

# Ways to understand India: The Czech experience

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**Abstract.** To promote and further the understanding of India in the Czech Republic, Czech Indologists (in addition to their academic activities) publish articles, analyses and books on Indian history, culture and politics in the Czech language and deliver lectures intended for the general public. They continue in the tradition of the founders of Czech Indian studies (e.g. Vincenc Lesný, Moritz Winternitz), who were active in the first half of the 20th century. The Indian Association, founded in 1934 and affiliated with the Oriental Institute in Prague, promoted mutual contacts between India and Czechoslovakia and organised visits of prominent Indians (e.g. R. Tagore, J. Nehru, S. Ch. Bose) to Czechoslovakia in the years prior to World War II. The Friends of India Association (founded 1990) offers public lectures and organises exhibitions of Indian art, performances of Indian artists, and occasionally, courses of Indian languages. In close cooperation with the academic community, the association tries to provide unbiased, balanced information on India which is based on academic research, personal experience, and very often, life-long dedication to the country and its people.

The general public in the Czech Republic is flooded with various kinds of information about India, not all of it being correct, balanced and adequate. To refute some of the persistent, distorted perceptions of Indian reality, Czech Indologists feel it is their duty to spread knowledge about India not only on the academic level but also to the general public. Doing it, they continue the tradition of the founders of Czech Indology, e.g. Professor Moritz Winternitz (who lectured on Mahatma Gandhi in the 1930s) and Professor Vincenc Lesný (who since 1920s has published articles, commentaries and reports in the dailies devoted to current problems of India and her struggle for independence). Both of them were among the main promoters of mutual contacts between India and Czechoslovakia. On the Indian part, e.g. Rabindranath Tagore, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, and Subhash Chandra Bose were active in this respect. In 1934, the Indian Association affiliated to the Oriental Institute was established in Prague as one of the very first organizations in continental Europe to promote mutual cooperation with India at a time when India was still a British colony. The association helped to spread knowledge about India and organised cultural exchange and visits of prominent Indian scientists, philosophers, artists and politicians to Prague. Among the most important visitors in the 1930s was Jawaharlal Nehru, who came to Prague in 1938 as a 'friend in need', 'to express sympathy to the

people of Czechoslovakia' just before the Munich Conference and subsequent occupation of Czechoslovakia by Nazi Germany in 1939.

The legacy of the Indian Association was taken over after 1945 by several organisations, the most prominent of them being The Friends of India Association (founded 1990). The Friends of India Association has the status of a civic society, which aims at promoting non-governmental relations with India in a wide range of areas. Its goals are to further increase the knowledge of India among the general public, to provide for the establishment of personal contacts between the countries, and to cultivate friendly ties with Indian visitors and the Indian community in the Czech Republic. These aims are pursued in close cooperation with the Indian Embassy in Prague. Czech Indologists cooperate with the association; they teach Indian language courses, give public lectures, and help prepare Indian art exhibitions and art performances. Czech Indologists of course have no intention of establishing a monopoly over the spreading of news about India to the Czech general public. Rather, they try to provide a more balanced and solid information on India which is based on their research, personal experience and, usually, a life-long dedication to the country.

In the years since the Velvet Revolution in 1989, it is possible to observe an enormous growth of interest in India and things pertaining to India in the Czech Republic. This development, in general, can be attributed to several different factors: freedom of expression, freedom to travel abroad, and more widespread use of modern technology (e.g. the internet), which enables people to receive and share information much faster than before. As a result, it is not an exaggeration to say that the Czech public finds itself inundated with various publications, radio broadcasts, and TV programs focusing on India. Not all the information obtained by these means is correct, balanced and adequate, however. Many people who promote India are ignorant of the true state of affairs or simply focus on presenting sensational news and news that is attractive to consumers. It is mainly for this reason that a majority of the scholars on India in the Czech Republic feel it is their duty not only to do their own research on India but also to spread knowledge about India to the general public. A proper presentation of the results of their research and of their frequent visits and study trips in India helps them to show India as it really is and to refute some of the persistent, distorted perceptions of Indian reality. More specifically, the Czech scholars (both at Charles University and at the Oriental Institute in Prague) teach various languages of the Indian subcontinent in courses, which are often open to the public; give public lectures on a wide variety of topics related to India; publish Czech translations of Indian literary works and also their own scholarly publications devoted to India; and often help with the preparation of various exhibitions and art performances. Just recently, for example, a comprehensive *History of India* (covering the history of the country

