

REBIRTH: A CONSTRUCTED MYTH AND RATIONALIST RESISTANCE IN SANKRITYAYAN'S PRAVAHAN

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Abstract :

This article critically examines the rebirth myth as depicted in Rahul Sankrityayan's Pravahan, framing it as a constructed narrative strategically employed to reinforce caste hierarchies, gendered exclusions, and moral conformity. Through an interdisciplinary lens drawing on Marxist historiography, Enlightenment rationalism, and feminist critique, the analysis reveals Sankrityayan's deliberate dismantling of metaphysical dogma. The narrative structure—anchored in dialogic fiction—serves not to affirm spiritual transcendence but to interrogate ideological apparatuses such as karma and dharma. By portraying rebirth as a socio-political invention rather than a sacred truth, Sankrityayan challenges the moral scaffolding of Brahmanical patriarchy and advocates for a historically grounded, rationalist mode of inquiry. The article argues that Pravahan functions not only as literary resistance but as philosophical defiance, inviting a re-evaluation of myth as a tool of cultural domination. By reframing myth as a tool of domination rather than transcendence, the article positions Pravahan as a literary act of resistance and philosophical critique.

Keywords: Sankrityayan, Rebirth Myth, Dialogic Fiction, Ideological Critique, Socio-Political Myth.

Introduction:

The concept of rebirth has long captivated civilizations across time, woven into mythologies, religious dogmas, and cultural imaginaries as a promise of renewal and transcendence. Yet beneath its evocative surface lies a curated narrative—one meticulously constructed to serve ideological, moral, and sociopolitical agendas. This article

interrogates the myth of rebirth not as an organic truth but as a symbolic framework strategically deployed to reinforce dominant worldviews and suppress dissenting realities.

In Rahul Sankrityayan's From Volga to Ganga the chapter Pravahan offers a sharp critique of rebirth as a constructed myth, one designed to enable hierarchies and suppress dissent. Through the dialogue

between King Pravahan and his lover Lopa Sankrityayan, a Marxist polymath and rationalist, exposes how the doctrine of reincarnation was weaponized by ancient ruling classes to justify inequality and pacify the oppressed.

From the Volga to the Ganges by Rahul Sankrityayan (வால்காவிலிருந்து கங்கை வரை - ராகுல் சாங்கிருத்யாயன்) is a book that narrates nearly 8,000 years of human history and chronicles, the continuous migrations of humankind in the form of compelling stories. These comprise nine ethno-historical human migration stories, each presenting arguments with remarkable clarity and conviction. They allow us to embark on a long intellectual journey through millennia, creating a sense of "time travel" into the deep past of humanity.

The Volga is a river that flows through Russia, while the Ganges is a river in India. Thus, this book can be seen as an attempt to present, in a highly engaging manner, the 8,000-year historical continuity of an ethnic group and successive generations journeying from the Volga to the Ganges.

The Volga River is recognized as the longest river in Europe. Originating in northern Russia, it flows through the steppe regions of central Russia and ultimately drains into the Caspian Sea in southern Russia. With a length of 3,531 kilometres, the river traverses a region that can rightly be described as the cradle of significant Indo-European civilizations.

The Ganges River, which flows through both India and Bangladesh, spans a

length of 2,525 kilometres. It originates in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand in India and flows southeast into the Bay of Bengal. The Ganges is formed from several tributaries originating in the mountains of Nepal, including the Yamuna River, which joins the Ganges. In Bangladesh, the river is also known as the Padma. The Jamuna and Brahmaputra tributaries also merge with the Ganges, enhancing its grandeur. The special feature of this book is that its author, Rahul Sankrityayan, interconnects the Volga of Russia and the Ganges of India through the twenty stories he narrates. Each story in the book draws upon elements of the historical narratives often told across generations and transforms them into literary form. These stories are suitable for extended discussion and debate. Among them, the eighth story, Pravahan (set in the 7th century BCE in Panchala, present day Uttar Pradesh), stands out as the central focus of this article.

