CONCLUSION

This project began as an exploration, via the vocational trajectories of Gandhi and select contemporaries, of the dynamics of East/West interaction as it panned out during a formative period of Indian nationalism. The specific focus was on the idea of vocation as it took shape within the framework of autobiography writing. All these figures were also travelers, literally and metaphorically, and their ideas of the self, as mediated through culture and nation as cognitive and experiential categories, were central to the investigation. Further, their linguistic negotiations added a significant dimension to the study, especially since questions of language, historically closely tied to issues of culture and nation, became a contentious point for rallying diverse groups along lines that either facilitated or problematized the idea of India. This, like all other questions, was examined at two levels - the personal and the public. The individuals under study had, to different degrees, a public presence and were self-conscious agents of change. Their personal decisions thus had an overtly public dimension, and the two could exist in a relationship of complementarity as well as conflict. Reading their public autobiographies against the context of their unpublished works, and reading the various silences and contrary pulls within the published works, yielded insights into their complex negotiations with the private and the public. A comparatist approach, where central themes were read as criss-crossing their narratives, lent richness to the examination of their choices. These choices continued to inform the national space in the form of conflicts between the nation-state and its fragments, of cultural authenticity and religious exclusiveness versus syncretic modes of being and narratives of the secular.

Their linguistic choices in particular carried a double charge – the chosen mode of self-expression, autobiographical or otherwise, signaled a position vis-à-vis the larger issue of language as a marker of identity, in an anti-colonial and post-colonial context. The vexed question of a lingua franca and the communalization of the language question, as well as the related claims of the ‘centre’ and the ‘periphery’, a significant aspect of nationalism in a country of India’s geographical spread and linguistic diversity, could thus be articulated via the language issue. The claims of
English on these figures were diverse. For the Westerners in question, it was the mother tongue which had to be partly unlearned in the interest of assimilation, while for the Indians, it was a multivalent force. Given the fact that for the Western educated Indian, it was the language of education, profession, and even social interaction, it acquired a double status. It was the language of the colonial master, which could be used as a tool to effectively and selectively dismantle aspects of colonial power. Both Gandhi and Nehru used it in this fashion, though their emotional connect with the language carried a different charge, with Gandhi ranged on the side of Gujarati and Hindi as media for intra-national communication even as he altered the English discourse in the inter-national arena by injecting terms like *khadi, swaraj, ahimsa* and *satyagraha* into it.

However, Rahula Sankrityayan’s linguistic trajectory offers a fascinating foil to the position of Gandhi and Nehru. Though he supported Hindi as a national language and thus was in agreement with Gandhi, in his practice, he broke all facile stereotypes of linguistic belonging and stands as a unique figure who challenges typological frameworks. In the eschewing of English as a mode of communication, embracing at once of the ‘high tradition’ of Sanskrit and the ‘vernacular’ Bhojpuri, and in his cosmopolitan multilinguality that spread his linguistic internationalism more towards the East than the West, he broke the mould. In this, he was a more authentic practitioner of the Nehruvian attempt in *Discovery of India* and *Glimpses of World History* to turn towards the immediate West and East of India in an effort to trace civilizational continuities and historical connections that could displace the Eurocentric, especially Anglo-centric biases of the colonial mind. While Nehru accessed his East largely via English and European Orientalist scholarship in English translation, Rahula Sankrityayan’s wider range of direct experience and scholarship, made possible by his vocational commitment to travel and language acquisition, gave him a grip on the civilizational issue that was very different in flavor and depth from that of Nehru’s. Internationalism took on very different dimensions in the life and work of Nehru, Gandhi and Sankrityayan.

Rahula stands apart as a figure of difference, at once a radical individualist and a man with a deep sense of discipline which manifested itself in his attitude towards
the Communist Party. Like Ambedkar, he assimilated Buddhism to his own ends. It became not a space of interiority but an outward-looking philosophy, logical and rational in orientation. Very much a creature of ‘Reason’, Rahula was a critic of the dangers of romanticising the past or tradition. However, he did so not from a de-racinated anglicized perspective that was out of touch with the rhythms of “peasant India”, which Nehru in the 1930s recognized as the true India. Located in a linguistic space that was at once local and cosmopolitan, his compelling presence reconfigures the way we think of these easy dichotomies of nation and region, Indian philosophy and materialism, the ancient and the modern. As a Sanskritist, he, like D.D. Kosambi, offers an alternate paradigm to that which sees in the language a repository of Brahminical tradition. As a Buddhist with a historical orientation, he offers a critique of the unproblematic ahistoricity of Gandhi’s and even Nehru’s occasionally mythicized vision of the past. In seeing India in the context of the world, a world that disregarded ‘the West’, he displaced the epistemic power equation that anglophile Macaulayan knowledge production advocated.

