CHAPTER 4
THE REINCAR(NATIONS) OF SATYANAND STOKES

For me, at least - an American born – the East has had a deep and soul-stirring message (Stokes Extracts Letter Sept 19 1928 TS).

From my Western temperament and thought-experience I have come to feel… the vital significance of personality and individuality…. The East, on the other hand, has filled me with an overpowering sense of the essential oneness of existent reality (Stokes Extracts Letter Oct 14 1924 TS).

Born Samuel Evans Stokes III into a prominent Pennsylvania Quaker family in 1882, Stokes’ journey from Philadelphia in the United States to the hills of northern India, and from Samuel to Satyanand, maps a personal as well as a larger public history, a history that has individual, familial, national and international dimensions. By the time of his demise in the politically charged India of 1946, Stokes had witnessed a large part of the struggle for Indian independence and created a niche for himself within it. Though he confined himself largely to the northern region of the Punjab and what is now Himachal Pradesh, Stokes emerged not only as a regional hero but also as a small but significant participant in the grander drama being staged at the national level. Parallel to this conventionally ‘public’ narrative of his life, one can trace an equally if not more significant personal one, in which his embattled choices relating to religion, location, and vocation feed into larger histories of religion and politics in the India of this period. Tracing the contours of his life, therefore, unfolds complex issues of identity, forged within a rich historical matrix of contending forces that constitute individuals, institutions and ideas that travel through time.

Stokes’s life suggests echoes and parallels with M.K. Gandhi and Verrier Elwin, and invites comparison with C.F. Andrews, a figure analogous to Stokes, and one very much better known. Although Stokes did not leave behind him a conventional autobiography and therefore cannot, strictly, be read as a ‘primary’ text in the frame that my project uses, there exist enough materials in the form of personal
correspondence and a significant book, *Satyakama: or True Desire* (1931) which, deploying the first person mode, addresses the issues under study. Apart from these two sources, Stokes’ prose writings such as the powerful pamphlet, *The Failure of European Civilization as a World Culture* (1921) and a collection of his essays published posthumously as *National Self-Realization and Other Essays* (1977) form a substantial though not too well-known oeuvre that places him firmly within the dominant debates driving the public domain in India at the time, even as it bears witness to a profound engagement at the personal level with religio-philosophical systems that define the world of his inheritance and the world he chose to be reborn into. Stokes thus constitutes an important plank in my study of the complex nature of the encounter between East and West, especially during the heyday of Indian Independence.

Stokes’ many lives are extraordinary in terms of sheer variety as well as depth of engagement. Though appearing at first to encompass bewildering contradictions, this variety is also sequentially and logically explicable. Stokes, like many reformist-pioneers of the time, displays a self-consciousness regarding his decisions, as well as an attempt to engage the reader (whether Gandhi or his mother in his correspondence, his wife in *Satyakama*, or the general reader in his essays) in an ongoing debate with the self. In this, too, his writings are comparable with the genre of the autobiography. For the autobiography as a form is of essence outward-looking, even as it claims as its rightful domain the personal space. Likewise, the genre reflects as much on the external world (of which the self is a part) as on the ‘individual’ that is its ostensible concern. And the ‘truth claims’ of autobiography find a suitable echo in the Gandhian, Christ-like earnestness of the persona that we encounter in Stokes’ writings.

As a Christian missionary who converted to Hinduism, a celibate who chose deliberately and emphatically the life of a householder, an American proud of his Quaker descent who, after serving in the British army, received a six-month prison term for his nationalist activities in the cause of India’s independence, and a pioneering farmer who single-handedly transformed the economy of the region he chose to make his home in the Himachal hills, Stokes’ life and writings epitomize the many-layered crossings that the metaphor of the journey conveys. Through these
multiple transformations, he compels a re-examination of facile modes of engaging with the binaries of self and other, native and foreign, private and public, spiritual and material, that have defined the imperial discourse of India’s encounter with the West. For breaking stereotypical moulds that define patterns of behavior for missionary-traveler-settlers, Stokes deserves study and careful comparison with figures such as C.F. Andrews, not least because he is under-represented in histories of the period. This is not surprising since his career resists being assimilated into mainstream narratives of nationalism or imperialism. He is not included in the lineage that Ramchandra Guha calls, via sociologist Shiv Visvanathan, the ‘other side of the Raj’, into which he puts non-conformist English men and women such as Verrier Elwin, Annie Besant, C.F. Andrews, Phillip Spratt, Sister Nivedita, Mira Behn and Edward Thompson (Guha xii-xiii). However, as a contemporary, consultant, and comrade to dominant figures in the Indian freedom struggle, such as M.K.Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, Stokes’ presence on the national scene demands recognition. It also adds to the richness of the tapestry that constituted the movement. To write him into that history is, thus, an act of service to the man and his many contributions, but also, eventually, to a period in India’s past that was constitutive of its modern destiny. To understand the contours of Stokes’ transformative encounter with India, it is useful to begin with a pre-history of that encounter.

