INTRODUCTION

Nation, Vocation, Location: Autobiographical Negotiations

This project examines 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 Gujarati/Hindi/Hindustani for father) and Mahatma, Gandhi’s centrality in 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, and selectively using the larger Gandhi archive, 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 – makes for fruitful comparisons, while their diverse individual trajectories, from places of origin to points of arrival, mark a rich heterogeneity. These other figures are, Cornelia Sorabji, Jawaharlal Nehru, Verrier Elwin, Madeleine Slade/Miraben, Catherine Mary Heilemann/Sarala Devi, Samuel Evans/Satyanand Stokes, and Rahula Sankrityayan. 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 religious, linguistic and ideological orientations. Travelers all, they represent a diversity of points of departure and multiple negotiations that compel a re-examination of issues of public/private, East/West, traditional/modern, and 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 reflected existing and new discursive choices available for individual self-articulation.

The common thread that holds together this study is that it reads the choice of vocation as their favored mode of self-articulation and that 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 diaries, letters, and other writings. 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 wrote exclusively in Hindi.

Of these eight figures, three are women, divided into two sets by the differences in location, temporal and ideological. The first chapter considers Cornelia Sorabji, chronologically distant from the other two, who also stands apart ideologically as an open opponent of Gandhi and the Indian national movement. Her life represents the dynamics of an Indian woman of a remarkably mixed ethnic and religious origin finding success and recognition within the Raj as India’s first woman barrister, a story that she tells in India Calling (1934). Mirabehn and Saralabehn are treated together as two Western disciples of Gandhi who offer significant comparisons and contrasts in the way their lives unfolded, as in their different modes of self-articulation. While the former wrote a highly individuated narrative called The Spirit’s Pilgrimage (1960), the latter took the ideological decision to write hers – Vyavahaarik Vedanta: Ek Atmakatha (1963) – in Hindi. By juxtaposing these two quite different women disciples of the Mahatma, I argue for a more complex picture of the range and diversity of the spaces available to Western women in the Gandhian phase of the Indian freedom struggle. That Mira is ubiquitous, and Sarala almost absent, from histories of the period dealing with Gandhi’s women disciples is also a concern that drives this comparative analysis. Each offers, in her own engagement with the Gandhian agenda of the Constructive Programme, significant insights into the ways in which nation and location were conceptualized at the time.

Satyanand Stokes and Verrier Elwin, though treated separately, also offer contrasting narratives in which the missionary Westerner could ‘go native’. The American Quaker Stokes’ relative absence, and the English-priest-turned-self-taught-anthropologist Elwin’s controversial and colourful presence, in discussions on India in its nationalist phase is a question that begs attention. I argue that each helps us think through questions of the nation, especially via the categories of religion, conversion, and the claims of the region. Each shares, too, a similar trajectory in that
each spent a period of ‘apprenticeship’ in the Gandhian struggle before diverging into different spaces at the margins of independent India. While Stokes did not write an autobiography, he did leave behind extensive correspondence and tracts like *The Failure of European Civilisation as a World Culture* (1921) and a philosophical/autobiographical book *Satyakama or True Desire* (1931). Elwin’s autobiography is almost disguised under an ethnographic title: *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin* (1964).

Rahula Sankrityayan, while he shares with Stokes and Elwin a phase of robust engagement with the freedom struggle, though marked more by his divergence from the Gandhian face of it, also offers an Indian example of a dynamic engagement with questions of religion. His five-part autobiography in Hindi, called *Meri Jeevan Yatra*, published in three installments (1944, 1950, 1967) along with a large and multilingual oeuvre, especially his treatise on travel called *Ghumakkar Shastra* (1948), form the basis of this study. His is the most individually diverse case of self-fashioning as his itinerant life and linguistic locations foreground issues of the regional, the national, and the international in ways literal and discursive. In some sense his uniqueness, which nevertheless intersects with crucial phases of the Indian freedom struggle and reflects crucial points of convergence with significant ideological and philosophical traditions within India and without, is deeply unsettling of facile frameworks. Little known to the Anglophone world, he has never been studied in the kind of frames here deployed – of autobiography as a genre or in terms of a comparative analysis vis-a-vis key national figures. His choice of Hindi, and occasionally Bhojpuri, as a mode of self-expression also impacts his location in the national imaginary. This is examined in the light of the politics of language in a colonial setting as also in a multilingual space such as India. Further, his extraordinary commitment to an ideal of itinerant living locates him at a fascinating juncture in the discourse of travel, ethnography, and self-fashioning.

Jawaharlal Nehru, independent India’s first Prime Minister, compels an engagement with the idea of the nation as a cultural unit as well as as a nation-state. *Glimpses of World History* (1934-5), *An Autobiography* (1936), and *The Discovery of India* (1946) see him fashioning a notion of the nation, and of his own place in it,
while his own mixed education and hybrid sense of location exert a pull towards internationalism. His vocational struggles and his sense of history are both examined in the light of issues of colonialism, modernity and the imperatives of nation-building.

Finally, M.K. Gandhi’s iconic autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1927) is treated as a paradigmatic text for critically engaging with issues of autobiography as a genre especially in terms of its cultural origins and location, while his larger oeuvre and life trajectory provide the frame for exploring the dynamics of national and international location in the context of anti-colonial nationalism. His profound ambivalence regarding the idea of the nation, of language, and of modernity is examined. His posthumous locations across discourses carry the discussion into recent relocations of his polyvalent and protean self that was also committed to a vision of integrity and integration.

The following section considers debates on autobiography as a genre and then connects the debate to questions of nation and vocation. The discussion travels via debates on the ‘East’/‘West’ divide and considers issues of modernity and its relation to the categories of nation, vocation and autobiography as a genre.

