

XI. India in Russian Thought

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Traditional Indian religious scriptures first entered Russia in 1788, when N. I. Novikov translated Charles Wilkin's English language version of the *Bhagavad Gita* into the Russian language. Fyodor Adelung (1768-1843) wrote a manuscript comparing the similarities between the Russian and Sanskrit languages. In 1842 Pavel Petrov (1814-75) was appointed head of the newly created Sanskrit Department at Kazan University. Kaetan Kossovich (1815-83) became the first professor of the Sanskrit language and literature at the University of St. Petersburg in the early 1840's. During the 1852-75 period a German-Russian scholar named Otto Nikolaevich Betlingk assembled the seven volume *St. Petersburg Sanskrit-German Dictionary*. Ivan Minaev (1840-90) who was appointed Reader in Sanskrit Literature in 1869, made three visits to India between 1874 and 1886. In India he lectured in Sanskrit, made important contacts with Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarkar (1837-1925) and other Indian scholars and collected an immense amount of material that he brought back to Russia. When he met Leo Tolstoy in 1883 they discussed Buddhism and afterwards Minaev sent him his monograph on India. R. G. Bhandarkar was elected as an honorary corresponding member of the Russian Academy of Sciences in 1888. In the second half of the nineteenth century, portions of the *Rig Veda*, *Ramayana*, and *Mahabharata* were translated into the Russian language. During that time Russian intellectuals supported Indian efforts to achieve political freedom.¹

The controversial Russian born Madam Helena Blavatsky (1831-91) lived in India between 1867 and 1870. Later in 1879 Blavatsky and the American Civil War Colonel Henry Olcott established the international headquarters of the Theosophical Society in Adyar, India. As a law student in England it was

Blavatsky's book the *Key to Theosophy*, which first prompted the young Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869-1948) to gain an appreciation for the ancient Indian teachings that he had previously ignored. Gandhi later met Blavatsky and Annie Besant but did not care for their ideas on religion.² Vladimir Solovyev (1853-1900) Russia's most eminent philosopher of the nineteenth century, wrote briefly and positively on the religious concepts of Vedanta, Sankhya, and Buddhism.³

As a young man Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) became acquainted with a Buddhist lama in 1847 who instructed him on the ahimsa doctrine of non-resistance to evil, which remained a lifelong theme for him. He first became interested in India during the 1857-58 sepoy mutiny, after which he commented on the "brutality of Great Britain." During the 1870's he studied the religion, philosophy, and history of India, and after 1887 he read numerous books on Buddhism. He was excommunicated by the Russian Orthodox Church in 1901. Later in 1904 he condemned Soyen Shaku (1857/59-1919) the leader of approximately 800 Zen Buddhist monasteries, for his support of the military establishment in the Russo-Japanese war.⁴

In India A. Ramaseshan published a popular socio-political journal entitled *The Aryan*. Being an admirer of Tolstoy he sent him a letter in 1900 and received a long reply the following year that was published in *The Aryan*. Tolstoy wrote that liberation from colonial repression should not be sought by a violent reaction. Political freedom would come about by refusing to serve in the military and by non-participation in the governmental administration. He also believed caste division was a stimulus to national disunity. A 1908 letter of Tolstoy's was published in India, in which he recommended nonviolent resistance. He declared that Indians should not actively participate in the British government and should refuse to take jobs as soldiers, tax collectors, and law court personnel.⁵

When he was over seventy years old, Tolstoy read some issues of the 1902-03 German publication *Theosophischer Wegweiser (Theosophical Guide)*, which contained several sayings

and parables of Sri Ramakrishna. In 1907 Tolstoy referred to Sri Ramakrishna as a saint and praised his teachings. He read an English language book published in Madras on the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna in 1909. From that book Tolstoy marked approximately one hundred sayings that he planned to translate into Russian and publish. Tolstoy also received some excerpts from Max Mueller's book on Sri Ramakrishna. After his death in 1913, one of Tolstoy's followers named I. F. Nazhivin translated Mueller's book on Sri Ramakrishna into Russian.⁶

