jis sanskriti ka abhinna ang hai, uska ek deergh-kaal-vyaapi jeevan hai—deergh kaal hi nahin, deergh-desh-vyaapi bhi kehna chahiye* (By the time the Ganga reaches Kashi, its waters are different from when it was at Gangotri, but it still retains its own identity. Buddhist culture is an intrinsic part of a larger Indian culture that is wide-ranging and vast, not just temporally but geographically as well) (in "*Bauddha Sanskriti*", quoted in Mule, p. 92)

Sankrityayan, Gandhi and Ambedkar: Some Conjunctures

Sankrityayan's historical significance for understanding the debates on Indian modernity and nationalism emerges when we study him vis-a vis his influential contemporaries. It would be useful to consider a contemporary who also engaged with some of the very same questions from a position that is recognizably closer to Buddhist ideals than Marxism. In an

insight that would find Buddhist approval, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi has repeatedly pointed out that imperialism and the violence that accompanied it were as harmful to the perpetrators of that violence as to the ostensible sufferers of it. Hence the satyagrahi, who hates the sin and not the sinner, acts with love towards the unjust 'enemy', knowing that in applying spirit force against him, he has the best interest of all at heart. The bodhisattva, in the same vein, may act with violence against some, in the larger interest of all. Of course, the crucial difference here is one of methods and means. Sankrityayan does not spell out his position on that which concerned Gandhi the most: that the pursuit of the good of the most must be a non-violent affair. As a communist, he was not committed to non-violence, though having been a satyagrahi, the actual modes of protest he most adopted were those institutionalised by Gandhi, suffering one of his worst head injuries as a result of a lathi-blow on a protest against a zamindar.

In his essay "Buddha and Gandhi", he expressly brings the past and the present together to suggest how the two great individuals represent related yet different modes of tackling social and political problems. He diverges from his earlier position on Gandhi as an obscurantist when he had launched a scathing critique of Gandhianism, taking up three issues: the belief in God as the ultimate power which results in muddled political thinking and policy making; the opposition to liquor even at the cost of livelihoods and the nutritional value of *tari* (the palm toddy which is a staple of Bihari peasantry for at least three months in a year); and finally the positing of brahmacharya in marriage as the sole means of population control which he thinks is impractical, and "an open advertisement for prostitution", (*Gandhivaad*, *Dimagi Gulami* p. 13) In his later engaging analysis written when Gandhi was much older, the Buddha, described as "the greatest of India's sons" is yet found wanting in his egalitarianism. Finding Gandhi going even

further than the Buddha in actively opposing human inequality, Sankrityayan concedes that perhaps the historical circumstances in which the two functioned were different, making it unnecessary for the Buddha to make the choices that confronted Gandhi.

In terms of historical proximity, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a senior contemporary of Sankrityayan, is an obvious and compelling study. One need not spell out the details of this modern Dalit leader's harnessing of Buddhism to fight the caste, but it is arguable that his mode of carving out a specific Dalit-Buddhist identity is at variance with other existent traditions of the Dharma as it is practiced, and is perhaps controversially one-sided. While this is not the context for exploring the intricacies of the issue, the example of Ambedkar is useful and evocative in the context of Sankrityayan as each brought to his engagement with Buddhism comparable considerations. At one level, the Sanskrit loving shloka spouting Sankrityayan, born into a *svayampaki* Brahmin family of Uttar Pradesh, with even his assumed name rich with upper caste resonance, could not be further removed from Ambedkar's personal circumstance of having suffered as an untouchable Mahar in Maharashtra. However, it is not in their natal identities that their identity of interest in Buddhism lies, even though contemporary dalit studies are so heavily weighted towards privileging essentialist experientialist perspectives as being more 'authentic'. Rather, it lies in a shared move towards a non-theistic, non-ritualistic, egalitarian, and rationally satisfactory system of belief that could offer a liberatory philosophy for the modern world. Both seek to highlight the democratic, collectivist and social reform-oriented aspects of Buddhism. They diverge, however, in their differential equations with both the rural and the Sanskritic traditions. While Ambedkar rejected the cultural markers of his birth, most visibly perhaps in the western suits he is wears in dalit iconography, he made the single exception of choosing Buddhism for its 'native'

origins, especially vis-a-vis the possibility that it was the 'original' religion of the untouchables (Zelliot, p. 15, 21). Sankrityayan too engaged with the discourse of the 'soil', or origins, in his quest for a relevant modernity for India, offering a nuanced counterpoint to both Gandhi and Ambedkar.

In Conclusion

Sankrityayan's life, in its creative and passionate engagement with the complex reality of a changing world as he encountered it, especially with ideas that sought to explain and change that world, becomes a prism to examine issues of religion, culture, nation and the self's coming into being within these frames. Buddhism and then Marxism, each with its own kind of concomitant internationalism, saturated his life and thought and formed the crux of his vocational concerns after he left the Arya Samaj. And yet, each was interpreted and made relevant for the political context he found himself in: a multi-layered ancient civilization with a diverse people needing to be brought together under the rubric of a nationalism that could justice to the layers of injustice that threatened to overtake even an emancipatory agenda. Seeking freedom for self and society, from servitude both internal and external, required engaging with and bridging the gulf between the religious and the secular, the regional and the global, the ancient and the modern, the scholar and the activist. In his life and his work, or rather in his life *as* work (which the autobiography is), lived in a delicate balance between the iconoclastic and the profoundly 'rooted', the private and the public, he poses questions and suggests solutions of remarkable resonance even today.

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Note: All works cited are in Hindi, unless otherwise specified

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