

A Soviet Man on a *Rendezvous* with India:
Alexander Dubyanskiy's First Field Trip in Letters

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«Place is security, space is freedom:
we are attached to the one and long for the other»
Yi-Fu Tuan¹

In September 1978, (the then Soviet) and Russian Indologist Dr. Alexander Dubyanskiy (1941–2020) arrived in India for the first time in his life. He, who had made about two dozen visits to his beloved country by early 2020, had been able to go on his first field trip relatively late in his scholarly life, a few years past the defence of his doctoral dissertation and after a number of fruitless attempts to receive a scholarship. Before such a trip was possible, he had gone through humiliating vetting procedures and experienced a few painful rejections. The longest trip in his life had a path-forming significance that goes far beyond its direct purpose of improving the knowledge of classical and modern Tamil.

This paper will look at this episode, well documented in private letters, as a cross-section of multiple liminalities, and explore the intricate combination of different, at times contradictory, feelings born out of this experience. The 9-month trip was a challenging enterprise, in logistical, socio-cultural and many other senses, but not least because of the underlying «fear of liminal experiences as truly personality transforming events» (Thomassen 2012, 30). The title refers to a famous literary essay by a 19th-century Russian literary critic Nikolay

1. Tuan 2014, 3.

Chernyshevskiy, *Russian Man on a Rendez-vous* (1858), dedicated, among other things, to a somewhat in-between status of “positive” literary heroes in Russian prose. Although this present piece has no *prima facie* connection to the principal message of Chernyshevsky’s article, through allusion to its title, it highlights the feelings of anxiety, insecurity, even agony that go hand in hand with attempts to venture out into the unknown, encounter new worlds or test oneself in a different environment. This rendezvous with “Otherness” can, indeed, be a very disturbing experience, as we are «confronted by the limitations of our own constructions of identity and difference»².

It would be useful to take a closer look at the general circumstances behind Alexander Dubyanskiy’s trip, before we analyse the epistolary sources. As might be well-known, during Leonid Brezhnev’s reign (but of course, also before and after it), all trips abroad, even to the countries considered “Friends of the Soviet Union”, were closely watched, applications were scrutinised on several levels, starting with trade union committees at workplaces and local Komsomol or Communist Party cells. After the candidacy of the person in question had been approved on these lowest levels, there came the turn of higher authorities to issue their opinion and approval (rejections were issued far more often, though). The lucky ones, who were finally cleared for crossing the border, could only do so after applying for and receiving their foreign passport, which had to be exchanged for their internal passport: the latter had to be kept at the personnel or other responsible department at their workplace during the whole length of the journey abroad. Finally, the last steps consisted in receiving a host-country visa and obtaining the USSR exit visa.

Alexander Dubyanskiy came from the family of a military serviceman, inevitably a Communist Party member, however, his own reputation did not inspire confidence at the Moscow State University administration: more than once he had said “no” to strong suggestions to join the CPSU, remaining expressively critical of the official ideology. Yet, back in 1978, the need to develop better programmes for teaching “rare” Indian languages in the USSR prevailed, and, Dubyanskiy, along with another colleague from the Institute of Asian and African Studies, was awarded a scholarship, which was jointly funded by the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) and the Soviet Ministry of Education. Following a few tough interviews and checking procedures, approval was finally obtained and both types of visas, the necessary papers and the Aeroflot tickets to Delhi were issued. This scholarship allowed Dubyanskiy to spend 9 months in

2. Thus Simone P. Fullagar put it, after Alphonso Lingis; see Fullagar 2001, 172.

India, from mid-September 1978 to mid-June 1979, as a postgraduate student at the Department of Tamil at the University of Madras.

