Perception of India in the Heart of Europe. Transition through Centuries

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Introduction

Since the Middle Ages, we Europeans have had a particular fascination with Orient and all which can be called Oriental – be it material (spices, textiles, special objects) or culture and spiritual values (religion, philosophy, mythology, subjects in literature *etc.*). The images of the Orient in general and of India in particular as constructed by the British, French and German intellectual elites have long maintained their central position and have been extensively described and commented upon. The perception of Orient and India in particular in the area which is generally known as Central Europe has developed in different way. Unlike European powers (Great Britain, France, Portugal, Netherlands and Spain), which had experienced overseas expansions for centuries and had colonies/dependent areas in Asia and thereby had a direct contact with their people and culture, the people of Central Europe were in quite a different position. To be more specific, the people of the Czech lands (Bohemia and Moravia), which now constitute the Czech Republic, were then a part of the multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Being a landlocked country, the Czech lands had practically no direct overseas contacts until the 20th century.

It should be noted that in multi-national Austro-Hungarian monarchy Czechs were an ethnic minority. Moreover, the Czechs were subjected to a long period of systematic Germanization. By the end of

18th century whole sections of the population were not fluent in their own language and they began to speak German better than Czech. The entire education and administration system was German, while Czech was kept alive mostly in the countryside. It was only in the 19th century that the Czechs were able to fight back for their language and national identity. New Czech elite and intellectuals emerged and they responded to the germanization by efforts to revive the language and culture which had a long and splendid tradition before the installment of Habsburg rule.

Culture and language played a key role in the overall process known as the Czech national revival. In their efforts to raise the status of the Czech language, the first generation of revivalists was looking for inspiration in Greek and Latin as well as Sanskrit, the classical language of ancient India.

The main credit for attracting interest of the first revivalists to Indian languages belongs to Father Karel Přikryl. Czech-born Catholic priest Karel Přikryl joined the Society of Jesus and was sent in 1748 on a mission to India. He lived for 11 years in Goa, teaching as a Professor of Theology at the Jesuit College. When in 1759 the Jesuit order was suppressed in Portugal and Portuguese overseas settlements, Přikryl was deported to Lisbon, and later in 1767, he returned back to Bohemia. Only one of his writings has been preserved. It is a systematic presentation of Konkaní language (one of the dialects spoken at Malabar coast), a manuscript written in Latin and published by José Pereira under the title *Principia linguae brahmanicae* in Benares and later in the journal *Archív Orientální* edited by the Oriental Institute, Prague.[1]

In 1791, the manuscript of Karel Přikryl reached Josef Dobrovský (1753–1829), a Czech Jesuit scholar, philologist and founder of Slavonic linguistic studies in Bohemia. While reading the Přikryl's manuscript on Konkaní grammar, Dobrovský was struck by some

[1] Pereira, J. (ed.), "Karel Přikryl, S. J., Principia linguae brahmanicae: A Grammar of Standard Konkani", *Archiv orientální. Quaterly Journal of African and Asian Studies* 36/4 (1968), pp. 625-684.

similarities between Konkaní language (of the same language family as Sanskrit) and Slavonic languages (such as in verbal inflexions, in the existence of instrumental case in nouns**,** *etc.*). Dobrovský was most probably the first scholar in Bohemia to notice the affinities between Indian and Slavonic languages. Stimulated by Dobrovský's findings, as well as by the results achieved by Western scholars on India, some other Czech scholars started to study Sanskrit and the ancient Indian literature and published articles on Indian languages and culture as well as translations of Indian literature into Czech.

Romantic perception of India by Czech revivalists of the 19th century

As compared to Dobrovský, whose interest in India was motivated purely by scholarly reasons, the younger generation of revivalists was enchanted by the exotic India represented to them and their perception of India was rather romantic. Because there was practically no precise and first-hand information on India, there developed an image of a sort of fantasy country. The revivalists were keen to find a proof that the Czech culture is closer to Indian culture than that of Western nations in general and the German one in particular, *i.e.* the Czech culture is older, nobler**,** and thus better than the German one in any respect. The idea of close relationship between the old Slavs and ancient Indians was drawn from the work of Polish author Valentyn Skorochód Maiewski**,** *O Slawianech a ich pobratymcach* (*On Slavs and Their Relatives*) published in Warsaw in 1816.[2]

