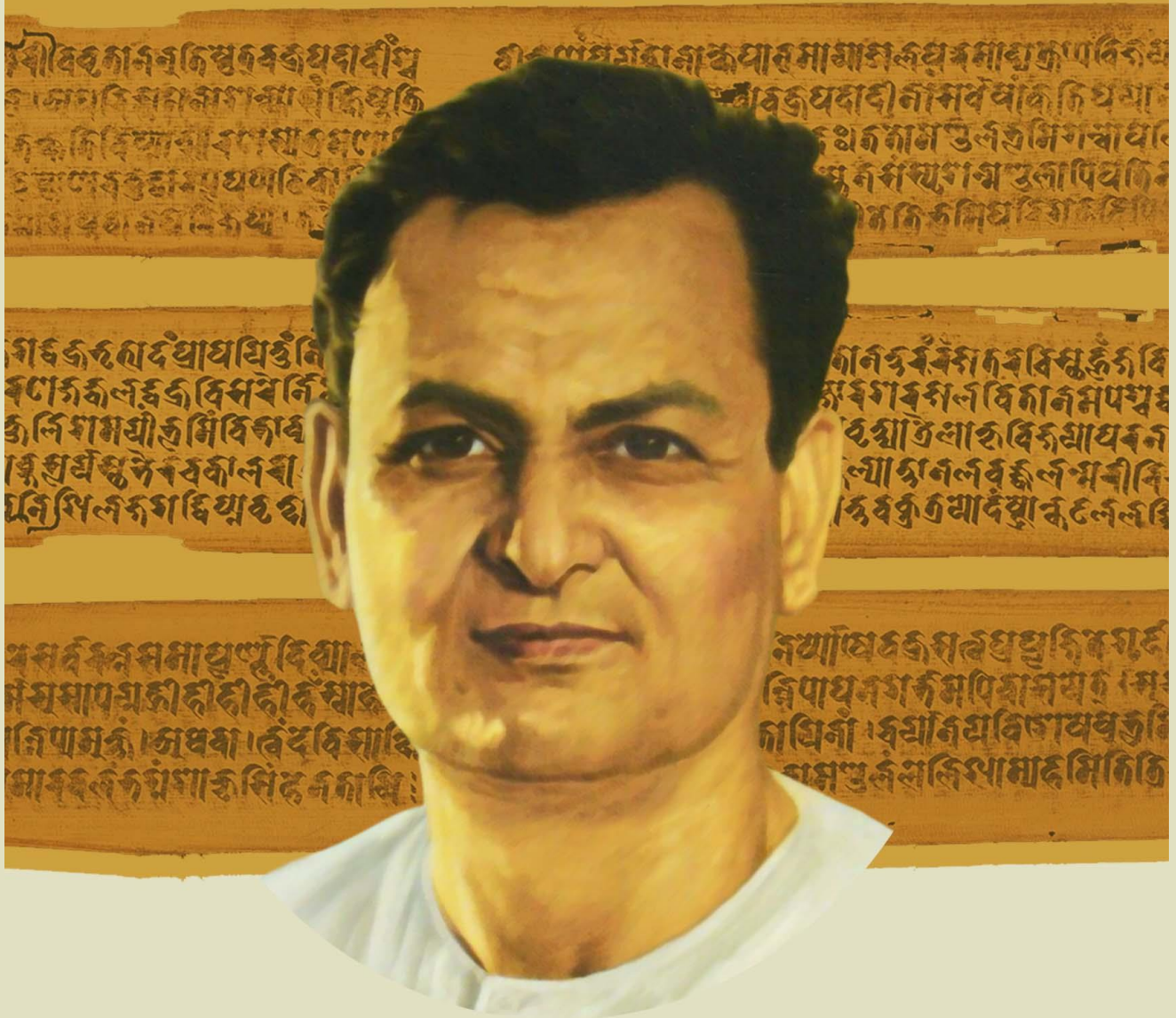


# YELLOW ROBE RED FLAG

A Short Biography of Rahul Sankrityayan



**Bhante S. Dhammika**

# Yellow Robe, Red Flag

## A short biography of Rahul Sankrityayan

S. Dhammika

*Eko care khaggavissana kappo*

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## Preface



Most of this short book was written between 1990 and 1991 with the intention of publishing it for Rahul Sankrityayan's birth centenary in 1993. However, I misplaced the manuscript and only rediscovered it amongst my late mother's papers in April of this year, 2021. I had sent a copy to her but completely forgot having done so. At the time of writing the book, the only material in English I had at my disposal was Prabhakar Machwe's *Makers of Indian Literature; Rahul Sankrityayan*, Rahul's *Selected Essays*, and the series of articles he wrote about his discoveries in Tibet for the *Journal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society*. My other sources were Rahul's friends and colleagues, including Bhadanta Ananda Kausalyayan, all of whom I had gone to India twice specifically to meet. I had also arranged to interview his wife Kamala but to my lasting regret the meeting had to be cancelled at the last moment. As soon as I rediscovered my manuscript, I obtained Alaka Atreya Chudal's 2016 comprehensive biography of Rahul and have used it to correct some dates and the sequence of some events, and have also included a few episodes in Rahul's life that I was previously unaware of.

## Yellow Robe Red Flag



Rahula Sankrityayan was the nearest India has come this century to producing a renaissance man. If he had done nothing but write, he would have been considered a great man for his contribution to Hindi literature. He wrote well over 120 books, including 22 travelogues, four collections of short stories, nine novels, 16 biographies, eight books on politics, three on philosophy, as well as numerous translations into Hindi. But the role of a writer was far too narrow and sedate for Rahulji. He was also a linguistic polymath, fluent in at least 14 languages, and he could manage in half a dozen others. Although he spent only eight years as a Buddhist monk, his contributions to Buddhist scholarship make him one of the three greatest Indian Buddhist monks of this century, the other two being Jagdish Kassapa and his good friend Ananda Kausalyana. As a scholar, Rahul made lasting contributions to Tibetology, history, logic, and the origins and development of Hindi. He was also a man of action, travelling the world, organising peasants in their struggles against oppressive landlords and agitating for Indian independence. He was interested in astronomy, folklore, mathematics and photography, and in the 1950s he planned to write a tome on sexology, but thinking that it might invite adverse comment he abandoned the project. He was married three times without ever having divorced, and at different times in his life went by at least six names: Kedranath Pandey, his birth name; Sadhu Ramudar Das; Khunna Chevan; Damodarachari Kedranath Vidyarthi; and Rahul Sankrityayan, the name he became most widely known by.

The path of Rahul's life was broad and convoluted and often ran parallel to, converged with or criss-crossed those of other great personalities of his time. His

friends included Lama Anagarika Govinda, Dr Rajendra Prasad, Sir Baron Jayatilleke, Govind Ballabh Pant, Gedun Chopel, K. P. Jayaswal, Fyodor Stcharbatsky, Nicholas Roerich, and D. D. Kosambi. He used to say: “I can’t give you an account of my seconds but I can give you an account of my minutes”. To recount his life in detail would require at least a substantial volume – his autobiography takes up six volumes – but we will have to be content with just some of the more important “minutes” in that extraordinary life.

Rahul was born in the small village of Kanila in the Azamgarh district of what is now Uttar Pradesh on 9 April 1893 and was named Kedarnath Pandey. His father, Govardhan Pandey, was a devout brahman of the Sankrityayan lineage (*grota*), which traced its origins back to the sage Sinkrti. Like most brahmans, however, he did not perform the rites and duties brahmans are supposed to but made his living farming as did his ancestors. Although Rahul’s family was not poor compared others in the village, the young Rahul knew deprivation and poverty and years later he still had vivid memories of the terrible famine of 1907. He was educated at the local village elementary school, later going on to Urdu medium and Hindi medium middle schools from 1908 to 1909. He was judged an intelligent boy but his restlessness and curiosity about almost everything prevented him from focussing on his studies so he was not considered a good student. He was married at the age of 11, child marriage being the norm at the time, but the union was never consummated. Rahul did not mention his first wife in all the six volumes of his autobiography and even towards the end of his life he was uncomfortable talking about her. She spent her whole life in the Pandey household, childless, neglected and scorned. In 1956 he returned to his village for the first time since his late teens and met her, then bed ridden and alone. There were tears on her part and a deep sense of guilt on Rahul’s.

Rahul’s uncle was a deeply learned brahman who taught students in the traditional manner – accommodating them in his home and sending them out each

day to beg for food, and later sending them to Varanasi to perfect their learning. He had no son himself so he took Rahul under his wing and began teaching him Sanskrit, but Rahul's desire for adventure compelled him to run away from home on several occasions. When he was 14, he got as far as Calcutta, where he worked briefly as an assistant in a tobacco store, but his father found him and bought him home again. On another occasion he set off for the Himalayas, visiting Rishikesh, Badrinath, and Kedranath, and getting as far as Gangotri, the source of the Ganges. During this trip he met and travelled with sadhus and swamis, whose free lives, unconventional behaviour, and in some cases deep spirituality appealed to him greatly. The snow-capped mountains, the hauntingly beautiful deodar forests and the crystal-clear streams entranced him and left him with a love of the Himalayas that lasted for the rest of his life.

