

Passage to India: Oscillating between love and hate. The emotional reception of India as the subject of Indian studies

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Abstract. Since time immemorial, India has evoked strong emotional reactions from the Europeans attracted by her rich civilisation. These reactions range from love beyond explanation to shock and panic leaving a deep impact on the personality concerned. In this presentation, the author touches upon the problem of the emotional reactions to India among the European general public and its possible written sources. One can often notice that even the scholars of Indian studies succumb to certain emotional biases that breed different sorts of stereotypes about India. This article therefore argues that it is necessary to reflect academically upon these extreme emotional interpretations of India, both those of Indologists and of common people.

For more than 100 years, the name of the famous novel by E.M. Forster has symbolised for European readers the enigma of India, the process of going to that mysterious far-away place where strange, unexplainable things happen, the secret cave where two different cultures try to talk to each other and where logic fails.

I have evoked here the name of the famous novel since, I think, it gives us the right metaphor for Indian studies. The word *passage* reflects well the encounter with that vast field of knowledge and reality that India is for Westerners, whether they are a traveller, an expatriate in India, or a student of India. It is not the trip to India, but exactly the passage to India which describes best the process of encountering India; it involves preparation, travel, shock, getting accustomed, coping to survive, experiencing illogical and mysterious things and extreme contrasts, trying to conquer, submission, adaptation, happiness, peace of mind, etc. In short, a vast range of emotional reactions is evoked during this passage.

I would like to sincerely thank Prof. Maria Krzysztof Byrski, PhD, hab., who has contributed as the peer of this paper and made some valuable remarks about the ideas of this text even before its finalisation. I can only agree with his view that my article may give an impression of the provocative presentation of a problem rather than that of an exhaustive paper. That was indeed my intention at the conference of East European Indologists where I presented this text. I think the exhaustive answer to this problem is the matter of future work for many of us.

Since time immemorial, India has evoked such strong and controversial emotional reactions from non-Indians, I dare say, more than any other Asian country. Even early representations of India by Greeks and later travellers and missionaries were often emotionally charged; in those texts one can feel the full spectrum of emotions ranging from surprise to demonization. Somehow people are really affected or changed by their encounter with India. And after teaching Indian culture and history to students for a number of years, I have also noticed that India as a subject is often treated rather emotionally.

Indian studies are as vast as India herself and even more, since they also encompass the 'passage', the process of discovering India, its traps, faults, and lessons learned included. Contacts between India and the West have in general been studied extensively, as have the intellectual exchanges between the two. But I think that the emotional interpretations of India at the level of the common man have so far been neglected. They should be reflected upon, researched, and taught to students of Indology. Serious work has been done by postcolonial writers to study the world of common Indian people, lower castes, women, and marginal groups. At the same time, psychoanalysis of the most well known Indian phenomena, cultural psychology, and psychology of religion become popular and informative sources about Indian men and women (Sudhir Kakar, etc.), but not much scholarly analysis has been attempted with the aim to reflect and see the patterns of the modern common Westerners' encounters with India, the passage to India of so many among us.

Why is this necessary?

The fact is that for an ordinary European the India of today is no longer a book affair, or even a journey of a lifetime as it used to be. Most of us can go to India and experience that country by ourselves more than once. India is much more in the focus of the new travelling class of Lithuanians than, let us say, China or Japan. Nowadays one can often hear local media celebrities sharing experiences of 'finding or losing themselves in India' in search of happiness, peace of mind, inspiration, etc. More so, various manifestations of India have come to Europe and settled in the form of many Indian restaurants, Indian dance and music schools, cultural associations, and Ayurveda, yoga, meditation centres. Obviously the same has been happening in Lithuania, where India has traditionally been taken for a symbol or metaphor of freedom we did not have ourselves. These manifestations of spiritual India have come into fashion among the general public of Lithuania with extraordinary speed.

They provoke our interest in India and serve as the launching pad for the 'passage to India', but they are also responsible for creating preconceived stereotypes of India. First, many of these Indian manifestations in the West offer a picture of India very different from the real India and do not really prepare one well to face the real India.

