

# Indo-Russian Discourse of Humanism and Transnationality Reflected in Anna Bhau Sathe, Alexander Pushkin and Afanasy Nikitin's Writings



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гуманизма и транснациональности  
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Dear Putija  
With best wishes.

- Joy.  
SANJAY DESHPANDE.  
7.11.19

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and Transnationality Reflected in  
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**Articles and materials of International Conference  
«Indo-Russian Discourse of Humanism  
and Transnationality Reflected in Anna Bhau Sathe,  
Alexander Pushkin and Afanasy Nikitin's Writings»  
(Moscow, 16–17 September 2019)**

Moscow  
2019



Содержание

Preface ..... 8

**Эльмира Маратовна Афанасьева. Роль Александра Пушкина  
в истории русской классической литературы ..... 12**

**Sonu Saini. Anna Bhau Sathe’s visit to Pushkin land and Afanasy Nikitin to India:  
A Study of the Genre «Travelogue» as Documentary Literature ..... 17**

**Галина Викторовна Якушева. Образ Индии в «Хождении за три моря»  
Афанасия Никитина ..... 24**

**Сергей Николаевич Травников. История создания и редакции  
«Странствования» Ф. С. Ефремова ..... 36**

**Devadatta Rajadhyaksha. Economic issues in India in Nikitin’s writings ..... 41**

**Manendra Sahu. Envisaging energy route on the footprints of Afanasy Nikitin ..... 47**

**Uday Sharma. Afanasy Nikitin’s Voyage Beyond the Three Seas  
and Indo-Russian Cooperation in The field of Tourism and Hospitality ..... 53**

**Rutuja Raut. Changing Social Dimensions of Indian Society since  
Afanasy Nikitin’s Writings ..... 59**

**Sanjay Deshpande. India-Russia Relation in Medieval Era: Historical Background .... 65**

**Kiran Save. Afanasy Nikitin and Major Milestones in Indo-Russian Cultural Relations . 69**

**Kashyap Pathak. India in the memory of Afanasy Nikitin ..... 74**

**Nikhil Gund. Reflection of Indian culture In Afanasy Nikitin’s Writing ..... 80**

**Paras Kumar Sharma. Analysing Nikitin’s journey from Tver to Calicut ..... 85**

## Changing Social Dimensions of Indian Society since Afanasy Nikitin's Writings

India has a long history of civilization and its development. It has always been a centre of attraction for various foreigners, travelers' scholars & explorers since ancient times. Flourishing cultural relations is not a matter of some year's efforts. It has been noted that different types of people like monks for spreading religion, traders for commercial purpose have travelled throughout central Asian states in stormy geographical conditions. These great people have explored India and its every aspects of society, political system, administration and governance, ruling of economy, various cultures and traditions, systems into their travel log and other written sources. Preserving these records was started since the visit of Afanasy Nikitin's to India by filling up the lacuna of documentation. These significant sources not only help in preserving historical records through documents but also they provide a strong foundation in nurturing the various relationships of nations even today with their historical legacy.

### Afanasy Nikitin — The 1<sup>st</sup> Russian Traveler

One such traveler of medieval India Afanasy Nikitin is considered to be the first Russian traveler to visit India. He was a merchant of Tver City which is a beautiful place where two small rivers meet the great Volga and very famous for the trade and commercial practices in ancient time. As far as his journey to India is concerned, some historians have confusion about the starting of his journey either in 1466 and some believe in 1468. He started his journey from Shirvan (the territory in modern Azerbaijan) to Dagestan. From there he travelled to Persia (today's Iran) where he stayed for one year. Later from there he travelled to India and he spent three years in India. Within India also Afanasy Nikitin 1<sup>st</sup> landed at Gujarat and from then he travelled to southern India and later to Sri Lanka. «In the spring of 1469, Nikitin undertook a 6 week voyage on a frail ship across the Arabian Sea and first saw the Indian mainland in Gujarat, where he purchased indigo. He continued his journey by sea from Cambay before arriving in Chaul, a village that is in Maharashtra's Raigad district»<sup>1</sup>.

His visit to India witnessed the reign of Bahamani Sultanate. When he reached India that time the local ruler was a Muslim, who was ruling under Bahamani king Muhammad Shah III. He also took note of Malik et-Tuzzar which stands for the post of Prime Minister of specific area who was very powerful. Nikitin has visited the major cities including Gulbarga and Bidar which possessed the status of capitals. His visit to India proved very important landmark in documenting the life of people and social picture. Also it becomes important in the sense that Afanasy Nikitin became the 1<sup>st</sup> Russian traveler to visit India even before the Vasco Da Gama. His impression about India was well documented in his book titled 'Voyage Beyond Three Seas'. This particular book gets lot of significance as it reveals information of nature of Indian social system, about trade and occupation of people, certain cultural aspects and other important things. In spite of being a merchant his writings and annotation of details in book throws clear lights on his observation skills. He was not a philosopher, not a scholar but still he could analyzed what he observed and documented in his book.



