




RESEARCH ARTICLE

A tale of a tyre: National space, infrastructure, and narration in S. H. Vatsyayan's 'Parśurām se tūrxam'

Gregory Goulding 

Department of South Asia Studies, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, United State of America
Email: ggouldin@sas.upenn.edu

(Received 22 January 2021; revised 31 January 2022; accepted 1 February 2022)

Abstract

The Second World War, although rarely an explicit topic in Hindi literature, was a crucial moment not only in articulating the politics of the nationalist movement, but in imagining new configurations of national and international space. This article considers a brief travelogue by the poet and novelist S. H. Vatsyayan 'Agyeya' that describes a journey from Assam to the borders of Afghanistan. Although purportedly a description of travel across a historical and mythic landscape of then-undivided India, *Are yāyāvar rahegā yād?* [Oh Wanderer, will you Remember?] unfolds in the final moments of the war effort in India in 1945. Agyeya, who, uniquely among major literary figures, joined the British Army despite being arrested for terrorism in the 1930s, was tasked with leading a convoy of jeeps from Parshuram, Assam, to Torkham, on what is today the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. In fact, the majority of the route, through landscapes both of mythology and history as well as fuel depots and off-duty American soldiers, is narrated by the tyre of one of these jeeps. 'Are Yayavar' thus reveals a tense interrelationship between the unified, religio-historical space of India which the text presents the reader, and the world of international mobilization created by the war. Ultimately, Agyeya's travelogue shows how Hindi writers engaged with the Second World War, and the ideas of space that it created, as ways of imagining the interrelations between national and international space in the first years of independence.

Keywords: South Asia; the Second World War; Hindi; travelogue

Introduction

'Parśurām se tūrxam: ek ṭāir kī rām-kahānī [From Parshuram to Torkham: A Tyre's Rama-story]', a description of journeys across India at the close of the Second World War (Figure 1), was written in around 1950 by the Hindi poet and novelist Sachchidananda Vatsyayan 'Agyeya' (1911–1987; hereafter referred to as 'Agyeya'), and published, in a collection of unrelated travelogues titled *Are yāyāvar rahegā yād?*



Figure 1. Agyeya's route across the multiple journeys of 'Parśūrām se tūrṅam'. Source: User Generated Map created on Google Earth, <https://www.earth.google.com/web>.

[Oh Wanderer, will you Remember?], in 1953.¹ Agyeya was already widely known as a writer and as a revolutionary who had been jailed in the 1930s for his participation in a conspiracy against the British. His participation in the war, in fact, is commonly presented as an aberration in his biography, a seeming contradiction given his earlier anticolonial activities. 'Parśūrām se tūrṅam' does not elucidate this contradiction; instead, his journey is presented as an adventure, which takes advantage of the chaos of the military administration to execute a series of scenic journeys.

Although its focus is on its eponymous narrator, and it fulfills most generic expectations of travel literature, 'Parśūrām se tūrṅam' is, in fact, narrated by a tyre. Agyeya himself is referred to, only in the third person, as the *yāyāvar*—a word which can be translated as 'wanderer' or 'vagabond'. With the exception of a long central section describing the *yāyāvar*'s journey from Calcutta to Agra, which is presented as the reproduction of the diary of the human traveller, the entire narrative is presented in the voice of the tyre. Although this choice means that the text will emphasize the mundane physicality of the journey, the tyre explains the choice as rooted in its perfect geometry, as the only shape with neither beginning nor end.² The tyre presents its story as a '*rām-kahānī*', explaining to the reader that he is choosing to frame his own story in the guise of another:

¹The recent biography by Akshaya Mukul, *Writer, Rebel, Soldier, Lover: The Many Lives of Agyeya* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2022), published after the finalization of this article, promises to reshape the study of Agyeya. Although it does not contradict any of the claims made in this article, it adds detail and context.

²Sachchidananda Hiranand Vatsyayan, *Are Yāyāvara, Rahegā Yāda?* (New Delhi: Neśanal Pabliśiṅg Hāus, 1975), p. 1.

What I am calling a *rām-kahānī* is my own story, simply because it is the story of my driver. Framing one's own experiences in those of another—in those of one's lord and master—is appropriate and proper; just as the Vaishnava saints clothed their own passions and heartbreaks in the life of Radha and Krishna, I make this symbolic man the basis of my own. If this compare strikes you as grandiose, do not forget that the *pīr* can never exceed his disciple!³

The tyre here asserts that the narrative of the *yāyāvar* is, in fact, an allegory of the journey of the tyre. This will be a difficult story, as befits a humble, earthbound object: a *rām-kahānī* literally translates to mean 'The Story of Rama', but in modern colloquial Hindi the phrase indicates any story of trials and tribulations—a tale of woe, as it were. The title therefore hints at possible readings of the travels to be described: perhaps as a retelling of the journey of Rama, which is definitional for the shape and idea of India itself; perhaps as a picaresque romance of mishap and accident.

What is the story of a tyre? Reading through an allegorical interpretation of the *yāyāvar*'s journey, we can extract a bumpy, rubbery life, attached to the axle of a common military truck and driven over the roads in a journey across a symbolically laden space between the eastern and western borders of colonial India. To extend the allegorical structure of this narrative, the tyre's story is the story of the material and logistical world of imperial India, shifting our attention from the abstract quality of this space to the realities of the roads and other infrastructure which form that space. The reader is therefore invited to rethink the historical and linguistic digressions of the *yāyāvar* through the deeper story of the human landscape of late-colonial India, revealed in the light of wartime mobilization. The seemingly playful opening of Agyeya's travelogue, although the source only of passing mention as the narrative proceeds, underlines a key argument of this article: that Agyeya's journey, which seems intended to restate an idea of an essentialized, territorially whole India, is kept in tension with the essential role of the war in creating that space.

Recent scholarship, including many of the pieces included in this special issue, has greatly complicated the understanding of India's role in the Second World War. This scholarship has responded to the general perception that the Second World War was, as Srinath Raghavan puts it, 'mood music in the drama of India's advance towards independence and partition'.⁴ New scholarship has highlighted instead both the many ways in which participation in the war shaped the nationalist movement, as well as the crucial role played by the war in articulating ideas of India and its role in the postwar international order.⁵ In addition, scholarship on the Bengal Famine, and its impact on literature and culture, has produced new understandings of how the war

³*Ibid.*, p. 2. All translations from the Hindi are by the author.

⁴Srinath Raghavan, *India's War: The Making of Modern South Asia, 1939–1945* (London: Penguin UK, 2016), p. 3.