Second, these institutions are sometimes met in advance with ambiguous emotional reactions (at least this is true of Lithuanians, some of whom are still a bit suspicious), mostly due to their 'esoteric' or 'exotic' types of activities. Even Indologists are sometimes considered somehow either 'more spiritual' or 'crazier' by the general public because of their association with India. At least in Vilnius, Indologists are sometimes looked upon either as sages on their way to enlightenment or, on the contrary, some quaint esoteric activists.

Former Indian ambassador to Lithuania, Mrs. Madhu Bhaduri, once said that spirituality had become the main Indian export to the West over the past several decades.¹ But she also warned about the trap of the results of such a process.

Travelling to India is a very emotionally intense and rewarding trip. But I agree with Ambassador Bhaduri in asserting that this may lay a trap for many: some travellers simply believe that India will change their lives permanently, will heal their spiritual wounds. Many of them remain fixed on the romanticised version of India, land of miracles and holy men. They seem to need some kind of the dreamland to escape the reality of the modern technological age. While their numbers increase, we seem to re-enter the era of romanticism. I am not sure whether this is all that Indians want Europeans to know about India, which apart from being an ancient and continuous civilization has an immense power to absorb innovations and a striking modernity.

At the same time, I have met quite many people who were so shocked by their first encounter with India: their preconceived notions about India's overwhelming spirituality were shattered by the manifestations of poverty, child beggars, or simply by any visible differences in the way of life. Some of them are afterwards unable to conceal their dislike for things Indian and even develop racist feelings which were never there before. This is dangerous, and one must not be afraid to talk about this.

These are two extreme reactions provoked by India. I think both extremes lead to miscommunication and hinder our understanding of such a rich and complex living civilisation that is now emerging as one of the global players.

With globalisation accelerating and interaction between Europe and India growing, there is the increased need to teach inter-cultural communication. For this purpose, the existing traps and dangers have to be analysed and reflected on. This has yet to begin in Lithuania where, despite India's increasing popularity, writings about our conceptions of India and the emotional effect it makes are still a rarity, not to speak about analytical material.

The situation is quite different in other European countries. Even though it is difficult to find comprehensive studies on the subject, at least there exist numerous

¹ Opening speech of Mrs. Madhu Bhaduri, ambassador of India to Lithuania, at a conference held at Vilnius University, 5 May 1996 (unpublished, private record).

primary sources, reflective travel accounts, even fiction books which choose India as their backdrop. As useful food for thought, I wanted to present here three French books on India that I happened to read one after another by sheer accident. They were published from 1994 to 2000 and belong to three very different categories of writing on India: one travelogue, one academic book, and one novel. But what made me pick them out to discuss together was that they all had the same red line cutting through: ordinary French going to India and after getting into various situations, oscillating between being madly in love with India and hating it. By no means can I claim that these books give a comprehensive picture of India's emotional reception in France, but they do display some symptomatic features of the emotional reception of India in French society, and to a large extent European society in general.

The first book, *Indias (Indes)* by Jean Causel, is a travelogue, but it focuses very much on subjective feelings and psychological experiences of a traveller in India rather than the technical details of the trip. In a sense, it interprets a geographical trip as an internal voyage of self-discovery (a powerful tradition among French intellectuals and poets, to mention in particular Henri Michaux) but does this through the eyes of the common lonely traveller. Right from the beginning, the author is struck by the beauty, colours, and smells of India; the sounds of the places visited; and the people met, as if following the best traditions of Pasolini's *Smell of India*. But once in a while, he is also driven into despair and anger, taken with surprise about his own wild and aggressive reactions to poverty and backwardness, to the strange and unexplainable things he sees, and especially to his own inability to comprehend India. It is a very lively account of a careful observer, sometimes exalted, sometimes full of humour about both Indians and European travellers. The author uses one of the stereotype metaphors for India—the plural, *Indias*—to reflect his complex emotional reactions that change every hour. His India of the morning is completely different from the India of the afternoon, and he does not know which of them is more real. It was a lovely book to read, and I am sure it is not the only one in the category of accounts of internalized geographical journeys to India.