_Autobiography East and West: Some Theoretical Issues_

Autobiography as a genre, as a cultural artifact to be subjected to theoretically informed study, is of necessity interdisciplinary. In crossing the personal with the public, the individual with the social, the past with the present, the literary with the historical, the imaginative with the factual, it opens up a plethora of interpretative problems and possibilities. As an object of taxonomical analysis, it confounds categories. Memoir, diary, letter, essay, journal, travelogue – each one of these genres feeds into the autobiography, often overlapping with each other. ‘Literary’ genres such as poetry, novel, and drama too, can be, and have been, harnessed for the purposes of conveying autobiographical content or read as surreptitious forms of autobiographical writing. Thus, while at one end of the spectrum, autobiography might be said to pervade all narratives, at the other, all autobiographies are nothing more than narratives of the self. Since the ‘self’ is constituted discursively in multiple
ways, the study of autobiography may logically be said to incorporate disciplines as varied as literature, sociology, psychology, philosophy, political theory, and history. The accessibility of the genre to readings from these very different disciplinary loci makes it a resilient form to study. Its many uses – as political testimony, creative outpouring, personal philosophy, or social anthropology – account for the genre’s popularity and has made it the object of much critical attention.

Challenging as it may be to the theorist, autobiography as an art, especially in the West, has come to be practiced widely. Studying the context of autobiographical production, including the fundamental question of its origin, prevalence, or even its absence in particular locations, becomes an illuminating exercise in the study of culture. Here, while ‘location’ can be understood in terms of geography in the crudest sense of the term – as physical space – it is the complex and contested interplay of geography with the other constituents of location that refines the term to provide a range of interpretative possibilities. These include terms like modernity that have temporal as well as spatial dimensions. While the ‘modern’ is often associated with the geographical West, and by extension with a Western mode of being, it is also a temporal marker that suggests its immanent arrival in other parts of the globe where Western influence spread. In anti-colonial and post-colonial contexts, this gives rise to issues about cultural inherence and ‘native’ counter-discourses that challenge modernity as an epistemic category that must be resisted. Other, more sophisticated, readings have seen modernity itself as a contested terrain in the West which renders artificial an absolute binary between East and West.

**Autobiography in the West - Tradition and Debate**

Georg Misch’s study of the genre of autobiography in antiquity, confined largely to the West (Misch1950), provides a good entry point into the genre’s inner dynamics as he situates his discussion within a philosophical enquiry into the fundamental basis for autobiography. The notion of the individual, and its origin and growth, constitutes the central theoretical concern of his work. Misch’s work may appear dated to contemporary readers, but the range and depth of its engagement with the theoretical issues that studying the genre throws up still demands attention.
In what could easily be dismissed as a faithful rehearsal of Eurocentric stereotypes of ‘East’ and ‘West’, Misch traces the autobiographical urge to the conceptual coming into being of the notion of the individual, with the historical precedence of this process in the West being responsible for the earlier provenance of the genre in that part of the world. This phenomenon he traces to certain defining moments in Western history. These include the coming into contact of a people with alien cultures via trade or war, producing a reflective consciousness, and a sense of a separate identity. Physical contact with other cultures, an encounter with difference, thus becomes a generator of the autobiographical impulse. In this, Misch anticipates late 20th century theorizing on identity formation and assertion as being a phenomenon linked to migration and Diaspora, but does so within a framework of a grand sweep of history, rather than the multiple, fragmented histories that late twentieth century Cultural Studies posits. Misch’s framework, reflecting the “Spirit of the Age” mode of historiography, is old-fashioned in assuming a more stable sense of the self, and in ignoring the dynamics (or absence thereof) of self-conceptualization or self-representation in those we would consider ‘marginal’ today.

For Misch, the genre has a grand mandate: “The understanding of ‘life’ – that is, of human life as actually lived by individuals, and of the social and historical ‘world’ in which they live–is the great, inexhaustible task in whose execution philosophers compete with poets and religious thinkers.” Citing H.A.Hodges, he argues that “the special place [autobiography] takes in the field of human knowledge depends, in the philosopher’s view, on the fact that in it ‘the subject inquiring is also the object inquired into’” and that “as a manifestation of man’s knowledge of himself, autobiography has its basis in the fundamental – and enigmatical – psychological phenomenon which we call consciousness of self-awareness….In a sense the history of autobiography is the history of human self-awareness” (8).

Misch’s debt to Enlightenment thinking is evident here: “it is of the very essence of human existence that we raise to the level of consciousness that which moves us ‘deep down’”(8-9). He gives a complex grid for analyzing autobiography from the naïve desire on the part of the writer for self-expression to the more skeptical questioning of transparency in such representation, invoking for this purpose the
“original meaning of persona, a mask…transferred beyond the language of drama, the part or character which anyone sustains in the world or which is imposed upon him by social or political circumstances” (10).

This last point acquires special significance in the light of autobiographical narratives by public figures in whose lives social and political circumstances assert their role rather more urgently. In such cases, where the life of the individual is intertwined with the history of a larger group or even a nation, the claims for autobiography to be history are greater.

This grand narrative of the genre, and of human history, is questioned by recent theory. For instance, the focus has shifted to narratives from the margins, of those underrepresented, in order to recover a more representative sense of the ‘spirit of the age’. Narratives by women, former slaves, and members of oppressed communities such as the dalits (in India), have become the objects of study and universalizing notions such as a single identifiable ‘structure of individuality’ characterizing an epoch, or of an unbroken organic pattern of growth characterizing ‘humanity’ are considered politically dangerous, a mere smokescreen for histories of repression of large sections of humanity.