⁵In addition to Raghavan's work, new general histories include Yasmin Khan, *India at War: The Subcontinent and the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); and the particular issues introduced in S. Basu, S. Bhattacharya and R. Keys, 'The Second World War and South Asia: An Introduction', *Social Scientist* 27, no. 7/8 (1999), pp. 1–10. Histories of the war's role in hastening the end of colonial rule include Daniel Marston, *The Indian Army and the End of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); and Christopher Bayly and Timothy Norman Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941–1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

produced new forms of literary organization.⁶ The response to the Second World War, both during the event itself as well as from the vantage point of independent India, is uniquely important because of the ways in which the war brought together new frameworks of thinking about global space with pre-existing, layered ideas of space, both those created by British imperialism as well as those promoted as part of the nationalist movement. The war prompted not only new forms of internationalism but also, through bringing attention to practices of frontier-making in the Northeast and Northwest, a new perception of the logistical map that shaped late colonial India. Across literary cultures, writers responded to this dual shift by reimagining national and international space, and their positions within it.⁷

Through looking at the ways in which Agyeya imagines India, and particularly its border in the Northeast and the Northwest, at the end of the war, this article will show how the Second World War, and the conceptions of space that it promoted, are at times in conflict with, but also constitutive of, essential ideas of India that would shape the post-independence period. The spatial regime of the war, with its massive logistical operations, road-building projects, and cosmopolitan consequences, is shown in this travelogue to be an essential component of the way in which Agyeya considers an essential, timeless India, even as it constantly undermines and throws into ironic relief that conception. The war emerges here, not as background music, but as a crucial element of the ways in which Indians thought of themselves in the world. The northeastern frontier region of British India is here crucial not only to the peripheral border of independent India—in a text written in the wake of the emergence of the Indian republic—but also to the constitution of India from the viewpoint of a Hindi-language hegemonic understanding of national space. The passage of Agyeya from the Parshuram Kund to the Khyber Pass knits together the logistical landscape of wartime India with the disputed boundaries of post-independence South Asia. By beginning where the Brahmaputra enters the plains of Upper Assam, the travelogue emphasizes a hydrological and topographical idea of India, formed at the intersection between a Sanskritic cultural zone of the plains and an exoticized, hill-dwelling ‘other’. And by ending the travelogue at the Khyber Pass, it makes a claim to what, in post-partition South Asia, was now the northwest border of Pakistan. By bringing together these contested spaces with the familiar zone of Hindi-speaking North India, the travelogue

⁶See Biswamoy Pati, ‘War, Famine and Popular Perceptions in Bengali Literature, 1939–1945’, in *Issues in Modern Indian History: For Sumit Sarkar*, (ed.) Sumit Sarkar (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 2000), pp. 258–90; Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine and the End of Empire* (London: Hurst and Company, 2015); and Diya Gupta, ‘Bodies in Hunger: Literary Representations of the Indian Home-Front during World War II’, *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 13, no. 2 (2 April 2020), pp. 196–214.

⁷A starting place for a study of this literature could consider, in addition to the works of Agyeya, Puruṣottam Śivarām Rege, *Mātrkā* (Mumbai: Mauj Prakashan Grha, 1978); Yaśpāl, *Deśdrohī* (Delhi: Lokharti Prakashan, 1984 [1949]); and G. M. Muktibodh’s Hindi poem ‘Zamāne kā cehrā’ in Nemichandra Jain and Ramesh Muktibodh (eds), *Muktibodh Samagra* (Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 2019), 1 pp. 66–97. These works indicate the diversity of responses to the war. In P. S. Rege’s epistolary novella, the war is an unspoken, growing force, gradually shaping the lives of the participant. In Yashpal’s *Deśdrohī*, similarly, the war is a crucial aspect of the evolving internationalism debated within its realist novelistic framework. Muktibodh’s poem, on the other hand, points not only to an important left genre of poetry describing the war, but also uses the moment of the ‘People’s War’ to reframe Indian internationalism from a post-independence perspective.

foregrounds the Hindi-speaking perspective on national space, and the crucial role played in the formation and elaboration of this space through the logistical networks formed by the Second World War.

I read Agyeya's depiction of the war as part of a larger imagination of national and international space in the twentieth century. In so doing, my aim is not only to bring the war into conversation with these larger and more familiar processes, but also to complicate our understanding of how India was conceptualized during this period. This text assumes the perspective of a nationalist North India, imagining the Northwest and Northeast as natural frontiers. As such, it asks us to consider the ways in which spatial conceptions, be they of the nation, of a historical landscape, of borders, or of a larger collectivity such as the international or the global, interact with cultural specificities such as the depiction of the Second World War.

The stakes of national territory

My analysis rests on recent work which has shown the ways in which the concept of India evolved, during the colonial period, into a naturalized territorial unit. Manu Goswami has shown the ways in which 'Bhārata', the most commonly used term in Sanskrit for the idea of India, came to be seen as a territory coextensive with that of the colonial state, and an implicitly Hindu space whose sacred geography was drawn from interpretations of the Puranas.⁸ In this process, the territory of India was naturalized through its historicization, resulting in an idea of India unbroken through time. In this account, history, pedagogy, and geography united to produce a compelling idea of India, but one which was implicitly reliant on an upper-caste Hindu and North Indian conception of history.⁹

Ideas of the territoriality of India are crucial for understanding the literary history of Hindi, which, in the nineteenth century, was explicitly put forth and developed as a language that could serve as a national language for an eventual Indian state. The basis on which it could make this claim rested on two perceptions. The first, which has received more attention in the history of Hindi, was its differentiation from both Urdu and Braj—the other two major literary registers of the region—through which modern Hindi could appear as the natural linguistic choice.¹⁰ The second claim was that Hindi was unique in its geographic range, and its historic connections with other regions

⁸Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 181.

⁹For more detail on the question of infrastructure and the colonial state, see Ravi Ahuja, *Pathways of Empire: Circulation, 'Public Works', and Social Space in Colonial Orissa (c.1780-1914)* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2009); and Nitin Sinha, *Communication and Colonialism in Eastern India: Bihar, 1760s-1880s* (Kolkata: Anthem Press, 2012). On pre-colonial and colonial infrastructure and governance, see also Aparajita Mukhopadhyay, *Imperial Technology and 'Native' Agency: A Social History of Railways in Colonial India, 1850-1920* (London: Routledge, 2018); and Aditya Ramesh and Vidhya Raveendranathan, 'Infrastructure and Public Works in Colonial India: Towards a Conceptual History', *History Compass* 18, no. 6 (2020). On the creation of road networks in the Naga Hills, see Lipokmar Dzuwichu, 'Roads and the Raj: The Politics of Road Building in Colonial Naga Hills, 1860s-1910s', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 50, no. 4 (1 October 2013), pp. 473-94.

¹⁰See Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 148.

of India, a range that in turn justified Hindi as the natural language for a rejuvenated India.¹¹ This was often expressed, in particular, through emphasizing historical linkages with both eastern and western India. The literary critic Hazariprasad Dwivedi, for instance, saw the territorial scope of Hindi as at the core of its identity as a literary language, extending in particular to the northern and eastern borders of India.¹² These historical connections, outlined in Dwivedi's literary history, implied that the Hindi region, in its centrality, had a stronger claim to a representative status on behalf of the nation.

