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Benares on the Rhine: India in the German Literature of the 20th Century

Martin Kämpchen

Germany is a Central European country, surrounded by other countries except two sea-fronts in the North where you have the North Sea and the Baltic Sea. This central position allowed Germany to absorb influences from all directions. Culturally, Germany was influenced profoundly from three basic directions: from the South, the West and the East. In the *South*, German people discovered the sun-bathed countries Greece and Italy which contrast happily with foggy and cold Germany. Both countries, Greece and Italy, are pictured in the German mind as places of warmth, of classical beauty, of graceful landscapes and long beaches and as places where hospitable, friendly people live who are endowed with a dignified life style and a certain lightness of life which the more serious and ponderous German character is missing. This yearning towards the South began even before Goethe's iconic travelogue *Italian Journey* about his escape to the happy South. In fact, this yearning continues even today. I was told that in the city of Rome more than thirty German cultural organizations are active.

Towards the *West,* Germany discovered the American continent, especially North America to which scores of Germans emigrated in the 19th and 20th centuries. While Europe was considered the "old continent" where nothing was left to discover and explore, North America was seen as a place where adventure was still possible. The pioneering spirit of the American people inspired reams of fiction, as did the fight of the Red Indians to maintain their land and their rights.

Finally, Germany looked to the *East* for cultural and spiritual enrichment. German intellectuals discovered the melancholy, but proud spirit of Russia, they explored the cultural wealth of China, of Japan and of India. Strangely, there was no yearning for the

East which combined and embraced these four different cultural entities. There was no pan-Eastern yearning because Russia, China, Japan and India were seen as culturally quite diverse. We can see this for example with Hermann Hesse who began by studying India's spiritual traditions and then moved on to China and Japan.

The yearning for India was enkindled in Germany by the Romantics in the early 19th century. The knowledge of India was then restricted to the descriptions of a few travel writers and to the incomplete or inadequate translations of philosophical works. Imagining India was unfettered by concrete facts and information. The German Romantics saw in India the "cradle of humanity", peopled by naïve, childlike human beings.

However, scholarly interest in India began early in Germany. In 1808, the first chair of Indology was created and a leading Romantic writer, August Wilhelm Schlegel, took charge. At that time, two hundred years ago, the interest in India unfolded on three levels: on the level of travel literature, on the level of literary fiction and Mythology and, finally, on the level of Philosophy and Philology.

Germany's relation with India was, from the beginning, free of colonial and commercial interests. England, being the colonial power in India, strived to construct a realistic picture of what India was. A romanticizing picture would not have helped governing and controlling the country. In contrast, Germany was able to project its secret emotional desires, its civilisational disillusionment, its weariness with Europe on to India and seek from India the rejuvenation of humanity. Even great Indologists like Max Müller did not deconstruct the polarity that was built up between a "spiritual East" and a "materialistic West"; others like Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore and S. Radhakrishnan did their part to cement the cliché of this polarity.

Travel literature around the turn of the century

This 'orientalisation' of India by the German Romanticists was partly countered by the travel literature produced in the late 19th century and early 20th century. It aimed at depicting India realistically and precisely. Authors wanting to write on India no longer needed to base their texts on their imagination. The image of India could be created more factually. Interestingly, these early travel writers were mostly noblemen and noblewomen and diplomats and their wives. Let us read out the list of these writers:

- Franz Ferdinand, Arch Duke of Austria-Este
- Rupprecht, Crown Prince of Bavaria
- Irma Princess Odescalchi
- Hans-Hasso von Veltheim-Ostrau
- Marie von Bunsen
- Elisabeth von Heyking

Typically, they would travel at great cost and with a large entourage and experience India from the perspective of a Europe that laid the proud claim on ruling the world civilisationally.

Scientists, too, were on their way in India and did not only collect their material for research but they also wrote down their travel experiences. Among these were scholars of high acclaim, as the zoologist Ernst Haeckel and the Indologists Paul Deussen and Helmuth von Glasenapp.

Journeys of well-known Writers between 1900 and 1914

Two decades after this wave of aristocratic travel writers, a small group of distinguished literary writers began to explore India. They traveled alone and in comparatively simple style, that is without the investment their noble predecessors were able to bring to their trips. Between 1900 and 1914, that is until the outbreak of the First World War, these

German writers for the first time wrote about India with first-hand experience. Again, they were not typical travel writers but they had established themselves in different literary genres before visiting India. All of them were, to a greater or lesser extent, influenced by the Romantic idea of ideal India and experienced India in that frame of mind.

