



## Ivan Minaev's *Sketches of Ceylon and India*: A Russian Perspective on Nepal

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### ABSTRACT

Ivan Minaev (1840-1890) was one of the first great Russian Indologists and students of Buddhism. Between 1874 and 1886, he made three long journeys in which he visited Ceylon, India, Burma and Nepal. Thanks to his profound knowledge of the classic (Sanskrit and Pali) and modern languages of the Indian subcontinent, he had the opportunity not only to read ancient works, but also to meet government and elite figures as well as the people. This paper focuses in particular on Minaev's depiction of Nepal in a series of travel notes such as *Ocherki Tsejlona i Indii* (Eng. trans. *Sketches of Ceylon and India*, 1878) and in a number of essays. Aware of the military and ideological clash between England and Russia that was taking place in Central and South Asia, Minaev took an original stance towards the British colonial domination: he supported the need for the Russian government to imitate the British Empire in building important infrastructures (roads, bridges, railways), but, with regard to Nepal, he emphasises the importance of respecting the appalling richness, variety and originality of its languages, religious rites, legends and songs, which are preserved in a much uncontaminated form here than in India.

**KEYWORDS:** Buddhism, British colonialism, Indian subcontinent, travelogue

### INTRODUCTION

Ivan Pavlovich Minaev (1840-1890) was one of the most important scholars of India and Buddhism in the nineteenth century Russia (Kotovskii, 1967; Ermakova, *Buddiiskii mir*, 1998; Vasil'kov, 2009, pp. 41-61). He was born in 1840 into a family of small, impoverished nobles in the provincial Russian city of Tambov. After completing his early education in his hometown, where he learned French and German, he studied at the University of St. Petersburg in the Faculty of Oriental Languages in 1858. Here he focused on Chinese under the guidance of V.P. Vasil'ev (1818-1900), and later, from his second year on, on Sanskrit with K.A. Kossovich (1815-1883). It was during these years that his passion for Buddhism was born. This passion accompanied him throughout his

life. His desire to study the earliest texts of Buddhist culture led him to further his study of Sanskrit and Pali in Europe. In 1863, after completing his university studies, Minaev began a five-year period of study in Germany, England and France, where he came into contact with some of the leading experts in Indology of the time. In Germany, he deepened his study of Sanskrit with Alfred Weber; in Berlin, he attended the lectures of Franz Bopp (1791-1867), one of the founders of comparative grammar of the Indo-European languages; at the University of Göttingen, he followed the Sanskrit lectures of Theodor Benfey. Heymann Steinthal's Berlin lectures had a significant influence on him. Steinthal was a student of Wilhelm von Humboldt, who emphasized the close connection between language, culture and the psychology of the people. After Germany, Minaev went to London, where he had the opportunity to study the rich collection of Indian manuscripts held at the British Museum and to come into contact with various Indologists. At the National Library in Paris he worked on manuscripts in the Pali language, where he compiled a comprehensive catalog of all manuscripts in that language held in the library. In 1869, upon his return to Russia, Minaev began his academic teaching at the University of St. Petersburg, where he first taught Sanskrit and later comparative grammar of the Indo-European languages. He continued his academic and research activities until his death at the age of 50 in 1890, due to tuberculosis.

Although the specific object of his research has mainly been the history of Buddhism, Minaev has always shown very broad interests that included various aspects of the cultures and languages of the Indian sub-continent and central-southern Asia. He has published studies on the languages of ancient and modern India, its literature and folklore, as well as several works on the historical geography of central-southern Asia, in addition to an important study on the history of Buddhism.

Among his linguistic publications, his work on the phonetics and morphology of the Pali language in his PhD dissertation is of particular importance (Minaev, *Ocherk fonetiki*, 1872; Minaev, *Essay*, 1875). Published in Russian in 1872, this work was soon translated into French and English and for a long time represented the only tool available in Europe for the study of the Pali language (Minaev, *Pali grammar*, 1990). In addition to this work, his Sanskrit grammar manual is important, which for a long time was the only tool for Russian scholars to learn that language (Minaev, *Paradigmy*, 1889). His activity as a philologist focuses on the publication of ancient texts in Sanskrit and Pali, as well as manual-type works. Among the publications of Sanskrit texts, we should remember the original language publication and the Russian translation of the Buddhist text *Pratimoksha-Sutra. Buddhist Service Book*. Among his manuals, we remember a manual of metrics of Pali literature and another on the main texts of Sanskrit literature (Minaev, *Die Pali-Metrik*, 1869; Minaev, *Ocherk vazhneishikh*, 1878).

