CHAPTER 5
RAHULA SANKRITYAYAN’S REVOLUTIONARY RELOCATIONS

For close to thirty-seven years, in my wanderings across the regions of the world, my work has been to trace the footsteps of my ancestors (Rahula Sankrityayan, “Foreword”, Bauddha Sanskriti).

Travel – as fact and metaphor – defines Rahula Sankrityayan’s autobiography. This chapter analyses the specific contours of this journeying and the rites of passage that go into the making of his unusual vocational choices. The trajectory of his life intersects thematically and historically with those of other key figures in the study. His life and work breaches boundaries, of language, discipline, religion, and ideology, and locates him in a uniquely angular position vis-à-vis other polymaths of his generation.

While his multi-volume autobiography in Hindi, Meri Jeevan Yatra (“My Life-Journey”, published in five volumes 2005), and his popular prose text, Ghumakkar Shastra (“Treatise for Travelers”), focus on the theme of travel, as fact and metaphor, other writings from his vast and diverse corpus of biography, history, political writing, fiction, scholarly exegesis and correspondence, reveal a public figure grounded in specific institutional contexts. Simultaneously circumscribed by these contexts, and chafing against their constraints to an individually driven quest for truth, he emerges most powerfully as a ceaseless quester, creating new contexts within a delicate dialectic of the past and the present. Focusing on his multi-volume autobiographical narrative, but reading it alongside analogous and supplementary writings that range from reminiscences, letters, biographical notes, and treatises, this chapter attempts to ‘locate’ him within contemporary discourses of self, nation, and the world. Sankrityayan was as highly self-conscious a participant in these contemporary public debates, as he was a self-aware record-keeper of his varied and eventful life.

The Life – Key Markers

Rahula Sankrityayan’s 70 year life span -- April 9, 1893 to April 15, 1963-- encompassed a rich diversity. He traveled and wrote indefatigably, took on many
names to coincide with his ideological growth while also meeting pragmatic needs, and left behind him a vast archive of writing that is rarely done full justice to in any one academic discipline. A quick recapitulation of his travels—used in the widest sense of the term—will indicate the analytical challenge that he poses.

Born Kedarnath Pandey in 1893 to an orthodox Brahmin family in Azamgarh village in the state of Uttar Pradesh, it was only in 1930 that he acquired the full name and title that he died with and is still largely known by: Mahapandit Rahula Sankrityayan. In the intervening period, he studied and experimented with many philosophies and paths in an ever-widening search for a truth that answered his evolving engagement with the world. He had a spell as a Hindu sadhu by the name of Baba Ram Udaar Das from 1912-13, during which he was offered the mahant-hood of Vaishnava Parsa math in Bihar. He soon fled this math as he found the feudal life and his inability to continue his Sanskrit studies while there repellent and started traveling through India on foot. He reached South India, studying Sanskrit at the Vaishnava math at Tirumishi (in present-day Tamil Nadu), yet again declining a chance to be heir to the ‘throne’. From Tirumishi he traveled north and his next step away from Hindu orthodoxy took place when he was beaten up by orthodox Shaivite sadhus for opposing animal sacrifice at a temple in Ayodhya. He joined the Arya Samaj in 1915, continuing his study of Sanskrit and Logic, while also getting inspired by the nationalist/anti-imperialist strand of the movement. As an Arya Samaji proselytiser, he wrote articles under the name Kedarnath Vidyarthi, and also came in contact with Buddhist ideas.

It was during his visit to Nepal in 1923, followed by the one to Sri Lanka in 1927, that he systematically studied Buddhism, acquiring the title of Tripitikacharya at the Vidyalankara University, Sri Lanka. While teaching Sanskrit at Vidyalankara, where he studied Pali simultaneously, he faced yet another philosophical crisis and finding, after due deliberation, that belief in a soul, or atman, was insupportable as an idea, formally declared his abandonment of the ‘Hindu’ tradition and became a Buddhist, ordained as Bhikshu Rahula Sankrityayan. By now he knew, along with Urdu, Hindi, Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian and of course his native Bhojpuri, Pali, Sinhalese and Tibetan. Convinced of the need to study Buddhism in a wider frame
and inspired by a vision of the lost glory of the Nalanda tradition of scholasticism, he traveled to Tibet as part of a plan to reconstruct the textual losses to the Buddhist tradition, preserved in Tibet after the medieval sack of Nalanda. He would undertake the arduous travel to Tibet four times, in disguise, and at considerable personal risk from the double hazard of local bandits and the British Police, to bring back with him over 1600 Buddhist manuscripts and numerous artefacts on 22 mules, translating some of them along the way. These he later donated to the Patna Museum.

While his titles (*Mahapandita* and *Tripitakacharya*) indicate his mastery of Sanskrit and Pali texts, the name ‘Rahula’ was chosen for its Buddhist antecedents (being the name of Prince Siddhartha Gautama’s son) and ‘Sankrityayan’ was crafted in recognition of the *gotra* that his family belonged to. This curiously composite name of his own invention (Buddhist and residually Brahmanical in its inclusion of the caste category) served him through his visits to Europe as a Buddhist missionary in 1932, during which period he declined, on political grounds, an invitation to travel to America in the same role. The name stayed with him in his later socialist phase which started in 1935, coinciding with his visit to the USSR, where he learnt Mongolian and Russian, and taught Buddhist philosophy at Leningrad University, at the invitation of the eminent scholar of Buddhist logic, Tscherbatsky. 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, initially as a member of the Indian National Congress. His nationalist political involvement earned him several jail terms, which he effectively utilized to further his education and produce much of his voluminous oeuvre. Growing disillusioned with the limited reach of the Indian National Congress, especially in the rural hinterlands of Bihar that he chose as his field of work, he became founder member, along with Acharya Narendra Dev, of the Socialist Party there in 1930. He founded the Communist Party in Bihar in 1939. He was a member of the Communist Party of India till 1948 when he ceased to be a member due to differences on the issue of Hindi as “*Rashtrabhasha*”, his position for Hindi violating the ‘party line’ at the time. He rejoined the Communist Party in 1955, and spent the last phase of his life in Darjeeling, where he passed away in 1963, the last few years of his life spent in spells
of writing and teaching on Marxist and Buddhist themes while simultaneously battling a debilitating amnesia. By then, he was master of 34 languages, and had written extensively in at least three, of which English was significant by its exclusion. He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in Hindi in 1959 and the Padma Bhushan in 1963.

Writing the Self – Negotiating a Pedagogical Imperative

The bare life-sketch captures precious little of Sankrityayan’s place and significance in his milieu which is better gauged by the variety and volume of the written and translated work he left behind in Hindi, Bhojpuri and Tibetan. His Hindi range includes nine novels, including the epic, Volga se Ganga, four collections of short stories, an autobiography published originally in five volumes, and fifteen biographies of religious and political leaders that range from ‘Vir Chandrasingh Garhwali’ to ‘Mao-Tse-Tung,’ and ‘Stalin’ to ‘Mahamanav Buddha’, reflecting an ideological range and spatial reach that is formidable. In addition, he wrote twelve travelogues recording his travels across Asia and Europe, with many through remote Himalayan states, seven collections of essays, ten translated books, and several booklets on folklore, science, sociology, politics, philosophy, and religion in Hindi alone. Additionally, he wrote three primers on the Tibetan language and two Bhojpuri plays. Fifteen volumes of classical Buddhist texts that he personally brought from Tibet undertaking three hazardous journeys, which he subsequently researched, edited, and translated, crown his literary-philosophical achievements.