With his uncle's encouragement and help, Rahul spent 1911-12 studying Sanskrit grammar, Hinduism, legal texts and classical poetry in the monastery of Chakrapani Brahmachar in Varanasi. Lessons were conducted in the traditional manner by sitting at the feet of the teacher and learning by heart. The young Rahul surprised his teachers with the speed and ease with which he mastered difficult Sanskrit text. Although his main purpose in studying was religious, he disdained the long meaningless rituals and the strict adherence to caste rules that were practised at the monastery. In the 1950s he paid a sentimental visit to the monastery and met one of his former classmates, who was by then a teacher and who had become blind. The old brahman asked him: "Rahul, now you are famous, a Mahapandita who has travelled the world, tell me what you have learned."

He replied: "I have learned one important thing, that God is dead". The old brahman was shocked and deeply hurt by this and tears began to trickle down his cheeks. When Rahul saw this he felt ashamed of his bluntness and comforted his old friend saying: "Not your God though. He's still alive." This story is indicative of

Rahul's personality. While he always held iconoclastic views and often expressed them robustly, he rarely antagonised people. His ability to charm, to empathise and to impress with his learning often won him friends everywhere and opened doors for him.

On yet another of his escapades, Rahul travelled by train without a ticket because he had no money, and on foot, to Puri, Madras, Tirupati, Kanchipuram, and right down to Rameswaram, visiting all the famous temples and places of pilgrimage on the way. Then he went up through Bangalore, Bombay, Pune, and Nasik, arriving in Ujjain just in time to witness the Kumba Mela. During this festival, thousands of *swamis*, *sadhus*, *nagababas* and *avaduts*, together with hundreds of thousands of devotees from all over India gather to bathe in the river at the auspicious time. At such gatherings there is often fierce competition between the different bands and sects of ascetics for positions of honour in the processions, and scuffles or even fights are common. The several outbreaks of violence that Rahul witnessed as well and the bizarre appearance of the various ascetics and their sometimes hideous self-mortifications revolted him. Nonetheless, he was determined to become an ascetic and in September 1912 he did just that, at the Parasa monastery in Chapra, taking the name Swami Ramudar Das. Rahul found the monastery comfortable and the life of the sadhus there sedate, neither of which appealed to him, and within a few months he was off again, this time to southern India where he took yet another ordination as a sadhu, this time with the name of Damodarachari. During his stay in the south he spent his time studying Tamil and classical Vedanta.

In 1914 he went to Ayodhya to study Vedanta at a brahman seminary and while there he met two photographers from the Archaeological Survey, who happened to be visiting, and so would begin his lifelong interest. It was also in Ayodhya that Rahul came in contact with the Arya Samji. This movement had been founded in 1875 by Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883) in an attempt to

reform Hinduism and take it back to what he considered to be its original Vedic purity. Arya Samajists refused to worship images, denied the authority of all scriptures except the Vedas, and repudiated animal sacrifice and caste, all ideas that Rahul sympathised with. The Samajists also had a reputation for argumentativeness, which fitted well with his personality too, and he soon became an ardent Samajist. He began giving public talks and later organised a boycott against a brahman who had sacrificed a goat in the Devakili Temple near Ayodhya. For this, Rahul was beaten up by the orthodox priests and their devotees.

In 1915, Rahul went to Agra to join Arya Samaj's Musafir College, and for two years perfected his Sanskrit and learned Arabic, theology and history. As his academic prowess grew so did his impatience with what he saw as the humbug and hypocrisy of traditional Hinduism, a tendency that was encouraged by the Arya Samaji literature he read attacking orthodoxy and the caste system. It was at this time that he began writing articles in Urdu and Hindi, exposing the hypocrisy he had encountered amongst sadhus and brahmans. It was also during this period that he began to translate the Quran into Hindi. Late in 1916 he travelled to Lahore, then an Aryan Samaj stronghold, to further his Sanskrit studies and also to learn Punjabi. But by this time, the Arya Samaj was starting to wear a bit thin. Rahul found that while they were happy to use logic and reason against their opponents' beliefs, they became defensive and irritated when it was applied to their own beliefs. Also, although there was much talk about the equality of castes and much publicity was given to the inter-caste dining that the Samajists organised, he found that they were almost as prone to caste prejudice as more traditional Hindus were.

In 1917, during a trip to Lucknow, Rahul had a chance meeting with Venerable Bodhananda, the first Buddhist monk ordained in modern India. As he later recounted, it was not his first encounter with Buddhism, but this time it left a lasting impression.

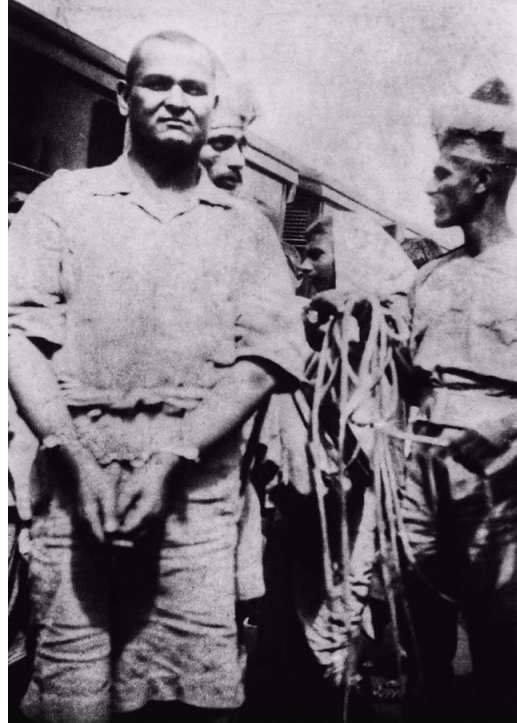


“The first I heard of the Buddha was in 1910. Towards the middle of that year, after completing my first tour in search of knowledge, I went from Badrinath to Bareilly where in the *dharmashala* I came across Sadhu Khunnilal Shastri and he gave me a small pamphlet on Buddhism written in Sanskrit. However, that meeting only slightly stirred my conscience. Next year, when I was going from my native village to Benares I saw some Burmese Bhikkhus worshiping at Sarnath. Not knowing each other’s language, we could not communicate. By saying ‘Cakkhu, Cakkhu!’ they made an attempt to explain something to me but I could not understand. Later on, I came to know that ‘*cakkhu*’ is the Pali word for ‘eye’, and what they meant to say was that the Buddha is the eye of the world. Thereafter, when I was attracted by the Arya Samaj, I heard a few details about the Buddha’s teachings which further aroused my curiosity about Buddhism. Since at that time there were no Hindi books on Buddhism, the only way to know Buddha Dhamma was to meet with and talk to someone familiar with these teachings. I got such a chance finally in 1917 when, as a young Arya Samaj activist, I went to Lucknow and stayed in the Arya Samaj there. Someone there told me the name of the Buddhist monk, and the same evening I went to meet him. This was Bhadant Bodhananda Mahasthvir. He talked to me for a long time on various aspects of Buddhism and also answered my questions. At that time, there were many Arya Samaj scholars who, despite Swami Dayananda’s theory of *guna-Karma-Sabhav*, were still staunch supporters of caste. But by 1917 I was completely *nastik* and fundamentally opposed to caste-system, for any reason and in any form. On talking to Bodhananda, I not only found confirmation of my own views, but also learnt much about Buddhism which appealed to me.”

In 1919, after two years of rigorous study, Rahul sat for the Sanskrit Shastri examination in Lahore and failed, so he went to Chitrakoot and sat for the Kashi Nyayamadyama examination but failed again. Considering that he was destined to become one of the greatest Sanskrit scholars of his time, his poor showing is rather surprising. Since his meeting with Venerable Bodhananda, he had begun reading books on Buddhism and in 1920 he travelled to all the places associated with the Buddha's life – Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Kusinara, Nalanda, Rajgir, and Shravasti. It was about this time that he started to keep a diary and over the next 40 years he regularly wrote entries in Sanskrit, sometimes using the ancient Brahmi script, Urdu, English, Russian, Hindi, and occasionally French. While his interest in Buddhism grew, so did his interest in politics.

In 1918, he had read about the Russian revolution and it inspired him enormously. He was well acquainted with the hopelessness and misery of Indian peasants who eked out wretched lives, and earnestly believed that what the Russian peasants had done for themselves, the Indian peasants could do also. He moved to Chapra in Bihar, joined the Indian National Congress, and established the Ekma Ashram for the purpose of organising the peasants against their landlords. When Gandhi's non-cooperation movement started, Rahul, dressed in the orange robe of a swami and toured the district giving fiery anti-British speeches, which succeeded in getting him arrested on 31 January 1921. From February to April 1922 he was in Buscar prison and shortly after his release he was elected secretary of the Chapra District Congress and continued his work to develop a political awareness amongst peasants in the area.