In language discourse the Slavonic languages (namely Czech) were claimed to be direct descendants and the closest relatives of Sanskrit. Of the many followers of this opinion, two brothers, Josef and Antonín Jungmann, should be named here. Josef Jungmann (1773–1847), a

[2] Quoted in: Strnad, J., "India as Reflected in Czech Consciusness in the Era of the National Revivalist Movement in the Nineteenth Century (ca. 1800-1848) ", *Archiv orientální. Quaterly Journal of African and Asian Studies*, Oriental Institute, 75/3 (2007), p. 284.

well-known Czech linguist, was also attracted to India and Sanskrit. He published in the learned review *Krok* (Pace) some studies in Indian poetry, *e.g. Krátký přehled prozodie a metriky indické* (A Brief Survey of Indian Prosody and Metric)[3] and some other articles. In 1828 he published the translation of Indian short story *Čtyři sprostní brahmíni* (Four Ordinary Brahmins)[4] and he referred to Sanskrit as the «real mother of the Slavonic languages and the most perfect language the under the Sun.» Josef Jungmann was interested in the prosody and metrical systems used in the poetry of different European languages as well as in Sanskrit. He was of the opinion which he shared with some contemporaries and many literati of the later generation that the only natural way of poetry in Czech and the Slavonic languages should employ metrical versification inherited by Greeks, Latins and Slavs from their common cultural background. He believed that it was only later, under the German influence, that the Czech poetry has been spoiled by shifting towards the syllabotonic, accented prosody. Thus the Czech revivalist poets started to compose their poetry in hexameters but also in old Indian meters (*árjagíti*, *sárangí*, *upačitra* and others). They made it so to prove that the Czech language is very close to the language of European antiquity (Greek and Latin) and the so- called mother of IE languages Sanskrit, and that in fact Czech is much closer to them than German which was (with its syllabotonic prosody) somehow excluded from this more noble language group. Jungmann expressed his strong belief in the superiority of the Czech language by a Czech verse composed in Indian meter called *árjá*. «You can boast of the Indian origin of your speech, O Teuton: your speech is the Indian's beauty's stepdaughter, but mine is her true daughter.»[5]

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[3] Jungmann, J., "Krátký přehled prozódie a metriky indické podle Henry Thom. Colebrooka v Asiat. Researches Vol.10" (A Brief Account of Indian Prosody and Metrics, after H. T. Colebrook in Asiatic Researches, Vol.10) *Krok I*, 1 (1821), pp. 33-63.

[4] Jungmann, J., "Čtyři sprostní brahmíni" (Four Ordinary Brahmins). *Časopis Společnosti wlasteneckého Museum w Čechách II*, 3 (Praha) 1828, pp. 71-83.

[5] Jungmann, J., Krátký přehled prozódie a metriky indické podle Henry Thom. Colebrooka v Asiat. Researches Vol.10 (A Brief Account of Indian Prosody and Metrics, after H. T. Colebrook in Asiatic Researches, Vol.10) *Krok I*, 1, Praha (1821), p. 39.

This was a sort of fiction of course, but a long-lasting one – the so-called Indian episode in Czech revivalist poetry lasted more than thirty years (in fact the last attempt of this kind was published in 1851).

The lack of direct and serious information on India quite often resulted in pure fantasies and idealizations of the country as a cradle of world culture as well as of the Indian people. Antonín Jungmann (1775–1854) wrote in his article *O Hindích* (On Indians) published in 1821:

> «Hindostan can rightly be called mother of the human races and teacher of all arts... The nation is very good, kind, well mannered, affable, honest and fair spoken, noble and sober and very clean, gentle and hospitable... it is neither bloodthirsty nor vengeful but submissive, though it has also martial tribes, *e.g.* Marathas, Varawas, *etc.*»[6]

Antonín Jungmann was busy also in the field of comparative mythology[7]. Looking for parallels between the Slavonic pantheon and the so called "prestigious" Greek and Indian mythologies, he arrived at some interesting conclusions. Jungmann compared the main Slavonic god Perun (god of thunder) to Brahma, the main god of ancient India. He also drew attention to the similarity of the Czech and Sanskrit words used for fire (in Sanskrit «*aghni*» and in Czech «*oheň*») – the object of devotion among Slavs as well as among old Indians. He pointed out that the name of Slavonic goddess of winter and death *Morena* resembles the Sanskrit word *Marana* (meaning death) as well as that the word *rárášek* (meaning an evil spirit or demon in Czech) resembles *rákšasí* (demon in Sanskrit), *etc.*

Perhaps the most curious example of adopting Indian mythology to Slavonic pantheon can be found in the epic poem *Slávy dcera*[8] (*The*

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[6] Translated from Czech. Jungmann, A., "O Hindích" (On Indians) *Krok I*, 2 (1821), pp. 65-81.