Here is the list of these writers:

* Waldemar Bonsels, 1904
* Max Dautendey, 1905-06 (and later)
* Rudolf Kassner, 1908
* Stefan Zweig, 1908-09
* Hanns Heinz Ewers, 1910
* Hermann Hesse, 1911
* Hermann Keyserling, 1911-12
* Melchior Lechter, 1910-11 (initially with Karl Wolfskehl)
* René Schickele, 1913

In the early 20th century, travelling to India had become easier. In 1869 the Suez Canal had opened which considerably cut short the sea route from Europe to India. Steam ships had begun plying international seas routes and travel agencies, such as Thomas Cook, began to use such routes commercially for passenger travel. The first telegraphic connection between Europe and India was being inaugurated. And the British colonial government built a comprehensive railway network in India to facilitate the movement of people and goods. Travels to India were no longer leaps into the Unknown.

The beginning of the First World War put an abrupt halt to this second wave of India travel. Only much later, in the 1950s – after the Hitler Regime and the Second World War – this interest in travels to India was renewed with the help of the Hippie movement.

From among the authors I have mentioned, Hermann Hesse and Hermann Keyserling are certainly the best-known and most noteworthy writers. Their works on India continue

to influence even the present generation. **Hermann Keyserling** wrote the epochal book *Reisetagebuch eines Philosophen* [Travel Diary of a Philosopher] (1918). It contains a long India chapter. Keyserling, too, began with the attitude of a Europe-weary intellectual, writing "Europa fördert mich nicht mehr." – "Europe no longer nourishes me." Arriving by ship in Sri Lanka, Keyserling traveled from the South to the North up to Lahore and Peshawar, and then turned East and touched Delhi, Benares and Calcutta. His "Travel Diary of a Philosopher" was one of the most read books in Germany between the two World Wars and was the foundation of Keyserling's fame as a leading thinker. He transformed travelling into a form of art, and a travelogue into a means to project one's own philosophy and way of life which he mirrored against his experiences. Properly speaking, not the experience of India was important to Keyserling, but the interpretation of his own thoughts against the foil of his experiences. His descriptions of the philosophies and religions of India portray his subjective opinions on these subjects, rather than these philosophies and religions themselves. Looking at the classical edifices and the landscapes of India, Keyserling indulged in daring flights of thought. With his book he re-created the classical German *Bildungsreise* – the "educational and inspirational journey" – for our modern age. 'Finding oneself' was his aim, a remarkably modern desire for a man one hundred years ago. He coined the oft-quoted motto "Der kürzeste Weg zu sich führt um die Welt." – „The shortest way to oneself is around the world."

In the year 1920, Hermann Keyserling founded the School of Wisdom [Schule der Weisheit] in Darmstadt south of Frankfurt. This was an academy which was modeled on the ancient *ashram*-ideal and on the Platonic academy of ancient Greece. In June 1921, Rabindranath Tagore was the first important speaker of the School of Wisdom which kept teaching until the beginning of the Third Reich.

Hermann Hesse has never entered the Indian mainland. Even then he gave his travelogue the title *Aus Indien* [*From India*] (1913). Again inspired by the Romantic idea of India, Hesse had imagined an ideal India. His trip to Sri Lanka and Indonesia in 1911

could not be but a disappointment. His mother and father had both been Protestant missionaries in Kerala, his grandfather, Hermann Gundert, was a missionary scholar who researched the Malayalam language and produced results which are important even in our present time. Hermann Hesse heard the first stories about India as a child from his parents and grandfather.

After his unfortunate trip, Hesse for a decade did not write on India. It was only with his famous novel *Siddhartha* (1922) that Hermann Hesse was able to return to his "ideal India". Here, he was able to bring together in a simple tale the philosophy of Oneness which Hesse had absorbed in his study of the Sacred Books of Hinduism. Another decade later, Hesse's trip to India was reflected in his narrative *Die Morgenlandfahrt* [*Journey to the East*] (1932). Hesse's "ideal India" had been further abstracted and generalized. The "East" was no longer a geographical entity, it is not a specific culture, not a group of peoples. The "East" is now internalized as a spiritual direction, it is a movement into interiority, into becoming essential and true. The "East" for Hesse is the metaphor of a mythic paradise and of a vision of spiritual fulfillment.

Hermann Hesse who lived hermitically in the Ticino mountains of Switzerland did not meet any of the Indian personalities of his time who visited Europe. He neither met Rabindranath Tagore nor Mahatma Gandhi, as Romain Rolland did. However, he did meet the Bengali historian and student of Tagore, Kalidas Nag. Nag visited Hesse repeatedly at the writer's home. The friendship that developed between the two resulted in a short, but significant correspondence. It is probably the most important exchange of letters between an Indian and a German personality of high cultural stature.