When the 37<sup>th</sup> Session of the Indian National Congress met at Gaya in December 1922, the dispute over the ownership of the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya was one of the matters on the agenda. The Sri Lankan Anagarika Dharmapala had lobbied long and hard to get the issue discussed and Rahul's colleagues Devapriya Valisinghe and Venerable Sirinivasa, secretary of the Mahabodhi Society in Sarnath, had been delegated to represent the Buddhist case. To their surprise and delight, despite being a Hindu swami, Rahul used all his eloquence



Rahul under arrest, 1923

to help their pleas to get Buddhist administration of the temple. The outcome was a resolution recommending the setting up of a committee to discuss the issue.

Dr Rajendra Prasad, later to become first president of India, chaired the committee and found that he had much in common with Rahul. Both spoke Bhojpuri and both were sympathetic to Buddhism, particularly its position on caste. A friendship and mutual respect developed between the two men that was to last many years, so that in 1927 when Prasad visited Sri Lanka he asked Rahula to guide him around the country. Rahul took him to Anuradhapura and other Buddhist sites explaining everything as they went. As for the Mahabodhi Temple dispute, the National Congress had more important things on its plate than squabbles over the ownership of a temple, and nothing ever came of the committee.

Between March and April 1923, Rahul visited Nepal to participate in the Sivaratri festival, the only time Indians were allowed to visit the country. While there, he had the opportunity to meet lamas from Tibet and Mongolia and he also

gave several inflammatory anti-British political speeches. Such was the reach of the British secret service that they came to know of this and as soon as he stepped back on Indian soil he was arrested. For the next two years, from April 1923 to April 1925, he was imprisoned in Hazaribagh prison. The authorities forced him to wear prison garb rather than his orange robe, which he was soon to discard voluntarily anyway. Rahul used his time in prison well, translating four English novels into Hindi, learning French and Avestan and studying Pali and Buddhism from a copy of the *Majjhima Nikaya* in Sinhala script that he managed to get hold of. He also wrote his first book, *Baisva sadi*, originally in Sanskrit but then translated it into Hindi so it would have a wider readership.

After his release, in 1926 he set off on a long journey through Kashmir into Ladakh, visiting the remote area near the Tibetan border and finally travelling down through Lahul, Spiti and Kinnaur. The vast emptiness of these lands, the ancient monasteries and the shy smiling people enchanted Rahul. He wrote an account of his journey called 'My Journey to Ladakh' (*Meri Laddkh Yatra*, 1926). It was also in 1926 that he met a young Hindu swami, Brahmachari Vishwanath, in Meerut. The two found that they had much in common, including an interest in Buddhism, and they soon became close friends.

In 1927, Vidyalankara Pirivenia, Sri Lanka's premier monastic college, asked Devapiya Valisinghe of the Indian branch of the Mahabodhi Society if he knew of a competent Sanskrit scholar to teach at the college, and he recommended Rahul. And so, from May for the next 19 months, Rahul taught Sanskrit to Sri Lankan monks while he perfected his Pali, learned Sinhala, deepened his knowledge of Buddhist philosophy, and wrote a book on Sri Lanka. He mastered Pali so thoroughly that Vidyalankara conferred upon him the honoured title of Tripitakacharya. Thinking that his friend Brahmachari Vishwanath would find the environment of scholarship and spirituality at Vidyalankara conducive, Rahul wrote to him urging him to come

to Sri Lanka. Vishwanath accepted the invitation and a few months after his arrival, he renounced Hinduism and ordained as a Buddhist monk, taking the name Ananda Kausalyayan. Rahul finally gave up Hinduism too, but when he took off the orange robe of a swami, he put on the white clothes of a Buddhist layman rather than the yellow robe of a monk.

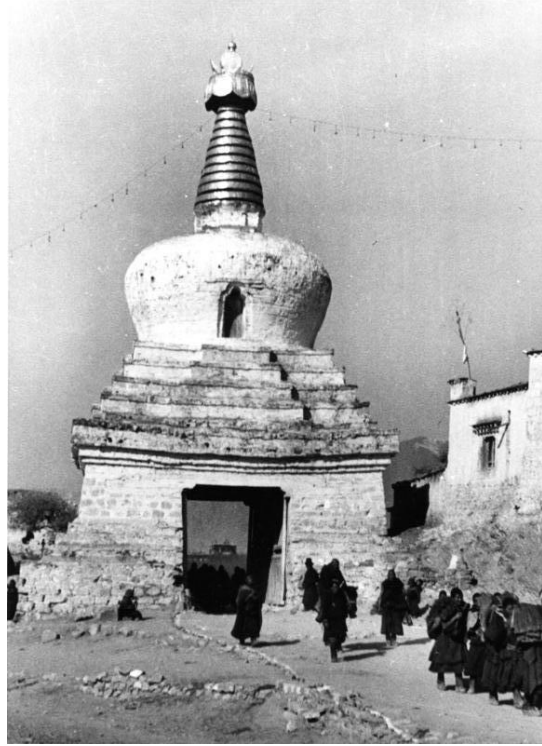
Now that he was a Buddhist, Rahul wanted to know everything about it, and in keeping with his character, he wanted to know everything about it now. Contrary to the popular stereotype of Theravada monks being narrow and sectarian, Mahayana was studied with appreciation at Vidyalankara, and the college had an extensive collection of Sanskrit texts in its library. Rahul soon studied and digested these works and was hungry for more. He knew that the Tibetan *Tipitaka (Kangyur)* and its commentaries (*Tengyur*) contained Tibetan translations of the flower of Indian Buddhist literature, and so he conceived the audacious idea of going to Tibet, becoming a monk there and spending three years studying the country's literature. Not only would this enhance his knowledge of Buddhism, but the thought of spending time in the "forbidden land" fired his sense of adventure. However, wanting to go to Tibet was one thing; actually getting there was another. Despite its backwardness in other ways, the Tibetans were surprisingly efficient when it came to keeping foreigners from entering their country, a task in which they received the assistance of the British authorities. To enter Tibet, one needed the approval of both governments, which Rahul knew he could never get, especially from the British. Despite this, he decided to go without permission and in disguise.

So in early March 1929, Rahul quietly crossed into Nepal at Raxaul by passing himself off as a Hindu pilgrim in his way to the Shivaratri festival. It was a ruse that caused moments of anxiety for him – he always stood out in a crowd because of his height (6ft 2ins) and his light complexion. Nonetheless, mixing with a crowd he managed to cross the border without incident. He made his way to Kathmandu and went to Bodhinath Stupa with a letter to its abbot from the abbot of Himis Gompa, which he had got when he was in Ladakh.

While in Kathmandu, he started learning Tibetan, examining maps and quietly making contacts with lamas and merchants about how he might enter Tibet. Using this intelligence plus stealth, charm and fast-talk, he slipped across the border and arrived in Lhasa on 19<sup>th</sup> July. He went straight to the home of the sons of one of the Newari merchant friends he had made in Kathmandu. His hosts gave him rest and introduced him to influential people in the capital. One of these had access to the Dalai Lama so Rahul wrote a poem in

Sanskrit in his honour, had it translated into Tibetan, and sent it to him. The Dalai Lama was reportedly impressed and promised Rahul an audience, although this never eventuated.

As soon as Rahul was rested, he started examining the monastery libraries in Lhasa and was astonished by the richness and diversity of the literature they



The western gate of Lhasa



With lamas in Ladakh, 1933

contained – a literature that at that time was little known outside Tibet itself. He had some money with which to buy books but nowhere near enough to purchase the treasures he saw. He wrote to Ananda Kausalyayan in Sri Lanka pleading for more money, so he and Venerable Lunupokane Dhammananda together raised Rs.300 and quickly sent it to Tibet. While waiting for the reply, Rahul visited all the sacred and historical sites in the Forbidden City, perfected his Tibetan and familiarised himself with the country's vast literary heritage. By the time the money arrived from Sri Lanka, in Tibet at the time the mailman travelled by pony or on foot, Rahul had had plenty of time to observe Tibetan monastic life and what he saw did not appeal to him. Of the crowds of monks in the monasteries only a small number were learned, and the endless complex rituals he witnessed reminded him of similar things he rejected in Hinduism. Revising his plans to become a monk there, he now decided to buy all the books he needed and take them back to Sri Lanka and study them there. Altogether, he has spent a year and a half in Tibet.

