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## **THE ERRANT PHILOSOPHER: RĀHUL SĀṂKṚTYĀYAN'S ART OF WANDERING**

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### **Abstract**

Rāhul Sāṁkrtyāyan (1893-1963) is a very prolific Indian intellectual and writer, who published in five languages about a very wide spectrum of subjects. He was a self-made person, had no formal education and no fixed residence, nor a stable job. A polyglot and a traveller, he is surprisingly little studied and many of his works have never been printed. Among his writings particularly relevant is *Ghumakkaṣ śāstra* (A Treatise of Vagabondology), a handbook for roamers claiming that wandering is the first and ultimate goal in human life. A world traveller, he wrote many travelogues. This paper focuses on the philosophical importance the author attributes to wandering.

**Key words:** Hindi literature, travelogue, wandering subjects, Indian philosophy.

### **1. A wandering sage for the modern age**

Rāhul Sāṁkrtyāyan (1893-1963) was a fiercely independent scholar, and he is one of the most interesting Indian thinkers and intellectuals of modern times. He was a polymath, and in this regard he reminds us of other talented public figures in South Asia prior to Independence, like the poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). He was a polyglot and a traveller, historian, novelist, and philosopher. He was a communist and Buddhist. His scholarship was amazingly vast and deep: it is impossible to enumerate all the areas of his interest; suffice to mention that they included Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetan, Hindi languages and literatures, linguistics, archaeology, Buddhist art, philosophy, and history. In a spirit of empirical enquiry that reminds me the one that in the 14<sup>th</sup> century urged Italian humanist Petrarca to explore libraries and monasteries all over remote regions in Italy and France in search of manuscripts, he set out to Tibet in order to recover a wealth of Sanskrit scriptures that no longer existed even in India.

Rāhul Sāṁkrtyāyan was born on April 9, 1893 into a Brahman family in the village of Pandahā (district Āzamgaṛh) in present-day Uttar Pradesh. His name was Kedārnāth Pāṇḍey, but he changed it first into Rāmaudār Dās, when he embraced the path of wandering asceticism, and later into Rāhul Sāṁkrtyāyan, as a result of his conversion to

Buddhism. The life of a wandering scholar came early to Rāhul Sāṃkrītyāyan; in third class he read a couplet by Ismāil Meraṭhī that became the motto of his whole life:

*sair kar duniyā kī gāfil, zindagānī phir kahām?*  
*zindagī gar kuch rahī, to naujavānī phir kahām?*

“Oh, you ignorant and idle, go and travel all over the wide world. You are not going to have another life for this. Even if you live longer, this youth is not going to return.” (Machwe 11)

Prompted by an inexhaustible curiosity, his travels took him very far from his ancestral village. As a youngster, he ‘ran away’ from home on two occasions: once when he was only nine and later –for good– at the age of 14. Beginning in 1917, he travelled to various parts of the Indian subcontinent, Sri Lanka, Central and Eastern Asia, Europe and the USSR. At the same time he embarked on a long intellectual and spiritual journey, living and learning with sadhus and sannyasis, studying in Vedantin and Aryasamaji circles, becoming a Buddhist monk. He never received a regular education, but studied extensively in Banaras, Lahore, Madras, Sri Lanka.

He got involved with mainstream politics and engaged in the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1921, participated to the civil disobedience movement in the 1930s, and took a leading part in the agrarian political struggle in Bihar, being elected President of the Kisān Sammelan in Motihari and of the Bihar Provincial Kisān Sabhā in 1940. He was imprisoned thrice, spending some years at the infamous Hazaribagh Jail in Bihar; for six months in 1922, in connection with his Non-Cooperation activities; from 1923 to 1925 for anti-British activities; from 1940 to 1942 in connection with the peasant struggle in Bihar. He worked initially with the Congress: in 1922 he was elected president of the Chapra District Congress Committee and became member of AICC in 1926. At that time he came closer to Marxist positions, and, together with Jay Prakash Narayan (1902–1979) and others, was one of the founders of the Bihar Socialist Party in July 1931. In 1939 he associated with the newly founded Communist Party of Bihar.