In this article, I will be considering how this idea in the discourse around Hindi shapes the ways in which writers in Hindi actually experience space. The importance of the modern idea of Hindi's territorial expanse has been acknowledged, as has the specific geographic imagination that accompanied the formation of Hindi literary history. The role of the Second World War in solidifying this sense of space, on the other hand, is generally not acknowledged, despite the fact that it was an event which directly intervened in how writers conceived of themselves in space. For instance, the same Hazariprasad Dwivedi, who wrote four novels in addition to his many works of literary history, made the link between the Second World War, the borders of India, and the spatial coherence of a classical *madhyadés* a part of his 1946 historical novel, *Bāṇabhāṭṭa ki ātmakathā* [The Biography of Banabhatta].¹³ After presenting a fictional autobiography of the seventh-century Sanskrit writer Bana, the novel is revealed, in a letter presented to the reader following the main autobiography, to have been written by a contemporary Austrian woman. Tellingly, the northwestern border region of India is presented in the novel as a kind of existential threat, always presenting a danger of invasion from Central Asia. In the letter that closes the novel, the nameless Austrian woman explicitly draws a parallel between the international world war taking place around her and the territorial integrity of India, as represented in the northwestern border regions.

Through bringing together the war with ideas of space in mid-century Hindi literature, with its emphasis on the territoriality of both language and national space, we can gain an understanding of how the territorial ramifications of the war shaped writers' imagination of the space of India. In this article, I will first examine Agyeya's position on participation in the war, before engaging in a detailed reading of this text, in order to trace the ways in which the idea of India interacts with the reality of wartime British India. I will pay particular attention, first, to the conception of the Northeast as both an integral frontier as well as an exotic, 'othered' location for a Hindi readership, and, second, to the situating of what would soon become Pakistan as a location for nostalgia. Finally, I will reflect on how this text, written after the war, independence, and partition, presents a vision in which the balance between the imagined space of India and the infrastructure of the late-colonial war is perceived in the aftermath of its rupturing.

¹¹Harish Trivedi, 'The Progress of Hindi, Part 2: Hindi and the Nation', in *Literary Cultures in History*, (ed.) Sheldon Pollock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), pp. 961–62.

¹²See Hazārīprasād Dvivedī, *Hajārīprasād Dvivedī Granthāvalī* (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 1981), 3:34.

¹³See *ibid.*, 1:243–244.

Recalling the Second World War

Sachchidananda Vatsyayan 'Agyeya' (1911–1987) lived one of the more momentous and wide-ranging lives among twentieth-century Hindi writers. Active as a literary figure from the late 1930s onwards, he was responsible for, among other things, the first major anthology of modernist poetry in Hindi, the most important semi-autobiographical novel of the twentieth century, and, in his long role as an editor, shepherding the careers of a range of innovative voices in Hindi well into the later years of his life during the 1980s.¹⁴ Eventually, Agyeya's work became a point of contention in literary criticism. In the Cold-War era debates in Hindi between left-oriented 'progressive', or *pragativād*, literature and experimentalist, or *prayogvād*, literature, Agyeya's growing criticism of progressive literature led to his frequently being accused of alignment with American interests.¹⁵ Furthermore, Agyeya's gradually increasing interest in what was seen as an essentialist idea of India, expressed most notably in works on Indian conceptions of time and symbol, led to charges of a reactionary traditionalism.¹⁶

In addition to his role as a figure of literary modernism, Agyeya's early career is defined by his involvement in the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA), for which he spent several years in prison in the early 1930s.¹⁷ Agyeya joined the revolutionary organization from college in Lahore, and was recruited primarily for his knowledge of chemistry in bomb-making.¹⁸ Along with Yashpal, who also went on to become a major literary figure, Agyeya thus takes his place among Hindi writers with direct involvement in revolutionary violence as part of the national movement.

Given this biography, it may come as some surprise that Agyeya, noted for his anti-colonial political activities, was also a veteran of the British Indian Army, in which he served from 1943–1946, and during which he seems to have primarily been posted in Shillong. Agyeya's military service is frequently treated as an anomaly in his long and varied career. In a representative example, an interviewer posed the question in the 1960s, counterpoising his work as a revolutionary with his enrolment in the army 'in the midst of the movement for independence'.¹⁹ These questions were perhaps even more pointed given Agyeya's increasingly controversial position in Hindi literature

¹⁴On Agyeya, in English, see Dalmia, *Hindi Modernism: Rethinking Agyeya and His Times* (Berkeley: Center for South Asia Studies, 2012); Angelika Malinar, 'The Artist as Autobiographer: Śekhar Ek Jivani', in *Narrative Strategies: Essays on South Asian Literature and Film* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), pp. 229–42; Snehal Shingavi, 'Agyeya's Unfinished Revolution: Sexual and Social Freedom in Shekhar: Ek Jivani', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 39, no. 3 (2 July 2016), pp. 577–91; and Nikhil Govind, *Between Love and Freedom: The Revolutionary in the Hindi Novel* (London: Routledge, 2014). Agyeya translated many of his own works into English. His most important novel, *Shekhar: ek jivani*, is translated as *Shekhar: A Life*, by Snehal Shingavi (New Delhi: Penguin Random House, 2018).

¹⁵See Shingavi, 'Agyeya's Unfinished Revolution', p. 580.

¹⁶See Trivedi, 'The Progress of Hindi, Part 2', p. 1013.

¹⁷On the history of the HSRA, see Kama Maclean, *A Revolutionary History of Interwar India* (London: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 27–30.

¹⁸The role of Agyeya—then referred to by his surname Vatsyayan—in the HSRA is described in Yashpal's memoirs, Yashpal, 'Simhāvalokan', pp. 306–07. A selection of these memoirs is translated as Yashpal, *Yashpal Looks Back*, (trans.) Corinne Friend (New Delhi: Vikas Publication House, 1981).

¹⁹The interview is collected in Sachchidanand Hiranand Vatsyayan, *Ātmanepada* (Delhi: Bharatiya Jnanpitha Prakashan, 1971), p. 195.

after independence. The somewhat scandalous fact of his support of the British war effort often appears in conjunction with the larger question of his political position.

By his own account, Agyeya attempted to enlist at the beginning of the war. Unbeknown to him, his application was shown to Evan Meredith Jenkins, then the governor of British Punjab.²⁰ Jenkins, who had been involved in Agyeya's earlier prosecution as a terrorist, recommended that his application be rejected, stating (according to Agyeya's later recollection), that although the situation was dire, it was not so dire that the British Army needed to enlist those who had actively conspired against it.²¹ By 1943, however, given both the circumstances of the war outside India and the politics of participation within, the British Indian Army found itself under enough pressure that Agyeya was recruited at the rank of captain. Agyeya's unique personal history aside, his class and (Brahman) caste status made him one of the many middle-class, educated Indians recruited at the officer level at this time.²² Furthermore, in the context of Congress opposition, the participation of a former revolutionary may have been useful in giving the impression that the war against Japan was in India's greater interest.²³

