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Story of the Clashing Images of the Country. The Case of India's Image at Home and in Poland

Abstract: The article deals with the complex process of creating a country image, both at home and abroad. It consists of two parts, being interrelated with each other, however not in a direct way. In part one the focus is laid on the image of India created by Indians themselves, which is partly a result of the grand economic transformation initiated in the beginning of the 1990s, and partly a heritage of much older cultural and political tradition. In part two the case of India's changing image in Poland is analyzed, viz. the case of a country, which unlike other European states, never ventured to establish its own political presence overseas, but nevertheless it was able to build a complex structure of various images of the civilization it hardly had any direct political contact with.

Keywords: India, Poland, history, country images.

The main objective of my article is to demonstrate the complex process of creating a country image. It consists of two parts, being interrelated with each other, however not in a direct way. In part one I focus on the image of India which is partly a result of the grand economic transformation initiated in the beginning of the 1990s, and partly a heritage of much older cultural and political tradition. The selection of texts, I have made to analyze this complex process of image-creation, may appear to be a subjective one, but I tend to believe that the selected texts faithfully reflect a wide and popular spectrum of opinions and convictions. I dare to think the phenomenon of "clashing images" is a never-ending story, as nowadays a country image is always in *statu nascendi*. In part two I deal with the history of India's image in Poland. In other words I attempt to present the case of a country which, unlike other European states, never ventured to establish its own political presence overseas, so it was not able to use the powerful state-machinery to acquire the knowledge very much needed to control a subjugated territory but nevertheless it could build a complex structure of various images of the civilization it hardly had any direct political contact with. The accuracy and intensity of this image-building process often depended on genuine interest in the culture of "a distant land", on the creativity and sensitivity of the local elite and political circumstances which could positively or negatively affect its receptivity. By the end of the 18th century Poland was probably the most religiously, linguistically and culturally diverse country on the European soil, located—and Poles often emphasized the fact—between "the West and the East" (with its own diversity

the pre-partition Poland resembled, *toutes proportions gardées*, the most culturally diverse Indian subcontinent). No wonder Poles drew inspirations for their own cultural identity both from the countries in the West (mostly France and German-speaking princedoms/kingdoms) and the East, which had a bit more obscure location in their minds but generally comprised the Russian and Ottoman empires plus Persia, although the latter one had probably more mythical dimension for Poles as they hardly ever had a chance to visit it. India gradually started to occupy a very important place, first in their poetic imagination, then in their scholarship and art. The process of building various images of India in Poland was somehow different from the one in Western Europe, as it was, at least in its early stages, mostly founded on imaginary concepts, poetic association with Polish folklore or extremely brave religious comparisons, and much later, on common striving for freedom, both spiritual and political. I assume that the phenomena of image-building of India in the Western countries, especially in the ones that played the global game in the 19th and 20th centuries, have been described and analyzed quite satisfactorily whereas the same process in Central European states, i.e. in the ones that had very limited direct contacts with South-East Asia yet gradually developed their interests in this region, has not been dealt with sufficiently. It is my intention to fill in the gap in a history of Indo-European contacts, with focus on Poland, the country that has constructed its own versions of clashing images of India. As in part one the selection of texts (or persons) I refer to may seem to be subjective, but I am convinced these adequately illustrate the attitudes, impressions, concepts and ideas which have greatly contributed to the process of making the image (or, in fact several images) of India in Poland. In part two the phenomenon of “clashing images” is hardly visible, as this stage of an image development is not yet present in our part of Europe. I generally refrain from commenting on the veracity of analyzed images, because I think each of them contains a few particles of the perceived and experienced ground-reality and a few particles of the imagined and projected reality. Therefore the final product is usually a combination of intentionally selected facts, their interpretations and our own vision of justice, success and truth.

There is little doubt in today's world that innovation, creativity and conducive cultural and political frameworks are the key drivers of business, economic or social success. Modern national companies, multinational corporations, centres of higher education, NGOs, selected teams of scientists do their best to project an attractive image of their own organizations and their own activities which should be externally perceived as being deeply rooted in the realm of practical innovation, unlimited creativity and strong corporate culture. In other words, to promote its various products and services a company, especially one operating internationally, desires to be positively branded. The concept of branding is not only limited to commercial, social or scientific entities, it is also applicable to nations and countries. It is quite reasonable to assume that a well-conceived and well-managed country image has a significant role in branding countries. As a result it helps the country to brand its own products, services, its own culture—which may serve as the half-independent soft-power globally—or its policies in the international arena. While USA has been known for long as “the country of liberties”, Great Britain has projected its own image as “cool

“Britannia” and India’s slogan is internationally recognized as “incredible India”.¹ The tangible and less tangible profits of positioning the country can be easily discovered in the stereotyped attitude towards available products and services. Plenty of customers worldwide declare their trust in “German cars”, “French perfumes”, “Italian/Chinese/Indian cooking”, although “German cars” may be assembled in Shanghai, “French perfumes” made in Thailand and the taste of Chinese dishes prepared in Europe might be miles away from the original one.² Nevertheless this stereotyped perception of “national products” still prevails and it is very unlikely it will be totally replaced by branding of international products whose origin is often not disclosed to potential customers. According to Simon Anholt and the company GMI (cited as Anholt-GMI) these nation brands are far more important than a Nike or Nestlé. It is their vision that with globalisation, “countries compete with each other for the attention, respect and trust of investors, tourists, consumers, donors, immigrants, the media and the governments of other nations.” It is thus clear that for a country’s government or organization it is essential to know where it should position itself and what it plans to achieve while projecting a nation brand. And it is not less important to ask how to define the branding of a country, how to measure its strengths, how to project its real advantages and finally how to persuade others into accepting its own positive image. Anholt-GMI propose their own Nation Brand Index which is based on people’s perception of a country in six selected areas: tourism, exports, governance, people, culture and heritage, investment and immigration.

After accumulating the collected data each country is ranked in the six selected areas and the result is indicated by a hexagon. The country with the highest overall score becomes the country with the best branding but there are also winners for each selected area.³

Making of a New Modern Country Image at Home and Abroad—India’s Case

All the proposed tools which can be applied for measuring the brand of a country are certainly very useful but unlike in the case of multinationals which appear to be extremely flexible in their pursuit of profits and therefore in reshaping and projecting its own image and—to some extent—its own economic reality (e.g. by changing or expanding sectors, in which they may operate), the limits of a country branding are clearly visible, or at least they are less prone to modifications. Promoting a country as a whole image is inevitably subject to where the reality is. This perceived reality seems

¹ *Incredible India (Atulya Bharat in Hindi)* slogan was officially branded and promoted by Amitabh Kant, Joint Secretary under the Union Ministry of Tourism, in 2002.

