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ESTERINO ADAMI, FRANCESCA BELLINO
AND ALESSANDRO MENGOZZI

OTHER WORLDS
AND THE NARRATIVE
CONSTRUCTION
OF OTHERNESS

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CONTESTING COLONIAL ETHNOGRAPHY THROUGH AN IMAGINED GLOBAL GEOGRAPHY FOR THE 22ND CENTURY

Rāhul Sāṃkrṭyāyan's Hindi Science Fiction
Bāisvīṃ Sadī

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A journey to the twenty-second century

Rāhul Sāṃkrṭyāyan (1893-1963, hereafter RS) was a fiercely independent scholar, and he is one of the most interesting Indian intellectuals of modern times, as Machwe's (1998) biographical account shows. As well as other, more internationally renowned, talented public figures in South Asia prior to Independence, such as Rabindranath Tagore or Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, he was a polymath. He was a polyglot and a traveller, a communist and a Buddhist. He was provided with an amazingly vast and deep scholarship, being a historian, a novelist, a philosopher, and much more. This article introduces RS's challenge to the narrative of colonialism, capital, socialism, and to the discourse of modernity. I will focus on two texts: *Bāisvīṃ sadī* (hereafter BS), a juvenile work written in 1923; and *Ghumakkar śāstra* (hereafter GS), first published in 1948, a work that marks his maturity, both in age and in thought, about which I have written elsewhere (Consolaro, 2013).

If intellectual wandering means to stake out the boundaries of established disciplines, for RS this also implied writing outside the limits of established genres, moving freely in space and time, and expressing his thoughts with no restraints. This was much praised in his collection of short stories *Volgā se Gaṅgā*, as well as in his historical novels (Fornell, 2010). A less studied but interesting text is BS, a Utopia about the 22nd century that was not inserted by Kamlā Sāṃkrṭyāyan – Rāhul's wife, who edited the edition of some of his works after his death – in the list of

fiction writings, being instead listed as a “political essay.” In the introduction to the first edition, RS states that Viśvabandhu’s “travelogue” (*bhramaṇ vṛttānt*) had come to his mind in 1918 and took the form an “essay” (*nibandh*) on 6th February 1924, during his reclusion in Hazaribagh jail (*Do śabd*, page not numbered). In later autobiographical accounts he explains how the text was composed, again emphasizing fuzziness regarding genre. For example, in *Merī Jīvan-yātrā* he writes:

[...] I felt once again the desire to write that book, and to write it in Sanskrit. [...] At that time, though, I didn’t have a clear knowledge of ‘Bolshevism and universal peace’. I hadn’t even heard of the name ‘Utopia’. But in 1917 I had read on the newspaper *Pratāp* news about the Russian revolution and its aftermath, and accordingly I had formulated an idea of society, that I wanted to represent in this book. I intended to describe the path leading from the present society to that one. Therefore, I sent a young ascetic, Viśvabandhu, to the Himalaya. [...] On my second ‘journey to jail’ I realized the impracticability of Sanskrit [...] and I wrote it as *Bāisvīṃ sadī*. (264–265)

This is what he wrote in his autobiographical essay “Maim kahānī lekhak kaise banā?”:

At the end of 1921, I was sentenced to six months. In prison, I got time to read and write, and I put pen to paper. This was the first time ever I wrote fiction. The purpose of my writing, though, was not to tell a story or narrate. Just as, being a traveller, I had begun writing about my travels, in 1918-19 I had created a socialist world in my imagination, adding some fantastic nuance to whatever true or false news were published in the Hindi press about the Russian revolution. I wanted to write down that imaginary world. At that time, I had no philosophical knowledge of Socialism, actually I hadn’t even heard Marx’s name, therefore my Socialism was utopian Socialism, I had no notion of practical issues. I did not know that the carriers of Socialism are workers and peasants, who have no lesser relevance than literacy. [...] Whether you define *Bāisvīṃ sadī* a novel (*upanyās*), a long story (*barī kahānī*), or a socialist utopia, that indeed was my first book of fiction (*kathātmak graṃth*). (596)

BS is a story about a journey in the future, straightforward to the point of appearing naïve. The narrating voice is a male character,