Officially, Agyeya was assigned a role in Shillong as editor of propaganda magazines.²⁴ In later interviews, however, he claimed to have been part of a small group which was to prepare an insurgency in Bengal and Assam; in the event of Japanese invasion, territory east of Chota Nagpur (which today lies in the borders of Bihar and Jharkhand) would be abandoned and destroyed to prevent further advance.²⁵ Agyeya compared the plan to that of the French resistance.²⁶ In practice, and given the eventual failure of the Japanese advance, Agyeya described his role as acting as an interface between the British Army and the local population.²⁷ Despite descriptions of the battle of Kohima which appear in his short stories and in his 1952 novel *Nadī ke dvīp*, it does not appear that Agyeya was ever placed in a combat role.²⁸

Given the interest and controversy surrounding the politics of his enlistment, over the rest of his life Agyeya publicly explained his motivations for participating in the war several times. His reasons changed, unsurprising given such a long span of time. But these changes show a crucial shift not only in how Agyeya understood his personal history, but in how he saw the war itself, and India's role in that war. At stake for Agyeya is, first, the question of supporting the British against fascism, rather than fighting

²⁰On Jenkins, see Nicholas Lloyd, 'The Last Governor: Sir Evan Jenkins in the Punjab 1946–47', in *The Independence of India and Pakistan: New Approaches and Reflections*, (ed.) Ian Talbot (Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 208–42.

²¹Sachchidanand Hiranand Vatsyayan and Raghuvir Sahāy, *Agyeya Apne Bāre Mem* (Delhi: Akashvani Mahanideshalay, 1992), p. 129.

²²Raghavan, *India's War*, pp. 85–86.

²³On this speculation, see Rām Kamal Rāy, *Śikhar Se Sāgar Tak* (Delhi: National Publishing House, 1986), pp. 67–68.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 76.

²⁵Bisheshwar Prasad, *India and the War* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2012), pp. 195–98. This claim is supported by Bimal Prasad Jain, OHT, interviewed by Uma Shankar, 3 June 1987, Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge, s121, p. 30.

²⁶Vatsyayan and Sahāy, *Agyeya Apne Bāre Mem*, p. 130.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 132.

²⁸See Vatsyayan, *Nadī ke dvīp*; *nadī ke dvīp* which has been translated in English as *Islands in the Stream*. Among the short stories dealing with the war, one has been translated by Sachchidanand Hiranand Vatsyayan, 'Hili-Bon's Geese', *Mahfil* 2, no. 1 (1965), pp. 17–23.

the British for independence. But Agyeya's explanations also hint at another, more complicated conundrum: the way in which justifying participation in the war implies an imagination of the world and nation. His changing position, therefore, reflects his negotiation of this problem.

A letter, in a 1971 collection of miscellanea but claimed to have been written to an unnamed recipient in 1943, contains, if its authenticity can be believed, Agyeya's earliest explanation for his participation in the war. In this letter, Agyeya frames his decision to join the army in explicitly internationalist terms:

It is my belief that the outcome of this war will be decisive to the interests of every country [*sarvadeśīya hita*] of the world. For this reason I believe that the individual national interest [*rāṣṭrīya-ekadeśīya-hit*] is subsidiary within this war. I do not think that it is unimportant; rather, I hold only that it is not absolute [*ātyantika*], but rather relative and dependent. Therefore, I do not see the liberty of India as an independent and absolute thing. The argument that India would receive independence through a Fascist victory is so illogical and foolish that it needs no response; I cannot agree with those who view indecision or 'neutrality' as the correct path, for the reason that a thoroughly wrong action can never be fruitful—certainly, it cannot be produce a praiseworthy and ethical result.²⁹

It is noteworthy that despite supporting the war, he does not do so through the language of the Communist Party.³⁰ Rather than present his choice as participating in a 'People's War', Agyeya frames his decision in the classical ethics of universality and particularity. The contrast between *sarvadeśīya hit* and *rāṣṭrīya-ekadeśīya-hit* can be read as a critique of the position, most associated with Congress in general and Jawaharlal Nehru in particular, that participation was unjust, despite the clear danger of fascism. It is because India's clear interest in freedom cannot be regarded as absolute that 'the outcome of the war', and its relevance for all countries, becomes decisive. It is under these conditions that he is able to reject not only the support for a fascist victory associated with Bose and the Indian National Army, but also the range of neutralities and non-participation stances found in Congress.

This internationalism would shift, gradually but decisively, over the following decades. As early as 1945—in another letter collected later in the same volume—Agyeya's decision is framed as 'saving India from the threat of fascism', adding: 'Any and all activities which will protect India [*bhārat kī rakṣā*] are required during a time of war.'³¹ Whereas in the earlier letter, Agyeya barely mentioned India by name, and referred to India's stakes in the war through the neutral term '*hita*', here he uses explicitly nationalist language. The term '*rakṣā*' has a far stronger sense of active protection, with an even masculine tone; and referring to the protection of India brings up associations, not with India as a member of equal nations, but with Mother India.

The final extant document regarding Agyeya's participation in the war dates from an interview recorded in 1984, only a few years before his death in 1987. By now, the

²⁹Vatsyayan, *Ātmanepada*, p. 213.

³⁰On the communist position, see Ali Raza, *Revolutionary Pasts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 218–227.

³¹Vatsyayan, *Ātmanepada*, p. 213.

internationalism of 1943 has vanished. In its place—and almost diametrically opposed to it—is the sense of the nation as an exceptional imperative, and an imagination of the nation as a physical body:

I could not accept that simply because India had been dragged into this fight without having been asked first, that we should not protect this country. So I believe, and I still believe, that when the country is in crisis, abandoning all politics and protecting the country becomes a duty [*kartavya*]. And when this circumstance presented itself, I wrote to the army that if there is a crisis on the border of India, or the possibility of an enemy entering into it, then I wish to fight for its protection...³²

Whereas in the 1943 letter, Agyeya was similarly explaining his decision as a departure from Congress's non-participation, by 1984 his reasons had shifted dramatically. Fascism is not mentioned. The war requires, in fact, the abandonment of politics in the face of crisis, and protection is framed as duty. What was described as 'the outcome of the war' is now presented in physical terms as the possibility of violation. What was once a position based on an internationalist, and implicitly universal, logic, one which disavowed decisions based on national interest alone, has transformed into one based on a sacred territorial space, and the suspension of politics is required to protect it.

This change, to be sure, was not Agyeya's alone, and his position on the war does not necessarily reflect how he framed his larger imagination of the world. Given his lifetime of travel, lengthy career as a writer, and the long evolution of his political positions, fully exploring Agyeya's perspective on the nation and the world lies outside the scope of this article. What this change does indicate, however, is a transformation of how Agyeya thought about the war, and its particular relations to both the planet, and to the idea of India as a bounded, territorial space. How did this position shift, and how does this shift reflect both the memory of the war and the effect of that memory on ideas of Indian territoriality and space?