² See the following: Philip Kotler, Donald H. Haider and Irving Rein, 1993; Benno H. Signitzer and Timothy Coombs 1992; see also: *To Develop Country Image and National Brand Strategy to Attract Foreign Direct Investment: An Example from Central Asia: Kyrgyzstan*. The text is available on the website: <http://www.bledcom.com/uploads/papers/Tunca.pdf>

³ See: *How the world sees the world*, The Anholt-GMI Nation Brands Index, Third Quarter, 2005; see also *Nation Brand Index—what brand image does your country have?* The text is available on the website: <http://www.marketing-planet.com/surveys/nation-brand-index-what-brand-image-does-your-country-have.html>

to be inescapable; the geographical location of a country, its history and economy or cultural values, in other words: hard facts cannot be mere fiction. However, this is not to deny that every country is able to create its own narration which may refer only to “positive” facts selected from the national treasury of history. This “positive fact selection” can hardly become dominating, as the process of creating a national image is partly a spontaneous activity, in which a role of the State, especially the democratic one, is limited. In case of national branding, various images of a country may emerge at the same time or at different times so the final product is likely to have changeable shades, several layers, or clashing interpretations. Projecting a carefully planned country image, which by definition should be more static than dynamic, will always pose a threat, because the historical reality and subjective perceptions can vary very quickly. This sort of image is a very complex structure, so it is not perceived in the same way globally. For example, an image of India in Europe would differ significantly from her image in Pakistan or China. The issue is even more complex, as a centrally projected image may or may not be accepted on the domestic ground, which in turn may produce the phenomenon of “clashing images”: a few images, being at variance with each other yet existing within one broad image. This image-game is becoming an inspiring challenge as it is being played both internationally and domestically; it is hard to conclude which one is more rewarding or more frustrating.

Branding India

Shashi Tharoor, an Indian politician and a Member of Parliament who previously served as the United Nations Under-Secretary General for Communications and Public Information and as the Minister of State for the Ministry of External Affairs, is a prolific author and journalist who takes credit for promoting a new inspiring image of India for the international audience. In his oft-commented books, especially *Nehru: The Invention of India* (2003), *India: From Midnight to the Millennium* (1997) or *The Elephant, the Tiger and the Cell Phone: Reflections on India in the 21st Century* (2007) he projects a great Indian leap into the 21st century, the experience of “the unimaginable transformation of the country” so far portrayed as having been deeply rooted in its tradition and ancient culture. Tharoor’s vision of a New India appears to be shared by many readers, both domestic and foreign. In the chapter 10 of *The Elephant...* he observes:

We all know India has changed dramatically in recent years: the country I left when I first went abroad as a student in 1975 would be barely recognizable to the young Indians of today. To those who remember the old India, there’s visible evidence of change around, from the variety of makes of cars on the roads to the number of channels on my mother’s television set, not to mention the malls now sprouting like mushrooms in chic suburbs that used to be dusty and forlorn mofussils. But what about the invisible evidence of change? How does one capture the transformation of attitude that’s essential a part of what India has become? [...] Sreesanth’s extraordinary hit over Nel’s head for six [both are cricket players, representing India and South Africa respectively—PK] encapsulates for me all that is different about the new India: courage, assertiveness, a refusal to be intimidated, a willingness to take risks and ultimately the confidence to stand up to the best that the outside world can fling at us. This goes well beyond the cricket field.[...] India is the land that throws out the intruders of Kargil, that acquires Europe’s largest steel conglomerate in the

face of taunts about ‘monkey money’, that exports more films abroad than it imports, that challenges the traditional assumption of superiority by others, that wins Booker prizes and Miss Universe contests.⁴

Shashi Tharoor perfectly understands the value of a well-presented image of a country, or an appealing narration on modernity and antiquity in one which easily captivates the reading audience. He is the author of a catchy phrase that in today’s world it’s not the size of the army that wins, it’s the country that tells a better story. Since India has always been extremely good at telling stories, the modern version of the “narrative branding” does not pose a real challenge for creative intellectuals, national brand managers and inquisitive observers. They may refer to ancient history or to more recent developments to give substance to their new vision of the country, and we assume that very few foreign critics would be capable of challenging a proposed line of reasoning. The fact that India, as a multi-linguistic, multi-religious and multi-ethnic state, has been functioning successfully for more than 60 years, and this in spite of the pessimistic analyses and gloomy views expressed by a plethora of European and American journalists, academicians or statesmen, mostly in the 1960s and 1970s, is *per se* the most visible proof of a success story. Ramachandra Guha, the author of the opus magnum on the modern history of India, “India after Gandhi. The History of the World’s Largest Democracy”, aptly delineates the intellectual divisions between Western and Indian politicians and ideologues in their perception of democracy, cultural coherence and the concept of the state.⁵ He reminds us that for the Americans and for many European nations a shared language and mostly shared faith worked in tandem with animosity towards the colonists or foreign oppressors which was the case especially for the Poles, the Czechs or the Lithuanians. He says

Behind every successful nationalist movement in the Western world has been a certain unifying factor, a glue holding the members of the nation together, this provided by a shared language, a shared religious faith, a shared territory, a common enemy—and sometimes all the above.⁶

By contrast the Indian nation in its official stance does not privilege a single language or religious faith. Although the majority of Indian citizens declare to be Hindus, India is not a Hindu state and there is no one national language spoken by all the inhabitants. Guha illustrates this secular and linguistic vision of the modern India with a few examples:

Like Indian democracy, Indian secularism is also a story that combines success with failure. Membership of a minority religion is no bar to advancement in business or the professions. The richest industrialist in India is a Muslim. Some of the most popular film stars are Muslim. At least three presidents of India and two chief justices have been Muslim. In 2007, the president of India is a Muslim, prime minister a Sikh, and the leader of the ruling party a Catholic born in Italy. Many of the country’s most prominent lawyers and doctors have been Christians and Parsis. [...] The pluralism of religion was one cornerstone of the foundation of the Indian republic. A second was the pluralism of language. Here again, the intention and the effort well pre-dated Independence.⁷

⁴ Shashi Tharoor, 2007.

⁵ Ramachandra Guha, 2007. It is worth mentioning that the US magazine *Foreign Policy* named the Author as one of the top 100 public intellectuals in the world in May 2008. In the poll that followed, Guha was placed 44th.

⁶ Ibid., p. 750.

⁷ Ibid., p. 752.

The globally projected success story of India, a state proud of both its ancient history and very promising future, is being retold by external observers, fascinated by the process of economic and social transformation which has produced, strong in number and assertive in attitude, a new middle class, combining dynamism and creativity with attachment to more traditional values. This frequently retold success story is set in a densely-populated country characterized by the most unimaginable ethnic, religious, linguistic diversity and co-existing cultural identities; in a country that has managed to create pan-Indian sentiments and pan-Indian pride, and that in spite of the not-so-old conflicts painfully experienced along the divisive lines of a language, religion and caste. The story is based on the economic achievements, mostly in the advanced technology sectors: IT, nano and biotechnology, or pharmaceutical industry which have reshaped and modernized the business structure in India. On the global scale the story was widely publicized by Thomas Friedman in 2005 when his mega-bestseller *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty First Century* was released. In the book, Friedman recounts a journey to the Indian IT-centre in Bangalore, when he realized globalization has changed core economic concepts. One of his most inspiring interlocutors, Nandan Nilekani, the former CEO of Infosys, made a statement on the flattening world and that later was used by the author as the title of the book. Friedman's view that the phenomenon of flattening is a product of a convergence of personal computer with fiber-optic micro cable with the rise of work flow software has often been criticized (Nobel's laureate Joseph Stieglitz presented quite an opposite opinion: not only is the world not flat: in many ways it has been getting less flat) but his message nonetheless reached the global reading audience who learned about the fundamental role of India in the process termed by the writer as Globalization 3.0.⁸

