



YEVHEN LIASHCHEVSKYI

 ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4856-1531>

Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie

## INTEREST IN INDIA AND HINDU TEXTS IN RUSSIAN LITERATURE FROM THE END OF THE 18TH CENTURY TO THE MIDDLE DECADES OF THE 20TH CENTURY

INTEREST IN INDIA AND HINDU TEXTS IN RUSSIAN LITERATURE  
FROM THE END OF THE 18TH CENTURY TO THE MIDDLE DECADES OF THE 20TH CENTURY

The article examines the reasons for the emergence of interest in ancient Indian religious and philosophical texts in the Russian cultural sphere, as well as the ways in which Indian texts entered Russian literature. The aim of this article is to show how the first Russian translations of the most influential ancient Indian works, such as *Bhagavadgita* or *Shakuntala*, caused the appearance of a large number of works in Russian literature that in one way or another refer to ancient Indian texts. The article also shows how Russian writers referred to ancient Indian texts in their works, using examples of particular writings.

In the second half of the 18th century, the genre of so-called “oriental story” became extremely popular in Russia. This was, for the most part, due to French representatives of the Enlightenment: Voltaire, Denis Diderot, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Charles de Montesquieu and others. Russian supporters of their ideas started using the Oriental legends and setting as a carrier of the philosophical ideas they professed; it was also a convenient manner of discussing the most touchy social-political issues.

It was Voltaire whose literary oeuvre had the greatest influence on Russian writers<sup>1</sup>. His writings — to mention only *The Princess of Babylon* and *The World as it Goes or the Vision of Babouc* — have be-

<sup>1</sup> See К. Фаззех, *Восточные мотивы и образы в русской прозе и драматургии II-й половины XVIII века*, РУДН, Москва 2014.

come a source of inspiration for many pseudo-oriental works created by Russian authors. Moreover, during this period, some translations and imitations of *The Arabian Nights* and other famous Arabic fairy tales appeared in Western literature. Together with the strategy of veiled speech, it sparked a vogue for the Orient in the 18th century. In Russian literature, oriental motifs proved especially convenient for censorship reasons, as the exotic disguise was indispensable for smuggling the criticism of the real social and political system. However, apart from the satirical works, many adventure stories were created.

The stories mentioned above, translated from Western European languages, had nothing to do with India as such but became one of the catalysts for the popularization of fashion for the Orient in general (and India in particular) which appeared in Europe in the mid-18th century and reached Russia in the early 19th century. Translations of the “gems of Indian literature” into European languages eventually led to a direct interest in India. The first sign of this was the 1788 Russian translation of *Bhagavadgita*, rendered as *Bhagavat-Geta or a conversation between Krishna and Arjuna with commentary*. The translator was Alexander Petrov, a close friend of an outstanding historian and writer Nikolai Karamzin. Petrov translated *Bhagavadgita* from English, and his work was undeservedly overlooked by all the Russian literary historians and critics, who only a hundred years later left their first comments on it. The importance of *Bhagavadgita* consists in the fact that the source text — a 700 pages-long philosophical interlude in the epic *Mahabharata* — is considered by most scholars to be a fundamental compendium of Hinduism and Indian philosophy. Hence, Petrov’s translation contributed to the spread of Hinduism in Russia and was one of the first steps in the development of Russian Indology.

Special attention should be paid to the publication that immediately followed Petrov’s book to become the most famous work of the analyzed period translated into Russian from Sanskrit: the play *Shakuntala* by Kalidasa. Its English translation by William Jones came out in 1789 and the German one by Georg Forster — in 1791. The Russian version by Nikolai Karamzin appeared in 1792. His wonderful foreword to *Shakuntala* reads:

The creative spirit does not live in Europe alone; it is a citizen of the universe. Man is everywhere the same; everywhere he has a sensitive heart, and the mirror of his imagination reflects heaven and earth. Everywhere, Nature is his mentoress and the main source of his pleasures. That is what I thought when re-

ading the *Shakuntala* [...] Almost on every page of this drama, I found the highest beauty of poetry, the perfect, inexplicable tenderness resembling the quiet May evening — the purest, inimitable nature and the art itself [...] For me, Kalidasa is as great as Homer. They both got their brush out of Nature's hands, and they both depicted Nature...<sup>2</sup>