Viśvabandhu (literally: Universal Friend), who wakes up after a two-hundred-year slumber. He remembers he had retired in meditation in a cave in Nepal after a life of travelling and teaching, at the age of 60. He sets off and walks in a familiar, yet different landscape: he is surrounded by rich agriculture and irrigation channels, hydroelectricity and channelled drinkable water, things that did not exist there at the time when he fell asleep. On meeting some human beings, he finds out that he is in the year 100 of the global (*sārvabhaum*) era, that is in 2124. A highly technological world is united into a global state confederation, and lifestyle is worldwide homogeneous. The naked wanderer is soon recognized as the famous Master Viśvabandhu from Nalanda University, and the rest of the narration describes his wonder at this utopian society that he comes to know while travelling back to Nalanda. The main focus of the argument is that, in order to have a good social system, good education and intellectual development are needed, together with material advancement.

Challenging modernity

The process of modernization that happened in the 19th-early 20th century should not be envisioned as the result of an “influx” due to the contact with the Western colonizers; it is better understood as an epistemological paradigm shift, a ferment of ideas that are tried in an epoch of crisis and that produce an intellectual debate, forging a new framework of thought. Also in the Hindi literary field a process of “translation of modernity” took place (Srivastav, 2005: 391), and RS too is the agent of an alternative kind of modernity: a transnational one, and a very radical one, insofar for him the ‘cosmology of wandering’ is not an appendage to a wider world view, but *is* the *Weltanschauung*.

In the world depicted in BS, private property has been eliminated, and there is no discrimination on the basis of gender, caste, class, or religion. A global language is used for general communication. Education is compulsory for seventeen years and children leave their parents at the age of three, living in boarding

schools that are based on community life. Individual bonds, such as family, are created by free choice, and ultimately are to be cancelled in favour of a global identity: in fact, a much wider view and a universal approach to any issue can be obtained only transcending local differences. The economic system is based on intensive production: each place produces only few items according to local characteristics, and all other commodities are imported. Infrastructures are efficient and transports are fast. People's occupations are according to their abilities and inclinations. Everybody has to work four hours a day five days a week; "the remaining twenty hours can be devoted to sleep, read, dance and sing, meet people, pursue their studies, practice philanthropy, do service to literature, and all other activities" (73). After nine months work everybody gets a vacation and can travel at will for a couple of months. This allows them to share their knowledge and learn about places and people, and this way knowledge, that was once elitist and reserved to highly cultured people, has become common.

RS presents a master narrative informed of Marxism and Buddhism, a vision that today can seem both philosophically and politically naïve, as it rests on a simplistic model of biotechnological evolution and a fantasy of horizontal perfectibility. What is the use of reading this science-fictional tale today? Interpreting BS just as an example of Marxist influence on an ingenuous Indian author would be reductive and erroneous. For RS learning was never an abstract activity: it derived from practice, performance, communication, and interaction with other people. In the first quarter of the 20th century the confluence of Buddhism, Marxism, Socialism (and Gandhism) was a relevant intellectual trend, which is yet to be studied systematically in the intellectual history of modern India. The passion that animates this book is a concern for the historical situation in which the author lived: India was in an age of conflicting fears and desires, in the middle of a nationalistic struggle, and RS was seeking modes of representation and forms of accountability adequate to the complexities of the real-life world he was living in. He wanted to think about what and where he lived, not eluding the embodied

locations and the rooted positions which he happened to inhabit. Therefore, he jumps two hundred years ahead in time, but he visits the places he actually knows, he describes the intellectual world he inhabits, calling on a new form of ethical responsibility considering “life” as “subject” of research, instead of “object”, anticipating a material and discursive connection between the text and its social and historical context that in Europe, for example, will be discussed much later by feminist and poststructuralist philosophy (Braidotti, 2006).

RS positions himself as transnationalist in an age of nationalism, and at the same time he is consciously localist in his imagination of a globalized world. His new world is a projection of the Buddhist monastic communal life informed by the Soviet model of economic system, advocating state ownership of productive enterprises, central planning of production and allocation of goods and services at state determined prices, a subsidiary role for money, banking and public finance, freedom of workers to choose their jobs, and state monopoly over foreign trade and transactions. In an epoch when the nationalist fantasy of modernization was based on an East/West dichotomy, he proposes alternative creative links and zigzagging interconnections between discursive communities which are generally kept apart from each other, prompting the reader to reflect on them. He focuses on literacy and scholarly work as the pivotal elements for a critique of tradition that aims at identifying forces, aspirations, and conditions that propel individuals out of the inert repetition of established habits of thought and self-representation, through an investigation based on Buddhist philosophy, that he had already started studying at the time of writing BS. He claims that habit is a sort of addiction, but it is socially enforced and thereby “legal”, and generates forms of behaviour that are accepted as “normal” or “natural.” Past experiences are given disproportionate authority just because accumulation of habits is granted unreasonable credit. In order to stop this process, a transformation of schemes of thought and of consolidated ways of inhabiting the world is needed, able to promote a change of culture. It is a radical change, happening in the immanent structure of the subject, which can