The Clashing Images

In the first decade of the 21st century more success stories appeared. American, British, German, Russian or Polish journalists, academicians, businesspersons or politicians with better or worse literary skills shared their impressions, analyses and opinions on the Rising India. Some of them have been focused on India for years and have kept the readers updated on the changing image of the country. In 2008 Dietmar Rothermund, released a book: *India: The Rise of an Asian Giant*.⁹ It summarizes his research on the transformation process in India and discloses to a reader an impressive spectrum of challenges the country has had to face since its independence. The author is, as he puts it himself, 'a witness who has watched India for nearly half a century.' He first visited the place in 1960, and managed to interview Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, twice. The image of India globally, as portrayed in the book, has undergone an astonishing number of changes and modifications, reaching a stage of an undisputed Asian giant ready to play a long deserved role of a superpower. It is the superpower with almost unlimited potential to be utilized in the near future. The book

⁸ See: Thomas L. Friedman 2005.

⁹ See: Dietmar Rothermund 2009.

must have contributed to strengthening an already positive image of India in Europe but not all the readers shared the author's optimism. A good illustration of a more skeptical view on the future of India and her globally projected image comes from a review by William Leith, representing The Spectator Book Club. Although he does not hide his very limited knowledge on the subject, his remarks and conclusions may reflect a common perception of the country abroad. The perception more focused on the negative implications of the economic growth, he perceives as being still generated by the Western nations. In fact he is quite far away from the economic reality because India is not as much dependent on the pro-export policy as other Asian countries, including China.

Does all of this make you, along with Professor Rothermund, convinced that India has a great future? I'm not as confident as the Professor. Just looking at Rothermund's facts, you can see the problem immediately. It's that India, with its vast, cheap workforce and Westernised elite, depends on First World business cycles for its wealth. This gives it great business opportunities, but also makes it terribly vulnerable. As recently as the 1990s, there was a wave of suicides among cotton farmers when the cotton price took a dive, courtesy of the global market. The main point about the rise of India, it seems to me, is that it's not based on the rise of Indian things, but on India's ability to sell stuff to the uncaring, treacherous West. And that can't be good.¹⁰

It should not come as a surprise that in every truly democratic state any sort of a positive branding is usually contested by those who may as well share the optimistic views on their own country but who are also aware of all the deficiencies, like commonly experienced injustice, social inequalities, or legal and cultural constraints in economic activities which are daily reported by the free media. They demand "a much better balanced" image of the country so that its citizens (and foreign observers too) can see the surrounding reality in the right proportions. Patwant Singh, one of the most respected Indian thinkers, in his *The Second Partition. Fault-Lines in India's Democracy* paints a gloomier picture of the Rising India. He does not deny that India is the world's second-fastest growing economy but admits that one in every four of its citizens lives on less than a dollar a day. He repeats a well-known mantra that the nation is proud of having more dollar millionaires and billionaires than the United States but stresses the fact it also has the highest number of maternal deaths in the world. Patwant Singh strongly argues that there are two countries and two nations existing side by side. The First India, whose image is being globally projected; and the Second India, whose plight is not the most favourite theme of Bollywood filmmakers. In the preface he states:

But somewhere along the way India got partitioned a second time without the world—or even Indians themselves—knowing it. So what we have now is two Indias. First India, the prosperous power with global aspirations, includes the country's top stratum and the middle classes; Second India comprises the rest of the population: starving, malnourished, subject to untreated disease, often unemployed and homeless, with infant and maternal mortality daily realities.¹¹

Patwant Singh's critical stance on the recent development of India reflects a much wider discussion on the social and economic implications of the twenty-year transformation process. Or better said: it is an illustration of a plethora of debates held on

¹⁰ William Leith, 2008. The text is also available online: <http://www.spectator.co.uk/books/752721/trouble-and-strife.shtml>

¹¹ Patwant Singh 2007, p. 15.

a regular basis by representatives of political, academic and business communities. Although his book does not reveal new facts on the social ground reality which has been analyzed and interpreted frequently both in India and abroad, he manages to impose his own interpretation on a nation's modern image which started to prevail on the global scale quite recently.

An image of any country being strongly divided economically and socially appears to be quite universal and may be applicable to several dozen nations. The essence of these divisions in the Indian context is nonetheless much more significant internationally as it differs from what we are able to discover in other parts of the world. The two clashing images have already emerged and that will gradually catch the attention of the interested global audience. In the case of India, a democratic country with huge economic and social potential, this clash of images will likely have an international resonance given her size, global role and aspirations.

In the domestic arena the wave of criticism of the selected social phenomena is quite powerful in the vernacular press. The special *Independence Day* issue of the biggest Hindi daily *Dainik Jagaran* (2011), with a readership exceeding 55 million, is almost fully dedicated to presenting the views and impressions on contemporary India, expressed by a few historians, academicians, students, members of various social and religious communities. Their views, both pessimistic and optimistic ones, should be regarded—we tend to believe—as the samples of the nation's satisfaction and depression, successes and failures, ambitions and illusions. Pushpesh Pant, a Jawaharlal Nehru University professor, comes up with the classical list of grievances against the state, against politicians and the world of local customs, traditions and rituals. The priority in criticism is given to the poor machinery of the state in the context of the social movement against corruption as initiated by a Gandhian, Anna Hazare plus the consequences of the two widely media-covered 2G and CWG scams. According to Pushpesh Pant the reactions of the state to civic anger resemble the ones of the British Raj government interested only in “keeping law and order” and certainly not in “upholding the liberties of individual citizens”. Painfully felt divisions between those who are privileged in the society and those who are considered inferior, the phenomena of child marriage, dowry, caste system and female foeticide can be found on the list of grievances as well. Professor Pant concludes his essay with the extremely emotional appeal to his readers, with the request to ponder on the true meaning of freedom and liberty: *Yah kaisi aazaadi! Bol ki lab aazaad haim tere! Ab tak.*¹²

His conclusions as well as the negatively projected portrait of India may stem from the “structural impatience”—a popularly imagined yet immaterialized vision of a democratic country, a type of a welfare state with the dynamic economic growth and developed civic society in which social injustice and crippling corruption is minimal. It is the vision of a country which has always existed, although in various avatars, in the imagination of the Indian intelligentsia. That sort of vision, as Sunil Khilnani suggests in his book “The Idea of India”, seems to be more a product of the planned

¹² Pushpesh Pant, *Bol ki Lab Aazaad Haim Tere! Ab tak*, “Nai Dilli,” 14 Agast 2011, p. 9; “Dainik Jaagaran” is the biggest daily in India in terms of readership, and probably the biggest in the world. No other newspaper can break so far the record of 55 million readers.

or intended social engineering than of an objective analysis of the transforming reality which, as we have come to know after studying the history of the 20th century, may become extremely resistant to the bravest and the most revolutionary social reform projects.¹³

