Part I

Introduction

Indophilia and Its Wider Worlds, 1890–1940

Gurus are forever.

A lock of silvery-grey hair fell off a sheaf of papers I was working on (Figure I.1). An attached note detailed its origins: the dead poet Rabindranath Tagore's beard. On his death, this was sent as a keepsake to his English disciple Leonard Elmhirst in Devon.[1]

Figure I.1 Tagore's beard hair.
Source: Dartington Hall Trust.

The hair exemplifies what I refer to in this book as deep discipleship. How did a cast of sympathetic Western subjects come to immerse and identify themselves almost completely within the aspirational communities of their Indian gurus? This book follows their lineages. *Passages through India* analyses the phenomenon of Western Indophilia (romanticised engagements around idealised forms of Hindu India) in late colonial British India, its ideological and affective composition, and its political implications. Rooted in disquiet with forms of industrial modernity, it looks at the nature of intimacies cultivated between major Indian guru-figures (Gandhi, Vivekananda, Tagore) and some of their Western disciples through ashrams and letters. Western disciples' love and longing for their mentors were harnessed to service the divergent needs of an expansive Indian nationalism. Bringing together themes such as intimacy, discipleship, religion and migration, the book argues that Indophile deployments around transnational projects like abolishing indentured labour and global Hinduism, while anti-colonial, were not necessarily emancipatory. Such deployments in India, the United States, Fiji and South Africa frequently reproduced the very hierarchies of race, class, caste and gender that they sought to transgress. Unifying distinct strands of discipleship within a shared tradition of Indophilia, this volume sheds light on influential Indo-Western encounters and their profound consequences, both in India and abroad.

Framing White Indophilia

This work builds on a set of relationships between key Indian figures and their Western disciples to explore the phenomenon of Western Indophilia. The romanticised engagements of sympathetic white Westerners for idealised forms of India, usually rooted in upper-caste Hindu imaginaries, is illustrated through the influential and intersecting networks around three major figures of modern India: the Hindu monk and missionary Swami Vivekananda, the poet and educationist Rabindranath Tagore and the nationalist leader Mohandas K. Gandhi. Together their careers broadly bookend the decades 1890–1940. Indophile disciples comprised largely men and women who made definitive passages to and through India. They belong to that important category of Western actors who refuse to fit neatly within either official colonial discourse or anti-colonial nationalism. Not Orientalist in the influential Saidian sense, they fit more closely within the description of 'affirmative Orientalists', who were apologists of Indian culture.[2] Their passages to India were initially made in non-official, if not strictly anti-colonial, capacities. However, their trajectories

diverged significantly from the dominant narrative of early imperial careering represented by British officialdom, merchants and military men.[3]

As Western actors who ultimately refused to own up to the racial privilege afforded by the nexus of imperial mobility and migration, their personhoods fragment our understanding of European agency, demonstrating the dissonances that exposed the serious limitations of the colonial project in action.[4] The empire, or imperial geographies, however, remained an important field to substantiate their work. In this, they were similar to other European men and women who sought and often found in the empire a space for vibrant opportunities – missionaries, feminists, Theosophists – in ways that may not have been possible within Britain itself.[5] Living and being in imperial locations exposed them first hand to empire's violence; such experiences were essential in eroding their belief in its munificence. The desire for alternative languages of affection and alliance with particular Indians was no less produced out of great despair at their own nation's (and the West more generally) betrayal of its enlightened civilising mission. However, this was not the only reason for the making of such discipleships. Disillusionment with Britain's manifest destiny was framed by deep disenchantment with forms of industrial and colonial modernity; Indophilia was an expression of that wider disquiet.[6] These were actors who desired to escape the 'techno-modernist' excesses of Western society. It led them to seek alternative models of living and being in 'non-modern' societies such as India and around forms such as the ashram.[7] This work, therefore, through a study of these figures and their networks, seeks to intervene in debates linked to questions of selfhood, modernity and religion, and more interestingly, on mobility and migration.