Rāhul Sāṃkrītyāyan’s commitment to the socialist and Marxist cause has to be interpreted as part of an intellectual trend that is yet to be studied systematically in the intellectual history of modern India. This is the confluence of Buddhism, Marxism, Socialism, and Gandhian thought, that in the first three quarters of the 20th century had an enormous impact on the biographies of a large number of prominent Indian men and women. Rāhul Sāṃkrītyāyan’s interest in Socialism was probably strengthened by his understanding of the social message of the Buddhist ethic. At the beginning of the twentieth century there was an incipient dialogue between some Buddhists and Marxists. Ideas about Socialism were also in the air. This gave rise to genuinely egalitarian and emancipatory tendencies within politics and promoted an organic relationship with Indian political thought that could have made possible a properly Indian social revolution. Just to mention a few such intellectuals: Dharmanand Kosambi (1876–1947), Acharya JB

Kripalani (1888–1982), Acharya Narendra Dev (1889–1956), BR Ambedkar (1891–1956), Vinoba Bhave (1895–1982), JP Narayan, Damodar Dharmanand (or DD) Kosambi (1907–1966), Ram Manohar Lohia (1910–1967), Hazari Prasad Dwivedi (1907–1979), and Baba Nagarjun (1911–1998). In these times, when late capitalism and globalized free-market economy have made their inexorable advance into India, in a socio-political situation where the left is driven further and further into the political backyard, and powerful rightwing political forces are more and more active, it can be useful to examine the broad influence of Buddha, Marx and Gandhi on the intellectual elites, to reconstruct the lights, the shades, the commitment and the promise of a more complex time when uncommon men like Rāhul Sāṃkrītyāyan were included in the intellectual life of the country, although not in the establishment leadership.

Rāhul Sāṃkrītyāyan's connection with any cause or movement has to be analyzed in the background of the politics of the time. He was not a man to pay unquestioning loyalty to any ideology or cause, and his positions would change in time according to his new experiences and knowledge. He was expelled from the Communist Party of India because of some 'unorthodox' views he expressed in his presidential speech in the Bombay session of the All-India Hindi Sahitya Sammelan in 1948, when he pleaded to use Devanagari script for Urdu (Sāṃkrītyāyan 2006-7); this caused bitter controversy and many Urdu speaking Communists advocated his expulsion from the Communist Party (Machwe 36). At that time the CPI was politically cornered: during the Second World War on a global level many intellectual and writers were attracted by the communist ideology, and the governments in the USA and Britain were trying to counter this growing trend, persecuting and witch-hunting the writers, artists, painters, film actors, etc., who were sympathetic to the cause of Communism. In India the CPI had been alternating between the initial repudiation of the 'imperialist war' and the support to the 'people's war' after the USSR entered the conflict. In August 1942 the Communist opposition to the 'Quit India' resolution at the historic AICC session had ultimately led to the expulsion of the Communists from the Congress organizations in 1946. Rāhul Sāṃkrītyāyan was readmitted in the Party in 1955, but by that time his range of interests extended far beyond the confines of any one belief system. In that period he had begun to doubt Stalin, and his disillusionment with Stalinist Russia was perhaps accelerated by the forced separation from his Russian-born Tibetologist wife, Elena Norvertovna Kozerovskaya (1899–1979), who had not been allowed to accompany him back to India. In the following years, the CPI was going through its internal intensifying split along the China-Moscow axis, and the intelligenzia of the CPI and Jawaharlal Nehru –engaged in his *Hindī Cīnī bhāī bhāī* propaganda– were both scrutinizing each other, but by then Rāhul Sāṃkrītyāyan was already threading on a higher middle path between Buddhism and Marxism.

