



ISSN: 2158-7051

INTERNATIONAL
JOURNAL OF
RUSSIAN STUDIES

ISSUE NO. 12 (2023/1)

POSTCOLONIAL WRITER AS TRAVELLER: TARASANKAR BANDYOPADHYAY IN RUSSIA

SAJAL DEY*

Summary

October Revolution of 1917 had undoubtedly fired the imagination of a section of people of many colonized countries all over the world. The search was not only for emancipation from the clutches of the colonizing or oppressive powers, but also for a better alternative to the prevailing systems of government/administration. Travelogues, books, reports and write-ups on Russia/Soviet Union since that time stand witness to this fact. Indian politicians and revolutionaries also visited Russia and wrote their accounts. In 1930, the first non-European Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore visited Russia and wrote his famous collection of letters *Russiar Chithi* (1931, in *English Letters from Russia*). Some writers and poets from Indian literatures (Bangla, Hindi, Malayalam, Tamil etc.) accepted the revolutionary theme and used it in their creative works. But certainly the receptions and perceptions of Russia were not homogeneous across time, space and people. Like everything else under the sun, it also has a history of evolution. In the present paper, I talked about and analyzed Indian writer Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay's reception of Soviet Union, as documented in his travelogue *Moscow-te Koyek Din (A Few Days in Moscow, 1959)*. Tarasankar went to Soviet Union as the leader of the Indian delegation to attend the preparatory committee meeting of Afro-Asian Writers' Association in Moscow in 1957. He also attended the Afro-Asian Writers' Conference that took place in Tashkent in October 1958. What is conspicuous in this paper is his uncompromising attitude to stand apart, to be different; which was the dominant attitude in the policies and politics of the newly independent India.

Key Words: Tarasankar Banerjee, Afro-Asian Writers' Conference, Tashkent, Moscow-te Koyek Din, Reception of Soviet Union.

*I am a socialist not because I think it is a perfect system,
but half a loaf is better than no bread.
– Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902)*

Introduction

Postcoloniality in the colonized and exploited countries and populations like that of India had taken a different shape in search of a new reality as encouraged by the formation, promise and manifested might of the Soviet Union in the XX century. In sheer number and the geographical area covered under them, these countries constituted the major part of the world at the outset of the century. Revolutionary activities in Russia, leading to the Russian revolution of 1905, and then culminating in the October Revolution of 1917, had undoubtedly fired the imagination of peoples of many such countries all over the world. The search was not only for the path to emancipation from the clutch of the colonizing or oppressive powers, but also for a better alternative to the prevailing systems of government. Travelogues, books and write-ups on Russia/ Soviet Union, written before and after the Indian independence in 1947, stand witness to this fact. Such travel writings require to be delved deep into as a genre, as a specific and direct site of reception of this perceived new reality.

In my earlier articles I have undertaken comparative reading of the travel narratives of Rabindranath Tagore and Saumyendranath Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore and Amiya Chakraborty; and attempted to analyze their perceptions of the then Russia/ Soviet Union. This kind of comparative analysis, while keeping the other factors unchanged, provide important insights into the issues at hand. In the present article my focus is on Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay's reception of the Soviet Union, as documented in his travelogue "*Moscow-te Koyek Din*" (*A Few Days in Moscow*, 1959). As usual, some other useful and relevant materials will also come under its purview. The aim is to view the perception of the Soviet Union as a socio-political model, as a location of aspiration and hope for underdeveloped or still colonized peoples, as well as a site of sight-seeing and cultural empowerment.

Tarasankar who?

Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay was one of the most powerful writers of post-Tagorean Bengali as well as Indian literature. Although Rabindranath Tagore was still there when Tarasankar started writing; his name, as a notable writer, could come up only after Rabindranath's demise. (Following the Indian convention, I shall henceforth mention him as 'Tarasankar', and not as Bandyopadhyay. As such we have a few other Bandyopadhyays, who were no less powerful writers.) Apart from other honours and awards, he also received Gnanpith, the highest Indian literary award in 1966. A prolific writer, Tarashankar is best known for his novels such as *Ganadevata*, *Hansuli Banker Upakatha*, *Arogya Niketan*, *Kabi* and a few others; in which he portrayed the life and strivings of the most ordinary as well as lower caste people of Bengal. He did not belong to those castes and that

class himself, nevertheless his deep empathy and acquaintance with the life of those lowly rural people and the soil they inhabited made him a master chronicler.