As a matter of fact, this long trip was Dubyanskiy's first visit anywhere outside the borders of the Soviet Union. Hence, he saw it not only as an opportunity to greatly enrich his practical knowledge of South-Indian culture, to deepen his understanding of Tamil literature and master the language, but also as a precious chance to get closer to the world "outside the Soviet Union and India". In the 1970s and 1980s, India's economy might have been closed and highly regulated, but the country's cultural policy was incomparably more open than that of the Soviet Union, so it was only natural to take advantage of this attractive cultural opportunity and look at India as, in a way, a hub where different civilisations could mingle freely – a safe space amid the troubled waters of world politics.

It is worth mentioning at this point that Alexander Dubyanskiy's position in India, if seen within the context of the possibilities open to the average Soviet visitor to this country, had certain lucrative angles to it. Due to the specific conditions of the Indo-Soviet scholarship programme, while being affiliated to the University of Madras, his scholarship came from two sources – the ICCR and the Soviet Ministry of Education. This scholarship was good enough to purchase academic literature and almost any other books of his choice, move freely wherever he wanted on a daily basis and even make some long trips around India. He still needed to pay occasional visits to the Soviet Union Consulate in Madras, in order to receive mail and his monthly allowance, but, being a postdoctoral student, he was formally not accountable to any Soviet institution in India; thus, he experienced independence unseen by almost all Soviet citizens working or studying in India at that time³. Alexander Dubyanskiy maintained an intensive (as much as was allowed by the postal situation) epistolary exchange with family and friends, writing several lengthy and detailed letters every month. Postal correspondence served as the one and only stable channel of communication, since the telephone connection between India and the Soviet Union was almost non-functional at the end of the 1970s. These 30-odd letters have been securely preserved by our family, numbered and kept as a separate bundle in an archival box. From the present-day perspective, they may serve as an interesting, even unique documentary source which contains personal impressions and reflections

3. Noteworthy that in India, undergraduate students from the Soviet Union were always closely watched; they also had to regularly report their whereabouts to particular consular officers and obtain permission to travel.

on everyday experiences in India, reports on routines and adventures, vignettes of life in Madras and Tamilnadu in 1978–79, and also a subversively-presented story of Alexander Dubyanskiy’s entangled emotional relationship with India, his home-country, and the world beyond the two. The 9-month-long trip, documented in letters, we wish to argue, exists within a distinct tempo-spatial unity, or, to use Mikhail Bakhtin’s term, a «chronotope», which has unique features – we observe a Soviet traveller at the end of the 1970s, who has to deal with multiple “new” worlds while living in India, who undergoes *rite du passage* to embrace the “Otherness” and rethink his relationship with his own world⁴.

The literary qualities of these witty, content-rich, epistolary notes allow us to see a value in them that oversteps their significance as purely private documents. In this paper, we treat the text as a travelogue of sorts, especially taking into the account that although the letters were meant as a private way to communicate with the closest family members, most passages were *de facto* written for public use, because the audience to whom they were read aloud often included a wider circle of relatives and friends. There was another angle, as well: it is worth bearing in mind that, in the 1970s, a person writing letters, as well as the addressees of letters, remained constantly conscious of the fact that in the Soviet Union privacy did not exist as such – private letters could be opened and subjected to perustration at any given point on the way to their destination. Inevitably, the presence of hypothetical “controlling readers” made people avoid mentioning some details, refrain from expressing certain thoughts, sometimes even use enigmatic expressions and ‘code-words’ known only to their confidants.

The idea of using these letters as material for a kind of illustrated epistolary travelogue was discussed in our family during the early lockdown months of 2020. Eventually we postponed this project till autumn; in mid-October, shortly before his unfortunate illness, Alexander brought the bundle of these letters out from his archive. In this way, he sanctioned the work on them, and, our family wants to believe, he would not have minded us discussing them, at least partially, in public⁵. We opened the letters soon after his passing and immediately engaged ourselves in reading and digitising the texts. We found this experience of travelling back through the decades to be soothing, consoling, but also very entertaining and joyful. We could almost live through these weeks and months in India together

4. Bakhtin 1981.

5. The full edition of these letters, with only very minor omissions, is now in preparation. The book illustrated with colour slides, made by Alexander Dubyanskiy during this field trip, will hopefully be published in Moscow by early 2023.

with him, revisiting our own past and even stumbling upon some answers regarding Alexander's personal and professional growth.

