

Alaka Atreya Chudal. 2016. *A Freethinking Cultural Nationalist: A Life History of Rahul Sankrityayan*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

In her volume on Rahul Sankrityayan (1893–1963), Alaka Atreya Chudal traces the North Indian writer and scholar’s life trajectory against the changing political and cultural contexts of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The book consists of an introduction, four chapters, an afterword, six appendices, a select bibliography and an index. In the first chapter, “Rahul Sankrityayan’s Autobiography: The Product of a Prison Cell,” Chudal locates Sankrityayan’s autobiographical writings within the larger corpus of autobiographical prison writings of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. She then follows him in his foray into the Arya Samaj in the second chapter, “The Arya Samaj: A New Light.” In the third chapter, “Buddhism: A Source of Indian Pride,” she deals with his endeavors as a Buddhist and finally turns to his engagement in communism and his investment in Hindi language activism in the fourth chapter, “Hindi: An Indian Voice.”

Chudal’s book is largely based on Sankrityayan’s six volumes of autobiographical writings, *Merī Jīvan Yātrā* (MJY), reprinted in a 1998 collection (Sankrityayan 1998). She explains that her decision to call these volumes “life history” is in part due to the autobiographical and biographical nature of these works. Sankrityayan and his wife Kamala, Chudal informs us, collaboratively published these volumes between 1946 and 1998. While Sankrityayan published MJY-1 and MJY-2 during his lifetime, Kamala

Sankrityayan drew on her husband's travel writings and diary entries from *Rūsme Pacis Mās* to publish MJY-3, 4 and 5. She then went on to publish the sixth part, called *Jīvan Yātrā* based on her own experience with her husband's illness and his ultimate death in 1963.

Chudal's grasp over the methodological and conceptual debates surrounding life history as a form of historical writing is evident. She sees autobiography as a rich and valid source for historical reconstruction, and while she uses Sankrityayan's other writings, his letters and exchanges in the book, MJY in its six parts forms the bulk of the source material for the book. Furthermore, Chudal draws on the history of the genre to remind us of the growing popularity of this form of writing in allowing individuals to engage in a kind of modernist self-fashioning in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The balance that she strikes in thinking through historical and biographical imperatives behind Sankrityayan's career as a writer is commendable. She shows us quite clearly that while the explosion of a market for Hindi publishing and printing created the conditions for Sankrityayan to engage in cultural production of this kind, his own distinction as writer of travel and popular history gave him unprecedented popularity among readers.

Unlike David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn who, in their edited volume *Telling Lives in India* (2004), see self narratives as structured by the subjective experiences and memories of authors and not necessarily grounded in factual truth and therefore prefer the term "life story," Chudal chooses to use the term "life history," for her work to emphasize the factual truths in MJY. Chudal is indeed sensitive to the textual practices in autobiographical writing; she even sets out to read strategies of writing within these texts. This is evident in her emphasis on the change of the narrative "I" from Sankrityayan to his wife in the sixth volume of MJY. However, one wonders if Chudal is not critical enough in interrogating Sankrityayan's narrative techniques in recounting his past. For instance, she takes Sankrityayan's refusal to learn English as a child as a straightforward case of traditionalist's love for Sanskrit and his fascination for his Sanskrit-educated uncle. Perhaps more than young Rahul's deep sense of tradition, this could very well be the retrospective attribution of a proclivity towards Sanskrit to his younger self of an older Sankrityayan, educated and well versed in Sanskrit. Self-narratives are often attempts of writers to thread into a coherent account, a consistent notion of themselves as individuals. A more careful consideration is required to think through a writer's imperatives in the presentation of his past self in particular ways.

In Chudal's exploration of Sankrityayan's life as an Arya Samajist, she identifies his nationalism as one framed by an interest in the organization's civilizational missions. To Sankrityayan, the Arya Samaj with its educational projects became a way to grapple with the questions of nation, community and progress. Chudal suggests that it was the unorthodox practices of the Arya Samaj – their call for universal education, incorporation of untouchables and other non-Hindu religious communities into its fold through rituals such as *śuddhi* – that appealed to Sankrityayan. Following this logic it is easy for us to understand Sankrityayan's smooth flow into the politics of the Indian National Congress (INC) as the party not only drew on individuals but also the cultural and political ideas of social reform movements such as the Arya Samaj.

Sankrityayan's imperatives for turning to the INC from Arya Samaj are fairly comprehensible. The use of cultural symbols of Hinduism along with universalist and secular protestations must have appealed to Sankrityayan. One wonders, however, if Chudal discusses in her book, all the possible imperatives for his turn to Buddhism. Of interest is the 1922 annual national meeting of the INC in Gaya and Sankrityayan's proposal for the handing over of the Maha Bodhi Temple to Buddhists. It is here it seems that he found himself in a more substantial contact with Buddhists. While Chudal deals briefly with this episode, we are left wondering what might have appealed to Sankrityayan in the conversations, exchanges and meetings that transpired between him and the Buddhists. Nevertheless, Chudal's suggestion of the ambivalence Sankrityayan experienced in the interstices of Arya Samaj, Buddhism and communism when faced with the choice of these different threads is commendable. In suggesting the ambivalence of such an experience, Chudal presents us with a more nuanced picture of Sankrityayan and the complex nature of his negotiations with these areas of his life.

