

THE INDIAN EXPERIENCE AS REFLECTED IN TWO ROMANIAN TRAVELOGUES

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Abstract

Traveling destinations have benefited considerably the accounts of travellers who considered it worthwhile to share with others the amazing adventures they experienced while travelling. Some travel journals are extremely personal, focusing more on the author's impressions and feelings triggered by the visited places, while others are more objective and are intended at being accurate and neutral descriptions of people and places. This paper looked into two approaches to India as presented in two Romanian travelogues, one dating back to the second half of the 20th century, and the other to the beginning of the 21st century. The comparative analysis revealed two distinct perspectives on the topic of India as a travel destination, and disclosed that they fully reflect the time period of their writing in terms of intended purpose, attitude towards readers' presumed prior knowledge of the topic and parallelisms with the authors' native land.

Key words: travelogue, identity, cultural difference, comparative study, destination

The globalisation process has enabled travels to far-off destinations with increased ease, thus reducing distances and bridging cultural differences which previously seemed completely incongruent. From a European perspective, the Indian subcontinent has still preserved its exotic nature, for all the documentary material depicting Indian experiences. A significant part in the disclosure of India to foreign travellers has been played by travelogues, which have sometimes significantly contributed to the selection of this country as a vacation destination.

This paper intends to draw a comparative parallel of two travelogues on India signed by two Romanian authors. The objective is to detect the authors' approach of the topic (it is particularly worth mentioning that the two writings are separated by a 30 years' time span), the general intended purpose of the writing and the subjective or objective dimension of the narrative. Before proceeding to the analysis per se, a theoretical framework of travel writing may come as useful, since the comparative study relies precisely on the coordinates which provide a more insightful perspective on the techniques and literary or informative aspects of travel writing.

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Although travel writing has been a very productive genre (or sub-genre, as some critics consider it) since the 17th century or even earlier, it is only recent that it has captured the attention of the large public and critics alike. This recent interest is due to a number of factors which are also accountable for the great boom of the travel industry during the last decades: improvement of transportation means, which have become rapidly available and increasingly affordable, the growth of a general mass of middle-class travellers willing to discover new destinations and possessing the financial means to do so, a growing interest in new and interesting locations, economic and political relations which have eased access to and from various destinations.

Consequently, travel writing has become an integral part of the travelling process, be it under the form of fictionalised accounts of actuality, journals, memoirs and, more recently, blogs – all with a marked literary dimension, or of leaflets, brochures, offers, which a heightened informative function and which could be deemed somehow a sub-division of travel writing.

The products of travel writing are used by (and useful to) all the parties involved in the travel industry. Tourists turn to them in order to find out further information on their holiday destinations besides the standard information provided by travel agencies. These writings, although highly subjective, also display objective descriptions of aspects that are usually presented in a sugar-coated manner by agencies when they leave room for improvement (for instance food, hygiene, the health system, quality of accommodation establishments, etc.). In turn, destinations fully benefit from such written accounts of experiences they provided especially if the authors are personalities of international acclaim (think of Kazantzakis' travel journal), whose worldwide recognition provides them with an authority which extends beyond the field that made them famous. Finally, travel agencies usually resort to informative texts (leaflets, brochures, etc.), which they either produce in-house or translate from various foreign languages, in order to promote the destinations they wish to sell.

Travel writing (alternative structures are used, without a general consensus as to a possible "definite" term to represent this form of narrative: travel story, travelogue, travel book, travel memoir) has coexisted with mainstream literature since the Antiquity, when it reflected partly an interest in travel and its manifold aspects, and partly an interest in history. Since travel writing is considered by some critics a genre in itself, while others see it as a mixture of genres, it has been quite difficult to attach a definition to it. Without being exhaustive, the definition provided by Borm is satisfactory since it refers to the many aspects involved in this form of writing: "any narrative characterised by a non-fiction dominant that relates (almost always) in the first person a journey or journeys that the reader supposes to have taken place in reality, while assuming or presupposing that author, narrator and principal character are but one or identical" (2004, 17). The degree to which a travel narrative blends fiction and non-fiction varies widely among travel authors, and predominance of one over the other dictates a division of readership depending on whether they are more interested in finding factual data on a certain destination or simply a more fictionalised account of it.