His life and his literary work testify to a capacity for and commitment to translation, in the most fundamental sense of that word. The verb ‘to translate’ means, among other things, ‘to carry across’, to transport, and Sankrityayan not only transported those rare Buddhist scriptures to India physically, he also lived up to the title of translator in the more common usage of the term. Among his translations into Hindi are several novels from the Kazakh-Persian writer Aini’s socialist oeuvre, Marx and Engels’ The Communist Manifesto and the text of the Quran, a project he set for himself in jail. But to follow the metaphor to its logical autobiographical implication, he was ultimately a translator of ideas: translating a non-traditional vision of civilisational
growth into the novel format in *Volga se Ganga*, or his own life in disguised fictional form in *Jeene ke Liye*. Ultimately, he was translating himself – both by incessant acts of physical dislocation and relocation across diverse worlds, in pursuit of knowledge, experience, and political commitment. He allowed those travels to transform him in revolutionary ways, and then translated that corpus of acquired knowledge – of self and the world – into writing. That writing was shot through with an urgent sense of its utility for ‘the common man’, aimed ultimately towards building a better society, the contours of which grew in his mind as he followed his onward journey.

His autobiography, the key text and source here, was meant to be circulated amongst a Hindi-reading public, and bridges the divide between the public and the private in carrying over his larger concerns into the story of his life. It is, however, a story that he could not tell in its entirety in his own voice, owing to serious illness in the last years and a total loss of memory at the ultimate stage. The last two volumes were published posthumously, having been compiled by his wife, Kamala Sankrityayan, supplementing the material culled from his diary with her own memoirs. The tone and texture of the writing changes drastically in the last volumes, almost taking on the character of a log book, recording the travails of the difficult last years which were spent nursing his debilitating amnesia. This makes the autobiography, technically, at least a partial biography, a fact that is expectedly reflected in the altered stylistic tenor of the volume, which becomes less conversational and more formal since Kamala-ji’s Hindi was an acquired second language. This is significant since the politics of language, and the politics of reception, weighed heavy in his consciousness as a public intellectual.

By choosing to call the story of his life *Meri Jeevan Yatra*, Sankrityayan was doing more than rehearsing a tested and tried, perhaps even tired, analogy. He consciously chose travel as a mode of being and learning, and developed it as a philosophy of life. His negotiations between the inner and outer domains, the past and the present, home and the world, the indigenous and the imported in language, attire, spatial habitations therefore have a particular immediacy and energy. The impetus for these forays into what were often uncharted terrains was equally complex. While deriving inspiration for this ceaseless traveling from sources as traditional as ancient Indian traveling sages and saints, homelessness their established creed, his equally
intense awareness of the contemporaneous and need to engage with it, resulted in a ceaseless quest for routes to the concretely effective. In his negotiation of the dialectic of past and present, the Indian and the foreign, he forms an instructive contrast to Gandhi.

In his Preface to the autobiography Sankrityayan provides the justification for writing the account. He is, in this, following an established tradition that has at least one better-known antecedent, the autobiography of M.K.Gandhi. Unlike Gandhi, Sankrityayan is not concerned with the question of the cultural specificity, or otherwise, of the genre, a silence which is significant in a writer otherwise so conscious of genealogies. His justification for the autobiography, though similar in spirit to Gandhi’s in assuming the pedagogic value of his story, avoids the ‘high’ language of morality and ethics, which accompanies the intense interiority of Gandhi’s tussles with his conscience. He, instead, chooses the more modest, and everyday, language of relating his life’s experiences and sharing the more generalized “knowledge” gained thereby. It is also a language that is a hybrid Hindustani, deploying the ‘Persio-arabic’ “mehsoos”, “guzare”, “khayal” and “musafir” as easily as it does the ‘Sanskritic’ “pariman”, “gyan”, “sandeha” and “vishva”:

[Main barabar ise mehsoos karta raha]…I had long felt that it would have been to my great benefit had others who had taken these routes left behind accounts of their life-journeys–not only in terms of knowledge gained but also in terms of time saved. I agree that no two life-journeys can ever be identical, yet there is no doubt that all lives, of necessity, ride the currents of the same inner and outer world (Preface, Meri Jeevan Yatra I, 1).

This statement is significant in the way it accepts and asserts, in the same breath, the dual principles of individuation and collectivity in human experience. Even the decidedly unusual ‘routes’ that Sankrityayan took appear to be part of a stream of shared human experience, rather than some irreducibly unique phenomena. This dialectical approach to the inner and the outer, the private and the public, informs all his writing. The pedagogic value of the writing comes from the latter fact: had other travelers left their accounts, he would have been the beneficiary, just as his
writing in turn joins that continuous flow of collective knowledge. The dual impulse, to acquire knowledge and understanding of the world, but, recognizing the basic fact of mortality, to do so in the minimum amount of time, points to one of the key philosophical imperatives that one can trace in Sankrityayan: life as a quest for knowledge along an evolutionary model of progressive self-improvement. This discourse of enlightenment, as it illumines his quest, looks in both directions: the private and the public domains, to the ‘East’ and the ‘West’, to his own nation’s past as well as to an ever-changing present in order to build a better future. He makes a further distinction regarding his autobiography: that he has chosen to write not his autobiography (jeevani) but his life-journey (jeevan-yatra). The reasons, he says, are evident: that his intention was “to mark the various rhythms and peculiarities of that world which a generation thrice removed will find very difficult to imagine” (‘Preface’ 1). Further, he claims ignorance in “the art of writing an autobiography”, an admission that does not add to the argument against writing one, since in the same sentence he disclaims having had training in writing on any other subject either.

The public domain impinges on the act of writing rather more urgently, when he reveals the material circumstances that occasioned the writing of the first part. Having been asked by friends to write his life story, he had always felt short of time. However, the spell of imprisonment in Hazaribagh Jail beginning March 14, 1940, with the prospect of being there for several months with no books to read and no intention of writing any others, changed his mind. Writing became a way of spending his prison days fruitfully, and he wrote from memory of the first 41 years of his life, in two months flat. The fact that he had diary accounts of the rest made him hesitate to write further from memory alone, and even when released from jail on July 23, 1942, he prioritized the publication of the other six volumes he had written in jail. Writing the ‘Preface’ in September, 1944, he discloses that he is currently perforce writing the next installment, again as a means of filling in the spare time he has while waiting for the visa to arrive from Iran, en route to his third journey to the USSR, a process indefinitely delayed in the new dispensation in the wake of the Second World War. Thus, the ‘outside’ impinges on the writing with a journalistic urgency here that by itself underscores the context and contours of the autobiography, making it an
unmistakably public document. Within this disclosure of the causal, and casual, terms of the text’s production one can read an indifference to the personal dimensions of the genre: his preference for the educative aspect to be highlighted, and the fact that he would rather publish his other political and historical documents before the autobiography goes into print, both underscore an attitude of unease, if not positive disdain, for writing the ‘mere’ self.

While defining the discourse of the emergent nation, the more progressive lineages from the land of his birth inspire him, but as he moves intellectually and then physically into the wider world, he finds himself deriving inspiration from a wider international scenario where the ideas of Karl Marx, altering the way the Soviet Union pursued its goals of national restructuring, were fuelling the dreams of a section of the anti-colonial movement in India. Thus, while the Buddha’s enlightenment lights his way, he also moves ‘progressively’ towards Marxist philosophy, and in fact often deploys both as explanatory or justificatory theoretical models. Here the enemy to be fought is not only to be the colonial outsider, but also the retrogressive social and economic structures that grip Indian society.

His commitment to progressive thought entails a pedagogical imperative that we find in Gandhi, Nehru and Sarala Devi’s narratives as well. In the ‘Preface’ to the autobiography, he speaks of the act of writing as an investment in “our” future generations. 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 practice of roaming, which he delineates in great detail, be taken up by all youth – men and women alike.