**Legacies: Recovery and Rejection**

*It seems to me that true Conservatism is the spirit which values the best of the past and shrinks from any line that would undermine it (Extracts Letter Feb 25 1924 TS).*

*I have found that all which is necessary is for a man to be true to the standards of social and spiritual obligation that he has learnt as a boy, and realise that what would not be “playing the game” in America is not playing the game in India (Extracts Letter Jan 1929 n.d. TS).*

Born in 1882 into the comfort of a Philadelphia Quaker family, with an engineer father who was also a successful businessman and a mother who had literary interests, Stokes’ life would have followed a predictable trajectory had he not been compellingly drawn to what we now call ‘social work.’ Dissatisfaction with his
immediate inheritance had manifested itself early in his life. In a sense, the original Quaker heritage of dissidence and simplicity informed his calling. Stokes chose a vocation that reflected a curious turning back to older ways of being a Quaker, ways of being that were defined by service and austerity: “I have ‘kept the faith’ with my Quaker ancestors who stood for equality of treatment and justice between men irrespective of race or creed, and who time and again suffered persecution for their convictions,” he would declare years later (*National Self-Realization* viii).

Stokes’ decision to renounce his immediate legacy in favor of one recovered from an older (Quaker) English past, was accompanied, when he came to India, with much more culturally and temporally far-reaching acts of self-creation. These turns in his career reflected a critical rejection of aspects of his past as also a creative appropriation of it, even as ‘new’ and ‘alien’ cultural traditions were harnessed in the interest of forging a vision of a future that he strove hard to realize in his long and fruitful life. This vision of a future entailing cultural relocation went much beyond the individual, to encompass family, community and the nation and resonated with, while also differing substantially from those of figures like Elwin, Mirabehn, and Sarala Devi, all engaged in comparable crossings of given boundaries, private and public.

Stokes rejected the trappings of privilege, barely managing to finish his studies at Cornell, drawn as he was towards work with the YMCA and starting a club for poor boys in the Philadelphia neighborhood with money given by his father for starting a business. A similarity with Gandhi merits attention here. The initial path to advancement that Gandhi chose involved acquiring an English education and pursuing success in the legal profession. Gandhi would go on to reverse this early trend (the more ridiculous aspects of which he parodied in his autobiography) and deploy that very privileged education for very different, subversive, purposes. Stokes did the same in turning his educational privileges to social account.

**Vocational Locations**

> My life has been given to this land ....I am not willing to be guided by any man. I try...to have no purpose of my own but to wait constantly on Him (*Extracts Letter Feb 7 1906 TS*).
I am more of a philosopher than a politician, and it is only when the dictates of my philosophy impel me to take a part that I reluctantly leave those things which to me are of far greater interest (Extracts Letter March 5 1921 TS).

When as a young man Stokes arrived in India, he was taking a personal risk. Stokes’ self-conception at the early stages did not exhibit an overwhelming sense of his national location. Rather, the Christian discourse of service to those less privileged, wherever they might be, dominates his writings. His spiritual awakening had taken place while listening to a hymn in church, as “all of a sudden the whole thing became intensely poignant to me….From that moment all the interests and objects of my life underwent a complete reorientation” (quoted in Sharma 12). He began what he saw as ‘God’s work’ in his own backyard, recognizing his calling much before embarking for India. The mission work he began with in India in 1904 was with Dr. Carlton, a physician working in India since 1881 at the Sabathu Leper Home in Shimla Hills. Given the Leper Act of 1898, which enforced segregation of the leper community, with English District Magistrates being given powers to commit them to institutions, understaffed leper homes were in need of help. Stokes’ choice of vocation to go and volunteer his services in this context, a course of action undertaken much against his parents’ wishes, can at first seem to be yet another co-option of a well-meaning Christian into the rhetoric and myth of the white man’s burden but there is a point outside the reductive politics of race and empire from which such work could be viewed. In 1905, he volunteered for earthquake relief before the Punjab Government. Acknowledging that his parents saw him as “unwilling to be guided, unstable in my purposes, extreme in my views,” the young Stokes reflects an independence of mind that was driven to question established verities (Extracts Letter Oct 1 1905 TS).

The rhetoric of empire had never appealed to Stokes as is evident from his early writings. Though during his early years in India, he had, like Gandhi, felt that cooperating with the empire might safeguard the interest of Indians, events after the 1919 massacre at Jallianwala had changed his thinking. Acutely aware of racism in America, he set about debunking, in writing, the myth of the white man’s burden, including producing a powerful critique of the role of Christianity in buttressing
European imperialism. His tract, *The Failure of European Civilization as a World Culture* (1921), in its wide-ranging and scathing critique of the racism that undergirds the European civilizing impulse, castigating the long history of exclusivist chauvinism that defines European brands of imperialism, clearly problematizes any attempt to fix him into a wider frame of white missionary activity serving as a tool of empire. Though the work of a believing Christian, by virtue of which fact it exempts the original Christian church from the indictment it metes out to post-medieval incarnations of it, the tract shows Stokes carefully sifting through a perceived cultural inheritance with the purpose of cleansing it of corruptions that are seen to be the residue of history.

In this, again, he resembles Gandhi, whose writings reflect a passionate engagement with the question of being a Hindu—a process requiring complex negotiations with aspects of Hinduism that he wished to exorcise from the faith and for which he fought rather more directly through his ashram practices, for example. His battles with the problem of untouchability, which drew sanction from the *varnashrama*, a central plank of Hinduism, and his attempt to cleanse the scriptures of traces of misogyny and violence reflect a process that parallels Stokes’ engagement with his Christian/European legacy. Gandhi’s declaration in *Young India* in 1921—“I decline to be bound by any interpretation [of the scriptures], however learned it may be, if it is repugnant to reason or moral sense”—finds echoes in Stokes (Gandhi *What is Hinduism?* 7). In this recovery of the original, transformative message of Christ, he also resembles C. F. Andrews, a friend and contemporary, who had also arrived in India in 1904, just over a month after Stokes.