Karamzin's foreword was one of the first literary commentaries on Indian classical texts. Comparing Kalidasa to Homer, Karamzin focused on the beauty and significance of Indian literature, which, in his opinion, was not inferior to the greatest examples of European art. *Shakuntala's* translation was a cultural shock in Russia because instead of showing a stereotypical land of "wonders" and "righteous sages" it revealed a real and surprisingly unfamiliar image of India. To use Nikolai Grintser's words, *Shakuntala's* translation "was a milestone in the development of Russian-Indian literary ties."<sup>3</sup> After a while, the translation of Kalidasa's play reached the Russian poets, though the reception process was hardly smooth. Indian literature has pushed Afanasy Fet and Fyodor Tyutchev to create poetic works called *Sakontala* in 1847 and 1827, respectively.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the publication of books and articles concerning India continued unabated. The translations of Sanskrit classics that came out at that time were particularly outstanding. They included excerpts from *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, plays by Kalidasa and Sudraki, Bhartari's poetry, excerpts from *Rigveda*, Indian fairy tales and legends from *Panchatantra* and *Hitopadesha*, etc.

As concerns the most significant translations of the ancient Indian texts published in the 18th and 19th centuries, one must mention the translation of the drama *The Rise of the Moon of the Intellect* by Krishna Misri which appeared in a collective volume in Moscow in 1846 under the title *The Feast of Enlightened Thought*. At that time, however, Vissarion Belinsky spoke about it unflatteringly: "Clearly, this drama is a philosophical allegory; even more so, it is a hundred times duller than the boredom itself."<sup>4</sup>

It is quite possible that the drama had a relatively low degree of artistic value. The work was, nonetheless, the first venture into trans-

<sup>2</sup> П. Гринцер, "Саконтала" Карамзина, in. *Политрон: к 70-летию В.Н. Топорова*, Рос. акад. наук, Индрик, Москва 1998, pp. 537–566, [http://az.lib.ru/k/kalidasa/text\\_1792\\_sceny\\_iz\\_sakontaly.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/k/kalidasa/text_1792_sceny_iz_sakontaly.shtml) (23.02.2020).

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>4</sup> В. Белинский, *Полное собрание сочинений*, т. 10, АН СССР, Москва 1956, p. 196.

lation from Sanskrit by the famous linguist and translator Kaetan Kossovich, who is considered to be one of the founders of Russian Sanskritology. Later, in the *Moskovitianin* magazine, Kossovich published his first translations from Sanskrit provided with scholarly commentary: *Supdas and Upesundas. An Episode from Mahabharata* (1844), *Bhagavat Gita* (1854). *The Tale of Vadiyadgar Jimutavagan*, *The story of Somadeva Bhatta* (1847) and the *Tale of Dhruva* (an excerpt from *Bhagavata Purana*) were published separately. In 1849, a translation of Shudraka's *Mrcchakatika* by under the title of *Vasantazena, an ancient Indian drama*, appeared, and in 1854 a translation of *Bhagavadgita* was published. Moreover, under the direction of Kossovich, one created a Sanskrit textbook, *The Legend of a Hunter and a Pair of Pigeons*, and a Sanskrit-Russian dictionary; unfortunately, the latter work was neither completed nor published. By his scholarly and translatorial activity Kossovich not only laid the foundation for Russian Indology but also kindled an interest in the ancient Indian literature, which became a creative impulse for many poets at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.

The phenomenon of translated Indian literature was an inspiration for Apollon Maykov to create a small poem titled *Kupal'shchitsy (Melodiya s beregov Ganga)* (1862). Such poems as, among others, *Tri nochy Buddy* and *Tri vstrechi Buddy* (1885) by Semen Nadson had a similar origin.