Apart from Hermann Keyserling and Hermann Hesse none of the writers who went to India in the beginning of the 20th century produced anything of lasting influence on the image of India among Germans. There is, however, one exception, a negative example: **Waldemar Bonsels**. His name remains known because his book *Indienfahrt* [India Journey] (1916) became a bestseller and is still being reprinted in our time. Waldemar Bonsels spent six months in India as a merchant of the Basel Mission. He, like the others,

was fascinated by the Romantic image of India. However, he tore down the innocence and high-mindedness of this image. For Bonsels, India consisted of exotic stimulation, sensual pleasures and mysterious adventures. He had no interest in the political situation or the social problems. The people he described were caricatures of the existing feudal social system which is being described without critical intent, just for sensationalism. The language Bonsels chooses is bombastic and overblown, it is the *kitsch* which we find associated with Indian novels of a later era glorifying the Maharaja culture.

Stefan Zweig is an Austrian novelist of high literary and lasting merit. In 1909, he returned from India shocked and alienated. He was a world citizen with wide contacts among the cultural elite of his time. He was an urbane cosmopolitan given to elegance, refined taste and good living. In this context of his life he was unable tolerate the harsh reality of India. Stefan Zweig wrote categorically, "India had a more sinister and depressing effect on me than I would have thought possible. I was shocked by the misery of the emaciated figures, the joyless seriousness in their somber glances, the often cruel monotony of their landscape and, more than all else, the rigid division of classes and races…"

Summing up his experience, Zweig wrote, "Fremdheit, unüberwindbare Fremdheit ist das abschließende Gefühl… ["Unfamiliarity, unsurmountable unfamiliarity, this is my quintessential feeling towards all sentiments of this people."]. Stefan Zweig, prolific though he usually was, produced only two essays on India, both portraits of a city, one of Benares and another of Gwalior.

Even then, Stefan Zweig surprisingly engaged himself in the discourse on the Indian independence movement and on the reforms of Hinduism. He met Rabindranath Tagore in Salzburg and had a lively correspondence with Romain Rolland and Hermann Hesse on India.

Indian myths and legends

Even after travel to India became easier, many German writers did take up Indian themes without actually having a first-hand experience of the country. Some restricted themselves to reading about India and created new writings from their reading experience. Indian mythology and Indian legends became popular reading material. A group of writers took up Indian mythological themes to fashion new texts in German. However, their intention was not to perpetuate Indian mythology in German language. Rather, the mythological themes were used as a foil in order to describe and discuss ideas and problems which were mostly far removed from Indian concerns. Best-known are the two texts *Siddhartha* by **Hermann Hesse** and *The Exchanged Heads* [*Die vertauschten Köpfe*] by **Thomas Mann**.

Siddhartha did profit from Hermann Hesse's trip to Sri Lanka and Indonesia. However, by his own admission, this legendary tale of a Brahmin son leaving home to find illumination was written mainly to find a solution to Hesse's own spiritual quest. Equally, Thomas Mann used the Indian legend in order to understand and play out the psychology of interchangeable identities.

Apart from these two works which are part of the canon of modern German literature we need to point to the less known writer **Alfred Döblin** and his epic in verse called *Manas.* It is reminiscent of the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. In this Greek myth Orpheus, grief-stricken by the death of his beloved Eurydice, follows her into the netherworld in order to call her back to life on earth. In Alfred Döblin's epic *Manas*, it is the woman, Sawitri, who goes in search of her husband, Manas. Sawitri is indeed able to restore Manas back to life on earth, but she herself must return to the gods as she is a divine being. Döblin, best-known for his novel *Alexanderplatz* on modern life in Berlin, re-creates an overwhelming realm of human feelings, from depression to hubris, in a language that is rich and ecstatic. This unusual work does not wish to illustrate any world-view or religious view, rather it uses this legend and this literary form in order to evoke the full range of human feelings.

One writer, of Dutch origin, but writing in German, **Karl Gjellerup**, is virtually forgotten in Germany, although he received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1917, four years after Tagore did. His novel *Der Pilger Kamanita* [The Pilgrim Kamanita] (1907) reveals Karl Gjellerup's detailed study of Buddhism. However, he does not show Buddhism as a world-negating and pessimistic religion. Rather Buddhism is depicted as a religion which leads to human maturity within the world and ultimately to Nirvana. The businessman Kamanita falls in love while on a trip. A series of unfortunate misunderstandings results in Kamanita and his beloved losing track of each other, and she marries another man. Hearing this, Kamanita renounces worldly life and becomes a monk. He meets the Buddha whom he tells his life story. Buddha prepares Kamanita for Nirvana where he meets his beloved again. She too had embraced the monastic life because she was unable to find Kamanita and join him in marriage.