Stokes had, over the course of his encounter with other European missionaries in India, turned to the Franciscan model of service as worship as opposed to the organized missionary mode that he had initially affiliated himself to. His differences from the missionaries went beyond the concern with their privileged lifestyle; they extended to theological issues. He disagreed with the missionary preaching on eternal damnation, for instance, a position that won him no friends amongst his set, some even urging him to go home (Sharma 23). Stokes, who had by 1905 decided to stay on in India, chose, against his parents’ advice, to disassociate himself from organized
mission work, and start his eccentric regimen of living in extreme austerity. As he wrote in his 1908 volume *The Love of God: A Book of Prose and Verse*:

I greatly longed...to arrive at a point where the relations existing between myself and the people would be unaffected by any material interest on their part. It grieved me to see that all the conditions of my life were such as made it almost impossible for me to understand or draw near to them...I hated my Western customs and longed to cast them aside (quoted in Sharma 25).

Ignoring his parents’ pleas to reconsider his decision, on grounds of “sanity”, Protestant “self-respect”, and American “self-reliance”, a 23-year-old Stokes took the plunge into ascetic hardship, and economic dependence, by adopting the life of a mendicant friar. His ideal of work, thus far supported by his family both financially and morally, was by now substantially different from the one he had inherited, almost fanatic in its reclamation of an older idealized Christian ideal of total poverty. He was recovering a radical Christ to justify his own vocational choices. As he wrote to his mother:

Christ was an extremist if there ever was one...Was there ever a more unconventional character than our Lord? How often he shocked the tender sensibilities of his people...the Jewish leader were quite right (from the purely earthy standpoint) in considering the teaching of Jesus to be the most dangerous and socialistic in character (*Extracts Letter Oct 1906 n.d. TS*).

This ‘Western’ ideal was now wedded to the ‘Indian’ ideal of the *sadhu*, as Stokes gave up his belongings, donned saffron robes, and moved into a cave in the middle of a wild forest. It was in this state that C.F. Andrews would find him in 1907, when he went to see him at Kotgarh, living and working with Sadhu Sunder Singh:

Both of these shared to the full all the longings I had in my mind to live among the poor...For in a literal sense they had set out to follow Christ like St. Francis of old, taking neither purse nor script, nor two coats a piece, but embracing poverty with joy for the Gospel’s sake. In leading this simple Christian life, they had brought back into the distracted Church of the Punjab something of the pure happiness of sacrifice which we read of in the first century of the Christian faith... (*Andrews 176*).
The quotation from Andrews is significant in underscoring the complex contours of this move on Stokes’ part for it indicates the curious mix of rejection of and service to the Christian church as it existed in the Punjab of the time. Stokes, at this point plunging recklessly into the unknown of another culture and another people, can also be seen as reclaiming his ‘own’ cultural past, in the interest of resuscitating that very institution, the church of Punjab. However, Andrews’ seamless equation of Stokes, the white American friar, and Sadhu Sunder Singh, the Indian sadhu, into one continuous tradition suggests a sensibility that transcends the divide of race, place of origin, or denomination. But Stokes was to take a longer and perhaps more courageous route to the dissolution of the difference of East and West. A parallel with some variations may also be drawn here with the figure of Elwin, who underwent even more dramatic transformations in India.

In reading Stokes’ choice of vocation, the familiar trope of colonial benevolence raises its head as the nexus between the discourses of ‘upliftment of the downtrodden’ and domination has come to be recognized as a standard formulation in post-colonial theory. The role of the missionary in furthering the cause of empire has been studied in this field, even as attention shifts to less schematic modes of reading the colonial encounter. The ‘white man’s burden’ works as a fit trope only up to a point, as, though white and privileged, Stokes’ case is somewhat different. Being American, he was only obliquely connected to the stream of British imperialism. One could argue that he could be potentially exemplifying a dissenting strain within the American context, since his Quaker heritage was known for its anti-slavery and anti-war activism. Further, at the personal level, he sought to close the imperial binary via a very personal decision: that of marrying locally.

Marriage: Crossing the Private with the Public

You would find it hard to understand how much more closer I am coming to the real inner life of India since I have taken this step [of marrying]. I thank God for allowing me to do it (Extracts Letter June 19 1912 TS)
Stokes’ marriage in 1912, eight years into his life in India, to Agnes Benjamin, a Himachali Christian of Rajput descent who was fourteen years his junior, marks some of the most crucial shifts in his engagement with India (Sharma 98). The decision was dramatic – the ascetic’s life was abandoned for the householder’s, with its concomitant implications for the delicate balance between the personal and the public. The potential for conflict between the householder’s life and that of the public worker was a concern that Gandhi had articulated time and again in his autobiography. The pulls of the family could distract the devoted nationalist from his chosen path, both in terms of mundane responsibilities and in terms of a more fundamental conflict of interest between serving the self, with the family as an extension of the self, and immersing the self, almost to oblivion, in a cause larger than itself. The latter was a process that required a degree of detachment from the carnal and the narrowly emotional, not possible for a householder. While Gandhi carefully created a version of *brahmacharya* as a solution to this perceived dilemma, and trained himself to treat his family as an extension of the nation on the one hand, and as an extension of the self (now sacrificed to the service of the nation) on the other, Stokes understood the problem somewhat differently. His position lay somewhere in the middle of Gandhi’s extreme asceticism and Elwin’s celebration of sexuality. In each case, the private domain was sought to be understood and explained in terms of the larger public engagements of the protagonists.