The theoretical issue that confronts one here is that of the nature of truth. If historical truth is a tangible object, capable of narrative recoverability, the parallel question of multiple narratives yielding multiple truths comes up. In politically conscious theories of autobiography, while the power of the autobiographer to bear testimony to suppressed histories is acknowledged, a nuanced sense of the creative element inherent in the act of writing is needed to render the reading complex. Thus, while truth is not jettisoned as a notion, to do so being politically disabling for a voice from the margins seeking to retell history from her point of view, there is a sense of the perspectival nature of narrative truth.

These positions, more sophisticated than the Misch kind of theorizing, need to be distinguished from theories of autobiography inspired by post-structuralism that emphasize the text’s independence from referential ‘truth,’ the human subject that is the object of representation being merely a textual function of the eternally, internally
contradictory narrative. Needless to say, such theories postulating the death of the author (such as Roland Barthes’ formulation, Barthes 1977) or the even more extreme deconstructive position of Paul de Man (de Man 1979) threaten the very validity of the category of autobiography. Since here there is no self, only a text, the claims of autobiography as a narrative distinguished by the fact of its having been written by an identifiable, and indeed rather loudly identified, person are negated.

The deconstructive insights of this avant garde trend have, however, broadly enabled the political, in so far as the questioning of a normative (Western) subject allows other voices to be articulated. Thus, autobiography studies that take gender, race, class, language or caste perspectives into account have become more nuanced in not taking any of these markers of identity as isolated factors. For instance, the notion of women’s writing, where women’s memoirs, diaries and autobiographical material have been a primary resource, have benefited from seeing gender through the prism of other ways in which women’s subjectivities are deflected. This has helped feminist scholarship avoid homogenizing all women’s accounts as narratives of oppression, at par with each other. Similar deconstructive insights have enriched readings of narratives by other marginal communities, complicating our understanding of the politics of location.

In recent years, works like Leela Gandhi’s *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought and the Politics of Friendship* (2006) have examined the anticolonial moment’s ‘Western’ side by focusing on metropolitan London to examine the role of “Western ‘nonplayers’ in the drama of imperialism” which “complicates our perspective on the colonial encounter” by enquiring into “the cultural osmoses occasioned by the colonial encounter” (L. Gandhi 1-2). Gandhi here addresses key issues in postcolonial thought as she urges that it “use the analytic advantage of historical hindsight [to] scrupulously disclose the failure of imperial binarism” on account of “the leakiness of imperial boundaries” (3). This work situates itself analogously to hers in that it examines, via historical hindsight, the complex workings of these very binaries of East and West, as they obtained in India. It helps to also interrogate the issue of genre from a similar non-binary perspective.
Location India: Was/Is There an Indigenous Tradition?

That autobiography is a Western genre is repeated so often by theorists and practitioners that it has acquired the status of a truism. Roy Pascal sees the genre as “a distinctive product of Western, post-Romantic civilization, and only in modern times has it spread to other civilizations” (Pascal 180). That Pascal proceeds to include in his discussion the Memoirs of Babur, the first Mughal, shows the tenuousness of the assertion. Other studies have shown how autobiography has existed in the Arab world before the advent of European colonialism (Leila Ahmed 1988) as also in Japan (Domna Stanton 1984) and Tibet (Janet Gyatso 2001). While Ahmed and Stanton represent feminist scholarship that has sought to resurrect women’s utterances via the autobiographical mode, Janet Gyatso dedicates her book to a male mystic tradition in Tibet. She begins her book with a refutation of Georges Gusdorf’s view that “autobiography is not to be found outside of our cultural area; one would say that it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man; a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe…” (Gusdorf 28). However, the very fact that she begins her book with the need to disavow Gusdorf’s view underscores its preponderance. Further, while she challenges his view that autobiography is exclusive to the West by citing Tibetan sources, she also upholds his view that it is a genre that requires certain historical conditions to come into being, though they may occur in both East and West, independently of each other. Thus China had autobiographies in certain periods while Japan had a preponderance of “secular autobiography from the 10th to the 13th centuries” (Gyatso 114-5). It is India that is singled out as a notable exception, a fact related to the paucity of written history in ancient India. The connection between writing history and autobiography is made via the conception of the self: “…the Western emphasis upon history is concomitant with a metaphysics of individuality – the paradigmatic representation of which is often identified as the Confessions of Rousseau” (Gyatso 110). While Gyatso’s emphasis on Buddhist notions of ‘no-self’ take her into an investigation of how Tibetan masters negotiated a contingent self within a philosophical matrix that challenged the very idea of a self, the Hindu belief in an eternal self, or atman, held by Gandhi, Stokes even Sarala, necessitates a different approach. Rahula Sankrityayan, though at one stage a Buddhist who took recourse to the Buddhist conception of ‘no-self’ to explain his life
choices, was also deeply committed to a historical consciousness and a Marxist celebration of empirical subjectivity. This raises unique questions about his conceptual as well as ideological locations.

Gandhi’s famous disclaimer that he was not writing a ‘real’ autobiography, since an autobiography “is a practice peculiar to the West” (My Experiments with Truth ix) is thus participating in a long-held tradition of belief. That this observation comes not from a theorist of the genre but from a generally observed reality gives it the weight of culturally experienced truth. A recent critical discussion in Hindi also agonizes over the lack of a culture of autobiography in Hindi (Chaturvedi 2003). In all these cases, generalizations regarding cultural/civilizational differences are invoked to explain the prevalence or absence of the genre in one culture or the other. While Misch sees the lack of autobiography in Eastern cultures as a signifier of a lack or of delayed evolution, for Gandhi it seems to indicate a culturally-coded preference for self-abnegation. Chaturvedi, however, sees nothing to extol in this lack, for reasons that differ from Misch’s. For him, the capacity or will to autobiography demands self-reflexivity, a truth-loving critical detachment from one’s self and a willingness to lay bare even the most private aspects of one’s life to public scrutiny. “Lokonnukhbabhasdharmita”, a ‘democratic spirit’, extrovert in orientation and conducive to public debate, marks the autobiographical venture (Chaturvedi 14; translation mine). This he finds largely missing in the world of Hindi letters, with the notable exception of reflections on the genre by the poet Nagarjuna.