[7] Jungmann, A., "Krátký obsah náboženství pohanského u Slovanů, zvláště u Čechů" (Brief Survey of pagan religion of Slavs, particularly of Czechs), *Krok*, II, 3 (1831), pp. 339-392.

[8] Kollár, J., *Slávy dcera* (*The Daughter of Slava/Glory*) Odeon, Praha, 1971.

Daughter of Slava/Glory) composed by the Slovak poet Ján Kollár (1793–1852) and published and edited for the first time in Pest in 1824. The goddess Slava who is presented here as a symbol of Slavonic race was actually never known and worshipped as a goddess – she is just the poet's imagination. Kollár even gave her an Indian etymology: he claimed that Slava was actually old Indian goddess *Sváhá*[9]. This construction was entirely fictional. Nevertheless, it was taken seriously well up to the middle of the 19th century.

The image of India constructed by Czech intellectuals during the national revivalist period can not be seen as a specific way of European Orientalism – the quantity of information coming to the small country in Central Europe was too small for this to develop. We should say that the way India was perceived in the 19th century was in some cases romantic and unreal. Nevertheless, the writings on India served their purpose – to encourage the pride of oppressed Czech people in seeking their new national identity and help them to develop into a modern nation in a modern Europe.

The 20th century India and Czechoslovakia – similar experiences, shared dreams, common purpose

The early 20th century found both the Czech and the Indian societies undergoing a transition, which in some respects displayed similar characteristics. Both the Indian and the Czech people were striving to achieve independence and both were looking beyond the borders of their countries to find encouragement and support for their cause. While the struggle of the Czech nation was virtually unknown beyond Austria-Hungary, the Indian national movement started to attract the attention of people worldwide. The Czech nation, which was already seeking self-determination for quite a long time, looked with sympathy

[9] Suková, L., *Obraz Indie v české společnosti a literatuře 19. století* (The Image of India in Czech Society and Literature of the 19th Century), Praha, Filizofická fakulta University Karlovy, 2001. (B.A. thesis, unpublished), p. 22.

on the freedom struggle of the Indian people. The Czech newspapers started to write about India in a more profound and detailed way. News appeared about the *svadeshi* movement, which developed in the Bengali provinces and presented the first real challenge to the British government[10]. The Czech society also began to discover the organizational structure of the Indian national movement (through the report on the meeting of the Indian National Congress in Calcutta in 1906) and began to get acquainted with the names of some of the Indian national leaders and prominent freedom fighters, for example Bipin Chandra Pal, Lala Lajpat Rai, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and namely of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, whose adventures in London and Paris, his daring escape and subsequent arrest during his deportation from Britain to India were covered by the Czech press. During World War I, articles were published about the Indian troops fighting on various battlefields, and the interest in economic and political development in India was also growing. An editorial article in one of the Czech dailies in 1915 reads: «The industrial development of this greatest colony in the world will bring in its wake changes in all directions. The country will finally achieve its economic and, simultaneously, political independence. And the present war, which will mark a new stage in the history of India, will accelerate the process whereby India will achieve independence.»[11]

In the newly formed Republic of Czechoslovakia after World War I (1918) the feeling of solidarity with India, which still remained a colony, developed among Czech intellectuals and general public. A great part in this development was played by the Indian scholars in Czechoslovakia and their growing prestige in both India and the world. The Prague India scholars fostered the growing interest in India by their translation work and by their own publications. As early as 1924 the *Nithi Dharma*, written by Gandhi[12], was translated into Czech language, followed in

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[10] *Národní listy*, 25. 11. 1905.

[11] *Právo lidu*, 11.4. 1915. (translated from Czech).

[12] Gándhí Mahátma, *Ethické náboženství: Nithi Dharma*, (transl. from English by W.F. Waller), Sfinx, Praha, 1924.