In his 1945 essay “Notes on Nationalism,” George Orwell points out that patriotism is not to be confused with nationalism. Nationalism had its many discontents for Orwell, especially as narrow nationalism was rearing its head in Europe at the time. Anti-colonial nationalism, however, was a form that could and did deploy both forms of it as per Orwell’s typology: it used patriotism as a tool of mobilization and confidence-building alongside a political consolidation along statist lines. But there was the danger that in fighting it in the colonizers’ terms the native might be replicating the structures of epistemic power that the West has traditionally wielded. Realpolitik seemed to demand nationalism, even with some of its homogenizing tendencies. However, as early as 1909, Gandhi was aware of the dangers of a homogenizing nationalism. As he put it in *Hind Swaraj*:

India cannot cease to be one nation because people belonging to different religions live in it. The introduction of foreigners does not necessarily destroy the nation; they merge in it. A country is one nation only when such a condition obtains in it. That country must have a faculty for assimilation. India has ever been such a country. In reality
there are as many religions as there are individuals; but those who are conscious of the spirit of nationality do not interfere with one another's religion. If they do, they are not fit to be considered a nation. If the Hindus believe that India should be peopled only by Hindus, they are living in dream-land. The Hindus, the Mahomedans, the Parsis and the Christians who have made India their country are fellow-countrymen, and they will have to live in unity, if only for their own interest. In no part of the world are one nationality and one religion synonymous terms; nor has it ever been so in India (44-45).

The lives of the figures in this study negotiate with ‘nation’ differently. Sorabji’s hybrid location as an anglicized Parsee Christian made her employ elaborate maneuvers to construct the Indian nation as a cultural space to which she had claims as a gradualist progressive spokesperson of the traditional zenana woman, all the while retaining loyalty to the Raj, and demonizing the nationalists who wanted freedom from British rule. Her struggle to be accepted as an equal by the English, while it marks her investment in Empire, is a reminder of the recalcitrance of imperial racism. In a contrary move, Sarala and Mira’s encounter with European nationalism around World War I provided inspiration for a radical questioning of their locations. They rejected the racism inherent in it and questioned the discourse of war as supported by the church. Gandhi’s attraction for them was in his role as a non-violent activist. While in Mira’s case, it was a deeply personal engagement that disregarded the issue of ‘location’ except as defined by the presence of the figures of Gandhi, Beethoven and a spiritualized ‘Nature’, Sarala’s was a more concrete engagement with Gandhi’s ideas, put into practice. The Constructive Programme and Vinoba Bhave’s bhoomi movement became significant planks of her vocational self-fashioning. In the case of both women, there was a questioning of the logic of nation-states. Sarala’s work was rural and suggested a pastoral denial of the forward march of modernity that the national mainstream was unleashing at the time. It constituted a firm refusal to be drawn into the political economy of a version of nationalism. Her environmental activism as part of the Chipko movement, and the work of bhoomi, were part of a quieter, alternative discourse of nation-building that was often at loggerheads with the governmental bureaucracy. Though largely non-confrontational,
the anti-dam activism, continued by Lakshmi Ashram today, had the potential to challenge the mainstream.

