



A freethinking cultural nationalist: a life history of Rahul Sankrityayan

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BOOK REVIEW

A freethinking cultural nationalist: a life history of Rahul Sankrityayan, by Alaka Atreya Chudal, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2016, xv+ 324 pp., Rs. 950 (hardcopy), ISBN 0-9-947787-4

The book under review is a biography of an Indian polymath Rahul Sankrityayan (1893–1963). A wanderer par excellence, he left home for the first time at the age of fourteen (1907) when he was a student of middle vernacular school in present day eastern Uttar Pradesh. In the next five decades, he travelled across the length and breadth of Asia and Europe, learnt, spoke and/or wrote in classical, literary and folk languages, and dabbled in a variety of intellectual, philosophical and political streams. It would be no exaggeration to call him a living embodiment of movement and transgression. He preferred to name his autobiography as travelogue, *Merī jīvan yātra* (Journey of my life) and wrote a primer on the science of wandering, *Ghumakkar-śāstra* for the perusal of younger contemporaries. Sankrityayan's life, work and ideas were steeped in and spread through many cultures, disciplines and geographies. Born in a *sanātani* Brahmin family, he lived variously the life of a Vaishnava sadhu, an Arya Samaji polemicist, a Buddhist monk, an antiquarian and scholar of Buddhism, a political activist jailed for anti-colonial speeches (1920 and 1923–1925) and beaten up by the henchmen of landlords in a peasant movement in Bihar (1939), a self-professed communist, a progressive writer, a novelist, a historian, a biographer, a language activist, a linguist, lexicographer and so forth.

Sankrityayan's multiple lives and immensely diverse and voluminous corpus of literary output itself pose a problem to any scholar who wants to make him a subject of her study. While he preferred to write in Hindi, his published materials (around 50,000 pages) are in at least half a dozen languages: Hindi, Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetan, Bhojpuri and English. One can add to them his private papers: the letters he wrote and received, the books and journals he read, and possible (intelligence) records to be explored in the state archives of European countries (USSR, Germany, Britain, etc.) and Asian countries including Japan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Tibet and, of course, India. Given the actual and potential monumentality of the direct sources on the life and work of Rahul Sankrityayan, this book is a much-needed introductory work for English language readers.

In an academic world of South Asian scholarship in which monolingual researchers and researches (at best with a working knowledge of any one Indian language alongside English) are in abundance, dealing with the figure of Rahul Sankrityayan is far from easy. Even the recent spurt in historical research, which focuses on cultural mobility, transnational circulation, connected and entangled histories and has otherwise provided new and exciting insights and approaches, probably suffers from the same problem. Barring a few, the preferred choice of actors for intellectual historians dealing with histories of *entanglements*, *cosmopolitanisms*, *global history*, *internationalisms*, etc. in the twentieth century, are limited to those figures who worked mostly in the European or colonial metropolitan languages and/or cities such as London, Berlin, Calcutta. For such studies, the figures like Sankrityayan may have been more than ideal subjects of enquiry, yet they are conspicuously absent. Working on figures such as Rahul Sankrityayan, Swami Satyadev Parivrajak, K. P. Jayaswal and many more, who were located and/or moved beyond predictable destinations in Europe and Calcutta and wrote frequently in the popular idiom and vernacular languages, is neither convenient nor fashionably relevant.

Given the constraints underlined above, qualitatively speaking, after Prabhakar Machve's short, sharp and crisp biography published by Sahitya Academy Delhi in 1978, this work is the only book-length critical account of Sankrityayan's life in English. The book, while doing the extensive