1931 by the Czech translation of Gandhi's autobiography with a foreword by V. Lesný[13]. A book by Moriz Winternitz (written in German), entitled *Mahatma Gandhi*, was published in 1930[14]. The scholars presented the Indian cultural values, current problems, political aspirations and the campaigns of the Indian national movement in the newspapers (journals), both Czech and German. They also wrote and published their own books presenting India as it was, in a sober manner which reflected the Indian reality – in other words, they tried to write about things which they believed the readers wanted to know and should know about India.

Scholarly perception – India studies at the Charles University and the founding of the Oriental Institute in Prague

Among the most prominent Indian scholars in Czechoslovakia were Otakar Pertold (1884–1965), Professor of Comparative Religion at the Charles University, specialized in South India and Ceylon[15]; Moriz Winternitz (1863–1937), Professor and Head of the Department of Indo-European Comparative Linguistics at the German University in Prague, specialized in ancient Indian literature[16]; and Otto Stein (1893–1942), specialized in ancient Indian history and archaeology. Winternitz and Stein actively participated in the development of Indology in India proper, where they won great respect for their knowledge and lectures, particularly in Calcutta and Tagore's Shantiniketan. In 1929, they brought out the first issue of *Indologica Pragensia*, stressing in the foreword that they «attach special importance to the closest connection

[13] Gandhi, M. K., *Můj život (My Life)*. Translated by Pavla Moudrá. With a Foreword of Vincenc Lesný, Orbis, Praha, 1931.

[14] Winternitz, M., *Mahatma Gandhi,* Verlag der Deutschen Gesellschaft für sittliche Erziehung, Prag (Praha), 1930.

[15] In 1921 Otakar Pertold became the first Czechoslovak Consul in India, Bombay.

[16] Winternitz, M., *Geschichte der indischen Literatur* (3 vols.) Leipzig, 1905-1922, published in English version for Calcutta University, 1927, 1933, 1959.

with our Indian colleagues and friends»[17]. While in Calcutta, Otto Stein contributed to the monthly *Prabuddha Bharata* an article evaluating Indian studies in Czechoslovakia of his time[18]: «Taking into account the Czechoslovak Republic as a state of some 15 million inhabitants, one must confess that in her universities the representation of India's culture can hardly be called inadequate, adding that Indology is not fostered by some egoistic motifs or is not a special lucrative source of those who devote their lives to it. We must rather appreciate the idealism and the economy of work by which it is able to reconstruct, from thousands of miles away, the complex edifice of a culture that we call India.»

India scholars lectured in the universities and already in the 1920's they began to pursue a wide variety of activities in the Oriental Institute in Prague (which was established with the help of Czechoslovak President T. G. Masaryk). This institute still exists in Prague as well as the international scholarly journal *Archív orientální* that the institute has been publishing since 1929. The great part of the activities of the Oriental Institute were undertaken by Vincenc Lesný (1882–1953), prominent India scholar focused on classical studies (Sanskrit, Prakrits and Buddhism), Professor and Head of the Department of Indology, Charles University, Prague. His visits to India subsequently led him to turn his attention more to the modern Indian languages, namely Bengali, modern literature and the current Indian problems: Hindu-Muslim relations, constitutional reforms, social problems, prominent personalities of Indian political (Mahatma Gandhi) and cultural life.[19]

The Czech India scholars established contacts with the prominent scholars, artists and politicians. Some of these contacts later developed

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[17] *Indologica Pragensia*. Herausgegeben von Moriz Winternitz und Otto Stein, Verlag Rudolf M. Rohrer, Brünn – Prag – Leipzig – Wien 1929. Vorwort / Foreword.

[18] Stein, O., "India's Culture as a Subject in Prague", *Prabuddha Bharata*, Calcutta 39/5 (1934), pp. 242-246.

[19] Lesný summed up his impressions and experience gained in India in three books, published in Czech: *Dnešní Indie* (Today's India), Máj, Praha, 1924; *Duch Indie* (The Spirit of India), Státní nakladatelství, Praha, 1927; *Indie a Indové. Pout' staletími.* (India and Indians. Through the Ages), Orientální ústav, Praha, 1931.

into life-long friendships, which transcended the purely personal level and influenced the perception of India in modern Czechoslovakia for a long time. Among the Indians who left deep impact on the Czech society (such as Subhas Chandra Bose and Jawaharlal Nehru) was probably the most prominent the world-known poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), who became a personal friend of Moriz Winternitz, writer and journalist Karel Čapek, composer Leoš Janáček and the prominent India scholar Vincenc Lesný[20]. Tagore became and for a long time remained a symbol of India for the Czech society.