Nagarjuna’s essay on the genre, “Aaine ke Saamne” (“In Front of the Mirror”) becomes a major locus of discussion for Chaturvedi who builds on the implications of ‘mirroring’ to the fullest. Autobiography, far from being a paean to an obsessive interiority, emerges in this discussion as a mode of (often) satirical engagement with one’s self and one’s times. Much like Augustan satire, it is essentially critical and social in orientation. It assumes not an isolated subjectivity, but a shared sense of humanity, contexts and issues. It is, in other words, an extended, candid conversation with the reader. Quoting Manager Pandey, he concludes that telling the whole truth is not only its “moral” but “aesthetic condition” as well (Chaturvedi 15, translation mine).
With a few exceptions, then, Chaturvedi points to the absence of autobiography in the Hindi language, a fact he links to several conjectural generalizations. Some questions that his work raises directly or indirectly include: Are Indians (and it is a leap of sorts to project a situation obtaining in Hindi letters to other Indian languages) somehow lacking in the capacity for brutal truth-telling that is the condition of the genre? Is there a premium on self-abnegation in Indian culture that results in anonymity being preferred by artists in general, an offshoot of the phenomenon being the absence of autobiography which purportedly celebrates individuality, or at least considers the individual self a fit object for an extended narrative? Is there, on the contrary, an absence of the spirit of objectivity in Indian culture that results in the prevalence of exaggerated narratives of praise, typically of great men, but not lives of lettered but ‘ordinary’ men? Since the last phenomenon would have obtained in Europe as well till as late as the 18th century, what with the Herderian conviction that only great men must write autobiographies, what accounts for the continued relative paucity of autobiographies in modern India?

Chaturvedi’s lament needs to be qualified by an earlier discussion on this issue. Mukund Lath’s Introduction to Banarasi Das’s 1641 autobiography Ardhakathanaka (Half a Tale), addresses some of these critical issues (Lath 1981). Describing Banarasi Das’s medieval work as “perhaps the only autobiography in the Indian tradition”, he ponders at some length the debate around autobiography (or rather its absence) in India (Lath i). Invoking and demolishing stereotypes, Lath makes a strong case for the presence of an individualist consciousness in ancient and medieval India, citing various cases of poets, playwrights, sculptors and painters leaving distinct signatures on their work.

Whether it is the practice of a playwright introducing oneself at the outset as recommended by the 9th century Kavyalankar (Lath xii), or a song-writer affixing a name at the end as a kind of signature like Jayadeva in Gitagovinda (Lath xiii), or the confident assertion of the poet Dharmakirti of his unique talent in Subhashitaratnakosha (Lath xiii) we have ample proof that ancient Indians were not anonymity-seekers. His conclusion that “autobiography in India was not something entirely unthinkable as it would have been if anonymity were a completely
overpowering ideal,” gets extended to the consideration of the *katha* and the *akhyayika*, two classes of narrative literature in ancient India. The latter of the two shares some of the features of autobiography: it is narrated in the first person and unlike the *katha*, has closer ties with everyday experience and reality, and is in fact “more firmly anchored in what we call realism” (Lath xvi).

However, Lath acknowledges that attempts to find something akin to an autobiography amongst the *akhyayikas* are tenuous and forced. Bana, the author of the only extant work in this genre does include some autobiographical material in his famous *Harshacarita*, but even these are narrated in the third person, thus failing to satisfy Bhamaha’s notable 6th century definition of the genre. And the *Dashakumaracarita* of Dandin, which could satisfy the criterion, has not been placed in either of the traditional categories of the *katha* or the *akhyayika* (Lath xviii). As Lath notes rather poetically:

> After Dandin, the dim yet pregnant vestiges of autobiographical expression in Sanskrit literature dwindle away into insignificance….

> After long centuries almost devoid of meaningful autobiographical expression, the emergence of the *Ardhakathanaka*, a full-fledged autobiography, therefore, certainly occasions surprise…. [But it] is manifestly an isolated expression which cannot be forced into any traditional literary genre or established mode of expression (xx-xxi).

Briefly considering and discarding the medieval literary tradition in India that abounds in autobiographies (the memoirs of Babur, the contemporaneous *Tuzuk-e-Jahangiri*; the historians Barni, Ibn Batuta and Badayuni who narrated the history of their own careers and experiences) as irrelevant to Banarasi Das’ “traditional, indigenous” (xxii) education and upbringing, Lath in fact asserts the mutual exclusivity of these two streams that coexisted without quite mingling, a state of affairs unaffected even by Akbar’s attempts to bridge the gulf. He establishes this fact by pointing, among other things, to Banarasi Das’ “utterly naïve and untutored attitude towards history which any acquaintance with sophisticated Persian historians would have made him seriously question” (xxiv).
Thus locating this unique text in a place outside a “tangible cultural tradition”, Lath ultimately ends by reasserting the stereotypes so often rehearsed vis-a-vis autobiographical writing in ancient and even medieval India (xxiv). His theorizing implicitly depends on the postulation of an indigenous Sanskrit tradition and an imported Persian tradition, just as latter-day theorists like to posit an opposition between a pre-colonial indigeniety and a Western colonial influence. He also raises an important question regarding the status of realism or factuality in Indian traditions of writing, also significant in relation to autobiography. If there is one text that brings these varied strands into a meaningful dialogue, it is surely the autobiography of M. K. Gandhi – the one modern Indian whose location at the cusp of a significant historical juncture helped define the terms of his complex engagement with history, a history that he wrote himself into, in more ways than one.