The special nature of Alexander's status in India, we would like to argue, made him experience a strange state of "non-belonging", disturbing and exciting at the same time. As a scholar of Tamil, he longed to dive deeper into South-Indian culture; yet, even when full immersion was theoretically possible, he clearly realised that one could only experience it up to a certain limit. As a Soviet citizen, he treasured these months of detachment from the Soviet reality and cherished the unique sense of freedom India could give. But all too often he was desperately homesick; as time progressed, he dreamt more and more of going back home and taking a walk in the coolness of a Russian forest. Loneliness often caused gloominess and at times drew him towards somewhat uncomfortable relationships with some of the consular staff in Madras. Finally, it was in India that Alexander could experience and enjoy the "outer world", encounter and explore different other cultures without the fear of being punished: films, books, food items and, of course, people from countries to the East and to the West of India formed a very special cluster of his impressions. But here, too, he was often torn apart by contradictory feelings: on the one hand, his rich cultural background entitled him to see himself, at least at times, as a "citizen of the world", but on the other, the political reality of that time prevented even the dream that Soviet people could one day be part of the global community. No wonder that on leaving India in June 1979, Alexander experienced a keen tragic sense of forced separation from a newly-gained personal freedom and fullness of life. He had little hope of returning to India soon, and he was almost sure that even maintaining epistolary contact with some of the Western scholars he had met would hardly be possible. One cannot help but rejoice at the fact that life did, after all, prove his fears wrong!

Many remember Alexander Dubyanskiy as a generally relaxed person with multifaceted interests and a calm and positive attitude to life. That said, one could expect the letters from this first trip to be a testimony to his curiosity, adventurous spirit and optimism – which they were to a certain extent; but the end of the 1970s was, indeed, a dark hour for many Soviet citizens, the era has left its mark on people's minds and souls. What could strike the reader in these letters is a tangible sense of sadness and recurring acknowledgements of an unquenchable longing, born, among other things, out of an existential split that, in fact, many travellers experience: «Now that the first impressions have worn off, the *longing* is beginning to set in» (dated 2 October 1978); «My mood hasn't changed much. I've been feeling *homesick* lately, thinking about everyone all the time; in fact, I

always feel togetherness with all my relatives [...] if I see something I think: “I’ll tell everyone about it”, if I take a picture: “I’ll definitely show you this”, etc. And waiting almost a month for the next post is just *excruciating*» (13 January 1979); «My mood, however, has been rather *crappy*, both because of general problems and in general – all sorts of festivities make me feel *unwell and lonely*» (23 February 1979).

Apart from deeper worries, it was sheer logistics of communication that brought added distress. It might be hard to believe now, but, having left Moscow in September, Alexander could only make one short voice call home on the 31st of December! It was made via radio communication installed on the captain’s bridge of a Soviet commercial ship in the port of Madras (!). There were technical glitches, the conversation was hectic and, it seems, left everyone even more insecure than before.

A few months were spent by Alexander and our family exploring an opportunity for his wife Natalia to join him in India for a short while: «I feel a sense of *unease* (even guilt) towards you, coming from the fact that I’m having so many experiences, seeing so many interesting things – all without you. The thought of how good it would be to be with you together, to show you so many completely different things – constantly crosses my mind. I am even thinking of purchasing a trip to India for you and me someday, once I have saved up the necessary amount of money. Well, we’ll see. It will soon be a month into my trip, and the impressions keep coming over me, so I really feel powerless to put them down on paper» (12 October 1978).

The project of a family reunion in India turned out to be futile: fearing that Soviet couples would elope together when abroad, the state only allowed couples from certain institutions and governmental structures to live together. There were no formal rules against such trips, but *de facto* it was impossible to get permission. The sense of disempowerment is clearly recognisable from this observation made after meeting a friendly Western Indologist in Madras: «I’m not sure if I’ll see her here again in winter: her husband is going to come to India and they are planning a trip together (*I guess, he’ll just come like this, he’ll simply fly in!*)» (8 November 1978).