Among the works dedicated to folklore, a collection of fairy tales and legends collected by Minaev in the Kumaon region and transcribed and published in the Pahari language and translated into Russian stands out in particular (Minaev, *Indiiskie*, 1966). Among the works dedicated to folklore, an important work is dedicated by Minaev to the narratives of Buddhist literature called *Jatakas*, tales on the reincarnation of Buddha, within which a large amount of folk material is reworked (Minaev, *Neskol'ko rasskazov*, 1871).

Minaev's works on the historical geography of central and southern Asia are also important. These are works of human geography, such as the fundamental *Information about the countries in the upper reaches of Amu-Daria*, in which he collects a large amount of information on those regions (Minaev, *Svedeniia*, 1879). Of considerable interest is also a commentary on the famous *The Journey Beyond Three Seas*, notes of travel by a Russian merchant, Afanasy Nikitin, kept during his trip to India between

1466 and 1472. Finally, Minaev is the author of the first Russian translation of Marco Polo's *Il Milione*, which he worked on during the last years of his life.

Among the most important works left by Minaev is a large project dedicated to the history of Buddhism which the scholar was unable to complete. Only the first two parts of this project were published under the title of *Buddhism. Researches and materials* (Minaev, *Buddizm*, 1887). The published parts include an introduction to the presentation of the Buddhist teaching in its historical sequence, based on a wide range of sources in Sanskrit and Pali. In this work, the scholar reconstructs the history of the earliest phase of the evolution of Buddhism, the transformation of its earliest institutions, and its main religious and philosophical concepts. Minaev aimed at "a critical review of Buddhist legends about antiquity and the primary origin of the sacred Pitakas" (Minaev, *Buddizm*, 1887, p. 12).

During his research activity, in addition to various trips to Europe, Minaev carried out three important missions in the Indian sub-continent: the first in 1874-1875, the second in 1880, and the third between 1885 and 1886. During these trips, he kept a detailed diary, only partially published, which represents an indispensable source for those missions (Minaev, *Dnevnik*, 1955). At the end of the first trip, that of 1874-1875, Minaev published an interesting travelogue entitled *Sketches of Ceylon and India*, which will be the subject of this paper.

#### **SKETCHES OF CEYLON AND INDIA AS A TRAVELOGUE**

The first trip that Minaev carried out in the Indian sub-continent was commissioned by the Faculty of Historical and Philological Studies at the University of St. Petersburg, with the aim of collecting ancient manuscripts and studying the oldest Indian monuments. In particular, the famous Russian philologist Alexander N. Veselovsky encouraged and supported this initiative (Kulikova, 1977, pp. 118-24). The trip was preceded by careful preparation, also thanks to the help of his teacher, Vasil'ev. As Tat'iana Ermakova (2018) has emphasized, the motivation given to the Russian Geographical Society to justify the funding of the trip is interesting: a better knowledge of Buddhism was essential because it was a religion that had had a certain spiritual influence on Russia and was the faith embraced by important communities of subjects in the Asian part of the Russian Empire (Nauchnoe, 2018, p. 611). For this reason, Vasil'ev had insisted that Nepal, which was considered the cradle of Buddhism, should not be neglected. It was here that Englishman Brian Houghton Hodgson had obtained important manuscripts in Sanskrit. Therefore, the support of the English authorities was essential for the success of the trip. So, before leaving, Minaev went to England for two weeks, to London and Cambridge, where, thanks to his contacts and the fame of his scientific works, he collected 30 letters of presentation from English scholars who could vouch for the scientific seriousness of his intentions. Regarding the suspicions that his mission could arouse in England, Vasil'ev wrote:

Mr. Minaev, as a result of his long stay in England and subsequent trips he has made there every year, is well known to English orientalists; they know well that he has only science in mind, and for this reason they can vouch for him that Russia, sending him, is not sending a political agent but only a true and honest scholar. (cited in Ermakova, Nauchnoe, 2018, p. 613)

Among Minaev's English contacts, special importance was given to the help of the orientalist William Wright, who put the Russian scholar in touch with his brother Daniel Wright, a doctor with the English resident in Nepal, who helped him in many practical and organizational aspects of his trip in Nepal (Ermakova, *Pis'ma britanskogo*, 2017, pp. 68-76; Ermakova, *Pis'ma Deniela*, 2017, pp. 97-110).