survey and placing itself in the context of existing works (in Hindi, Nepali and English) on Rahul Sankrityayan, rightly underlines that most studies deal with only certain themes or aspects from the works of Sankrityayan. The present book, it is claimed, aims to give a holistic understanding of the complex historical protagonist in the context of his age. Sadly, the claim falters soon and the reason seems to lie in its approach. The author frames her questions with the somewhat naive assumption that a widely travelled (both literally and figuratively) polymath like Sankrityayan, though clearly not to be understood in terms of neat and separate sojourns or phases, may actually have been following ‘a possible single track’ throughout his life. Unearthing that ‘possible single track’ it is argued, may provide a clue to ‘the underlying cause behind the multiplicity, ambivalence, and turning points’ in the lives of people like Sankrityayan (P. 7). The author indicates that terming someone a renaissance man is not enough. One needs to find out: ‘Is there a thread running through Sankrityayan’s life?’ (P. 9). The running thread, according to her, can be found out by identifying ‘cultural fixtures that caused major turnings in his life. These are: the Arya Samaj, Buddhism, communism, and the Hindi language’ (P.17). The author then claims to discover *a single running thread*, and that is nationalism, or what she calls ‘nationalist sentiment’ which connected the multiple and multidimensional selves of Sankrityayan.

To translate into Sankrityayan’s terminology, nationalist sentiment could be called *mātrībhūmi ki sugandh* (the motherland’s aroma), which was the source of his own *abhimān* (pride) in being an Indian ... In the quest for a link between Sankrityayan’s multiple identities, it was *abhimān* that I felt held the key to the solution. (pp. 17–18)

In other words, the author finds singular cause, i.e. nationalism, which seems to have unilinearly propelled Sankrityayan to successive journeys and to inhabit many worlds and world views. What was Sankrityayan’s nationalism then? Arguably, he was a proud nationalist, but different from the Hindu supremacist and exclusionary variety. He was proud of India and its thousand-year-old culture, but also believed that it always had a place for all linguistic and religious communities. Despite foreign origins, religions like Islam and Christianity could be equally Indian provided they manifested Indian character in terms of dress, cuisine, language, literature and a shared sense of glorious history. *Bhārtīyatā* was ‘the most important touchstone of true nationalism for Sankrityayan’ (p. 19). The *key link* and *a possible single track* (i.e. *bhārtīyatā* or nationalism and his constant drive to work for national building or *rāṣṭriya kārya*), according to the author, explains Sankrityayan’s chequered career, not anything else. She argues that contrary to the image and trope of a wanderer or *ghumakkar*, it is this sentiment and drive for building the nation towards restoring its glory that explains him (p. 27). To put it crudely, smitten by the force of nationalism, which kept on expanding its horizon of expectation, Sankrityayan wished to contribute his own bit by successively falling for Arya Samaj, Buddhism, Marxism, and finally the cause of Hindi as the national language. Hence, the author accords him the title, ‘a freethinking cultural nationalist’.

The author’s approach is reductionist and her findings are not entirely exciting. Yet, she deserves to be applauded for two reasons. For providing a book-length biographic account, if not an intellectual history; and for incorporating the significance of Nepal in Sankrityayan’s life in greater detail: this aspect has not been analysed in any significant manner in other studies. The author has dealt with the perception of Sankrityayan and the reception of his work amongst Nepali community, also providing valuable appendices on Rahul’s engagement with Nepal.

These merits notwithstanding, it is indeed disheartening to find that the possibility of an intellectual history of a multifaceted personality is allowed to be lost. The book hardly delves into the larger pool of primary sources. Apart from the sources on the Nepali side of Sankrityayan’s life, the book uses mainly published volumes of his autobiography *Merī jīvan yātrā* (Journey of my life), one historical-utopian novel *Bāisvīn Sadī*, his lectures on language questions (*‘Hamārā*