In 1896 Tolstoy considered Swami Vivekananda's *Lectures on Raja Yoga* to be "most remarkable" and he mentioned that he "received much instruction from it." Tolstoy read two articles in 1908 written by Vivekananda, including an essay on "God and Man" which he described as "wonderfully profound." He especially admired the subtleties and eloquence of his writing style. In 1909 he praised a German language translation of Swami Abhedananda's writings, which he wanted to have translated into the Russian language.⁷ Yakov Popov (1844-1918) a Russian military man and philanthropist who donated money for the construction of a hospital and school on his family estate, met Swami Vivekananda in Calcutta. Between 1906 and 1914 he translated and published Swami Vivekananda's writings on the four yoga's into Russian. *Lectures on Raja Yoga* was translated into the Russian language in 1911 undergoing three editions.⁸

Around 1894 Mahatma Gandhi was very much influenced by Tolstoy's book, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, which was ethically rooted in Jesus' teachings given in the Sermon on the Mount. Reading the book brought about a transformation in Gandhi's thinking, from a supporter of violence to a firm believer in ahimsa. Near the end of his life Tolstoy exchanged several letters during the 1909-10 period with Gandhi. They both advocated civil disobedience, nonviolence, and self-suffering. Two months before he died, Tolstoy hardily endorsed Gandhi's book *Hind Swaraj* and vehemently supported his civil resistance movement in South Africa.

After 1910 Gandhi referred to his 1,100-acre South African community settlement near Johannesburg as “Tolstoy Farm.” In 1921 he wrote that Gandhi and the English author and social reformer John Ruskin (1819-1900), were the two western writers that exerted the most influence over his thinking.⁹

The Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) a founder of Abstract Expressionistic art, was attracted to the Theosophical movement and through it he gained an appreciation of the Indian spiritual heritage. After 1904 Eastern religious doctrines supplied the theoretical ideology that aided him in making the transition into abstract art. He was able to spiritualize art and Abstract Expressionistic landscape painting, by applying Indian ideas of: the unfolding of the universe from the internal to the external, the correspondence between color and sound, and the use of unique imagery to represent the process of evolution.¹⁰ Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938) was a renowned Russian play director, producer, and actor at the Moscow Art Theatre. As early as 1909 he utilized the yogic system of mental concentration, stressed pranayama as the art of correct breathing and had the actors transmit pranic vibrations into space and to each other. He often illustrated his talks to actors with quotes from the Indian sages.¹¹

Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) the prominent short story writer and dramatist visited India and Ceylon in 1890. In 1899 he praised the Russian Jewish physician, epidemiologist, and humanitarian Vladimir Khavkin (1860-1930), who worked to control cholera and bubonic plague in Bombay where he lived from 1893 to 1915. During the 1896-1900 period, Russian medical centers dispatched a number of experts to work with Indian physicians to help quell the plague epidemic.¹² Maxim Gorki (1868-1936) the novelist, short-story writer, and dramatist radically opposed the concept of political non-resistance to the Czarist political regime in his 1900-02 discussions with Leo Tolstoy. In 1905 Mahatma Gandhi wrote an article praising Gorki for his courage in being arrested by the tsarist authorities and his imprisonment. Gorki supported the

Indian liberation movement and established contact with Shyamaji Krishnavarma and B. R. Kama, two Indian revolutionary emigrants in Western Europe. After the Communist takeover of Russia he initiated the idea of creating an Institute for Oriental Studies that Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924) ardently endorsed. Lenin took an interest in Russian-Asiatic studies creating an Institute of Oriental languages in Moscow and Petrograd.¹³

The leading figure at the Institute was the Polish born Theodore Stcherbatsky (1866-1942). In Russia he was a student of Ivan Minaev who later studied Buddhism and the Tibetan language under the direction of the Mongolian Lamas. Assisted by Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarkar and the ruler of Baroda, in 1910 Stcherbatsky lived with a Brahmin pundit from Durbhanga in Bombay. They communicated in Sanskrit and lived in an entirely Indian atmosphere, spending all but two days a month discussing philosophy for the entire day. In India he discovered some rare Sanskrit, Buddhist, and Jain manuscripts. Later he was the director of the Russian Institute of Buddhist Culture (1928-30) and head of the Indo-Tibetan section of the Institute of Oriental Studies (1930-42). In his magnum opus *Buddhist Logic* (1930-32), he made several references to the six traditional Indian schools of philosophy. Living in a Communistic country, Stcherbatsky presented Sarvastivada and Mahayana Buddhism from a non-theistic perspective, yet he was considered by many to be the greatest Western authority on Indian Buddhism. Unfortunately his leading Indology protégés like E. Obermiller (1901-35) and A. Vostrikov (1904-37) died at a young age.¹⁴

Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947) an outstanding artist left Russia in 1917 to settle in the United States and later visited India in 1923. In a letter to Swami Abhedananda in 1928 he mentioned that Sri Ramakrishna's teachings first attracted him to India, which led to his veneration for Swami Vivekananda. Indian themes and mythology were reflected in his paintings. His son Jurij Roerich (1902-60) lived in India from 1923 until 1957 when he returned to Russia. He was a

well known Soviet Orientalist specializing in Tibetan history and language.¹⁵ Petr Ouspensky (1878-1947) visited India in 1915. After returning to Russia he was inspired by Georgii Gurdjieff (1877-1949) teachings during the 1915-18 period. Ouspensky discussed Max Mueller's view of Brahman and Atman in *Tertium Organum* which was published in the United States in 1922. After 1924 Gurdjieff reviewed ideas acquired from Indian religion, such as Atman and buddhi with his followers in the United States and France.¹⁶

Lev Shestov (1866-1938) is one of the three most prominent modern philosophers and mystics of Judaism. Because of a growing disenchantment with the Soviet regime, he and his family moved to Paris in 1920. When he died in Paris there were two opened books at his bedside, a Bible and Paul Deussen's translation of the *Vedas* with a passage underlined.¹⁷ Nicolai Berdyaev (1874-1948) the well-known Russian religious philosopher was exiled from Russia in 1922. He noted similarities between the teachings of Indian yoga and the Christian mystic St. Simeon, while quoting Swami Vivekananda. Berdyaev explained the theological differences between the Christian concept of limited historical time and the eternal time of Hinduism, to Swami Siddheswarananda (d. 1957), former head of the French Vedanta center at Gretz.¹⁸ The Russian born philosopher Abraham Kaplan (b. 1918) taught at Harvard and other leading American Universities. He visited India in 1958 for several months and was impressed with, the philosophy of Kalidas Bhattacharya, and with the Indian religious tolerance and desire to transcend academic pursuits in quest of eternal truth.¹⁹

The renowned sociologist Pitirim Sorokin (1889-1968) was Prime Minister Aleksandr Kerensky's (1881-1970) personal secretary. Because of his anti-Communist activities he was imprisoned, sentenced to death, freed by Vladimir Lenin and eventually deported from Russia in 1922. In 1936-37 he was invited to the Sri Ramakrishna Centenary in Calcutta but was unable to attend. The Harvard professor thoroughly endorsed Sri Aurobindo's criticism of the modern psychoanalytic movement and wrote an

essay on his Integral Yoga which he supported.²⁰ Sorokin edited a book of essays taken from a symposium called *Explorations in Altruistic Love and Behavior* (1950), which included a manuscript written by Swami Akhilananda (d. 1962), the head of the Vedanta Society of Boston. He also edited a book that contained several essays on the subject of yoga entitled *Forms and Techniques of Altruistic and Spiritual Growth* (1954). Boris Pasternak (1890-1960) a poet and novelist who declined the Nobel Prize in 1958, translated poems and verses composed by Rabindranath Tagore into Russian.²¹

Mircea Eliade (1907-86) who established an international reputation in the area of the history of religions was born in Rumania, a country that is located on the Southwest border of Russia. From 1928 to 1931 he studied Indian philosophy under Surendranath Dasgupta (1885-1952) at the University of Calcutta. He then spent six months in an ashram in Rishikesh in the Himalayas. Returning to Bucharest he wrote a PhD dissertation on the comparative history of techniques of Yoga, for which he received a Ph.D. in philosophy in 1933. During his lifetime he wrote three excellent books on yoga and an autobiographical novel with Indian themes entitled *Maitreyi* (1933). He joined the faculty of the University of Chicago in 1957, became a good friend of Ramando Panikkar and shortly before he died was the editor-in-chief of the 16 volume *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (1987), which devotes a large number of pages to Indian and other Asian religions.²²

After World War II Russian scientists continued to investigate Indian related topics. In the 1960's and 1970's a team of Russians scholars using computers and other sophisticated methods analyzed the Harappan script of the Indus Valley and concluded it was proto-Dravidian. Russian archaeologists made important discoveries in Turkmenia of an ancient culture, which was in close economic and technological contact with the Indus Valley civilization.²³

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