Sankrityayan’s adoption of different names at different points in his life is a somewhat graphic means of tracking a changing self, and a desire to record that altered identity publicly. Like the itinerant life-style, they are part of an older tradition, but he stretches the tradition to suit his unique trajectory. His name change marks not just a new religious identification, it relates crucially to his growing historical understanding, and his perceived sense of his desired location within it and, finally, with his growing self-definition as a world citizen. His understanding of
religion and tradition, is inextricably linked to this growing awareness, and is, therefore, as political as it is philosophical and historical. Interestingly, there is no name change after the Buddhist ‘Rahula Sankrityayan’. Buddhism continued to provide him with a kind of philosophically rooted resting-place from where he could stretch his Marxist wings without hitting too great an ideological obstacle or making too great a theoretical compromise. More than anything else, it enabled an understanding of the self that allowed for an open-ended exploration of life.

The philosophical notion of the self that underpins his writing is inherent in the epigraph to his autobiography: [Berhe ki tarah paar utarne ke liye maine vicharon ko sweekar kiya] “…I took ideas/knowledge as a raft to ferry me across, not as a load to be carried on the head.” This paraphrase of the Buddha’s saying from the Majjhima Nikaya, where he, the Tathagata, the ‘Thus Gone’, implores his followers to accept his teachings as a means to ‘go across’ rather than as doctrine to be held on to and defended, aptly measures the contours of Sankrityayan’s ideological travels, even as it reasserts the metaphor of life as a journey, with ideas and knowledge as mere tools to enable a cognitive crossing over. The teleological thrust behind it – one does have a ‘river’ to cross over, and there is ‘the other side’ – indicates a philosophical approach that enables engagement with the world, and a progressive openness to experience, a willingness to change one’s beliefs in response to new facts and stimuli, a radical dynamism of the self and society that is fundamentally at odds with orthodoxy.

This willingness to challenge orthodoxy, apparent in a tendency towards iconoclasm, finds a self-reflexive moment in the autobiography, when he detains the reader, albeit for a short time, on some silences regarding his personal life:

Social hypocrisy angers me no end. I believe – these hypocrisies have to go, or society shall fall apart. Therefore, along with debunking social hypocrisy, I would have been pleased to shatter my own persona [“vyaktitva”] to pieces. Many today would have been unfairly judgmental of me as a result, but their numbers would be negligible compared to those who would have appreciated me in the future. Even so, I have to
control my pen on this subject out of deference for the wishes of my friends and dear ones (Meri Jeevan Yatra I, 247).

Multiple negotiations are evident in this excerpt: the truth claims of autobiography as a genre are recognized in all earnestness, even as conflicting impulses play out their claims alongside his own stated desire to extend his declared iconoclasm to himself. The public implications of the genre of autobiography, of the responsibility to maintain a gravitas-laden persona, conflict with the claims of a rebellious sensibility: “The idea of shattering the cult of personality-worship gets me excited ever so often, much like little boys holding stones in their hands love to hear the music of clay pots breaking into tiny pieces” (247).

That this iconoclastic intention was successful is attested to in Namvar Singh’s question whether “Rahulaji did not, inspite of the insistence of his friends and loved ones, manage to scratch his image just a bit.” He also points to the inevitable element of art in autobiography which makes a jagged life a linear narrative. As it happens, “[In] Rahul-ji’s ‘Meri Jeevan Yatra’ …dates and events, despite being real, acquire a different aesthetic form (“kalpa-srishti”) in the process of being organized in serial order. As a result, the transformation of Mahapandit Rahul Sankrityayan appears to be a straight line, whereas the possibility of its being complex are greater” (“Kedar se Rahul”’16).

The Scope of the Self – Religion, Culture, Nation and Beyond

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 Sankrityayan represents, in a highly compressed form, a strand in an entire generation in India’s history attempting to simultaneously create and explore an indigenous inheritance and align it with a kind of selective cosmopolitanism that is a result of precisely these travels in the wider world. A telling metaphor that underscores the nature of the problem as he defined it occurs in Volume II of the autobiography. His physical journeys continuously reflected on that of the nation and of humanity in general. While in the London metro, an encounter with the escalator, an “electric staircase” that gave him much trouble, leads him to a thoughtful analogy. “The world,” he says, is much like an escalator; “while it drags one foot forward, we wish to keep the other rooted to the motionless ground. Hindustan suffers from this disease the most. Circumstances are propelling it forward into the future, but it wants to hold on to its past in matters of religion and society. Our people study science, geography and astronomy, then … maintain full faith in the old astrology….“ (Meri Jeevan Yatra II, 100). Listing the usual signs of orthodoxy, the Brahamanical ritualistic attire and the purity-pollution taboos, he points to the contradictions that mark India’s march towards freedom.

This pilgrim’s progress takes place within the larger narrative of the India’s struggle to achieve political freedom and social change, the making of which was effected along lines that crossed the local, the national, the global human. An entire discursive terrain can potentially be mapped through this life, where one would encounter individuals like the socialist Acharya Narendra Dev or Bhadant Ananda Kauslayayan, the former, his co-translator, in jail, of Karl Marx’s The Communist Manifesto, the latter, his life-long comrade in their shared passion for Buddhist revival in India. One would also encounter polymaths such as the scholar 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” (Machwe 16), or sometimes, through a simultaneity, as suggested by the mixed genealogy of his chosen name. This fact, that he chose a
caste-specific surname, retaining a link with the name of his forefathers, despite the sharp ideological break from the Brahmanical fold that conversion to Buddhism implied, is of a piece with his interest in continuities and genealogies. These are explored on the civilisational scale in volumes like From Volga to Ganga, at the level of languages in his devotion to etymologies and linguistic cross-connections, and in tracing the micro-history of his district, and in the historically inflected self-exploration that is his autobiography. His retelling his life-story is determined by the dynamics of the genre of autobiography where the past is remembered as filtered through the fully-formed adult consciousness. The recollection of this personal past is thus structured into a narrative of evolution in consciousness, which often takes revolutionary turns.

His physical relocations start from childhood. From the rural hinterland of Uttar Pradesh where he is born into a family of modest means, he is sent to “Rani ki Sarai,” a small town characterized by provincial attitudes. He studies at a madrasa where the primary pedagogic tool was the cane that the dreaded school-master wielded. His first encounter with a city is when he is taken to Banaras for his sacred thread ceremony accompanied by his uncle, in 1902. He escapes his uncle’s guardian eye, marking the first moment of his ghumakkari. Recalling the fear that his guardians experience at his first attempt to evade adult surveillance, he uses a set of colloquialisms to relate the many dangers to life, limb, that beset a little boy from the village. The adults fear that he might be lost “…in the city of the courtesan, the charging bull, the slippery steps of the ‘ghat’ and the wandering mendicant” (“‘raand-saand-seedhi-sanyasi wale’ shaher mein ek dihati bhatake ladke….” Meri Jeevan Yatra I, 49). The last of the perceived threats, in the colourful list of rhyming alliterative ones, was particularly perspicacious since he did succumb to that temptation with its attendant abdication from the householder’s vocation. That he would, much later, ‘succumb’ to other temptations, of entering the householder’s path, not once but twice, despite his protestations to the contrary, are testimony to an internal contradiction that Namvar Singh notes: “Fear of the home and yet a longing for a home: Meri Jeevan Yatra is, as if, an attempt to embrace these two polar opposites at once” (“Kedar se Rahula” 16).
However, larger structures, such as the injustices of states, impinged on the human need to find or make a home, as his personal experiences bore out. His inability to stay on in the USSR, after marrying and settling there, had partly to do with his felt need to return to an India in the throes of national movement for liberation from British rule, while his Russian wife and child’s subsequent inability to join him in India resulted from the harsh laws regarding citizens’ travel under the Stalin regime. In either case, causes larger than individual human will prevailed; the nation, as nascent entity, or achieved fact, was the stumbling block in the fulfillment of personal dreams, although his figuring of his nationalist engagement occurs in terms of a deeply felt personal commitment. In his daughter Jaya Parhawk’s words, “he did not want a home without a nation” (Interview 2006).

