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HEROES, PILGRIMS, EXPLORERS

IIC QUARTERLY
WINTER 2003-SPRING 2004

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ISSN No. 0376-9771

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Winter 2003–Spring 2004
Volume 30, Numbers 3 & 4

India International Centre Quarterly is printed and published by K.N. Venugopal for India International Centre, 40 Max Mueller Marg, New Delhi 110003
Typeset at Print Services B-17, Lajpat Nagar-2 New Delhi and printed at Chaman Offset Printers, 1626 Suiwalan, Darya Ganj, New Delhi 110002

Price for this issue Rs 250

Annual subscription

IIC Members

India : Rs. 300

Abroad : \$ 30 (by airmail)

Non-members

India : Rs. 400

Abroad : \$ 35 (by airmail)

Institutions

India : Rs. 600

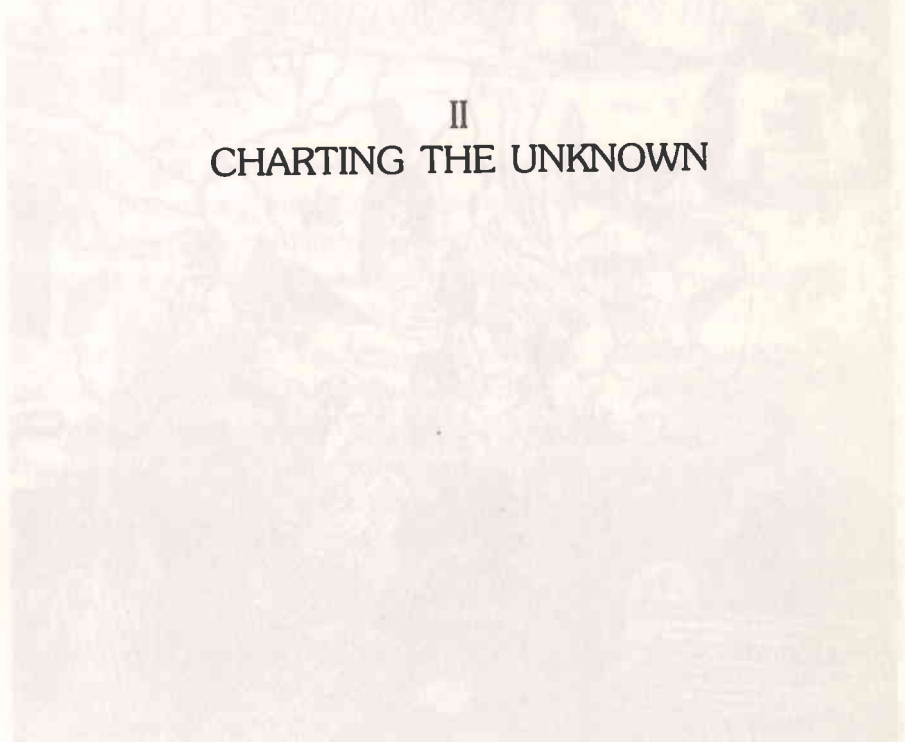
Abroad : \$ 45 (by airmail)

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Hart Vasudevan

The Selfhood of Arjuna in his
The Bhagavad Gita

II
CHARTING THE UNKNOWN



The Bhagavad Gita is a Hindu scripture that is part of the Mahabharata. It is a dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna, who is an incarnation of the god Vishnu. The Gita is a philosophical text that discusses the nature of the self, the soul, and the path to liberation. It is one of the most important texts in Hinduism and has influenced millions of people around the world.