Postcolonial traveller

When he visited Russia in 1957, India had already become independent, but was struggling to move forward shaking off the two-century old rusts of colonization from her body and soul. Tarashankar's perspective, therefore, had to differ from that of the Tagores and Chakravarty, who visited Russia in the 1920s and 30s.

Among the kinds of travelling undertaken by people, one specific kind stands apart which can be termed as 'rath dekha, kola becha' (রথ দেখা, কলা বেচা) following the Bangla proverb. The proverb is about an endeavour/journey in which two jobs are done simultaneously, one being the express one, or the main one; and the other being the secondary one, or apparently the hidden one. For businessmen and professionals this kind of voyage is not very uncommon. Only thing is that not everyone will come up with a travelogue worth reading, something that can be expected of a writer like Tarasankar or an inquisitive trader like Afanacy Nikitin. Surprisingly, Nikitin's name features less frequently as compared to other pioneer voyagers outside the field of Russian studies, although he visited India in the fifteenth century (1469 – 1472), even before the much celebrated Vasco Da Gama. This is yet another example of Eurocentrism in which West European narratives get prominence neglecting all the "others" including even the East European perspectives. But of course there are differences between these two journeys. One difference between Nikitin's feat and Tarasankar's visit is that the former spent three years in India and the latter only nine days in Russia.

When Tarasankar was invited to attend the preparatory committee meeting of Afro-Asian writers' association in Moscow in 1957, he was also asked to stay back in Russia for a longer period and see the country well. This was usually done willingly by the delegates from other countries. The proposal to see and know the Soviet country with one's own eyes was always considered to be a welcome one; in fact it was a privilege, facilitating a lifetime experience. Very few would have said no to that kind of a proposition. But Tarasankar had to decline as he was worried about his daughter's health and wanted to return to India as soon as possible (Bandyopadhyay 3) In Indian middle class psyche and the value system associated with it, welfare and care of near and dear ones are always considered to be higher than any other pleasure or job. As the leader of the Indian delegation Tarasankar was supposed to take part in the meeting, it was an obligation but he did not want to prolong his stay in Moscow any more. The leading Indian writer made his distinction known right from the beginning.

Politics and/or/in literature

The Afro-Asian Writers' Conference was held in October 1958 in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbek soviet republic. The air in the conference hall was heavy with political implications. It was not an overtone or an undertone but a chorus with many delegates opting for an overtly political stand. The subtle influence of Soviet Union and its allies was absolutely clear but not directly obvious on the surface. Krishnalal Shridharani reports that it was because of the stubborn defiance shown by Tarasankaras the leader of the Indian delegation that the distinct voice of India was taken note of. He writes:

"It was the firmness of Tarasankar Banerjee, which at times turned into his readiness to

resign, that compelled the conference to listen to India's lonely voice. India spoke throughout the conference through its magnificent minutes of dissent" (p.58).

What was at stake actually in Tashkent? What was it that troubled the renowned Indian writer so much? Was it because the entire gathering bore resemblance to a political assembly rather than a literary one, in spite of the excitement and warmth of meeting so many fellow writers from the two most colonized continents on the earth? Was it the threat of being subdued by an overtly political doctrine that had already started to influence and control literature essentially? Colonialism, anti-colonialism, politics and many other things could easily be a theme or a part of any literary output; but are they not different from literature? Should a writers' conference of such a grand scale take one single political stand and deny literature its million possibilities? Rebutting the allegation that India was acting anti-anti-colonial, Tarasankar's response to the opposing side, as dictated to Sridharani, was well worded:

"We have fought against colonialism and we will continue to fight against colonialism. We go even further. We are opposed to any form of domination of one country by another" (Sridharani 59). The last line was undoubtedly polysemantic, and open to interpretations. One interpretation could be that it was an allusion to the soviet aggression in Eastern Europe, which was internationally not as inconspicuous as it appeared to some members.

One must be aware of the fact that Tarasankar was not personally averse to politics. Like many other writers, he had a strong political affiliation. He actively took part in politics right from his student life and was even interned and jailed later on. In 1942 he was made the president of the Anti-Fascist Writers' Conference in Calcutta. He was nominated a member of the legislative assembly in 1952. In between 1952–60, he was a member of the West Bengal Vidhan Parishad and Rajya Sabha. His major novels deal with the then mass movements in Bengal as well as the entire India. Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that – both as a writer and a politician – he knew what he meant when he opposed the popular stand and forwarded a different view in the Afro-Asian Writers' Conference.