be fostered only by a clear understanding of maps and relations of the interconnections that link individuals to their social and organic environment.

Global villages

Let us turn to the way RS envisions living conditions and planning in his Utopia. The system of government, based on representational democracy and universal adult suffrage, is organized on a series of levels, beginning with local or village government, and ascending through the districts and provinces to the national and finally global level. Full-scale industrialization, scientific agriculture, and modern infrastructure are a constant feature all over the world. Densely populated, crowded cities do not exist any longer.

In the colonial view India's poverty economic underdevelopment, urban congestion, and deficiency of transportation reflected the nation's shortcomings and were a symptom of backwardness. In an era when industrialized civilization was already well-established in the West, India was just beginning to industrialize. While the nationalist fantasy of modernization found its expression in the dream image of a planned industrial metropolis, RS suggested the possibility of an alternative both to it and to the refusal of it – Gandhi's "traditional" village. Modernist urban planning favoured by progressive architects, such as Bombay's MARG group, aimed to achieve a more efficient and rational urban space, but failed to address social desires and needs (Prakash, 2010: 251–88). RS did not endorse the liberal state's ideal to promote the public good through capitalism: in his vision private interests would necessarily hinder the state's ability to express general interests. At the same time, he did not accept anti-modern positions: for him national traditions and industrial and technological modernity were compatible, and were to be embodied in the future free Indian nation, that was to be concurrently modern and different. He fosters a nation-based cosmopolitanism, challenging the colonial discourse that iden-

tified colonized as bearing an ontological and anthropological deficiency. Rather than articulating a supposed cultural essence of the nation, he viewed himself as an intellectual participating in a universal discourse that rejected single thought, where there was an interconnection of discourse communities.

RS's village has nothing to do with the 'traditional' Indian village. It shares with Gandhi's village the definition of a place where people can live simple, dignified lives in meaningful communities. Both emphasize local autonomy and employment, the village and the villager. But Gandhi's apotheosis of village republic – constructed as representative, deliberative, and harmonious – rested on the moral basis of *dharma*, and represented a hierarchical and ordered "freedom," even somehow reflecting suspicion of mass democratic action. Order was granted by existing sanctified custom, in which rank and distance, privilege and obligation, rights and duties, were legitimized by religion. Seeing industrialization as a force that brutalized human beings, alienating them from self and society and depriving them of the capacity to govern themselves, Gandhi proposed an economically and morally revitalized village community as a viable and attractive alternative to urban and machine civilization. Many among India's intellectual and professional classes, though, dissented about the notion that the village was the virtuous solution. RS's position is similar to Ambedkar's: the village – a social unit consisting of castes divided into Touchables and Untouchables – was the very site of social evil, where no room for democracy, equality or fraternity was left.

RS's modernism balanced nationalism with universalism, thus avoiding the East/West binary trap. For him the claimed purity of cultures was simply a nationalist myth fabricated in the 19th century, and it was a mistake to think of "premodern" and "modern" in a dichotomized way, equating them with East and West. His cosmopolitanism assumed India's national sovereignty and equality in a world of nations, but at the same time postulated a transnational level. In his view the village is not self-sufficient, as it is a cell of a complex structure where circulation of goods