Sankrityayan’s early forays into self-exploration and self-creation took the religious route. Religion, however, was also inextricably linked to the larger pursuit of education in the widest sense of the term. When he evaded adult supervision to wander Benaras’ streets as a young boy, it was expressly in pursuit of some books that he had seen by a wayside stall. His refusal to accept the child-bride his parents foisted upon him in a time-tested strategy of tethering him to the domestic domain derived from this knowledge-cum-wanderlust, which found no contradiction in religion until he started getting absorbed into the hierarchical structures of the feudal culture of the larger manifestations of organized religion. His final break with the Parsa math, of which he was the declared privileged heir, was on the dual issue of its life of parasitical leisure combined with his not getting an opportunity to study Sanskrit in that position. His attraction to the Arya Samaj was similarly inspired by his desire to study the ancient texts in Sanskrit, and the proximity to the nationalist cause that he gained while being there, was a by-product of this primary aim.

His first encounter with Buddhism, in his own telling, was not conscious, and reflected generations of collective national amnesia. He refers to his childhood memory of a Buddhist statue worshipped as “Deeh baba” in his native village, its Buddhist origins forgotten in centuries of neglect. The educated Indian class’s newfound appreciation of Buddhism, visible since the early 20th century, he says 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 Mahasthavir 402-3). In the observation and in the
irony that accompanies it, one discerns an element of cultural nationalism: our lost glory, he implies, must be rediscovered, but for the restoration to be truly enabling, its sources have to be internal. In many ways, Sankrityayan’s Hindi narratives were performing that task.

Beyond the passing references to Buddhism at school, it was only in 1910, when he reached Bareilly after completing his first trip to Badrinath, that he received a somewhat clearer exposition of it in the form of a Sanskrit pamphlet by a Sadhu Khunnilal Shastri. Later, traveling via Sarnath, he encountered some Burmese monks at prayer. Even later, in his Arya Samaj phase, he traced the footsteps of the Buddha in Bihar, mistakenly, he says, considering him to be another sage like Maharshi Dayanand, unaware of the doctrinal differences. As he read and heard more about the liberal views of the Buddhists, who, as rejecters of the authority of the Vedas, were of the ‘enemy camp,’ his readings as an Arya Samaji ironically had the effect of rousing curiosity in that rival faith. Subsequently, meeting Bodhananda Mahasthavir, he started on an intellectual engagement with Buddhism which took him first to Sri Lanka, then to Tibet, and finally to the project of Buddhist restoration in the land of its birth.

For Sankrityayan, the Buddhist tradition also reinforced his favoured philosophy of ‘ghumakkari’. He points out that quite contrary to the insulating effect of the Brahmanical taboos on travel across the oceans, Buddhism encouraged the spread of its rational and universal message via travel through the most difficult terrains, its missionaries transcending all obstacles, be they the mighty Himalayas or the Gobi desert (Bhadant Bodhanand Mahasthavir 403). Likening Buddhism’s universality to the merging of many rivers into the one ocean, he celebrates its humanistic creed that erases hierarchical identities based on gender, caste and class: “The Buddhist faith [“Bauddha dharma’’] is like the rivers that leave behind their name and form [“naam-roop’’] to become one with the ocean” (Ghumakkar Shastra 59).

His essay “Buddhist Dialectics” explicates the connections between Buddhism and Marxism: it is easier for someone with a Buddhist background to understand Marxist philosophy, he claims, linking Buddhism’s dialectical method, its rejection of
a creator god, and its humanism with some key ideas in Marx, though Buddhism remains for him, in the final analysis, a form of Hegelian idealism. In *Ateet se Vartaman* (1956), he again seeks to silence critics that Buddhism is not a full-fledged philosophy.

Yet, the growing rift in his mind between ‘faith’ and ‘science’, fuelled by the perception that religion cannot be a viable ideological ground for a future society, tilts the scale in favour of the latter. He mentions Buddhism’s ‘irrationalities’ that prevent the relation between it and Marxism from becoming one of identity. And his, by now radical, antipathy to organized religion, a primary cause of social conflict according to him, is linked to his refusal to identify himself with Buddhism, as also with the Gandhian attempt to use religion to work towards a national unity. In a polemic against a perceived decaying order, he declares that “the unity of Indians can be achieved not by bringing religions together, but by burning them down… religion is a disease, the only cure for which is death” (quoted in Poddar 27).

His views on Gandhi reflect a growing mellowness that is telling. While his early position on Gandhi is that of a Marxist critic, (“*Gandhivaad*” in *Dimaghi Ghulami* 1937) he later modifies his position, and by the time he writes his essay “*Buddha aur Gandhi*”, he can describe Gandhi as a true Mahatma, who is not rendered immobile by his belief in God and a changeless universe. As an emancipator, Gandhi’s failure to accept the Buddha’s philosophy of flux is regrettable, though his increasing interest in economic emancipation is heartening. Gandhi, whom he describes as “a karma yogi,” can actually exceed the Buddha were he only to address the issue of class disparity with the active power of *ahimsa*.

Further instances of his nuanced approach to these non-Marxist inspirational figures from Indian history occur in his essay on Akbar: “Culture and religion are not the same thing; I myself am an example of this. Despite my great reverence for the Buddha, and acceptance of his philosophical views to a great extent, I still cannot call myself a follower of the Buddhist faith”) (*Akbar* 343, translation mine). The broader implication of the above lies in the dissociation of ‘culture’ from ‘organised religion’ or ‘faith’ (both meanings of ‘*dharma*’ would be applicable here) to suggest larger,
secular continuities of culture that a disavowal of faith does not jeopardise. This is what K.P. Jayaswal, writing in 1936, a year after the scathing Dimaghi Ghulami was published, meant when he said that Sankrityayan “is not only a son of the Buddha, he is primarily a son of India” (quoted in J. Sankrityayan 21).

This idea, nascent here, makes it possible to place his trajectory, and ultimate ‘evolution’ into Marxism, within a larger frame of a rootedness in ‘Indian culture’, but a cultural nationalism defined on his own terms. A good example of it occurs early in his autobiography, when he recalls childhood with the benefit of hindsight. His autobiography is derivative of the rich rural repertoire of oral traditions and 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 flavour of his grandfather’s storytelling can be tasted in his conversational prose that is peppered with ruralisms. But this is the limit of his inheritance. His difference from his grandfather’s travels and narratives indicate the distance he has traveled linguistically and ideologically. His autobiography at this point becomes a marker of a rite of passage as he, in retrospect, in a language that can slip as easily into Sanskrit poetry as Urdu couplets, 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 traces of a heterodox tradition are sought to be erased by counter-myth-making, Sankrityayan, via his own retelling of this history, participates in a progressivist act of rescuing that lost history from oblivion.

The excerpt helps us understand his commitment to a nuanced and dynamic approach to self, language, history, and ultimately, the nation. An important text that exemplifies this approach is his popular treatise on his self-styled ‘philosophy of travel’, called Ghumakkar Shastra.
Ghumakkar Shastra – Travel, Vocation, and Mapping the Nation

Ghumakkar Shastra is significant in being symptomatic of how Sankrityayana’s public persona was cultivated and projected in a deliberately provocative and accessible written style. As opposed to the autobiography, which is laden with the weight of detail (daily detail in the latter half) since it owed its origins to diary entries, this concise booklet-manual makes deceptively light reading as it alternatively teases, cajoles, provokes and challenges the reader to accept its somewhat hyperbolic advocacy of the path of the wanderer, a path that is posited as the ideal vocation. In its advocacy of the virtues of “leaving home”, it raises questions about the mutual connections between location and vocation. Studying the autobiography in juxtaposition to it also highlights in telling detail the writer’s own deviations from this projected ideal, in effect making this an inseparable, though oblique, foil-adjunct to the autobiographical narrative.