In the time span that characterizes Rāhul Sāṃkrtyāyan's life, travels, and literary production a major change was taking place in the scholastic field in India. As a young man he wandered in a country where the intellectual sphere maintained many traits that had not changed from precolonial times; Buddhism, as discourse or practice, was thoroughly extinct. Later on, the scholarly environment changed. New academies were being established: prestigious colonial institutions such as the Fergusson College in Pune or the Doon School in Dehradun, products of the nationalist movement such as the Aligarh Muslim University and the Banaras Hindu University, as well as Nehruvian establishments such as the Tata Institute for Fundamental Research in Mumbai. Within the space of a couple of decades a knowledge elite of physical and social scientists had challenged the hegemony of traditional learned groups such as Brahmans or Kayasthas, who were giving way to the modern technocrats engaged in building a range of institutions for the new nation-state. Buddhism too had come back to India in new postcolonial avatars, such as Babasaheb Ambedkar's *Navayāna* (New Vehicle) that tapped the potential of Buddhism for Dalit liberation. Rāhul Sāṃkrtyāyan, together with other Buddhists such as Acharya Dharmanand Kosambi and Bhadant Anand Kausalyayan (1905–1988), personified a particular kind of blending of Communist and Buddhist, and rationalist ideas. The Orientalist and Indological apparatuses connected to colonialism had apparently left with the demise of the British Empire, but the construction of the new national knowledge was struggling with the country's own cultural pasts and the epistemic models connected to them. Rāhul Sāṃkrtyāyan was invited as Buddhist scholar and Indologist at the University of Leningrad (USSR) from 1944 to 1947, and also taught philosophy at Vidyalankara University (Sri Lanka) from 1959 to 1961. Yet, he was never invited –or allowed– to teach in any Indian university, due to his lack of a degree: his formal education, in fact, had stopped in class seven.

Rāhul Sāṃkrtyāyan built his enormous learning collecting material for his writings during periods of extensive travelling, getting in contact with wise individuals, attending philosophical and religious debates, and reading in more than thirty languages. His scholarship was based on the model of the *bahuśruta*, the deep-read (or, more precisely, 'heard') well-informed scholar whose erudition did not derive from an established educational curriculum, but rather from the practice of *satsaṅg*, that is known in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism as consisting of the association with enlightened and truthful people, such as monks or gurus, where the knowing process takes place through verbal communication by direct word of mouth, in face-to-face encounters, and interpersonal relations are kept high. Drawn by desire of knowledge as well as by the refusal of child marriage, he had left his home to live with sadhus, an experience that brought him in contact with Sanskrit and Vedānta, and at the same time transformed him into a bitter critic of bigotry, orthodoxy, and social conventions dictated

by religious principles. He later became an atheist and a confirmed materialist, but continued to value the educational experience of *satsaṅg*, adding a secular and cosmopolitan connotation to it; for example, he inserted into the list of inspiring people to spend time with academicians, scientists, and Western thinkers such as Darwin, Marx, and Engels. He firmly believed that it was necessary to spread the knowledge of the "life, thought, and deeds of the great builders of the modern world" (Sāṃkrityāyan K. 1994, 4: 191 all transl. mine), and that "only Communism [was] the panacea for all the illnesses of humankind" (Sāṃkrityāyan K. 1994, 3: 209). Therefore in 1953 he composed the first complete biographies in Hindi of Karl Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao Zedong, so that the exemplum of these great men might foster the birth of a successful revolutionary leader also in India. Before that, in 1944, he had already published a series of biographical sketches titled "New leaders for the new India", a presentation of 42 contemporary eminent figures in the fields of science, literature, and art in India. A second part, introducing the biographies of 12 women and 12 men, was planned but never realized (Sāṃkrityāyan K. 1994, 2: 17).

For Rāhul Sāṃkrityāyan learning was never an abstract activity, but it derived from practice, performance, communication, and interaction with other people. Many of his works were inspired by his travels, and these were not only travelogues: also his major historical endeavor in two volumes, *Madhya Eśiyā kā itihās* (1956), translated into English as *History of central Asia: bronze age (200 B.C.) to Chengiz Khan (1227 A.D.)* (Calcutta 1964), is the result of a two year stay in Russia (1945–47). Following Buddha's saying, for him knowledge was not a baggage loaded on his head, but rather the boat taking him on his journey, and teachings were like maps that he would use to draw an itinerary on his life journey (Siṃh 2007-8). Rāhul Sāṃkrityāyan was attracted to Buddha's message of humanity and rationalism, the idea that humans are able to change their own destiny, and should not rely on rituals and other religious performances. He had always been a socially conscious person, and when he met Buddhist philosophy he found this message apt for common people: this was a philosophy –he used the word *dharma* not as 'religion', but as 'universal law'– meant not just for the patrons and the kings, but benefiting everybody. In his essay *Buddhist Dialectics* Rāhul Sāṃkrityāyan praises Buddhism for granting equal rights to all without any distinction of race, country or caste, and for including features of "advanced materialism." He points out that "it will be erroneous to say that [...] it ever came anywhere near the fundamentals of Marxism. But an understanding of Marxist philosophy is easier for students of Buddhist philosophy" (Sankrityayan 1970:3). Buddhism inspired him not only philosophically, but it also triggered his creative vein. For example, the protagonist of the most famous historical novel by Rāhul Sāṃkrityāyan, *Siṃha Senāpati* (1947), is a general (*senāpati*) of the Licchavi clan, a character whose name coincides to one occurring in Buddhist texts. The