Tagore and his impact on the Czech thinking and culture

It was through Lesný that Rabindranath Tagore established his contact with the small nation in Central Europe. Lesný mastered Bengali and he was the first European to translate Tagore's poetry directly from the original, a fact that Tagore himself appreciated in a letter dated Aug. 5, 1936:

> «Dear Professor Lesný, I considered it a very happy day you have become connected with us by bonds of friendship in Shantiniketan. It is the aim of Shantiniketan to mutually connect the hearts of people from various nations through the meeting of knowledge. We consider your assistance and friendship in realizing its aim very valuable. It is astonishing for me to see how deeply you penetrated into the heart of Bengali language and mastered my writings, within a short time. In no other foreigner I have ever seen such a concentration and strength of judgment. Accept my heartiest thanks for making the readers of your country acquainted with my writings.»[21]

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[20] Lesný mastered Bengali and was able to translate Tagore's poetry from the original. He published also a biography of the poet – *Rabíndranáth Thákur = (Tagore): Osobnost a dílo*, J. Šnajdr, Kladno 1937. The book was later published in English: *Rabindranath Tagore, His Personality and Work* (translated by Guy McKeever Phillips), Allen and Unwin, London, 1939.

[21] Letter of Aug. 5, 1936, *Central Archives of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic*, *Collection Lesný*, file IIb1, i. no. 315

The correspondence between Lesný and Tagore started, however, already before World War I. The file of the correspondence between the two of them contains, among other things, Tagore's letter, dated Dec. 15, 1913, which is very likely an answer to the very first letter written by Lesný to Tagore. It reads: «Dear Sir, It has greatly delighted me to receive your letter and to learn that our language in not unknown to you…Yours truly, Rabindranath Tagore.»[22]

Tagore – a genius of poetry and a friend of Czechoslovakia

Lesný had first met Tagore in person in October 1920 in London and invited him to visit Prague. While in New York, Tagore also received a letter of invitation from Moritz Winternitz.

Tagore came to Prague on June 18, 1921. The first visit of the poet, whose work was known in the Czech lands already since the pre-war years, had left a deep impression on the Czech public. The several days he spent in Prague were filled with lectures, recitals and meetings. Only hours after he arrived he was introduced by Lesný in the great hall of the Charles University, which was packed with people. The poet lectured on philosophy and religion and received an overwhelming applause. His following lectures under the auspices of the university and his public lecture in Lucerna, the biggest hall in Prague of that time, met with similar success. Tagore's visit of Prague received wide media coverage. Before he arrived, Lesný introduced him and his work, including Tagore's educational experiments and his "*Abode of Peace*", in a student journal[23]. The journalists also pointed out that in the wake of the Amritsar tragedy, which happened in 1919, the poet in protest returned the British knighthood, which was awarded to him in 1915.

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[22] Letter of Dec. 15, 1913, *Central Archives of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic*, *Collection Lesný*, file IIb1, i. no. 315.

[23] Lesný, V., "Rabíndranáth Thákur a jeho Dům pokoje. U příležitosti básníkova očekávaného příjezdu do Prahy" (Rabindranath Tagore and his Abode of Peace. On the ocassion of the expected arrival of the poet to Prague), *Studentský věstník* (Prague) 1, 20 (1926), pp. 1-3.

For the second time Tagore visited Prague on October 9, 1926, this time as a guest of the Czechoslovak writers, organized in the recently established (1925) P.E.N. Club in Prague, whose president at that time was the world-known Czech writer Karel Čapek. Tagore was accompanied by several friends, including Ramanand Chatterjee, the editor of the *Modern Review* (published in Calcutta), who later published detailed reports about this visit. Tagore, who came to Prague via Berlin and Dresden, was praised in Prague not only as «genius of poetry and friend of Czechoslovakia», but also as «an opponent of fascism and propagator of rapprochement between races and nations, whose work had a mighty impact on European spiritual life in the period of post-war disintegration of cultural values.» During his week-long stay in Prague, he again lectured in Lucerna, appeared on the Czechoslovak radio, and recited his poetry in the National Theater, where he attended the performance of his play *The Post Office* in Czech language.