In his early testimonies to his rationale for marrying who, when, and how, Stokes did pay tribute to his subordination of the ‘private’ to the ‘public’, even suggesting an instrumentalist approach to this institution more in keeping with the dedicated missionary than either the Protestant or the more liberal Hindu variants on marriage. His letters to his mother sought to allay her anxieties regarding this step by indicating that the step was in keeping with his ‘Western’ Christian values. As he wrote on July 17 1912: “God has been very good to me, and (as I told you would be the case) He has put into my heart a very real love for the girl who is to be my wife…I tell you this because it will make you feel better about the marriage” (*Extracts Letter* July 17 1912 TS). He had also expressed a desire that his mother visit them during the ceremony as “such a visit would be of infinite value to my little wife, drawing us
together by a common experience and giving her an opportunity to see the life in such a home as ours in Germantown…. I would love to have her get the ideal that we have of the proper relations between the husband and wife” (*Extracts* Letter Sept. 3 1912 TS). Later, he shared with his mother his desire that his wife acquire “a command of English reading and speaking” and wished for her the “mental stimulus which a trip to *my home* and a year among *my people* would give her” (*Extracts* Letter Jan. 9 1913 TS, emphasis added). His sense of home here was tenuously balanced between the American and the *pahari*. Though he saw his marriage as a part of his larger vocation, he guarded his privacy somewhat jealously from the intrusive American press, which swiftly dubbed Agnes Benjamin his “East Indian bride” on their first visit to Philadelphia in April 1913 (A. Sharma 111). Concerns about the colour of his first child – “the boy is very light in complexion; indeed I have seen darker babies in America” – indicate the latent anxieties about ‘going native’ that his mother appears to have harboured (*Extracts* Letter Dec. 11 1913 TS).

Just as her mother’s anxieties were laid to rest when she visited India, his later book, *Satyakama: or True Desire*, addressed to his wife from jail, greatly modified the impression of asymmetry that seems to mark his earlier equation with his wife. Here, he addressed her on equal terms reminiscent both of the Protestant companionate marriage and his own version of advaitic conjugality. He saw marriage, he said, “as the embodied expression of that [non-dual] experience of oneness…. ‘Salvation’ is not to be attained by freeing oneself from the bonds begotten of love for wife or child or other dear ones…” (*The Failure* 212).

Stokes’ decision to marry an Indian had hinged largely on his stated belief that the only way to break the system of racial discrimination was by inter-marriage, a view that he set out at great length in his tract on European racism: *The Failure of European Civilization as a World Culture* (1921). Since the tract was written nine years after his marriage, it reads like a somewhat dry document which scarcely does justice to the complexity of the decision, but even his earliest communications with Andrews (his confidante in this as in many other decisions) indicate the intentions behind the act. As Andrews put it in 1922, Stokes set about proving in the “most direct way that there was no ‘race’ or ‘caste’ within the Christian church, if the
Church were only true to its founder, Jesus Christ” (Sharma 86). This Stokes was, in Andrews’ introductory remarks to Stokes’ 1931 tract, also a man disillusioned with the Allies after the Peace Treaties, regarding “the menace of the white race supremacy as the most sinister portent in the present history of mankind” (Satyakama xi). The marriage, typically enough for the man, addressed at once a range of concerns, from the local one with the racially exclusivist church in the Punjab to the post-World War international scenario.

In *The Failure of European Civilization as a World Culture*, Stokes’ discussion of race in Western culture began with an analysis of the ancient Greek city-state, which he contrasted with the culture of the Greeks. While the former was exclusive, denying equal rights to aliens in the political unity because they were not of the same stock, the “culture of the Greeks, rising triumphantly above the spirit of racialism…became a mighty instrument for the unifying of humanity” (10). The British Empire, he felt, was emulating the former characteristic of the Greek state, resulting in a failure of “political solidarity,” even as American exclusionism had its own kind of deplorable racism. Woodrow Wilson’s immigration policy, which deployed the notion of “unassimilable classes,” resulted in the creation of “barred zones” and “dams against the coloured races, with spillways of course for students, merchants, and travelers…” (36). Cannily recognizing the struggle amongst the white nations for the “vacant lands of the Pacific” as the *raison d’etre* behind these policies, Stokes went on to ridicule the claims of contemporary eugenics and race theory. With a rhetorical reversal similar to Gandhi’s mode of argument, he overturned the very terms of the debate, referring to whiteness as an “ethnic disease”, requiring the compulsory segregation of that race from the others (39).

Indulging in a good bit of amateur historiography, tinged with anthropological theorizing, Stokes identified the colour bar as a modern European civilizational achievement. Whereas in the past, invaders mingled with the inhabitants of the places they invaded, leading to the “unity of humanity”, with “the Muslim faith” being particularly active here, he saw the modern version of European expansionism as “the breach of a great trust by a great race,” the great inheritance being the best of ancient Greece and the original legacy of Jesus (53). Dissociating the early church from the
kinds of racism it later accreted to itself, Stokes made a powerful case for inter-marriage between whites and non-whites as the antidote to the fear of miscegenation that keeps racism alive. His solution, at once personal and political, was as final as it was simple.