Within this context, 'Parshurām se tūrxam' emerges as a site to understand how Agyeya thinks through the creation of this nationalized space. Given that the piece was written in 1950, several years after Agyeya's participation in the war, it must be read in light of his changing ideas. The piece presents a sweeping, naturalized vision of India, supported by the text's frequent recall of famous mythological and historical events which tie together the nation. In this sense the text seems to accord with Agyeya's changing view of the war and its relation to India. But the narration of the tyre reminds the reader that this journey is taking place across a logistical landscape brought into being by British late-colonial and wartime logistics. Journeys across mud roads, bridges, and train bogeys belie the sense of permanence, the naturalness of this space, that the text's title, with its two traditional extremes of 'Parshuram' and 'Turxam', insists upon. The culture of British India, furthermore, with a cosmopolitan atmosphere of soldiers from around the world, interacts in complex ways with Agyeya's idea of India. This tension between the wartime organization of British India

³²Vatsyayan and Sahāy, *Agyeya Apne Bāre Mem*, p. 130.

and the historical richness and integration of Agyeya's India shapes the way in which Agyeya's travels through India navigate between these dual geographies.

A dream of a frontier

The device of a tyre, which fades over the course of 'Parśūrām se tūrxam', is most prominent in the journey across the wartime Northeast. As the driver of the jeep passes over the rough military roads of Assam, past Sadiya and into the inner line, the tyre notes the broken axles, weak dynamos, and other tribulations that befall an old army truck:

It should be considered an act of self-deprecation if I were to say that only one tyre could be depended upon! The engine had already run eighteen thousand miles—and only those well-initiated military vehicles know how long eighteen thousand military miles can be! The *glass* had all broken, the *carburetor* was busted, the wires snapped, the battery needed to be changed, the dynamo would fail to charge at random, the brake was weak...³³

This was a different war than the one we see in Agyeya's stories, written either during or soon after the war—stories of interpersonal relations between soldiers and local non-combatants, as in 'Hili-Bon's Geese'. This is a war instead of technology—of carburetors and dynamos, of permits and deadlines. The Japanese advance, the tyre notes at the beginning of the story, has 'toppled and collapsed' and the driver knows that he probably will not be in the Northeast much longer. Sensing an opportunity for travel, he takes advantage of an assignment to visit the pilgrimage site of Parshuram Kund. The timing of the journey, following what is implied to have been the truly dangerous period that preceded it, gives a slightly weightless feeling to the proceedings, which are filled with small jokes and wordplay.

Agyeya seems aware that he is writing for a Hindi audience without a deep knowledge of the Northeast; when he first writes out the word 'Assam', for instance, he includes a footnote distinguishing its correct pronunciation.³⁴ This portion of the text seems written as a kind of travel guide, noting the historical, and especially mythological, references embedded in the landscape. The relatively obscure pilgrimage site of Parshuram Kund, located where the Brahmaputra enters the plains of upper Assam, is described both in terms of sacred geography as well as an exoticized depiction of the peoples of the Northeast:

When again would he be able to touch the border of the North-East, the ascetic's forest and tank of Parshuram, the ruins of Kundinapur where Rukmini once sat and waited for Krishna; the banana-tree forests served by the *gaiñde*, elephants,

³³Vatsyayan, *Are Yāyāvar, Rahegā Yād?*, p. 3. Italicized words are transliterated English words in the original.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 3.

and *mithūn* (wild buffalo); the *Abor*, *Mishmi* and *Khamti*, the forest people [*van-vāsī*], forever sheltered by the impenetrable jungles... and in a few days is Magh-Purnima, which would be a festival day at the Parshuram Pond.³⁵

In his short stories, written ten years previously, Agyeya showed a subtle awareness of the life of people in the Northeast during the war, forced to negotiate their lives in a militarized zone. Here, however, his description relies upon a distinction between the normatively Indian, but unnamed, people who create the mythic space of Parshuram Kund, and the *van-vāsī* who live beyond the pale of civilization. In doing this, he chooses to consider tribal peoples as symbols, rather than the real people encountered in his short stories.

Multiple layers of history and perceptions of space press down on Agyeya's depiction of Parshuram Kund. The reference to the sacred place itself, and its role as one of the easternmost references within classical Sanskrit literature, emphasize the eternal, sacred quality of Indian space. And yet, as he approaches the pond, he notices that it is surrounded by improvised huts, covered with galvanized steel roofs. The elevated tone is always at risk of being punctured by reality:

The right to clean these symbols of the penitents' [*mumuṣuom*] sins has always been given to the uncivilized valley-dwelling Mishmi people. The weight of the sins of developed urban society is washed by undeveloped [*avikṣit*] forest peoples. The truth of how meaningful a symbol this practice is, has perhaps never occurred to either side!³⁶

Agyeya presents Parshuram Kund as a sharp dividing line, a place beyond which, into the 'impenetrable jungles', the author cannot imagine travelling. This is despite the fact that, by the time he was writing this travelogue in 1950, the independent state of India was already negotiating what would become the long, violent history of its administration of the Northeast.³⁷ Their description here is suffused with the contradictions of this approach, visible in the subtle shift from referring to them, with somewhat unconvincing irony, as *asabhya*, or uncivilized, before using the decidedly post-independence language of development in calling them *avikṣit*, or undeveloped.

Crucially, perhaps, despite the title of the travelogue, this is in fact a journey not from Parshuram Kund to Turxam—that is, across a cohesive, unified greater India, ending only at mountain passes—but, initially, across Assam towards Parshuram Kund. This is, in fact, a mostly solitary journey across a militarized space, in which the use of the narrative device of the tyre removes, for the most part, any mention of actual human beings. Instead, the narrative focuses on the wild, degraded mud roads and moonlit night-time landscape through which the truck travels:

³⁵Ibid., p. 6.

³⁶Ibid., 10.

³⁷On the immediate post-independence history of Northeast India, see Sanjib Baruah, *In the Name of the Nation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), pp. 37–43. Baruah describes a 'politics of insecurity' that is a useful counterpoint to Agyeya's description of the region.

He drove himself, on full moon nights, perhaps his body contained sufficient *vitamin carotene*, since he could drive at night without pain in his eyes! On the contrary, the intimate darkness was an aid to thought—and in the moonlight the entire state was visible, whereas a light would only illuminate the road, leaving the surroundings covered in black ink!³⁸

This mixture of mundane detail and aesthetically resonant description comes to typify the narrative. The text presents the traveller as both attuned to the realities of wartime travel and to the often-romanticized landscape through which he travels. The description frequently juxtaposes a refined, Sanskrit-derived Hindi to transliterated English; the reference to the full moon, or *śuklapakṣ*, is followed by *beta carotene*, a device commonly used in Hindi to create a comic effect. The resulting text is one in which Agyeya's arch, knowing voice, and deep investment in evoking the layers of myth and history that compose his idea of India, are superimposed upon the vast but visibly strained networks of wartime logistics.