from the earliest times up to the year 2000), a joint publication by four scholars of the Oriental Institute, was published. It is first such book to be published in the Czech language. Czech scholars of India also contribute on regular basis to the journal *Nový Orient* (New Orient), which has been published (in Czech) by the Oriental Institute since 1945.

By making the knowledge of India more available and accessible, the scholars in the Czech Republic are continuing the long tradition of the founders of Czech Indology, dating back to the period before and particularly after the creation of independent Czechoslovakia in 1918.

After 1918, Prague became one of the important centres in continental Europe, especially with regards to Indian studies and relations with India in general. The scholars of India in Czechoslovakia had since the early 1920s begun to pursue a wide variety of activities under the auspices of the Oriental Institute in Prague (the establishment of this institute was supported by Tomáš Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia, among others). These scholars tirelessly worked on further strengthening and encouraging the traditionally strong interest and sympathy felt by the Czech people towards India. In this respect, it is good to mention, for example, Professor Moritz Winternitz, whose lectures on Mahatma Gandhi and his ideals and activities (Basu 1932, 223) attracted a large number of people in the 1930s. It was Professor Vincenc Lesný, however, who played perhaps the most important role in making India known to the Czech people. In the 1920s and 1930s, when the Indian struggle for social and national emancipation was reaching its climax, Lesný published articles, commentaries and reports in both Czech and German periodicals (*Lidové noviny*, *Naše doba*, *Přítomnost*, *Demokratický střed*, *Prager Presse*, and others). There he presented his remarkable views about the current trends in Indian politics, especially on Gandhi's *Non-violence and Non-cooperation Movement*, and he analysed the overall state of the Indian national movement (Lesný 1923; Lesný 1925, 3; Lesný 1926; Lesný 1930a; Lesný 1930b). Among the other relevant topics he discussed were, for example, Hindu-Muslim relations, constitutional reforms, and social problems. He introduced the prominent personalities of Indian political and cultural life to the Czech public and he informed readers about new books published in India or about India. The scope and frequency of these contributions reflect the wide range of Professor Lesný's interests, as well as his deep and extensive involvement in Indian affairs (Filipský 1982, 17).

The comprehensive process of learning about India and of establishing contacts between Czechoslovakia and India was facilitated and accelerated by frequent and repeated visits of prominent Indian scholars, journalists, politicians and artists to Prague and other cities in Czechoslovakia. The increase in bilateral trade created even more

possibilities for establishing interpersonal contacts, especially after a Czechoslovak consulate was opened in Bombay (1920) and later in Calcutta. Thus, a way opened for a group of people, joined not only by professional interests, but also mutual sympathies and friendships, to come together.

In Czechoslovakia, the key role in establishing contacts with India was played by Czech India scholars, namely Moritz Winternitz, Vincenc Lesný and Otakar Pertold (Pertold even later became the first Czechoslovak consul in Bombay). In India, Rabindranath Tagore, Suniti Kumar Chatterji, Ramanand Chatterjee (editor of the *Calcutta Modern Review*), Benoy Kumar Sarkar, Jawaharlal Nehru, A.C.N. Nambiar, Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan and Subhash Chandra Bose were particularly active in promoting mutual friendship and establishing close ties between the countries.