## Reflection of Indian Society in Afanasy Nikitin's Writings

The medieval India was consisted by various dynasties and kingdoms. From the writings of Afanasy Nikitin it can be mentioned that he travelled mostly the southern part of India across the Muslim kingdoms. The powerful among these kingdoms were the Bahamani Kingdom.

### Royalty

While describing the palace of sultan he mentioned the beauty and richness reflected through it. The palace was fretted by the work of precious stones and painted in gold. Inside the palace it was decorated by various vessels. While highlighting the beauty of Bidar palace he states the richness by mentioning that it has 7 giant gates where on each gate 100 armed guards were standing for protection. Afanasy Nikitin was also surprised to get to know that in spite of having infantry and cavalry the Muslim rulers ride on men. Probably there he gave reference of palanquins which was surrounded by so many guards.

### Social classes & Inequalities

Medieval Indian kingdom witnessed agriculture being mostly practiced by common people as an occupation and as a source of livelihood. Related to the agriculture he provides the reference of landlords. Apart from king, and his officers the society was divided into different castes and religion. While categorizing the duties performed by the Brahmins he limits it to only studying Vedas and discharging their religious duties. «As doctors, astrologers, philosophers and historians, they sometimes came in contact with rich and strong men. However, Brahmins did not agree to put the chain of slavery upon themselves, defying all promises of great gifts and honors»<sup>2</sup>. From this we could recognized the caste system imbibed within society.

One complexity comes here to understand the economic gap between people and the king or even the ruling class in general. Nikitin has described that the other administrative officers and the ruling class were rich however the common people were poor and suffering from accomplishing their basic needs.

### Slaves

With the prosperity such evils also existed in Indian society where people who have lost in war were made slaves. There were women, small children, and male in market for selling. Their prices were depending on their qualities, capacity and beauty in the exchange of *tankas* and *dirhams*. Also there were markets for selling and purchasing them and the rates were different for slaves. After their purchase they were utilized for several domestic and military purposes.

### Religion and Its Impacts

A devout Christian, he tactfully avoided several moves to convert him to Islam. He has changed his name as Khoja Yusuf Khorasani for staying and also fasted in the month of Ramzan and follows other practices. Though he did this still it was little guilty for him to follow this practice as by faith he was a follower of Christianity. «But he has a liberal mind. As for the true faith, God alone knows it, and the true faith is to believe in one God, and to invoke His name in purity in every pure place — he declared»<sup>3</sup>. He did found certain



similarities between Russian orthodox Christians and the Indian communities for their prayers. In his writing he has also mentioned that Hindu community people were more comfortable to talk to him than the Muslim. They did not hide anything from me while performing any duty like eating; praying, doing something else, and also they did not hide their wives or put any restrictions on them to come in front of any foreigner. Afanasy Nikitin could observe the different sects within Hindu religion. These people mostly believe in god and they have faith. They performed prayers on time especially idols of lord Ganesha and Hanuman. Also they considered cow as a mother and ox as their father. Cow dung was being used as a fuel for cooking.

### **Social Custom**

However, people who have different faiths they don't eat or drink together. In this matter even inter sects marriages are not allowed. Even the food habits were changed according to changes in food habits about the vegetarian and non-vegetarian food. This also depends on beliefs. Hindus ate non vegetarian food except beef. Rice, vegetables and milk made food were the common ingredients in food. With the same about documenting certain records of social conditions he also wrote that everyone go naked in India. Women also go bareheaded and bare breasted. Small children till the age of 7 were roaming bare feet but still physically they were strong. One notable thing which he mentioned on one side about the bareheaded condition of the people, at the same time he also mentions the wearing of gold ornaments. It is analyzed by some scholars that while going down to Southern India, the intensity of heat increases. So people wear scanty clothes. Probably because of this Nikitin would have considered Indians roaming as naked as such. He also mentions the poverty and high density of population.

While mentioning about the social practices he also mentioned about the trade practices. Being a merchant he focused on visiting commercial areas of exchanges. Among that prominently he described the trade of spices, diamonds and gold. Wealth and elephants were the symbols of richness of the empire and also sometimes the reasons for the conflicts to extend the empire. So this social picture depicted by Afanasy Nikitin in his famous book about the Indian society and its various aspects proved very important source of study for excavating the realities of that time. However, with changing time and circumstances the situations of society have changed to a greater extent. From medieval time till contemporary period social issues have transformed to a greater extent. The social system consisted with the caste, religious factors, mode of occupations, its faith and beliefs, even the food practices have changed. Following are the recent social issues of significance in contemporary times which differentiates modern society from medieval time.

With reference to the Afanasy Nikitin's writing changing dimensions of social issues of Indian society in contemporary time are stated as following. These are the issues existing during medieval Indian society but with changing time the issues have transformed a lot which are mentioned below.

### **Poverty**

In the medieval period the poverty was a major phenomenon with inequality and lack of opportunities to earn more wealth due to certain customs and limitations. In contemporary social system poverty do exists. But the reasons and its parameters have changed.