As soon as he arrived back in India, Rahul left straightaway for Sri Lanka now

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Tibetan monastic life did not appeal to Rahul. Assembly of monks at Tashilhumpo

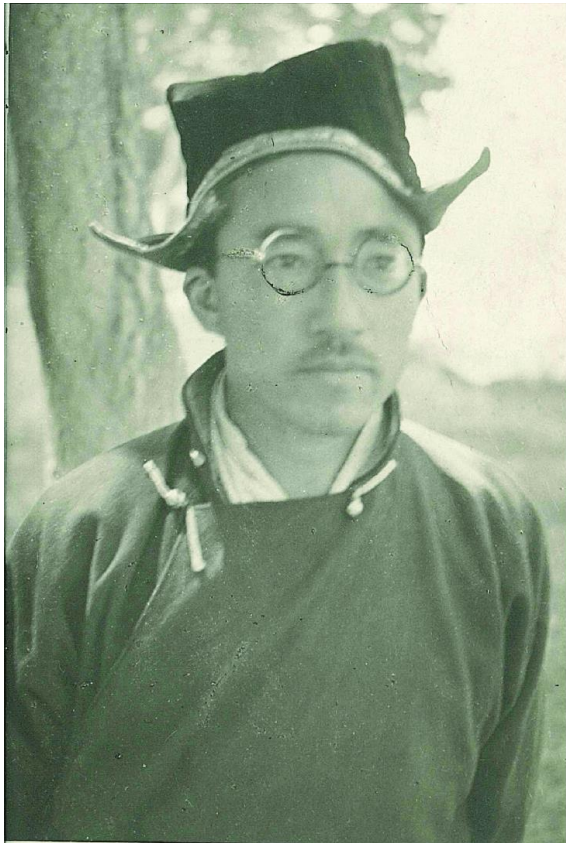
certain that he wanted to become a Buddhist monk, which he did on 20 July 1930 under the tutelage of the great scholar Venerable Lunupokune Dahammananda Maha Nayaka Thera (1918-1945). He took the name Rahul Sankrityayan, the name by which he would always be remembered. In Colombo, an exhibition of the magnificent *thankas* or scroll paintings he had brought back from Tibet created great interest, and in his spare time he compiled a 16,000-word Tibetan dictionary. In July the next year he left for England together with Ananda Kausalyayan at the invitation of the British Mahabodhi Society. He gave several talks in London as well as holding another *thanka* exhibition, this time at the Buddhist Mission in Regent's Park. *Buddhism in England*, the journal of the Buddhist Lodge, had this to say about the exhibition:

“These paintings, almost unique in beauty and historical interest, were on view at the Mission last October, the Exhibition being opened on October 15<sup>th</sup> by M. Christmas Humphreys. A large number of visitors came to see the pictures, many of them being experts and representatives of the London Museums. So large has been the attendance at the Mission recently, that the wall between the two largest rooms has been removed in order to house the audience, and the new room made an admirable gallery for the exhibition.”

Later, Rahul donated all the *thankas* to the Patna Museum where they are still on display, although much damaged by neglect and the humid climate. By the end of the year, Rahul had published his first book on Buddhism, ‘The Life of the Buddha’ (Buddha *charya*) which remains one of the best accounts of the Buddha’s life and teachings in Hindi. A few months after his arrival in England, he returned to India via France and Germany, later writing several books about his travels.



In 1933 Rahul decided to go to Gilgit, one of the most remote corners of British India, both to explore the area and to correct the draft of his *Majjhima Nikaya* translation in the cool of the mountains. When the British commissioner in Srinagar came to know of his arrival and his plans, he immediately quashed them, so Rahul decided to go to Ladakh instead, a decision that turned out have a major influence on education in Ladakh. During his short stay in Srinagar, the German Buddhist Anagarika Govinda happened to be there also and the two were invited to give a series of talks by the small Kashmiri Buddhist community. After this, Rahul and



Ladakhi scholar Testan Phuntsog

Govinda travelled together to Leh, the capital of Ladakh, arriving on 25<sup>th</sup> June. The few government schools in the region all used Urdu medium and Rahul was told that the Ladakhis had long wanted text books in Tibetan, so he teamed up with the scholar Testan Phuntsog (1907-1973) and within three months the pair had compiled a ground-breaking series of four readers and one grammar for schools. The readers were graded according to the level of the students, unlike traditional Tibetan educational material, and they included poetry by Ladakhi authors, local folk songs, biographies of famous Ladakhis, a selection

of Aesop's fables, and short essays explaining the nature of air and water. They were the first modern Tibetan school text books and remained the model for all subsequent ones in Ladakh until just recently. The year 1933 saw the publication of Rahul's account of his travels in Tibet (*Tibbat ma sava vars*), a short book on child

education in Ladakh (*Tibbate bal siksa*), his translation into Hindi of the *Majjhima Nikaya*, and a Hindi Sanskrit translation of the *Dhammapada*.

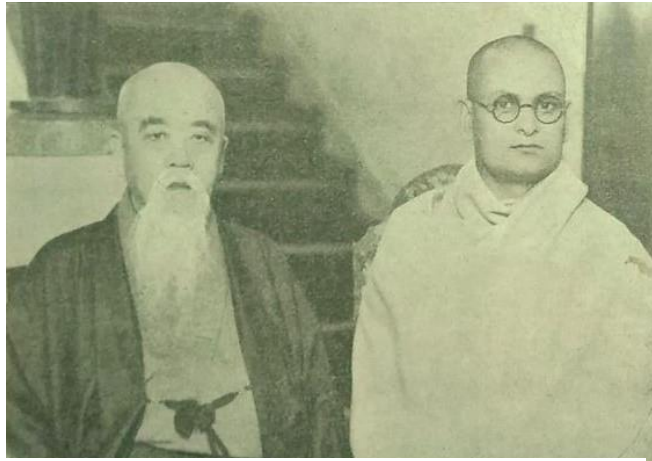
During the years he was a monk, Rahul led an austere life. When not travelling he would study, translate or write all through the night until 4 am, when he would put aside his works and attend to his correspondence, which by this time had become very considerable. He did not like writing letters but he replied, if only briefly, to every letter he received. He would finish just before 5 am and then lie down, fall asleep almost immediately, and wake up again at about 6 am. He would then wash, read the newspaper and eat breakfast. Because he only ate very lightly before noon and never in the evening, he would always eat a huge lunch – 15 chapattis with ghee and two curries.

Rahul was not vegetarian and his iconoclastic nature egged him to good-naturedly tease those who were. Once in Colombo, he was invited to a distinguished lay Buddhist's home along with a group of other monks from Vidyalankara for a meal. When the all-vegetarian meal was set before him he looked at it with mock disdain and said: "Well, this is the buffalo's lunch, where's ours?" Straight after breakfast, Rahul would begin work again. If visitors with something important to discuss came, he would put his work aside and attend to the conversation. But if they came simply to chat, he would listen to them for five minutes and then simply return to his work, completely ignoring them until they left.

This regime allowed Rahulaji to have an enormous literary output during the eight years he was a monk. Between 1930 and 1937, apart from the books mentioned above, he edited and translated seven major Sanskrit works, translated the *Vinaya Pitaka* (1934) and the *Digha Nikaya* (1935) into Hindi, as well as writing six travelogues, several collections of short stories, and a dozen articles and monographs. The extensive travelling he did during this same period was not a hindrance to his writing. Then and later, Rahul could write anywhere – on a train, in

a crowded prison cell, while waiting for a bus, or in a roadside *chai* shop. His first published work, the utopian novel ‘The Twenty-second Century’ (*Baisvi sadi*), was written in the Hazaribhag prison hospital, where he was recovering from dysentery. He corrected the proofs for his book on Japan while travelling through Nepal on horseback. A friend reports seeing him dictating to three secretaries in relay.

Rahul had been interested in Buddhist logic for some time, a field only imperfectly understood at that time because so many texts were either lost or only available in Chinese or Tibetan translations. In 1934, he was preparing to restore a Tibetan translation of Dharmairti’s *Paramanavartika* back into Sanskrit when, by extraordinary coincidence, he heard that the original of this very text had just been discovered in Nepal. Between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, thousands of Indian books, mainly Buddhist sutras and sastras, but also some secular literature, were taken to Tibet to be translated as that country strived to absorb everything Buddhism had to offer. With the Muslim invasion in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, India’s great monastery and university libraries were put to the torch. Palm-leaf books did not last long in India’s harsh climate and as Buddhism declined and books were no longer copied out, the few that were not burned soon rotted in the heat and humidity or were destroyed by insects. Consequently, most of this literature was known only through Chinese and Tibetan translations and the handful of fragile tattered manuscripts that happened to survive.



With Ekai Kawaguchi in Japan, 1935

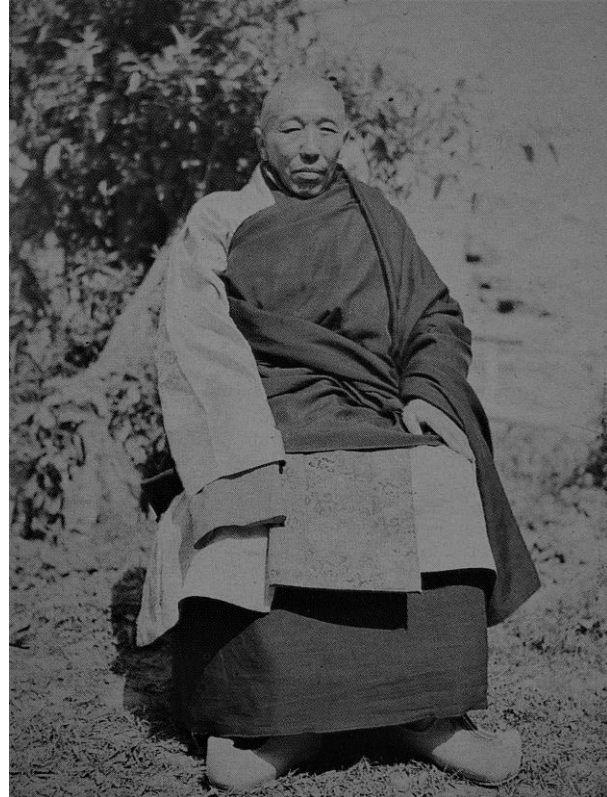
Scholars had suspected that some originals of Buddhism’s lost literary heritage might have survived in Tibet’s cold dry climate and indeed one or two books

had been found. Ekai Kawaguchi, a Japanese monk who had travelled in disguise through Tibet in the early 1900s, had found a copy of the *Saddharmapundarika* and the Italian Prof. Giuseppe Tucci had discovered several other works during one of his expeditions in the 1920s. However, the Tibetans' refusal to let almost any foreigners into their country made even a cursory search for such manuscripts almost impossible. The discovery of the *Paramanavartika* in Nepal convinced Rahul that if he could visit Tibet again, he might be able to discover some texts in Sanskrit, thus saving him from the laborious task of translating them from Tibetan translations.