Alexander tried to develop strong connections with local people in Madras, he made friends with some colleagues, and started visiting people at their places (in cities, small towns, in villages). He felt good talking to people from different classes, took every opportunity to converse and even found bargaining in Tamil to be a very “rewarding” process. But at the same time, he chose to maintain a good

relationship with some of his fellow countrymen. Amongst the other Indian cities within the Soviet network of influence in India, Madras remained a relatively important spot, given its size and the presence of the seaport there. The Soviet Union had a Consular department, a Centre for Science and Culture in a separate building with a concert hall, a trade representative and a few news agency offices. Soviet Novosti Press Agency (also known as APN) in Tamilnadu was at that time headed by the Frolov family, one of whom, Tatiana, was a fellow Tamilist and a good, supportive friend.

Alexander did not really have to maintain contacts with other Russians in Madras, but he still chose to do so, as if recognising the need to invest in an additional support system. From time to time, he took part in functions, festive dinners and informal parties; he did so, more often than not, out of a sheer sense of politeness and the need to have added security. Eventually, he did get some practical help from these circles, but it all came at a price. As a result of this *quid pro quo*, by March 1979, he ended up having accompanied (as a pianist) a few children's matinees and festive concerts (for example, for New Year's Day, Soviet Army Day, International Women's Day, etc.), given some kids musical training, organised a full classical concert for a vocal aficionado from the Consulate and even delivered a lecture on Indo-Soviet friendship himself.

The subversively-forced nature of these activities was another source of unhappiness: «I don't often like being in the Consulate, – he confessed in December 1978, – because it is a place where all sorts of gossip and rumours circulate; one always gets slanted stares and envious glares there, people just keep on chewing the fat. I am a free, independent person and, in principle, have no special relationship with anyone there [...]». In the end, Alexander managed to use his consular contacts to his benefit: a crucial task of sending his huge collection of books and exotic curiosities to Moscow via sea cargo would not have been possible to fulfil without a nod from the headquarters of the Soviet Consulate in Madras.

Affiliation to the University of Madras allowed Alexander Dubyanskiy to take part in academic events of very different levels, organised often in strikingly contrasting styles. These included, for example, an international anthropological conference (December 1978), which attracted a good number of Western scholars and was held in English, and a Tiruvācakam conference in Kumbakonam (January 1979), which took place in a Saiva temple, where everyone was wearing white ceremonial clothes to fit the dress code of the gathering. The emotional accounts of these events could reveal a bigger picture of how the protagonist was positioning himself in the intellectual world.

The anthropological conference, it seems, made Alexander painfully aware of his belonging to a different “camp”, not so much in the political sense, but, rather, academically, as he felt, he was not sufficiently trained in listening to the ‘conference style of English’ and was not fluent in Western academic jargon. It was his gift of self-irony and humour that helped him add only light self-humiliating notes to his description of the event and avoid feeling uncomfortable for too long: «Among the bearded, pipe-smoking, self-confident Euro-Americans, I certainly felt out of place. And I *was*, in fact, *out of place*, as I knew no one and was not an official member of the conference, so no one knew me either. I think a lot of people looked at me and wondered, “Who the hell is this guy?” but no one asked me directly, except for one young and rather unsympathetic Canadian who came up to meet me but was disappointed, I think, when he found out where I was from» (22 December 1978).