Balancing the Reality

These extremely gloomy images of the country are challenged by Patrick French, a British writer, the author of an acclaimed book *India. A Portrait*. He is perfectly aware of all the Indian success stories circulating in Europe and America, but also of the tendency to criticize the present state of affairs in India after the great economic reforms were introduced in 1991. This wave of criticism, contrary to what French says, is visible not only outside of India but very much at home as well. The writer seems to be slightly irritated by the extremes of that criticism and therefore he makes every effort to recreate a much more balanced image of the country in which global success stories are combined with local failures. His essay “A Tryst with Change” appeared in *The Times of India*, a special *Independence Day* issue focused on changing perceptions of the recent history and the challenges the country will have to face in the coming years. Patrick French presents his own, as he wishes, balanced vision of India’s image deeply set in the historical ground reality:

Today, there's a widespread tendency, particularly in foreign publications, to look at the downside of the Indian history. During a recent lecture in Mumbai, I was told India was now divided between haves and have-nots. My reply was that in the 1970s, when per capita GDP was rising at less than 1% per annum, it was divided between have-nots and have-nots. A conclusion that India is today in a terrible state ignores not only the period before economic reform, but the conditions in the country immediately after Independence. In the year of India's first general election, American diplomat Bill Bullitt wrote in *Life* magazine: 'An immense country containing 357 million people, with enormous natural resources and superb fighting men, India can neither feed herself nor defend herself against serious attacks. An inhabitant of India lives, on average, 27 years. His annual income is about \$50. About 90 out of 100 Indians cannot read or write. They exist in squalor and fear of famine.' In 2011, while poverty remains a chronic problem for many in this country, it exists alongside swathes of middle-class wealth. An Indian's life expectancy today stands at 67 years and is rising. The changes of the last 20 years cannot be reversed. The hundreds of millions of people lifted out of poverty cannot be told they should return to their villages.¹⁴

The phenomenon of the clashing images of India crosses easily her borders, although the final combination of these two is likely to have various proportions in different countries. An image of India abroad, as it is the case with other nations, may have been gradually stereotyped or, given the impact of Indian soft power recently, may have become “Bollywoodized”. Some elements of Edward Said's concepts of *Orientalism* can be traced in this stereotyped image as well. These reflect the simplified knowledge about the “mystical or mysterious East” (of which India is seen as a part), which is generated from preconceived archetypes “that envision all ‘Eastern’ societies as fundamentally similar to one another, and fundamentally dissimilar to

¹³ See: Sunil Khilnani, 1999.

¹⁴ Patrick French 2011, p. 22.

'Western' societies."¹⁵ Most of the preconceived archetypes on India are much more likely to be found in those countries which made their presence on the subcontinent through centuries-long commercial and political activities, religious or missionary initiatives, long-lasting cultural bonds and—last but not least—military interventions. Fortunately the archetypes co-exist with much more modern concepts and images of contemporary India.

The Image of India as Created in Poland

Poland, unlike many other European countries, never ventured to build its colonial or imperial status in Asia or Africa. From 1795 to 1918 it did not exist as a sovereign state so it could not play any role in the Big Game of the 19th century. Poles had quite limited access to many Asian countries under control of the old European superpowers and therefore their imageries of India were to a large extent founded on the available reports on "the grand voyages" (mostly produced by the British or French), selected pieces of literature and philosophy (whose authors were mostly the Germans) or simply word of mouth. What strongly attracted Polish 19th century poets, philosophers, the well-educated members of the intelligentsia and the academic community to "the European discovery of India" was a spiritual message of classical Hinduism and Buddhism. With Max Mueller's translations of the most sophisticated Sanskrit works, Schopenhauer's philosophical zeal for the Upanishads, Goethe's admiration for Kalidasa's Shakuntala, publications by August Schlegel, Alfred de Vigny or Paul Deussen and the Buddhist treatises rendered into English by the Pali Text Society, the metaphysical richness of India became a true source of inspiration for Poles who yearned for freedom of their own country and reflected upon the glorious past and spiritual dimensions of the present.

Ex Oriente Lux

Adam Mickiewicz in his letters discloses a growing interest in Indian culture which he perceives as very close to the tradition of the Slavonic peoples but emphasizes even more strongly the affinity between ancient India and Lithuania. He refers to widely popular comparative studies on the similarities of mythological symbols and explains the philosophical link between the concept of Atman / Para-Brahma and Lithuanian Pražimas, who, in its active incarnation, is named "Devas". Mickiewicz's poetic drama

¹⁵ See: Edward W. Said, 1979. Said puts forward several definitions of "Orientalism" in the introduction to the book. Some of these may have been more widely quoted and influential than others: "A way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience" (p. 1); "A style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'." (p. 2); "A Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (p. 3); "...particularly valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is as a veridic discourse about the Orient" (p. 6); "A distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts" (p. 12).

Dziady, considered one of the greatest works of European Romanticism, may partly reflect his extensive studies on Indian classical literary antiquities. The essence of the *Dziady* ritual which is an ancient Slavonic and Lithuanian feast commemorating the forefathers, could resemble an Indian sacrifice, although it seems to be doubtful whether it was the poet's intention to bring out that resemblance. Mickiewicz endeavours to discover more cultural, social and metaphysical Indo-Slavonic bonds which could illustrate a popular belief in the common origin of these peoples and their common ideal of moral values. He comes up with the idea of the "perfect Indo-Slavonic synthesis" he discovers in a Slavonic peasant, "the Brahmin and Christian, the most splendid."¹⁶

The great Mickiewicz's passion for Indian civilisation was shared by another one of the "Three Bards" of Polish literature, Juliusz Słowacki. He may have been inspired by the Upanishads, available at that time in various translations, especially by the most revealing formula "tat tvam asi" (Thou art that) and by the message of Buddhism. The former inspiration, as Juliusz Kleiner suggests, can be found in Słowacki's poetic prayer "Genesis out of Spirit," while the latter in his poem "King-Spirit." A Polish Indologist, Maryla Falk in her study "Indian Element in Słowacki's Thought" presents quite a daring conclusion on the literary and philosophical structure of the poem. She declares the "King-Spirit" to be not less than "the first Bodhisatva-epic in Western literature."¹⁷ This conclusion may appear somehow disputable to a few, however it rightly directs our attention to the original source of poetic and philosophical inspiration. For the Polish poets India was the promised land of ancient spiritual wisdom and her universal message, they believed, should be heard and meticulously interpreted. This idealistic image was shared by many like-minded intellectuals in Europe, but in Poland it was even more glorified by adding the elements of common cultural and spiritual heritage of Slavonic (plus Lithuanian) and Indian peoples.¹⁸

The true light of spiritual freedom must come from the East—*ex Oriente Lux*, that widely-accepted phrase did not cease to exist by the end of the 19th century when Romanticism lost a part of its literary and spiritual appeal. It retained its popularity in the first decades of the 20th century in several European countries, and Poland was no exception. Wincenty Lutosławski (1863–1954) was probably the first intellectually prepared propagator of yoga in Poland. A philosopher and an expert on Plato's works he studied the treatises of Vivekananda and Yogi Ramacharaka (the pseudonym of William Walker Atkinson) which became the basis of his own philosophical version of yoga, popularized later in Poland. Lutosławski shared his views with Indian readers, publishing articles in magazines including *East and West*, *Vedic Magazine* or *Young India*.

