

Appreciating Indigenous Culture: A Critical Study of Rahul Sankrityayan's *Volga to Ganga*

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Abstract

Indian culture experienced profound transformations during the Mughal and British colonial periods, largely due to systematic attempts at cultural suppression through domination and ideological distortion. These forces often depicted Indian civilisation as mysterious and exotic rather than historically grounded and dynamic. In the twentieth century, Rahul Sankrityayan's *Volga to Ganga* emerges as both a significant literary work and a political statement advocating cultural resurgence. Through a creative reconstruction of human civilisational history, Sankrityayan constructs a narrative that highlights the richness, diversity, resilience, and continuity of Indian culture. This paper integrates literary analysis with historical contextualisation to explore how the text reclaims indigenous traditions, knowledge systems, and spiritual philosophies through twenty interconnected stories spanning from 6000 BCE to 1942 CE.

Keywords: Indian culture, diversity, power relations, civilisational history, cultural domination

Introduction

This paper presents a critical evaluation of *From Volga to Ganga*, one of the most celebrated works of travel literature by Rahul Sankrityayan, who is widely acknowledged as the pioneer of Hindi travel writing. His symbolic use of the Volga and the Ganga—both revered as mother rivers in their respective cultures—creates a metaphorical linkage between Russian and Indian civilisations. The Volga, affectionately called “Matushka” (Mother Volga), and the Ganga, worshipped as “Maiya” (Mother Ganga), function not merely as geographical entities but as cultural symbols.

Originally written in Hindi as *Volga se Ganga*, the work represents an innovative blend of historical fiction and analytical insight. Sankrityayan enables readers to perceive travel literature as both reflective and transformative. Among the many texts that celebrate cultural identity, this work occupies a central place. It remains one of his most renowned compositions and was later translated into English by Victor Kiernan.

Historical Overview and Core Themes

The text is a collection of twenty interlinked stories portraying shifting social realities and power dynamics across different historical periods. A dominant theme is humanity's persistent quest for power—not simply political authority, but a deeply ingrained psychological drive that transcends gender, caste, class, and geography. Sankrityayan presents power as a universal impulse shaping human behaviour, often at the expense of ethical considerations.

The study particularly examines how individuals recognise the significance of power, often only when it begins to slip away. Stories such as “Nisha” and “Diva” focus on the transfer and contestation of authority, portraying power as both a tangible and psychological force. Their unexpected endings compel readers to reassess conventional assumptions about hierarchy and ambition.

It was still cold at night, but the days were warm, and the family whose mother was Nisha had now fallen with other such groups on the banks of the Volga. In those days it was mother who held sway not father. It was, indeed, impossible to say who was the father of any individual was. (45)

The narrative reveals that the obsession with power is timeless—it is shared by gods, rulers, and ordinary individuals alike. History is replete with examples of betrayal and violence committed in pursuit of authority. Sankrityayan's work aligns with this tradition while offering a nuanced literary exploration of such impulses.

First published in 1944 and translated in 1947, the text spans from 6000 BCE near the Volga to 1942 CE along the Ganga. Covering approximately 8,000 years and 10,000 kilometres, it imaginatively reconstructs the migration and development of Indo-European civilisation.

Sankrityayan's Contribution to Travel Literature

Rahul Sankrityayan (1893–1963), born Kedarnath Pandey, later adopted his name in inspiration from Gautam Buddha's son Rahul and the term "Sankrityayan," meaning assimilator. His life reflected this identity, as he became a distinguished scholar, traveller, and thinker. Known as the Father of Hindi Travel Literature, his intellectual journey began at a young age when he left home to explore the world.

Despite limited formal education, he mastered multiple languages independently and authored around 150 books across diverse subjects. He travelled extensively, participated in the Indian freedom movement, and was imprisoned for his anti-colonial writings. His intellectual trajectory included phases as a Buddhist monk and later as an advocate of Marxist socialism.

Born in Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh, into a Brahmin family, Sankrityayan's early life was marked by self-education and extensive travel. Over forty-five years, he documented his experiences with scholarly precision. His notable works include *Tibbat Mein Sava Varsha*, *Meri Europe Yatra*, *Yatra Ke Panne*, *Kinnar Desh Mein*, and *Athato Ghumakkad Jigyasa*. Among these, *From Volga to Ganga* stands as his most significant achievement.

Cultural Significance of the Volga and the Ganga

The Volga, Europe's largest river, flows through central Russia and holds immense cultural importance, symbolising identity and sustenance. Similarly, the Ganga occupies a sacred position in Indian consciousness. Originating from the Gangotri glacier, it flows across northern India before merging into the Bay of Bengal. In Hindu belief, it is revered as a divine entity associated with purity and salvation, as reflected in myths like that of King Bhagirath.

