Gandhi’s Vulnerability

Nehru’s secularising turn

In the previous two chapters, I showed Nehru constructed India and himself in relation to modernity. I also showed Gandhi articulated a sacred geography to counter the geography of modernity and the narrative of modernising progress, which was an integral part of Indian travelogues in the nineteenth century. Here I develop my analysis of Gandhi’s notion of the sacred by considering how he returns to the spiritual roots of autobiography as a Western genre of literature in his writing. This reflects the discourse of vulnerability in his writings, and is indicated in particular by his representation of stage fright.

Gandhi’s self-presentation in his *Autobiography* as a seeker after religious truth\(^1\) is in marked contrast to Nehru’s secularism, which has been noted by commentators.\(^2\) Here I focus on the secularising turn in Nehru’s autobiographical project, which parallels the secularising of autobiography as a genre in the West from the late eighteenth century onwards. Autobiography had its roots in the religious act of confession, but with the coming of modernity, the vertical axis of communication with a deity was displaced by a horizontal axis of inter-human communication, in which the author addresses his or her readers.\(^3\) In Indian nationalist autobiographies the language of religion is re-worked as a political language, rather than being displaced or supplanted by it. Nationalism itself has quasi-religious features of nationalism, and has been called the ‘religion of modern times’.\(^4\) We have seen how Rai uses the language of religious conversion to plot his own move towards Hindu nationalism. In Banerjea’s autobiography, nationalism has the hallmarks of a religious faith, focussing in particular on a quasi-mystical union between himself and the audiences he addresses in his public speeches. The defining of his persona as a public speaker reaches a euphoric climax in the account of his presidential speeches at the INC annual session in 1895.\(^5\) He describes how a ‘galvanic current’ is established between himself and his audience, and he refers to the divine nature of inspiration for the orator (‘the high and holy atmosphere fragrant with the breath of the gods’, ‘the immortals of the earth, breathing an atmosphere fragrant with their breath’, ‘the celestial fire’).\(^6\)
The disquisition ends with Banerjea as an orator achieving a quasi-divine status himself as ‘the younger section of the audience rushed up the platform and were at my feet, eager to touch them . . .’ Banerjea depicts himself as being in a trance-like state, withdrawn from his surroundings, when he is preparing his speech. This transported state becomes an epiphany in which he achieves a kind of prophet-like vision: ‘For the moment, glancing through the great past, the genius of which seemed now to stand revealed to me, I could realize the spirit that moved the ancestors of those young men, to found the greatest Hindu empire of modern times.’ In this scene of ecstatic union, Banerjea merges with his audience in a ‘full flood’ by giving voice to their powerful emotions and sentiments.

Banerjea sees the relationship between himself and the nation as a semi-mystical one, in which his self merges with an audience who represent the nation in the making. Nehru deliberately avoids the religiosity of nationalist language which Banerjea uses. While Nehru does describe his illness in the autumn of 1923 as ‘in the nature of a spiritual experience’, he stresses that this experience leads to a sense of detachment and an ‘increasing distance from the religious outlook on life and politics’. He treats terms in religious discourse as tropes referring to a variety of processes and entities. The term ‘God’ is seen, variously, as a signifier for ‘the vital energy inherent in matter’, ‘a creative life-giving force’, ‘personal, national or international’ ideals, and finally a ‘vague conception of a perfect man and a better world’ which underpins the narrative of history as progress. He sees religious texts as authored by human beings, rather than as revealed scripture and the ‘incarnations or mouthpieces of a divinity’. This makes readers alive to their aesthetic qualities, which would be missed if they were to be believed in literally. Instead readers would be ‘oppressed by [the] weight of belief’. For Nehru, Indian mythology, like Greek mythology, should be treated as the product of a literary imagination, rather than as revealed scripture. This has other consequences. Treating scripture as the ‘product of the human mind’ means interpreting it in terms of its historical context, so that ‘the trappings of ritual and religious usage in which it is wrapped’ reflect its time, and are not to be emulated. This underpins Nehru’s narrative of history as progress, calling to the creativity of human agents, rather than seeing them as ‘the mouthpiece of a divine or superior power’. Nehru also sees the concept of divinity as a projection of human capabilities, but by not recognising it as such, scriptures are treated as revealed truths, and religion checks ‘the tendency to change and progress inherent in human society’. The secularising process underlines the narrative of history as progress, which, as Robert Nisbet argues, replaced the notion of destiny presided over by a transcendent deity. While Banerjea also invokes the narrative of history as progress, he qualifies this with the adjective ‘divine’, so that progress is a ‘divine law’. This qualification is indicative of how his nationalism is intertwined with a religiosity of language.