The atmosphere of the Tamil conference in Kumbakonam was more jovial. Here, too, Alexander was aware of the differences between him and other conference guests, however, it expressed itself on a new level, as he felt “anything but ignored”: to begin with, he was handed «a badge with a ribbon (as a participant), a programme and a book of food tickets». He goes on:

It should be noted at once that I was dressed in a white *veshti*, i.e. *like everyone else*, although it turned out that I represented the “white race” at the conference *all alone* and was therefore *not like everyone else* – which again gave rise to many questions, conversations, interviews, etc. In general, of course, I attracted a lot of attention, which ranged from finger-pointing to all sorts of questions and conversations [...]. I was most concerned, however, with my inability to sit on the floor “tailor style”, so I could only do it “failure style” and thus attracted even more, I should say, sympathetic attention (almost sympathy). And, to be noted in a parenthesis, I would have gladly accepted this sympathy, because by the end of each of the three days of the conference my body was crying out for mercy, aching and moaning – because all the papers had to followed from the floor level. (27 January 1979).

One is tempted to interpret the two descriptions in terms of a typical West *vs* East dichotomy, as we recognise here the depiction of a colder, rational, excluding, even unsympathetic “Western” crowd contrasted by the image of a warmer, emphatic, emotional “Eastern” community. Alexander, however, never needed to choose between the two, in order to go either the “Western” or the “Eastern” way. As it seems, at a certain point, he felt somewhat alienated from both, although in his later years, he did manage to integrate himself better in them, both academically

and personally. Yet, truth be told, he never mastered snooty conversations and sitting in a cross-legged position.

One of his early contact figures in the “Western” academic world was Prof. Brenda Beck. She was affiliated to the University of Madras for a short while in 1978, and left a very bright impression on Alexander’s mind, striking him as a very warm person, «without any trace of arrogance». She was ready to give her time and share valuable advice regarding Alexander’s academic project; as he puts it in his letters, «I tried to give her the gist of it, but I did it confusingly, stammering in English so it was a shame» (8 November 1978). Prof. Beck sounded nevertheless encouraging and promised to send reprints of her articles to Moscow; she apparently kept her promise later on. She also spoke about the international Tamil conference that was due to take place in 1980; being a member of the organising committee she encouraged Alexander to come to India again – it was «a very tempting and honourable» invitation, but he was quite sure, nothing would come of it, as casual conference visits were almost never allowed to Soviet scholars.

Alexander’s letters are a bitter testimony to the fact that closed borders, cultural and intellectual isolation are extremely harmful for academic life. While “classical” (in a very broad sense of this word) world culture was, with certain limitations, “allowed” in the Soviet Union, things like contemporary lifestyle and cultural trends, current intellectual achievements and modern philosophy were deemed “non-progressive”, “reactionary”, “dangerous” and were, therefore, considered unfit for the citizens. It didn’t take much to bring a cultural shock to hapless Soviet visitors on their first trip abroad. The following passage describing Alexander’s visit to Kerala’s seafront reveals exactly this kind of innocence about the ways of the world:

A few odd-looking characters show up now and then, wearing peculiar outfits – oversized shalwars, some sort of shapeless robes, loose shirts, *veshts*, or even just loincloths. They walk with staffs in their hands, carrying primitive bags; they have beads, earrings, often long hair, some, on the contrary, are clean-shaven. These are the hippies. They have chosen Kovalam Beach as their camping ground (however, we later found out that the main hub of the hippies is in Goa). Near us, a couple settles down to enjoy the sun; the girl only has a strip of cloth on her loins. The sun is blazing all the time, but it does not bother her [...]. (27 February 1979).

Encounters with various “foreign” (for India) things were a common thing in Indian cities, there were a lot of international products on display: restaurants serving ‘exotic’ for India cuisine (Alexander mentions, among others, Chinese

restaurants in Madras and a very authentic Vietnamese bar in Pondicherry), cinema halls where one could watch the latest “Bondiana” and popular American films, and, of course, rich and spacious bookstores (like the iconic “Higginbotham’s” in Madras). Western books were especially tempting: he was determined to bring back to the USSR not only professional literature, but collections of comic books (the “Asterix” series), recent detective novels, some English classics, although he felt constantly stressed about transporting all these newly acquired treasures back home.