In respect of India as the topic of travelogues, as Teltscher claims, "the conventions for representing India are already fixed [...] and the land is over-described" (2002, 191).

They are “fixed” by a century-old tradition, one may say, of various representations of India, under almost as many forms as there are writers (ranging from scientific works to autobiography and fiction). Despite its remoteness to Europe, India has been a privileged topic of travel writing compared to other so-called exotic destinations such as Africa or the Americas. This is mainly due to the vast amount of British writings which have been very productive since the 17th century. In time, writers’ approach paralleled and echoed the economic and political relations established between the British Empire and India.

Thus, in the 18th century, it was mainly represented as a location of great wealth. Given the fact that by the second half of the 19th century, most of India was already under British rule, travel accounts focused more on this relation, with a subtle tendency of suggesting the superiority of the British as compared to the poor and debased Indians. Nevertheless, a part of these 19th century writings, particularly signed by women (for instance Emma Roberts or Maria Graham) opted for an idyllic representation centring on Indian topography, monuments and historic issues. However diverse the forms of expression, the recurrent topoi of travelogues on India are the customs and traditions which seem to be frozen in time, the marked stratified social hierarchy, the rich mythology, and the history of the country.

The 20th century brought about a change of paradigm in terms of approach and discourse. India is thus increasingly mirrored as the background of the authors’ search of identity, and, many times, it seems to be the perfect location for an initiating journey towards the self with the much hoped for outcome of an ultimate epiphany at the end of the road.

The two travelogues under study in this paper also focus on India and were written at a distance of thirty years one from the other. “India. Meridianul Gandhi” was published by Ion Dumitriu-Snagov in 1978, at Editura Sport-Turism. The other one, “Namaste. Un roman de aventuri spirituale in India”, is signed by Sega (penname of Octavian Segarceanu) and was published in 2012 at Humanitas, in the collection “Memoirs. Journals. Travels”.

If one were to consider the publishing house alone, one would be tempted to believe that Dumitriu-Snagov’s book is a regular guidebook on India, with factual data, figures and a discourse whose aim is to convince potential travellers that India may be the perfect solution for holidays. The title also encourages this interpretation; unfortunately, it is not forceful enough to allure readers into approaching the book unless they are truly interested in a holiday to India. On the other hand, Sega’s title is more appealing and promises more. It claims to be a novel first of all (which automatically dismisses the idea of a merely informative text) which, moreover, tells of spiritual adventures. Were it not for the blurb, before actually immersing into the reading, it would be pretty difficult for the reader to realise whether it is an autobiographic account of a travel to India, or merely fiction set there.

In broad lines, both titles are personal accounts of a travel to India, but apart from the main topic which they share, almost everything else separates them, from the intended purpose of the book to the author’s presence in the text, approach to and representation of factual data, discourse features, depiction of secondary characters or general atmosphere. Almost from the very beginning, it is obvious that Dumitriu-Snagov is not at

his first trip to India, which he seems to rediscover with nostalgia for past experiences lived on Indian ground, among which a merely alluded to romantic affair. But this is secondary to the main idea. It is clear that he went to India to do research, which is supported by the fact that his travels across India are mainly dictated by research purposes, and are not tourist exploits.

On the other hand, Sega states from the very beginning that this is his first encounter with India, to which he turns as to a miraculous place that could provide answers to his many existential questions. This trip occurs at a crucial point in his life, when he is overwhelmed by a feeling of desolation at the void of his own existence, which he felt he could no longer conduct along the coordinates of an ordinary existence - a job, a stable relationship, friends and family.

This brief account of the two writings already suggests the authors' purposes. Dumitriu-Snagov's book conveys a clear didactic objective, which is proven by the profusion of cultural references (pertaining to mythology, architecture, literature), some of them very detailed. These erudite references reveal not only thorough knowledge of the Indian background and a sustained research effort, but also the author's subtle intention to educate his readership.