The link between the two books, apart from their titles, lies in an Urdu couplet (Ghumakkar Shastra ascribes it to the poet Ismail ‘Meruthhi’) that forms a leitmotif in Meri Jeevan Yatra, a personal mantra that goads him at crucial junctures:

Sair kar duniya ki gafil zindagani phir kahan
Zindagi gar kuchh rahi toh naujawani phir kahan –
(Roam the world, Thoughtless One, for life is fleeting
Some life you may have awhile, but youth is surely fleeting)

This carpe diem poem, far from its more hedonistic Latin counterparts, serves the interests of an altogether more purposive, even occasionally ascetic, ideology here. As opposed to tourism, which is done in comfort, this path exercises all the faculties of body and mind (Ghumakkar Shastra 92). Those struck by “the disease of ghumakkari” are likened to patients of tuberculosis, a disease whose only cure is death. It is not a path to be taken to lightly, he warns (23).

The text uses the wanderer motif, which has a mixed genealogy. Both proscriptive and prescriptive, Ghumakkar Shastra attempts to convince an intended readership of the nation’s youth, as well as their guardians, of the desirability of the wanderer’s way of life, one sanctified by the weight of previous generations of
itinerant figures. Somewhat tongue-in-cheek, he invokes the *Shastras* to say that we must cultivate curiosity for all that which is “*shreshtha*” (superior) and “supremely beneficial to the individual and society” (7). Further, it is the highest duty, he declares, of every traveler to benefit “future generations of wanderers” by writing of their travels. The benefits are many: hitherto unexplored regions are discovered for the benefit of both – the traveler and the inhabitants; the traveler improves his understanding of the world while deriving enjoyment, while the places visited benefit from the contact with another culture, that of the traveler. Of course, for this utopian result to occur, the traveler must approach traveling as a vocation. Strict norms must dictate conduct while wandering through strange lands, and the public-spirited act of sharing the experience with other readers should ideally perpetuate the cycle of good deeds that the traveler initiated by encouraging them to take to the road. This is so because the written word, like photographs, can never capture the true flavour of the experience of travel and therefore first-hand experience is the only guarantee of authenticity. In a metaphorical mode, he likens even the travails of travel to spice in food, without which the experience would be bland.

Having made his claim that wandering is the supreme activity, he sets about creating an appropriate tradition for it. While primitive “natural man” was a wanderer, and hence it is the intrinsic nature of humankind to do so, one clear tradition is that of the wandering *sadhu*, the holy sage, the greatest of whom, he admits is the Buddha himself (7). Mahavira and Shankaracharya follow, as do Guru Nanak and Dayanand Saraswati. This creed, and he uses a quasi-religious language, is the highest, the “only timeless, eternal creed in the world, great as the sky, vast as the ocean…,” one that has been followed by the leaders of all the great world religions in their hey-day (11).

Keeping to the universalistic spirit thus established, he quietly expands the scope of the ‘great men’ to include ‘secular’ benefactors of mankind, and is not averse to including Christopher Columbus in this pantheon. He invokes Mongolian travelers as facilitators of the scientific revolution in the West and, indeed, Charles Darwin as an inspired traveler who owed his discoveries to travel (8). The *ghumakkhar* is the one who has made the world what it is, he argues, breezily disposing of the incidental violence (the rivers of blood, “*khoon ki nadiyan*”) that
had often accompanied these traveler-settlers. Colonisation of uninhabited territories receives his approval and he chides the lazy “frog-in-the-well mentality” of the Chinese and Indians who quite failed to inhabit the vast territories of Australia — “ours for the taking a couple of hundred years back” — and who now carp about over-population (8). The swift move from the discourse of general self-development to the public good, to the specific distribution of geo-political power in the twentieth century is not accidental: it is typical of Sankrityayan’s range of concerns.

Ghumakkari is not a narrow-minded creed, he asserts, and it encourages women to travel as well as men (even the Buddha admitted women into the homeless community of the ordained — the sangha), though they may be better advised to do so in groups of three. One discerns here familiar themes in Sankrityayan’s life and work: a concern with shaping a new society based on egalitarian principles, drawing upon existing traditions wherever possible, and resurrecting if necessary, progressive traditions that have been lost in the long march of India’s history. The creed of wandering is one such, “forgetting” which has pushed India into the depths of insularity, a frog-in-the-well mentality (“koop-mandookta”) (8).

The treatise then matter-of-factly moves on to enumerating the requisites for becoming a consummate wanderer, drawing upon his own experience, and the list is interesting for its dovetailing of this socially subversive creed into a constructive program of benefitting the nation, and indeed all humanity. Thus, first and foremost, the wanderer needs courage to withstand the psychological pressure to conform that the institution of the family places on him/her, and must be prepared to deal with mother’s tears, father’s fears and spouse’s grouses and protests (14-18). Fears of other kinds, such as of new technology, are put in their place — 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 instantaneous (23). Modernity and tradition blend in that juxtaposition.

In another modern twist to the figure of the itinerant monk dependent upon alms for survival, he argues for ghumakkar’s financial independence and advocates vocational training, to be easily acquired by apprenticeship or even association. His list of desirable professional skills are largely derived from what are considered
“low-caste” professions such as that of the barber (easy portability of implements helps), carpenter, weaver, tailor, blacksmith and farmer. This later finds a parallel in his passionate argument for the rejuvenation of the Hindi language with words derived from the texture of working class/caste lives. Thus, words indicating activities that belong to the professional world of carpenters, blacksmiths, and farmers are to be included. Female *ghumakkars* can correspondingly specialize in beauty treatments, something sure to get them employment wherever they go. 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 (classical music is good but the folk tradition is better). The flute, he suggests, is a good instrument to carry, and can even be improvised from simple raw materials.

For the traveler venturing into tribal regions, the text advocates care. Citing the example (known for inspiring Marx and Engels’ thinking on the origin of the family) of Lewis H. Morgan’s researches into the Native North American tribes, he sees here the possibility of learning anew the ‘first moments’ in humankind’s social development, especially in the field of language. The text here takes on a gazetteer quality as he lists in detail the different tribes to be encountered and in different regions in India. His progressive social agenda make shim argue that the *ghumakkar* must highlight the poverty and backwardness of the region and to hope to bring the light of modernity and progress into those lives, much in the tradition of Morgan’s evolutionary model. However, even as he asserts this ‘progressive’ message, there is a core of respect for the cultural richness of these tribes, and the need to preserve their arts and crafts. Hinting perhaps at Verrier Elwin, he mentions a particular Englishman who, out of pure ‘academic interest’, married a tribal girl in order to study the forest tribe better, but warns: “Since marriage is one of the worst things that can happen to a *ghumakkar*, I feel such cheap tactics ("saste hathiyar") should not be used…” (42). The objection is not only to ‘succumbing’ to the lure of marriage however; the act invites his criticism for an implicit exploitative utilitarianism.
Celibacy, though preferable in the highest kind of wanderer, is not a prerequisite, even if there are paeans to that virtue enshrined in Buddhist lore, along with practical means of maintaining that state in the face of temptation. Since being ‘burdened’ with off-spring being a sure means to curbing free-spiritedness, this eventuality must be avoided at all cost though, unlike Gandhi, there is no moral injunction against contraception. ‘Love’, as an entire section is titled, is implicitly treated as a powerful urge that binds humans to one place, when allowed to dominate the emotions, and especially when progeny are a by-product. Sankrityayan, however, appeals to the spirit of science and, describing *brahmacharya* as “that familiar but impractical” path, says that until such time as current orthodoxies are discarded, solving thereby many of the problems a *ghumakkar* may face, he must perforce “purchase things at the going rate” (65). In fact, pragmatism of a kind defines Sankrityayan’s delineation of this ideal, as he proceeds to giving precise advice on the logistics of being a *ghumakkar*.