During his first trip to the Indian sub-continent, Minaev travelled almost entirely through Ceylon and visited a good part of northern India, from Calcutta to Lahore. He travelled to the state of Bihar, Nepal, Kamaon, visited parts of Punjab and Rajputana and concluded his itinerary in Bombay. In Nepal, in particular, he managed to collect a considerable number of manuscripts with the help of Daniel Wright (Ermakova, Nauchnoe, 2018, pp. 610-24; Handurukande, 1990, pp. 195-214). At the conclusion of this journey, Minaev wrote a series of articles in Russian, based on his travel diary and published in a number of Russian journals, which were later revised into a book entitled *Sketches of Ceylon and India. From the travel notes of a Russian* published in 1878 (Minaev, V Nepale, 1875, pp. 297–318; Minaev, Ocherki Tseilona, 1878). This book only came out in English in 2020 edited by Narayan Prasad (Minayev, *Sketches*, 2020).

As it emerges from the *Sketches*, Minaev had a remarkable ability to apply his extraordinary linguistic and interpretative skills not only to the many manuscripts, but also to the vivid contemporary social and cultural reality that opened up before his eyes. During his journey, the Russian scholar not only collects manuscripts and sharply analyses ancient Buddhist monuments, but is also able to talk to figures from the most diverse cultures. He knows how to converse with officials of the British administration, as well as with Indian intellectuals or the simplest people of different ethnicities he meets on his journey. From them he gets an extraordinarily broad picture of the country's linguistic, political and cultural situation. As Aleksei Vigasin (2020) writes, “the breadth of coverage of the *Sketches* is amazing. They include a description of the life of various strata and localities, the system of English administration, the analysis of social movements, the characteristics of popular superstitions, cults, and festivals”.

When it came out in 1878, *Sketches* was a considerable success among the Russian public and within a few months it became a rare work in Russian bookshops. This interest had been aroused in particular by the new orientation of the Russian Empire's foreign policy during the reign of Tsar Alexander II, which was given wide coverage in Russian newspapers and magazines. During the 1870s Oriental studies began to become increasingly important in Russia precisely in connection with the Russian government's interest in an expansionist policy in Central Asia, where Russia began to come into conflict with the British Empire.

Minaev's special interest in Buddhism explains in particular the attention the scholar gives in his *Sketches* to two geographically and culturally different realities such as Ceylon and Nepal. The fact that these were two places fundamental to the development of Buddhist culture prompts the Russian scholar to devote special attention to them. However, in order to understand Minaev's view of Nepal, it is important to briefly outline Minaev's attitude towards British colonisation and the ideas he had developed concerning Russian colonisation policy in those regions.

Minaev (1880) explains his positions in the introduction to *Sketches* and in a series of articles published in Russian journals. A complex and nuanced position emerges. The scholar is aware of the important ideological implications underlying the political clash between the Russian and British Empires in Central and South Asia. Addressing the Russian public, he urges readers not to indulge in superficial patriotism or easy dreams of conquest in Asia. According to him, the Russian government should not believe that it could easily replace British rule. In the mid-1870s, Minaev argued how the British Empire had been able to make a positive contribution to the development of those regions. He therefore urged his compatriots to learn more about British colonisation policies in order to understand how to carry out an effective Russian strategy to compete with the British. His book would have served that purpose as well. He writes in the introduction to *Sketches*:

The impulse to study India in Russia should not be the patriotic, dreamy plans of grandiose conquests. We need to know the richest and most prestigious possessions of England, already because England in Asia is our neighbour and everywhere a rival. . . . The better, more comprehensive and impartial we evaluate what England has created, the more certain will be our own success. (*Ocherki Tseilona*, p. IV)