But when Sega mentions culture-specific terms, he does it matter-of-factly, as if he infers that his readers should already be familiar with them. Even if this were not true, his purpose is not at all pedagogical; he simply wishes to share with his readers his travels on the road to self-discovery which happen to occur in India. It is also some sort of a confession of past desperation and future hopes: "I didn't wake up here. I came here to wake up" (28) he claims, and he is undeterred in pursuing his goal: "Tomorrow, the journey continues. Towards myself. Come what may" (33).

It would be impossible to analyse the texts without a consideration of the general extratextual context, which dictates many aspects of the book design, from discourse to content which has to be read between the lines and even attitude towards the potential readership. Dumitriu-Snagov wrote his book in 1978, when Romania was under communist rule, and having to submit to all the limitations imposed by a regime which denounced everything foreign as harmful and potentially subversive. The liberalisation period of the sixties was over, and the Soviet space regained its place as the epitome of all human endeavours and achievements possible, and an imposed model to Romanians in all walks of life. Apparently, it may seem surprising that a topic such as India, which could offer the opportunity of an exotic escape, albeit spiritual, from the all grey Romanian lifestyle was not rejected by censorship. A closer reading, however, reveals that the book echoes the period at various levels.

One is the already mentioned didactic objective. Romanians were informed of another people's lifestyle and values, but it is not just any people. The author insists less, if ever, on the hardship of everyday life in India, on people's humiliating condition of extreme poverty and lack of education. He emphasises the struggles of a people of getting to light, of creating a better life for itself and so Indians are suggested to Romanians as an example to follow. Inevitably, there is also a character, Rao, who is endowed with the role of the civilising hero, deeply concerned with the problems of humankind in general and of the Indian people in particular. For instance, with a purely socialist enthusiasm, he claims:

“We all fight for progress, but not all of us see its social implications in their great complexity” (20). In the seventies, therefore, as depicted in this writing, India was not so much an exotic space (closer contacts with exotic dimensions were not encouraged, since they may have opened Romanians’ eyes and prompted them to dare and want more than what the regime was “generously” offering at the time), as a term of comparison, an example of a nation that was also struggling with difficulties in order to go ahead and achieve ultimate progress.

Since Segă published his novel in 2012, the general historic context is so different than the seventies that it almost seems to refer to another dimension. By 2012, India had not become one of Romanians’ favourite holiday destinations, and people still considered it an exotic space. In the Romanian mentality, it is still not associated with great tourist objectives, but more likely with spiritual experiences that assist the individual in finding a way to self-awakening and self-fulfilment. This image of the Indian sub-continent has been strengthened by the success of a widespread literature of positive thinking in the trail of famous Deepak Chopra. This image of India has become almost a cliché and, in a way, Segă’s writing inscribes itself in this stereotype. Segă assumes this status when he mentions in the very title that his journal is a book of “spiritual adventures”. Thus, it perfectly meets the expectations of the readership which is searching precisely for a local Romanian account of a spiritual adventure in India.

Another relevant difference which reveals the time span between the two writings is discourse construction. During the communist period, standard pieces of writing involved a language abounding in metaphors which sometimes verge on the absurd and the illogical; the style is generally intensely poeticised, but without actually transmitting any message. Dumitriu-Snagov’s writing displays adherence to this style; this is precisely why it is sometimes quite a challenge to understand the main idea of a sentence after a single reading (actually, Allesandro Bausani who signs the preface subtly warns on the difficult writing style). The choice of vocabulary is academic, but words are sometimes devoid of meaning; they only express an idea that, in itself, lacks any consistency. Here is such an example: “The reactors, giants of modern energy, gather around them, with their temple-like authority, a silent cluster of laboratories. Here, everything unfolds according to the rigours of order and responsibility, self-aware seriousness, high-level awareness, for which the lava of thinking raises up to the incandescence of the human race” (20).