Detail of India from the Genoese "Map of the World" of 1457
Nikitin may have used this as he compiled his "Voyage"
in Feodosia — a port that belonged to Genoa
until the Tartars seized it in 1476

Hari Vasudevan

*The Solitude of Afanasii Nikitin in his
'Voyage over the Three Seas'*

I

Almost all forms of travel literature are popular the world over. But among historians, fashions have changed in attitudes and approaches to journeys and movement. The use of old travel accounts as source and evidence is passé, and the journey as journey—that is, an exercise marked by travails, hardships and achievements, is unfashionable as a subject. As cultural studies sweep history, travellers become of interest for reflecting the ambience from which they derive their assumptions—less for the specific experience that is their fate. Hence the new interest in *how* the Renaissance shaped the travellers' responses to the peoples they 'discovered' or the societies with which they interacted. Hence also other inflections in history. With what assumptions did Da Gama go about handling the Arabs? What are the other 'stories' that a traveller's text may reveal beyond the details of the description that it yields? How does it mould into a pervasive discourse or culture?

Those ignored by the old interest in travel literature—who attracted no attention as wayfarers because they left no well-articulated story—have found a place under this new lens. The smaller peoples of the Far North, the Eskimos of Greenland and Canada or countries where 'travel' manifests poorly in the written word as in Korea or India, are now deemed potential areas for exploration. The distinction between the 'traveller', the 'explorer', the 'migrant' and diasporas is fast fading in a broader concern with societies in movement and how they take their cultural baggage with them. Any traveller and any 'account', well set out or implied, stands tall in this world of new stories.

The grand departure in this approach to travel and travel accounts, though, has had its casualties. In the chaos that has marked history writing in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, the new approach to travel has seldom shown itself effectively. Readers still have to wait for new approaches to the reports of Bering, who explored the Russian north in the early 18th century, or Nikolai Rezanov's account of California. The same must be said for the writing of the celebrated Russian ethnographer/anthropologist of the Pacific, N.N. Miklucho Maklai, and the reports of Chokan Chinghiz Valikhanov, the Russianised Kazak who explored the territories of the 'hordes' of the Steppe in the mid 19th century. Not too far for Russia the postmodern historian's fascination with subalterns of Eurasia—the writings left by trading communities among Tartars and Bashkirs, or the songs and legends of the Chukchi and the Tungus peoples.

As far as Russia's travel legacy for India is concerned, similar neglect surrounds the celebrated Afanasii Nikitin, the first major Russian traveller to India, whose descriptions of Bidar and Vijayanagar in the mid-15th century were often quoted in standard accounts of Indian history. Once the marker of Russian boldness and dash for the historian Nikolai Karamzin, and later the symbol of Russia's essential cultural duality, its Eurasianism, which was as much Asian as European, Nikitin's 'standing' in global imagination has tailed off. His account of his journey, *Voyage over the Three Seas*, does not command excitement—except in a niche in North America, where a few lone scholars of Russian literature pursue their interests with distinction to the periodic acclaim of a panel at conferences on Slavistics.

This does not mean that in the case of Nikitin there is no image or no persona in the public imagination. What is unusual is that the profile is political—bearing more the tint of propaganda than that of traveller. Nikitin has had many avatars. For Orthodox priests and highly placed officials of the 15th- 18th centuries, he was an object of curiosity as the first major Russian traveller to India. To the 18th century historian of the Russian state, Nikolai Karamzin, he was a standard bearer of the exuberance of Russian nationality. To 19th century scholars of Indian history, he was a source on Bidar and Vijayanagar. But the image of Nikitin that survives today is as the standard bearer of Indo-Russian friendship. That avatar which dates back to Soviet times has a focus, in the monument to him unveiled by K.P.S. Menon in Tver, where Nikitin was a merchant. It also lives in K.A. Abbas' film, *Pardesi*,

a joint Indo-Soviet production of 1957, where Nargis played the Indian girl Champa who explained the wonders of India to this stranger. Today the image has become a bridge between Mumbai and Russia, as Western India tries to do business with the Russian Federation.

This is an unfortunate twist of fate. For Nikitin was a traveller who would be fascinating to the 'new' historian of the wayfarer and migrant. He is the epitome of how culture survives and is carried through layers of acculturation and the problems of multiple identities. His 'Voyage' provides an example of the exceptional means used by culture to survive in the most difficult conditions. Nikitin was unusual when compared with eminent European travellers. He was no Marco Polo, cocooned by the achievements of the trading city from which he originated, and endowed with an exceptional confidence. This reflects itself in the vicissitudes of his journey as well as the description of that journey thereafter. Again, Nikitin cannot be easily 'typed' as an offshoot of the Renaissance, conforming to a set paradigm that had come to be established in the refined environment of the Italian city state or its Iberian echoes. He was an accidental traveller from an ambience that was open to various influences, travelling in an empire that has almost vanished from imagination: the Western Mongol Empire, which had its distinctive features.