In his review of the book *Russia and the East* in 1878, Minaev (1880) notes: ~~that~~ “Wherever British domination was established, security, the prosperity of the trade, and the spread of education appeared.” In addition, he warns that colonisation by force of arms alone, such as the Russians planned in Central Asia, would not be successful. “In India, the British have a civilian, and not a military, government; there are universities and the native free press.” (*Ocherki Tseilona*, p. IV). With respect to Russian propaganda that tended to emphasise the Indian population's hatred of British rule, Minaev (1880) replies: “They say the English are not liked in India; but where did people loved and love the alien foreign power? They are not loved, but people believe in the justice of their court; their judges are beyond suspicion of corruption; people are coming with request in their schools and universities” (*Ocherki Tseilona*, p. IV).

At the same time, Minaev (1880) argues that in order to correctly assess the contribution made by British institutions to the development of the Indian sub-continent, one must also be familiar with the “real” and ancient India, the one that is still untouched by colonization:

One should not think, however, that it is possible to study English order in India without the knowledge of ancient India or India, not infected by Western civilization: a correct estimate of what was created by the English is possible only when acquainted with a national, a purely Indian point of view; for this, it is necessary to know the old India, the key to the comprehension of which must be its strange and diverse religion. (*Ocherki Tseilona*, p. V)

It is here that Minaev's profound knowledge of the cultures of India and the key role he attributed to the study of religions in the cultural development of a nation emerge. According to Minaev (1880), to know ancient India well, the surest way is to start with its religions. The epigraph from Thomas Carlyle placed at the beginning of the volume of *Sketches* is revealing: “a man's religion is the chief fact with regard to him. A man's or a nation of men's”.

While Minaev (1880) recognises the importance of the contribution made by the British in establishing institutions and infrastructure in India, he does not hide the fact that British rule also had a profoundly negative influence on the mentality of the population, particularly the Indian elite. As a passionate scholar of religious life, Minaev deplores the negative influence that English civilisation in particular had with its cynicism and scepticism on the religious life of the new generations of the Indian elite. At the beginning of *Sketches* he writes:

India, above all, is a vast country full of diversity and originality; there, next to the phenomena of primitive culture, there are strata of society infected with diseases of another more progressive stage of development: on the same soil, a superstitious fetishist prospers, and young sceptics who deny, do not believe in anything and doubt everything, grow and mature. (*Ocherki Tseilona*, p. III)

In assessing the spiritual corruption of the Indian intelligentsia, Minaev was influenced by what had been going on within the Russian intelligentsia for some years. From the 1860s onwards, many young Russian intellectuals had been influenced by a range of ideas from England, France and Germany that challenged traditional Russian religious and patriarchal values. The ideas of Jeremy Bentham, Fourier, Schopenhauer and

Feurbach had fuelled a series of sceptical, cynical and nihilist attitudes towards traditional religious values among young people, giving rise to a movement of ideas that came to be called Russian populism.

Nepal appeared to Minaev as the place where, unlike what was happening in India, the corrupting influence of Western ideas had not yet arrived. In his opinion, Nepal retained an extraordinary richness and variety of different languages, cultures and religious forms and, at the same time, thanks to the foresight of its premier Sir Jung-Bahadur, institutions and infrastructure on the Anglo-Saxon model were being developed, without, however, being adversely affected by the corrupting influence of Western thought and life.