sāhitya delivered in 1947 at the 35th convention of *Akhil Bhārtīya Hindī Sāhitya Sammenlan*, or All India Literary Conference at from the book *Sāhitya nibandhāvalī*), some of the biographies and biographical sketches (for example, *Māhāmānavbuddha*, selected sketches from *Naye bhārat ke naye netā*). Many other works are either only referred to or are discussed with reference to other existing secondary works only. Moreover, the book either ignores or fails to adequately draw upon the existing corpus of scholarly works on nationalism, Buddhism, communism and intellectual history. For instance, arguments related to general history of communism or nationalism and its significance in colonial Indian life and society are mainly sourced from dated works such as Gene D. Overstreet and Marshal Windmiller's *Communism in India* (1959) and A. R. Desai's *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* (1954). Moreover, new and exciting insights and alternative approaches provided by historical researches on cultural mobility, transnational networks of circulation, connected and entangled histories of ideas, institutions, objects and people, vernacular and anti-colonial cosmopolitan intellectuals, religious and political internationals and internationalisms of the early twentieth century are completely bypassed. Maya Joshi's 2009 essay on Rahul Sankrityayan published in *Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences* is coincidentally missing from the exhaustive bibliography. Consequently, when Rahul Sankrityayan is placed in the context of his age by the author, it is a bald and crude conception of nationalism that replaces the dynamic context of the early twentieth century. She 'peels away the multiple masks he variously wore to reveal what, if anything underlay them'. In history discarding the layers and searching for something solid beneath them without estimating the significance of multiple layering is perhaps like peeling through the onion. We are offered a linear trajectory of intellectual evolution, i.e. that he joined the Arya Samaj because it helped him confirm his pride in ancient Vedic India; dissatisfied with the Brahmanical past he soon left Arya Samaj, joined Buddhism and wanted to restore its glory imagining it to be the most rational autochthonous philosophical tradition; in search of its modern philosophical counterpart from a Buddhist he became communist, because the latter could help him attain modern form of social solidarity to strengthen the Indian nation; he tried to transform or adapt communism in his own ways of making it Indian, and at the cusp of independence he relentlessly worked in the service of a unifying language of the nation, namely Hindi, to strengthen this sense of Indianness further. Rahul Sankrityayan, who travelled many risky paths, lead multiple lives, wrote passionately on disparate issues and themes, fell for and then questioned various dogmatisms, respected, trespassed and transgressed many boundaries of his times, becomes ultimately an eccentric monochromatic cultural nationalist in this account.

This unilinear story is, however, not completely of its mark; it is only hugely reductionist. It bowdlerizes more than it reveals. It remains a biography without much of history. To cite just a few examples, it fails to place Rahul Sankrityayan's writer-antiquarian Buddhist self in the context of a rich and entangled history of the Bodhgaya movement, it does not explore his relationship to transregional Buddhist scholar-activist networks, the larger history of Theravada revival, and Indian nationalist interest in Buddhism in the early twentieth century. In effect, one may not find any historically intelligible connection between people like him and his contemporary scholar-writers Narendra Dev, Dharmmanand Kosambi, K.P. Jayaswal, Mohanlal Mahto 'Viyogi' or Rambriksha Benipuri's interest in Buddhism and the Buddhist past, apart from the fact that all were proud cultural nationalists with some kind of egalitarian vision of *bhārtīyatā* or Indianness. One barely finds information about the circle of his friends and associates with whom Sankrityayan collaborated or worked. One hardly gets the glimpse of complexity of the shrill language debate at the cusp of Independence. It is hard to see any nuanced difference between the arguments of people like Rahul Sankrityayan and his adversaries in the camp of *Hindiwallas*. Likewise, in the author's interpretation, Sankrityayan's idea of *bhārtīyatā*, his perspective on the Indianisation of Islam, its political implications in understanding of India's past and present,

appears no different from that of any twentieth-century Hindu nationalist of his time. Alongside citing Sankrityayan's speeches had the author also referred to his literary works, to cite just one example, the story-chapter *Suraiyā* in *Volgā se gangā* (1942), and analysed the deployment of linguistic idiom and metaphors, she might have underlined the distinction of Sankrityayan's understanding of the Indian past and the Indianisation of Islam vis-à-vis other (Hindu) nationalists of the time.

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