Some key questions in this regard would be: What, if any, is the ‘Indian’ notion of selfhood? Is there a single retrievable Indian-ness? If yes, then are there enough autobiographical texts that we can archive to help us theorize this? How do we read the absence of the genre in India’s past, except at particular junctures? What does the perceptible emergence of this genre, especially in Bengal and Maharashtra in the 19th century, tell us about these cultures’ relationship with the West or with modernity? How do the early 20th century examples of autobiography develop this emergent tradition? Where does Gandhi’s autobiography fit into our thinking on these questions: is it, in other words, an idiosyncratic anomaly, or are there perceptible continuities that have a wider, general impact?

**Gandhi as Autobiographer: Bridging the Gaps**

Gandhi chooses to end his autobiographical narrative at the very point (1921) when his personal life becomes practically indistinguishable from public history. By focusing on the private domain, he wishes to indicate a degree of interiority defining his narration. Unlike Nehru, who maintains a cautious, English reticence about his private life through much of his autobiography, even as he tells the history of the emergent nation through it, Gandhi wishes not to use this narrative to tell the story of the nation. Coming from a figure who was already emerging as ‘the Father of the Nation’, this emphasis invites attention.
The apparent contrast posited here between the private and the public needs to be viewed in the light of Gandhi’s attempts to close the gaps between these aspects of existence in his own life. For Gandhi, the personal is also the profoundly public, national, international, and even cosmic. The public display of the most intimate crises is not divorced from the nation-building project. The crux of the argument lies in his notion of Truth, experiments with which provide the defining principles of his life and writing. Truth, much more than facticity or ‘historical’ narration, entails encountering psychological, physical, political, and ultimately spiritual crises that must be shared with the reader in a pedagogical spirit. Grounded in the concrete present of a political struggle, also visualized as a more long-term social regenerative project, his quest for Truth is multidimensional. Freedom is to be had from British rule, but also from the colonial mindset, the troubling residues of an inherited faith and society, and finally, with more than a hint of the transcendental, from the world. Here Gandhi’s syncretic sensibility evokes the Indian tradition, in this case the Gita, to link the fulfillment of worldly duty to ultimate freedom. His deployment of autobiography as a mode thus becomes a testing ground for our understanding of how an Indian aesthetics of the genre might be conceptualized.

Bhikhu Parekh (1989) and Sunil Khilnani (2001) have argued that Gandhi’s autobiography exemplifies the process of adapting a Western import for Indian purposes. In doing so, his autobiography is of a piece with his cultural and political thinking: the creative appropriation of a range of influences for a tactical assault on colonialism/imperialism and its cultural aftermath. An example of this is the initial disclaimer that he is not writing a “real autobiography” in the Western sense, but merely the story of his “experiments with truth.” The context of this disclaimer is important: when Gandhi declared his intention of writing an autobiography, a “God-fearing friend had his doubts.” Gandhi quotes him as saying:

What has set you on this adventure? Writing an autobiography is a practice peculiar to the West. I know of nobody in the East having written one, except amongst those who have come under Western influence. And what will you write? Supposing you reject tomorrow the things you hold as principles today, or supposing you revise in the
future your plans of today, is it not likely that the men who shape their conduct on the authority of your word, spoken or written, may be mistaken? Don’t you think it would be better not to write anything like an autobiography, at any rate just yet? (Experiments ix)

The anxieties expressed here indicate the range of expectations Gandhi had already come to live up to in the early 1920s and his decision to go ahead and write an autobiography surely indicates a less rigid view on the matters raised by the unnamed friend. Given the echoes in Gandhi’s thought of such ‘Western’ influences as Emerson and Tolstoy and considering that amongst the formative influences on his most cherished experiments with dietetics and naturopathy drew inspiration from sources as ‘Western’ as German homeopathy and the vegetarian societies popular in the London of his sojourn there, the friend’s anxieties about Western influence need to be qualified. But Gandhi, who in Hind Swaraj (1909) had already castigated European civilization as a contradiction in terms, appears here to appease a perceived threat to the nationalist cause, perfectly confident in his own genius for assimilating from the ‘West’ whatever served the purpose.

A dynamic notion of the self, making it the duty of all to engage in strenuous self-examination and self-creation, is what finally gives Gandhi’s autobiography a distinctly modern feel, much like the man himself. With the deliberate use of the word ‘experiment,’ Gandhi was trying to signal an open-ness to experience and genius for self-invention. He experimented with Western dress, dance, English-style vegetarianism, professional law in London, celibacy, dietetics, non-violence as a personal and a political creed – all aspects of the truth which he did not reduce to convenient compartments. As Sunil Khilnani perceptively remarks:

…his use of the form [autobiography] marks a landmark in non-Western, and specifically Indian, literary invention. He used it to create, in the Indian imagination, the domains of public and private: He reminds his readers that for a “history” of his public work and life, they should turn to “Satyagraha in South Africa”; here, in the autobiography, they will find only the details of his personal and private life.
Yet no sooner were these spheres demarcated than Gandhi was busily blurring and commingling them...allowing him to recount his own non-Western – and distinctively modern – Indian life (“The Magnificent” n.p.).