¹⁶ Adam Mickiewicz, 1929, volume XI, p. 156. Probably the best study on the influence of Indian literary and philosophical tradition on Polish literature, especially the literature of "Young Poland" (*Młoda Polska*) is by Jan Tuczyński, 1981. Jan Tuczyński refers to Mickiewicz's inspiration and interest in Indian civilization in the Chapter on Mickiewicz, pp. 63–71.

¹⁷ M. Falk 1951, p. 257.

¹⁸ J. Tuczyński, op. cit., pp. 75–96.

Antoni Lange, a talented poet, polyglot and translator, discovered for himself “the land of spirituality” through Annie Besant’s and Madam Blawatska’s books on Theosophy. He was also a keen student of Sanskrit and acquired a good command of the language which made it possible to translate a big portion of the ancient Indian masterpieces. Lange, himself a master of the poetic phrase, rendered into Polish the selected parts of the “Mahabharata” and “Ramayana,” then the “Panchatantra,” “Hitopadesha” and “Gitagovinda.” His fame as a translator rests mainly on the renditions of *Savitri* (1910) and *Nal and Damayanti* (1906), and especially the former is still regarded as the best ever translation of the poem into Polish. Lange’s works deeply influenced another poet, Jan Kasprowicz whose literary achievements owe a lot to philosophical tradition of India and Rabindranath Tagore’s poetic vision of the world. Kasprowicz, one of the greatest bards of Polish literature, concentrates on the beauty of nature, and the structure of his poetic narration, as suggested by Jan Tuczyński, to some extent reflects the metaphysical attitude of ancient Indian sages. The poet was inspired by the teachings of the “Brihadaranyaka-Upanishada,” “Bhagavadgita” and the tenth book of the *Rigveda* (hymn 129). He is also the author of two poems: “Savitri” and “Sita,” obviously referring to their Indian archetypes, which deal with the universal concept of liberating love.¹⁹

The list of Polish poets or writers who drew upon Indian literary and philosophical tradition is much longer: Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer, Leopold Staff, Wacław Sieroszewski, Witkacy and Stanisław Maria Saliniński, to name but a few. Various interpretations of the formulas “Tat tvam asi” or “Aham Brahma asmi” (I am Brahma), the teachings of the Vedanta and Buddhism, the literary richness of the Mahabharata and Ramayana, and finally the poetic vision of Tagore in the widely translated “Gitanjali”—all these elements, artistically processed by men of literature, contributed to forming the spiritual image of India, prevalent among the well-read representatives of the Polish intelligentsia. This image was much strengthened at a later time by two prominent Poles who declared India to be their second motherland. These were Wanda Dynowska, known under her Indian name as Umadevi, and Maurycy Frydman, also known as Swami Bharatananda. Both of them were very close to leaders of the Indian independence struggle and offered their services and hearts to the Dalai Lama. Dynowska and Frydman started in 1944 the Indian-Polish Library (Biblioteka Polsko-Indyjska), translating Indian classics (mostly religious and philosophical works) into Polish. Their books were available in Poland in the 1960s and 1970s and the Library was at that time probably the most popular source of information on the spiritual dimension of India.²⁰

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 125—154.

²⁰ Wanda Dynowska’s biography and a story of her activities is available on the websites: <http://www.jkrishnamurti.republika.pl/dynowska.htm>; <http://www.autodydaktyka.republika.pl/ezoterika/dynowska.htm>; See the text by Tadeusz Margul, *Wanda Dynowska — Wielka Ambasadorka Kultury Indyjskiej* [Wanda Dynowska—The Ambassador of Indian Culture] see also another text: *Wanda Dynowska i Maurycy Frydman, twórcy Biblioteki Polsko-Indyjskiej* [Wanda Dynowska and Maurycy Frydman, the Founders of the Polish-Indian Library]—<http://prognozy2030.salon24.pl/51965,wanda-dynowska-i-maurycy-frydman-tworca-biblioteki-polsko-indyj>; The official name of the Library in English has a few

The image of India in Poland would not be complete without the remarkable contribution of Polish Indology which deserves its own very high position among the European scholarship centres. The first Sanskrit Chair was founded as early as 1893 at the Jagiellonian University and the Indology Department of the Oriental Institute at the University of Warsaw was established in 1932, and is now the biggest centre for Indian studies in Poland. A very long list of Indological publications had probably a relatively limited resonance (due to their scholarly methods of analysis, specific topics dealt with etc.) in the process of shaping the more general image of India, nonetheless a few of these works (e.g. Stanisław Schayer's *History of Indian Literature* or Krzysztof Byrski's translation of *Kamasutra*) did impress the wide reading audience who were able to draw their own inspiring conclusions, later developed, modified and used in the popular press.²¹

Polish Refugees and Maharaja Jam Saheb

World War Two was probably the most traumatic period of history for Poles. They were the victims of genocide, ethnic cleansing, imprisonment and deportations on a scale never experienced before. For a few of those children who had been deported to Soviet Siberia, India—after the Sikorski-Mayski Agreement in 1941—became their second home. Joseph Stalin granted “amnesty” to thousands of Polish citizens, out of whom approximately 5000 children, mostly orphans were transported to India. The successful cooperation between the Red Cross, the British Army, the Polish II Corps Command, the Consulate General of Poland in Bombay and the Indian local authorities resulted in establishing “Little Poland” in the western part of the country. The first group of children arrived in Balachadi, near Jamnagar (Gujarat) in July 1942, and since then until 1946 about 1000 of them lived there. At the end of 1942 construction began on a new settlement in Valivade, next to the town of Kolhapur. The first group of refugees, mostly children and women, arrived in 1943. In the beginning there was naturally a shortage of teachers, textbooks or the needed equipment but in spite of that all the young people in settlements were required to attend school. Very efficiently the whole educational and cultural infrastructure was completed. In Valivade, for example, there were 3 Polish kindergartens, 4 elementary schools, a secondary school, a lyceum and a teachers' training centre. The children and their guardians could also attend Sunday mass, play soccer or organize Christ-

variations, e.g., *Polish-Indian Library*, *Indian-Polish Library*, *Indo-Polish Library*. In my opinion the best English equivalent of the Polish version is “*Polish-Indian Library*.”

²¹ There are many publications on the history of Polish Indology, available both in Polish and English. In fact these are the stories within one story as there are several Indological centres at Polish universities. The oldest one is in Cracow (Jagiellonian University), followed by Warsaw (University of Warsaw). Indological studies (traditional ones like “Indology” or in selected academic areas) are pursued also in Poznań, Wrocław and Lublin. Indology departments publish their own works on a regular basis; e.g. “Cracow Indological Studies” or “Warsaw Indological Studies”. See also D. Stasik, A. Trynkowska (eds) 2006.

mas carol evenings. Daily activities did not leave much space for reviving traumatic memories.²²

The image of a new children's home in India has been depicted in several publications. India is portrayed as an extremely tranquil and colorful place, with very warm and friendly people; it is a safe haven where young Poles, after experiencing terrible Soviet ordeals, finally found peace, protection and loving care. Maria van der Linden, in the book *An Unforgettable Journey* recounts warmly her arrival to India and her stay in Jamnagar:

The ship sailed into shallow waters near Jamnagar until it could proceed no further. At that point an anchor was dropped and its engines switched off. One by one we were then lowered over large Jute nets suspended down the side of our stationary ship. We were assisted by Indian soldiers who carried the small children on their shoulders, into the waiting barges below. Two tugs were employed to tow each barge towards the coast, again as far as the sea depth permitted. The Indian soldiers then carried us on their shoulders individually into extremely shallow water where we waded bare-footed ashore towards the adjacent sandy beach. Here by the sand dunes a train awaited our arrival. This train brought us to Jamnagar, one hour later. [...] Our new camp was 25 miles from the town of Jamnagar. The camp had been constructed by courtesy of the Maharajah of Jamnagar who also paid for all the daily expenses connected with the running of this new orphanage. Our camp site was on hilly land overlooking the sea some three miles away and near the Maharajah's summer residence, which occupied another hill site terminating in a high cliff, by the sea. We had an excellent view of our benefactor's holiday resort from the camp. Here we were safe as his honoured guests...