The charisma, which Rabindranath Tagore possessed, also influenced the Czech art. Among the things which remind us of his visits is a cycle of love songs inspired by Tagore's poetry and composed by Josef Bohuslav Foerster (1859–1951) or a *Lyrical Symphony* (seven chants based on Tagore's words) by Austrian composer Alexander Zemlinsky (1872–1942).

The most prominent among the Czech composers inspired by Tagore was Leoš Janáček (1854-1928). His vocal composition *Potulný šílenec* (*The Wandering Madman)* is a polyphonic work for a male choir with soprano solo based on the words from the Tagore's *Gardener*. Janáček had met personally with Tagore in 1921, when he was present at his lecture on Buddhism at the Charles University and at a public lecture on Bengali literature, where Tagore recited his own poetry. The deeply impressed composer then summed up his feelings and admiration for the poet in his article, which was published in journal *Lidové noviny*.

> «The poet entered the hall silently. It seemed to me as if a white sacred flame flashed high above the heads of the many thousands

present. He said: You should know how to read my poems – therefore I am speaking to you. It was not a speech – it sounded like a song of a nightingale, smooth, simple, void of any harshness of the diphthongs. It occurred to me to fall in with a gay chord with the initial sounds of the poems he read out. I heard soft harmonious voices or sounds but it was incoherent to me. The melody kept on falling down in a torrent of tones. And the voice was permeated by the soft sorrow of his song: It is time to go, Mother. Or by emotion: Here she comes! And by the strong faith of his prayer: Will you, Father, let my country rise again to freedom? I listened to words burdened by the heavy weight of lead: Oh Lord, thou hast taken any moment of my life into thine hands. I followed the modulation of this song-tune at its important points. In his song of the "Tame bird in the cage and the free bird in the forest" Tagore's tone was longing with the whisper of a tame bird in the cage and was crying, heavy with tears, in the words. "Woe unto me, I know not any forest songs. Their love is tormented by ardent desire, but, I cannot fly wing by wing." There is no doubt that the Bengali poet is supremely musical. He spreads tone with every single syllable just as we do in our country in songs. As he was leaving, indescribable grief showed on his face. He spoke to us in his language which we could not understand but from the sound alone we were able to recognize the bitter pain in his soul. I saw and heard the prophet of his people.»[24]

Tagore was the first Indian who openly declared his friendship towards Czechoslovakia, when the country faced the hard trials of the Munich Agreement in 1938. As the tension in Europe increased and the crisis loomed, the prominent personalities of culture in Czechoslovakia turned to their friends and colleagues abroad with appeals for support. On Christmas Eve 1937, in a very well-prepared program, the unique message and appeal for peace were presented in a direct broadcast to India. The world-known Czech writer Karel Čapek addressed

[24] Translated from Czech. *Lidové noviny* (Brno), June 26, 1921.

Rabindranath Tagore and Vincenc Lesný simultaneously interpreted his speech from Czech to English:

> «Tagore, a great master, a harmonious voice of the East, we greet you in your Shantiniketan. We greet you from Czechoslovakia, where snow is falling, from a Europe, in which we are feeling lonely, from the Western World, where not even the most developed nations can shake one another's hand in brotherly greeting. And yet despite the distance between our countries and cultures, we are extending a fraternal hand to you, to you poet of sweet wisdom, to your peaceable Shantiniketan, to your great India, to your immense Asia, to that Asia, too, which is being laid waste by weapons invented in the West. At a moment when at both the easternmost and the westernmost fringes of our common continent guns are thundering, a tiny voice of Western Democracy is calling to you at the close of the year: May the World live on, but let it be a world of equal and free people.»[25]

Tagore was listening in Vishvabharati and his answer came shortly after by telegraph: «Friends in Czechoslovakia, in the terrible storm of hatred and violence raging over humanity accept the goodwill of an old idealist who clings to his faith in the common destiny of the East and West and all people on the Earth. Rabindranath.»[26] Moreover, Tagore, touched by the message from Prague, sent to Lesný a poem full of emotions and anxiety which was later found among Lesný's documents[27]. Tagore's letters to Lesný, written in the following months, showed that he was closely watching the developments in Europe and was deeply concerned with the fate of Czechoslovakia. In August

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[25] Translated from Czech. Quoted in: Strnad, J.; Filipský, J.; Holman J.; Vavroušková, S., *Dějiny Indie* (*History of India*), Nakl. Lidové noviny, Praha, 2003, p. 876.