Again, the 'Voyage' was not a neat text, honed to shape after repeated revision through additions of flourish, and understatement. There is a portion of Nikitin's writing that is raw—reflecting bare emotion—seldom available in other grand narratives. Such 'digression' suggests that the product is a diary in bits. Some of it was assembled in Russia, perhaps in imitation of other accounts of pilgrimages and official delegations. Other sections may tell a different tale—of how writing served the traveller during his voyage.

Afanasii, the son of Nikitin, (hence Afanasii Nikitich according to Russian usage or Afanasii Nikitin to Western practice), was a merchant of the Upper Volga in the mid-15th century. He was from the town of Tver', a small trading point north-west of Moscow—surrounded by a flat landscape that rises up to the Valdai Heights and marsh country impressive for its lakes and rugged beauty. This was the cardinal town of one of a host of principalities of Russian-speaking lands, like Kostroma and Suzdal that had survived from the disintegration of the Kievan Empire two centuries previously. Like the other principalities of the Golden Horde, it was a part of the

Western Mongol Empire—and ruled as vassal territory from the Volga town of Sarai and later Sarai-Berke after 1240.

Here, Tver' had initially been the nodal point of an appendant of the principality of Vladimir—the main force of the region in the aftermath of the Mongol conquest. During the 14th century it had become a principality of importance in its own right, thereafter succeeding to a position of primacy in the area before it ultimately faded before the rising power of Moscow. Moscow itself was a comparatively minor principality in the 13th century; but became the lead actor in the area well before Nikitin's time. This coincides roughly with the early part of the reign of the Muscovite prince Ivan III, correctly recognised as the founder of the modern Russian state in the late 15th century. Moscow played a distinct role in the defeat of Mongol armies at the battle of Kulikovo Field (1380), which undermined the Mongol authority in the region. In the late 14th century, as the Empire around Sarai fell to pieces, and 'khanates' emerged in Astrakhan and Crimea, Muscovite princes eclipsed Tver', wholly. They improved their standing on the Volga, manoeuvring between the rivals in the Mongol Empire and the major force to the West, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The 'Russian land', scattered settlements of Slavs west of the Urals and bearing the Orthodox Christian faith, had had no centre for two centuries after the destruction of Kiev. But it was finding a new standard bearer as Nikitin set out on his journey.

There is no evidence of Nikitin's age, nor his substance, at the time when he left Tver' on his remarkable journey in 1468. There is no trace of what family he came from—though it is clear that he was a member of the merchant estate, owned no land or serfs outside Tver', and with no connections that were socially prominent. Tver', like Moscow, was not a wealthy town: a small 'kremlin' surrounded by wooden buildings and the odd church. It had benefited from its status as the centre of a principality; but it had also been the target of attacks by Muscovite soldiers and disciplinary action by the Mongols. Merchants did well from the river networks around the town, and its position as a link in a chain that began in South Asia, China and Iran, and ended in the Baltic towns including the hinterland city of Novgorod. Inhabitants had a knowledge of the broader range of the Western Mongol Empire since delegations and the Grand Prince were required to visit the 'Horde' regularly at Sarai. Many chronicles maintained by the Russian Orthodox churchmen of the Volga towns provided information on these visits. Copies of these accounts are

likely to have circulated in some 'book' form, as did religious literature. While utterly Christian and wholly Russian, the Tveriane also had some knowledge of the Mongol language—if only in some rough and ready form. He may also have had some sense of Persian for trading purposes. Impressions of great cities including Byzantium/Constantinople, ravaged in 1456, formed part of the sense of the world, as were the opportunities such entrepôts offered for standard goods of the region such as furs.