Thanks to translations, which over time turned into references, allusions and motifs, Indian culture was more and more “impregnating” Russian literature. Robert Stacy, Professor in Russian Literature at Syracuse University, focused the references to Indian culture and everyday life in Russian literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>5</sup>. He provided a detailed list of poets from the “Pushkin era”<sup>6</sup> whose works contain the fragments somehow referring to India. These were, among others, *Zamechaniya ob Indii* by Denis Davydov (1784–1839), *Tri rozy* by Dmitry Venevitinov (1805–1827), *Tsyganka* by Yevgeny Baratynsky (1800–1844), *Vasantasena* by Dmitry Oznobishin, and *Predsmertnaya ispoved'* and *Molitva parii* by Apollon Grigoryev (1822–1864). The examples illustrate the importance of translations from Sanskrit made several years earlier, since hardly

<sup>5</sup> R. Stacy, *India in Russian literature*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi 1985.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noticed that Alexander Pushkin also showed great interest in classical Indian literature, especially in the epic poem of *Ramayana*, which he mentioned in his correspondence with the Russian philosopher-Decembrist Petr Chaadayev.

any poet from the above list could deal with the original Indian texts; it was the translation that played the role of catalyst in the crucible of intercultural exchange.

One of the first Russian writers who consciously decided to delve into the ancient Indian writings in their original form was Konstantin Balmont. The scope of the related activities he undertook was unusually wide. In his original literary works, Balmont glorified the Sanskrit classical texts and sometimes even paraphrased their fragments (for instance, his *Indiyskiy motiv*, *Indiyskiy mudrets*, *Pauk*, *Maya*, and many others were taken from Vedanta). However, he was also engaged in a deep study of the Indian and Buddhist culture. His translations of excerpts from the Rigveda and Atharvaveda, the oldest collections of hymns, were published in 1908. The writer also partially translated the *Upanishads* and some famous Sanskrit plays, such as Kalidasa's dramas and *The Life of Buddha* by Ashvaghosha (1916).

Another important figure in the process of incorporation of the elements of Indian culture into Russian literature was Nikolai Gumilev. The poet continually addressed the theme of the Orient throughout his literary career. Since 1910, almost all of his verse collections (*Romanticheskiye tsvety*, *Zhemchuga*, *Ognennyi stolp*, etc.) have been interspersed with some oriental, mainly Buddhist, motifs and symbols. In many Gumilev's works, the idea of transmigration of souls and reincarnation is prominent, echoing the Buddhist teaching of samsara.<sup>7</sup> Metempsychosis is embodied in his *Zabludivshiy sya tramvay* (1921) and *Prapamyat'* (1917). The Indian "topoi" are also present in such poems as *Rayskiy sad* (1911), *Severnnyy Radzha* (1908), and *Skazka o korolyakh*, as well as in the play for children *Derevo prevrashcheniy* (1918).

A significant contribution to popularizing Indian culture in Russia was brought by Lev Tolstoy, too. In the late 1870s and early 1880s, during the period of spiritual crisis, the writer made an attempt to find an answer to the burning questions about the meaning of life and the destiny of man. Hence, he turned to rich layers of Indian classical narratives and folklore as well as to the philosophical wisdom of *Vedas* and *Upanishads*. Until his death, Tolstoy paid much attention to Indian culture and was supporting its dissemination in Russia.

Tolstoy took a special interest in Buddhism and the ethical side of its philosophy. Wishing to "teach" Buddhism to the masses, he wrote

<sup>7</sup> Н. Даренская, *Индия в творчестве Н. С. Гумилева*, ЕФИР, Москва 2017.

two related essays. He began work on the first one, called *Buddha*, in 1886, but sooner rather than later decided to cease working on it: he seems to have found it impossible to fully embrace such a vast and complex philosophical doctrine within the boundaries of a single essay. Nevertheless, after a considerable time, in 1905, a more concise version of *Buddha* was published in the collective volume *Krug chteniya*. From the extant sketches of its earlier and later versions, it can be concluded that Tolstoy's primary goal was not so much to present the Buddha's biography, but rather to accessibly explain the nuances of Indian culture, philosophy, and geopolitical situation. The second Tolstoy's essay was written in early 1910. It is his foreword to the article by Pavel Boulanger entitled *Zhizn' i ucheniye Siddarty Gotamy, prozvannogo Buddoy, t. ye. Sovershenneyshim*. Aside from the above attempts to grasp the principles of Buddhist morality, in 1894 Tolstoy wrote a short story called *Karma*, dedicated to the same topic, in which he outlined the essence of one of the basic concepts of Vedic philosophy — the law of justice or reward. Tolstoy's later story, *Eto ty*, is also connected with the Buddhist idea of the common good.