Let me mention one other author who re-fashioned Indian legends into works of German literature. He is **Ernst Wiechert** who remains a well-known name in the canon of modern classics. He wrote *Der weiße Büffel* ["The White Buffalo"] in 1937, during Hitler's Third Reich, but was able to publish the book only after the Second World War. The novel was a strong denunciation of Hitler's dictatorship and of violence, veiled in an ancient Indian legend. The young man Vasudeva, who lives in a village, fights against intruders, called "The Violent Ones", from the far-off city. Vasudeva oscillates between using violence to avenge their deeds and non-violent service to humanity. When Vasudeva visits the city to demand justice from its king, he is executed. But finally, the king converts himself to a non-violent rule.

After the Second World War

All the literary works discussed to far, with the exception of "The White Buffalo" by Ernst Wiechert, have been published in the beginning of the 20th century. The Third Reich did not witness any remarkable work on India. Indian themes did not fit into the

orbit of Nazi ideology and therefore they were anathema. Only after the Second World War did German writers once again turn their interest towards India. Again journeys to India became possible. With the introduction of regular air travel and an increasing tourist flow to India, especially more and more young people were able to visit which for economic reasons had so far been impossible. The result of such facilities was the Hippie Movement and the Flower Children cult which swept into India. In the 1960s and 1970s, thousands of hippies inundated the beaches and pilgrimage places of India. They brought with them a specific subculture which did not gell well with the existing Indian social environment. In English, this movement towards hedonistic leisure and exotic pleasures created several iconic writers, such as Allen Ginsberg, who made prolonged visits to India.

In German, however, not a single book of note was produced by the Hippie generation. On the contrary, for several decades German writers kept away from India. Why was this so? – My own assumption is that India was considered as socially too complex, as emotionally too difficult to penetrate. Now that travel had become easy, and the improved infrastructure allowed travel writers to visit almost every corner of India, the enormity of the task of understanding India struck them.

Many months, perhaps years, of living in India are needed in order to fathom the emotional and psychological situation of this country. Only after writers feel comfortable in their Indian environment and get an intuitive understanding of it can their imagination penetrate it and transform it into literature with their creative powers. For most writers in Germany – and not in Germany alone – this was too much of an effort to contemplate. So they avoided India. They feared a lack of authenticity in their fictional writing on India; they were anxious not to become superficial and clichéd.

After Hitler's Third Reich and the Second World War, the time for romanticizing und idealizing India was over. The Nazi period had seen a surplus of emotions and sentimentalization. Since then German culture is wary of showing too much emotional engagement in any sphere. Now a realistic picture of India was being sought. This could

be obtained only with the help of a brave-hearted experience of even the dark sides of India. The Romantic India disappeared from literature and degenerated into the pages of illustrated papers and tourism advertisements. The new focus was on India as a "developing country", as a "poor country" with its strong social, ethnic and linguistic tensions.

The result of these transformations in viewing India was that the few German writers who did visit India restricted themselves to highly subjective forms of literature. Diaries, travel-essays, interviews were the preferred genres in which they related their India experience. By their very nature these genres limit the writers' expertise to subjective descriptions. Again, not India itself is the focus, but the writers' experience of India.

Noteworthy among these books that emerged was **Ingeborg Drewitz'** *Mein indisches Tagebuch* [My India Diary] (1983) of a one-month roundtrip sponsored by the Goethe Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan; **Günter Grass'** *Zunge zeigen* [*Show Your Tongue*] (1988) is the diary of his stay of five months in Kolkata and of a one-month round-trip in India. **Hubert Fichte** produced a lengthy interview with a hippie who spent some months in India in *Wolli Indienfahrer* ["Wolli, India Traveller"] (1972).

Ingeborg Drewitz and Günter Grass had their focus on the poverty and injustices of Indian society and were unable to absorb any other facet of Indian reality. They failed to present a balanced and detailed image of India. While former generations sentimentalized the feudal luxury of India's noble classes, authors like Günter Grass and Ingeborg Drewitz sentimentalized poverty and the poor with verbose expressions of desperation.

