ABSTRACT

Nation and Vocation: Relocated Selves

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by

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This project attempts to study a historical conjuncture in India with relation to the autobiographical narratives of a specific set of individuals who converge around M.K. Gandhi, a figure who came to be called the Father of the Nation. Also referred to as Bapu (the colloquial Hindustani for father) and Mahatma, Gandhi’s centrality on the Indian national scene in the first five decades of the twentieth century is undisputed. As myth and reality, he ruled the national consciousness and defined the contours of its struggle for freedom from British colonial rule. Focusing on his autobiographical narratives, but using the larger Gandhi archive selectively, this project examines Gandhi’s negotiations with the categories of nation, vocation and location. It also examines, in a comparative light, an entire set of his contemporaries via their autobiographical narratives as they engaged in similar negotiations. The shared experience of the anti-colonial struggle and encounter with Gandhi—as comrades, followers, dissenters---make for fruitful comparisons, while their diverse individual trajectories, places of origin, and points of arrival mark a rich heterogeneity.

The figures in question are Cornelia Sorabji, Verrier Elwin, Madeleine Slade/Miraben, Catherine Mary Heilemann/Sarala Devi, Samuel Evans/Satyanand Stokes, Rahula Sankrityayan, Jawaharlal Nehru and M.K. Gandhi. Each was a public figure, whose life trajectory reveals an extraordinary range of negotiations with space, defined not only geographically, but in the widest sense, as representing ideological orientations. Travelers all, they represent a diversity of points of departure and personal negotiations that compel a re-examination of issues of public/private, East/West, traditional/modern, as well as the dynamics of the local/national/global. Each was engaged in acts of self-invention, but given their public stature, these were not just private acts. They perforce impacted the social spaces around them and yet reflected existing and new discursive choices available for individual self articulation. The
common thread that holds together this study is that it reads their choice of vocation as their favoured mode of self articulation. This vocational imperative is read in terms of the category of the nation. In each case, I make use of materials beyond the autobiographies, sometimes extending the generic limits of the term to include other writings, diaries, and letters. Biographies and debates around each figure, as well as debates around the theories of autobiography, nationalism, and vocation provide the theoretical frame for this interdisciplinary project that is also bilingual, since two of the figures write exclusively in Hindi.

The Introductory Chapter titled “Nation, Vocation, Location: Autobiographical Negotiations” introduces the figures and considers theoretical debates around the nation and autobiography as a genre, especially as they have been formulated vis-à-vis an imagined East/West divide. It considers the complexity and challenges of reducing the debate to facile binary frames.

Chapter 1 examines the personal and vocational trajectory of Cornelia Sorabji as India’s first woman barrister who was also ranged against the nationalist struggle. Examining her autobiography India Calling (1934) and her other writings, the chapter makes extensive use of her letters accessed from the British Library’s India Office Collection to consider her notion of ‘India’ and her construction of herself as spokesperson for that India and of the zenana women within it. Her hybrid location as a Christian Parsi with an anglicized upbringing makes her a unique figure in the national imaginary.

Chapter 2 focuses on two Western women followers of Gandhi—Miraben/Madeleine Slade and the less well known Sarala Devi/ Catherine Mary Heilemann—to contrast the diverse ways in which they negotiated the Gandhian movement. Miraben’s autobiography The Spirit’s Pilgrimage (1960) and Sarala Devi’s Vyavaharik Vedanta: Ek Atmakatha (1963, written by her in Hindi and accessed her as such) become the locus of discussion, while their correspondence provides additional material for analysis. The chapter considers their location as constructive workers, their
relationship to Gandhi, and the question of linguistic choice as a mode of identity formation.

Chapter 3 examines Verrier Elwin’s autobiography *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin* (1964) as an entry point into discussions of nation and the region. Elwin’s dramatic shifts in location—from being a Christian missionary to the Gandhian phase to the anthropological tribal affiliations to a final phase as Nehru’s missionary—reveal a complex engagement with questions of personal identity, religion, nationalism, colonialism, culture and power.

Chapter 4 concerns Satyanand Stokes, born Samuel Evans Stokes, who too, like Elwin, came to India as a missionary. Drawn by Gandhi, he became a participant in the Indian freedom struggle, finally to ‘convert’ to ‘Hinduism’ and settle in Himachal Pradesh, a region whose economy he transformed by his radical interventions. His letters and his longer narratives, *The Failure of Western Civilisation as a World Culture* (1921) and his *Satyakama, or True Desire* (1931) form the textual basis for this chapter which examines his private and public negotiations with his own Quaker/Christian past, Indian politics, and socially regenerative work in the rural margins.

Chapter 5 focuses on the fascinating figure of Rahula Sankritiyayan whose autobiography in Hindi, *Meri Jeevan Yatra* [My Life Journey] (5 volumes, 1944, 1950, 1967) traces his extraordinary journeys of the self. In his eventful life, he was a Hindu *sadhu*, an Arya Samaji, a Gandhian nationalist, a peasant leader, a Buddhist monk and scholar, and finally, a member of the Communist Party of India. He wrote in many languages and travelled incessantly. His voluminous oeuvre, comprising literary and, historical writings and translations into Hindi are barely known to the Anglophone world. This polymath’s ceaseless wanderings were both discursive and literal. My chapter also considers his text *Ghumakkar Shastra* to explore the contours of his national and international locations. A section dedicated to his controversial views on the debate on *Rashtrabhasha* Hindi addresses issues of language and identity. All primary materials accessed here are in Hindi, with my own translations.
Chapter 6 examines India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s negotiations with his identity vis-à-vis the East/West debate. His autobiography (1936) is read alongside his other major works -- *Glimpses of World History* (1934-5) and *The Discovery of India* (1946) -- to explore his constructions of the category of India as a civilization and his own private negotiations with this complex phenomenon, especially via the figure of Gandhi. Using Max Weber and Nietzsche, it explores the questions of politics as vocation and of writing history as a means of shaping a modern national selfhood.

Chapter 7 is devoted to M.K.Gandhi’s iconic autobiography: *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1927) and considers the issues of autobiography as a genre that is purportedly Western in origin. It also considers Gandhi’s views on language, gender, the nation and the region, and the private and the public to delineate his deeply interiorized and integrated vision of swaraj. His posthumous relocations, as affect and effect, in the work of scholars such as Tridip Suhrud, Irfan Habib and Akeel Bilgrami, are read as possible ways in which we might approach the question of locating him in terms of the binaries of East and West and tradition and modernity.

The Conclusion considers these figures in a comparative light and suggests how their lives and writings, read within the frames here deployed, might help challenge each other, as well as some current formulations within postcolonial theory regarding the centre and the margins. Conflicts regarding the nation, going beyond the colonial binary are sought to be understood within a framework of national activism. Gandhi’s subtle critique of the grand narratives of politics and the nation, in writings such as the little read *Constructive Programme*, is significant in contextualizing these key players at this historical juncture, not all of whom have received the scholarly attention they so richly deserve.