Mad about India (Fous de l'Inde) by French psychiatrist Regis Airault is the only academic book in my overview, research by a practicing doctor. It focuses on the so-called 'Indian syndrome', the set of very intense emotional reactions that affect Westerners and cause different types of psychiatric problems while in India. The author has worked as a psychiatrist at the French consulate in Bombay and had to deal with numerous cases of repatriation and therapy of French nationals developing mental disorders in India. So he asks a very straightforward question: does India render one mad? Airault says that his numerous patients speak for themselves and describes different types of expatriates in India, especially their colonies in Goa, where most of

his patients finally end up in full distress. He stresses that apart from the people who already had mental problems before going to India, this 'Indian syndrome' touches those who were in perfect mental health before their trip. And in most cases the symptoms disappear after returning to their countries of origin. Trying to answer what destabilises Westerner's minds in India, Airault explains how Indian concepts of reality, religion, social order, inequality, etc. affect a Westerner who is not prepared or fosters different illusions. Airault calls this Indian syndrome the 'oceanic' feeling, since it deeply affects the identity of a person, who loses touch with reality and develops the feeling of communicating with the cosmos. A rather shocking revelation, as it may seem, but in no way does this book put blame on India. It actually provides an analysis of the shortcomings and faults of the Westerners' minds, for which India assumes the role of purgatory.

The third book is a work of fiction—the novel *Pariahs (Parias)* by Pascal Bruckner, a well-known French writer and philosopher who writes about Westerners living in India and coping with the darkest sides of India's reality, various marginal groups that usually shock Westerners in India. The characters here are imaginary, but what struck me was that most of them represented the different types of people Airault described in his book. Most of the situations described here look very realistic, as if witnessed by the author himself, so realistic that I would almost take some dialogues for reports of socio-anthropological interviews. Since different types of expatriates meet in India and share their opinions, some of their reactions to India and things Indian are very strong and even insulting, and one has the feeling that the author has chosen to put his observations into fiction just because he did not want to sound too frank in an academic book. At the same time, there is a strange feeling in it about the somehow exaggerated mysterious backdrop that India provides to the characters, the oppressive feeling of some 'dark forces' working on the characters of the book, just as in *Le Vice-consul* of Marguerite Duras, which is the classical presentation of imaginative India as the venue of the psychological disorders of Europeans.

So, dwelling on these three French books, what are the categories of people going to India and what are their emotional reactions?

Surely we could start with ordinary travellers who 'collect' countries and simply want to see India as any other destination. There is a popular saying that India does not leave one indifferent, one either loves her or dislikes her in absolute terms. The ones who love India usually go back there and cultivate their interest in India in order to understand the aspects that appeal to them most. The author of *Indias* is so overwhelmed by his Indian experience that it looks like this particular trip is going to be a long 'passage' to India. He writes in such a way that one almost can feel his nostalgia for India dripping from the pages of the book. Airault

notes that only the absolute minority of people travelling to India develop 'oceanic syndrome', while the absolute majority undergo strong emotional pressure ('oscillation of identity' to quote Airault) (Airault 2002, 54) that only reinforces their stability in the end.

Several groups of people interested in India are enumerated by Julien: the characters of *Pariahs*—missionaries and volunteers ('those who pursue the ideal of charity'), 'the pilgrims in search of Light', 'the melancholic ones who are chased by their perpetual sorrow and who stay in India because life is cheap', and those 'who come in search of emotions, colours, impressive décor for creation' (Bruckner 1985, 154).²

Julien attributes himself to the last category of people—the artist in search of inspiration. It is exactly for the strong emotions, both positive and negative, that these people go to India. Julien, a young writer, believes that after experiencing India he will write the book of his life that will make him a world-famous writer. He never accomplishes his mission, and unfortunately in the end he reminds us of some patients of Airault. But it is a fact that numerous artists, musicians and thinkers have made India the source of their inspiration, and very successfully—so successfully that we can hardly classify them as the common people who are the subject of my enquiry.

