

Advance Praise

In this study of the deep discipleship inspired by a generation of world-famous gurus, Somak Biswas splits open the seams of sentimentalism that underwrote transatlantic Indophilia in the context of colonial modernity. Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore and Mohandas K. Gandhi were household names. They were also the objects of longing and love for men and women who gave their lives over to them in pursuit of earthly transcendence and revolutionary politics. Biswas explores both the social geographies and the cultural practices of these radical devotees, producing a lively account of utopian communities stitched together by spiritual desire and preserved in a rich and vivid archive of letters that testify to the power of affective politics in the making of global history.

—**Antoinette Burton**, University of Illinois

An elegant account of the mutual but also rival desires that constituted the now classic relationship between Indian sages and their Western followers starting early in the last century. The combination of counter-cultural transgression and conservatism that Biswas describes in such relations makes for a highly original argument.

—**Faisal Devji**, University of Oxford

Weaving together modern guru–disciple relationships and the journeys of Western figures in pursuit of Indian gurus, this significant work explores a strikingly unusual theme. It inverts the dominant tenor of interactions between the coloniser and the colonised by looking at Western men and women who were entranced by Indian religious and political figures in times of intensifying anticolonialism. It probes the manifold complexities that are involved in such inversion, which defied the logic of ‘normal’ colonial encounters. By counter-posing histories of several gurus and their disciples, the book, moreover, describes the relationships on different registers. Each relationship is situated against a broad historical backdrop of contemporary politics and faith, of gender and emotions, in Britain and America as well as in India.

—**Tanika Sarkar**, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Passages through India puts flesh on the bones of the familiar trope of the Indian guru and the Western disciple. It is a useful reminder of the important work of ‘white solidarity’ in reshaping the global image of India for an anti-colonial project. At the same time, it is clear-eyed about the exclusionary effects of relying on Hindu high culture and a politics of respectability for this image makeover.

—**Mrinalini Sinha**, University of Michigan

Passages through India

Passages through India offers a study of the phenomenon of Western Indophilia: romanticised engagements around Hindu ideas of India. It argues that affective practices cultivated between major Indian guru-figures (Gandhi, Tagore and Vivekananda) and their white disciples serviced a larger politics of respectability, tied to the exigencies of Indian cultural and nationalist politics. Indophile deployments in transnational projects like the abolition of indentured labour and global Hinduism, while anti-colonial, were not quite emancipatory. Such deployments – in Africa, America, Fiji and India – frequently reproduced deep hierarchies around race, class, caste and gender. Unifying distinct strands of western discipleship within a shared tradition of Indophilia, *Passages through India* offers a new methodological framework that situates self and subjectivity as central to processes of global mobility and migration.

Somak Biswas is Junior Research Fellow at the Institute of Historical Research, London. He works on the intersections of South Asian, British, imperial and global history. He is also a member of the Global History and Culture Centre, University of Warwick.

GLOBAL SOUTH ASIANS

Throughout the modern era, South Asia and South Asians have been entangled with global flows of goods, people and ideas. In the context of these globalised conditions, migrants from the subcontinent of India created some of the world's most extensive and influential transnational networks. While operating within the constraints of imperial systems, they nevertheless made distinctive and important contributions to international trade, global cultures and transnational circuits of knowledge. This series seeks to explore these phenomena, placing labourers, traders, thinkers and activists at the centre of the analysis. Beginning with volumes that seek to radically reappraise indenture, the series will continue with books on the mobility of elite actors, including intellectuals, and their contributions to the global circulation of ideas and the evolution of political practice. It will highlight the creativity and agency of diasporic South Asians and illuminate the crucial role they played in the making of global histories. As such it sets out to challenge popular misconceptions and established scholarly narratives that too often cast South Asians as passive observers.