It was not possible for a responsible representative of a country like India, with thousands of years of spiritual, cultural and literary heritage, to accept a superficial political doctrine as its guiding principle in the literary arena. Indian literature, with its vast repertoire of Bhasha literatures, has a rich history of dissenting as well. That the others, including the west, knows very little of them, is a different matter altogether.

Referring to Dipesh Chakrabarty at this point will not be irrelevant. He says:

That Europe works as a silent referent in historical knowledge becomes obvious in a very ordinary way. There are at least two everyday symptoms of the subalternity of non-Western, third-world histories. Third-world historians feel a need to refer to works in European history; historians of Europe do not feel any need to reciprocate (p.28).

Chakrabarty's observation can be extended to cover other disciplines as well, in which many western scholars/commentators are still found to be writing essays or commenting on politics, literature, culture or anything under the sun without studying the huge contribution made by "other" traditions, particularly by India. In this particular case, even China and most representatives of the third world were acting as true agents of the western paradigm. For some reason, Soviet Union apparently played the role of a quiet and dutiful host, but their strong support for the dominant mood was not to be doubted at all.

In Sudeshna Khasnobish' words:

We all know that what is called 'soft power' is an important part of international diplomacy and 'war by other means'. It includes weapons of propaganda, public relations and, at a somewhat higher level, art, literature, the theatre, the cinema and so on. Culture, in this

sense, is almost a necessary part of ideological and political struggle (p.1).

Tarasankar was not in complete agreement with 'that' ideological and political stand, while still having an anti-colonial perspective. Needless to point out that in global political scenario of that time, the other camp led by the USA was not lagging behind in using its own 'soft power' and winning over friends. When the US propaganda machinery made its agent Society for the Defense of Freedom in Asia publish the Bengali translation (1953) of *The God that Failed*, the preface was written by none other than Tarasankar (Mukhopadhyay, pp.167–68). Six of the leading intellectuals of the world criticized the Soviet Union and soviet communism in this book. Apart from Bengali, this book was translated and published in many other Asian languages.

In Tashkent in Tarasankar's own group, of which he was the leader, many were leftists and were fiercely in favour of a proclaimed anti-colonial stand. Back in his homeland, he was a congressman then and ideologically at loggerheads with the communists. Herein, perhaps, lies another reason of Tarasankar's pronounced dissent. Although he had to put his signature on the slightly modified main proposal, but his dissent was conspicuous. That India was different, independent and was not willing to follow the crowd in a hurry was made to be noticed in black and white. In spite of that, the politicization of the writers' association was complete; at least officially. And that was obviously the main idea behind organizing such an international event. Prabodh Kumar Sanyal, a writer and member of the Indian delegation in Tashkent, mentions this episode in some detail in his travelogue *RussiarDiary* (pp.86–93). He thought this was a complete surrender of the Indian side to the adamant attitude of the Chinese, Arabs and Africans. Sanyal even doubted whether everything that had happened in the conference was clearly depicted while reporting later on to the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (p.119).

Myth and Reality

It was the post-Stalinist era when Tarasankar visits Moscow. The memory of the terrible atrocities of the earlier regime was still haunting people's mind. Like many others, Tarasankar also heard mutually contradictory stories and views about Moscow; horrifying stories of a city smeared with blood and horror, as well as stories of an alternative and beautiful life in there. He was apprehensive of the probable severe restrictions in every step of the day to day life of the Muscovites. And he was seriously scared to meet communists in Moscow, speculated that they might be very aggressive. But what he found in actuality was different (Bandyopadhyay, p.28). The personnel deputed to receive, assist, accompany and help them (he and Mulk Raj Anand) in each and everything during the whole visit were extremely cordial, hardworking, efficient, and they even became somewhat close to the Indian writers. Were they trained to behave that way? Was that an absolutely diplomatic ploy? Quite possible! But Tarasankar remembers at least one woman with affection (not a romantic affair) in his heart. There was "nothing official about it", as the oft-used expression says.

It was in the ordinary people of Russia that Tarasankar found the warmth of humanity. The love and respect, the warmth and intimacy, the people to people contact that he observed as well as received were felt as the real human touch. Apart from other positive things that the Soviet system introduced, racism based of any kind was not visible in Russia. This was in sharp contrast with what was practiced in the then caste-ridden India, the legacy of which is still visible in several parts of the country.