Chudal explains in the introduction to the book that her research on Sankrityayan began with an exploration of Sankrityayan's relationship with Nepal. Perhaps because this area of her research is older and has therefore had the chance to develop over the years, chapter three of the book where Chudal deals with Sankrityayan's connections with cultural figures in Nepal is nuanced and very well developed. This is also perhaps the chapter in the book that will be of most interest to scholars working on Nepali history and culture. Several appendices at the end of the book, which consist of short notes on Sankrityayan's friendship with the politician Dharmaratna Yami, his

exchanges with the writer Laxmi Prasad Devkota, and his engagement with other Nepali literary and cultural figures, supplement this chapter. These short notes are invaluable for those who wish to understand the richly interwoven ties between the Nepali and Hindi public spheres.

In placing Sankrityayan in the historical milieu of Buddhist revivalist movements of the subcontinent, Chudal allows us to understand the extended networks of Buddhist social movement activists that enabled his movement to and from different countries. She argues that his particular affinity to Nepal and its people stemmed from a notion that a common civilizational past bound the two countries and their people together. Her suggestion is that even as Sankrityayan in his travels across the national boundaries of Nepal experienced the differential treatment of Nepalis and Indians as citizens of different countries, a sense of kinship made him feel close to Nepal. She tells us that he thought of Nepal as India's "younger brother," (p. 179) and rightly suggests that he was not the only one to think in these terms as such notions were common amongst Nepalis and Indians of the time.

An issue that occasionally erupts in Chudal's work that she does not critically assess is a kind of golden age thinking in Sankrityayan. It is apparent that Sankrityaya idealized a glorious past and made attempts to salvage cultural artifacts that he considered critical in the building of a national future. Chudal's argument that his endeavor to recover original Buddhist texts as an attempt to "raise India's status back to what it was," (p. 142) suggests that Sankrityayan also had notions about what India was not at present and what it could be in the future. A further development of her work to think through Sankrityayan's imaginations of these different temporalities for the nation and their implications would have given us a more comprehensive insight into Sankrityayan's nationalist visions.

A commitment to a notion of an all-encompassing *ekjātīyatā*, which Chudal sees as a consistent thread in Rahul Sankrityayan's nationalist thought, continued to the very end of Sankrityayan's life. In looking at the later part of Sankrityayan's life as a Hindi language activist, Chudal argues that he saw the Hindi language as having a universalizing potential for nation building. She tells us that Sankrityayan was against the dividing of Hindi and Urdu along communal lines and pushed for a Hindustani language that incorporated elements of both. While Chudal suggests that his own imperatives as a Hindi language writer might have influenced his push for the Hindi language, she does not sufficiently address the implications

of Sankrityayan's push for a Devanagari script. She also seems to take for granted Sankrityayan's claim that Hindi was most suited for the Indian nation because of its closeness to Sanskrit. The differential sacrifice that such a claim calls for from South Indians is one such implication that Chudal does not consider. A more thorough engagement with some of the divergent arguments over the Hindi question from Rahul Sankrityayan's detractors, such as P.C. Joshi, who she discusses briefly, might have allowed her to build a more nuanced and complex argument about Sankrityayan's language politics.

Chudal sees an inclusive cultural nationalism as definitive of Rahul Sankrityayan's views as an Arya Samajist, a Buddhist and a language activist. She takes Sankrityayan's conceptualization of the nation as having a common language, a common past as indicative of his inclusive cultural nationalism. It is, however, difficult not to see this kind of nationalism as appropriative and hegemonic. Even as the outward protestations of such a conceptualization of Indian-ness as an all-encompassing civilization may appear inclusive, the tendency of such thought to fold into one category (of Indian) difference and dissension cannot be overlooked. While Chudal gives us a comprehensive insight into the historical context in which Sankrityayan imagined and thought about the sentiment of nationalism, more thorough and critical investigation of such nationalism is wanting in the volume.

Given that her project is primarily to understand the implications of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century nationalist movements in India on Rahul Sankrityayan's life trajectory and his own formulation and re-figuration of nationalism, her decision not to engage too closely with his other literary texts is quite understandable. However, Chudal's treatment of Sankrityayan's novel *Bāisvī Sadi* (2006) in the second chapter of the book gives us much insight into the writer's imaginations of a nation. Through a close textual reading Chudal explores the making of a utopian nation composed of individuals from across the world committed to communist principles in the novel. The effectiveness of her use of this particular literary source makes one wonder if placing some more of Sankrityayan's literary works in conversation with the autobiographical writings would have bolstered or complicated the claims about Sankrityayan that Chudal makes in the book.

In tracing Sankrityayan's nationalist thought over the course of his lifetime, Chudal definitely counteracts the tendency in Sankrityayan studies to see his associational choices and intellectual orientations as disparate. However, even as the book acquaints us to a distinct form of nationalist

thought through Sankrityayan, it falls short in its critical appraisal of this mode of thinking. Even as we see a universalist thrust in Sankrityayan's notion of an all encompassing nation, his turn to particular cultural symbols such as Hindi in defining this nation needs to be more thoroughly interrogated. Chudal's book is undeniably the first of its kind to give us an account of Sankrityayan's life in its entirety in English and is therefore, an important contribution.

## References

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