General Editor

Crispin Bates
University of Edinburgh

Editorial Advisory Board

Sunil Amrith
Yale University

Ashutosh Kumar
Banaras Hindu University

Subho Basu
McGill University

Andrea Major
University of Leeds

Joya Chatterjee
Trinity College, University of Cambridge

Rajesh Rai
National University of Singapore

Marina Carter
University of Edinburgh

Goolam Vahed
University of KwaZulu-Natal

Maurits S. Hassankhan
Anton de Kom University of Suriname

Titles published

Fleeting Agencies: A Social History of Indian Coolie Women in British Malaya,
Arunima Datta

*The Indentured Archipelago: Experiences of Indian Labour in Mauritius and Fiji,
1871–1916*, Reshaad Durgahee

*Citizens of Everywhere: Indian Women, Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism, 1920–
1952*, Rosalind Parr

*Uncivil Liberalism: Labour, Capital and Commercial Society in Dadabhai Naoroji's
Political Thought*, Vikram Visana

Passages through India

Indian Gurus, Western Disciples and the Politics of Indophilia, 1890–1940

Somak Biswas



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-60880-0 — Passages through India
Somak Biswas
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of
education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009608800

© Somak Biswas 2023

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions
of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take
place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

First published 2023

First paperback edition 2025

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-009-33798-4 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-009-60880-0 Paperback

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence
or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this
publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will
remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-60880-0 — Passages through India
Somak Biswas
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

To Dalit seers, peers and queers

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xv

Part I

Introduction: Indophilia and Its Wider Worlds, 1890–1940	3
1. Languages of Longing: Indian Gurus, Western Disciples and the Politics of Letter-Writing	25

Part II

2. Home in the World: Indophiles and the Ashram	57
3. India, Indophiles and Indenture: Cultural Politics of a Transnational Discourse, 1911–1931	117

Part III

4. Practices of Discipleship: Vivekananda and His Women Disciples, 1890–1910	155
5. Vedanta and Its Variables: The Politics of a ‘World Religion’, 1890–1910	203

Epilogue: What Settles After	257
<i>Bibliography</i>	267
<i>Index</i>	283

Figures

1.1	Tagore's beard hair	3
1.1	Tagore's letter to Pearson, 15 January 1913	31
1.2	Tagore sends a Vedic prayer of peace to Andrews	40
1.3	Tagore playing 'truant', 1914	45
2.1	Ashrams and utopian settlements inhabited by Gandhi and Tagore's Western disciples	59
2.2	An index of utopian communities in the early twentieth century	63
2.3	Sabarmati Ashram, Ahmedabad, founded by Gandhi in 1917	64
2.4	Shantiniketan, founded on the ideal of a community in the forest	66
2.5	Hriday Kunj: Gandhi's residence in the Sabarmati Ashram from 1918 to 1930	69
2.6	Pearson's letter to Tagore, asking he be allowed to call him 'Guru', 17 December 1912	71
2.7	Andrews and Pearson's Fiji visit, <i>Times of India</i> , 20 October 1915	74
2.8	Indians in South Africa, <i>Times of India</i> , 25 March 1914	75
2.9	Gandhi inspecting goats at the Royal Agricultural Hall, London, 1931	81
2.10	Pearson's memo to Elmhirst, asking to borrow his motor lorry for a picnic with students	85
2.11	Andrews's name proposed in the governing board of Visvabharati, 1923	87