Nikitin is not specific about why he and a group of merchants began their journey down the Volga in 1468. It may have been standard enterprise, normal at the time, or a specific journey to explore the opportunities provided by the internecine conflict between the successors of Sarai. The group left with the benediction of the archbishop of the town Gennadii and the governor B.Z. Borozdin. They received special letters of commendation from the Grand Prince of Tver', Mikhail Borisovich. At Nizhnii, they joined a caravan attached to the ambassador from Shirvan in Azerbaijan to Moscow, but they separated from the group when they reached the Lower Volga, and were plundered by the Khan of Astrakhan, one of the successors of the Western Mongol Empire. The merchants' appeal for help to the Shah of Shirvan proved fruitless. Nikitin's companions, now empty-handed returned to Tver'.

Nikitin, however, persisted, though it is not clear how he kept body and soul together. He does not mention trade. And it may be that he worked passage. He made for Baku by the sea route, and then decided on a further course—towards India. What impelled him is not certain. Russian myths carried some ideas of the strange puritanical *brahmanas* of this far-flung land. But, more significantly for a merchant, Mongols undoubtedly carried over some notions of the Sultans that had resisted them in the Sindh and the trade that existed across the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea. Certainly, he was impressed by his surroundings—for each of the towns he passed was vastly more opulent than the settlements of the Volga. Setting out from Hormuz, in the course of six weeks Nikitin made his way by the northern coast of the Arabian Sea, via Muscat, to India. Passing through Cambay in Western India he finally reached Chaula, south of Bombay in May 1471. The great trade of the Krishna-Godavari *doab* drew him and he settled down in the Bahmani Kingdom, in Bidar—thereafter visiting a host of cities in the area, including Raichur, Kulur, Golconda and Parvat.

In spring 1473, while in Western India, he decided to return to Russia, and in January 1474, took ship for Hormuz. He was blown off course, found himself in Somalia, where he was robbed, but had means sufficient to return to Hormuz via Muscat. Dissuaded from proceeding through Iran because of local hostilities, he set out for the southern coast of the Black Sea, reaching Trapezund by October 1474, where he was held by Turks and all his goods confiscated. Nikitin, however, again found passage to the Crimea (Feodosia), where he threw in his lot with a local community of Russian merchants who took him with them along the Dniepr in spring 1475. He set out for Tver', but he never made it—dying in Smolensk, hardly a hundred miles from home. There is no stone to mark his grave. How and where he died is hearsay that has come down over time.

II

In the course of this tempestuous journey, Nikitin kept notes. While in Feodosia, he made some effort to give these shape, but had very little time to do so. His fellow travellers on the route to Tver' found the 'books' he kept and handed them over to Vladimir Mamyrev, a member of Ivan III's household in Moscow; and the notes were included in the chronicle for the 1480s. Seven copies of the chronicle were made during the next two hundred years. And it was one of these, integrated into the Troitska Chronicle, that was discovered by an early historian of the Russian state, Nikolai Karamzin, at the end of the 18th century.

Nikitin's account was then celebrated—after lying unknown for centuries except as a curiosity for Orthodox priests and a few highly placed officials and nobles who read chronicles. Karamzin then claimed hero status for him, as one who had carried Russia's national renown through the world.

Indians heard of Russia long before they heard of Portugal, Holland and England. At a time when Vasco da Gama was only thinking of the possibility of finding a route to India via Africa, our man from Tver' had already traded along the Malabar coast and discussed matters of faith and dogma with the inhabitants of the land.

Early historians of Vijayanagar and the Bahmani Kingdom liberally integrated Nikitin's descriptions into their accounts. From

the unveiling of a statue to him in Kalinin (Soviet Tver') in 1956 to K.A.Abbas' film in 1957 and until today, Nikitin has lived on as a monument to Indo-Soviet/Russian friendship.