At the other extreme there is Segă’s style, which reveals the use of postmodern techniques. Here and there the narration alternates past experience with present impressions, and the layers of subconscious and conscious sensations combine like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. His expectations from his readers are completely different; he does not aim to raise their educational level; he starts from the assumption that they are well-read (he does not explain any accidental mythological references) and with thorough knowledge of English. This attitude towards the readers is proven by the fact that the book is abounds in whole sentences in English: “You have a very good energy, Segă!” or “And now, let’s celebrate the 10,000 Buddhas”. Other times there are simply words inserted in the text, which continue the idea expressed in Romanian: “Pe tine cum te cheama, *beloved?*” or “A iesit din depresie si s-a gandit sa mai *hang around* o vreme”. All these English instances are marked in the text by the use of italics.

It is obvious that the two Romanian authors are not typical tourists. In fact, they do not even see themselves as tourists at all. Their travelling objectives are completely different than the drives behind regular tourists' adventures: Dumitriu-Snagov pursues some research purposes and although he combines his academic activity with sightseeing, his tourist travels are well-documented, and his visiting interests go beyond the superficial taking in of information provided by professional guides. He prefers to go across by land, accompanied by local friends, since he claims he is genuinely interested in discovering authentic India: "I could go *across* India and think *in* India, not merely capture, in grasshopper leaps, landscapes in between flights" (23). In turn, Sega is not particularly interested in sightseeing. He came to India with a very clear purpose in mind: that of joining an ashram in the hope that he would eventually find the path towards self-illumination.

Todorov (1999) classifies travellers into several categories among which the assimilator, the tourist, the impressionist, the assimilated, the exiled, the disillusioned and, finally, the philosopher. We could include the two Romanian authors in this last category. According to Todorov, there are two sides of the so-called philosophic travel: humility and pride, just as there are two trends associated with it: lessons to learn and lessons to teach. Usually, the "philosopher" undertakes a trip with the main aim of exploring the deeper self (which is particularly true in Sega's case).

The means to this end is precisely the contemplation of differences which is the best way of reaching deep within. This may well refer to Sega, since he considers his trip to India as an opportunity to learn the lesson of self-discovery. Dumitriu-Snagov, however, does not manifestly express a desire to acquire some sort of revelation, although, if one were to read between the lines, he considers revelations inherent if you live the Indian experience at a spiritual level as well. In Dumitriu-Snagov's case, as Todorov claims, "noticing differences is only the means to discover the characteristics of things or beings, of situations or institutions. Due to his travels abroad, the philosopher discovers the universal horizons (although they may never be definite) which allow him not only to learn, but also to judge" (474-75). Indeed, in "India. Meridianul Gandhi", the author does not necessarily judge, but filters his Indian experiences through the lenses of the socialist doctrine. Adherence to the doctrine is particularly visible when he praises the nation's grand achievements, making use of an entire repertoire of socialist concepts, and blames on religion people's deplorable condition of extreme poverty.

This consideration of travellers as "philosophers" suggests another very significant aspect of travelling in terms of confrontation with a completely distinct culture. This is particularly relevant when comparing two culturally remote spaces such as India and Romania. The larger the cultural gap between the two interacting cultures, the stronger the reactions of persons faced with this situation. One's own identity is visibly challenged by the confrontation with alterity. Generation-old conditionings and standards deeply rooted in one's own country may shudder and reveal their fragility when the Other presents his own set of values and vision of life. In the foreigner's eyes, comparisons may ultimately be positive or negative. But if he truly seeks an identity appraisal, the encounter with otherness is compulsory. According to Hall, "identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through

the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called the constitutive outside” (2000, 17) that the identity can be positively shaped.

The effect of the confrontation with alterity is sometimes increased by the exotic nature of the destination. This is particularly true when the destination is India and the travellers originate from European countries, for instance. The exotic reveals itself in every aspect of everyday life, from cityscapes to traditions, customs, gastronomy and the locals’ look and appearance.

However accustomed the traveller may be with the destination, as is the case of Dumitriu-Snagov who was not for the first time in India, it is impossible to avoid any reference to cultural difference. Although the author himself does not express any form of bewilderment or culture shock, he explains various concepts and ideas to his readers. For instance, he explains what papaya is like – “fruit from the same family as the water melon, extremely juicy, with a refreshing flavour and reddish pulp” (36). The author also remembers one of his first encounters with aspects of the exotic that happened during one of his previous trips: “I remember my surprise at seeing the huge banana bunches and how Radha laughed at my comparison with corn cobs!” (37).