and people is necessary. Yet, it is equipped with all necessary items for a simple and healthy life. This village is the core of a nomadic society and economy, in the sense that it allows and promotes the fluid circulation of capital, commodities, and people at a global level. It differs from the capitalistic vision in that the latter favours the proliferation of differences, but only within the strictly commercial logic of profit. RS's nomadic vision is strictly no-profit, and aims to the development of intellectual subjectivities permitted by a collectively organized society taking care of all bodily needs that generally distract from intellectual activity. Rejecting universals, whether from a unifying "capitalist" or from a "nationalist" perspective, he reinterprets national selves as fluid cultural spaces devoid of the oppressive potential of collective nationalist identities. Even if centralization is viewed as inevitable in the modern age, RS's ideal is a set of small, heterogeneous and independent communities, that restore human intimate connection with the soil, albeit scientific and technocratic methodology are viewed as supposedly thoroughly applicable. Indigenous nations can persist and contribute to the world society: being transnational does not coincide with the disintegration of any sense of collective polity. There are all the norms of metropolitan modernity that were supposed to compose the modernizing national order – industrialization, self-realizing individualism, innovation, science, medicine, rationality, the bureaucratic state relations of mobility, empire, agency and citizenship. But they are devoid of the hegemony of masculinity and of imperialistic aims, thanks to the substitution of a centralized state control to capitalism. For RS an idealization of labour such as the one proposed by Gandhi is not acceptable: technology and commodities are not to be rejected; on the contrary, they are welcomed as possibilities for a better quality of life, allowing time to entertainment, art and culture, in a radical quest for an alternative to materialism.

Transnational subjectivity and a global nomadic world

RS's argument is grounded on an ethics of sustainability, based on interconnections. I have used the term "subject", yet

this should be understood not as a coherent and unified character, but rather as a changing, mobile and heterogeneous self, that can be expressed only in parts and fragments. If the subject is not one, whole, unified and in control, but rather fluid, in process and hybrid – if it “in transit” – then travel becomes a privileged position to express it. This has been observed also with reference to other relevant public intellectuals of that period, such as Nehru, Gandhi, and Iqbal (Majeed, 2007). Notwithstanding the differences among them, transnationalism is a common feature of their work.

The grand unifying concept whereby a nation defines the identity of its people has been challenged and criticized by postcolonial theories on the subnational, including people from various diverse regions within the same nation (Mitra, 2012); the subaltern, including people who are generally classified as the minority groups determined through race, religion, caste, class, etcetera (Ludden, 2001); and the transnational, including people belonging to a certain nationality, but living in other countries (Appadurai, 2000). In BS, RS construes a global world where identity cannot be simply subsumed within a group identity, or conflated with a pre-existing nationality. He relocates the notion of identity beyond the discourses of “symbol” and the “local” into a larger cultural space, that is the interconnection of relations where the subject positions itself, performing production and consuming practices that comply to the transformations that may affect the space system (Lefebvre, 1991). Different forms of cultural construction are central to the production of space, principally in terms of class, but also gender, ethnicity, sexuality, family relations and age. Identity, being produced by a culture space, is further used to manipulate such a space, and becomes an agent to reproduce it.

The protagonist of BS is a well-travelled 260 years old man, who happens to put together the ability to travel in space as well as in time. When he first meets local people, he appears as a naked caveman and he is self-conscious of their gaze: “Everybody is staring at me, wondering whether I am a beast [...] Well, that man is coming in my direction, I’ll ask and find out [...] They are

probably considering me a 20th century savage and they even saw me wearing just leaves! Moreover, here nobody wears a beard, not to mention my bear-like hair!” (6–7). He is confused, yet he is not restraint by any sense of self-lack, but rather actively starts asking questions in order to understand his new situation. Soon he is recognized as the famous Master Viśvabandhu from Nalanda, who contributed to the revivification of the ancient Buddhist monastic university, establishing an educational centre that has become a worldwide beacon for the study of philosophy, history, antiquities, and linguistics. He sets forth to Nalanda, and the rest of the story is a travelogue, presenting the wonder of places and people he meets on the way. Far from “settling back home,” he visits the educational institutions there, and then, together with his new friend and travel mate, the historian Viśvamitra (Universal Friend, he too!), leaves again for a new journey all over India.

The text closes with a short description of the “happy globalized welfare” in the republic confederation of India. Interestingly enough, the emphasis on educational institutions and the spread of literacy does not point to a celebration of the modern technocrats engaged in building a range of institutions for the new nation-state, but is rather a counter-discourse, arguing that traditional forms of learning have the same importance as modern science. In fact, there is a constant effort to stress that, although all nations are on an equal status, India has a leading role, which ultimately derives from its great culture and learning.