[26] Quoted in: Krása, M., *Looking Towards India: A Study in East-West Contacts*, Orbis, Praha, 1969, p. 92.

[27] The poem is typed in English, untitled, dated on Dec. 25. 1937 in Shantiniketan, and bears Tagore signature. Collection Lesný, *Central Archives of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic*, *Collection Lesný*, File IIb1, i. no. 315

1938, he wrote: «We are all greatly concerned with the drift of political conditions in Central Europe. You must be passing through days of terrible anxiety. Be assured that the whole-hearted sympathy is with your country and the cause of humanity.»[28] In the fall of 1938 Tagore publicly condemned the Munich Agreement, which in effect meant the occupation of the border regions of Czechoslovakia by the Nazi Germany. He was again among the first people to express sympathy and to offer encouragement to the Czech people. In a telegram, addressed to the Czechoslovak President, Edvard Beneš, we read: «I can only offer profound sorrow and indignation on behalf of India and of myself at the conspiracy of betrayal that has suddenly flung your country into a tragic depth of isolation, and I hope that this shock will kindle a new life into the heart of your nation leading her to a moral victory and to an unobstructed opportunity of a perfect self-attainment.»[29] Indignation, caused by the Munich dictate, also influenced Tagore's literary work and is expressed in a bitter poem *Prayashcitta* (The Penance)[30]. Tagore also gave the covering letter, which he sent to his friend Lesný together with the poem, to the British and Indian press.

"Uttarayan"

October 15, 1938. *Shantiniketan, Bengal*

«Dear Dr. Lesny,

I feel so keenly about the suffering of your people as if I was one of them. For what has happened in your country is not a mere local misfortune which may at the best claim our sympathy, it is a tragic

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[28] Letter of Aug. 20, 1938, *Central Archives of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic*, *Collection Lesný*, File IIb1, i. no. 315.

[29] Quoted in: V. Lesny's public lecture on Tagore, 1946 Collection Lesný, *Central Archives of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic* File IIb9, i. no. 436.

[30] When, on March 15, 1939, the rump of Czechoslovakia was occupied by the Germany, Tagore wrote another poem *Ahban* (*A Call*) which he sent to Canada.

revelation that the destiny of all those principles for humanity for which the peoples of the West turned martyrs for three centuries rests in the hands of cowardly guardians who are selling it to save their own skins. It turns one cynical to see the democratic peoples betraying their kind when even the bullies stand by each other.

I feel so humiliated and so helpless when I contemplate all this, humiliated to see all the values, which have given whatever worth modern civilization has, betrayed one by one and helpless that we are powerless to prevent it. Our country is itself a victim of these wrongs. My words have no power to stay the onslaught of the maniacs, nor even the power to arrest the desertion of those who erstwhile pretended to be the saviours of humanity. I can only remind those who are not yet wholly demented that when men turn beasts they sooner or later tear each other.

As for your country, I can only hope, that though abandoned and robbed, it will maintain its native integrity and falling back upon its own inalienable resources will recreate a richer national life than before.

I am sending you a copy of my English rendering of a recent poem of mine, yet unpublished, in which my outraged sentiment has found its expression. You may use it as you like, though it will also be published in the November issue of the Vishva-Bharati Quarterly. If you like I can also send you the Bengali original.

With the best wishes and regards,

Yours sincerely,

Rabindranath Tagore.»[31]

[31] Letter of Oct. 15, 1938. Collection Lesný, *Central Archives of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic,* File IIb1, i. no. 315.

The original version of the above mentioned poem (Prayashcitta) was sent to Lesný in February 1939. In the covering letter Tagore writes that it was sad to read «... all the news about the great betrayal of your magnificent country at the hands of England and France... I met Mr. Nehru... and he gave me a graphic description of the woes of mutilation of Czechoslovakia... Let me only hope, your brave people will not fail to rebuild once again your own future.»[32]

Similar experiences and shared dreams of freedom and independence in this particular time of European crisis influenced not only the leading personalities but also the general public in both India and Czechoslovakia. It helped to strengthen their mutual friendship, which survived even after the occupation of Czechoslovakia when all direct contacts between both countries had been interrupted. After the war, Czechoslovakia was one of the first states to establish diplomatic relations with the newly independent India on November 28, 1947.

[32] Letter of Febr. 14, 1939. Collection Lesný, *Central Archives of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic* File IIb1, i. no. 315.