Two essentially “Western” places in Tamilnadu became for Alexander the metaphor for an unattainable academic paradise. The French Institute of Pondicherry was a place to admire: occupying «a luxurious two-storeyed mansion, overlooking the embankment», it served as the embodiment of «silence, cleanliness, grace» (April 1979). Its library and a friendly bookstore could only compare to the library and the territory of the Theosophical society in Madras – both places were deeply missed by him when he left, and he tried to pay a visit to them each time he returned to Tamilnadu thereafter.

As time passed by, the Western “exotic” things India could offer were getting more familiar: impressions were settling down, books were being packed to be sent back home and, generally, the hunger for the outer world was being quenched little by little. Alexander felt a bit less disturbed about his Soviet contacts in Madras; he was still missing home but was more in peace with his loneliness. In other words, he was, finally, ready to focus on his own “discovery of India”. He occasionally admitted a sense of tiredness caused by the heat and noise, complicated logistics, intensity of life, but India at large took the central place in his epistolary reports.

Alexander Dubyanskiy was building his relationship with the three worlds – Indian, Russian and Western – mainly relying on human contact, for through this there was reconciliation with the foreign world as well as with one’s own. The human dimension is extremely important in building a relationship with the “place” (in Yi-Fu Tuan’s sense of the word) in India, which, eventually, was to be found in Madras. From the very first days, the capital of Tamilnadu was perceived as a friendly *topos*, but it was only in April 1979, when Alexander was able to express his deep love towards this city in a truly panegyric way:

Going past the lighthouse recently in the afternoon (the road to the consulate is just off Marina – along Marina Beach itself), I decided to climb its stairs [...]. I’d been up once, but it was during the rains, and although it wasn’t pouring from the sky, there were dark clouds over Madras and the city was shrouded in fog, so the view from the lighthouse was limited (but still great). Now, on a

sunny day, the skyline opened up and the city showed itself at its best – with its white buildings, tall hotels, promenade and masses of palm trees. From above, Madras was immersed in greenery – palm trees and all – what a beautiful city! And now it's so close and dear to me, and of course, I'll miss it. (24 April 1979).

Madras was, of course, not home in a real sense, but, rather, a domesticated city, a place to recuperate after intensive escapades. The bigger space, or greater India, was waiting to be discovered and 'tamed'. The epistolary travelogue records the moment, when Alexander leaves Madras for the first time, to get to know and embrace rural Tamilnadu, on the way to Madurai. The passage about the joyful recognition of things that had been learnt in theory is self-explanatory:

We set off early as it was a long journey. As we left and drove out from Madras, the countryside began – towns, villages, rice paddies, sugarcane plantations, coconut palms, bananas. Along came the village temples and shrines I'd read so much about – images of snakes or a goddess on a platform under a sprawling tree or just a stone tied with some cloth. Soon I started noticing the temples of Aiyandar, the village patron god: they are usually recognisable by sculptures of horses made of clay or terracotta. Beautiful landscapes, interesting scenes and pictures unfolded like in a movie, and it was a pity to rush past them so quickly. The road we travelled was good in itself, but here we must also take into account the peculiarities of local manners: free stretches were rare, and mostly it was busy with people carrying some kind of luggage (often on their heads), just lying almost on the roadway, cyclists riding as God intended, cattle – walking, lying down or pulling heavy carts, dogs sleeping right in the middle of the road, trucks rushing along so that they couldn't be avoided. In addition, crows, chipmunks, lizards and, on one occasion, monkeys, which I thus saw here for the first time in their natural state, almost climbed under the car's wheels. (12 October 1978).

In November, Alexander went on a month-long grand tour of the country, visited cities, archaeological monuments, and religious centres. Together with his colleague and travel-mate Dr. Boris Zakharyin, they covered a few thousand kilometres in four weeks, heading first to Kerala and Karnataka, then, via Bombay, to Ajanta and Sanchi, dropping by Lakhnau on the way to Benares and mapping the movement back towards the south from Calcutta, along the eastern coastal line. It was an extraordinary but tiring journey that ended in the present-day Telangana. The trip was a quintessential experience in terms of accepting the "Otherness" of the country and, what is most important, being accepted by India.