story opposes a republican state run on socialistic principles to the monarchic structure of surrounding kingdoms. Anyway, he was not the only Hindi writer attracted to Buddhism: as Guzel Strelkova has pointed out, Buddhist motives can be found in works by Ajñeya, Yaśpāl, Jayśaṅkar Prasād, Mohan Rākeś, Kṛṣṇa Baldev Vaid, and in many *dalit* Hindi authors (Стрелкова 2004; 2006).

Rāhul Sāṃkrtyāyan positions himself as transnationalist in an age of nationalism, and at the same time he is consciously localist in his imagination of a globalized world. This is a very interesting perspective also for the present. As Mahbubani pointed out, the generally shared assumption that the developmental path of all societies culminated in the plateau on which most Western societies now rest does not prevent to imagine alternative peaks to which "the rest" can take their societies. Rāhul Sāṃkrtyāyan seems to have a third way, an alternative to the East/West discourse: instead of contrasting deference to societal interests, respect for authority, conservatism in social customs, attachment to the family as an institution, frugality –that is, what in the 1990s will be defined 'Asian values'– to 'Western values' such as obeisance to the rule of law, respect for key national institutions, political and economic freedom, emphasis on individual achievement, he proposes a totally different approach unhinging both Eastern and Western conventional expectations. Even his reading of Communist revolution is original: in the aftermath of the Russian revolution, for example, Rāhul Sāṃkrtyāyan did indeed criticize capitalism and embraced a revolutionary and internationalist Soviet model, but he also imbibed it with a South Asian flavor that creates a 'glocal' alternative.

## 2. The art of wandering

Rāhul Sāṃkrtyāyan's life was a paean to travelling. Actually, almost his entire life was spent in journeys, and in writing his autobiography he put the title "The journey of my life" (*Merī jīvan yātrā*). In 1949 Rāhul Sāṃkrtyāyan published a seminal essay, *Ghumakkaṛ śāstra* [GS]. This title can be translated as "The wanderer's holy book or The science of wandering" (Srivastav 377). *Ghumakkaṛ* does not denote a member of a nomadic people, but rather an individual who follows a wandering lifestyle within a sedentary society. The *ghumakkaṛ*'s state or action is *ghumakkaṛī*; this means being in a perennial state of *ghūmnā*, a verb denoting circulation, spinning, and thus implying going around, loitering. The work is defined as a *śāstra*, a term that has maintained also in Modern Standard Hindi the meaning of "a work or book dealing with religion, or with any branch of knowledge, which is regarded as of age-old or divine authority" (McGregor 948). Also the *incipit* of the treaty is meant to emphasize the importance of the teachings it presents, as based on eternal and universal principles. In fact, it opens with the expression "Athato ghumakkaṛ jigñāsā", a deliberate reference to *Brahmasūtra* 1.1.1,

stating "Athato brahma jigñāsā": Now one should inquire about *brahman*. By substituting *ghumakkaṛ* to *brahman*, this statement establishes an equivalence that allows the author to declare that wandering is the world view, it is *dharma*, and that the treaty he is writing is equal to a systematic presentation of normative propositions creating a philosophical system, and outlining a unique ethic for the global wanderer.