Stokes and Elwin were both men of the Church who went native and chose vocations that involved complex negotiations with nationalism and with religion. While Stokes displayed a more sophisticated understanding of global power equations as played out in the early decades of the twentieth century, like Elwin, he also made a profoundly political gesture by choosing the mode of his vocational engagement with India. They reveal two divergent yet overlapping trajectories of growing out of traditional missionary roles, engagement and disagreements with Gandhi, and the Congress, and a complex negotiation with conversion and religious identity, in terms of their national inheritance as well as in relation to the complexity that a changing India presented them with. They also took oddly similar modes of active retreat into corners of India, though here Stokes steered clear of the state, while Elwin, as Nehru’s missionary, found a niche that spoke for the extreme margins within the national. Each worked for the downtrodden and took on the existential risks of marrying and raising family in India. While Stokes’ ‘reconversion’ to the Hindu fold marked his desire for social assimilation, Elwin too had to change his stance on the tribals’ relation to Hinduism. Each of them shows a dynamic sense of self and engagement with the socio-economic and political reality of post-colonial India. While Stokes revolutionized the economy of the Himachal region, fighting the post-colonial oppressors as he had done the British who imposed begar, Elwin saw himself as the spokesperson of the most neglected section, the tribals of India, though well within the structures of state power, thanks to Nehru’s patronage. Elwin showed how, perhaps as an insider/outsider, could represent the interest of the centre against internal hegemonizing forces such as the Assamese and the Hindu converters. In this, his life raises important issues about the relations of power between the centre and the periphery within the national confines. To the extent that the issues of tribal exploitation are still alive, his life-choices make for instructive signposts on the debate on the nation seen as a territorial and cultural unity.

Nationalism in its formative phase was diverse, rich, complex and capable of accommodating difference. Some of the flattened exclusionary cultural nationalism
of the later twentieth century, relying on a notion of native culture and religious exclusion, would be alien to the syncretic and creative uses of tradition that these figures made. However, as Elwin’s case and the cases for Gandhi’s assassination make clear, these negotiations were far from easy or ‘safe’ for the individuals concerned. Sankrityayan, who could be a supporter of a strong state, maintained a deep commitment to the claims of the region as a linguistic and cultural entity. The issue of state power clashed with some of the key beliefs of Gandhian struggle. As Gora puts it in his blunt critique of the moment of independence: “If Gandhi got into the seat of power on India winning freedom, or if Jawaharlal Nehru followed the Gandhian way, India would have politics instead of power politics. Both did not happen… Gandhi was assassinated and Nehru held the power that preserves the imperialist ways of centralized authority” (73).

However, even with all his anarchic tendencies, deeply suspicious of the state and of modes of governance that relied on structures outside the individual, Gandhi not only participated in, but led a national struggle, fully cognizant of the dangers of ‘othering’ that could vitiate the effort to forge a national identity. He did his best to allay the fears of the minorities, brought women into the fold of political action, reached out to the dalits, and had innumerable Western supporters and admirers whom he was able to marshal for the cause.

His own self was a subject of experiments that were as radical for a Hindu as for any Westerner. He was not a scientist in an ordinary sense, simply because scientific discourse did not think of the self, the social, ethical and biological self taken together as a fit subject for such experiments. He was inventing a whole new vocabulary and new contexts in which to try it. If he harked back to the example of traditional yogis and holy men, never had there been such a yoking of that kind of life-choice to a public persona by one who also insisted on making the experiments public. Earlier yogis may have had political content in their writings, they may have tried to reinvent religion with a view to reviving a subject people, as Vivekananda did, but Gandhi was the lone political strategist who could undertake such a large-scale, and effective, transformation in the psyche of a people. His political effectiveness, as opposed to his political philosophy, or the absence of it, was acknowledged by his contemporaries across the ideological divide.
While he was a powerful force in history, it is important to remember with Vinay Lal that ‘History’ was one modern category that Gandhi simply ignored, unlike his predecessors on the nationalist scene like Bankim in Bengal and Tilak in Maharashtra, who were deeply troubled by the marginalization of the Indian from the European master discourse of history and unlike Savarkar who spoke of the “holy work of the historian” and his disciple Nathuram Godse, “a self-confessed history buff” (Lal 285). In marginalizing the discourse of History, Gandhi, Lal argues, was signaling an epistemic freedom that hit at the roots of modernity’s hegemonizing force. Nehru then would be seen to be well within the framework of the modern and to that extent complicit in the dubious capitulation to Western modernity that his ideological opponents amongst Indian nationalists – Bankim, Tilak, Savarkar – also display. To the extent that Ambedkar and Rahula Sankityayan were also committed to this modern discourse of history and rationalism, as evidenced in their selective appropriation of Buddhism, they were similarly within the ‘Western’ epistemic frame, however indigenized it may have become by having been in the hands of nationalists. Gandhi alone stands out, for Lal, as a beacon amongst these, who can offer a radical mode of dissent.