When the truck reaches Sadiya, located where the Lohit and other tributaries join the Brahmaputra, the narrator must apply for an inner line permit. The inner line, which had acted to create a frontier zone in the upper Assam valley since its establishment in 1873, acts once again to puncture the spell of the narrator's journey across a unified space.³⁹ The narrator responds to this with a sense of indignation rooted in the imperial structure of the permit:

The Yayavar would say that the domination of the country bothered him most first, when he heard the name 'Everest' given to the tallest mountain on earth, in the Himalayas; and second, when he had to go to the office of a foreign political agent for a permit to visit the border areas! Every border of the country is a pilgrimage site [*tīrthasthān*], otherwise, how would the country be a sacred land [*puṇyabhūmi*]? But to go to one's own pilgrimage point and wait upon the self-interested representative of a foreign power—only one who has experienced such a thing knows how irritating this is.⁴⁰

The narrator's reaction makes clear the stakes of Agyeya's conception of Indian space, as well as the incongruity with the space created by the long history of empire and war. The necessity for a permit is presented as an apparent and obvious affront to the narrator's national spirit, one as nakedly imperialist as the naming of Mount Everest. And yet the meaning is undercut by two things. The first is that, as Agyeya wrote the piece, the inner line still existed as an administrative concept—and in fact is still used today to regulate migration.⁴¹ The second is that the narrator himself is

³⁸Vatsyayan, *Are Yāyāvar, Rahegā Yād?*, p. 4.

³⁹On the history of the inner line, see Bodhisattva, 'When was the Postcolonial?: A History of Policing Impossible Lines', in *Beyond Counter-Insurgency: Breaking the Impasse in Northeast India*, (ed.) Sanjib Baruah (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 49–89, 52–55; see also Benjamin Hopkins, *Ruling the Savage Periphery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), pp. 56–57.

⁴⁰Vatsyayan, *Are Yāyāvar, Rahegā Yād?*, p. 5.

⁴¹See Baruah, *In the Name of the Nation*, p. 93.

compromised by his own participation in the imperial structure which has created the inner line in the first place.

Agyeya, himself a representative of the British Indian Army, responds to the requirement for a permit by framing the issue in terms of, quite literally, sacred geography, referring to a 'sacred land'. But rather than read this as a kind of over-compensation for his military service, when we consider this moment alongside the rest of the travelogue, it evokes the tense inter-layering of sacred and imperial space. As much as he is insistent that this is a journey across a *punyahūmī*, through emphasizing the logistical realities of that journey, he makes this interrelationship clear. The logistics enable his journey, even as they complicate his movement. As the travelogue begins to describe more familiar areas—places that are at the heart of a Puranic idea of India—it begins to make even more clear the ambivalent relationship between imperial infrastructure and idealized space.

Defamiliarizing the centre

Through the structure of its narrative form, 'Parshuram se turxam' maintains a tension between the idea of a coherent, and implicitly Puranic, Indian space and an underlying British imperial structure. In addition to the narrative voice of a tyre, which gradually recedes into the background, the journey itself, despite the simplicity of its title, is broken up into several, overlapping trips across wartime India. That the first of these trips is a journey towards, rather than from, the borderland indicates the ambivalence of the project, even as it insists upon the essentially Indian—and Indic—history of the landscape. And whereas Agyeya's description of Upper Assam emphasizes the exotic and foreign for its Hindi readership, the second journey relies upon defamiliarizing the heartland, showing the imperial infrastructure within the familiar landscapes of North India.

The second major leg of this journey is comparatively jumbled and difficult to follow. The narrator tells us that some time later he was asked to lead a convoy of five cars from Assam to Punjab; he does not mention the point of departure, but it seems to be Dibrugarh. Instead of driving on the rough, military roads of Upper Assam, the trucks are loaded on a variety of transports. Agyeya follows the imperial logic of increasing infrastructure and colonial governance, noting the then-newly completed Coronation Bridge over the Tista.⁴²

Gradually, military infrastructure, and the specific cosmopolitanism it has produced, becomes a more prominent feature of the journey. From Siliguri, the driver loads a convoy of trucks onto a train to Calcutta. He finds himself sharing the journey with American military vehicles—the still-novel *jeeps*—and a group of mostly Black American soldiers. Although the impact of foreign soldiers on Indian society during the war is well established, the passage stands out here for its sudden interest in what, prior to this point in the narrative, was a background of passing foreign bases:

As soon as they boarded the train, the white soldiers began to play a disk of crackling *Jazz* dances on the *gramophone*, and a *Negro* began to strum the *banjo*, sing

⁴²Vatsyayan, *Are Yāyāvar, Rahegā Yād?*, p. 22.

and laugh. The poets have often described eyes so long they extend to the ears [ākaraṅ āmkh], but the real thing is the mouth of a smiling *Negro*. Just as a full moon appears shining above a bank, so the lines of teeth in the *Negro*'s sparkling mouth were sparkling.⁴³

At first glance, this passage can be read as of a piece with the rest of the travelogue, and with Agyeya's linguistic humour, contrasting classical Sanskrit aesthetics, and a sophisticated diction, with the novelty of American words. The description of Black soldiers, even as it is dominated by racialized tropes which consider Black people solely in terms of their bodies, softens, through its depiction of a convivial, integrated party, the reality of segregation in the American armed forces, something of which Agyeya would almost certainly have been aware.⁴⁴ But even as the text evokes tropes of minstrelsy, Agyeya places them within an evocation of classical Sanskrit aesthetics. The comparison of the Black soldier's mouth to the moon is as elegant as it is unsettling. The simile takes the racist caricature of the grinning Black man and expresses it—while referring to 'the poets'—in the classical language of ornament, or *alankārā*. The effect of combining 'othering', racialized language with classical aesthetics parallels the description of Parshuram Kund, holding together the classical world with which the travelogue imbues the landscape and the space created by the Second World War.

As the travelogue moves from Calcutta onwards, to Benares, Agra, and eventually Lahore, the text suddenly abandons the conceit of the tyre and is narrated in the form of a diary, noting that the tyre's 'airy nature' requires a pause.⁴⁵ The switch has the effect of emphasizing the familiarity of the landscape and travel across it—the tyre's world of car parts, mud roads, and bridges is to be replaced by the abstract nodes of North Indian metropolises. But this well-known space is continuously interrupted by the structure of militarization and imperial governance which is laid over it. As the driver passes by cities he knows, he finds himself camped out in bases outside. And when he does stop in the city of Agra, it is, he notes, not to see the Taj, but to transfer from the Eastern Command of Calcutta to the Central Command, and to give notice of further travel to the borders of the Northern Command in Punjab.⁴⁶ If the idea of Indian integrity was asserted in a journey to its far eastern frontier, then here, the seeming centre of that integral space is shaped by British imperial and wartime governance.

The cup of memory

The third and final section of the travelogue, which takes the reader to the border of Turxam, describes an area that would be both far more familiar to the reader than Assam, but also complicated by the event of partition, only a few years before the text's composition. Indeed, the shadow of partition, and the idea of Pakistan, looms over this final section, in which a utopian pan-Asianism, itself girded by the idea of an essentialized Indian space, collides with both the future of partition and the present of

⁴³Ibid., p. 22.

⁴⁴See Raghavan, *India's War*, pp. 297–98.