Other forms of preparedness – knowledge of geography, languages, history – are desirable and necessary. *Ghumakkari*, he warns youth, is no escape from studies, thus revealing a sharp understanding of human psychology, as well as an extension of the discourse of purposeful self- (and national) development that underlies this apparent call to irresponsibility. Within its serious purview lie the laudable aims of acquiring better understanding of the nation (“*desh gyan*”) (67). Tagore’s artistic formation owed itself to travel, he argues. Sankrityayan’s insistence on the local, displayed in his demonstrated devotion to Bhojpuri gets reasserted towards the very end of the book. This happens in within an international context. He notes with approval a Russian friend’s congratulating him on exuding the “fragrance of the soil” (“*matri bhoomi ki sugandh*”) wherever he goes (86). However, this “*sugandh*”, he is quick to add, can all too easily turn into a “*durgandh*” (a foul smell) in the case of the ‘wrong’ kind of wanderer, one who is not careful with his conduct and one whose outlook is narrowly parochial. Thus, the question of location gathers finer nuances as he addresses and anticipates some of the dangers of parochial versions of counter-imperialist nativism, even as he celebrates a rooted, regional selfhood.
His own ambivalence towards his native village, which he did not visit after having launched forth on his vocation of *ghumakkari* until the age of fifty, had led Namvar Singh to speculate as to the real catalytic force behind his leaving home: the desire to escape the child marriage he was forced into. Fifty being deemed an age in terms of all expectations to begin a family would be laid to rest, Sankrityayan chose that as the time for a “safe” return (Singh 15). It is another matter that he would, later, remarry well past that age, and start a family quite contrary to his own advice in *Ghumkkar Shastra*. His last wife, Dr. Kamala Sankrityayan had an incisive comment on this decision to voluntarily curb his freedom. Quoting a criticism of her role in his life as an obstacle to his free-roaming as a lion, she points out that “a lion too grows old, weak and dies. And feels the need for a lioness” (*Meri Jeevan Yatra V*, 378-9). Thus underscoring his failing health as a reason for his entering matrimony at a late stage in his life, she introduces the existential element into the motif of freedom that the autobiography explores and that *Ghumkkan Shastra* somewhat airily advocates.

*Ghumkkan Shastra* casts the village as a source of stifling safety and insists that the world at large is not a dangerous mine-field. The message of the text is that the world is essentially humane and that one who leaves his home behind will find all too many homes eager to take him in. This expansiveness, based on faith in human nature the world over, under-girds the book’s cosmopolitan optimism, situating it as an inspirational manifesto for a new generation. The location of this text within a pedagogical system, an informal one of guide books and self-help books as well as a formal one of university reading lists, is declared early. In the “Preface” to the second edition, 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 it offers, to wander the world while youth lasts, if somewhat subversive of social convention, is yet brought firmly back within a safe frame. Its reception history corroborates this fact. Though initially he received letters of protest from irate parents who blamed him for planting the seeds of irresponsible wandering in the impressionable minds of their off-spring, this ‘subversive’ got easily absorbed into formal pedagogic systems. (K. Sankrityayan. Interview). The text, much like
the writer himself, in acquiring an iconic status in his very lifetime, had added another dimension to the title’s mock-gravitas, its comic claims to shastra-hood, by creating a new icon that hovers between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘secular’, of science and religion, of home and the world. In doing this, this text that resists taxonomic classification, participates in the broader trend explored here: the undoing of facile binaries.

**The Master of Tongues – Language, Nation, and Identity**

The issue of language has had a contentious history in the politics of nations. It is associated with some fundamental questions of identity and location, and nations have had to negotiate with these questions for centuries. While language had provided the terms for carving up of nation states within Europe, the 20th century offered, to a mind like Sankrityayan’s, an inspiring model for India in the experiment conducted within the Soviet Union. He was impressed and inspired enough by this model to suggest it as his solution to the issue of tremendous linguistic diversity within a unified republic – one of the key problems of the newly emergent Indian nation. But even before that status had been achieved, before the battle for the nation had been won, language was an issue that had caused considerable dissension and debate, touching such fundamentals of social and political organization as religion, caste, and class. The politics of location was played out in terms of the margin and the periphery not only vis-à-vis these sets of concerns, but also in the more obvious’ literal sense of the relation of the rural with the urban. Thus, while the macro picture of India presented conflicts at the level of the claims of the North versus the South, the more local intra-North-Indian battle lines were also drawn along the lines of the oral versus the written, of the ‘mere’ dialect versus the written language, of the hoary ancient and the relatively modern, of Hindi versus Hindustani versus Urdu. The position of English within this debate, of special interest to post-colonial theory, is significant since it touches the issue across the nation. The later claims of English versus Hindi, played out most vociferously in the politics of the Southern states in post-Independence India, draws
its energy from the discourse of centre versus periphery, whereby the northern hegemony of Hindi as a national language had to be opposed in favour of English, seen to be more ‘neutral’ and pragmatically suitable as a unifying official language, thanks precisely to the residual impact of colonial rule.

Sankrityayan, though located in a cosmopolitan mind-scape, chose however to align himself most powerfully with the claims of the land of his birth, the ‘Hindi’ belt of eastern Uttar Pradesh and then in Bihar, his adopted *karma bhoomi*. While he deliberately composed plays in Bhojpuri, and made his characters in several ‘Hindi’ works speak dialects appropriate to the regions they belonged to, he came to be known for his pro-Hindi position, articulated with great robustness and clarity, drawing its energies from many sources and having implications that were equally multi-dimensional. Given the fractious binaries that so easily threaten to take over this discussion, his position on language has to be studied in a nuanced manner in order to capture the complex currents and counter-currents that fashioned it.

His opposition to English, voiced throughout the autobiography in critical asides regarding the conduct of ‘educated’ Indians, quite unambiguously drew upon anti-imperialist sentiment, which saw the proliferation and power of the language as a sign of mental bondage, the “dimaghi ghulami” he castigates in a pamphlet of the same name. However, the choice of linguistic register he employs in the naming of this pamphlet indicates yet another set of issues in his immediate context: the fractious battle being fought over Hindi. “Dimaghi ghulami”, the two words he uses, reflect the syncretic approach to the Urdu-Hindi polarization that had already been established. Without enumerating the details of this extremely involved politics that goes back into the 19th century, it is important nevertheless to focus on Sankrityayan’s own position on the issue, reflected implicitly in the particular linguistic choices he made in constructing his own oeuvre, most notably his autobiography, and enumerated overtly in a series of essays and public statements. His first memory of education implicitly involves the choice of linguistic medium. Recalling his schooling, he gives reasons for why the ‘madarsa’ at Rani ki Sarai was chosen for him. His grandfather, believing that Urdu was “more highly regarded” (than Hindi), had planned for him to be sent on to Azamgarh thereafter to study English, so as to
secure government employment (*Meri Jeevan Yatra I*, 36). That he would subvert this ‘safe’ vocational plan is a tribute to the spirit of freedom embodied in his alternate pursuit of ‘ghumakkari’ in action. Escaping from home as a child – rejecting the dual imprisonment of a child marriage and a pre-ordained vocational path – was his risky mode of self-discovery, one that had the issue of language as a running leitmotif. For it is his declared love for Sanskrit, and the philosophical knowledge it made available to him, over Urdu which he had found difficult as child, that impelled him as a youth to seek the religious institutional spaces that could provide him with the desired education in the desired medium. It is another matter that, by 1915, he was writing articles in Urdu for the *Musafir* under the name Kedarnath Vidyarthi, and by 1916 in Lahore, he had acquired enough worldly wisdom to advise another seeker after Sanskrit to continue his formal studies in the English mainstream while pursuing the “soul-uplifting” studies in Sanskrit at the Arya Samaj’s D.A.V. College (188).