His impressionable personality had won him many friends during his first visit and this, together with the fact that he was now a Buddhist monk, made him certain that if there were still any palm-leaf manuscripts in Tibet he would find them. He talked his way across the Nepal-Tibet border at Kodari at the beginning of April 1934 and headed for Lhasa. At Gyantze he was stopped by the British trade agent, suspicious that he might be the political agitator Swami Ramudar Das, the very type the British did not want in Tibet. "Aren't you Swami Ramudar Das?" the agent demanded, eyeing him suspiciously. "No, sir, my name is Venerable Rahul Sankrityayan" he replied straight-faced and with a clear conscience that he was not breaking the Fourth Precept. On 19 May he entered Lhasa and immediately began visiting all the temples searching for palm-leaf manuscripts. He located a copy of a commentary on the *Sisupabaadham*, which he managed to purchase. He also saw a copy of a commentary on the *Abhisamayalankara* by Buddhasriynana, which the owner would not sell, although he was given permission to photograph each page of the priceless book.

A nobleman who he had met during his last visit brought him news that the monks of the Kundeling monastery near Lhasa had recently found a palm-leaf manuscript while preparing a catalogue of books in the monastery library. Rahul was almost overcome with joy when he was shown the manuscript and it proved to be a

commentary on the *Vadanyaya* by the great Acarya Santaraksita (725-788). But his joy was short lived. The lamas refused to sell the manuscript or even let him photograph it and put it back in the dark dusty corner where it had laid unread for so many centuries. His contacts in Lhasa arranged for him to meet Kalon Lama, one of the most powerful ministers in the government, and begged him to help. When Rahul explained that the purpose of his mission was to recover Buddhism's lost literature, Kalon Lama was impressed and immediately ordered the lamas in the monastery to allow him to photograph anything he wanted. He even promised to issue a general permit from the cabinet to all local authorities and private individuals requesting them to help him in his search. Rahul could hardly believe his luck. It appeared that all doors in Tibet's long untouched monastery libraries would now open for him, allowing him to examine their



Kalon Lama who promised to help Rahul

treasures. But it was not to be. Three days later, Kolan Lama died, meaning that Rahul was going to have to handle Tibet's formidable monastic bureaucracy alone.

It was not long before he realised what he was up against. He obtained written permission from another senior monk to examine a manuscript at Reting monastery which had originally been brought from India by Acarya Dipankara (980-1053) in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Having spent more than a week travelling the 60 miles to Reting, the lamas refused to let him see the rare manuscript because of a minor omission in

the letter. The tragedy is that the pettifoggery of the lamas, both in this and other monasteries, has meant that today no one can benefit from the priceless manuscripts that they jealously guarded. What they refused to let Rahul purchase, copy or even photograph were probably all consigned to the flames by the Red Guards in the 1960s.

After waiting more than a month for a letter of permission from the cabinet to examine certain libraries, Rahul finally left Lhasa without it. Winter was coming on and his time was running out. He visited monasteries at Shigatse, Ngor, Shalu, and Sakya, eventually collecting 40 volumes of manuscripts, and left Tibet in November just before snow closed the passes. When he arrived back in India, the importance of his discoveries was immediately recognised and he was hailed a hero. In between giving lectures about his adventures, he began studying and editing the texts he had discovered and planning to return to Tibet to get more. He told the enthusiastic scholars who gathered around him that with sufficient funds and photographic equipment, he could deliver even more treasures to them.

The government of Bihar was prepared to give him a modest grant but the Indian government in Delhi showed no interest at all. While Rahul was struggling for funds, Prof. Tucci had no difficulty getting funds for his expeditions to Tibet from Italy's fascist government. The Indian government's indifference to Rahul's endeavour exasperated him and he complained bitterly about it.

“What interest can Italy have in the Sanskrit manuscripts from Tibet? It, however, has liberally financed the numerous expeditions of Dr. Tucci to Tibet to the extent of sanctioning not less than Rs. 25,000 for each expedition. The Italian government pays the passage, as well as providing a doctor, a steno-typist and a photographer. As a result, Rome possesses an almost priceless collection of the Sanskrit manuscripts preserved in Tibet.”

Going to Tibet again without funds or proper equipment would make Rahul's task difficult but it would not stop him. He knew now just how rich Tibet's secret store of ancient Indian texts was, and one way or another he was going to recover them. He also knew that although the manuscripts had lasted up until now, they would not necessarily last forever. The lamas valued palm-leaf manuscripts, but not so much for their contents, which were written in Sanskrit and which they no longer understood, but as sacred relics, ritual objects or talismans. Sometimes these books were stacked up inside statues to "empower" them but thereby rendering them inaccessible. While Rahul was at Samye, he was told that just a few years previously a large ancient stucco statue had collapsed and dozens of ancient books were found in the rubble. The statue was reconstructed and the books were put back inside. Worse still, some lamas would cut manuscripts up and sell them as charms or grind them into powder to make medicines, which they believed had miraculous healing powers.

Rahul's discoveries had attracted interest far beyond India, and after his return to India he left for the Soviet Union at the invitation of Prof. Fyodor Stecherbatsky (1899-1942), the West's greatest authority on Buddhist logic. He travelled there via Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea and Manchuria, and the Trans-Siberian railway. The trip resulted in a book on Japan and a two-volume history on Iran.

Almost immediately after arriving back in India from the USSR in December 1935, Rahul was struck down by typhoid and was so sick that at one time his friends started making arrangements for his funeral. Two months later, still weak and not fully recovered, and carrying only Rs. 100 and four dozen packets of film, he set off for Tibet again. This time he was accompanied by a Sri Lankan youth named Abhayasinghe Perera, who had only one arm and a rather eccentric character. The two must have looked quite a sight as they crossed the high passes – Rahul, tall, lean and dressed in yellow robes, and Abhayasinghe, slightly less than 5 feet tall, dressed

in white beside him. Once again, in the absence of any travel documents, Rahul used his tongue and his connections to get across the border.

“The Kundari frontier military post is not very far from Tatpani. Here the names of all the travellers are noted down. When the clerk heard that I was Indian, an unusual visitor to that place, he told me that he must inform the officer. The officer was a new man, not the one whom I saw two years ago, but he was a good-natured person. One of his soldiers also happened to know me when I had passed the place the last time... So, he was quite satisfied with the purpose of my journey; yet he said: ‘It is a frontier post, and a heavy responsibility lies upon our shoulders. I can refuse your passing the frontier, but it will be too cruel. So, in the future it will be good for both sides if an official letter from Nepal is brought’.”

When the two men had reached Nyalam, the people told him that they had been ordered not to let Indians proceed further and refused to give them the horses or the supplies they needed. Rahul went to see the local magistrate and to his delight discovered that they had met before. The magistrate was quite happy to let him proceed but said he would have to check with the co-magistrate who was, he was warned, a stickler for the rules. The next day, Rahul went to see the co-magistrate, carrying with him a large album of photographs he had taken in Lhasa during his previous visits. The photos of Rahul with various famous lamas and well-known Lhasa personalities impressed the co-magistrate and he agreed to let the two men proceed. On 6 May, Rahul and Abhayasinghe passed a low mountain spur and saw the great Sakya monastery in the distance, its golden spires shining in the early morning sunlight.