Ambulatory metaphors are crucial to a philosophical tradition in which the stylized or spontaneous acts of daily life generate meaning (Cervenak). In South Asian culture there is an abundance of ascetics and wandering yogis and monks (Oman), and the community of renouncers inhabits a circuit of sites, a series of pilgrimage places linked through myth and geography, instead of being based in one particular place (Hausner). A great deal of circulation has always been present in South Asia for many different reasons: pilgrimages to religious places or festivals, commerce, travel abroad as a researcher or tourist seeking knowledge and edification (Subrahmanyam, Markovits and Pouchepadass); all these kinds of journeys involved a detachment from one's homeland, an act of seeing or spectating, and –in many cases– some sort of transformation of the viewer. What differentiates Rāhul Sāṃkrityāyan's view is the radical stance he takes on wandering as a goal: "Until now people thought that *ghumakkaṛī* is the means and the goal is *mukti*, the attainment of divinity; but *ghumakkaṛī* is not only a means, it is at the same time also the goal" (GS 88).

*Ghumakkaṛī* is a method that emerges as the limit of philosophy. Moving in space implies the contemplation or observation of the world which is associated with wandering. This, though, does not generate a 'spectator theory of knowledge'. The *ghumakkaṛ* as philosopher/sage is not only a 'spectator', but is always a 'performer' of practical and political wisdom. The observation of landscape and people involved 'looking with wonder,' an activity in which reason works in conjunction with reverence; this kind of wonder looks upon what is alien and finds some sense of kinship with it, it rises from the simultaneous experience of strangeness –the condition of the wanderer– and kinship –the condition of being human. This, as Bharati Puri has pointed out with reference to Rāhul Sāṃkrityāyan's writing about Kinnaur, was a very different attitude from the one we find in a range of works by European travellers and British officers.

Another relevant aspect of *ghumakkaṛī* is its gratuity, the fundamental importance of *niruddeśya*, 'purposelessness,' as a mode of being or a mode of politics. *Vidyā* or *siddhānt*, terms that we might translate as philosophy, are hailed as a contemplative activity that is completely 'purposeless' in the world of human affairs. As we have seen, Rāhul Sāṃkrityāyan links theoretical and practical activities. Yet, the discourse of 'purposelessness' pervades the GS. While stating that *ghumakkaṛ*-s must never be idle (21), that intellectuals and artists must be useful and beneficial to the collectivity (79-83), and that wandering philosophers also have a cultural-political dimension insofar they

should utilize and disseminate what they have seen and learnt (GS 81), he also claims that 'purposeless' knowledge, paradoxically, is the most important ingredient in the happiest human life (GS 84-88). On one side, *ghumakkaṛī* is a pure act of 'sight-seeing' which is done only for its own sake, and it employs a mode of reasoning that is separate and distinct from practical reasoning and, in fact, cannot lead to praxis: an activity is 'purposeless' precisely because it is chosen for its own sake and does not produce any effect or byproduct in the world. The goal of *ghumakkaṛī* is, first and foremost, to transform the individual, conferring upon her/him a state of wisdom, happiness, and blessedness. On the other side, *ghumakkaṛī* is not only the highest form of knowledge, but also the precondition for all virtuous praxis, as it can be translated into ethical praxis: the philosophic spectator and performer will perform his/her wisdom (in word and in deed) in the civic realm, and her/his metaphysical sightseeing leads to ethical action. This apparent contradiction can be better understood as a variation of the notion of 'detached action' as expressed in the *Bhagavadgītā*, or the Buddhist concept of *virāg*. *Ghumakkaṛī* stimulates a reflection upon the interplay between aimlessness and purposefulness that helps to clarify the relation of philosophy to performance in general. It is an activity that can contribute to construct signification beyond the commonly accepted narratives of usefulness and purpose, individualism, and freedom.

In investigating *ghumakkaṛī* one of the most interesting features is the association between wandering and liminality. The position of the wanderer as described in the GS is the one of an individual who has broken all bonds, who moves at the borderline of any alliance and fixed identity. First of all family is defined as an obstacle: parents and spouse are relations that tie to a place, and children give rise to responsibilities that do not allow freedom of movement. In their journeys wanderers are bound to visit many different places, where they have no personal or institutional connections. According to Simmel's classical definition, strangers, who temporarily live in established social groups, are simultaneously members of the community and not members of the community. They are not seen as individuals, but as a particular type that is a combination of the stranger's identity and the local identity. This makes it difficult for them to interact with local people, at least until they learn the local language. They are not part of the local community, yet they spend some time in these places and they need to earn their living: begging, in fact, is acceptable for monks, but *ghumakkaṛī* is a secular activity. Therefore, they have to master some abilities that grant them means of support. *Ghumakkaṛī*/philosophers should not confine themselves to the higher or 'liberal' arts; they must be able performers, good dancers and singers, and display a wide variety of manual and technical skills that have clear practical benefits (GS 26-31).