On the last page of his travelogue he writes:

I do not have any confusion regarding one thing only. And that is the ordinary people of

Russia. They are full of vivacity. They are simple. They want to love, and expect to be loved in return. I felt this especially while boarding the airplane to return home. The ordinary human being emerged out of the educated and prudent people (Bandyopadhyay, p.124).

“You don’t know Mr. Banerjee, what price we paid for it!”

The city of Moscow looked beautiful. With its imposing Kremlin, the wide tree-lined streets, Red Square, the theatres, the museums and the famous Moscow metro, the capital city was undoubtedly a feast to the eyes of the visitors. But whenever a muscovite was complimented for living in such a wonderful city, the reply came with a deep sigh: “You don’t know Mr. Banerjee, what price we paid for it!” The huge bloodshed and destruction during the revolution and the civil war that followed, the two world wars, the tremendous hardship that the Russians had to go through to rebuild the country and to redesign life, were palpable through this reply. Actually the story of hardships goes back to the previous centuries, to the serfdom days of Tsarist Russia and further back up to the horrible days of Tatar-Mongol Yoke in the thirteenth century. There were only sporadic slots of respite in this long story of devastation, burning, exploitation and bondage.

The difference with the fate of India was that Russia was not a colony or part of any foreign empire. It was a colonizer country itself till the revolution took place. The tsarist Russian empire was a big one, ruling over a huge area of the globe spread across two continents. Some of the critics are of the opinion that Russia continued to be a colonizing power in a new form even after the formation of the Soviet Union; they called it a communist empire. That was a very big difference between the two countries. But that did not mean that the sufferings the ordinary Russians had to go through in their entire history were any less in amount, but possibly only in nature.

The phenomenal soviet rebuilding required extremely hard labour and steadfast dedication from the people, and they paid the price. Every conscious citizen knew what they had to go through to make their country look like that. The leadership did not want the new system to fail at any cost.

Comparison of Russians with Indians or other people

One of the basic features of any travelogue is comparison between the home country/culture and the country/culture one visits. The comparisons made can be subtle or overt, implicit or explicit; but some kind of comparison does usually exist. Right from Afanasy Nikitin’s travelogue to that of Tarasankar, this integral trait is quite discernible. The comparisons that Tarasankar made started from food habits, prices of food stuff, and earnings of ordinary people to ideological differences of the two countries. He did not fail to notice the equitable distribution of wealth and food among people in the Soviet system and compared it with the then policy in India. He writes: “In our country as well, although we did not accept the ideal and philosophy of communism as the only truth, we accepted that ideal as far as distribution of wealth and personal accumulation of resources were concerned” (Bandyopadhyay, p.35).

He adds then:

Nevertheless, a question arises. In a country, where such phenomenal progress in agriculture has been achieved, why should the prices of vegetables be so dear? The intricacies of Economics are incomprehensible to me; I do admit that I do not understand it properly; so if people point finger to that shortcoming of mine, I would not go into any debate. (Bandyopadhyay, p.35)

Tarasankar's position can be best understood through these lines uttered by Nehru later in 1964:

We have done something to show the world that the two mutually exclusive ideologies of Capitalism and Capitalist Democracy, on the one hand, and Communism, on the other hand, do not have any monopoly of approach to the main issues of production and distribution. There is a third way which takes the best from all existing systems – the Russian, the American and other – and seeks to create something suited to one's own history and philosophy (Martyshin, p.183).

Needless to say that Tarasankar was affiliated to the same political party and had similar political views as that of Nehru. Moreover, he was representing the country of which Nehru was the then head of the government. This settles some of the enigmas regarding the Indian stand in this and some other international conferences that took place around that time. The Nehruvian path can be best understood as the middle path – which reminds us of the Buddhist way of distancing from two extremes in life – but the two approaches are not exactly the same thing on the whole. However, there were moments and issues in Nehru's political life when he shifted from his own previous position.

Superiority and inferiority complexes

While visiting a different country or observing a different culture, it is very common to silently suffer from either the superiority or the inferiority complex, or feel both at different occasions. Human upbringing conditions a person since childhood in such a way that it becomes very difficult to become absolutely non-judgemental later on. Education, ideology, faith – nothing helps in actuality. The “we” and “they” syndrome, some kind of “otherization” is always there in all human beings, in variable degrees. Candid travelogues and autobiographies often throw light on this particular aspect of human mind. Tarasankar's travelogue was no exception to this generality.