## Yellow Robe, Red Flag: A short biography of Rahul Sankrityayan

After Lhasa's Potala Palace, Sakya monastery was probably the most impressive building in Tibet. From a distance, its huge grey walls studded with towers give the impression of an immense fortress and indeed they were built very much for defence. Its numerous pillared chapels are lit by windows



Sakya Monastery

near the roof allowing light to stream down from above, in contrast to most Tibetan temples, which are gloomy and dark. Originally founded in 1073, Sakya had been an important centre for the translation of Indian Buddhist texts. When the great

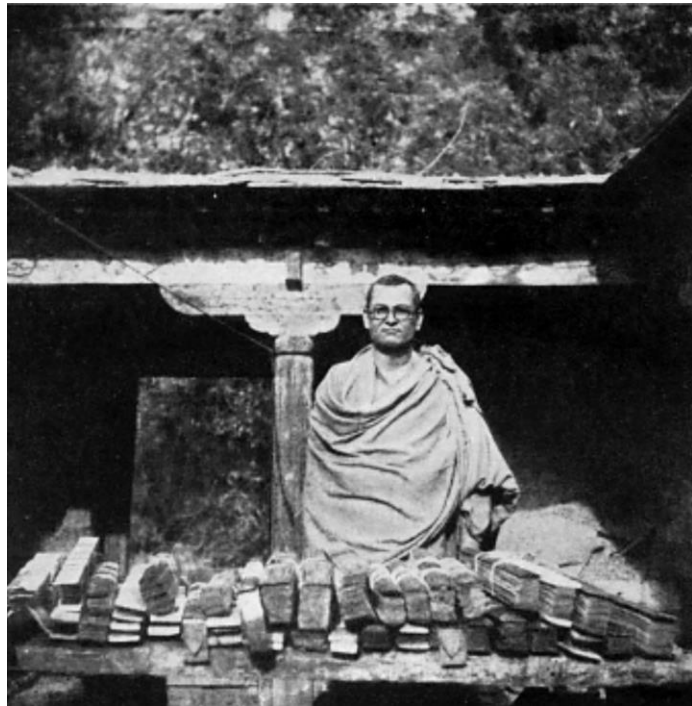


The main hall in Sakya Monastery

## Yellow Robe, Red Flag: A short biography of Rahul Sankrityayan

Buddhist university of Vikramasila was destroyed, its last abbot, Sakya Śri Bhadra (died 1225), fled to Tibet and found refuge at Sakya, where he spent his remaining years writing and teaching. Sakya was as much a semi-independent state as a sect of Tibetan Buddhism, and was ruled by two branches of a family that succeeded to the throne in turn. During his previous visit, Rahul had impressed the lamas and lay rulers of Sakya with his deep knowledge of Buddhist philosophy, Tibetan language and history, and so he received a warm welcome on his return. During this first visit he had been able to copy all but the last chapter of Prajñakaragupta's *Pramanavarttika Bhasya* and as soon as he had rested after his arrival, the manuscript was brought to him and he began to copy out the last 5,000 *slokas*. It took 11 days working in a dark, freezing-cold room.

When Rahul had finished and was about to leave, he was told that it might be worth his while to look in to some of the monastery's other old library. A search had to be made for the key, but as the library could well have not been opened for hundreds of years, it took a whole day to find it. Eventually he was led up some stairs and through halls to a door made of rough wooden planks. The seal was broken, the key was put in the archaic lock and turned, and with some difficulty the door was pushed open. They had to wait a moment for the clouds of dust to subside. Rahul



At Sakya Monastery with ancient palm leaf books

entered and as his eyes gradually adjusted to the light he saw, stacked along the wall,

dozens of palm-leaf manuscripts, distinguishable from Tibetan books by their size and shape. On top of them were piles of droppings mixed with egg shells and feathers from the skylight in the roof where pigeons had been nesting for hundreds of years. Almost crying with joy, Rahul immediately cancelled his plans to leave Sakya. Before him lay enough manuscripts to keep a dozen scholars busy for decades – editing, translating and studying – and there was no question of him leaving them unexamined.

At the same time, there were so many that he could not copy or photograph them all so he took a cursory glance at each and selected the most important ones. In order to save his film, he decided to copy everything out by hand. From 26<sup>th</sup> May to 9<sup>th</sup> July, he copied about 500 *slokas* (16,000 letters) a day and spent another 12 days making a descriptive catalogue of the remaining manuscripts. The feverish pace at which he worked, the strain on his eyes, the dust and the cold all made him quite ill but he had the satisfaction of knowing that he had made the single most important discovery in the history of Buddhist Sanskrit studies.

One of the gems he discovered was Matrçeta's *Sarapañcasataka*, a devotional hymn to the Buddha in beautiful Sanskrit verses, in its day considered one of the masterpieces of Sanskrit literature. This poem was known to have existed because of occasional quotes from it in other works and from Chinese and Tibetan translations, but the original Sanskrit of it was thought to have been lost forever. Now Rahul had rediscovered it.

After 11 fruitful weeks at Sakya Rahul and Abhayasinghe, Rahul departed for Tashilhunpo monastery near Shigatse. The journey was a difficult one as it had been raining and, with all the rivers swollen, Rahul feared that his horses with their precious cargo might end up in the water. In three days they reached Ngor, which although only 400 years old had many ancient manuscripts that had originally been housed at Sakya. During his last visit he had seen 40 bundles of manuscripts which

he now wanted to photograph. This proved to be impossible. The library could only be opened in the presence of five monastic officials and several of them were absent from the monastery. One of his friends, Kuding Rimpoche, was on a three-month retreat but Rahul managed to get permission to see him. During his last visit, the Rimpoche, who was hard of hearing, had given him some money to buy an ear trumpet. Rahul had refused the money but promised to bring the ear trumpet, and to the Rimpoche's delight he had kept his promise. But despite the goodwill that this act of thoughtfulness engendered, it could not get Rahul into Ngor's library. So, not wanting to waste time, he left the next day for the ancient monastery of Shalu. He was met by Risur Rimpoche, to whom he had sent books while he was in India and Japan, and they arranged the next day to go to Ripuk, a small hermitage and temple about a mile south-west of the main temple. The encyclopaedic scholar Buston (1290-1364), who wrote a comprehensive history of Buddhism in India and Tibet and who had catalogued and arranged the *Kanjur* and *Tanjur*, had lived at Ripuk and many of the books he had used in his research were still preserved there. This time, Rahul got immediate access to the library but he had no film left to photograph what he saw. He had sent a message to India asking for film to be sent to Shigatse so he decided to leave straight away and see if it had arrived.

At Shigatse, he heard that the film from India was due to arrive soon so he decided to use the time to search for more manuscripts in the town's great monastery of Tashilhumpo. He heard that there was a palm-leaf manuscript in the Neriritong monastery, about six miles out of Shigatse. To Rahul's astonishment, the manuscript proved to be the *Parajaka Pali* in Sinhala script. Apparently, when the Panchen Lama was visiting the holy places in India in 1905, he met a Sri Lankan monk who gave him the book. The sun went down before Rahul could return to Shigatse and as he hurried along in the twilight, two men accosted him and demanded money. Tibet was full of robbers who thought nothing of murdering a victim if they had nothing

to steal and he was alone and still several miles from the town. Thinking quickly, he uncovered the shoulder strap of his camera giving the impression that he was carrying a pistol and the robbers backed away.

As soon as he had his photographic supplies, Rahul, Abhayasinghe and a Nepali photographer they had hired hurriedly returned to Shalu, but not before nearly losing all the equipment while crossing a river. The party spent 10 days photographing some of the manuscripts and copying others out by hand. One of the ancient manuscripts was written in Sanskrit but on paper rather than palm-leaf, indicating that it had been written by an Indian monk residing in Tibet. It proved to be written by Vibhutichandra, a famous scholar who had come to Tibet in 1203 after the destruction of Vikramsila. It soon became clear that Rahul would not be able to copy out or photograph everything in time, 330,000 characters in all, so he asked if he could take some of the manuscripts with him and return them later. To his surprise and relief, the lamas agreed and so the party left Shalu immediately for Gyantse. They stayed there from 17 August to 7 September, copying out the manuscripts that the custodians of Shalu has so generously let them take.

On his return to Shalu to give back the manuscripts, Rahul heard that the steward of Ngor had returned to the monastery and that if he hurried, he might be able to get him to unlock the library there. Days were wasted trying to get fresh horses. As so much still had to be done, Abhayasinghe went off to Tanag to copy manuscripts there while Rahul headed as quickly as he could to Ngor. When he arrived and found that the steward had left just a few days before, he was utterly exasperated and near to losing his temper. He pleaded with the four other custodians to let him in to the library but they adamantly refused even though two other lamas who intervened on Rahul's behalf actually threatened to break down the door of the library. The steward lived a day's journey away and a letter was sent to him requesting him to return to allow Rahul into the library.

While waiting anxiously for his return, Rahul made a quick trip to Nartang monastery (established in 1153). This monastery had no ancient manuscripts but he was able to see and photograph dozens of rare Indian bronzes, thankas and even an ancient model of the Maha Bodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya, which must have originally been brought from India.

When he returned to Ngor the steward had come but he made it clear that he would only stay for four days and that any copying or photography would have to be done in that time. This gave Rahulaji very little time. He made a quick search of all the manuscripts, separating the most important works, and spent every available moment over the next four days photographing them. The most significant Buddhist texts he found at Ngor were a complete copy of Vasuhandhu's *Abhidharmakasabhasya* and Saraha's *Dohakosa*, a work written in a prototype of Hindi. Of great importance as far as Sanskrit literature was concerned was his discovery of the *Subhasitaratanakosa*, an anthology of 1739 verses compiled around 1100 by a Buddhist monk named Vidyakara from the great monastic university of Jagaddala. This book was a rare survivor of late pre-Islamic Indian poetry. When Rahul returned to India, the photos he had taken of this work proved to be so poor that only parts of them could be read. Fortunately, his discovery alerted scholars to a manuscript with the same name in a library in Kathmandu which proved to be the same work, and photos of this manuscript together with Rahul's made it possible to reconstruct the text.