In the 1920s it became apparent that there was a need to establish some sort of more formal platform to promote commercial, cultural and social contacts between Czechoslovakia and India. It was the Oriental Institute in Prague, which, in the mid-1930s, first reacted to this need. On 4 May 1934, based on the previous decision of the governing body of the Oriental Institute (made on 20 September 1933), a new organization affiliated with the institute and known as the Indian Association was established. The aims of the association consisted chiefly of promoting commercial cooperation and cultural exchange between Czechoslovakia and India. The organization was created mainly as a result of the activities of Vincenc Lesný, then secretary of the Oriental Institute. The inauguration ceremony of the association, held on 5 May 1934 in Lobkovic Palace (where the Oriental Institute was located) was attended by a large group of Indian guests, including a prominent Bengali Congress politician and Calcutta Mayor Subhas Chandra Bose, who delivered one of the speeches. Bose then maintained permanent contact with the association. Later, while serving as president of the Indian National Congress, he became a chairman of the Indo-Czechoslovak Society in Bombay. The society was founded in July 1938, largely as an act of solidarity with the Czech people at time when the threat of Nazi aggression against Czechoslovakia had become imminent.<sup>1</sup>

The Indian Association in Prague was one of the very first organisation in continental Europe to promote mutual cooperation with India at the time when India was still a British colony. The association spread knowledge about India's political aspirations, the struggle for freedom, and the various ways and means this struggle was carried out. The activities of the association were appreciated by prominent Indian personalities, especially by a lifelong friend of Professor Lesný, Rabindranath Tagore.

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<sup>1</sup> After World War II, the activities of the Indian Association were continued by Indo-Czech Cultural Societies in Bombay, Calcutta and New Delhi.

In a letter dated 29 December 1935, he wrote: 'It has given me great pleasure ... to know about the good work you are doing through the Indo-Czechoslovak Society. For a proper understanding between the people of Europe and of Asia, we require many more such societies. We must realise, before it is too late, that we share a common civilization and culture and we have a common responsibility towards all humanity' (AVČRb). Jawaharlal Nehru also displayed keen interest in the activities of the newly established organisation and he made sure that the publications and journals of the secretariat of the INC in Allahabad found their way to the association. In a letter from 22 November 1935, Nehru expressed his hope 'that the contacts between the Indo-Czechoslovak Society and the Indian National Congress will grow and will prove advantageous to both countries and their peoples' (AVČRa).

The activities of the Indian Association with Professor Lesný as chairman and A.C.N. Nambiar (an Indian journalist living in Prague) as secretary were truly remarkable. On 18–22 July 1936, for example, the annual conference of the Federation of Indian and Ceylonese Students Abroad, organised by the association, took place in Prague. The conference was moved from its original location in Italy in protest against Italy's aggression in Ethiopia. Prague was then chosen as a result of Nehru's personal initiative in the whole affair. The week-long conference took place in the building of the Oriental Institute and was closely followed by the press. The students who came were welcomed by Professor Lesný and the Mayor of Prague, Dr. Baxa. During this conference, the flag of Indian National Congress, the tricolor with the *charkha*, was hoisted in Prague for the very first time (Filipský 1982, 33).

In the 1930s, there was a steady flow of prominent Indian scientists, philosophers, artists and politicians coming to Prague. The Indian Association took an active part in the organisation of performances by Uday and Ravi Shankar; Lesný personally arranged the participation of Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan in the International Congress of Philosophy held in Prague in September 1934 (Radhakrishnan's contribution was entitled 'The Message of Philosophy for Our Times'); and in June 1935 the well-known philologist Suniti Kumar Chatterjee came to visit Prague. There were other visitors, including the historian Beni Prasad of Allahabad University, Professor Benoy Kumar Sarkar from Calcutta, as well as many journalists and students (Krása 1969, 97–8).

Jawaharlal Nehru was, beyond any doubt, the most important visitor to be welcomed in Prague by Lesný. Nehru came to Prague in 1938 as a 'friend in need', 'to express sympathy to the people of Czechoslovakia at a time of uncertainty and danger' and to 'see its situation with his own eyes' (Krása 2000, 104). He met with the leading Czech personalities on the field of culture, including Karel Čapek, a well-known Czech writer and president of the Czech branch of the PEN Club. Thanks to the dedi-

cated work of Lesný and other members of the association, Nehru left Czechoslovakia full of admiration for its people and with the firm belief that the republic was ready to defend her freedom. The articles he published during this particular time sharply criticised the appeasement policy and clearly showed how well Nehru understood the political background behind the Western diplomacy, which eventually led to the Munich dictate and, subsequently, to the Second World War.