These networks helped consolidate some of the most sympathetic global opinions on India and Indians. An extensive literature already exists on each of these figures, given their importance in the national and international pantheon. Vivekananda, Gandhi and Tagore each have a proliferating body of scholarship that have examined those figures and their disciples/collaborators in numerous cultural, political and intellectual histories.[8] Few have, however, analysed the affective as an important site of analysis. I argue that a focus on this elusive intimacy is important; it determines the fraught-ness of their investments. These cannot be folded only within 'friendships of largeness and freedom', measured by the inevitable touchstone of Indian nationalism, where Western disciples seem star-struck by their Indian gurus.[9] By analysing

how aspects such as space, emotions and embodiment were fundamental in producing and sustaining those relationships, I examine the experience of Indophile discipleship and its wider uses.[10]

Given that Indophile archives are shot through with what might be conceived as uncertain attempts to create intimacy, what did these transnational networks produce? I argue that these relationships, invoked and sanctified in the name of spiritual, cultural and political freedom, were also mobilised by an Indian nationalist elite anxious to settle respectable ideas of India that inhered in the representations of Vivekananda, Gandhi and Tagore. Inasmuch as these intimacies were guided by a profound sense of love, longing and idealism, their actions often had sharp exclusionary effects. This work interrogates the shifting meanings of radicalism as they travel in time and place.

C. F. Andrews and William Pearson, Gandhi and Tagore's English disciples, are celebrated figures in the history of abolishing indenture. Scholars have noted how the abolitionist movement was fundamentally tied to a more bourgeois desire for Indian respectability against an immoralised labour community.[11] A study of Indophile interiority reveals how notions of respectability were crucially inflected by their extended experience in prominent modern ashrams, experimental spaces that projected forms of upper-caste Hindu living as ideal. Nationalist or hagiographic practices of memorialisation frequently occlude the larger politics of their doing. Margaret Noble, the Irish disciple of Vivekananda, gets portrayed as a 'Celtic lioness',[12] Andrews as the 'rebel-saint'.[13] That all these figures have commemorative stamps, roads, statues or projects in their names sponsored by postcolonial Indian governments attest to this celebratory mode. Allusions to homoeroticism or (sexual) sublimation are carefully read away or left untouched, leaving behind a smoothened narrative of 'pure' discipleship.

This work foregrounds emotional experiences of discipleship as essential to analysing Indophile cultural politics. The chapters consequently move from the affective to the discursive, showing how personal enchantments inter-braided their political investments, the attachment to significant Indians providing a critical impetus for their subsequent self-transformations. This book follows the tension in sublime friendship: always partial, often instrumental, and regularly producing forms of Indophilia that arguably undermined Indophile claims of universal moral and material uplift.

The exclusionary effects of Indophile politics were not always obvious within India itself; a transnational scale helps chart their broader implications. The Hinduism deployed in the United States by Vivekananda and his Western disciples was different from that popularised within India; yet Western discipleships were instrumental in its moulding as a transnational discourse, manifest in its cultural nationalist and universalist registers.

Western disciples, through an essential whiteness, evidenced the arrival of a putative world that affirmed Indianist projects. Tagore's 'habit' of English secretaries – Andrews, Elmhirst, Pearson – (noted in a sarcastic aside by the spurned translator Edward J. Thompson) during his many travels after 1913 was arguably a visible demonstration of that world, exemplified aptly by educated Oxbridge Englishmen. This 'world' entered forms of Indian public discourse, evoking and validating Indian cultural and civilisational superiority to Indians themselves. The various chapters in this book map the scale of this Indophilia and its expansive cultural geographies, even as India remained a focal point of their investments. Diaries of the French pacifist and littérateur Romain Rolland provide a sense of the scale of this Indophilia and its cumulative convergences. His accounts list the many overlaps and broader effects of these actors and networks outside India, even as they remained divergent within India itself.[14]

Intersections: The Late Nineteenth Century

By the late nineteenth century, Britain's naval superiority, financial reach and near-absolute hegemony in trade, commerce and territorial expansion confirmed the formidable magnitude of an Anglocentric world order.[15] The gradual economic subordination of India as a colonial dominion within global capital networks catalysed the emergence of an colonial intelligentsia in various provinces of British India. Many sought in indigenist categories of thought an inspiration for culturalist politics that explained away India's material subordination by refiguring India as an ancient repository of religious, spiritual and ethical values. This essential, spiritually whole India, part of a larger 'Orient', was in sharp contradiction to a grossly materialist and unethical West.[16] For Westerners disenchanted with the onslaught of industrial modernity and what they felt was a decline in moral living, the positioning of India as a site of age-old spiritual wisdom carried viable appeal. In adopting various

public Indian figures as their master, mentor or friend, they made substantive investments in numerous projects undertaken by these figures.