After all this, Rahul headed back to Sakya via Shigatse. He was not certain that his photographs of the *Yogacarabhumi* would come out so he wanted to return and copy whole work out by hand, just to be sure. It took 15 days, working in freezing conditions. Unlike many monasteries, the authorities at Sakya assisted Rahul in every way they could. Not only that, when he and Abhayasinghe finally left they provided them with warm clothes for the rapidly approaching winter and

fresh horses to get back to India. They crossed the Lachung Pass into Sikkim on 4<sup>th</sup> November with a string of 22 pack horses loaded with ancient manuscripts. Sanskritists, Buddhist scholars and historians gasped in amazement when they saw what Rahul had recovered – 156 unknown works in all. Previously, the discovery of a few pages or even a fragment of a page of an unknown Sanskrit work was sufficient to create interest in academic circles. Now, one man without any academic credentials and meagre resources had presented the academic world with a treasure trove of complete works, many of them unknown until then. So important were the discoveries that Prof. Stcherbatsky suggested convening an international conference to enable scholars to examine the works and discuss their contents.

Of course not everyone was pleased. Some Indian scholars were incensed that a vagabond monk who had never even studied at university had upstaged them. The fact that most of them were high castes too and that Rahul was a brahman who had “let the team down” by becoming a Buddhist may have also had something to do with their attitude. And in some quarters at least the jealousy endured. Although Rahul was later to teach in universities abroad, he was never invited to do so at an Indian university.

Rahul now became fame even beyond India. Articles about his exploits appeared in Indian and overseas newspapers and journals, and he enjoyed the attention that went with celebrity. His adventures in Tibet resulted in five travelogues – ‘Four Months in Tibe’t (*Tibbat men Sava Varsh*, 1931), ‘My Journey to Tibet’ (*Meri Tibbat Yatra*, 1932), ‘Into Inaccessible Asia’ (*Asia ke Durgam Bhukhandon men*, 1935) and ‘Notes on a Journey’ (*Yatra ke Panre*, 1936), as well as the extensive history ‘Buddhism in Tibet’ (*Tibbat men Bauddha Dharma*, 1935), and numerous articles and monographs as well. Few outsiders up until then had travelled as widely in the country or written as extensively on it from first-hand experience. The recent interest in pre-Communist Tibet has resulted in the reprinting

of numerous old travelogues and histories of travel in the country, e.g. Peter Hopkirk's 'Trespassers on the Roof of the World'. Despite this, up to now, none of Rahul's books about Tibet have been translated into English and few accounts of travel or exploration in Tibet have even mentioned his name.

Shortly after Rahul's return, he was invited to the Soviet Union by Prof. Stcharbatsky of the Soviet Academy. While there, he met and fell in love with Ellena Narvertovna Kozerovskyaya, the secretary of the Indo-Tibetan Department at Leningrad University, who he was helping with a Tibetan-Sanskrit dictionary. Rahul disrobed and the two were married. She was not the only thing he gave his heart to. His interest in Communism had been steadily growing since he had first heard about it in the 1920s. In 1931, he had joined the newly formed Bihar Socialist Party and been its first secretary and, in between his studies of Buddhism, he had also read much Marxist literature. Rahul never believed that Marxism and Buddhism were the same, but he did believe that they were, each in their own way, trying to free human beings from suffering and ignorance – Marxism through social change, Buddhism through psychological change. Marxism appealed to Rahul's sense of adventure, his non-conformist nature and to his understandable desire to eliminate the abysmal ignorance and superstitions that kept so many Indians in poverty, disease and wretchedness.

Buddhism appealed to him because it upheld, at least for monks, the ideals of wandering free without encumbrances, and of spending one's life in the unhurried quest for knowledge. He also appreciated its insistence on putting everything unnecessary aside and getting to the essentials. And of course, Rahul was a lover of Indian civilisation and Buddhism was, he believed, the flower of that civilisation. In his essay 'Buddhist Dialectics', in which he examines common themes in the two philosophies, he wrote:

“Of course, it would be erroneous to say that it [Buddhism] helped Marx's



philosophy or it ever came anywhere near the fundamentals of Marxism.

But an understanding of Marxist philosophy is easier for the student of Buddhist philosophy.”

It is not hard to see how Marxist theory could appeal to a person like Rahul, but it is less easy to understand how its practice in the Soviet Union could have impressed him. During his stay, Stalin’s purges were at their height, fear and suspicion were everywhere, especially in the universities, and people were frightened even to be seen talking to foreigners. It was during his stay in Leningrad that the NKVD shot all the monks in the city’s only Buddhist monastery, Datsun Gunzechoinei, although Rahul undoubtedly knew nothing of this. The most famous of these victims was the great Buriyat scholar-monk Lama Agvan Dorziev (1853-1938), who died of a heart attack while awaiting execution, perhaps brought on by the terror of what was to happen to him. Around the same time, the two famous pioneering Indian communists living in Moscow, Abani Mukherji and Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, were accused of being spies and shot at this time also. It is not known how close Rahul was to joining them.

Great men often have great blind spots and Rahul, like many intellectuals of the time, did not see or perhaps chose not to see the excesses of Stalinism. But although he could not or would not see, it still affected him. He was refused permission to travel while in the Soviet Union, something he loved to do, and when he decided to return to India, his wife was denied permission to accompany him. A few months after his departure, Ellena gave birth to a son, Igor, whom Rahul only saw again during his two other trips to the Soviet Union and who, because of Soviet censorship, never read any of his father’s books. His experiences in the USSR resulted in a number of books, most of them reflecting his increasing enthusiasm with Communism – ‘Soviet Jurisprudence’ (*Soviet Naya*, 1939), ‘The History of the Soviet Communist Party’ (*Soviet Kamyunist Party ka Itchas*, 1939), ‘What is to be

Done?’ (*Kya Karen?* 1939) and later several travelogues: ‘Soviet Land’ (*Soviet Bhumi*), and ‘Soviet Central Asia’ (*Soviet Madhya Asia*).

On his return to India in January 1938 he made one more trip to Tibet, finished editing the *Pramanavartikasvavritti Tika* and prepared for its publication. That same year, he also joined the All-Indian Communist Party. Although his work with peasants in Chapra, his stints in prison and his visits to the Soviet Union had given him impeccable revolutionary credentials, some in the party were suspicious of his love for Buddhism. For years he was known in the Party as the “yellow Marxist”, sometimes affectionately, usually scornfully.

Now it was politics and writing that took up most of Rahul’s time. He organised anti-British, anti-landlord strikes and boycotts in Bihar, and was arrested and imprisoned again. While in jail, he went on two



Rahul with Ananda Kausalyayn

hunger strikes, once for 10 days and once for 17 days, to protest against the abysmal prison conditions. His leading role in the Bihar Congress Socialist Party and the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha, a radical peasant movement, got him elected to the Bihar Provincial Congress Committee in 1940. At this time, the British were worried that political agitation in India would undermine the war effort and began arresting thousands of Congressmen and other pro-independence workers under the Defence of India Act. Rahul was re-arrested and spent 29 months in Hazaribagh prison. Freed from the distractions of politics and travel, he threw himself into writing. He wrote ‘Three Plays’ (*Tin Natak*) and ‘Five Plays’ (*Panch Natak*), both in Bhojpuri, ‘The

Development of the World' (*Vishugki Ruprekha*), 'Human Society' (*Manav Samaj*), 'The Rise of Buddhism' (*Bouddha Darahan*), 'Scientific Discoveries' (*Vajinanik Bhautikvad*), and the two-volume 'New Leaders of the New India' (*Naye Bharat ki Naye Neta*), all published in 1942. It was also while in jail that Rahul wrote what are widely regarded by critics as his two most important books, 'From Volga to the Ganges' (*Volga se Ganga*, 1944) and 'Underpinnings of Philosophy' (*Darsan digdarsan*, 1942), which are certainly the most widely read. The first of these is a collection of short stories which have the whole gambit of Indian history as their backdrop. The two major influences in Rahul's life, Buddhism and Marxism, are clearly discernible throughout the book. Fourteen of the stories are taken from Pali and Sanskrit Buddhist sources, while others show a decidedly Marxist interpretation of events, often to the point where facts fall victim to "scientific materialism". Despite this, the book is still considered a landmark in the development of the Hindi novel and the first edition sold out in seven months. Within a year it was translated into most Indian languages as well as English, Nepali, Burmese, Polish, Russian, and several other European languages. In *Darsan digdarsan*, Rahul examined Greek, Indian (including Buddhist), European, and Islamic philosophy from a Marxist perspective. It was a ground-breaking work and remained until recently the most comprehensive study of its type available in Hindi.

After Rahul's release from jail in 1942, he decided to make up for his time in confinement by travelling all over India and visiting places he had never been to before. He also visited his native village for the first time in nearly 30 years. Both his parents had already died but he did meet his siblings and his first wife. In July 1945, at the invitation of the Soviet government, Rahul took up the post of professor at Leningrad University and from then until July 1947, taught Hindi, Sanskrit, Tibetan and Buddhist logic and began compiling a massive Russian Sanskrit dictionary, a work which he never got around to publishing.