The Polish children's camp at Balachadi-Jamnagar was in the Indian state of Gujarat. The camp's hilly situation provided a panoramic view of the surrounding landscape. Golden sand on the beach glistened in the tropical sun and the clear blue sea beyond it reflected hot sunrays. The sunsets were a magnificent sight to behold. The crystal clear moonlit sky was illuminated by numerous twinkling stars. It was full moon when we arrived. The tranquillity of the night was invariably interrupted by the eerie howling of wild hyenas and jackals which roamed the wide arid expanse around the camp...²³

A very special role in the whole "Polish Project" in India was played by the Maharaja Jam Sri Digvijaysinhji Ranjitsinhji Jadeja (Jam Saheb), the ruler of Jamnagar. He extended his hospitality to young Poles, bore the costs related to running the settlement and actively participated in cultural life of the Polish community in Jamnagar. He is credited with saying to the children: "As you have no parents I shall become your father, here in India." In the interview for the weekly *Tygodnik Polaków "Polska"* [Poles' Weekly, Poland], published in November 1942, he made an official declaration to provide the young refugees with all the necessary assistance and finances. He also stressed his deep interest in the history of Poland and recounted a memorable meeting as a youngster with the world-famous Polish pianist and Prime Minister Ignacy Jan Paderewski.²⁴ Jam Saheb became a symbol-figure in the Polish-Indian relations, especially after 1989. His role as the guardian of the Polish orphans in India has been often emphasized and the story of his life narrated in many publications both in Poland and abroad. There is a very popular and much respected Bednarska High School in Warsaw whose Honorary Patron is Maharaja Jam Saheb, very warmly yet

²² The best documented collective work on Poles in India during WWII is *Polacy w Indiach 1942–1948, w świetle dokumentów i wspomnień* [Poles in India 1942–1948 in the Light of Documents and Memories]. London 2000, as well as, *Poles in India 1942–1948: Second World War Story*, 2008.

²³ Maria van der Linden, 1994, Chapter 8, *Journey to India*. Available also on the website: <http://www.antonanz.net/BIBLIOTEKA/LINDEN/HTM/L08.HTM>

²⁴ *Polacy w Indiach...* [Poles in India], 2002, pp. 82–83.

unofficially referred to as “our Polish Maharaja.” This extremely positive image of hospitable India was also revived by the Polish Prime Minister, Donald Tusk on his official visit to New Delhi. In the conversation with the President of India, Pratibha Devi Singh Patil, he said, “at the time of World War II when others were killing our children you were able to save the lives of many of them.”²⁵ This particular part of the general image of India, the country that extended hospitality to Polish children at the time of need, would probably get even more solidified if the story were translated into the language of a feature film, or at least, a well-promoted documentary.

“Indian Art Deco”—Stefan Norblin

The hard times of the War generated another remarkable link connecting Poland and India. It could be best described as an inspiring combination of Polish artistic creativity with Indian cultural heritage. An introduction to the story comes from the Luxury Travel Magazine which promotes one of the most unique and luxurious hotels in India, and probably in the world:

Designed by the renowned Edwardian architect Henry Lanchester and embellished with exotic murals of the self-exiled Polish artist Stefan Norblin, the palace is a blend of Eastern and Western architectural influences. Set amidst 26 acres of lush gardens, perched above the skyline of Jodhpur, rises the imposing facade of Umaid Bhawan Palace, the last of the great palaces of India and one of the largest residences in the world, now a Taj Luxury Hotel. Named after Maharaja Umaid Singh Ji, the grandfather of the present Maharaja of Jodhpur, Maharaja Gaj Singh Ji, this golden—yellow sandstone monument was conceived on the grandest possible scale in the fashionable and grand Art—Deco style. It was completed in 1943 and has served as the principal residence of Jodhpur’s Royal family since then...²⁶

Umaid Bhavan has become the symbolic place of Polish artistic presence in Asia. It was Stefan Norblin, who contributed significantly to decorating, embellishing or, better said—creating the grandeur and majesty of the palace interior. Norblin (1892–1952) was a well-known artist in Poland before World War II who earned his fame as a world-renowned portrait painter, having done work for much of the royalty in Europe and the Middle East. When the Nazi army invaded Poland in September 1939, Stefan and his wife Lena immediately fled, picking their way across Europe and the Middle East until they could land in their new home, India. It is not quite clear why the Norblins decided to stay over there, as initially they had been planning to travel to a completely different destination which was America. They must have been fascinated by the cultural charm of the country and this fascination somehow may have coincided with their financial problems which made their travel plans difficult or impossible. Fortunately Norblin was able to secure special commissions by the Maharaja of Morvi and the Maharaja of Jodhpur. The task he was given by the royals turned out to be the most unusual and most challenging in his professional career and

²⁵ I had the privilege to listen personally to the conversation held in the Rashtrapati Bhavan (President’s Palace in New Delhi) on 8 September 2010.

²⁶ The official website of the luxurious Taj Hotel Group, a text on the Umaid Bhawan Palace in Jodhpur: <http://www.tajhotels.com/Luxury/Grand-Palaces-And-Iconic-Hotels/Umaid-Bhawan-Palace-Jodhpur/Accommodations.html>

unfortunately it was also the last one (of that scale) in his life. Claus-Ullrich Simon in his publication “Stefan Norblin, a biography that should be rewritten” highlights the artistic style and Norblin’s creativity which was fully materialized in the process of embellishing the grand Indian palaces:

Because this palace which was just completed in 1944 and was not accommodated for the reigning Maharaja but his modern minded son, the Maharaj Kumar Mehandrasinghji of Morvi, Norblin created many paintings in the Art Deco style: wild tigers lurking in trees watching the guest dine, Hindu gods guarding his sleep and half nude ladies winding themselves around trees watching whoever is in the swimming pool. There is also an erotic cabinet with a round bed: hidden behind mirrors there can be found clearly erotic paintings, which can only be illuminated from inside, and are depicting European lovers in daring poses, pursuing their pleasures. The main part of Norblin’s work for this palace is made up of paintings portraying Hindu gods drawn from the infinite sources provided by the Hindu religion. [...] Norblin also worked as a court painter at the design of the Umaid Bhawan Palace in Jodhpur. He created many paintings which in contrast with the works of art designed for Morvi, appear somewhat heavier, even warlike. During this time paintings and interior perspective drawings were made for the furnishing of the Royal Hunting Lodge Sadar Samand which was built around the same time as the palace. One of Norblin’s last accomplishments was a series of six murals, applied directly on plaster, in the Oriental Room, the Throne Room of the palace which depict themes of Indian mythology.²⁷