### NEPAL IN MINAEV'S TRAVELOGUE

In *Sketches* Minaev devotes to Nepal the second of the seven chapters dedicated to the description the northern part of the Indian sub-continent, after the description of Bihar and before that of Camoen. The chapter opens with a long geographical and historical introduction, partly taken from local chronicles, from the *Vansavali*, and partly from Hodgson's book on Nepal, in which the various ethnic groups present in the territory and the different dynasties and rulers who have succeeded one another in history are described. However, Minaev emphasises how in reality these written sources could say little about the contemporary situation in Nepal. It is mainly his observations from encounters and dialogues with the local population that show us his positive image of the country. In particular, in the chapter that Minaev devotes to Nepal, the Russian scholar challenges the negative view of the country expressed the year before by one Daniel Wright in his edition of a *History of Nepal*, published in 1877 in English. In his book, Wright had mainly emphasised the negative aspects of the local population: its dirtiness, hypocrisy and falsehood, its suspicious and deceitful character, the absence of schools and culture, etc. Minaev, reviewing Wright's book, had disputed that image. He had written: "Reading Dr Wright's book on the Nepalese, you get an idea of a dirty, lazy, greedy, arrogant, haughty people" (Minaev, Nepal, 1878, p. 64). In that same review, he had begun to express the positive judgements about Nepal that would later be elaborated in his book. In *Sketches*, Minaev (1878) offers a very different perspective and assessment of Nepal than the British observer. Comparing the population of Nepal with that of Ceylon and Bihar, he draws a decidedly positive portrait of the local population: the inhabitants of Nepal appear to him "generous, cheerful and sociable" (*Ocherki Tseilona*, p. 234). In *Sketches* Minaev (1878) observes that in Nepal "crimes are rare, these mountain dwellers love the truth and are generally pleasant" (*Ocherki Tseilona*, pp. 235-36). He concludes that "the Nepalese are good-natured and cheerful people" (*Ocherki Tseilona*, p. 280).

The Russian scholar's attention is particularly drawn to the forms of the people's religious life. Minaev (1878) notes how tolerance and the absence of fanaticism are fundamental traits of the religious sentiment of the Nepalese people. Added to this is a superstitious attitude that leads people to never reject new deities and new forms of prayer: "Buddhism has held back here because the population is indifferent, not fanatical in nature and at the same time so superstitious that is always ready, on every occasion, to pray and honour every god" (*Ocherki Tseilona*, p. 250). A strong syncretism of Buddhism and Hinduism is visible in numerous manifestations of the forms of religious life in Nepal: "Monasteries and temples of the gods stand side by side. . . but in monasteries live the married monks, and in brahmanical temples there are buddhas and bodhisattvas, and in the Buddhist temples there are brahmanical gods" (Minaev, *Ocherki Tseilona*, p. 251). Minaev (1878) notes that the Buddhism

practised in Nepal also had quite different manifestations from the Buddhism he observed in Ceylon. "The Buddhist clergy here are different from that of Ceylon; they devote themselves differently, read (very rarely) other books, pray not to what they worship in the south. . . . Here other festivals and other processions are in honour of the local deities" (*Ocherki Tseilona*, p. 251). Different were the devotional practices of Buddhist monks and different were the appearance of the places of worship, even compared to the old Buddhist monuments that had been preserved in Nepal: "Their temples are built according to a different plan and are decorated in a completely original way; their stupas are completely neither similar to those of Ceylon, nor to the ancient ones that are presently known in ruins" (Minaev, *Ocherki Tseilona*, p. 251). These traits of the religious sensibilities of the peoples of Nepal are the result of a long historical process, of the succession of different ethnic groups and dynasties over the centuries, each with its own deities and rituals. Minaev (1878) further argues: "The influx of various colonies, the change of various dynasties, each of which came with its own gods and with its own servants, were to influence the religious consciousness of the Nepali people" (*Ocherki Tseilona*, p. 250). The large number and variety of deities worshipped, the syncretism of forms in rituals and religious temples, combining elements of Buddhism and Hinduism, were thus the result of influences brought both from the north, from Tibet, and from the south. In this regard, Minaev (1878) notes: "The richness and diversity of the Nepalese pantheon is striking, even in comparison with that of Benares or any other city where Hinduism still nestles" (*Ocherki Tseilona*, p. 251). Minaev (1878) concludes: "External political circumstances and the national character itself contributed to the development of the religion that now exists in Nepal: a strange mixture of Brahmanism and Buddhism, high ideas and gross idolatry" (*Ocherki Tseilona*, p. 253).

Thanks to his observational skills, Minaev (1878) carefully describes the most diverse aspects of life in Nepal: sacred rites and festivals, prayers and religious rituals, marriage customs and the status of women, eating habits, superstitions. He writes:

There are few countries in India that represent such a rich field for ethnographic research, beginning with the languages of the various peoples of Nepal and ending with folk superstitions, preserved here in their primitive inviolability; in this mountainous country, between the Aryan India and the Tibetan tribes, to the north, everything is original and curious. (*Ocherki Tseilona*, p. 279)

His sensitivity to religious life and folklore and his linguistic knowledge prompted Minaev to include and translate some of the Buddhist prayers, songs, etc. in the book.

