

REMEMBERING THE BIHAR SOJOURN OF MAHAPANDIT RAHUL SANKRITYAYAN

BRIEF LIFE SKETCH OF RAHUL SANKRITYAYAN

Mahapandit Rahul Sankrityayan (9 April 1893 – 14 April 1963), who is called the Father of Hindi Travelogue, Travel literature because he is the one who played a pivotal role to give travelogue a 'literature form', was one of the most widely travelled scholars of India, spending forty-five years of his life on travels away from his home.

Rahul's personality was as impressive and memorable as are his achievements. He travelled widely and wrote in five languages – Hindi, Sanskrit, Bhojpuri, Pāli and Tibetan. His published works span a range of genres, which include autobiography, biography, travelogue, sociology, history, philosophy, Buddhism, Tibetology, lexicography, grammar, text editing, folklore, science, fiction, drama, essays, politics, and pamphleteering.

The historian Kashi Prasad Jayaswal of Patna compared Rahul Sankrityayan with 'Gautam Buddha'.

The Government of India awarded him the civilian honour of the Padma Bhushan in 1963.

CHILDHOOD: - He was born as Kedarnath Pandey on 9 April 1893 in Pandaha village, Azamgarh district, in a Bhumihar Brahmin family in Eastern Uttar Pradesh. He received formal schooling at a local primary school, though he later studied and mastered numerous languages independently, as well as the art of photography.

PHILOSOPHY OF HIS LIFE: - In his initial days he was a keen follower of Arya Samaj of Swami Dayananda Saraswati. Buddhism came to him and changed his life. He lost faith in God's existence but still retained faith in reincarnation. Later he moved towards Marxist Socialism and rejected the concepts of reincarnation and afterlife also. The two volumes of Darshan-Digdarshan, the collected history of World's Philosophy give an indication of his philosophy when we find the second volume much dedicated to Dharmakirti's Pramana Vartika. This he discovered in Tibetan translation from Tibet.

TRAVELS: - His travels took him to different parts of India including Ladakh, Kinnaur, and Kashmir. He also travelled to several other countries including Nepal, Tibet, Sri Lanka, Iran, China, and the former Soviet Union.

While travelling, he mostly used surface transport, and he went to certain countries clandestinely; he entered Tibet as a Buddhist monk. He made several trips to Tibet and brought valuable paintings and Pali and Sanskrit manuscripts back to India. Most of these formed a part of the libraries of Vikramshila and Nalanda Universities. These objects had been taken to Tibet by fleeing Buddhist monks during the twelfth and subsequent centuries when the invading Muslim armies had destroyed universities in India. Some accounts state that Rahul Sankrityayan employed twenty-two mules to bring these materials from Tibet to India. Patna Museum, Patna, has a special section of these materials in his honour, where a number of these and other items have been displayed.

BOOKS: - Sankrityayan was a multilingual linguist, well versed in several languages and dialects, including Hindi, Sanskrit, Pali, Bhojpuri, Urdu, Persian, Arabic, Tamil, Kannada, Tibetan, Sinhalese, French and Russian. He was also an Indologist, a Marxist theoretician, and a creative writer. He started writing during his twenties and his works, totalling well over 100, covered a variety of subjects, including sociology, history, philosophy, Buddhism, Tibetology, lexicography, grammar, textual editing, folklore, science, drama, and politics. Many of these were unpublished. He translated Majjhima Nikaya from Prakrit into Hindi.

One of his most famous books in Hindi is Volga Se Ganga (A journey from the Volga to the Ganges) – a work of historical fiction concerning the migration of Aryans from the steppes of the Eurasia to regions around the Volga river; then their movements across the Hindukush and the Himalayas and the sub-Himalayan regions; and their spread to the Indo-Gangetic plains of the subcontinent of India. The book begins in 6000 BC and ends in 1942, the year when Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian nationalist leader called for the quit India movement.

His most important travelogue literature is- "Tibbat me Sava varsha(1933), "Meri Europe Yatra" (1935), "Athato Ghumakkad Jigyasa", "Volga se Ganga", "Asia ke Durgam Bhukhando Mein", "Yatra Ke Panne" and "Kinnar Desh Mein".

He maintained daily diaries in Sanskrit which were used fully while writing his autobiography. In spite of profound scholarship, he wrote in very simple Hindi that a common person could follow. He wrote books of varied interest. He was aware of limitations of Hindi literature and singularly made up the loss in no small measure.

Mahapandit was awarded the Padmabhushan in 1963, and he received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1958 for his book Madhya Asia ka Itihaas.

SOVIET UNION: - Although he had little formal education, in view of his knowledge and command over the subject, University of Leningrad appointed him Professor of Indology in 1937–38 and again in 1947–48.

PERSONAL LIFE AND FAMILY: - Rahul was married when very young and never came to know anything of his child-wife, Santoshi. Probably he saw her only once in his 40s as per his autobiography: Meri Jivan Yatra. During his stay in Soviet Russia a second time, accepting an invitation for teaching Buddhism at Leningrad University, he came in contact with a Mongolian scholar Lola (Ellena Narvertovna Kozerovskaya). She could speak French, English, and Russian and write Sanskrit. She helped him in working on Tibetan- Sanskrit dictionary. Their attachment ended in marriage and birth of son Igor. Mother and son were not allowed to accompany Rahul to India after completion of his assignment. It was Stalin's Russia.

Late in life, he married Dr. Kamala, an Indian Nepali lady and had a daughter (Jaya) and a son (Jeta). Jeta is now a professor at North Bengal University in the field of Economics and Jaya lives now at Dehradun as per sources.

DEATH: - Rahul accepted a teaching job at a Sri Lankan University, where he fell seriously ill. Diabetes, high blood pressure and a mild stroke struck him. Most tragic happening was the loss of memory. He breathed his last in Darjeeling in 1963.

His last residence at Darjeeling was at 21 Kacheri Road: Rahul Nivas.

BIHAR AND PATNA CONNECTION

In his young age, he spent several years in the "Parsa Gadh" village in the Saran District in Bihar. The village's entry gate is named "Rahul Gate".

Many of Rahul's personal collections including the ones he gathered from his multiple trips to Tibet were distributed across to multiple Universities and Museums but Patna possesses the greatest of all documents due to the personal influence of K. P. Jayaswal.

In his later life, he became very close to another great scholar from Bihar, Kashi Prasad Jayasawal and due to his inspiration; Rahul ji did a frequent visit to Patna. Today, due to that association; Patna can boast of having the greatest collection of 'Sanskrit, Prakrit and Tibetan documents outside Tibet'.

Today, Patna Museum and Bihar Research Society (now part of Patna Museum) has an extensive collection of Buddhist scrolls, Thangka paintings and old manuscripts which Rahul Sanskritayan had assimilated through his journeys across Tibet. Many of these are rare gems of Indian scriptures translated into Tibetan.

(c) Copyright of Prabuddha Biswas