It is also worthwhile to note the influences that, according to him, opened up his mind and world-view: the Arya Musafir Vidyalaya at Agra, meeting with Bhai Mahesh Prasad, a leading Arya Samaji, and World War I. In addition, his “addiction” to newspapers, which started in Agra with Ganesh Shankar Vidayarthi’s ‘Pratap’, now included several Urdu ones and the English ‘Tribune’ (188). While he corresponded in Sanskrit at this juncture and even wrote all his diary entries in 1922, while in Buxar Jail as a political prisoner for six months, in Sanskrit, at some places he tried to versify in Sanskrit, Arabic, Urdu and Hindi. In fact his output while at Buxar Jail is telling in its linguistic variety and range of concerns. While they read a smuggled copy of Trotsky’s *Bolshevism and the World Revolution*, he composed a political *bhajan* in Sanskrit to cheer up his comrades: “Shrunu Shrunu re panthi, Ahamihanahekaki” (“Listen O traveler, I am not alone!”). While he composed impromptu verses in Brajbhasha on ‘files’, he also started translating the *Quran* in Sanskrit, simultaneously helping with the political prisoners’ staging of Bharatendu Harishchandra’s Hindi play *Andher Nagari* (Machwe 16).

As a linguistic polymath, he commanded various languages and used them as he felt appropriate, as required by circumstances. In fact, he would even employ silence, pretending actual dumbness as a means of escaping detection en route to
Tibet. It is significant to note that the wrote his daily diary, a private document, in Hindi, with sizable parts being rendered in Sanskrit, and even at times in the Persian and Brahmi scripts, with the explicit intention of preserving his privacy. He however chose as the language of his autobiography — a published, public document — an accessible and hybrid Hindustani. The reasons are not far to seek. Since the diary was sought to be kept private, for reasons ranging from political sensitivity (as when he recorded his Tibet travels or his involvement in the nationalist struggle) to personal needs (he mentions the need to keep details of his married life and correspondence with his Russian wife Elena from Kamala, his later spouse), he would often deploy scripts unknown to those he was in the midst of. An interesting instance of his use of Sanskrit in his diary was a declared intention of thus teaching this language to his wife Kamala, who he knew would attempt to read it in private. Thus, though he could indulge his scholarly interest in linguistic histories, as evidenced in his forays into etymological issues, the underlying principle guiding his approach to language was to see it as an effective medium of communication, the boat of the epigraph.

The character and texture of the Hindi he uses is noteworthy. His indefatigable translations from Pali, Sanskrit, Tibetan, Persian, and English into the common man’s Hindi underscore the oft-stated position that language was for him a vehicle, a mode of effective and urgent record-keeping (as in the diary) and communication (as in the autobiography, which often drew upon his daily jottings in the diary). However, this ‘utilitarian’ approach to language co-exists with an aesthetic and historical sensibility, and his linguistic and stylistic choices reflect the pedagogical/historical impulse to preserve, appreciate, and disseminate an understanding of civilisational growth and continuity, an ideological commitment to the dialects and “mother tongues”, as well as an obvious joy in linguistic abundance and variety. In his view, the unity of the nation was threatened less by regional units and more by the failure to acknowledge the identity of mother-tongues (Ateet se Vartaman 191).

His autobiography appears to be targeted for a generalized Hindi-speaking reader, who could be rural or urban, so long as he/she was literate in Hindi. The texture of his informal Hindi, laced with colloquialisms and colourful idiomatic expressions, suggests a reader whose first language is a Hindi of informal everyday
discourse. However, interspersed within it are expressions from his native dialect (the Bhojpuri of Azamgarh), Sanskrit phrases, and even bits of Urdu poetry, all rendered in Nagari script, in a way that assumes a reader who is at ease with these ‘slippages’ from one register to another. This could mean one of three things: either there were enough readers in the 1950s whom he could hope to communicate with in this admixture of tongues, or that he was making a polemical point by deliberately juxtaposing these somewhat different registers, or that he wrote unselfconsciously in the language he was most comfortable in, oblivious to the communicability or otherwise of parts of his narrative. The last thesis being largely untenable due to his declared desire to communicate clearly with the maximum number of people, the first two are thus left for serious consideration, and there is reason to assume that each is true in its own way. The inclusion of Bhojpuri and dialect was a part of his passionately held belief in the claims of the local.

This found ‘public’ manifestation in his creative work in Bhojpuri and also in the espousal of the Soviet model of encouraging all regional languages as media of education at the elementary level and as media for intra-regional communication. In a fictionalized discussion scenario, he images the language conflict in a striking analogy with the Soviet Union, in which India would be a single republic comprised one hundred smaller ones (Bhago Nahin, Duniya ko Badalo 162). It was a position inspired by a commitment to nation-building: this was the only way to ensure a unified state which yet allowed for the preservation of distinct linguistic identities and ensured a quick solution to the rampant problem of illiteracy. The solution was pragmatic, but also tinged with romanticism, evident in the discourse of the “fragrance of the soil” that he celebrates in Ghumakkar Shastra, even as he warns against the insularity that could result in this “fragrance of the soil” transforming into the “stench” of parochialism. Unfortunately, in the fractious world of contemporary communal politics, allegations and counter-allegations of this very “stench” marred the controversial reception of his espousal of Hindi as the link language.

Language was so central that one of the chief turning points in his life’s journey was the direct consequence of his public espousal of Hindi over Urdu, an episode that became the catalytic force behind his abrupt and unpleasant departure
from the Communist Party of India. While the episode is significant in highlighting the centrality of the language debate to politics of the time, it is important to see the issue in the larger context of his life’s work, especially as elucidated in his autobiography. In Volume IV, he addresses the issue directly, in the context of post-independent India’s policy-making under the leadership of Rajendra Prasad, the first president of the Republic, who was committed to the project of creating an alternative to English for official usage. Sankrityayan’s arguments against a manufactured Hindustani are telling: “Hindi alone can serve this purpose,” he claims, “since it alone has been a language of inter-regional communication for ages”. This is so not because of any deliberate effort, but because “there is a common vocabulary (shabdkosh) between Hindi and other regional languages…which is why that part of it has been comprehended from Himalaya to Kanyakumari. Urdu’s Farsi-Arabic words are hard nuts to crack for Asamiya, Bangla, Uriya, Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Marathi and Gujarati” (Meri Jeevan Yatra IV, 485).

His controversial Presidential Address at the 35th session of the All India Hindi Sahitya Sammelan held on December 27, 1947 in Hindinagar, Bombay builds upon this line of argument. Titled “Hindi: Apni Bhoomi ki Adhishthatri” (“Hindi: The Tutelary Deity of its Land”), the speech posits Hindi as the only viable language for inter-regional communication in the newly-formed Union of India, with regional languages serving as media for intra-regional education and administration, from the smallest to the highest units in each (Rashtrabhasha Hindi 28). The argument is made in the name of expediency, and historical precedents are offered. “History shows”, he says, “that such a [link] language has been accepted in India whenever there has been a period of political unity, and even during periods of disunity” (28). Whether it was the language of the Asokan edicts, or Sanskrit, followed by the Apabhransha, which contained the seeds of all regional languages, though its “cultured” form was the language of the Panchal region, the precedent for a shared language exists, he claims. He points out that “even during the period of Muslim rule”, Hindi served as the shared language of sadhus and akharas drawn from all corners of India at large congregations such as the Kumbh Mela. He goes on to laud these holy men for having served, in dark periods of India’s past, as examples of democratic ways of being,
solving to a great extent “the problem of regionalism and pan-Indianness, while also weakening the hold of caste” (28-9). Finally, he asks for the decision to be left to people from different regions, confident that they will choose Hindi (30).