Westerners disenchanted with forms of industrial modernity saw this turn as a profound 'crisis of faith' moment in Western civilisation. Indophilia came to represent the nostalgic pursuit for an idealised world whose spatial and temporal frames intimated a world outside of modernity, but accessible to those inside it. This modernity rested on 'rupture',[17] but this rupture also produced the desire for a utopian 'lost world', a point the chapter on ashrams takes up in fuller detail.

The vibrant cosmos of *fin-de-siècle* Europe and America, and the many movements that populated its subcultures, became a fertile ground to produce and perform this Indophilia. Movements such as feminism, vegetarianism, social utopianism or non-conformism cherished alternative traditions with 'Eastern' origins. Direct and indirect encounters with these movements supplied almost all of Vivekananda, Gandhi and Tagore's Western followers.

Several scholars have already pointed to the fluid, fertile ground this nexus provided for anti-colonial politics.[18] Intersections between European anti-imperial traditions and the radical discourses of vegetarianism, animal rights, feminism, theosophy, homosexuality and socialism are hard to miss. These intersections enabled contrarian engagements in Europe and America with forms of utopian community that challenged the sway of liberal imperialism, scientific racism and laissez-faire economism.[19] Indian religious and cultural formulations provided critical ways to explore, if not escape, closures wrought by capitalist modernity. These formulations generally did not displace popular Orientalist typologies of a spiritual, mystical India. Yet, such cultural appropriations were not necessarily one way, as Vivekananda, Tagore and Gandhi demonstrate. They mobilised important Western resources and networks in stabilising their own projects.

Western individuals and institutions attracted to these personalities and their causes saw a fulfilment of their own personal and spiritual quests. Women followers such as Besant or Noble, coming from the British suffragist tradition, found in certain emanations of Hinduism and Buddhism a closer spiritual opening compared to the patriarchal ethos of high Anglicanism.[20] Notwithstanding these dissatisfactions, some form of belief in imperial munificence remained intact in these curious seekers and sympathisers but

guided by a liberal aspiration of India as an essential, if not always equal, partner within the British Empire. In such circles, Indian preachers, politicians and artists were eagerly avowed and listened to. The desire for a closer connection with charismatic Indian figures and through them, a closer access to their idea of India produced determinate forms of Indophilia.

Indophiles who declared their love and longing for India could not – and generally did not – escape the bind nationalist politics placed on them. They saw their political endeavours for India as integral to the larger 'service of love' for their respective guru-figures. Anti-colonial identification with India and Indians came at a cost. These disciples variously courted arrest, got beaten up by white settler mobs, wrote incendiary literature, and aided civil disobedience and revolutionary terrorist movements wherever they could for the expansive cause of Indian nationalism.

Accessing Intimacy: Affects, Objects, Spaces

Cultural-material artefacts were integral to the lives of disciples.[21] Spatialising emotional practices, as Chapters 2 and 4 on the experience of discipleship will show, suggest how intimacies were contingent on disciples' desire to enter certain spaces. Ashrams and spiritual geographies provided Western disciples with the special frame to experience place-making. The desire to relate to specific places produced a range of practices through which they entered their mentors' worlds.[22] The concept of 'emotional community' provides an apt way to describe aspirational spaces like ashrams that provided sites for intensive self-reflection and transformation.[23]

The experience of discipleship was premised on emotional regimes that depended on the regular enactment of literary, physical and material practices. These practices were embedded within hierarchies of race, caste, class and gender that rendered specific acts of inversion, subversion or immersion meaningful. What value did the 'dust' of Indian gurus' feet hold for Western disciples? [24] Dust had deep material significance.[25]

New materialist interventions have reflected on how 'worlds' are produced – and made sense of – through a range of human practices in relating to that world.[26] This 'world' – the aspirational spaces and places that Indophiles sought to be a part of – produced the form and fantasy of Indophilia; the habitus of that 'world' insistently naturalising a set of cultural values as normative.