And yet Gandhi has been read repeatedly as a modern by Marxists like Irfan Habib, and also by philosophers like Akeel Bilgrami who traces an alternative modernity, not in the ‘East’ but in the ‘West’, in 17th century Europe. One way of seeing the modernity of Gandhi is to see his engagement with the business of self-fashioning and nation-building via new vocabularies and strategies. “The non-violent approach to Swaraj is a novel approach. In it old values give place to new,” he would declare in his Constructive Programme, adding that “in our country there has been a divorce between labour and intelligence. The result has been stagnation” (8,11). Contrary to the perception of him as worshipper of stagnant rural India, this modern Gandhi wished in 1941 to instill a sense of nationalism in a population that was too insular: “The villager’s Indian is contained in his village. If he goes to another village he talks of his own village as his home. Hindustan is for him a geographical term….The villager knows nothing of foreign rule and its evils….My adult education means therefore, first, true political education of the adult by word of mouth” (15).
Yet, Gandhi pushed the boundaries of the idea of freedom and in radically leaving open the achievement of swaraj or self-realisation – a goal both for the autobiographical self and for the individual Indians he saw as citizens of a future India – as an unrealized and potentially unrealizable goal, he suggested the limits of the modern. The practical good sense with which he laid down programmes and agendas, must not be confused with signs of a liberal state, as Uday Mehta reminds us, or of managerial approaches to governance as argued by Vinay Lal. As Mehta puts it, “Gandhi’s endorsement of democracy was very much in a lower key. It was nestled in the everyday and commonplace materials of social life, which for him supplied the conditions of moral action, and not the elevated gravity of the political, which as he disparagingly said always had ‘larger purposes’” (3). Gandhi’s position on separate electorates was typical: “Living unity can never come out of artificial entities brought together on a common platform” (Constructive Programme 6).

*Constructive Programme*, to which the last Appendix was added three days before he was killed and in which he expressed his vision for the “servants” of the people that he wished Congress workers to be, challenged the language of the state, in that it posited individual responsibility, a change of heart, and deep inner work, as essentials to *Poorna Swaraj*. Constructive work was, he said, “as absorbing as politics so-called and platform oratory, and certainly more important and useful” (3). Recognizing that “practice will always fall short of the theory even as the drawn line falls short of the theoretical line of Euclid,” he argued that “complete independence will be complete only to the extent of our practice of truth and non-violence” (4). He also asserted the power of the personal: “Political acts we know have been and can be prevented, but personal friendships with individuals cannot be prevented. Such friendships, selfless and genuine, must be the basis for political pacts. Similarly centralized *khadi* can be defeated by the Government, but no power can defeat individual manufacture and use of *khadi*” (4).

In post-colonial India, the nation-state as a gigantic mechanism that could swallow dissent, or in fact absorb it, was evident in the way the *khadi* programme panned out. Sarala Devi perceptively saw Gandhi’s achievement as the political one and looked towards Bhave for the economic independence that post-colonial India
needed to achieve. Noting the neglect of khadi, she rued in her autobiography that in 1948 “those who been close to Gandhi and who had belief in his principles were losing hope day by day” (222). Nehru wanted the simultaneous growth of big dams and cottage industries, refusing to see the fundamental philosophic dichotomy between the two. Gandhi’s constructive programme, not assimilable into homogenizing state-led coercive mechanisms of development, attempted to wrest the word ‘constructive’ from its constrictive and repressive range of suggestions.