⁴⁵Vatsyayan, *Are Yāyāvar, Rahegā Yād?*, p. 26.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 28.

imperial space. The frequently jovial tone of earlier sections becomes more subdued and elegiac. Whereas the beginning of the travelogue was almost giddy with the excitement of the exotic, as the *yāyāvar* travels through Punjab en route to the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and the Tribal Areas, the narrative's insistence on the long, connected history of the area plays out as implied tragedy.

The spatial logic of this section emphasizes an unspoken presence. Titled simply *paścim—khaibar* [West—Khyber], the travels, which pass from Amritsar into Lahore and Rawalpindi, before veering north towards Swat and Abbotabad before ending at Torkham, never mentions Pakistan by name, and refer only elliptically towards its formation. As the traveller passes through Lahore, he warns himself against nostalgia, writing,

No, *yāyāvar*, don't tarry with memory. Now is the time to gather more. When the cup fills, pour it out, let it fill for now—⁴⁷

The warning against the author's own memories of Lahore, it is implied, is a guard against his sorrow at the loss of a city in which he had lived for many years. But it also evokes the somewhat awkward logic of his journey, which only fitfully addresses contemporary politics. The travelogue is presented as an attempt to form a new memory of space, in contrast to unspoken trauma. And yet the shape of the narrative, which coincides closely with a journey across Pakistan, only reinforces the sense that the stakes of the travelogue remain, in some sense, the integrity of an Indian space.

That space, including Punjab itself, is transformed by this narrative into a borderlands zone. The transition between Punjab and the NWFP is blurred, in contrast with the discussion of the inner line of Upper Assam. Instead, as the traveller journeys along and across the rivers of Punjab and the NWFP, he lingers on the area's history of warfare and famous battles, and its Sanskritic and Buddhist past, which he portrays as underlying a Muslim present.⁴⁸ The traveller's enthusiasm for and clear knowledge of the archaeological sites of the area—Agyeya's father was an officer with the Archaeological Survey of India—has the effect of foregrounding the ancient past. When the present does enter into the narrative, it is with 'trucks filled with men in green kurtas' chanting slogans such as 'We will fight for Pakistan' (*laḍ ke leṅge pākistān*).⁴⁹ Noting that the hills around Abbottabad were covered in wild daffodils, Agyeya quotes from his journal:

In my imagination, I see thousands of feet trampling these daffodils, merciless, ruthless feet, and as the stalks of the flowers snap, their sound is drowned in the roar of slogans—it appears like a symbolic image from the *cinema*—daffodils swaying in the snow, trampling feet, endlessly...⁵⁰

The intent of this passage may be similar to the discussion of memory in Lahore—to reflect on a traumatic event which took place soon after the journey, from the hindsight of experience. However, the anonymity of the men is representative: they are

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 34.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 39.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 41.

⁵⁰Ibid.



Figure 2. 'Remember' by Nicholas Roerich, 1924. Source: Held at the Nicholas Roerich Museum, New York.⁵¹

presented as a single, violent force, in a narrative which otherwise rarely mentions the people living in the contemporary spaces that are described. Agyeya never explicitly identifies the men as Muslim. But by centring them within a cinematic image, this passage reduces contemporary Muslim politics in the region to an image of mindless violence.

In depicting the peoples of the NWFP as inherently violent, Agyeya's text participates in a discourse regarding the area with a long genealogy in British imperial governance. A flip side of this perception, however, is his depiction of the area as a cosmopolitan zone. As the traveller moves closer to the more restricted Tribal Areas, en route to the Khyber Pass, the text is increasingly depicted as a frontier between Agyeya's idea of India and a larger, Central Asian world. Again, the local politics of the area is rarely discussed, despite the fact that, the traveller notes, his movement into and within the Tribal Areas is complicated by continual military activity.⁵² The traveller meets and travels primarily with a painter named Anton, who had grown up in a refugee White Russian family in northern China before making his way, via Shanghai, to British India.⁵³ Along with Anton, the traveller meets and interacts with a range of characters from Soviet Central Asia, as well as with a painter who had,

⁵¹James Boyd, 'In Search of Shambhala? Nicholas Roerich's 1934–5 Inner Mongolian Expedition', *Inner Asia* 14, no. 2 (2012), pp. 257–77.

⁵²See T. Moreman, *The Army in India and the Development of Frontier Warfare, 1849–1947* (New York: Springer, 1998), pp. 179–80.

⁵³Vatsyayan, *Are Yāyāvar, Rahegā Yād?*, p. 44.

the text notes, previously travelled in Tibet. This transregionalism is not necessarily rooted in the contemporary politics of the region—Afghanistan, for instance, does not figure in the travelogue, nor do the transnational political possibilities, including the demand for an independent Pakhtunistan, being articulated through ideas such as Yaghistan.⁵⁴ Rather, Agyeya's pan-Asianism arguably owes more to the line of thought represented, in Hindi, in the work of writers such as Hazariprasad Dwivedi and Rahul Sankrityayan. These thinkers, influenced in no small part by the revival of Buddhism in South Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, emphasized an idea of the nation in which Buddhism, and its connections with Asia, played a crucial role.⁵⁵ Through its detailed exploration of Buddhist ruins and influence in this region, and his simultaneous description of a cosmopolitan borderland, the text emphasizes a form of connection and internationalism that is nevertheless rooted in an idea of an eternal, territorially cohesive idea of India.

Tellingly, this section is bookended to a discussion of a painting by Nicholas Roerich (1874–1947) (Figure 2), who was known at the time both for his association with India as well as for his wide travels in Central Asia.

At the beginning of the section, the traveller remembers the painting, which depicts a young man on horseback, leaving his home in the mountains:

There is a painting by Nicholas Roerich, in which a departing horseman is turning and looking at a small cottage, a massive mountain looming behind him... the name of the painting is 'Remember!' But the one whose vision saw the mountain ahead of all, and whose imagination created, for something called 'home,' a shed somewhere by the horizon, which any gust of wind could scatter into pieces, like a mischievous boy who, having run away from school, is climbing trees and throwing down bird's nests—will he remember?⁵⁶

The description here gives the impression of fragility, of a home dwarfed by the massive landscape around it, and of a young, irresponsible traveller, eager to experience the world, being reminded of a homeland he might otherwise forget. In the context of the journeys described here, there are several possible interpretations. We might read it as pointing towards the vulnerability of Agyeya's idea of India, one that, in his journeys from Punjab into the NWFP and the Tribal Areas, is dwarfed both by the romanticized landscape and by the historical events that are hovering at the edge of the account. But in its description here, and its emphasis on memory, the text seems to be uncovering a deeper ambivalence towards the model of space which is the theme of the journey.

As the traveller stands at the border of India, the painting returns to mind:

This is the boundary peak of our country, the border of the country is its limit and the protection of the border is the protection of the boundary of the country... standing quietly, the traveller had a sharp memory of Roerich's painting—in this

⁵⁴See Sana Haroon, *Frontier of Faith* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 30–31.

⁵⁵On Sankrityayan's interpretation of Buddhism, see Alaka Atreya Chudal, *A Freethinking Cultural Nationalist* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 161–66.