According to Minaev (1878), the richness of the forms of religious and cultural life of the various ethnic groups present in Nepal had also been preserved thanks to the scarce European influence, which, unlike India, had not yet contaminated the nation's social and cultural life with its ideas and lifestyle. Credit for this, according to him, had to be given in part to the shrewd Nepalese government, and in particular to Sir Jung-Bahadur. He had met Sir Jung-Bahadur several times and does not hide his admiration for him. Jung-Bahadur is described as "remarkably intelligent" and "cunning" (*Ocherki Tseilona*, p. 272). Additionally, he again notes:

He is very vigorous . . . nothing brutal, not noticeable either in the eyes or in the expression of the face; he seems a good-nature man, speaks in low voice and softly, he is very polite. Looking at his ingrating treatment with Europeans, no one will even think that this old man has such a bloody past. (*Ocherki Tseilona*, p. 276)

After the war with the British, Jung-Bahadur had been able to maintain good relations with the British authorities and at the same time managed to retain full independence from them. Although legally the movement of foreigners in the country was guaranteed, in reality the Bahadur government created countless bureaucratic obstacles for Europeans who wanted to reside or travel in Nepal. Therefore, for many decades only three Europeans lived in Nepal, the resident, his assistant and a surgeon. In this case, Minaev (1878) writes:

Nepal, as an independent state and at the same time semi-closed to Europeans, had very little impact of Western civilization. Travellers here were very few; the English colony in Kathmandu, even now, at the beginning of the present century, has always been small, there have never been more than three Europeans, permanent residents: the resident, his assistant and the doctor, and these three people live outside the city, do not have direct relations with the natives and even go out walking under convoy of a Nepalese policeman. Every step of the European, under the constant supervision of the police, is observed; every issue of the European excites as if suspicion. (*Ocherki Tseilona*, p. 278)

Minaev (1878) reports that, according to the British, who had now abandoned all hope of annexation, the Nepalese people were satisfied with their government: "The British assure that the Nepales are satisfied with their ruler. . . . The people in Nepal sing, dring vodka, worship and really seem satisfied" (*Ocherki Tseilona*, p. 275). He adds: "Jung built bridges, constructed roads in some places, without burdening the people with taxes, strengthened the army, gets on with the British, and therefore, maybe, the Nepalese are satisfied with their present situation" (*Ocherki Tseilona*, p. 275).

According to Minaev (1878), the attitude of the Nepalese towards England is twofold. While the people are suspicious and afraid of the British presence, the elite are fascinated by British culture and civilisation. Minaev writes that: "There is hardly another country where they are so little loved and so much afraid" (*Ocherki Tseilona*, p. 279). However, Jung-Bahadur had given his children an English teacher and education. Minaev believes that this foreign education could have a negative impact on the country's elite, especially after Jung-Bahadur's death in February 1877. The attraction to western lifestyles, which was possible in Indian cities like Calcutta, could have a corrupting effect on the golden youth of Nepal:

Calcutta for Nepal's jeunesse dorée is the same as Paris for dissolute youth in Europe. In Calcutta they break free: without fearing the vigilant supervision of their fathers, here they are drunk with champagne, they taste beefsteak; in Calcutta, far from the wives, from the fathers, without fear of losing the caste, they are indiscriminately and without measure committed to those pleasures, which abound in all the big cities in general, and the eastern in particular. (*Ocherki Tseilona*, p. 277)

The chapter on Nepal ends with an open question about the country's future. Minaev asks: to what extent will Bahadur's successors be able to maintain good relations with the British Empire, keep the peace and preserve the country from Western corruption?

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be said that Minaev, thanks to his profound orientalist culture, in *Sketches of Tseilon and India* offers an acute and attentive insight of Nepal from a rather different perspective than that presented by the contemporary English accounts, such as the one developed by Daniel Wright in the *History of Nepal*. Minaev emphasises the importance of respecting the appalling richness, variety and originality of



its languages, religious rites, legends and songs, which are preserved in a much uncontaminated form here than in India. Although he acknowledges the positive role played by British rule in some aspects of India's colonization, he hopes that British influence will not lead to the disappearance of the cultural and religious richness he observes during his trip in Nepal.

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