Far from being aloof and not caring for the world, *ghumakkaṛī*-s are in a privileged position in order to understand the world. They are not radically committed to the unique



ingredients and peculiar tendencies of one group, and therefore approach any community with a particular structure composed of distance and nearness, indifference and involvement, detachment and participation. They live in a paradox, as wandering is at the same time mark of helplessness –in Rāhul Sāṃkr̥tyāyan's time travelling was not easy, and could be dangerous– and yet of superior power. In this regard, Rāhul Sāṃkr̥tyāyan introduces the notion of social responsibility towards strangers: "The *ghumakkaṛ* must be aware that his path may not be made of flowers, but anyway, is there any path that is made of flowers? In any case, the very humanity of human beings is in becoming universal and being ready to help unknown foreign strangers. Actually, the more a person is unacquainted, the more sympathy one has for him. If he does not understand the language, local people consider their duty to help him in any way" (GS19).

This notion of intense empathy is linked to the idea of wandering as a philosophical performance of sexual and racial freedom. In a work that shows the word *śāstra* in its title, the historically crystallized androcentric and caste-based connotation of these kind of texts –non-caste people and women were generally excluded from Vedic learning– are constantly contradicted. *Ghumakkaṛī* is asserted as a right to women as well as to men, and this is specifically discussed in two chapters of the book (GS 50-55; 89-93), but also repeatedly in the treaty, such as when discussing love relations and sexuality (62-66) or the need for economic self-reliance (26-31) with reference to a wandering life. Wandering –meant both as rambling or roaming, and as meditating– describes the philosophical and performative event of resistance to racialized or gendered captivity. *Ghumakkaṛī* as a discourse transcends perspectives linked to membership of class and caste categories, and the *ghumakkaṛ* is not a 'global' figure, but rather s/he generates 'local' concerns.

Rāhul Sāṃkr̥tyāyan himself was renowned in India not only for his travels, his scholarship and his espousal of the Communist cause, but also for his shocking performances, challenging established social conventions. He was a favorite of the British-Indian media, that besieged him whenever he set out for a journey. In these occasions he would often perform very outrageous actions, like loudly publicly ordering beef for dinner at a railway station, where people had come to see him off, causing scandal to 'respectable' media people and caste Hindus within the earshot (Schaedler 185). Nevertheless, he does not endorse the aura attached to wandering which is often exploited by media and by wandering people themselves (GS: 82–83). He stigmatizes travel writers who fabricate exotic and esoteric details in order to make their writings more attractive, and he deprecates the dishonest attitude of the press, ready to promote a belief based on fabrication in order to allure readers and sell more copies. Rāhul Sāṃkr̥tyāyan never glamorizes wandering and he has a pragmatic attitude to travelling,

always pointing out the necessity to plan an itinerary with fixed stages. He does not romanticize the journey, describing troubles, fears, fatigue, lack of sleep, illnesses that accompany the wanderer on the road. He appreciates the possibility to travel quickly and comfortably, refusing the equation of travelling and mystic search. He has positive remarks on the development of travel as 'tourism' in a period when increasing mobility in the world was important. It was only thanks to the development of a tourism industry that it was possible to get food and lodging in faraway places where no relatives or friends were available. In giving accounts of the visited places he always engaged in providing the historical context its legitimate meaning/s, and his writings draw information from locals as well as functionaries of the colonial empire, from academics as well as fellow wanderers; without ignoring mainstream narratives, he would constantly give voice to marginal positions, trying to remove blind spots in history.

The condition of wanderer introduces also a reflection on human existence, emphasizing the transience of it. Rāhul Sāṃkr̥tyāyan stresses the importance of accepting the mortal condition. The *ghumakkaṛ* does not fear death (GS 78). Even if it is good to aspire to a long and healthy life, thinking of immortality is wrong (GS 74). "Actually the hero-wanderers should not be greedy for immortality, nor covetous for fame and glory. This does not mean that they should aim to be infamous. They should act for the benefit of the people, and push forward the society and the world. If they succeed in these aims one way or another, they are to be considered successful." (GS 77).