This issue requires different angles to get solutions. This issue has been a serious problem with changing dimensions during various dynasties. However in modern time also it does exist and impose a challenge to the government to eradicate poverty or at least to reduce it. For reducing poverty various measures have been initiated by the different government and they are still continued. But the reasons for remaining poor and being poor are quite different from medieval time.

### **Kingship and Modern Government**

The type and nature of government matter in terms of evolution of society as it plays the crucial role in creation of opportunities which enhances the life of people. Medieval Indian society witnessed the rigid and conservative practices of rights entitlements to some privileged groups or sections. Later period witnessed rights enjoyed by colonial masters by coming here. As India has its own struggle for independence, various diverse groups also have their own stories of gaining rights and privileges for which they have fought. «The political independence has also led to major changes in social structure of our society and its system of authority by abolishing the feudal systems of zamindari, jagirdari, and the princely states»<sup>4</sup>. These changes are remarkable which had transformed millions of lives for their better future. As far as protection of rights of mostly vulnerable sections Constitution allowed positive discrimination. In earlier social system which was very rigid and conservative doesn't allow such drastic changes easily by other strata of society. So the role of government and constitution proved to be very pivotal.

Another feature of medieval Indian society which explained by Nikitin is of grand royalty of kings and their dynasties. In contemporary society such system does not exist. So treating one person at the cost of another person's rights or just making them inferior for your personal services is stopped now or rather it means violating their rights is a matter of offense.

### **Cultural Touch**

Medieval Indian society used to practice traditional methods in terms of wearing clothes, speaking languages, food habits and celebrations of festivals. The recent trends within social system highlight the impact of westernization where the above mentioned things are getting influenced by the western culture. For this drastic change liberalization, privatization and globalization are responsible elements.

### **From Caste to Class**

This is the epic and unique feature of Indian social system and enrooted within society since Varna system. However the treatments which certain sections used to get have changed by humanity and equality touch with the support of laws and regulations. Today rather than caste concept of class has emerged due to privatization and globalization. «Material wealth serves a purpose beyond financial security and prosperity — it's also a prominent social marker. While that may not be surprising, it does seem that the instrumental value attached to affluence in India is particularly notable. According to the 2013 Ipsos Global Trends Survey, 58 percent of Indians measure success on the basis of what they own — the global average was 34 percent»<sup>5</sup>.



As far as religious faiths and beliefs are concerned freedom is given to the citizens as per their will. However even today in between certain issues of violations related to caste and religious factors takes place as in diverse society like India these matters are sensitive and becomes the part of politics.

### Women's Sensitivity

During ancient times issues of women were neglected or they did not get separate attentions. However with changing time and situation focus on women's issues increased to a greater extent. Issues like gender equality, exercising their rights, exploitations of women and their safety and security are gaining importance. Today women are setting up great records. «A gradual change is now visible in modern-day India, and this can be seen in large cities. Women now have diverse professions as doctors, engineers, entrepreneurs, pilots, taxi drivers and police officers. They have found employment in fields that have been traditionally considered male-dominated»<sup>6</sup>. This drastic change in position of women is not a result of one day or even a one year. It took several years to come out of this conservative social system. «Girls are the world's most squandered gift. They are precious human beings with enormous potential but across the world, they are generally the last to have their basic needs met & 1<sup>st</sup> to have their basic rights denied»<sup>7</sup>. There are many schemes which try to seek the women empowerment from the government side and various NGOs.

### Approaches to Social Problems

Besides these issues mentioned above there are other severe and several issues that are existing in society and putting great challenges to the humankind in general. The nature of crimes now became the individual oriented but having concern of social and communitarian impacts. Problems of child abuse, drugs trafficking, and issues of senior citizens, health and sanitation, education come under the broad arena of social issues. With the same increasing corruption, prostitution, degradation of environment, rapes and violation against women, cyber crimes are of great importance in modern time. Such problems were not addressed expressively in ancient or medieval time. There might be efforts for development but these efforts were not made for all strata of society. Unfortunately in certain parts of Indian society such things repeat with some sections. However, the numbers have declined and the society has transformed.

For this remaining roots of social evils reactions of people, individuals and government matter as they see to it with different approaches. As the issues are becoming personal but impacts are wide, the mechanism to solve these wide range social issues needed to be strengthened. There has to be collective efforts for spreading social awareness, fulfilling duties and responsibilities. Various agencies of government are working on multiple missions and policy programs for their successful implementation. Also with modern and sophisticated technology individuals at their personal level can fight for gaining their rights back with support of law.

The society which was observed by Afanasy Nikitin has transformed to a greater extent with lots of changes imbibing into it and witnessed many dimensions that are quite different from the medieval period. However one cannot deny the role of writings of Afanasy Nikitin in history of exploring realities of India when it was unknown to all other countries. Also it did play crucial role in reshaping the earlier India-USSR and today's India Russia relations which is of great significance.



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