2.12	Andrews's poem, 'My Gurudeva', published in the ashram journal on Tagore's birth anniversary, <i>Visvabharati News</i> , vol. 4	89
2.13	The Vinoba–Mira Kutir: Mira's room in the Sabarmati Ashram, where she lived from 1925 to 1933	92
2.14	Andrews fundraising for Shantiniketan, whose finances were generally precarious, 20 November 1931	95
2.15	Envelope addressed to Andrews, then residing with Gandhi at Sabarmati	100
3.1	The <i>Fiji Report</i> , authored by C. F. Andrews and W. W. Pearson and dedicated to Gokhale	131
3.2	Pearson's letter to Tagore from Fiji, 1915	133
3.3	Gandhi requesting Andrews to visit South Africa, on the 'Indian Question', July 1939	141
3.4	Proposal tabled by C. F. Andrews at the Special session of the Indian National Congress, 1930	142
4.1	Swami Vivekananda; the folded-hand pose iconised	160
4.2	Vivekananda discoursing at the Ridgely Manor, New York, 1899	167
4.3	Vivekananda and his women disciples at a picnic, Pasadena, 1900	169
4.4	Old Belur Math building on the left and Vivekananda's house on the right; the River Ganges flows in the background	171
4.5	Holy Geographies: Vivekananda and his Western disciples' travels across the Himalayas, 1898	179
4.6	Martand-Sun Temple, Kashmir, 8 CE	181
4.7	Letter from Josephine MacLeod to Leonard K. Elmhirst, written on the Ramakrishna Mission's letterhead	191
4.8	Letter from MacLeod to Elmhirst, offering a new recruit for Shantiniketan, April 1923	192
4.9	Letter to M. R. Jayakar, requesting funds to consolidate Ramakrishna Mission's work in western India	193
5.1	Vivekananda with Indian disciples and brother monks in Madras, 1897	225
5.2	'Origin of Ethical Ideas', lecture by Lewis Janes	232
5.3	Cambridge Conference: List of House Residents	233
5.4	Cambridge Conferences Brochure, 1898	234
5.5	Brahmo Samaj, Zoroastrianism and Evolution lectures	236
5.6	Cambridge Conference Brochure advertising Abhedananda's lecture	240
5.7	Cambridge Conference Programme	241
E.1	'Psychic Plot Swayed Mrs Bull', <i>New York Times</i> , 23 May 1911	258
E.2	Last Message of C. F. Andrews, in Tagore's hand, 1940	263

Acknowledgements

It is difficult not to read our own despair in the subjects we study. Fortunately, an array of dazzling people has constantly supplied me with constant wisdom and warning. It is a pleasure to thank them all. The History Department at Warwick University has been my refuge, its people a source of great comfort and conviviality. Even after I finished my PhD in 2020, I linger in love of the place and its people. The Global History and Culture Centre provided an exceptionally exciting place. I am grateful to the *Past and Present* for a research fellowship that allowed me time to finish this book. The Institute of Historical Research, London, helped me settle into a flexible postdoctoral life just when COVID struck.

Sarah Hodges's sharp tutelage has moulded this work in important ways. Aditya Sarkar's generous engagement helped me hone key arguments made in this book. Anne Gerritsen has been a wonderful mentor, offering counsel and courage as and when needed. James Poskett, Meleisa Ono-George, Guido Van Meersbergen and Rebecca Earle provided help and advice whenever I reached out. Outside Warwick, Ruth Harris has been the most wonderfully supportive mentor.

Poorva Rajaram's delayed but definitive entry in my life has been a high point; her friendship has nourished me in every possible way. Cheri Kuncheria, Vidya Subramanian and their two adorable felines have been the most excellent hosts. Saba Hussain and Anjali Thomas made life in Coventry full of laughter, sharing advice, agony and great gossip. I became friends with Andrew Burchell over seven years ago; I am most glad he remains so. Poorva, Cheri, Adhitya Dhanapal, James and Andrew's comments on several draft chapters have been most useful. Andrew, Martin Schauss, Matteo and Pierre (Botcherby) translated relevant sections of

Romain Rolland's 'Indian Diaries' from the French original. For all their labours, rendered freely, I have only gratitude.

I would like to thank the following for their warm friendship and inspiring work, in no particular order: Anna Sailer, Kalyani Prajapati, Adhitya Dhanapal, Sam Strien, Tarangini Sriraman, Jason Cyrus, Awanish Kumar, Anisha George, Arun Kumar, Komal Mohite, Paloma Perez-Galvan, Shounak Ghosh, Paromita Sinha, Ishita Chakraborty, Maroona Murmu, Shrikant Botre, Joeeta Pal, Sohini Chattopadhyay, Bobby Tam, Mouli Banerjee, Lavrentis Galanoupoulos, Koonal Duggal, Vincent Kelly, Maria do Mar Pereira and Aya Nassar. Friendships forged outside of the history circuit have been refreshing. Thanks to Ria Bari, Prachi Singh, Harpreet Kaur, Abhinav Mishra, Preeti Thakur, Sumeet Tsering, Arindan Mandal, Abhishek Verma, Kanhaiya Lal, Harshita Asthana, Shailesh Yadav and Shashikant Manishwar for many wonderful evenings spent in impromptu *antaksharis* and midnight bike trips for *masala chai* in Murthal.