Julien's book never materializes, and in reality he represents the category of people that Airault talks about; 'escapists', those who want to escape from their own oppressing surroundings at home: the cult of hard work, time pressure, responsibilities, oppressive family bonds, etc. Julien runs away to India trying to escape his over-attached mother. Going to India is perceived by some as the process of getting lost to one's own society and finding oneself. In fact, there is practically no limit between the urge to lose oneself and find oneself; what matters is for how long. For this category of people, India becomes a mental Bermuda Triangle, to quote Airault and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of France (Airault 2002, 12). According to Airault, many Westerners simply disappear in India voluntarily, most often only temporarily.

Airault confirms my earlier assumption that many Westerners from industrialised countries are in the need of some dream place, some 'mysterious India' where they can find refuge, where time does not exist, and where rationality fails, some 'hanging garden of our imagination' (*ibid.*, 13).

Airault says that these people undergo two sorts of phenomena: the shock of India and the test or trial of India, both of which can provoke a range of intense emotions from panic to ecstasy and can cause mental problems for perfectly normal people. He notes that the absolute majority of them recover completely, and they usually have

² Translation from French here and further are by the author of this paper.

very positive accounts of their Indian experience. The only thing that bothers them is nostalgia for India.

Another group of people described by Airault are those who go to India in their unconscious need to undergo an initiation, a kind of rite of passage (in many respects this is related to the previous one). Airault notes that industrialised society has lost the tradition of initiation for adolescents long ago, while the need for this remains. A trip to India therefore presents a possibility to get out of one's own old personality, face eternity, overcome a challenge, and return fit and sane, initiated into normal life. India receives them all with her all-pervading religiosity, old civilization, and numerous contrasts and is a place where one can easily witness fragile human life. Here the symbols and stereotypes of India incomprehensible, 'old new' 'Mother India', are very much what these travellers need. Julien of *Pariahs* reflects about that too: 'I think we go to India to recover our dreams of adolescence... Here nothing is decided, the door to the Unknown is open' (Bruckner 1985, 179). 'This old new country gives you the feeling of having just come out of the waters of Creation. It represents neither the past nor the future of humanity, but its origin. Here one feels the smell of placenta, the smell of newborns' (ibid., 180). This image of maternity, feminine India, mother India is one of the most powerful stereotypes of India, both for artists (for Pasolini the song of the boys in the street has also become the expression of the primordial song of creation (Pasolini 1984, 11) and people on the street are dressed like ancient Greeks) (ibid., 16), and for the scholars of India, as is well demonstrated by Ronald Inden (Inden 2000, 124–6). Airault explains that for the children of industrialized society in which women go to work early leaving their babies in the care of others, where family bonds have weakened to the extreme, India provides the image of real 'Mother India', a symbol of maternal and family care where you would not be left to yourself, where there is someone to care for you. Julien says: 'Here everyone feels like a child in this maternal civilization: the caste and family protect each of us like a sort of bubble, and up to the threshold of their old age individuals swim in the maternal warmth' (Bruckner 1985, 180).

Speaking about the shock India causes to the characters in all three books, one notices that it is always related to the weaknesses of the person in question, so it is not India directly that shocks, but certain subjective inabilities and failures of the people themselves. For example, Frederique of *Pariahs* is struck with panic when attacked by beggar children not because of their poverty or the fact of begging children as such, but because of the children choosing him in particular, even though there were other people around who could have been attacked. Frederique is shocked that these children discover his vulnerabilities. Perceiving one's own shock may be a shocking experience in itself when one sees the others around him managing the shocking

situation pretty well. It seems as if India exposes one's own vulnerabilities, takes away one's mask of stability and respectability and the feeling of being in control, and uncovers our limits of power, influence, and comprehension. India makes one go through a real trial: again, a purgatory or rites of passage. Those who overcome it rejoice. Others want to avoid it; I myself have met people who like India very much and know a lot about India but prefer to love her from the distance, somehow intuitively feeling that it may destabilize them too much.