Nikitin's notes and his account acquired renown as *Voyage over the Three Seas*. The text forcefully bears the mark of a well-conceived narrative, and has all the characteristics of dense description that distinguish well-known travel accounts. In addition, it is concise. With due Orthodox Christian humility, Nikitin launches on his story:

Through the prayers of our Holy Fathers, O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, Thy sinful servant Afanasii, son of Nikita.

I have described my sinful voyage beyond three seas, the first being the Sea of Derbent, or Sea of Khwalis [Caspian Sea], the second the Indian sea or the sea of Hindustan, and the third the Black Sea, or Sea of Stambul.

I set forth down the Volga from the Golden Domed Cathedral of the Redeemer, from Grand Duke Mikhail Borisovich and from His Grace Gennady of Tver. Upon arrival at Kalyazin, I received the blessing of Father-Superior Macarius and brethren of the Monastery of the Holy Trinity and the Holy Martyrs Boris and Gleb; from Kalyazin I proceeded to Uglich, from Uglich to Kostroma to Prince Alexander, bearing another pass from the grand Duke, and he let me sail on unhampered. Nor was I hampered on my way to the city of Nizhny Novgorod to Mikhail Kiselev, the Governor, and Ivan Sarayev, Keeper of the Tolls.

Nikitin then proceeds to tell of his journey to the former Mongol capital, Sarai, and further towards Astrakhan, where he was plundered together with his companions, sustaining thereafter repeated attacks and robberies. The story is dispassionate and precise.

The King sent his whole horde in pursuit of us, and for our sins, we were overtaken at Bugun; the Tartars shot one of our men, and we shot two of theirs. Our small ship was stopped by a weir, they seized her and at once plundered her; and all my luggage was in that small ship.

And we headed for Derbent on two ships; on one of them sailed Hasan Beg, the Ambassador, with Iranians, and us, the Russians, ten men in all, and the other ship carried six Muscovites and six men from Tver, as well as cows and victuals. A storm overtook us at sea. The smaller ship was smashed against the coast, near the little town of Tarki, and the men went ashore; then came some Kaitaks, and made captives of them all.

Nikitin's calendar is exact, punctuated thereafter with asides such as "I journeyed to Kashan, where I stayed for a month, thence to Nain, and from Nain to Yezd, where I also lived for a month"; or, with due regard to his faith "And Hormuz lies on an island which is flooded by the sea twice a day. There I kept my first Easter, having arrived four weeks before the feast".

The descriptions of towns around the Caspian is sparse. Nikitin clearly considered their features to be common knowledge. As a Russian merchant linked to the Western Mongol Empire, to him both the habits of Islam and the nature of the cities was well known. He did not consider them worthy of comment.

III

Once Nikitin takes his tale to India, the story presents the magnificent descriptions for which it is repeatedly quoted in accounts of the Deccan at this time. The country was distinctive and fabulous in his eyes. It lacked the trading opportunities he was told of, but there was no doubt of its opulence or Nikitin's fascination with that opulence. The description of Bidar has been used by historians repeatedly.

And Bidar is the capital of Moslem Hindustan (sic). It is a large city, and many people live in it....In that city there lives Melik-al-Tujjar [Mohammed Gavan, Vizier to Mohammed Shah III of the Bahmani dynasty] the Khorassani, a boyar who has an army 200,000 strong. Melik Khan has 100,000 and Farkhad Khan, 20,000. And many khans have an army of 10,000 each. The Sultan goes to war with an army of 300,000. The land is very populous; the countrymen are very poor, but the boyars are rich and live in luxury; they are carried in silver litters, preceded by as many as 20 horses in golden harness and followed by 300 horse, 500 foot, 10 trumpeters, 10 drummers and 10 pipers. And the Sultan goes forth with his mother and wife to amuse himself, and is accompanied by 10,000 horse and 50,000 foot. And there also go forth 200 elephants in gilt armour. And the Sultan is preceded by 100 trumpeters, 100 dancers and 300 spare horses in golden harness, and followed by 100 monkeys and 100 gaurikas or handmaidens.