This modernity was necessarily a mediated and mediating one, with sometimes incompatible notions jostling against each other. A case in point would be the way in which he deployed the notion of the self that he inherited from the ‘Indian’ tradition. It has been suggested by the indologist Agehanand Bharati that this self has been understood via three different words in traditional Indian thought. Bharati distinguishes them as, “atman”, “svayam” and “aham” (Bharati 206-209). While the first carries transcendental connotations due to the dominant high advaitin discourse of Parmatman or Brahman, the latter two have somewhat limited, even negative connotations, as in words like “svarth” or “ahamkar”. Reading a word such as “svadharma” as indicating merely “one’s proper duty” with “no reference to any further notion of “self”, Bharati argues that the “Indian independence movement appropriated the Sanskrit lexeme as though it denoted a person, a self, as in svaraj, ‘self-rule’ or in ... the RSS (Rashtriya-svayam-seva-sangha ‘national “self”-help association’ (208). That aside, it is not difficult to see how Gandhi uses the idea of atma in atmakatha to indicate a self that is a changing, dynamic entity, responding to its environment, learning and modifying its behavior accordingly. Such is the self that emerges from his atmakatha, a potentially transcendent, mystical notion of an unchanging essence brought down to the level of lived, daily reality.

Gandhi’s revolutions were simultaneously semantic and political. One has merely to consider the redefinition of modern English effected by such neologisms as swaraj, ahimsa, satyagraha, all used by him in his English writings. By often not translating these words into their English equivalents, Gandhi was making a tactical move since the words, having acquired the resonance of chants and rallying battle cries, would have been diluted of translated. That they also indicated a confident sense of linguistic location in the native language was no less significant. If language is a carrier of culture, and robbing a people of their language one of the tools of mental colonization, then Gandhi’s was also a semantically political act. His
commitment to ‘nation’, understood not only as a territorial unit, but as an emotional-cultural one, was manifested in the forging of a vocabulary that could stir a deeper sense of identification than English could provide. As the language of the colonial elite, and one that created a gap between Indians educated in the modern Western systems and the masses, who were village-based, English had to be eschewed. Promotion of a national language, a rashtrabhasha, was a later development geared towards better mass mobilization in India; Gandhi had already been using words like ‘Satyagraha’ in South Africa, the space that became his laboratory for trying out his unique political vocabulary.

**Nation, Vocation, Location: Points of Conceptual Departure and Arrival**

The debates around autobiography as genre invariably revert to questions of the genre’s cultural specificity, articulated in terms of a general ‘East/West’ divide which also merges into a tradition/modern divide. This is because the notion of individuation seen to be central to the autobiographical impulse, is often located in Western, ‘modern’ cultures, seen as a Western ‘invention’, and seen to flourish in the mode of thinking made possible by the European Enlightenment. Immanuel Kant’s seminal essay ‘What is Enlightenment?’ is one key example of this mode of thinking about human maturity as individuation. The ability to conceptualize and articulate the self as a separate being who is also an agent of its destiny is thus central to the enterprise and autobiography as a genre can be seen to be arising from a similar sense of selfhood. The ability to think historically and write history is also seen to be connected to this notion of the ‘West’ and linked to a modern sense of selfhood, whether for an individual or a collective.

As Raymond Williams has shown, however, even in the ‘West’, the concept of individuation, in this sense, is relatively recent. His discussion of the word ‘individual’ points out a latent paradox: while ‘individual’ connotes singularity, the contiguous term ‘indivisibility’ suggest connectedness, and he points out perceptively that it is in the field of logic and biology, in the 17th and 18th centuries respectively, that the term acquired the sense of a singular unit. It is in the 19th century that the term acquires a new meaning and enjoys “a remarkable efflorescence”: “Increasingly
the phrase ‘an individual’ – a singular example of a group – was joined and overtaken by ‘the individual’: a fundamental order of being.” Connecting this to the fall of feudalism and Protestantism’s increased emphasis on “man’s direct and individual relation to God”, Williams charts the Enlightenment trajectory of “a new mode of analysis” which then connected to the foundational principles of liberal thought and utilitarian ethics (Williams 161-4). As a Marxist, Williams is naturally interested in tracing the history of the concept for its crucial political implications for a Marxist analysis of culture, which rests upon a questioning of the notion of individualism, but it is a useful corrective to essentialising notions of an ‘eternal’, ahistorical ‘West’ identifiable with individualism per se.

As we have seen in the discussion of autobiography, different cultures across the ‘East’/ ‘West’ divide have shown evidence of both historical thinking/writing in this sense and of autobiography as a genre. This complicates the binary thinking that labels autobiography an inherently ‘Western’ genre, though there clearly is greater evidence of articulations of the self emerging from spaces that are called ‘Western’. Further, the ‘modern’ cannot simply be conflated with the ‘Western,’ since moments of ‘modernity’ can arrive at different moments in different parts of the world. Thus modernity in its spatial and temporal dimensions is multiple, not singular and uniform. It is also noteworthy that the same questionable binary construction that seeks to conflate East with tradition and the West with the onset of modernity, is also applied to debates on the origin of nation/nationalism. The idea of the nation, historically seen, is also, like autobiography, considered to be of ‘Western’ origin.

The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought glosses ‘nationalism’ (there is no entry for ‘nation’) as follows:

(1) The feeling of belonging to a group united by common racial, linguistic and historical ties, and usually identified with a particular territory. (2) A corresponding IDEOLOGY that exalts the nation-STATE as the ideal form of political organization with an overriding claim on the loyalty of its citizens (559, emphases original).
It proceeds to locate the idea’s origins: “Developing first in Western Europe with the consolidation of nation-states, nationalism brought about the reorganization of Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries…” Considering “the African and Asian manifestations”, the Dictionary posits “territorial nationalism”, “ethnic nationalism” and “a ‘pan’ or ‘super state’ variant” as analytic categories (559-60). My study will attempt to relate the varieties of nationalism articulated by my protagonists to these analytical categories.