Reading intimacy is always a fraught proposition for 'unused to pushing the affective up against the political', we tend to dismiss emotive negotiations as elusive.[27] The anxieties of contact and contagion around interracial relationships provided much impetus for sexual control and policing of racial, cultural and moral borders.[28] It also produced the curious ellipses, silences and ordering logics of the colonial archive through which certain kinds of sexuality (or sexual difference) registered their presence. The chapter on indenture draws on this insight to show the convergence of normative social hierarchies in the *Fiji Report* drawn up by C. F. Andrews and William W. Pearson (and supported by Gandhi and the Hindu nationalist leader Madan Mohan Malaviya), central to the abolition of indenture.[29] Based on their investigation of indentured sugar plantations, the report abounded in the language of sexual immorality and 'moral panic' around a fallen purity. Letters written around this time show them constantly evoking and mobilising a pure ashram life in their critique of sexual transgressions that blurred social lines in plantation colonies. This was further troubled by their own lineages as celibate Christian missionaries.

Important insights coming from the field of feminist, queer and postcolonial scholarship have been crucial in grappling with ambivalences that inhere in intimate deployments.[30] Private letters form an extremely important site to analyse interiority.[31] There are, however, limits to how such desires could be named. Love and longing for mentors could be expressed only through desexualised tropes. Idioms of spiritual love helped contain potent affections from spelling itself out clearly, leaving in its wake a rich trace of allusions and ambiguities. To recover such articulations is to also note their limits and failure, formative as they were of the larger politics in such representational hermeneutics. Failure shaped the unsteady politics of performance.[32]

Lofty languages of discipleship helped contain the 'problem of desire'. Madeleine Slade and Margaret Noble were relentlessly made to fit desexed, celibate roles of sisterhood or motherhood. In male disciples' articulations of affection, there is much homoerotics at work. Andrews' letters to Tagore exemplify the agony of affection: 'O my dear, dear friend, I can never tell you in words how I love you.'[33] A similar tension appears in Gandhi's relationship with followers-cum-associates such as Hermann Kallenbach and Polak, though Gandhi was more open to reciprocal intimations and practices of (homoerotic) male intimacy than Tagore. Sublime friendship became an invocation to express feelings that could otherwise not be named.

Homoeroticism could be framed in remarkably heteronormative terms.[34] Male Indophile letters to their mentors testify to this framing; Gandhi could confidently send 'love-letters' to both Andrews and Kallenbach without any overt displacements of gender. It is precisely this ability that made male–male desire speakable, preserved in a language that was deeply homoerotic but not sexual. Indeed, the tendency to collapse all desire as ultimately sexual tends to make both desire and intimacy rather impoverished categories. A history of intimacy is not only one of sexuality, but a larger set of practices that comprise the tactile, the embodied and the material. Personalised projections were integral to the imagining of this intimacy. In the way Gandhi's mahatma-hood was circumscribed and enforced by mythopoeic imaginations of the Indian peasantry, disciples' excess of projections made and remade their gurus.[35] At the centre of such projections lay the body of the guru, around which practices of embodiment were rendered meaningful.

Following influential theoretical interventions, narratives of embodiment have received close scholarly attention.[36] Letters from the guru and their bodily artefacts re-enacted this experience. MacLeod's attempt to feel Vivekananda after his death by inhabiting the rooms he lived in reflected this desire to imagine and invest in an embodied co-presence. In a similar way, Mira and Andrews sought to feel the larger presence of their gurus through their letters; to touch their handwriting was to feel the guru's presence. Bull's desire for Sarada Devi's photograph and rosary blessed by her, and Saradananda's cramming of his small room with Bull, Noble and MacLeod's possessions instantiate the many forms through which things, spaces and places embody selves. Practices of embodiment were valuable in the ways they made disciples feel connected to their mentors' worlds. There was distance, sometimes insuperable, but it was often seen as creating wonder and mystique, an enchanted world around their Indophilia.

Worlding Indophilia

There has been a benign tendency in certain influential strands of recent scholarship to view India's elite entanglements in largely affirmative terms. In her study of *fin-de-siècle* anti-colonial thought, the literary scholar Leela Gandhi has termed the ability of individuals such as Andrews, Pearson or Nivedita to form 'cross-cultural friendships' as constitutive of 'affective communities'.