The cleanliness, the grandeur and the culture-scape of the city of Moscow were simply awe inspiring. The Indian cities, the post-partition refugee infested Calcutta in particular, were no match to it. Like many other foreign visitors, Tarasankar was overwhelmed. Had he been to other cities that were almost completely destroyed in the war and rebuilt by the soviet people again, he would have been awestruck to a greater extent.

On the other hand, contemporary Russian literature and plays could not impress the Indian writer. Himself a creative person, coming from a country with rich vibrant literatures in many languages, Tarasankar felt discontented. He briefly dealt with this issue, particularly Russian literature of soviet period, and compared it with that of the nineteenth century Russia. But of course there cannot be any comparison between the two. Tarasankar made an attempt to identify and analyze one or two basic traits of Russian fiction in a few words.

Tarasankar also expressed his displeasure seeing the names of the Indian authors and their books that had been selected for translation into Russian. Some of the authors were prominent and had representative stature while the other names were simply unthinkable, not even from any ideological point of view. But he appreciated the huge scale of translation from and into Russian taken up by the soviets. It was in fact the biggest translation project undertaken by any country in the history of the world. As a result, one fourth of all books printed yearly in the world used to be

printed in the Soviet Union alone; although majority of them were books having relevant ideological basis or propaganda material. Nevertheless, the huge translation project had definitely helped the Soviet Union improve its image in many countries of the world, and allowed formation of a global readership of Russian as well as soviet literature.

Conclusion

The unmistakable ambivalence is conspicuous in all these travel writings that has been studied by me so far. It was there in Rabindranath's letters, and it is here in Tarasankar's narration as well. None of them was completely content with what they had observed in Russia. At the same time, both were hugely impressed by the sheer magnitude of dedicated developmental activities. The vacillation was there in both of them. But Rabindranath was undoubtedly more impressed than Tarasankar who visited Russia almost three decades later; probably because the purposes, contexts and circumstances significantly changed by that time.

The common thing between them – apart from the both being Bengali writers – was the burning passion to serve their own people and own culture. In this there was hardly any disparity between the two. Although one can point out that Rabindranath was a Universalist and Tarasankar was rooted in his home soil (the rural Birbhum), the positions being totally contrasting to each other; nevertheless their lifelong work leads us to a simple resemblance. Rabindranath was an Indian in spite of his Universalism, and Tarasankar was an Indian in spite of his rootedness in his soil and culture. Both spent sleepless nights in search of ways to uplift the countrymen and their lot. Their literary creations; especially some selected novels, essays and short stories, bear witness to that apart from some other activities. Their travel writings also point towards the same.

[All quotations of Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay have been translated from Bangla by the present author, except wherever mentioned otherwise. Banerjee is the anglicized form of the Bengali surname Bandyopadhyay]

Bibliography

- Bandyopadhyay, Tarasankar. *Moscow-te Koyek Din*. Calcutta, 1365 (Bengali Era).
Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. New Jersey, 2000.
Indian Embassy. *Prazdnikna Tverskoy Zemle, Indiisky Vestnik*, Moscow, 2009.
Khasnobish Sudeshna. *Soft Power: The Culture Weapon in the Cold War and South Asia*, <https://silo.tips/download/soft-power-the-culture-weapon-in-the-cold-war-and-south-asia#>
Mukhopadhyay, D K. *Tarasankarer Upanyase Deshkal, Pashchimbanga*, Calcutta, 1997.
Martyshin Orest. *Jawaharlal Nehru and His Political Views*. (Tr. Sergei Chulaki) Moscow, 1989.
Sanyal, Prabodh Kumar. *Russiar Diary*. Calcutta, 1369 (Bengali Era).
Shridharani, Krishnalal. *Association and Isolation at Tashkent, Indian Literature*, Delhi, 1958,

www.jstor.org/stable/23328578.

Vajpeyi, Ashok (Ed). *India Dissents: 3000 Years of Difference, Doubt and Argument*. New Delhi, 2017.

***Sajal Dey** - PhD, Assistant Professor at the Department of Russian Studies, The English and Foreign Languages University, Regional Campus Shillong, Meghalaya, India
email: sajaldey@eflushc.ac.in

© 2010, IJORS - INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RUSSIAN STUDIES