It was in this spirit that he had set about choosing a wife from a Christian pahari home for himself, keeping his faith in Christ alive even as he rejected the latter-day manifestations of the faith. The decision was at once deeply personal, involving as it did the renunciation of the renunciates’ path, and deeply political, involving as it did the choice of a more socially-engaged existence, one that rendered him more vulnerable and responsible towards the future he was committing himself to creating. The desirable by-product of such a union was, of course, offspring that could not be racially fixed into the binaries of white and black. If this was a step toward making India his home rather literally as he entered the grihasthashrama, his next major personal decision involving his family was one that marked a further step in the final goal of total assimilation into that chosen corner of India. That decision involved the voluntary ‘conversion’ of himself and family to the Hindu fold. But that decision also coincided with more public engagements, international, national and regional.

**World / War / Citizenship**

_The awakening and growth of the land of my adoption is closely bound up with the success of the Allies (Extracts Letter May 9 1914 TS)._ 

It was the First World War which provided the impetus for Stokes’ choices involving the vexed issues of citizenship, race, and gender. Like Mira and Sarala who watched the increasing polarization of peoples within Europe, with Sarala directly impacted due to her German pedigree, and Mira taking her first vocational leap as a music concert manager, Stokes and Elwin, as men, were affected more directly. Elvin, “used the Officers’ Training Corps as an outlet for my surplus energies,” rising to be Sergeant-Major and greatly enjoying “swaggering about” in uniform (Tribal World 9), while Stokes’ mode of telling his story of service in the British army at this time carries a high serious tone. It mirrors, in fact, the tone, tenor and weight of Gandhi’s reasons for contributing to the British side in the Boer War when in South
Africa. He is driven by a self-consciously held perception of the momentousness of the event and his place in the larger scheme of things. While both Gandhi and Stokes were driven by a sense that the only way Indians could claim equal rights as British subjects was by acting as exemplary citizens, Stokes also functioned from a well-developed sense of the international balance of power that the war threatened to impact.

Stokes would communicate to his mother that “I should consider a great dishonour and myself a coward, if I held back now when every man is needed” (Extracts Letter Sept. 12 1917 TS). He found, ironically enough, that his applications for enlistment were rejected on the grounds that his close association with Indians rendered him a potential seditionist. Offering to become a British Indian citizen to help facilitate his enlistment did not help either. His support for the war was in consonance with his stated belief in “individual freedom and personal responsibility” – principles he felt America risked betraying by its initial reluctance to support Britain against Germany (Sharma 117). After America’s entry into the fray in April 1917, he reapplied, successfully, as a naturalized British citizen – a prerequisite for enlistment.

Stokes at this juncture crossed various lines of identification, defining a self that constituted itself as a citizen of the world, a strategically chosen self as a naturalized British subject, and, within the India that he fully intended to make his home, a deliberately chosen regional identification. His original vocation, that of working with the most downtrodden, helped define his choice of the last two locations, even as it coalesced with a Gandhian identification with the rural rather than the urban as the real heart of India. His view of international politics sprang from a related conviction regarding the values enshrined in ‘Western’ liberal democracy, a conviction that can also be traced in Gandhi’s thought. He was at this point an American of English descent, now naturalized as a British citizen in the cause not of England per se, but “that larger loyalty to the interests of mankind as a whole” which he thought would be best served by supporting the Allies in the War. In supporting the war effort, Stokes was serving this larger interest. This was, of course, simultaneously
in line with the dominant refrain of the Indian national movement as represented by Gandhi.

But the Gandhian call was multi-dimensional, the public coalescing with the private, and the call to dedicate one’s life and work to the poorest in the villages had, in Stokes’ case, been sealed in a very personal way by virtue of his having married a ‘local’, a marriage that had already resulted in four offspring by the time of his enlistment.

**Nationalist Locations: With Gandhi and Beyond**

*There are ancient peoples, such as China and India, with civilizations based upon thousands of years of experience, to whom the nations of yesterday with their arrogant and predatory commercialism are an offence (Extracts Letter March 31 1919 TS).*

*I am a student not a leader, and my particular life work – laid aside for a time at Mahatmaji’s call last year–awaits me in my library (Extracts Letter Dec 10 1922 TS).*

Stokes’ marriage to Agnes Benjamin coincided with an increased engagement with the larger nationalist issues that had come to absorb him, helping redefine the notion of vocation. The publication of *The Failure* had been preceded by a series of articles, dealing with “the ultimate goal of Indian Nationalism” (1, emphasis original). Moving beyond a life of service to ‘the ‘poor’ to a more analytical and grassroots engagement with the institutions that caused that poverty, Stokes inevitably entered the arena of politics at the local and national level. His perception of his chosen vocation, literally that of work, derived from the Gospel but also, ultimately, from Gandhi’s use of *The Gita*. As with Gandhi, Stokes read *The Gita* from a fresh, ‘modern’ perspective, though the two men differed substantially, as evidenced in their correspondence and other writings, on the contours of that modernity.