He would later refer to this trip as a ‘pradakshina’ and a life-shaping event that made him look into the depths of time and taste India’s troubled modernity. The trip was a “chronotope” in its own right, as the two explorers found themselves in a very special time-warp, which is typical for event-filled voyages into “exotic” worlds. For a few weeks to come, they could not maintain contact with their “own” worlds, as receiving letters or keeping in touch with families was technically impossible; the flow of impressions and the intensity of travelling, often by night trains or buses, made them almost forget everything and concentrate on living the “here and now”. Needless to say, this episode made Alexander unaware, at least temporarily, of political borders and cultural differences, helped him detach himself from the crisis of belonging he had experienced during his first weeks in Madras; he was, thus, able to give himself over to the frenetic spirit of the journey. The sense of liberation and ultimate freedom he experienced would not be recreated in any other circumstances later on.

The whirlpool of impressions was starting to calm down only when they reached Palampath, a quiet village in the Warangal district (present-day Telangana). Visiting a group of 13th-century temples – the creation of the Kakatia dynasty – Alexander experienced a catharsis-like moment that justified the hardships of the previous weeks. The energy of the trip transformed itself into *śānta bhāva*:

From Vishakhapatnam we went to Vijayawada [...] then to Warangal, and from there we travelled to Palampath village by bus. This was the grand finale of our trip – indeed, a gorgeous experience. The place is apparently little visited by tourists – thanks God for that – so both the temples and the area itself retain a sense of intactness. There's a complex of medieval temples, sadly much ruined, but still retaining some gorgeous sculpture and stone carvings. The area is, as I said, rustic – silent, with only the sound of birds and the creaking wheels of heavy rice straw carts coming in a caravan from the fields to the surrounding villages. The landscape is very beautiful – fields, palm trees, forested mountains, huge boulders, especially in the bed of a dried-up river, and a large lake about a kilometre from the village. The dilapidated temples and shrines are hidden by dense greenery, often just braided by tree branches (Kipling comes to mind again). We made a considerable detour around. I can't tell you the thrill of walking on Indian land – in the middle of nowhere, in the countryside, in touch with the Indian nature and with the life, unhurried and simple, which had been going on like this for centuries. Actually, if we put aside the bus and the paved road, everything else – palm leaf covered huts, wooden ploughs, oxen, carts – is absolutely primordial. Of course, this is a superficial glance, there have been

changes in the internal life of the village, but an outsider gets a sense of it being quite a patriarchal place. (19 December 1978).

The epiphany to “the wonder that was India” should bring us to the concluding part. Alexander’s travelogue in letters, reveals, through his direct and indirect statements, the image of India as a “soft power”, a neutral secure space, where people and civilisations could meet and enrich each other. In this way, the challenges of this essentially liminal experience could be, if not fully overcome, but at least levelled down significantly and turned into cultural advantages. For an engaged and attentive outsider like Alexander Dubyanskiy, even post-Emergency India – traumatised, economically and morally shattered – succeeded in playing the role of a cosmopolitan paradise. It was a paradoxically calm, integral space, where, in a striking contrast with the Soviet Union, free will, open-mindedness and freedom could be exercised without any fear. Not every Soviet visitor to India could experience these emotions and thoughts – it was due to the uniqueness of Alexander’s position that he could enjoy the trips and the freedom of movement. He used to confess later on that the return to Moscow, as joyful as it might have been for personal reasons, was a moment of despair for him on a socio-cultural level. He could not have known back then if he would ever be able to make another escape to India, and he certainly could not have predicted that it would only take ten years for walls, some metaphorical, some real, to fall.

TATIANA DUBYANSKAYA



Alexander Dubyanskiy on the rooftop of Hostel for Postgraduate students, University of Madras (1978).

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