Friendships with Sue Lemos, Madi Simcock-Brown and Nazifa Zaman have been most rewarding, both personally and politically. J. Daniel Luther, Shantanu Singh and the *Queer Asia* collective taught me queer kinship. Thanks are due to Sara Bamdad, Daniel Papadopoulos, Martin Schauss, Mantra Mukim, Anna Rivers, Anna Carolina Rocha, Virinder Kalra, Laura Schwartz, Claire Bielby, Hilary Marland, Asma Abdi, Clare Langhammer, Kalyan and Kalyani Bhattacharya, Uttara and Subhas Chakraborty for a great many things. Sohini Ghosh, Anwesha Rana and Qudsiya Ahmed have been exceptional editors and an author's dream. It is a pleasure to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their generous comments. Thanks to Priya Das the production process has been a smooth experience.

My parents Ankita and Subodh Biswas have been bewildered with my never-ending research quest, and mostly glad to see something tangible in the form of a book. Aunts, uncles and family chipped in to do their pastoral bit; their worries often taking surreal forms of surveillance. Rupa and Alakesh Biswas provided a caring home in Delhi to fall back every time I needed. Trips to my aunt Geeta Bairagi's home were wildly anticipated affairs. Chhanda and Chandra Biswas opened their home to me in Philadelphia during a long archival trip. My brother Sayak and sister-in-law Namrata helped me navigate episodes of our very own mint-edition family drama, besides much else. The cousins' collective has been furiously loyal to a fault; much love and thanks to Arpita, Arnab, Aarushi, Amitesh, Rony, Roshni, Shubho and Vastika for stepping up as and when. My niece Mishita's arrival has been a wildly happy affair. I wish my grandmothers Nirmala and Kalpana Biswas were alive to see this book. They represented two sharp ends of an early

generation of Dalit womanhood. Nirmala was rural and unlettered, immersed in her world of *haribhakti* and conjugal duties. Kalpana was educated, urbane and aspiring to respectable gentility. I miss them both terribly.

Librarians and archivists across three different continents provided invaluable material help that made this book possible. I would like to thank the following places (and people): the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library; National Archives of India; Shantiniketan (Shovan Ruj); Sabarmati (Kinnari Bhatt); Bodleian, Dartington Hall Trust, Edinburgh University Library and the British Library; Cambridge Historical Society, Boston; University of Pennsylvania Library and the Swarthmore College archives in Philadelphia. Archival dust is a real thing. It imbues meaning in the way we read sources. Visits to Sabarmati, Shantiniketan and Almora helped me understand these places and their enchantments.

Jawaharlal Nehru University has been the most significant influence in my adult life. Thanks to the teachers who taught us history, it was entering a world of sheer delight and intellect. The late M. S. S. Pandian was the first scholar who taught us pride in being Dalit; that is a lesson for life. Tanika Sarkar has been brilliant, offering the most astute advice on life and work. Radhika Singha is simultaneously awe-inspiring as a scholar and humane as a person. Meeting Janaki Nair in the London Coal Drops Yard provided the perfect backdrop to reminisce her classes on the history of capitalism. Meeting them all recently reminded me of the kind of historian I want to be. At a time when India is almost completely gripped by the frenzy of Hindu nationalism, a whole generation of JNU teachers and students offered hope.

Matteo has been my steady source of happiness and strength for several years now. He has suffered my delightful wit and banter every single day with the stoic indifference of a great martyr. He remains convinced of my general ‘un-funniness’ and stoutly pities those who have fallen to my charms. Our cats Ludo and Lucrezia have meowed their love into our lives. Matteo’s family has been exceptionally kind: heartfelt thanks to (mamma) Maria, Gino (the papa), Michela, Giuseppe, Ebe, baby Annamaria, the dogs (Smile, Griffin, Leo), cats (Raja, Sgat) and Gino (the parrot).

Finishing this work under dark times has been a challenge. Both in India and Britain, contemporary debates on ethnic violence and national borders have inflected my study of western Indophilia and its long-term stakes in producing ‘good’ and ‘bad’ immigrants. As Britain finally makes me feel like a ‘familiar stranger’, it is perhaps apropos that a presentist despair creeps into my conclusion. But if the times are dark, the songs will be of dark times. Why should our history writing be any different?