These differences got articulated on issues such as Council Entry which Gandhi opposed but Stokes supported, as well as the call for Non-cooperation. On this last issue, Stokes emerged as a crusader for the claims of the region over top-heavy nationalism, implicitly opposing the elitism he detected in the national agenda of the
Congress. His reasons for opposing non-cooperation en masse are telling: “The vast majority of the peasants of India cannot afford to go to jail….Indeed if they are to keep body and soul together, they cannot afford the slightest interference in their agricultural work,” as he wrote to Gandhi (Sharma 214).

There was also the issue of Gandhi’s defence of the spinning franchise, which Stokes felt was untenable, his belief being that membership of the Congress could not rest upon adherence to such rigidly set conditions: “Everyone who sought to serve India honestly and faithfully, no matter what his particular views on spinning or any other subject may be, should be entitled to belong to the national body if India was his home,” he argued in a letter to C.F. Andrews in 1924, making domicile the sole criterion for nationalist activism (Sharma 215).

Stokes’ somewhat more ‘modern’ persona manifested itself in his interest in science and experimentation, certainly inherited from his father who was known to have contributed to elevator-making technology in the U.S., as was evident in his experiments with apple-growing in the Kotgarh region. Ably assisted by his mother in Philadelphia, Stokes had, following scientific methods, chosen varieties of apples that would flourish in the hills of Himachal. This was a component of his self-perception as a “practical recluse” (letter to Gandhi, quoted in Sharma 212), idealistic and pragmatic at once, working for the economic empowerment of the hill folk of the region he had chosen as his karma bhoomi. If in this he resembled Sarala, he diverged from her in his many differences vis-a-vis Gandhi. Stokes also differed markedly from Gandhi on the latter’s advocacy of celibacy as the sole form of birth control. In both these aspects, Stokes brought to his engagement with Gandhi and currents within the national movement a somewhat ‘Western’ rationalism and modernity, even as he settled and lived in the villages a life pared down to the bare essentials. His vision of the ideal future for India, “an enlightened India - a civilisation different in character from that of the great northern industrial nations, but in no way inferior,” deserves fuller quotation:

The Western conceptions of progress and economic success are insistent and powerful in their appeal to the minds of an awakening people, and Indians must have something truly Indian yet truly noble
and capable of realization upon which they may fix their eyes if they are to avoid being led astray.

[India should be] free from the intense and wearing strain of Western activity...an India in which the dignity of family life, sound education and intelligent patriotism are united to simplicity of living, free from the mistaken idea that a happy home must needs be the home of luxury (National Self-Realization 7-8).

That this was not a faithful rehearsal of familiar, somewhat patronizing injunctions by a Westerner to the ‘East’ to retain its “traditional virtues” while the ‘West’ could retain its modern advantage, is attested to by Stokes’ adherence to this very lifestyle: “This is the life I love. I have no use for the striving restlessness of the West” (Extracts Letter Feb 21 1919 TS). He sought and found in Harmony Hall, his Himachali homestead, “the true life, away from the unthinkable complications of modern predatory competition and industrialism,” which he described as “self-destroying monstrosity” (Extracts Letter Mar 31 1919 TS). Once again, the personal immersion in the stated theoretical formulation provides a compelling critique of simplistic binaries of reading the East-West encounter.

Stokes’ engagement with the national question had other undertones that indicate the delicate balance between doing justice to the best in European civilization as he saw it and facing the discrepancy between that ideal and the reality as it manifested itself around him. His critique of British racism and imperialist economic exploitation was trenchant and clear. His involvement with the national cause had won him the sentence of the six-month prison term at Lahore Central Jail in 1921, where he had refused preferential treatment over other Indian nationalists. But one can detect an independent spirit that prevented a full-scale immersion in the Congress-led nationalist cause, even an anxiety to do ‘justice’ to the British administrators who were responsible for carrying out the policies of the Empire. While his defense of some individual imperial administrators as essentially noble men with good intentions in the service of an objectionable empire evokes powerfully the Gandhian dictum of hating the sin not the sinner, there is in Stokes a tendency to apologize for the British, a result perhaps of his own reluctance to abandon aspects of his legacy. Gandhi’s own questioning of the colonial system, at a level both philosophical as well as
pragmatically political, was of course by no means “purely” of the “East”, even though he deployed successfully so many of the culture and religion-specific discourses as modes of mass political mobilization.

This is not to question Stokes’ commitment to his stated vocation, but to see the complex contours of it. While self-transformation of a Gandhian kind and political work of the kind that involved initiating the process of abolition of begar (forced labour), or empowering the poorest of the hill-folk with a consistent, informed, and comprehensive protection of their interests as farmers were modes of engagement he deployed, there was a curious shrinking from the hurly-burly of active politics. It is not surprising that one of the reasons for his retreat into the Simla hills after the prison term at Lahore was the crude language and ill-manners of his fellow prisoners, as he admitted candidly to his wife in Satyakama. Though he could on occasion take more militant positions, his position on most issues discussed by the All India Congress Committee (he was the only American to have ever served in that Committee) was moderate (Clymer 1990). Though he could be surprisingly radical in his positions (he was among the first in 1921 to promote the idea of giving Gandhi dictatorial powers over the nationalist movement), it took the gravest provocation, the passage of the Rowlatt Act and the mode of repression of peoples’ agitation against it, to turn him “profoundly anti-British in [his] attachments” (National Self-Realization 14-15).