By the end of the 1990s almost all the murals were in a terribly bad state and needed very careful and professional restoration. The Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs initiated the process of the long-awaited restoration works which could officially start after signing the agreement with the Maharaja Gaj Singh II of Jodhpur. Once it was done all the necessary finances were allocated and a group of the most experienced Art Deco restorers was selected to commence the work. By the end of 2010 the six murals slowly began to regain their past glory and almost at the same time Stefan Norblin, somehow half-forgotten in Poland until then, began to regain his position in the Art Pantheon. In September 2011 the Regional Museum in Stalowa Wola, a town located in the Podkarpackie Province and known for its Art Deco architectural design, organized the Stefan Norblin Exhibition, the first of this kind in Poland. In a close cooperation with the Maharaja of Jodhpur and the Ministry of Culture the Museum was able to display Norblin’s works which were otherwise inaccessible for the Polish art-lovers. The whole event was not only dedicated to the artist, his life and artistic achievements, it was a promotion festival of Indian heritage, Indian dance and Indian cuisine as well.²⁸ India was portrayed as a land of the sublime art which combines the elements of her cultural richness with Polish and European vision of universal creativity. That new element added to India’s image was to some extent reflected in the decision made by the Government of Poland to promote officially the selected Norblin-related cultural events during the Polish Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2011.

²⁷ Clauss-Ullrich Simon 1996, pp. 3–5. See also in the same volume: Joachim K. Bautze 1996, pp. 8–18.

²⁸ The official inauguration of Norblin’s exhibition on 2 Sept. 2011 was covered widely by the local media, e.g. the popular, regional edition of the *Gazeta Wyborcza*: http://rzeszow.gazeta.pl/rzeszow/1,34962,10208138,Norblin_i_miasteczko_Indyjskie_juz_w_sobote_w_St_.html; a special press release was prepared by the Stalowa Wola Regional Museum. It is available in Polish on the website: http://muzeum.stalowawola.pl/2011/38_norblin/robocze/norblin_info.pdf. The event was broadcast by the Radio Rzeszow and telecast by the channel of the Polish television TVP Kultura.

Norblin's story in India, is however best known through his paintings and murals (very few written materials on his life there have been retrieved so far), and may appeal strongly to various segments of Polish society, up till now only mildly interested in the subject. There are attractive and fascinating elements in the story which are likely to enrich or at least influence to some degree the present image of India in Poland. It cannot be denied one will come across slightly stereotyped, or referring to Mircea Eliade's terminology, archetypal parts of this image: Norblin's adventurous grand voyage to India, majestic maharajas' palaces as if created by dreams, the most unimaginable pastimes of the royals, the gods of Hindu pantheon depicted in the most unusual way by the painter, then his life in India full of mysteries, and finally his dramatic suicide in America.²⁹ India, in this new avatar, may re-appear as the land which resembles more of Kipling's literary imageries than the subcontinent's reality of the 1940s. It should not however become a source of worry, because we have always lived on cultural archetypes while projecting our new images or recreating the old ones, and—as Eliade points out—we shall need them to constantly activate our creative imagination without which, I reckon, we may lose a part of our own collective personality.³⁰

Gandhi after Gandhi. The concept of non-violence

Poland's romantic vision of history, full of bloody self-sacrifice and freedom myths, was gradually modified and finally transformed in the 20th century. At the time when the myths clashed with the most brutal reality, and when the contemporary history of Europe produced millions of victims a totally new philosophy of action had to be devised in order to save—as it was defined—"the national substance." Adam Zamoyski in his book *Poland. A History* explains the historical and psychological circumstances of this fundamental shift in thinking on the present and the future:

It was the events of 1918—1921 and the horrors of the Second World War that turned the issue into a moral one for thinking Poles. The consequence was a wide-ranging discussion on the whole question of what a future Poland's attitude to Russia, Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine should be. This discussion was carried on during 1970s and 1980s, in word and print, in smoke-filled rooms and over radio waves, both within Poland and in émigré circles, mostly in London and Paris. It was in many ways the kind of reassessment that former colonial powers were forced to make during the 1950s and 1960s, and it had three fundamental consequences. The first one was that the Poles came to accept the necessity of taking territorial disputes out of the argument. The second was that they grew used to treating other new potentially independent nations as equals and their aspirations as legitimate. The third was an acceptance that the only way forward was through cooperation, at any cost. No formula for adopting any form of violence could be approved of.³¹

The concept of non-violence was, first of all, applicable in the broad area of domestic affairs, especially in the struggle against the Communist regime, which by the end of the 1970s was opposed by a growing number of politically active Poles. This concept was sometimes combined with the idea of civil disobedience, based on the position that laws can be unjust, and that there are human rights that supersede such laws.

²⁹ See: Mircea Eliade 1959.

³⁰ See: Mircea Eliade 1971, see also (*Myth and Reality*, 1963).

³¹ Adam Zamoyski 2009, p. 399.

The whole philosophy of non-violence and civil disobedience, perfectly embodied in Gandhi's satyagraha movement, became a trademark of Polish opposition which must have drawn its inspiration from many sources. One of them was undoubtedly the Mahatma and his formula of a non-violent fight against the oppressors in South Africa and the British colonial rule in India. Gandhi's autobiography had already been translated into Polish and was widely read not only by lovers of the Indian civilization. It was followed by many other publications that shed more light on the historical context of the satyagraha movement. Probably the most politically significant promotion of the non-violence philosophy was Richard Attenborough's film "Gandhi" screened in 1982, in fact only a few months after the Martial Law was imposed in Poland. Mahatma Gandhi became a symbolic figure for many Poles, an archetype of a non-violent freedom fighter, frequently invoked by the organized Opposition, Academia members, journalists or workers. Ashis Nandy, an Indian political psychologist, comes up with an interesting interpretation on the link between this archetypal Gandhi and Polish workers who rejected violence in their political struggle:

When the Polish workers rose against their authoritarian regime in the late 1980s, they talked of Lech Wałęsa as their Gandhi. [...] But the Polish labourers were not interested in the historical, verifiable similarities or dissimilarities between the two; they were making a different statement. They were saying something about what they themselves wanted and about how Gandhi with his weapon of militant nonviolence, had become in our time a symbol of defiance of hollow tyrants and bureaucratic authoritarianism backed by the power of the state and modern technology. For above all, this Gandhi is a symbol of those struggling against injustice, while trying to retain their humanity even when faced with unqualified inhumanity.³²

After 1989, when the Communist system collapsed and the democratic, free-market transformation commenced, this political archetype of Gandhi began slowly to fade away. He is certainly remembered as the founding father of contemporary India, a deep thinker and a history-changer whose universal message is still recognized worldwide. However as history has its unpredictable twists and turns I would not rule out the possibility that a new archetype of Gandhi will one day appear again.