The space constructed in BS is an alternative both to conventional and imperial notions of travel, as well as to the late eighteenth and early 19th centuries travel writing by Indians who looked at Britain as an example of the power of a stable modernity and express a sense of incompleteness and inadequacy (Puri). RS challenges the colonialist discourse that immobilizes the “native”, objectifying non-white persons as “travelees” (Pratt, 2008: 258). He also overturns historicism – the European “way of saying “not yet” to somebody else” (Chakrabarty, 2008: 8) – drawing on a long tradition of mobility in order to reclaim for India a place in a global narrative of modernity, qualifying it as a travelling culture and claiming that not only India is ready to

play a role in a modern world, but actually has always been on the forefront. In GS he traces a long genealogy of wandering Indians, ranking them as “first-class *ghumakkars*” (7–12); in *Volgā se Gaṅgā* he shows the nomadic roots of Indian culture, and in his travelogues and autobiographical accounts he defines himself against European ethnographic representations of the “native”. RS’s texts are autoethnographies, texts constructed by the other in response to or in dialogue with those ethnographic representations by which European colonizers represented to themselves their others (Pratt, 2009: 9). Ethnological encounters through travel are not erased, as it happens in imperial representations of the other, but rather are emphasized and expressed through a non-unitary, nomadic or rhizomatic view. Here the ethnographer’s gaze is situated and embodied; knowledge is always partial, it is produced in itinerary, through encounters in specific locations. There is no trace of Haraway’s (1991: 189) “god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere,” distancing the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power.

Strategies of positioning and embodiment

Strategies of positioning and embodiment are evident in Viśvabandhu’s account of his journey. Even if faster technologies are available, he insists on travelling by train, possibly a slow train, in order to be able to see changes in the places he used to know. This is not resistance to modernity, as in Gandhi’s case (Majeed, 2007: 80–96), but rather a way of emphasizing that the location RS is interested in is not a fixed place or a bounded site, but an itinerary of travel that implies a shifting positioning. A slow journey is also a strategy that abolishes distance, allows deeper human interactions and perhaps, per extension, “rambling”. This is not envisioned in contrast to the utilization of the modern technology of transport. Slow travelling does not necessarily imply the peripatetic, or the renounce the comfort of technological development: RS conceptualizes a globalized welfare, where comfort and commodities are at everybody’s disposal, with no

class, caste, gender or whatsoever discrimination. While sitting on the train to Nalanda, Viśvabandhu is shown recalling the old times, when to travel for poor people meant being packed like sheep into a wagon, standing, and with no place to sleep; forget reading, one had to be alert and beware of pickpockets. Now, comfortably sitting in a train provided even with a library wagon, he can converse at ease with his travel mates, getting a better idea of a global geography where multiple sites of self-differentiation are present. For example, he meets a woman professor of Andhra University, coming back from a long study journey to Madras, Sri Lanka, Bali, Australia, Borneo, Nanjing, Beijing, Siberia, Mongolia, and Tibet. This multi-centred geography, as shown in figure 1, is in contrast to the Eurocentric global geography that puts London – *the* modern metropolis – in the centre and describes the rest as a declining periphery.



Fig. 1 The research journey of the Andhra University woman professor (adapted from Google Maps).

The map coming out of this text traces fluid geographies, that are simultaneously local, transregional and global. It redefines

both Europe and India's place in a global geography, drawing a map of India in alternative to the image constructed by colonial ethnography, which positioned London at the centre of the world. In the new world there is no metropolitan centre, but a rhizomatic structure of interdependent villages. There is a capital, called Global city, having a population of 50.000 people, which is situated in Brazil on the equator (see figure 2). This is the residence place of the President, functionaries, and secretaries, but it is described as just a place of temporary permanence, with the members of the global assembly constantly flying in and out.

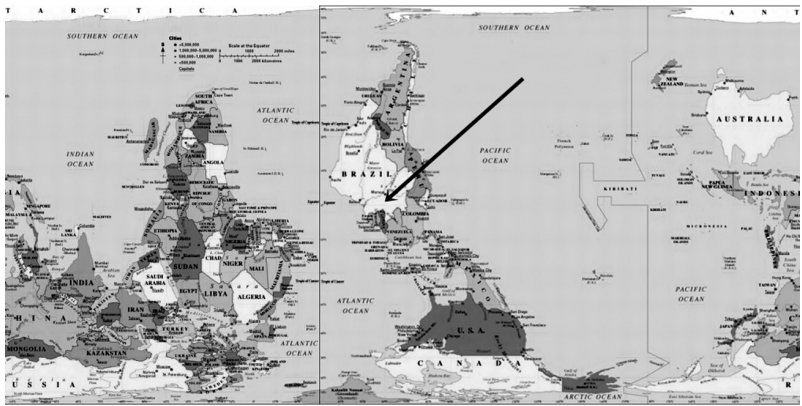


Fig 2. Map of the world in BS (adapted south-north Hobo-Dyer Equal Area Projection Map). The arrow marks the world capital.