Sankrityayan's Pravahan is set in 700 BCE Kannauj, where the king candidly admits to Lopa that his promotion of Brahman—an abstract, unseeable deity—and the ideology of rebirth are deliberate strategies to maintain power. "Reincarnation is the most useful," Pravahan declares, explaining how it convinces the impoverished to accept their suffering as karmic retribution for past lives, thereby stifling rebellion. This narrative aligns with Sankrityayan's broader Marxist lens, which views religious doctrines as instruments of economic and social manipulation. His portrayal

of Pravahan's cynicism mirrors his own lifelong resistance to orthodoxy, from his early rejection of Brahminical Hinduism to his later embrace of Buddhism.

II Rebirth as Cultural Instrumentation

Pravahan's significance extends beyond historical fiction; it reflects Sankrityayan's intellectual journey as a skeptic who challenged dogmas through travel, scholarship, and activism. His works often interrogate how myths are engineered—a theme echoed in critiques of his From Volga to Ganga for its alleged biases, despite its subversive messaging. By dissecting Pravahan, this study explores how Sankrityayan's rationalist resistance dismantles the myth of rebirth, offering a radical alternative: a worldview rooted in material conditions and human agency. In doing so, it invites readers to question not just ancient hierarchies but the enduring narratives that shape modern inequities.

Sankrityayan's depiction of rebirth in Pravahan is mechanical rather than mystical—an ideological tool wielded by Brahmanical elites. Pravahan introduces reincarnation not as revelation but as invention, crafting a myth to legitimize caste hierarchy and hereditary status. In hierarchical societies, the idea of karma and rebirth served as a mechanism of societal governance. This ideological move dulls class consciousness, presenting inequality as metaphysical destiny. Sankrityayan frames rebirth as power politics cloaked in spiritual narrative.

This narrative occurs as a dialogue between Pravahan, who had long memorized and studied the Vedas in school (குருகுலம்), and Lopa, who would later become his wife.

Pravahan: By the age of twenty four, I had mastered all the arts and stepped out into the real world. There, I encountered many new things to learn. After entering the realm of state administration, I realized how fragile and unreliable the old boat constructed by the Brahmanas truly was. (This "old boat" metaphorically refers to the early Rigvedic and other Vedic texts.)

That is precisely why I have built a new and stronger boat. (Here, "boat" symbolizes the Upanishad concept of Brahman as the foundation of a new philosophical path.)

Lopa, I am not concerned with truth or falsehood. My concern lies with practical feasibility. The concept of rebirth has now emerged as a fresh idea in this world. Moreover, you are well aware of the self-interest concealed within it. However, my students have now begun to spread this notion in all four directions. People are already prepared to dedicate ten to twelve years of their lives to understanding the paths to Pitruloka (the ancestral realm) and Devaloka (the divine realm). Lopa, by then, neither you nor I will be around. But a time will come when the poor will endure all forms of suffering, injustice, and hardship, solely in the hope of their rebirth.

Do you see how simple the method

I have devised is, to make people believe in re-birth, heaven and hell?

Lopa: Yet to fill one's stomach, it is akin to roasting hundreds of generations in fire. (An intensely disheartening and sad tone)

Pravahan: Even Maharishi Vashistar and Visuvamithirar composed the Vedas merely for their own subsistence. The Northern Panchala (Rohilkhand) king Divodasa was praised in poem after poem for his conquest of the Sabara fort.

Provisioning for survival is no crime. But what we have done is not merely for our own survival. We have secured sustenance for our children, grandchildren, and generations yet to come for thousands of years." (Rigveda 6.26.25 is cited here to support the point.)

For this, we deserve eternal renown. What the ancient sages and the Brahmanas who feast upon their legacy could not accomplish, Pravahana has achieved."

Lopa: Pravahan, you are a cruel man.

Pravahan: Yet I have accomplished my task with unmatched skill and completeness. (Sankriyayan 91-92)

III. Rationalist Deconstruction and Historical Materialism

Deeply influenced by Marxist thought, Sankriyayan rewrites myth with historical consciousness. Pravahan's narrative is situated within evolving material

conditions, suggesting that myths like rebirth only emerge to accommodate socio-economic shifts. Through dialogue and narrative pacing, the text strips metaphysical beliefs of their eternal stature, revealing them as temporally bound tools. Sankriyayan doesn't merely critique religious dogma—he offers history as an antidote to myth, presenting critical rationalism as a method of liberation.