A Western reader might be tempted to identify the *ghumakkaṛ* with some figures of vagabondage that have become classic through literature, viz. the hero 'on the road' or the *flâneur*. Rāhul Sāṃkr̥tyāyan's modernism, though, is very original and deserves some clarification. First of all, the kind of modernity he expresses is radically different both from cultural metropolitanism, and from provincial intelligentsia (Srivastav 391). Differently from Baudelaire's or Benjamin's *flâneur*, *ghumakkaṛs* are not solitary (male) loiterers, incognito observers engaged in an act of passionate observation of the fast-paced show of urban, capitalist modernity. They do not privilege the urban environment, where anonymity is synonymous with all-seeing spectator. For Rāhul Sāṃkr̥tyāyan being a stranger is the condition that generates a particular kind of intimacy. An instance of such empathy and special kinship is found in the following passage from GS, introducing the meeting of three wandering persons in 1913 in Karnataka.

Loitering with the image of ancient Vijayanagar in my eyes and its ruins under my feet I reached a tamarind tree, where an aged man was sitting on an old platform. He was no common man, but a *ghumakkaṛ*. On seeing a young man like me he called out: 'Come here, you good fellow, rest for a while.' The young wanderer sat close to him. There was a fire burning in front of them. Tobacco arrived three hundred years ago from South America: not only it removes boredom from the lives of common people, but also

wanderers are forever indebted to its virtues. I cannot say whether the old man had *gāṃjā* or if the young man had already given up this habit, but anyway, the senior traveller filled his pipe with tobacco and soon both were passing the pipe and talking about their sojourns around the world. After some time a third *ghumakkaṛ* joined them. Now the pipe took longer to complete the turn, but the conversation was richer. The sun had set and it was getting dark. The third wanderer said to the young one: "Come, let's go to the banks of the Tungbhadra river. There are three more people like us there." The young man took leave from the old man as if he were a very long acquaintance, and went off with the third. Would you like to know the religion of these three persons? That was the religion of *ghumakkaṛī*, even if each one had his individual religion, which he believed in. The senior wanderer was a Muslim fakir. He was a good *ghumakkaṛ*. The young *ghumakkaṛ* was the author of this story and at that time he was swinging between Śāṅkarācārya and Rāmānujācārya, having somewhat succeeded in getting above notions of untouchability. The third *ghumakkaṛ* was perhaps a sannyasi. (GS 58-59)

Travelling is a difficult path indeed, and becoming a *ghumakkaṛ* does not mean just packing up and setting on the road. Before an individual is ready for the "great departure" (*mahāniniṣkraman*) an extensive period of preparation is required (GS 22), not only in order to acquire the general and linguistic education that allows one to face the world, but also to make preliminary experiences of travel and check one's commitment. For example, for somebody who lives in a tropical area the experience of -20° temperature cannot be learnt just by studying geography and reading maps, but a trip to the Himalayan region in winter might be a good occasion to get acquainted to snow and cold weather (GS 23).

It is also possible to trace some links between Rāhul Sāṃkrītyāyan's wanderings and the wandering style of his writing. Critics have often pointed out that Rāhul Sāṃkrītyāyan's works show inconsistencies and fluctuations, carelessness and lack of polish in style, and have censured the incompleteness that resulted from that. He was aware of the lack of meticulousness and accuracy in writing, as well as of his limitations, and he referred both to Buddha's doctrine of impermanence and to Lenin's judgment of Marx's theory as non-final in order to emphasize the impossibility of perfection for the human condition, wishing for future generations to improve upon the present errors (Machwe 11). This attitude cannot be dismissed as mere negligence, but can be better understood if we think of Rāhul Sāṃkrītyāyan's way of reasoning and writing as inspired by *ghumakkaṛī*. As he writes in his autobiographical paper "Maiṃ kahānī-lekhak kaise banā?" (How I became a fiction writer), the impulse to write, the whole idea of putting down his ideas in words or on paper, came first out of people asking him about his journeys, and later, during long stays in prison, out of the wish to tell other people about his ideas (Sāṃkrītyāyan K. 1994, 2:595-597). He writes to change, or to inspire, or to inform people. One can condemn that as a kind of propaganda, but I think this is rather a