Dumitriu-Snagov’s approach to Indian realities is an attempt at taking the reader as close as possible to the Other, at bridging differences and facilitating a cultural dialogue in which the potential interlocutors have all the necessary information about each other. In a way, he translates Indian culture to Romanian readers. This is the general impression one is left with after finishing the book. This feeling is also heightened by the fact that the author chooses to explain every possible cultural concept, such as the role of *devadasis*, some sort of Roman vestals, or the meaning of the Bharatanatyam dance. In addition, at the end of the book there is a glossary with Indian concepts, both proper and common nouns, that he recurrently used in the book.

Although for the first time in India, Sega does not necessarily seem to be utterly surprised by what the country places before his eyes. His first impression is sensorial – “It seemed that all the spices of the earth had gathered above this place” (10). He experiences the monsoon through the filter of his job, that of a former advertiser: “*Indian Monsoon*, 150 ml. A spherical recipient with a coral red liquid held by Aishwarya Rai, with an equally red dot between her aristocratically arched brows. [...] Aishwarya Rai is wearing a green silk sari and is lit by a full golden moon, half hidden by the clouds of a violet night” (*ibid.*). It is an attempt at experiencing the foreign through the perspective of the professional.

Both authors resort to comparisons with their native land. It is an unavoidable process, an automatic reaction to the encounter with the new. It is also a means of finding one’s comfort zone by subconsciously searching for similarities in difference. When the universal reveals itself in the particular, it is easier for the foreigner to find his place in the new geographic and cultural space, which, due to such similarities, seems to lose some of its strangeness. Although he inevitably draws comparisons with Romanian realities, these are scarce and telegraphic in Sega’s case, suggesting that he is willing to fully forget about his past life and embrace this new experience whole-heartedly (he even confesses: “The country that I left 15 hours ago is already a memory devoid of any flavour and colour, as if belonging to a different life”). For instance, when he is literally assaulted by the crowd of

taxi drivers at the airport, Sega says: “Guys, I come from Romania, so I’m not that easily impressed (11)”, thus alluding to the chaos to be also found in Romania in a similar situation. When he finally gets on a taxi, he actually realises that taxi drivers are pretty much the same all over the world, with small differences of nuances: “There are no small crosses or icons stuck onto the windshield of the taxi I got in, but Sai Baba of Shirdi, Krishna and Ganesh” (21). The practice is identical, what differs are the deities.

Dumitriu-Snagov’s parallelisms with Romania inscribe within the orientation of the book towards the mediation of Indian exoticism. One such example is the comparison between the temple of Meenakshi and Sarmizegetusa: “Nowhere else but at Sarmizegetusa will you find terms of comparison with the temples of India, elements where ancient traditions preserve the symbolism of the celestial order of the column... the column devoid of any architectural function” (55). Other examples refer to comparisons of worshipping rituals or aspects of countryside lifestyle.

As proven by the two writings under study, the Indian subcontinent has not lost its appeal to travellers in over thirty years. On the contrary, its charm and blending of spirituality and reality seem to exert an increasing fascination over 21st century travellers. The distinct approaches to India displayed by these two authors further highlight the never-ending possible interpretations provided by this country full of history and contrasts. Apart from indicating the evolution of the Romanian travelogue dictated by the natural changes at the level of readership expectations, perspective on exotic destinations and degree of auctorial visibility within a thirty years’ time span, the comparative analysis of the two writings has also revealed the versatile nature of travel writing, which allows for both highly subjective reflections of a given destination, and more objective accounts of the same destination. Without placing themselves at total extremes, Dumitriu-Snagov’s “India. Meridianul Gandhi” and Sega’s “Namaste. Un roman de aventuri spirituale in India” reflect two attitudes towards a country which is constantly changing its face, with the natural consequence that such changes trigger a shift of travellers’ approach to its realities.

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