It took another twenty years until authors writing in German dared to fictionalize India again. **Josef Winkler**, an Austrian, wrote a novel on Benares in which he described in minutest detail the goings-on at a Burning Ghat next to the Ganga. Winkler's book *Domra. Am Ufer des Ganges* ["Domra. On the Bank of the Ganga"] does not repeat the romanticizing of India, it does not indulge in any imaginative flights or colourful descriptions, it does not even offer social criticism. It neither looks at the "oriental" and "exotic" India nor at the "poor" and "unjust" India. Josef Winkler tries to capture the

essence of India in a series of isolated observations at just one iconic place in India, the Burning Ghat in Benares. It is highly debatable whether this method leads to a representative picture of India. However, should it be the purpose of a novel on India by an Austrian writer – or any writer – to produce a representative image of India?

Winkler has continued to visit India and especially Benares. He has revealed his fascination of death, death rituals and cremations in other texts as well. In later books he has several times included descriptions of India, although India has not been their focus.

Lastly, we mention **Martin Mosebach**, a conservative writer with considerable public success, who – in contrast to Josef Winkler – delights in telling stories and does so in beautiful, rhythmic, long-winding prose. The plot of a complicated love story in his novel *Das Beben* [The earthquake] (2005) begins in Frankfurt, Martin Mosebach's home town, and unfolds in an old, decrepit palace in Rajasthan. The narrator, an architect, escapes from his beloved, Manon, to India. There he gets the assignment of renovating an old palace and transforming it into a hotel. Finally, his beloved in Frankfurt finds the architect in his Indian hide-out.

Martin Mosebach has also published a travelogue (*Stadt der wilden Hunde* [City of Wild Dogs] 2008) which identifies him as a frequent and fascinated visitor to India. Surely, Martin Mosebach does not aim at romanticizing India nor at sentimentalizing its poverty. Nor does he really want to "find himself" in India. Rather, Mosebach is fascinated by the ancient grandeur of India's culture. Even then, he describes the day-to-day affairs of contemporary India with wit and precision. His way of looking at India and his style may hopefully introduce a new paradigm which others will follow.

The efforts of the Max Mueller Bhavan/Goethe Institut

This overview of India in contemporary German literature would not be complete without mentioning the Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan whose efforts to bring German authors to India has had a remarkable resonance. When authors visit India, they quite

naturally grapple with this country's reality through their writing. Over the years it was not only Günter Grass who came to India on the invitation of the Goethe-Institut; there were several others, and most of them put down their experience in writing. In the year 2000-2001, the Goethe-Institut selected a group of writers who arrived in India, travelled individually, guided by the Max Mueller Bhavans, and then met in Mumbai for a seminar to evaluate their impressions and discoveries in India. Most of these middle-rung. middle-aged writers visited India for the first time.

Among these writers were Ulrike Draesner, Felicitas Hoppe, Kathrin Schmidt. Arnold Stadler, Dieter Gräf, Gert Heidenreich, Ilija Trojanow and Thomas Becker. They all continue their career in writing and some of them have meanwhile received the highest literary prizes Germany can offer. Noteworthy among the products of this major effort by the Goethe-Institut to bring German writers to India, is Thorsten Becker's novel *Die Besänftigung* [The Appeasement] (2003). It was the literary outcome of Becker's prolonged visit to Guruvayur in Kerala where he observed the temple elephants. Becker gives an old and wise elephant a voice who relates the legendary history of his elephant tribe. The narrative of this legend with its several variations is original and ingenious. It is a return to the use of myth to tell a contemporary story. However, readers are at a loss to discover which modern message Becker wishes to convey with his elephant myth.

The texts which these writers who were invited by the Max Mueller Bhavans produced on India were collected in a book. The collection contains many poems with some memorable lines, many of the poems are playful and experimental and try to find new forms of expression to come to terms with the overwhelming reality of India. Yet, many texts also reveal the superficiality and clichéd banality which even writers fall prey to when they are exposed to a complex reality for too short a time. They fail to create a context and a field of associations and sensual impressions which can evoke clear and strong images within a reader.

Since 2000-2001 there have been other writers who have attempted to build fiction and poetry around their India experience. Ulla Lenzen is one notable example. On the whole,

German writers no longer shy away from writing on India, and they are prepared, like Ulla Lenzen, to spend several months in India and return several times and possibly even to some extent learn an Indian language, to absorb this reality. But there has been no paradigm change in the reception of India in German literature. The ground reality is that India as depicted in literature does not "sell" in contemporary Germany. There are very significant exceptions like Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and the novels of Salman Rushdie and the books by Sudhir Kakar which all sold very well. Even a novel by Buddhadev Bose, translated from Bengali to German, was a surprise success. But be it Indian literature in German translation or Indian themes by German writers, the general conclusion remains that India appears too far removed from the mainstream interest of German readers. This is a reality which cannot be argued away.