Rahul in 1947

With Indian independence in 1947 and the decision to make Hindi the national language, many problems related to that decision arose. Proper Hindi equivalents for numerous technical, scientific and administrative terms had to be decided upon, questions related to linguistic states had to be settled, and dictionaries had to be compiled. Rahul arrived back in India just a few days after independence and found that he had a new role cut out for him – the development and promotion of Hindi as the national language. That year he presided over both the All-India Hindi Sahitya Sammelan and the Progressive Writers Association, began working on a lexicon of Hindi technological terms, the *Sana Sabda Kosha*, which when finished contained 20,000 terms, as well as editing the *Hindi Encyclopaedia* and sitting on the Constitution Translation Committee. His knowledge of the various sub-languages and dialects of Hindi was unparalleled, and fearing that with the promotion of standard Hindi they would die out, he argued passionately that they should be given the status of regional languages and used as the media of instruction within their own areas. He also believed strongly that Urdu should be written in Devangri rather than

in Nastaliq script, thereby encouraging the integration of Muslims into the Indian mainstream, and he said as much in his presidential address to the All-India Hindi Sahitya Sammelan. This position angered Muslims, and was also at odds with the Communist Party's language policy. The Party demanded that he retract his statement, he refused and he was expelled. Unbeknown to him, his explosion caused considerable difficulties for his wife in Russia. Pressure was put on her to divorce him and she lost her job. With Stalin still alive, being married to a "heretic" was almost as dangerous as being a heretic. When Rahul quietly re-joined the Communist Party again in 1956, he joked: "I'm putting on the sacred thread again", referring to the sacred thread brahmans wear.

By the late 1950s, age and the effects of his gradually worsening diabetes were slowing Rahul down, which on the one hand meant that he had to travel less but on the other hand gave him more time to write. His output during the first decade of independence was prodigious. His political writings from this period included 'Today's Government Law' (*Aj ki Rajniti*, 1949) and 'What do the Communists Want?' (*Kamyunist Kya Chante Hain?* 1953), as well as biographies of Lenin, Karl Marx, Stalin, and Mao Tze Tung, all in 1954. He also wrote the second volume of his biographical works – 'Memories of a Childhood' (*Bachapan ki smritiyan*, 1953), 'From Past to Present' (*Atit se Vartaman*, 1953), (*Sadar Pritvi singh*) (1955), 'Those to Whom I am Beholden' (*Jinka Main Kritajna*, 1956), and 'Chandrasinga the Brave' (*Vir chandrasinga Garhwali*, 1956). Other minor works included 'Rajasthan Rani's Abode' (*Rajasthani Ranivas*, 1953), 'The Many Coloured City of Nectar' (*Bahurangi Madhupuri*, 1953), 'Kansila's Story' (*Kanila ki Katha*, 1956), and 'The Literary Collection' (*Sahitya Niba Shavali*, 1949). He also wrote his delightful and ever popular 'Treatise on Rambling' (*Ghumakkar Shastra*, 1949), a book in which he celebrates the joys of travelling and which is still a favourite with readers.

In 1948, Rahul hired a young Nepalese woman named Kumari Kamala Periar

to help with his secretarial work. Despite the age difference between them, they fell in love, were married and settled down in Darjeeling and later had two children together. Being able to see Kanchenjunga's snowy peaks every day on the horizon inspired him to write several books about his beloved Himalayas including 'The Kinnar Land' (*Kinnar desh*, 1948), 'Introduction to Darjeeling' (*Darjeeling Parichaya*, 1950), 'Garhawal' (1952), 'Nepal' (1953), and *Himachal Pradesh*, (1954). 'From Past to Present' (*Atti se vartaman*) was also released in 1953. However, his most important work from this period was his monumental two-volume 'History of Central Asia' (*Madhaya Asia ka Itichasa*, 1952).

Nineteen fifty-six marked the Buddha Jayanti, the 2,500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Buddha's enlightenment, and the World Fellowship of Buddhists held its fourth general conference in Kathmandu to celebrate the event. The conference's two most significant speakers were Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, the leader of India's untouchables, and Rahul. In his speech, Ambedkar spoke of the differences and meeting points between Buddhism and Marxism and urged his millions of followers to look to the former to change their lives. Perhaps wisely, Rahul chose to speak about the compatibility of Buddhist philosophy with modern thought. To coincide with the Buddha Jayanti, Rahul wrote and published his 'Buddha, the Ideal Man' (*Mahanva Buddha*).

In 1958, he was invited to China to do research on Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist manuscripts. Although he was an enthusiastic communist, no doubt one of the reasons the Chinese invited him, he seems to have had a premonition that something terrible was about to befall Tibet. From China he wrote to Dr Rajendra Prasad expressing his fears and asking him to do what he could to rescue Indian manuscripts in Tibet before any danger came to them. After four and a half months in Peking, he fell sick and had to return home. Despite his fears about the situation in Tibet, he wrote glowing accounts of his experiences in China, 'What I Saw in China' (*Chin men kya dekha*, 1960) and 'Communes in China' (*Chin men kammyun*,

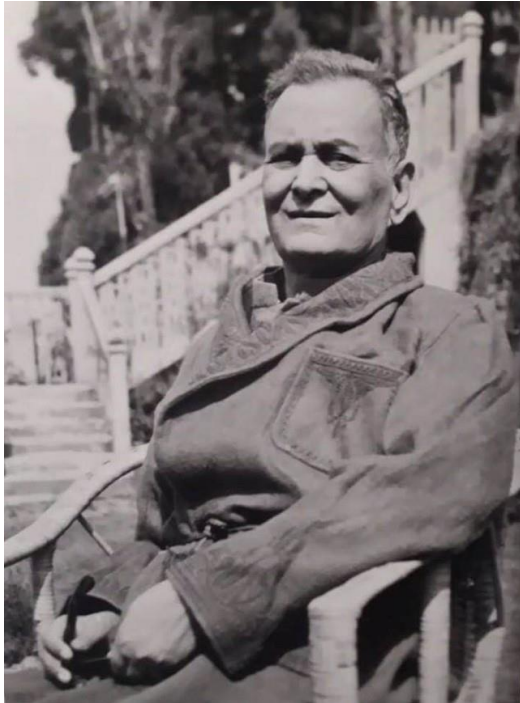


Receiving the Hindi Sahitya Akademi Award from Nehru, 1958

1960). In 1958, Rahul also received the prestigious Hindi Sahitya Akademi Award for his *Madhya Asia Ka Itihas* from the Sahitya Akademi, India's national academy of letters. The prime minister of the time Jawaharlal Nehru presided over the ceremony and personally handed the award to him. Rahul had little interest in accolades,

awards and prizes but he was genuinely delighted to get such recognition for his writings.

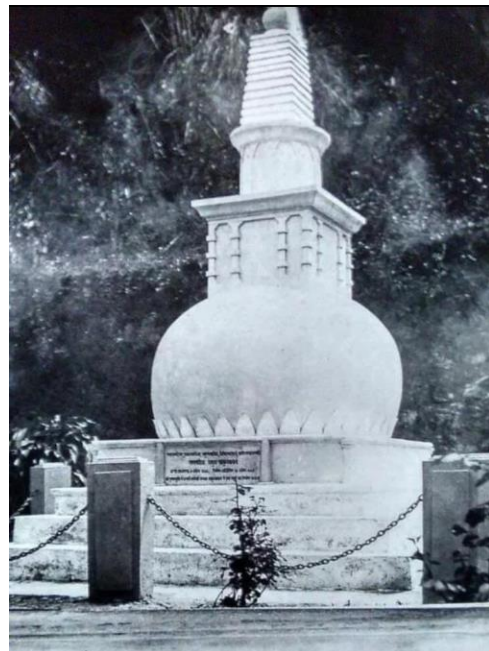
That same year, Sri Lanka's Vidyalandara Pirvena was upgraded to a



Rahul in old age

university and invited Rahul to head its new department of philosophy. Despite being tired and in increasingly poor health, he accepted the invitation mainly because he needed the money. Rahul had never bothered much about money. He had always stayed with friends or simply moved on when he could no longer stay in a particular place. When he got royalties from his books, he either spent the money, gave it away, or used it to finance his travels or to buy books. Now, in poor health, at the end of his life and with a young family to support, money had suddenly become a problem. By

1960, the first symptoms of senile dementia became apparent and it was clear that he would not be able to continue working much longer. By December the next year, his memory had become bad and he was taken to the USSR for treatment, but it did no good. Unable to look after himself or even recognise his friends, he walked around his Darjeeling home depressed and talking incoherently to himself. Once able to speak more than a dozen languages, now Rahul could not even remember his own name. Finally, he was admitted to Eden Hospital in Darjeeling where he died on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April 1963. The Nepalese



Stupa containing Rahul's ashes,  
Darjeeling



## **Yellow Robe, Red Flag: A short biography of Rahul Sankrityayan**

monk Mahanama, who had come to Darjeeling to attend Rahul's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday just five days before, and the English Buddhist monk Sangharakshita conducted his funeral. After the cremation, a small stupa was erected in his memory. It stands today, watched over by the mountains where Rahulji spent some of his happiest days.