In addition to the works devoted to Buddhism, in such collective volumes as *Kruzhok dlya chteniya*, *Mysli mudretsov* and *Indiyskaya mudrost'*, Tolstoy has published many proverbs, aphorisms and other quotes from the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, seeking to popularize Indian philosophy.

Aside from being versed in Indian philosophy, during the last years of his life, Tolstoy openly and actively participated in the social and political life of India: he corresponded with many famous Indian thinkers and journalists, among others with Mahatma Gandhi, Baba Premanand Bharati, Brahma Sri Bhagavata Swami and Vijaya Dharma Suri. According to Abhai Maurya's study titled *Indian and Russian Literary Mutuality*,<sup>8</sup> he criticized the colonial policy.

It should be stressed that Lev Tolstoy's contribution to the popularization of Indian culture in Russia was hardly confined to the desire to expand the existing basic knowledge about the country and disseminate the information obtained by him in the scholarly and literary circles. He also has succeeded in arousing interest in the high moral principles of Indian philosophy among ordinary people. The writer was so profoundly absorbed with the problems of the Indian

<sup>8</sup> A. Maurya, *Indian and Russian Literary Mutuality*, Atlantis Press, Paris 2015.



subcontinent and the plight of its inhabitants that he tried to help them with his famous letters; thus, he deserved the deepest respect of the Indian people.

Between the 1920s and death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, there were no examples of intercultural communication in the field of fiction that were of interest to me. The majority of works somehow referring to India and its literature that were written in the above period tended to smack of political ideology, which adversely affected the very nature of intercultural interaction — perhaps the best example is the novel *Opasnyĭ beglets* by Emma Vygodskaya (1948). A closer examination of such texts reveals a tenacious process of bringing the monuments of the Indian literature, philosophy and religion to conformity with the doctrine and day agenda of communist propaganda; it also included the very life of the Indians depicted as “exploited people” in need of an immediate socialist revolution.

The situation did not improve before the imposition of the so-called thaw, i.e. Khrushchev’s internal policy of relaxation in the 1950s. Thus, in 1963 a story such as *Razor’s Edge* by Ivan Yefremov could finally be published, where India was described in detail and realistically enough.<sup>9</sup>

As concerns the Russian school of Indology, after its rapid development at the beginning of the 20th century it was almost obliterated in the 1930s. Its rebirth took place in the early 1960s despite various obstacles put by the authorities trying to curb both the independent fiction and scientific research. It was possible owing to the general relaxation within the Soviet regime after Stalin’s death and the efforts of enthusiasts.

For example, in 1960, *Dhammapada* — one of the most important Indian scriptures containing the collected teachings of Buddha in poetic form as well as the main ethical principles of early Buddhism — was translated from the Pali language by Vladimir Toporov. Roughly in the same period, translations of some ancient *Upanishads*, such as *Brihadaranyaka* and *Chandogya*, were prepared by Alexander Syркин. The importance of these renditions is evidenced by the fact that the fiction writers almost immediately started drawing on them. In the famous story of the *Monday begins on Saturday* by Strugatsky brothers (1964) one of the characters quotes a fragment from Syркин’s version:

<sup>9</sup> See E. Селиверстова, *Индийские мотивы в русской литературе XX века*, СПбГУ, Санкт-Петербург 2017.

— And now — said the voice, — the next one. “Everything is one Me. This is Me, the world’s Me. Unity with ignorance, which comes from the eclipse of light. It disappears with the development of spirituality.”

— And where does this nonsense come from? — I asked. I wasn’t waiting for an answer. I was sure I was asleep.

— A pericope from Upanishads — the voice told, willing to provide me with a one.

— And what are “Upanishads”? — I was no longer sure I was sleeping.

— I don’t know — said the voice.<sup>10</sup>

Apart from that, one should mention the translations of *Mahabharata* by Vladimir Kalyanov and Boris Smirnov. Provided with critical commentary, they appeared at various times. The most detailed information about the history of Soviet Indology has been included in the Grigory Bongard-Levin and Alexei Vigasin’s book titled *Image of India. The Research on Ancient Indian Civilization in the USSR*. Also, a valuable study on the issue can be found in Sergei Serebryan’s monograph *Indology in Russia*, dedicated to the oriental studies in the country before and after the October Revolution.