The Sultan's palace has seven gates, with a hundred guards and a hundred kafir scribes at each gate; some of them register those coming in and others, those going out; but strangers are barred from the palace. And the palace is very beautiful, with fretwork and gilt all over it, and its every stone is fretted and very beauti-

fully painted in gold; and inside the palace there are sundry vessels.

There is a clear distinction in Nikitin's approach to Islam and Hinduism. The former was well known in Russian lands. As a faith it is treated as alien, but not requiring description beyond limited references, establishing a calendar more than providing an account of practice. For example he refers mostly to the timing of the great fasts. Hinduism, on the other hand, attracted curiosity and more detailed attention, and he dealt at length with temples and Hindu beliefs in *Voyage*. Hence the careful description of Hindu responses and a temple at Parvat:

I asked them questions about their faith and they said to me: "We believe in Adam and the *buts* [idols], they say, are Adam and his whole kin". Altogether there are eighty-four faiths in India and everyone believes in *but*. People of different faiths do not eat or drink together, nor do they intermarry; some eat mutton, fowl, fish, and eggs, but of no faith do the people eat beef.

I spent four months at Bidar and agreed with some Indians to go to Parvat, their Jerusalem, or Mecca in the Moslem tongue, where stands their chief butkhanah. It took us a month to reach the butkhanah. The market by the butkhanah lasts for five days. And the butkhanah is very large—half the size of Tver—and is built of stone in which the deeds of but are carved; in all there are 12 tiers of carvings that show but working wonders, or appearing before Indians in many shapes: first in the shape of a man; second, of a man with an elephant's trunk; third of an ape-like man; fourth of a man having the form of a ferocious beast. He has always appeared before them with a tail and his tail, which is carved in stone, is seven feet long. People from all over the land of India come together at the butkhanah to see but's miracles. Near the butkhanah, old wives and young maidens shave all their hair; beards and heads are shaved too. Thereupon they go to the butkhanah; each has to pay a fee of two sheshkanis for the benefit of but and horses are charged four fanams....

Typically, like many travellers of the day, Nikitin jotted down as fact most of the nonsense that was handed to him concerning his environment—a curious combination of legend and fact. Hence of the area around Alland, near Gulbarga, he says:

As for monkeys, they live in the woods; and they have a monkey prince, who leads an army. And when anyone harms them, they complain to their prince, who sets his army upon the offender. Then the monkeys fall upon that one and destroy the houses and

kill the people. They are said to have a very large army and to speak a tongue of their own; they give birth to many young, but the young that are not like their father or mother are left on the roads. Then people of Hindustan pick them up and teach them sundry handicrafts, but some of them they sell, doing it at night lest they should flee back, and some they teach how to imitate players.

IV

Voyage is marked though, by more than these well-ordered notes which, interspersed with information concerning distances between towns, were ultimately to be of value to other merchants. On occasions in the text there are wild deviations—almost great wails of agony that have no place in the run of the narrative! Possibly, in integrating Nikitin's notes into the *Chronicles of Moscow*, the scribes of the time made no distinction between the travel account that Nikitin had assembled in Feodosia, and other rough notes he had with him when he died. And from these jottings comes a story quite apart from that of observation and curiosity. Or, was it that in constructing his narrative in Feodosia, Nikitin suddenly brought back to mind experiences in India? Or both? Whatever the case, the interpellations indicate the *cost of the great journey—a sense of loss as much as of gain that must be the fate of almost all travellers who become part of the path they traverse.*

Nikitin in his new environment was known as Khoja Jusuf Khorossani—and he had to deal with all the demands of a new identity. No longer for him the name or the customs with which he was born. Rather, a gradual dilution of references and only paper with which to share the pain of alienation and loneliness. The experience did not mark his Caspian travel. It was only in India that it surfaced. Despite his thorough acculturation as an Orthodox Christian and a Russian, his easy acquaintance with Muslim customs and the Mongol Empire resulted in a slow drift in his habits, and he became uncomfortable with the experience.