Gandhi is often seen as a figure who undid the binaries of self and other by displacing the language of retributive justice and retributive politics by the Sermon on the Mount which resolutely refuses to deploy the mind-frames and tools of the oppressor, seeing in the means/end contradiction a fundamental obstacle to the achievement of true freedom. He coined an entire vocabulary to capture this alternative politics, which avoided the burden of history and of the past by reconfiguring the discourse. His autobiography becomes a paradigmatic text for understanding these contradictions as it combines within it the concern with self-fashioning, the projection of a public self, as well as debates about the location of the genre itself in certain cultural/civilizational spaces marked as ‘modern’ or ‘Western’. Deploying autobiography theory, this study has traced the complex contours of Gandhi’s positioning vis-à-vis the modern. To the extent that the nation is also seen as a modern and Western ‘import’, Gandhi the nationalist also entered into that debate as a key shaper of the national movement in the twentieth century, reshaping the Indian National Congress in the process. In him, the language of interiority blended with that of mass mobilization, as he turned his entire self into a symbolic instrument. Yet instrumentality as a philosophic position was anathema to his beliefs. Combining the spiritual with the political, he confounded his opponents with modes of activism that were propelled by his charisma. Weber’s writings on charismatic authority thus help make sense of Gandhi’s enormous appeal and effectiveness, not only in his time but in ours.

However, the undoing of the binaries of private and public, of nation and self, of self and other, can fall into a facile kind of deconstruction that ignores the fact that Gandhi was not a relativist and certainly not invested in the undoing of the idea of the
subject. He was “foundational”, even as he shook the foundations of an empire and questioned those of orthodoxy. In his own way, he undid binaries, broke stereotypes and offered alternatives to foreign imperialism, native orthodoxy, liberal democracy, and modern statism. He did this while being a nationalist, a patriot, an internationalist with a wide following amongst Westerners, a mentor and ‘Father’ to the statist Nehru, a ‘mother’ to many of his followers, and a devout Hindu. He rewrote Indian history even as he disavowed history as a mode of apprehending either the self or the nation. His autobiography was as private and spiritual and it was political.

In a trenchant critique of the social sciences, Vinay Lal has pointed out that Gandhi refuses to be made comprehensible by available Social Science discourses – a fact that he sees not so much as proof of Gandhi’s unique recalcitrance, as of the limitations and poverty of the Social Sciences. That it can evolve no vocabulary to adequately address the Gandhi phenomenon which is sought to be forced into one or another frame that he always slips out of indicates the narrowness of the frames of reference that the discourse suffers from. Lal sees in recent attempts to appropriate Gandhi even for ecological and other contemporary movements modernity’s long hands that want “to suck him out of the hermeneutic machine” and force him into structures that he continues to evade (279). Yet, acknowledging this recalcitrance does not allow us to reify it as a mystical quality. Reading his life and its narratives, in all their affective and effective dimensions, is to acknowledge just this paradox.

Much like Gandhi, all the characters studied here subvert easy stereotypes about East and West, private and public, the regional and the national. They represent the possibilities of forging human connections across multiple divides without being apolitical. Their lives became testaments to their struggles and challenge us to rescue the words ‘human’ and ‘humanist’ from the suspicion with which it has been viewed by the ‘post’ phenomenon. Not empty rhetoric or gesture, their lives reveal a hybridity and mixed-ness that refuses to be incorporated into mere textuality. They were able to resist by forging original, creative alliances. Being in the crucible of history-in-the-making gave their lives and the writing of them an existential edge that compels attention. Stokes, Sarala, Elwin and Mira demonstrate the power of Indian nationalism to assimilate and harness the energies, in a non-essentialist fashion, of those of
different races and nationalities, especially of the ‘enemy’. They also exemplified assimilation in their own right. Their work remains an emblem of non-coercive but effective politics that makes no distinction between the private and the public. Politics and activism for them were not professional spaces but existential conditions of their being. This non-dualism of sensibility is reflected in their titles: *Satyakam: or True Desire* and *Vyavaharik Vedanta: Ek Atmakatha*.

Gandhi offers an alternate path that does not deny the reality of power – political, industrial and, discursive – and suggests means of challenging it non-violently. There is in Gandhi an overarching sense of a dynamically evolving but coherent ‘self’ that experiences life’s flux and learns lessons from it. “As a practical man, he took any situation as it obtained with all its paradoxes. He never sat down to scan or to sift its contradictions intellectually, but moved the whole situation towards the ideal…” (Gora 63-64). This testimony comes not from a ‘Gandhian’, but from Gora, a declared atheist who nevertheless forged a deep friendship with Gandhi. As ecological concerns and the ravages of ‘developmentality’ challenge the survival of the species today, Gandhi’s conceptual challenge to these, at once national and global, can help resist the forces of globalization in their negative sense. He was thinking global, acting local. And the location of that ‘local’ was the self as object of study and analysis.