In Sankrityayan's narrative, these rivers serve as symbolic markers of the Aryan migration from Eurasia to the Indian subcontinent. Through interconnected stories, the text traces cultural evolution and transformation across centuries:

As Mankind changes, each age succumbs to progress and gets pushed to a level higher. Rahul ji has tried to present these levels in totality, for a combined view through his stories in this anthology. Objection could be raised regarding some of the inclusions, that they have more than a touch of the logical or philosophical and the description of the very ancient epochs is excellent. (378)

Narrative Structure and Historical Span

The text presents a chronological journey of Indo-European peoples over thousands of years. Though fictionalised, the stories are grounded in historical and anthropological insight. The opening story, "Nisha" (6000 BCE), portrays a matriarchal society of cave dwellers. Life is primitive, and social organisation is centred around maternal authority. Gradually, the narratives reveal a transition toward patriarchal systems, evident in stories like "Diva" and "Amritashva."

In the evening all men and women of the settlement were gathered in the spacious courtyard of the Great Father. Som, honey-beer, and well flavoured beef and horse-

meat were continually being brought in. The Great- Father was celebrating a feast in honour of the birth of a son. (66)

Subsequent stories depict technological advancement, social stratification, and cultural conflicts. Narratives such as “Angira” emphasise cultural preservation, while “Sudas” reflects early Vedic developments and political authority. Later stories explore religious institutionalisation, social conflict, and the emergence of trade and class divisions. “Naagdatt” introduces political consolidation and foreign interactions, while “Prabha” highlights literary and cultural advancements. “Baba Noordeen” explores Sufism, and “Rekha Bhagat” critiques colonial exploitation. The final story, “Sumer,” situates the narrative within World War II and ideological struggles.

Religious Evolution and Cultural Interaction

As the narrative progresses, Sankrityayan examines religious development and cultural exchange. Religion is often depicted as a tool of social control, particularly in maintaining hierarchical structures. At the same time, the text highlights moments of cultural synthesis, such as Indo-Greek interactions and the rise of Sufism. Through figures like Ashvaghōṣa, the work demonstrates the fusion of Indian and external traditions, contributing to the evolution of literature and philosophy:

Ashvghosh read through some Prakrit translation of Greek plays with the handsome young Greek whose name was Buddhpriya, discussed with him ideas about the scenery and so on. He borrowed Greek terms to describe the stage setting, and to commemorate the art of Hellas. He wrote play in a mixture of Sanskrit and Prakrit, prose and verse. (194)

Modern Political Consciousness

The later stories reflect the emergence of political awareness and resistance. Colonial exploitation is critically examined, and revolutionary ideologies are foregrounded. In “Sumer,” the protagonist’s faith in Soviet socialism reflects Sankrityayan’s ideological inclinations and his vision of a just society. This book rests on usually wide range of travel, reading, and active politics assimilated and presented in a readable format by a public spirited intellectual who is committed in shaping a progressive nation.

Matriarchy and Power: The Story of Nisha

“Nisha” serves as a foundational narrative exploring matriarchal authority and generational conflict. Nisha, the clan leader, exercises absolute control. However, her inability to relinquish power leads to tragic consequences when she attempts to eliminate her daughter Lekha and grandson. The story symbolises the destructive nature of unchecked ambition and the inevitability of power transfer. It highlights how the desire for dominance can override familial bonds:

Lekha had no need to wonder what was happening. She has long noticed the change in Nisha’s attitude to her. Today, Nisha meant to remove her like a thorn from her path. She was still able to make Nisha feel her strength, but the child encumbered one hand. Seeing her calling up all her energy, Nisha strove to force her down, her breast pressed against Lekha’s head. (47)

Philosophical Insights on Power

Sankrityayan presents power as a constant across all historical stages. While its forms evolve, its essence remains unchanged. The pursuit of power shapes human actions, social structures, and historical trajectories. Through a blend of fiction and historical insight, the text offers a multidimensional understanding of civilisation, addressing themes of gender, politics, religion, and identity.

Conclusion

From Volga to Ganga transcends disciplinary boundaries, engaging with history, sociology, anthropology, and literary studies. It provides a comprehensive view of human civilisation from

prehistory to modern times. The work not only enriches Hindi literature but also serves as a valuable academic resource. In this book the author seeks to strive towards a more refined culture and for happiness for the humanity at large. Sankrityayan's narratives, though fictional, are deeply rooted in historical reality. They reflect humanity's enduring struggle with power, identity, and transformation, making the text both timeless and intellectually significant.

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