Airault describes some travellers developing certain aggressive defensive reactions against the shocking phenomena in India: beggars, lepers, drug addicts, and other marginal groups. But Bruckner creates the strangest and most surreal character in these books—Victor of *Pariahs*. From a charming connoisseur of India, he suddenly turns into a mysterious maniac killer of all the unfortunate marginalised people on India's streets. I thought it to be a completely fictional character, but Airault says that it is not a purely imaginary case. One of his patients in India had developed a similar inclination to kill with 'the mission' of freeing both the world and the unfortunate pariahs (Airault 2002, 112).

All the three books mention one more category of Westerners with strong feelings for India—the people sent to India for professional reasons. Some of them develop and manifest the utmost dislike for things Indian and Indians, but prefer to stay in India because of financial reasons, since life is cheaper there and their expatriate allowances are huge. I have myself met such people among the diplomatic community and employers of multinational companies in Delhi. In *Pariahs* the description of the dinner hosted by Madame Cupillard (Bruckner 1985, 38–44) reminded me a lot of several gatherings of Westerners I myself witnessed while in India. Here the middle class French employee of the French company in India keeps several servants whom they treat appallingly for, let us say, simply failing to cook French meals. They proudly admit that they do not even serve themselves a glass of water, because they pay their servants for their work, which should be properly done. In India they lead an imperial lifestyle and use their Hindi or Urdu in imperative mood only, while for their salary back home they would be doing their own dishes and cleaning their own smallish apartments. As a connoisseur of India, the same Victor admits in the novel that these people meet only Indians from the upper classes and avoid making contacts with Indians of their own class and that helps them preserve the illusion of their superiority. They view everyone who likes India simply as a naive idiot. They manifest a sort of colonialist attitude, for among themselves they share a disdain for the 'spoiled' locals and boast about the superiority of the white race. Airault suggests, however, that this aggressive behaviour is not conditioned by racist ideas or views as such, but rather by the psychological pressure of a different culture and climate and profes-

sional boredom (Airault 2002, 114). But are such hate and anger not the expressions of one's inability to control the realm around oneself?

The others who adapt and get to love the country get absorbed into Indian culture and even create syncretistic rituals of their own. I could not but smile at the passage about Julien of *Pariahs* worshipping the god Ganesh in the Hindu way, but also pleasing his deity with a shower or a soak in a bathtub, in the genuinely French understanding of comfort (which actually goes against the Indian understanding of hygiene) (Bruckner 1985, 164).

What is common to the characters of all three books is that their emotional receptions of India are not stable at all: travellers like Clausel, the characters of *Pariahs*, and even the patients of Airault experience India in a flow of changing emotions—oscillating between extremes. Julien says: 'I worship India in the morning, I denounce her at noon, love her again in the afternoon, and despise her once again in the evening' (ibid., 162). There is a very similar quote of Ruth Praver Jhabwala saying: 'It goes like this: first stage, tremendous enthusiasm—everything Indian is marvellous; second stage—everything Indian is not so marvellous; third stage—everything Indian abominable' (Bumiller 1991, 283). This oscillation comes out of one's own failure to adjust, to understand India, and at the same time to understand one's own reactions to India, to control the flow of events.

What conclusions could I draw? This brief account of emotional receptions of India in the randomly chosen three French books is a very superficial one, and I am not claiming it is real research. But still it shows that at least for the French, India is a well-reflected field of strong human sentiments. It is therefore unavoidable that studies of India are also affected, perhaps more than any other area studies, by different emotional elements, positive and negative, mostly related to the so-called spirituality of India. And that this trap of India is not really India's fault, but rather the result of the fixed attitudes, narrow-mindedness, and ignorance of Westerners.

We can also see that the primary material for the research of emotional receptions of India by the Western public may be extremely rich and varied, but mostly non-academic. To this we have to add new sources of modern material, numerous accounts of India found in lifestyle magazine, Internet blogs, etc.