⁵⁶Vatsyayan, *Are Yāyāvar, Rahegā Yād?*, p. 32.

view there was no 'home', but he took it into his heart, because it was for this that there could be a home anywhere—the boundary... and as he was thinking this, the customs across ages, the thread of centuries of tradition, were slowly articulated; The *India*-ness of India, its soul, began to speak. India, washed from below by the endless ocean touching the horizon, and covered from above by the Himalayas that kissed the heavens, whose border came up against a standing natural boundary and a sinking natural boundary, which even as it was bound to the earth, reached for the heavens, and made them more visible in its pure humanity, which found one-ness in many-ness because it could incorporate so many within its unity, could bear it—*priyaha priyāyārhasi deva soḍhum* [as a lover tolerates his beloved, so you should tolerate me, O Lord!]⁵⁷

The first description of Roerich's painting focused on the foreground, and the perspective given by the small figures, and the tiny, fragile cottage, separated by a huge volume of dark space and the vastness of the mountains in the distance, which take up almost the entire canvas. Now, though, the emphasis is almost completely flipped—the 'home' which is to be remembered is no longer the cottage, but the abstract space created by the mountains themselves. The traveller, seeing the border, thinks of boundaries and protection, in language strikingly reminiscent of Agyeya's eventual explanation of his wartime service. Protection of the border, or *simā*, is protection of the boundaries, or *maryādā*, of the country at large. The mountainous landscape of the Northeast is therefore framed as being the constitutive force which creates India itself, rendering India's secularism to be something only possible within this geographic unity. But that geography is defined by a naturalized Puranic idea of India.

Seen in this light, we can revisit the idea of home as created by a boundary in the quote above. Agyeya's vision of India, as presented in this piece, would seem to be rooted in the traditions of cosmopolitanism and interethnic toleration that would be enshrined, and remembered today, as the secular commitments of the post-independence Indian state. But he wrote those lines from a post-partition perspective, remembering the border of what was no longer India, but Pakistan. If this vision of an India which, in being shaped by the ocean and the mountain range, is an outcome of natural destiny, sits even more uneasily with the militarized space through which the *yāyāvar* travels, then it sits even more uneasily in light of the partition of British India in 1947. Looking back at wartime India from a post-partition perspective, the same tension between a mythologically defined India and the militarized zone of the British colonial state is remembered as a constitutive force, and a moment of unity prior to the rupture of partition and post-independence tension in the Northeast. From the point of view of a separated Pakistan and a contested, separatist Northeast, 'Parśurām se tūrṅam' should ultimately be read as a profoundly post-partition, post-independence narrative of the Second World War and the abbreviated opportunity it created to reimagine the space of India.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 59.

Conclusions

Ultimately, 'From Parshuram to Torkham', even as it indicates the importance of the Second World War to Indian cultural and literary history, perhaps also indicates some of the reasons why it has been so obscure. The reader would be forgiven if, at first glance, they did not notice that the traveller was a soldier at all. His actual activity in the army is never explained, and he never takes up any explicit position vis-a-vis the war. Instead, it appears as incidental to his travels, a pretext for the journey which he takes across India. Of far more interest to Agyeya, seemingly, is understanding what ties together these paradigmatically different locations.

But if the story of the war, and of the journey by truck through the war, provides one narrative framework, the author attempts to provide another through describing a mythological and historical landscape which emphasizes a space that is essentially Indian. The author structures his trip as one from an eastern limit to a western one, defined by the Parshuram Kund on the eastern and the Khyber Pass on the western borders. These locations are explicitly defined as places of pilgrimage. The space of India that the author travels through is very much that of a Puranic historical space. From this point of view, it would seem as if the war was not an important element of this journey, beyond that of a pretext. Even as the infrastructure of the war constantly imposes itself on this journey, it is never presented as the most interesting or important aspect of the trip. However, if it is a pretext, it is an insistent one. Each of the border spaces is transformed, and indeed created, by the military actions which constitute it. The Parshuram Kund is accessible only through the rail and road work created through frontier policy in the Northeast. The Khyber Pass, likewise, is a more or less totally garrisoned zone; this situation, which precedes the war, undercuts any idea of it as a naturalized space formed by geographic destiny.

This travelogue therefore presents an ambivalent space between the infrastructure of British imperialism and a Puranic map of India. Attention to Agyeya's idea of the war, both in his personal letters and in his travelogue, reveals a deep connection between his decision to participate and his changing attitudes towards national space. The internationalism with which he initially seemed to join the war still seems present at moments in this travelogue, such as in his depiction of a cosmopolitan space of wartime deployments of soldiers from around the world, or in his cosmopolitan travels through Punjab and the NWFP. But ultimately, this travelogue indicates Agyeya's later thoughts about the war, which rely upon a nationalism of India as an eternal, Puranic space, formed by the natural borders of mountain and sea. This idea of space is transformed in the context of the war and approaching partition, revealing both the continuing relevance of these ideas, as well as their limits. The contradictions caused by Agyeya's idea of Indian space echo throughout the travelogue, and raise questions about the complicated ways in which the idea of India, both as a nation and as an imagined space, relates to the politics of partition, the interpretation of the ancient past, and the memory of the Second World War.

One way in which this travelogue works with this tension is through the many shifts in its narrative structure. Seemingly narrated entirely by a tyre, this narrative device is gradually reduced, until, at times, it is removed entirely. But the tyre, and the connection between the military space of imperial British India during the war, never fully disappears. The continual reference to the tyre, and the tyre's perspective on the

world, remind the reader of the physicality of this space, despite efforts by the driver, at times, to ignore it. In this way, the tyre functions as a metaphor—not necessarily for the journey itself, but for the ambivalence with which Agyeya approaches his own memory of the war and his participation in it.

Continued research into the archive of Hindi literature and literary depictions of the Second World War in India can further unearth the complex, multifaceted approach to the war and its role in forming perspectives on the nation and the world. A comparison between a text such as Agyeya's travelogue, in which the wartime logistical landscape is contrasted with an India replete with history and myth, and the many depictions of the war on the left, which used depictions of the 'People's War' in order to articulate internationalist visions, could clarify the ways in which national and international space are interrelated. In that case, we could easily invert the question posed to Agyeya's travelogue: how is the idea of the international, and the popular war, transformed by prevailing ideas of India as a territorial space?

As Agyeya's travelogue reveals, the space of the war is essential to understanding how writers understood more familiar transformations in Indian life in the course of the 1940s, as well as during the post-independence era. Conversely, as scholarship begins to understand the importance of the Second world War in Indian history, sources such as this can be equally invaluable in analysing the ways in which the war played a crucial role in thinking about space in India. The journey taken by the traveller, narrated in a manner that is citational, at times touristic, and deeply invested in defining a national space that is rich in history and myth, cannot be separated from that of the tyre, intimately connected to the infrastructure of the Second World War.

Competing interests. None.

Cite this article: Goulding, Gregory. 2023. 'A tale of a tyre: National space, infrastructure, and narration in S. H. Vatsyayan's "Parśurām se tūrxam"'. *Modern Asian Studies* 57(5), pp. 1530–1550. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000105>