That he was a reluctant revolutionary can be gleaned from the tone of the letter he had written to his mother in the wake of the Jallianwala incident in 1919, but also as a response to the increased racial division internationally:

…if the West refuses to admit her mistakes there will be a world conflagration beside which the recent war was child’s-play.

And the West will be to blame. God grant that before that time Europe and America may wake up to the real nature of their attitude and change it. *The thought of my sons ranged against the West harrows me*, but if for such a cause such a war should break out, I should wish them to be on the side of the East (*Extracts* Letter June 5 1919 TS, emphasis added).
It is interesting to note that Stokes spoke here in terms of the “East” and the “West”, even as for him, the horror lay not, as one would expect of a Quaker, in his sons going to war (his own conduct in the World War I war effort anticipated this line of revolt against the pacifist legacy that he otherwise chose to identify with) but in their being “ranged against the West”. We could read this as a compensatory gesture of identification with a “West” that he had abjured quite clearly before this event, and also factor in the dynamics of his relationship with his mother, who was a reluctant convert to his decisions regarding his work in India. Writing to his mother in 1921 he expressed a desire to retain the Imperial connection:

As you know I have gradually been forced from a position of approval of British rule to that of a moderate Nationalist, and from that to one a thorough-going Nationalist. This does not mean that I desire an immediate severance of India’s connection with the Empire. On the contrary, and if the British Empire could make it clear that it will give Indians the same position that it does Europeans throughout its confines, I would fight tooth and nail to retain the imperial connection (Extracts Letter Aug 13 1921 TS).

Stokes could not and did not wish to cut the umbilical cord of his European past, celebrating his ancestry (American, and English before that) even as he made the counter move towards total assimilation into the local.

In the latter half of his life, Stokes abandoned active politics, out of personal choice, a decision that did not result in a retreat from the public, but a more intense involvement with the regional and the local rather than the national. He retreated into the Kotgarh /Thanedar region, where he had already succeeding in abolishing begar, had successfully transformed the economy of the region with his apple plantation, ably followed up with protectionist measures and campaigns for building infrastructure such as roads, and had started Tara School, catering to the poorest:

Our idea is not preparation for the university–most of our lads could not afford to do so. I aim at real education….My purpose is to turn out men with ideas of their own, developed personality and character, a clear conception of the world in which we live and the problems which mankind
has to face, a clear idea of the needs of the Kotgarh locality and a sense of their personal responsibility to do their part in solving the immediate problems of their own neighbourhood (Extracts Letter Nov 13 1923 TS).

While this reflects the values that define the Gandhian principles of Basic Education that Sarala Devi came to institutionalize at Lakshmi Ashram, he also reflects another Gandhian value enshrined in these institutions, namely religious ecumenism. Appropriately enough, one of his enduring legacies is the all-faith temple he built at Kotgarh, an elegant structure built at personal cost (the Burma teak was brought from Calcutta and the stone quarried from long distances away), advaitic in its absence of an idol, with a lone painting of Krishna and Arjuna gifted by the artist Nandlal Bose adorning its austere interiors. It suggests the paradoxical austerity of the propertied reformer, local yet global, not overtly bound to any one faith but carrying nevertheless an unmistakable sign of its location within a dominant Hindu tradition to which he had consciously and publicly attached himself.

His home at Kotgarh, named “Harmony Hall” after the American family homestead, was a space that symbolized this symbiosis. While the general ambience was rural and pahari, with family members sitting on the floor to eat with their hands, Stokes was proud enough of his American legacy to have brought with him from one of his trips to America some valuable family heirlooms in the form of paintings and portraits. While he insisted, Gandhi-like, on educating his children in circumstances identical to those he had set up for the children from the poorest families in the neighborhood, they did have the advantages of visits to the ancestral family home in Philadelphia, a luxury ill-afforded by their classmates. This link with the land of birth, which was simultaneously a space of privilege and a testing ground for his ‘conversion’ to the Indian way, bespeaks a decidedly complex sense of self, one that is necessarily hybrid, and one that insists on assimilating the contradictory places that it has traversed.

Conversion: Conviction and Compromise

Knowing no more Christian or Hindu, Muslim or Jew, I have found only brothers and children of a common Father (Extracts Letter Dec 9 1923 TS).
Gandhi was a professed opponent of religious conversions, opposing, for instance, the suggestion in the English Press that Madeleine Slade had ‘converted’ to Hinduism. Stokes, who followed Gandhi in seeking an integration of Christian and Hindu values, took the decision to ‘convert’ to the Hindu fold in 1932 prompted by complex motivations. Given the social restrictions placed on their family due to rigid caste rules in the Kotgarh ilaqa, Stokes took the leap prompted by local friendly “progressive thinking families” who wanted their greater integration into their society (Sharma 276). His rationale for conversion was stated as follows in a piece called ‘Mr. Stokes’ Declaration of Faith’ published in The Indian Social Reformer on October 8, 1932: “I have felt of recent years that I could be honestly a Hindu, whereas I have not for a long time felt that I had the right to call myself a Christian….As the Church must follow its light so I must be as true as I can to what light I see” (Sharma 282). However, as Sharma points out perceptively, “he also admitted that he was doubtlessly influenced by mixed motives as most people were,” citing Kotgarh residents’ perception that “the Arya Samaj [which had opened its first school in the hills in Kotgarh in 1920] had played an important role in Stokes’ conversion” (Sharma 282-3).