The analysis shows that in the 19th century and the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, extraordinary interest in India, treated as a source of inspiration and beauty, became a trend greatly influencing Russian culture.

In contrast to the previous epoch (XI–XV centuries), in the 19th century, an attempt was made to show the real India. However, its image and teachings in most works remained idealized. Many researchers agree that the growing popularity of the Orient and the demand for its peculiar worldview within the Russian culture coincided and was closely connected with the decline of spirituality in the 19th century and early 20th century.

## REFERENCES

- Belinskiy, Vissarion. *Polnoye sobraniye sochineniy*. t. 10. Moskva: AN SSSR, 1956 [Белинский, Виссарион. *Полное собрание сочинений*. т. 10, Москва: АН СССР, 1956].
- Bongard-Levin, Grigoriy, and Vigasin, Aleksey. *Obraz Indii: Izucheniye drevneindiyaskoy tsivilizatsii v SSSR*. Moskva: Progress, 1984 [Бонгард-Левин, Григорий, and Вигасин, Алексей. *Образ Индии: Изучение древнеиндийской цивилизации в СССР*. Москва: Прогресс 1984].

<sup>10</sup> Аркадий и Борис Стругацкие, *Понедельник начинается в субботу*, Детская литература, Москва 1965, [http://www.serann.ru/text/ponedelnik-nachinaetsya-v-subbotu-8625\(6.03.2020\)](http://www.serann.ru/text/ponedelnik-nachinaetsya-v-subbotu-8625(6.03.2020)).



## INTEREST IN INDIA...

- Darenskaya, Natal'ya. *Indiya v tvorchestve N.S. Gumileva*. Moskva: EFIR, 2017. [Даренская, Наталья. *Индия в творчестве Н.С. Гумилева*. Москва: ЕФИР 2017].
- Faezekh, Karimian. *Vostochnyye motivy i obrazy v russkoy proze i dramaturgii II-y poloviny XVIII veka*. Moskva: RUDN, 2014 [Фазех, Каримиан. *Восточные мотивы и образы в русской прозе и драматургии II-й половины XVIII века*. Москва: РУДН 2014].
- Grintser, Pavel. "Sakontala Karamzina." *Polytaron: k 70-letiyu V.N. Toporova*. Moskva: Ros. akad. nauk, Indrik, 1998: 537–566 [Гринцер, Павел. "Саконтала Карамзина." *Polytaron: k 70-летию В.Н. Топорова*. Москва: Рос. акад. наук, Индрик, 1998: 537–566] <[http://az.lib.ru/k/kalidasa/text\\_1792\\_sceny\\_iz\\_sacontaly.shtml/rus](http://az.lib.ru/k/kalidasa/text_1792_sceny_iz_sacontaly.shtml/rus)>.
- Maurya, Abhay. *Indian and Russian Literary Mutuality*. Atlantis Press, Paris 2015, < <https://www.atlantis-press.com/proceedings/icadce-15/23752>>.
- Seliverstova Yelena. *Indiyskiye motivy v russkoy literature XX veka*. Sankt-Peterburg [Селиверстова, Елена. *Индийские мотивы в русской литературе XX века*. Санкт-Петербург 2017].
- Shifman, Aleksandr. *Lev Tolstoy i Vostok*, Moskva 1971. [Шифман, Александр, *Лев Толстой и Восток*. Москва 1971 <<http://greylib.align.ru/1009/aleksandr-shifman-lev-tolstoj-i-vostok-tolstoj-i-indiya-1-chast.html>>].
- Stacy, Robert. *India in Russian literature*. Delhi 1985.
- Strugatskiye, Arkadiy & Boris. *Ponedel'nik nachinayet-sya v subbotu*. Moskva 1965. [Стругацкие, Аркадий и Борис. *Понедельник начинается в субботу*. Москва 1965 <<http://www.serann.ru/text/ponedelnik-nachinaetsya-v-subbotu-8625>>].