Hence we find a major deviation in his account of life in Bidar:

And I know not when Easter Sunday, the great day of the Resurrection of Christ, occurs, so I try to guess by signs: with the Christians, Easter comes nine or ten days before the Moslem Bayram. I have nothing with me—no book; we took books with us from Rus,

but when I was robbed the books were seized. And I have forgotten all that I knew of the Christian faith and all the Christian feasts; I know not when Easter occurs or Christmas, or Wednesday or Friday. And surrounded by other faiths, I pray to God that He may protect me: "O Lord God, O God of truth, O Thou that art merciful, God my Creator, Thou art my Lord. There is one God, the Prince of Glory, Maker of heaven and earth.

Nikitin felt a slow accommodation to local customs that disturbed him. Again, back in Bidar after travel in the vicinity, he notes:

In the month of May, I kept Easter at Moslem Bidar, in Hindustan. And the Moslems kept Bayram on a Wednesday in the month of May; and I had begun to fast on the first day of the month of April. O faithful Christians, those who voyage to many lands fall off into sin and rob themselves of their Christian faith. And I Afanasy, servant of the Lord, have been yearning for my faith with all my heart; Lent and Easter have already passed four times, and yet I, sinner that I am, know not when Easter or Lent or Christmas or any other holy day comes, nor do I know when it is Wednesday or Friday. And I have no books, for when I was robbed, all my books were taken away from me. And because of the many misfortunes, I went to India, for I had nothing to take to Rus, no goods being left. The first Easter Sunday found me at Kain, the second at Chapakur, in the Mazanderan country, the third at Hormuz, and the fourth at Bidar, in India, with Moslems. And there I shed many tears for the Christian faith.

To Nikitin, India spelt not only the fabulous but also a path of confusion, as he encountered dense arguments and pressures that preyed on his convictions and sensibilities:

Malik the Moslem pressed me for a long time to adopt the Moslem faith. But I answered him: "My lord, you perform your prayers, and I perform mine; you say five prayers and I say three; I am a stranger, but you are not." But he said to me: "Indeed, albeit thou professest not to be a Moslem, neither doest thou know the Christian faith".

And then I thought over a great deal and said to myself: "Woe to me, miserable sinner, for I have strayed from the true path and knowing no other, must go my ways. Almighty God, Maker of heaven and earth, turn not Thy face from Thy servant who sorrows. Shelter me and have mercy upon me, O god who created me; lead me not away, O Lord, from the path of righteousness, but keep me in Thy true ways, for I have of necessity done nothing virtuous for Thy sake in my distress, and have lived all my days in evil. Four Easter Sundays have already passed in the Moslem

land, but I have not forsaken the Christian faith; and God knows what may yet happen. In Thee I trust, O Lord, save me, O God!

It is questionable whether there is an issue of damnation or redemption that was at issue here—or a fear of the consequences. For that is never raised. More significant is a sense of the loss of faith. This is seen along with nostalgia and homesickness—a longing for Russia. In the course of lyrical digressions, there is a departure:

The heat is not strong in Hindustan; it is strong at Hormuz and in Bahrein, where pearls are found, and also in Jidda and Baku and Egypt and Arabia and Lar. It is hot in the land of Khorassan, too, but not so hot. And it is very hot in Jagatai. And it is hot in Shiraz and Yezd and Kashan, but a wind blows there at times. And in Gilan the heat is very great and sweltering, and in Shemakha it is sweltering too. It is hot at Babylon and also at Homa and Damascus. But it is not so hot at Aleppo. And at Sivas and in the land of Georgia everything is most plentiful. And the Turkish land is very plentiful. Walachia is plentiful too, and all food is cheap there. The land of Podolia, too, abounds in everything.

May God protect the Russian land! There is no land in the world like it, although the boyars in the Russian land are unjust. May the Russian land be well-ordered, and may there be justice there. Allah, Khuda, O God, Tanri !

Hence, depressed by a life that was not leading to great fortune, Nikitin decided to return home. And he carried with him both his uncertainties and longings as he left India in 1474:

And I am going back to Rus thinking that my faith is dead, for I have fasted with the Moslems. The month of March has passed, and for a month I have not been eating any meat, fasting with Moslems and eating nothing fat, no Moslem food, and taking two meals a day—nothing but bread and water.