It is useful, again, to turn to the etymology of the term ‘nation,’ a word that does not get a separate entry in Williams’ Keywords either, where it is subsumed under ‘nationalist’. He does however begin the latter entry with a brief history of its origins and uses. Derived from the Latin for ‘breed’ or ‘race’, its primary connotations since its common use began in the 13th century were of a racial group rather a politically organized grouping. Acknowledging the “overlap” in the two meanings of the word, Williams asserts that it is not possible to date the historical moment of the term acquiring the latter connotation. It is only in the 17th century that the term came to denote “the whole people of a country” with “national” coming to be used in a “persuasive unitary sense” (18). This is of course the European genealogy of the term, and in India, at least in English, it would again have to be the experience of colonialism that brings anxieties of national identity to the fore in this language. Other ‘native’ formulations, historical or legendary, need not concern us here except in terms of how they may be selectively appropriated by nationalists for the purposes of arousing national consciousness.

As it happens, the list of contiguous terms that Williams lists below his entry is as instructive for analyzing the range of nationalism as a discourse in India at this moment in history, as it would be for Europe: “Ethnic, Folk, Literature, Native, Racial, Regional, Status” (212-13), all these impinge on vital questions of identity and location, both in terms of anti-colonial mobilization as well as on the issue of the independent nation-state that was the context for the life and writings of most of the protagonists in this study, who lived to see the newly independent Indian state grapple with the task of nation-building in an environment that was plural and diverse. How they conceptualized the nation in the first place, especially in relation to issues of race
and ethnicity, language and literature, the centre and the region, was significant for the way they saw their own location, and vocation, within the nation. In the case of the Europeans who came to India, their relation to discourses of nationalism in their native contexts was, I hope to show, a significant factor in determining their relocation to India. Within India, their shifting locations further marked their complex engagement with the idea of India as it was being thought of during the freedom struggle and as it shaped up after 1947.

Nation is a disputed category in current discourses even as it remains a political reality in the world. Difficult to pin down theoretically, it appears as a polyvalent term that suggests a range of contiguous terms such as nationalism, nation-state, and nation-building. There is no consensus on what ‘nation’ and ‘nationalism’ mean, or even on how old these concepts are. Christoph Jaffrelot’s 2003 discussion on the theoretical nuances of the term problematizes the blurring of the distinction, in academic usage, between the terms patriotism, nation, nationality, and ethnicity. Thus, he quotes Arjun Appadurai as defining patriotism as the readiness of the citizens to die for their country, while nationalism describes those engaged in aggressive, expansionist politics (Jaffrelot 4). George Orwell had made much the same distinction in his 1945 piece “Notes on Nationalism”, but one would agree with Jaffrelot that this dichotomy is misleading; each needs the other. If one accepts Jaffrelot’s assertion that “nations have an institutional dimension that is state-oriented,” while nationalism’s “foundations are rooted in identity politics and culture,” then my subject-matter is more properly concerned with nationalism, not with nation (5). However, Nehru was directly involved in the fortunes of the nation-state, with Gandhi as an ambivalent, sage-like presence warning against its dangers. Elwin, Sarala, Mira and Stokes were involved in their own ways, often deeply critical, with India after 1947. Sankrityayan was an actor on the national-political stage intermittently and often obliquely, while his Marxist internationalism co-existed with an avoidance of English and blended with a profound sense of belonging to a linguistic location that ranged from being ‘pan-Indian’ in its preference for Sanskrit, to ‘regional’ in his embracing of Bhojpuri as a mode of self-expression. The issue of nation as location affects all the figures in its cultural dimensions as well as in the more institutional ones, and they become
participants and interrogators of some of the notions of the nation and nationalism then prevalent.

Jaffrelot’s discussion is primarily conducted within the European context, with a passing reference to Partha Chatterjee’s work (1986, 1994), which interrogates the Eurocentric bias in the construction of the category nation by speaking of it as a ‘derivative discourse’ and questioning Benedict Anderson’s famous formulation of the nation as an imagined community. In bringing attention back to the idea of colonialism continuing by other means, via the replication by the ‘East’ of ‘Western’ categories for understanding itself, Chatterjee opens up an important issue that resonates with the debates in autobiography theory as well.

The idea of modernity is seen to be intricately connected to the rise of nationalism as a master discourse. Anti-colonial nationalism of the kind that arose in Africa and Asia can be seen to be responding to the challenge by selectively appropriating the colonizer’s notion of the nation. This was done specifically as a reaction to a colonizing discourse that seeks to deny the colonized the capacity to think itself into nationhood. In the case of India, it would take the form of thinking of India as a mélange of communities, a formulation that the nationalists fought. Assertion of India’s nation-hood, either as an existent fact or as a future possibility, then became a de facto plank of the anti-colonial struggle. The nature of this Indian-ness, and of the changes required therein reflected different ideological biases and readings of ‘history’.