written expansion of the passion for conversation that is visible in the passage shown above. This interpretation of writing as 'telling' can be seen as an "oral residue" (Ong 65), and is better understood in a framework where knowledge tends to be embedded in the interaction among humans, as I said before. Words acquire their meanings from their performance, and are closely tied to body language, such as gestures, rocking to and fro, or facial expressions. Written texts lack intonation or tone of voice; the act of writing separates, sets up the conditions for personal disengagement or distancing. Rāhul Sāṃkr̥tyāyan tries to avoid the reduction of the written word to the visual field, and chooses a colloquial style that evokes the direct semantic ratification controlling the meaning of the word (Ong: 65; 181; 11-12). Rāhul Sāṃkr̥tyāyan's style reflects a philosophy of strategic indirection, as resistance to the conventionally accepted truth does not necessarily require a straight line. In his writing all facets of his personality become visible, the impulse to communicate prevails on the will to write a light, entertaining, and sophisticated sentence or to tell an elaborated charming story. This kind of writing upsets critics who seek 'plot', 'direction', 'meaning'. For example, according to Sisir Kumar Das, Rāhul Sāṃkr̥tyāyan's historical novels "defy popular narrative structures" (119): this resistance to the plot also resists appropriation and teleological understandings of identity implying some reduction of the 'other'.

### 3. Conclusion

What has the notion of *ghumakkaṛī* got to offer us in this age? In the postmodern world constructivism or deconstruction seem to have taken the place of theoretical certitude, and we may be able to live without certainty. But can we really do without wonder? Nietzsche addressed this issue when he claimed that an all-too-human world, a world in which everything "consists of us," devoid of any possibility of wonder, is empty and unendurable; on the other hand, people who practice reverence to other-worldly divinities are "nihilistic" (211). Yet, Rāhul Sāṃkr̥tyāyan seems to suggest that the faith in historicism and the notion that the world simply "consists of us," is not detached from the sense of wonder. Wandering is an activity in which rigorous philosophical and scientific inquiry is accompanied by reverence and restraint, and it is linked to the wonder: an ethical or aesthetic, an ecological (from Greek *oikos* 'house, dwelling place, habitation' + -logia 'study of') wonder– I would say, rather than a theological one. Rāhul Sāṃkr̥tyāyan's works are pervaded by an underlying sense that the whole world is a household (*oikos*) made up of a myriad of kindred members. Instead of looking with wonder at the nonhuman beings in the natural world, or at transcendental realities, Rāhul Sāṃkr̥tyāyan finds a sense of wonder finding a kinship with the strange and various

human life forms in the world around us. And wandering is what keeps humans in touch with wondering.

Rāhul Sāṃkrityāyan maintained very original views on contemporary politics, being at the same time a man before his time, and a man of his time, too. He had an impressive built, a very strong character, and a literary and intellectual talent that created an aura around him that still lives on, even if his name is not included in the mainstream by the present intellectual politics. That contemporary postcolonial studies almost totally ignore his contribution to the Indian thought is perplexing, and confirms the Anglophone hegemony in postcolonial studies. Hindi scholars in the Indian Hindi academic field, whose intellectual conservatism is renown, generally pay lip service to 'Rāhuljī,' and limit themselves to call him 'father of Hindi travel literature' without engaging in a thorough reconsideration of his works in the light of the recent critical interventions that have transformed South Asian studies in the recent decades. As for international collaboration between scholars in Hindi Departments in Indian Universities and their counterparts abroad, much is still to be done.

Rāhul Sāṃkrityāyan's learning cannot be split into different disciplines such as literature, spirituality, astrology, science and technology, sociology, political science, history, linguistics, culture, law and religion. His works are a good example of how cultural and social specificities of non-western spaces and times could be elaborated into an autonomous and methodologically challenging framework. A better knowledge of these processes could be of benefit for history and cultural studies, for anthropology and globalization theory. This seems even more urgent if we think of the Western power which is underpinned so many of our intellectual assumptions. In an era when Europe and the USA undergo a deep crisis and weaken, those assumptions are more and more likely to look untenable: knowing about other societies could simply be seen as a necessary survival strategy even in a 'West and the rest' perspective.

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