There is no certainty where these asides were written—in Feodosia, when he returned to Russia, or elsewhere. This is clear from the following passage:

In Thee I trust, O god, save me, O Lord! I know not my way. Whither shall I go from Hindustan? If I go to Hormuz, there is no passage from Hormuz to Khorassan, Jagatai, Bahrein or Yezd. There is strife everywhere. The princes have been overthrown everywhere. Mirza Jahan Shah was slain by Uzun Hasan Beg, and Sultan Abu Said was poisoned; Uzun Hasan Beg tried to rule in Shiraz, but that land would not recognize him. And Yadigar Muhammad will not join him, for he is afraid. And there is no

other way. And to go by way of Mecca would mean to take the Moslem faith; it is because of their faith that Christians do not go to Mecca, for there they would be converted to Islam. And to live in Hindustan would mean to spend all that I have, because everything is expensive here; alone I spend on food two and a half altins a day. As for wine or mead, I have drunk none of it here.

Such a passage could not conceivably have been written once the journey was complete, and the author was on the last lap on his way home. Like much else in the *Voyage*, this indicates the existence of notes, scribbled at various points during the journey.

V

That the second strand of Nikitin's narrative should be known at all is perhaps an accident of fate. But this is an accident that raises questions concerning the cultural baggage the Russian traveller of the time carried with him, and the nature of identity itself. It also raises questions concerning the function of writing for this traveller.

The account fits into a mould, and it can be compared with other accounts by other European travellers. The distinction is that Nikitin felt quite at home in the Caspian region, and, as he proceeded, felt he could take on the identity of a Caspian merchant. In Hindustan, this 'ease' proved itself well-founded, and he slipped into Muslim practices. But this sparked off a deep conflict within himself. Is it possible then, to talk of essential identities? And is travel the measure of what is fundamental? Nikitin's account itself does not betray the 'Orthodox' or the 'Russian' eye. It betrays the eye of an inhabitant of the Western Mongol Empire—hence the lack of surprise or interest in the Caspian or the customs of Islam in India. But the sub-text in his narrative betrays a duality and an unease with layers of his sense of self.

Would this unease have been present if Nikitin had not lacked the protection and support that the travelling community can provide? Do they rather indicate the pressures under which travel is undertaken by the individual, unprotected by group or community? And what is the consequence of such pressures? Is the upshot of such pressure to be lumped into 'mere' homesickness—to be transcended and overcome? Or does the reaction have a cumulative result—as it clearly did in the case of Nikitin?

In the case of Nikitin, writing itself served as an aid to him in difficult circumstances. Paper and writing provided him with a space that was his own—distinct from the actual journey in which a part of what he had known was contested and doubted. His travel narrative in fact occupied a special territory in his journey—quite different from the literary and social status it occupied for other travellers. It was *intensely personal*. And it is to be asked how this habit came upon Nikitin whether it was part of cultural baggage he brought from Russia, or whether it was an instrument that he came upon from other sources.

Clearly, Nikitin carried with him a great solitude throughout his journey, despite an apparent ease with the world around him. This was a solitude that was impossible to remedy except through his return to the home that obsessed him. His writing is a clear and unequivocal testimony of that solitude—but it is also likely that it was more. Probably, the fact is that the description for which he became renowned played a more fundamental role in his life than is true of other similar cases. The *Voyage over the Three Seas* served its author well after his death, securing for him a proper place in the hall of fame. In its own time, it rendered the author a different service: as companion, confidant and the ultimate repository of his wonder as well as torment. For Nikitin, it became the core of his personality in the course of a journey that threatened to obliterate the identity that he had never realised was so fundamental to himself.

Notes and References

All quotations from Afanasii Nikitin's "Voyage over the Three Seas" are from the English translation, Afanasii Nikitin, *Voyage over the Three Seas*, Progress Publishers, Moscow [no indication of date of publication]. The map of the voyage is from G. Bongard Levin and A. Vigasin, *The Image of India*, pp.26-27.