How the various colonized peoples met this challenge raises issues about the paradoxes of de-colonization. For, imitation of the colonizer’s modes of thought and organization can be seen to militate against the need for internal de-colonization, since colonization is often seen to work its influence by denigrating the colonized people’s own culture and traditions, resulting in deep psychic damage. Undoing this damage and restoring a sense of self is often a step in the anti-colonial struggles where simple political freedom without cultural reaffirmation is seen to be incomplete. This often results in a critical reviewing of traditions, practices, and modes of living of the colonized, by the nationalist leadership, which often responds
to the colonial challenge by a self-reflexive critique and reform from within. Thus, a dual process is at work: a critical examination of their own practices, by a native elite leadership that has the ability to see them through a Western/modern lens, and a simultaneous assertion, and sometimes an invention, of positive, pride-instilling, and enabling dimensions of the native culture. The ambidextrousness of the native leadership is usually taken as a given in this process, since it has to have the ability to amphibiously inhabit dual worlds: its own native one and that of the colonizer which it must fight at the two levels of overt politics as well as at the level of cultural discourse. Partha Chatterjee (1986, 1994), Ashis Nandy (1983) and Bhikhu Parekh (1989) have offered varied perspectives on nationalism in India, while Aijaz Ahmad (1992) and Sisir Kumar Das (1995) have attempted to problematize the issue by theoretical and archival engagements with Indian literature.

Despite his caution against “the risky moments in the narratives of anti-colonial nationalism …[when] marks of resistance … were sought to be erased” by a hegemonising nationalism, Partha Chatterjee has to admit that “it would be dishonest… to claim that the critique of nationalism is easy”, given the “shams of the myths of global cooperation” which are visible to him due to “the biculturalism of intellectuals in postcolonial countries….for it is hard for us to imagine a plausible state of the world in which our relation to the dominant structure of scholarship and politics will be anything but adversarial.” Instead he suggests that we pay heed to “nationalism’s capacity to appropriate….dissenting and marginal voices,” almost against the grain of his own skepticism about nationalism. (The Nation 156).

The imperatives of nation-building exert another set of influences, further pushing the Indian nationalists towards replication of existing patterns. In Chatterjee’s reading, the concern with building a nation-state along industrial lines was inherent in the reconfiguring of the nationalist agenda in the 40s to move towards construction, with Planning as the key. Nehru became the chief executor of this shift towards large industry and Gandhi was marginalized, in an increasing bureaucratization of the issue, taking away the space for political dialogue and negotiation: “It was in the administration of development that the bureaucracy of the postcolonial state was to assert itself as the universal class, satisfying in the service of the nation its private
interests by working for the universal goals of the nation” (The Nation 202-3, 205). Further, the residue of the colonial construction of India as a space incapable of being a nation continues “...even if we dismiss the sociological view that declares India to be a mere collection of discrete communities as a peculiarly colonial construct, we are ...still left with a brand of postcolonial politics whose discursive forms are by no means free of that construct” (224). I will attempt to see the extent to which these concerns are justified by the materials I access in relation to the lives and life-writing of the very public protagonists of this study, whose lives intersected with that of the nation at multiple historical conjunctures. The uses of language, and the debate on a national language, then become a key concern.

Colonial/imperial power and its many manifestations, the modes of opposition to it as well as the incipient modes of its continuance in postcolonial India, is thus one set of issues that this study incorporates in its considerations of the life-choices and modes of self-narration that the individuals in it deploy. The other significant frames are notions of vocation, of self-fashioning in terms of a cause or a goal defined very much in terms of the historical moment. All these individuals lived out significantly political lives, even when their life-trajectories seem to diverge from the path of the obviously ‘political’. I use the word politics in the sense not of the ubiquitous presence of the political in the minutest, most private aspects of human life – the sense that feminism, for instance, has made current via its slogan that ‘the personal is the political’ – but primarily in the sense of politics as a site for public aspirations and collective struggles. I also use it in the sense that Max Weber gives it in his essay “Politics as Vocation”, where he defines politics broadly as “any kind of independent leadership in action.” After a consideration of the nature of the State, he says that questions of “interests in the distribution, maintenance or transfer of power” are involved when we use the word “political” (77-8). Thus, all these individuals are directly involved with questions that address issues of power, though the ways in which this was negotiated in the private and the public domains varied. In some cases, as with Gandhi, the gap between the private and the public closed to an extent that confounds analysis. In fact, Gandhi’s recalcitrance in the face of analytical frames offered by the Social Sciences is a question in itself that Vinay Lal has explored in a searching essay (2006).
But Weber helps in understanding Gandhi’s power and impact by postulating the “extraordinary and personal gift of grace” as a form of authority (79). Weber offers an insightful analytic tool for understanding the intertwining of vocation and location in the complex political negotiations that the individuals under study were engaged in. Identifying three ‘pure types’ of political authority – the ‘traditional’, the ‘charismatic’ and the ‘legal’ – Weber concedes that it is rare to find any pure examples of these types, but that the “complex variants, transitions and combinations of these pure types” are in any case the proper domain of political science: “Here we are interested in the second of these types: domination by the virtue of the devotion of those who obey the purely personal charisma of the leader. For this is the root of the idea of a calling in the highest sense” (79).

To the extent that many of these figures were “called” to a greater or a lesser degree by Gandhi, the charismatic leader, their quests were imbued with this Weberian quality of a vocation defined in a religio-spiritual sense as a calling. In the case of the Western questers, this was often literally true, with Elwin marking a point of departure some distance into his journey. Indian followers like Nehru and Rahula Sankrityayan reveal a layered engagement with the figure of the Mahatma. However, the purely personal call was heard by only one, Madeleine Slade, whose Indian name Mira captures the complete immersion in the discourse of “devotion to the charisma of a prophet” that Weber sees as the basis of charismatic authority and which defines the contours of her Indian engagement (M. Weber 79). For all the rest, Gandhi was not primarily a charismatic figure to be followed out of personal devotion: he could be a challenge, an opponent, and even an oppressive paternal figure. However, they all acknowledged the extraordinary power that this aspect of his presence wielded in the making of the Indian national movement.