This narrative presents, through story form, the idea that Pravahan was the originator of the concept of "Brahmam" as a metaphysical absolute and the doctrine of rebirth, the belief that living beings undergo repeated cycles of death and rebirth. These ideas are said to have been established and systematized in the Upanishads.

Unlike other animals, whose lives revolve around basic needs such as food, shelter, and reproduction, human beings gradually transcended these primary concerns and began shaping their identity through agriculture, animal domestication, and eventually, the development of ritual practices and religious institutions. In these ritual systems, humans introduced many new elements, often motivated by fear and the desire for cosmic order. As rituals evolved, so too did imagined metaphysical constructs, most significantly, the idea of rebirth, which was embedded deeply in the human psyche through religious texts and sustained across generations.

The Vedic texts successfully inculcated this imagined world, with the concept of rebirth becoming central to the human understanding of suffering, ethics, and

the afterlife. Today, this doctrine of rebirth remains an unshakable belief deeply embedded in the minds, particularly of the Indian population. This belief has facilitated numerous superstitions, exploitative rituals, and delusional promises.

What is particularly striking is that even knowledgeable individuals holding higher administrative positions continue to possess an unwavering faith in the construct of rebirth. This belief is not incidental, rather deliberately constructed and codified in the Vedic texts, repeated through ritual recitation, and incorporated into moral narratives, thus embedding itself into the very fabric of Indian cultural life. Over time, this constructed idea gained the force of an unquestionable truth.

IV. Dialogic Fiction as Cultural Critique

Rather than presenting a linear myth, Pravahan unfolds as a dialogic contestation. Characters debate, resist, and reinterpret. This format underscores Sankrityayan's commitment to open inquiry over dogma. Fiction here becomes a tool to democratize discourse, where history and belief clash—and sometimes collapse—under the weight of reason. The rebirth myth thus becomes a site of intellectual resistance, not transcendental truth.

The eighth story in the narrative cycle offers a compelling account of how this unnatural philosophical invention called “rebirth” was born during the Upanishads period. Now, many people, perhaps most of society, continue to believe in rebirth. The concept has penetrated the human

psyche so deeply that it is no longer perceived as a philosophical theory but as a lived truth. Surrounding this belief, an entire ecosystem of rituals, ceremonies, superstitions, and religious performances has emerged and flourished.

If humanity is to liberate itself from such fabricated beliefs, the first step is to recognize them that they are imaginations, fabricated stories and not realities. Awareness of their constructed nature is essential for human liberation. Only by critically examining the historical role of religion and god-concepts, as purposeful inventions designed to establish control over societies, can humankind begin to truly free itself from their grip.

We have strayed far from nature. Even animals and birds, which possess a form of natural freedom, are not as bound as human beings today, whose lives are constrained by religious mythologies and psychological constructs born of fear and control. The only way to reclaim our lost autonomy is by reintegrating with nature and accepting a naturalistic worldview. Recognizing that humans, too, are animals, one among many species, is the beginning of reclaiming the freedom that our imagined beliefs have taken from us!

V. Conclusion

Sankrityayan critiques karma and dharma not merely as metaphysical tenets, but as regulatory mechanisms embedded in caste ideology. These doctrines enforce submission, masking injustice as cosmic balance. Pravahan dismantles these constructs, positioning Enlightenment

rationalism as liberation from metaphysical entrapment. Sankrityayan's atheistic humanism reclaims moral inquiry from religious dogma.

Sankrityayan doesn't critique rebirth in isolation; he dismantles the moral scaffolding that supports it. Karma and Dharma—pillars of the rebirth ideology—are shown to function as social regulators. Pravahan demystifies them, portraying these doctrines as moral surveillance systems that perpetuate submission rather than justice.

Pravahan stands not merely as a literary text but as a philosophical intervention—a deliberate disruption of ideological myths that have long underpinned social hierarchies. Sankrityayan repositions rebirth from cosmic inevitability to cultural strategy, exposing its complicity in caste oppression, moral surveillance, and gendered exclusions. Through historical materialism, dialogic storytelling, and rationalist critique, the narrative rejects transcendental dogma in favour of humanist inquiry. In doing so, it echoes the Enlightenment's call for reason and liberation, urging readers to see myth not as sacred truth but as a political tool—one that can be dismantled to imagine more equitable futures.

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