It is in the next section of “Scripts” that he makes his more controversial statements. Arguing that the Nagari script should be retained, though it could do with some modifications for ease of typewriting and printing, he argues for the Nagari script to be used for Urdu as well, citing the example of the Tajiks and the Turks, who have benefited from giving up the Arabic script, in favour of the Russian which, with its 32 letter-alphabet, is “even more scientific than the Roman.” Though provision should be made in India for those who wish to study the Arabic script, including Urdu being made the medium of instruction at institutions like the Aligarh Muslim University, he rejects the argument for the adoption of the Roman script by Urdu votaries, seeing in their arguments not scientific thinking, but spite for Nagari.

In a sub-section under “Script”, he introduces a page-long comment, openly acknowledging the religious colouring that the language issue had acquired, titled “Islam Should Indianise Itself”. Here he raises questions on “Islam’s resistance to Indianness [Bharatiyata] unlike Christians, Parsees, and Buddhists”, In this, he includes markers of cultural identity such as “language, clothing, and food” (“bhaasha, vesh-bhoosaha aur khaan-paan”) as well as showing respect for “India’s glorious past”, in which he finds Muslims “lagging behind” (31). The argument is buttressed with the example of East Pakistan, where the adoption of the Bangla script “does not threaten Islam”. Interestingly, in Volume II of the autobiography he makes the same point, but employs an example that is double-edged: “If there is anything I dislike in Islam, it is the indifference and resistance to the regional language and culture…” he says, upon encountering Gujarati Bohra businessmen in Sri Lanka, who insist on keeping their records in Gujarati. He quite misses the point that by the logic of his own argument, they are showing signs of assimilation since they do not insist on Persian or Arabic (Meri Jeevan Yatra II, 21). Finally, he argues for “the future” which demands that Muslims in India adopt Hindi and hopes that a day might come when some great Muslim scholar of Hindi will preside over the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan (Rashtrabhasha Hindi 32). This line of argument surfaces in the
autobiography when he relates his visit to Jamia Millia Islamia, where the publication of an encyclopedia in Hindi had been brought to a halt due to objections about the project being sponsored by a “communal Hindu government”. Sankrityayan’s argument against this move is relevant: “Hindi is not the birthright of Hindus alone. Qutban, Manjhan, Jayasi, Rahim prove this claim wrong. Though Muslims have been indifferent in the intervening centuries, the time is near when we will have very good Hindi storywriters, essayists and poets who are Muslims” (Meri Jeevan Yatra IV, 234). This is in keeping with his historical sense, evident in his essay on Akbar as an example of successful assimilation, and in Volga se Ganga which depicts a Hindu Jat from a village near Delhi laud Allauddin Khilji as a king beloved of their community due to his decision to ‘belong’ to the soil and “share our joys and sorrows” (253).

While the language of the Presidential speech may have been unduly provocative (resulting in Sankrityayan having to leave the Communist Party) in the context of the communalization of the language issue, it is imperative to also note the wider politics of the language question, evident in his advocacy of a particular kind of Hindi. One powerful motif that runs through his writings is that of the need for preserving India’s linguistic diversity, especially of languages that are neglected. A good instance is that of Kauravi, the concern for which is informed by his historic sense of it as “the mother” of the “National Language”, Hindi. Addressing the issue of linguistic snobbery, he points out that speakers of Kauravi are loath to acknowledge their connection with it since it has been supplanted in ‘educated’ discourse by a more “bookish Hindi” (“Rashtrabhasha ki Janani: Kauravi”, first published, Saptahik Hindustan, Feb. 22, 1953, reprinted in Rashtrabhasha Hindi 78). He goes on to make a plea for reestablishing this connection, especially amongst “Hindi litterateurs,” if we are to see “the ultimate development” of “our language,” and a painstaking and systematic task of recovery (78). Underscoring the need for “digging the well in order to slake the thirst”, to translate his own idiom, he charts out the practical course: collecting folk narratives and compiling dictionaries and grammars (80). The recovery however is not to be confused with revivalism for its own sake, it serves to enliven the formal idiom as Tagore and Sarat Chandra did in Bengali and solves the problem that writers such as Premchand faced when trying to represent ordinary life more
intimately (79). For his use of Bhojpuri, Premchand was derided as a rustic by orthodox Urdu votaries, while also making him less accessible to those readers who were not familiar with that particular regional dialect, a problem that a common institutionalized ‘source language’ such as Kauravi would solve, since it would be able to provide a vocabulary for a wide spectrum of rural life.

This one article provides an excellent indication of his mature thinking on the language issue and its place within the discourse of the nation. The need to nurture ‘roots’ is inextricably linked to resuscitating a privileged, bookish discourse by privileging the rural, the ‘common man’, over the uprooted urban, whom he disparagingly calls “shaharon ke kucch aakaash bel” or “some rootless city-dwellers” (78). Popular culture is to be valued and preserved (he himself expended considerable energy in collating ‘wedding songs’ from Uttar Pradesh and encouraged his readers to do so) and institutional support should be garnered for this cause, though individual efforts are lauded. Conversely, ‘popular’ cultural forms such as Hindi cinema, which homogenize regional differences, are treated with disdain (Meri Jeevan Yatra II, 456). The division between high and low, rural and urban, male and female locations is thus sought to be transcended in order to knit together a national community of literate citizens who value their cultural roots. The fine line between preserving a unique voice and hampering communication (one that Premchand crosses, according to him, by using a private vocabulary) must be bridged, and the means and resources for this bridging must be drawn from a shared, national past.

His opposition to English as a viable link language for India is, of course, implicit in this line of argument, for its being the language of the colonial class and of its Indian collaborators (Hamari Paribhashayen, Mussyorie, Aug 22, 1959, in Rashtrabhasha Hindi 82). But what is also implicit is the placing of Urdu as projected by its votaries, within this space of privilege. Both, interestingly, come together in the figure of Nehru, who is critiqued in the autobiography for being steeped in Englishness to the core (“unka rom-rom angreziyat se bheega hua hai”) under his deceptively Indian attire of “achkan aur pyjama” (Meri Jeevan Yatra IV, 194) and his advocacy of Hindustani, due to his privileged and parochial location within the Kashmiri Pandit context. This appears to be the reason for his opposition to it as the national language,
combined with its failure to match Hindi (as enriched by Kauravi) in its reach: both into India’s past and into its present territorial dimensions. Ultimately, then, his keen sense of its location—temporal and geographical—makes Hindi his choice, even as that same sense of location makes him a votary of claims of the regional, a model he has no hesitation in deriving from the Soviet Union. It is thus that he squares the contrary demands of avoiding the crippling “frog in the well” mentality while nurturing the nativist “fragrance of the soil,” the central tension that defines both his life and the writing of it.

Sankrityayan’s concerns with location panned out in multiple ways with geographical, philosophical/ideological and linguistic negotiations being central to them. His internationalism disregarded the West as defined by the USA, and looked towards Europe only selectively, primarily as a space associated with progressive Marxist thought. His Marxist leanings also made him look East-wards towards China. His commitment to Buddhism meant that he was reconfiguring the idea of India in terms of continuities with the rest of Asia. In doing this, he can be seen to be participating in a larger trend amongst a section of the Indian intelligentsia, represented among others, by Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru’s very different linguistic locations and vocational trajectory, however, mark the limits of the comparison.