Mixed in intention though it was, the conversion carried no ambivalence about the actual change of faith. Undertaken with full priestly paraphernalia, the ‘re-conversion’ of the entire family to Hinduism was of course not free of many of the traits one finds in Gandhi’s modes of decision-making. Though decidedly un-Gandhian in principle, it was profoundly Gandhian in its reassertion of public purpose (here also figured as the male’s agency) to which the family, including a deeply ambivalent wife, acquiesced. Stokes took the decision so that the family may be “fully identified in the years to come with the larger life of these hills” which were predominantly Hindu (Sharma 278). Ironically, however, Agnes Banjamin, forced after the shuddhi ceremony to practice a kind of untouchability vis-à-vis her own (Christian) family, paid a heavy emotional price for the decision (Sharma 288). However, Stokes was cognizant of the implications of the decision for her: “Had I not known what she was I should never have dared to ask of her the sacrifice I did… Knowing her I asked of her what I know would bring her pain, convinced that in doing so I was moving for her and (our children’s) ultimate good” (quoted in Sharma 287).
His acquiescence in the dominant prejudices of the Hindus of the region, especially in his wife’s reinforcement of the caste rules in the domestic domain, indicates a compromised modernity and forms a sharp contrast to Gandhi’s famous insistence that a reluctant Kasturba break the caste barrier personally by cleaning the latrines at the ashram. It can, however, be best understood in terms of his own stated rationale: as a kind of strategic capitulation, geared towards a larger conviction that the family’s final assimilation into the region, especially via the marriage of his children into ‘regular’ Hindu families, would ultimately loosen the race and caste barriers that he was so committed to undoing. Asha Sharma points out another achievement: his daughter Savitri’s wedding in 1935 was marked by “the unprecedented inclusion of Christians in traditional Hindu festivities….For the first time in the Kotgarh ilaga, Hindus and Christians ate together” (290). A ‘conservative’ move could and did effect some ‘radical’ changes. In its contradictions, then, Stokes’ ‘conversion’ embodies the paradoxes that Stokes embraced, consciously and deliberately, in choosing the life-trajectory that he did. It refuses easy assimilation into fixed ‘locations’, with the uniqueness of the situation forming the first principle of choice.

In this, he is reminiscent of Elwin, whose volte face towards the end of his career on the question of modernizing the tribal (a passionately opposed project in his early career) indicates a paradoxical conformism. Stokes’ career, much less ‘wild’, echoes his zeal for the hill-folk amongst whom he settled, though unlike Elwin, he did not live to see an independent India wherein his location vis-a-vis that nation-building enterprise could be mapped.

A major aspect of activism for Stokes involved the experiment with self and that extended self – the family – which got mobilized in the cause of ‘reform’. Even as this activism ‘conversed’ with the Indian nationalist agenda with varied degrees of intensity and in many permutations, it simultaneously carried on a conversation with the ‘other’ that the protagonists carried within. His attempt to reform the church in India via an interracial marriage might have given way to a more complete immersion in the adopted milieu as evidenced in his conversion, but if the first-person narrator in Satyakama is to be believed, the assimilative urge never left Stokes. Satyakama, though full of Sanskrit terminology drawn from a range of Indian philosophical
traditions, pays its tribute to the Gospels, and to the spirit of Christ. Just as Stokes proudly cherished his decidedly American/British heritage well into his last years, his book, written in English and addressed to his wife from jail, bears testimony to that mixed sensibility. He adapts the message of the Indian scriptures to his more worldly ethos, one in which the conjugal and the familial is rescued as a path to release, being as legitimate as the ascetic and the celibate.

Stokes’ is an example of a pioneer’s life, its many challenges and rewards bearing testimony to the large ideological space that India afforded at that juncture in its history. That the familial domain was inextricably woven into larger commitments to India, whether in its regional or national manifestations, marks Stokes’ version of bridge-building between the private and the public, always driven by a vision of equity that was as grounded in the material as it was in the spiritual. Near the end of his own life in 1946, he would describe himself as “not an extremist, or a starry-eyed visionary…. Nor…a socialist… [but a man] convinced that no human relations that are not based upon true equity can give any hope for the ‘brave new world’ about which we have heard so much” (Sharma 352).

As it turned out, his ultimate act of bridge-building, his decision to convert to Hinduism, was historically vindicated, as, after initial rejection, the family was socially and matrimonially assimilated in the region. History, however, has added an ironic twist to this narrative of location and vocation in the colonial context: Stokes’ descendents are, in telling contrast, now largely settled in the United States, a reverse migration that reflects decisions personal, but also undoubtedly political and economic (Sharma 368-372). Studying these forces in terms of (neo)colonialism yields an equally compelling narrative of a newer India, in a different world.

If Stokes, like Elwin, defined his national locations in terms of the regional and the international, and did so via personal choices regarding marriage and religion, Rahula Sankrityayan, the subject of the next chapter, can be seen as their Indian counterpart in many ways. He too engaged dynamically with religious and philosophical choices as a means of defining his location. Like them, he signifies an attempt to blend diverse influences from the East and the West, as well as a compelling position on the claims of the regional vis-a-vis the national and the international.