An important strategy for space production in RS's works is embodiment. One strategy of embodiment is privileging the oral word, which always exists in a total existential situation which engages the body. In BS food and diet, hygiene, clothing, and sleep are described over and over, with a redundancy that shows how they are not simply an ingenuous account of needs, but must be interpreted as fostering insights into the complexities and difficulties of embodiment. The lifestyle of a traveller must be such as to secure one's mobility as an itinerant. As shown in GS, divesting one's self of possessions and adopting a rigorous and controlled behaviour are required conditions for those who

embrace wandering as their dharma (62–63). In contrast to the process of disembodiment that can be observed in Indian travelogues of the 19th century, he proposes what Majeed defines as “re-corporealisation” of space and movement (95), insofar he stresses the reality of the body and the embodied experience of living. Physical work is exalted as positive and rewarding. While travelling, one can experience body-reflexive practices such as fasting and *brahmācārya*, which he treats not as tools for religious or spiritual enhancement, but as a means for exploring of the nature of embodiment. Body is an on-going situation, it is connected to the mind and in order to have intelligent people one should create a healthy body and environment: in BS Viśvabandhu describes extensively the nutritional and educational policies of the 21st century, emphasizing how children in the utopian future are more intelligent not only because they receive better schooling, but also because they live in a healthier environment and have a healthier diet (79–83; 87). He is also interested in sartorial politics and the text presents redundant appreciations of the good shape of people and of the comfortable clothes they wear, pointing out the connection between good look and health, but also the democratizing, gender and class balancing effect of a more comfortable and less glamorous fashion (35).

When dwelling in travel is the norm, discipline and management of one’s own embodiment and corporeality are necessary in order to maintain freedom from any kind of bonds. For example, while RS recognizes the intensity of sexual desire as a natural phenomenon, he also exhorts *ghumakkars* to control and overcome sexual drives, or else they will end up sedentarizing, insofar pleasure is addictive and habits are the first bondage in human life (GS: 62–66). The choice for a celibate life is concerned not just with the body, but also with the mind and the interactions between body and mind. If a male and a female *ghumakkar* decide that they want to have an intercourse and/or a relationship, they can keep on living on the road, but if they set up a family, the process of sedentarization becomes inevitable. In any case, wanderers should always behave so that they do not get ashamed

nor make others feel shameful. This is a strategy for developing at the same time self-respect and equality: if wandering individuals are free, they nevertheless must avoid doing things that might injure or cause embarrassment to people living in sedentary contexts, as their duty is to keep high the status of *ghumakkars*. At the same time, when shame is associated with formal systems based on inequalities of power and status, they should not feel ashamed in performing works that are considered lower in those societies, as they have gone beyond the notion of higher or lower rank (26–31). In the envisaged 22nd century perfect society all manual works have been replaced by technology and workers do not have to toil. There is no division between intellectual and manual work, as erudition is not reserved to an elite, but is rather the basis of civil life.

RS's wandering, as well as the wandering of his *ghumakkar* fictional characters, is an activity in which rigorous philosophical and scientific inquiry is always accompanied by reverence and restraint. Wandering is what keeps humans in touch with an ethical or aesthetic wondering. The utopian 22nd century globalized society envisioned by RS proposes an alternative modernity to the one imagined by the socialist Russia, the capitalistic Europe, and also to the visions offered by Indian nationalists. In the closing of the text, the 260 years old traveller Viśvabandhu and his travel mate Viśvamitra continue their journey in a world where universal equality is guaranteed by both material and intellectual equal opportunity and freedom of movement for goods and people. They embody a nomadic model for a positive globalization, thus constituting not only a local modernity, but even anticipating theories of becoming and philosophical nomadism that are now labelled as postmodernist.

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