The fact that the destiny of both India and Czechoslovakia intertwined during the fateful time of this crisis had a deep impact on an entire generation in both countries. It also laid a solid, firm foundation for the future relations. When Czechoslovakia was occupied by Nazi Germany in March 1939, direct contacts between the countries were no longer possible and the activities of the Indian Association thus ceased. This interruption, however, was only temporary. Despite the devastation and losses caused by World War II and the German occupation of Czechoslovakia, bilateral contacts were re-established shortly after the war. Vincenc Lesný, a prominent India scholar and devoted friend of India, became the director of the Oriental Institute. In 1945, the Indian section of the Society of Cultural and Economic Relations with the Countries of the Orient was established. In 1969, the Czechoslovak-Indian Society was established. The society was reorganised in 1990 as the Friends of India Association. This association has the status of a civic society and aims at promoting non-governmental relations with India in a wide range of areas. Its goals are to further increase the knowledge of India among the general public in the Czech Republic, to provide for the establishment of personal contacts between the countries, and to cultivate friendly ties with Indian visitors and the Indian community in the Czech Republic. These aims are pursued in close cooperation with the Indian Embassy in Prague.

The activities of the association, among others, include lectures and discussions involving both Czech and Indian experts and scholars. In January 2006, for example, there was a very interesting lecture given by Professor Debabrata Chakrabarty from Calcutta, who spoke about the previously mentioned India scholar, Moritz Winternitz. There are also special lecture series focusing on various topics related to philosophy and religion. In addition, the association organises 'Indian poetry evenings'. On the occasion of the 145th anniversary of the birthday of Rabindranath Tagore in May 2006, a poetry evening entitled *Gítanjali—the Poetry of Rabindranath Tagore* was held in Prague. The poems were recited in Czech, as translated by Dušan Zbavitel, laureate of the Indian national award *Padma Bhushan*. Indian culture and art are also introduced by means of audio-visual presentations and programs. Scholars of India, in the same way as in the past, often occupy leading positions in the association; they play a crucial part in organising courses of Indian languages (especially Sanskrit) and in preparing exhibitions of Indian art and ethnographic exhibitions that focus on

India. These activities are not limited only to Prague, but take place in other parts of the Czech Republic as well. Some of the other venues include the gallery of Jaroslav Hněvkovský, 'the painter of India', in Žebrák, or the Memorial Hall of Czech–Indian Relations in the house of Vincenc Lesný in Komárovice (Moravia). The association, in cooperation with the National Movie Archive, also prepared a retrospective showing of various Indian films, and every year it devotes some time to the key works of Indian cinematography. Music and dance performances are not neglected either (on 3–7 July 2006, for example, the Dinesh Chandra Basal Dance Ensemble of Rajasthan performed in Ostrava, Karlovy Vary, Teplice and Prague).

The Association publishes the *Bulletin of the Friends of India Association* several times a year. This bulletin is sent both to association members and to anyone who is interested. The bulletin, in addition to providing reports on recent developments, also contains editorials and details about upcoming activities and lectures. The membership of the association is open to anyone who is interested in India and its rich cultural legacy and who is willing to contribute to the association's efforts in the field of increasing the knowledge of India.

I have mentioned at the beginning that our country is, at the moment, truly deluged with news from or about India. Scholars of India in the Czech Republic, as well as the Friends of India Association and similar institutions (e.g. Continents), of course have no intention to establish a monopoly over the spread of news about India to the Czech general public. Rather they try to provide more balanced and solid information on India, its people, and its culture, often based on their research, personal experience, and in many cases, a life-long dedication to the country. It is in this respect, as I would suggest in conclusion, that we build on the traditions we have inherited from our predecessors, the founders of Indology in the Czech lands.

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