Bollywood and Global Business—the Latest Avatar of India in Poland

Classical Bollywood movies, unlike in Romania or in the former Soviet Union, had not been screened in the cinemas or telecast in Poland prior to 1989. Only the narrow circles of Indology students or best-informed Indian cinema lovers had very limited access to a few films, mostly with Amitabh Bachchan starring. That started to change gradually by the end of the 1990s, however a true breakthrough in accepting "the Bollywood message" took place only in 2004 when *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* was screened in the biggest cinema halls in Poland. Mira Nair's "Monsoon Wedding," although not a Bollywood movie itself, had generated earlier a discussion on the Indian film industry in the Polish media, but it was Karan Johar's mega-hit that showed

³² Ashis Nandy, *Gandhi after Gandhi*, http://vlal.bol.ucla.edu/multiversity/Nandy/Nandy_gandhi.htm; The text was first published in a slightly amended form as "Gandhi after Gandhi" in *The Little Magazine 1*, no. 1 (May 2000), pp. 38–41.

to a local audience the emotional, artistic and commercial potential of the Indian soft-power. The film, with Polish subtitles was available soon on a DVD version and almost immediately found its way to the top 10 best-selling films in the Empik chain of shops located in all the big cities and major towns. The same year one of the most popular film festivals, ENH Cieszyn focused on classical Bollywood movies: *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, *Dil Se*, *Devdas*, *Kal Ho Naa Ho*, *Main Hoon Na*, and in Warsaw and Cracow the first edition of the “Ticket to Bollywood” Festival was organized. In 2006 the top Polish winter spa, Zakopane, became a location for the film *Fanaa* in which the Polish Tatras played the dramatic role of the Indian Himalayas. Both of the superstars, Aamir Khan and Kajol appeared on Polish TV and probably were slightly amazed after realizing how popular and easily recognizable they were, and that in a country which they had come to for the first time and knew very little about. The growing interest in Indian cinema was somehow reflected by the book market. Shashi Tharoor’s controversial book on Amitabh Bachchan was translated into Polish and a young film-scholar Urszula Woźniakowska published her academic study “Bollywood. Yearning for Truth and Longing for Myth.”³³ In the popular press the phenomenon of Bollywood was often analyzed, although in a rather superficial manner. The well-known clichés of escapism and social problems illustrated by a film narrative or archetyped struggle between good and evil appeared, sometimes accompanied by colourful biographies of Shah Rukh Khan, Aishwarya Rai, Aamir Khan or Big B. For the most committed Bollywood fans and for Bollywood “beginners” a special Internet forum in the Polish language www.bollywood.pl has been created, which is believed to be a very reliable source of information on latest films, events, stories or books on the subject.

Another event which strengthened the Bollywood message in Poland was the visit of Amitabh Bachchan to Cracow in April 2011. He was the chief guest of the Off Plus Camera Festival during which the European premiere of his film “Paa” took place. Amitabh Bachchan was officially welcomed by the president of the city, recited publicly in the theatre “Teatr Stu” his father’s poetry, Harivansh Rai Bachchan’s “Madhushala,” and participated in the ceremony of disclosing his father’s portrait in the Jagiellonian University. All these events were widely covered by the popular media in Poland, and later he shared his impressions on the visit with thousands (or millions) of his fans on the blog <http://bigb.bigadda.com/>

The Bollywood presence in Poland is a recent phenomenon but it has already exerted an impact on the process of shaping India’s image. Some stereotyped perceptions may have got even stronger, like the ones emphasizing traditional family values and father-son relations (*Kabhi Khushi, Kabhi Gham*) but there are new elements not visible before. Terrorism as a serious threat to India’s stability (*Fanaa* being quite popular, due to the fact the film was partly shot in Poland), the concept of modern patriotism cutting across the social divisions of religion or caste (*Lagaan*) and the attitude towards Islam (*My Name is Khan*)—these “filmed” and popularized problems were hardly mentioned or referred to in the context of India’s image in

³³ See: Shashi Tharoor 2004 (The original title is *Show Business*, published in 1992); Urszula Woźniakowska 2010.

Poland in the 1990s or prior to 1989 but gradually started to occupy its space in the popular imagination during the first decade of the 21st century. It should be stressed however, that this impact has its own limitations and can generally be discerned in a big metropolis where cultural or academic centers and all kind of activities related to them contribute fundamentally to discovering new areas of inter-and cross-cultural interactions.

The recent Bollywood phenomenon in Poland coincides with another one, which is the arrival of powerful Indian companies interested in huge investments and diversification of their global business. In fact it was Mittal Steel, producing 80 percent of the country's steel, that opened the gates wide for other companies to follow. Lakshmi Mittal and his family drew the attention of the local media which narrated extremely colourful success stories on his global enterprises, with a quite understandable focus on his daughter's costly wedding in the Versailles palace. A story of another Indian company, Infosys generated slightly less colourful but more business-oriented interest in the global capabilities and ambitions of Indian IT and BPO, especially when the decision was made to shift the company's European headquarters from London to Łódź. This relatively new wave of Indian business activities was perceived as a herald of the far-reaching transformation of world economy in which the Asian players are very likely to play a big, if not dominating role in the near future. That was somehow being proved by the sheer amounts of money the new big players allocated for their large-scale acquisitions, green-field investments or joint-ventures. Only in Poland have Indian-global companies invested more than 2 billion dollars.³⁴

The global visibility of Indian entrepreneurs has been often reported by the Polish media, but most of these reports are based on European or American sources. It is very true that these success stories have added a valuable element to the already positive image of India in Poland, but this time the copyrights for this are not held in Warsaw or Cracow. The "success story" message is totally an imported product, nevertheless it appears to fit well into the whole image structure.

* * *

The image of India in Poland has changed significantly since the end of the 1990s when Indian soft and economic power became much more noticeable globally and when it found its shape in the Polish mainstream media. The newest strata of this image structure co-exist with the older ones, based on the stories and narrations dating back to WW II or to the pre-war period. The poetic dimension of this image, most visible in the poetry of Romanticism and "Young Poland" (Młoda Polska), should not be neglected either. There are also some stereotyped elements, as elsewhere in Europe, like social divisions (castes), spirituality (gurus and brahmins), religious

³⁴ Not all the economic reports, both Polish and Indian, provide the same figures on Indian investments in Poland. In case of Mittal the issue is even more complicated, as Mittal holds a British passport and Mittal's company is registered in the EU. Therefore all the investments made by Mittal's company are officially NOT classified as Indian. Nevertheless it is a popular perception that it is "India Inc" (of which Mittal is a part) that has made huge investments in steel business and wields global economic power.

beliefs (sacred cow) which often reflect the reality in a distorted form. People of Poland have their own unique image of India, as I endeavour to prove; the image that owes a lot to the historical, cultural and common socio-psychological bonds linking both countries, sometimes in the most unusual way. One may only wonder if and when the phenomenon of the “clashing images” of India will appear in Poland and how it would be transmitted to the general audience. This phenomenon is already being carefully studied by a few, keen to learn more on contemporary India. At present their number is limited mostly to the representatives of the academic community who are privileged to have much bigger access to the world of international affairs and still do not lose their interest in the problems of universal nature. However that situation is likely to change soon, especially when the globalization process accelerates and the multi-polar world order becomes the only reality.

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