Even though this was not my primary aim to discuss here the issue of the emotional reactions of Indologists and their scholarly objectivity, the question is in the air: whether modern Indologists should let their feelings flow and whether they should get emotionally involved with the subject they study. As a human being, the scholar or student of Indian studies is not immune to emotional reactions towards India. In fact, many of us enjoy spending hours sharing our experiences in India among ourselves and romanticising India at least a bit. We feel nostalgia for India. We are

sincerely upset by the accusations coming from India about our insensitivities and racist attitudes towards the culture we study, especially those in Eastern Europe who were never colonisers but were themselves victims of colonial regimes. But it is also known that the armchair Indology still exists, and some well known Indologists argue against their students ever going to India! I was told that one Indology student was scolded by her professor in Berlin for coming to class dressed in a shalwar kameez.

If we look at the history of Indian studies, we may find that it is full of emotions, from admiration to demonization; after all it was created by individuals. Still it is often forgotten that colonial Indology was shaped not only by the ideology of colonialism and racism, but also by the biased subjective emotional experiences of particular individuals.

Of course Indology was the baby of a colonial regime. As emphasized by Edward Said, the colonial perspective made Asia studies its own tool and instrument and crawled into consciousness as a way of projecting the Orient as something inferior to be controlled, to dominate. But colonial scholars were very different personalities, with different attitudes towards India. For example Sir William Jones or Warren Hastings, the first governor general of India, were very sympathetic and even positively passionate about India. There were scholars who were ridiculed and treated with disdain by their compatriots for their fascination and sympathy for India's culture, literary treasures, and people.

It is not widely known that there were many Europeans of high rank in colonial India who had defied the famous verse of Rudyard Kipling in 'The Ballad of East and West' (which begins with 'Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet') (Stedman 1895), who Indianised themselves and adopted Indian traditions and even religions. Needless to say, they were considered mad in 18th century Europe, more so in Victorian Britain of the late 19th century, when they were heavily discriminated against (this is very well documented by William Dalrymple in his books *White Mughals* and *The Last Mughal*).

And it is also true that some later colonial scholars who actually shaped British colonial policy had extremely low personal feelings for India. James Mill, the author of *The History of British India*, which was considered a major scholarly work on India, though an undisputed authority, was known for his derogatory opinions about Indian civilisation. His attitudes stemmed firstly from his radical utilitarian views, but, I guess, possibly also from his personal arrogance. He never went to India, considering this to be the behaviour of the impartial authority, being one of the beginners of the armchair Indology. So I guess the colonial knowledge about India was shaped not only by the dominant ideologies and intellectual attitudes, but also scholars' personal

emotional reactions and qualities, though to a lesser extent. It seems that personality and personal emotional receptivity is an important factor and has to be taken into account when evaluating the product—a scholarly statement on India.

Discussions about colonialism and postcolonial studies have reflected on the images and stereotypes of India created by imperial thinking in the West and later repeated in modern Indian studies. As Inden shows in his *Imagining India*, both Western academia and the public tend to represent India as an imaginary land, creating and passing on the stereotypes of irrational civilisation, village and caste India; feminine India; and spiritual sponge-like India (Inden 2000, 263–4). Even though the colonial era is over, this imaging of India by her different segments as stereotypes still continues to a large extent, though perhaps without its aspect of racial superiority. Now it is perpetuated not by scholars but by the general public. It seems as if fans of India like to imagine this fairytale land for their own psychological reasons.

Being often asked by people whether I love India and why, I started replying half-jokingly that it was no longer a love affair, but rather a marriage that I entered into with India. I jokingly say that it is like a Hindu or Christian marriage that is made in Heaven, and not a contract you can disrupt. You love her because you have chosen to, but you also argue with her and finally you accept her as she is since you cannot change her but rather have to live with her out of your own commitment.

I think both full detachment and full Indianisation are equally dangerous for a scholar; both cultural arrogance and culture-blindness are obstacles to objectivity. The main challenge for scholars is to always remain critical when there are academic judgements to be made.

To sum up, emotional receptions to India do count. Because they do play a role in both the popular perceptions of India and even in the scholarly realm, they should not only be taken into account for the sake of objectivity, but also be researched and taught. As I saw, the French have critically articulated their emotional reactions to India, and it is time for the Lithuanians to follow—not only for the sake of scholarly objectivity, but also to enhance the understanding of Indian civilisation among the general public. This should become part of the curriculum of the modern Indian studies.

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