

# AFANASY NIKITIN'S PASSAGE TO INDIA: FACTS AND FANCIES

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**Sergei Dmitreivich Serebriany**  
Professor  
Russian State University for the  
Humanities,  
Moscow, Russia  
[s.serebriany@gmail.com](mailto:s.serebriany@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** *The travel of the Russian merchant Afanasy Nikitin to India in the 1470s is often evoked, especially in official discourses, as a proof of "centuries long relations" between Russia and India. But, in fact, this accidental passage of a lonely merchant from the principality of Tver to the Bahmani Sultanate was just an episode without any consequences, neither for Russia nor for India, for several centuries to come. Afanasy Nikitin died on his way back home. Fortunately, his notes, that he had kept while in India (and/or on his way home), were preserved and passed to Moscow. But they remained little known till the beginning of the 19th century, when historian Nikolai Karamzin (1766–1826) unearthed them in the library of a monastery. Nevertheless, for about a century and a half, these notes (in the 19th century, they got the title "Хождение за три моря") did not attract much attention, either of scholars or of general public. It is only in the 1940s that the notes of Afanasy Nikitin began to be studied seriously in Russia. A lot remains to be done. In the meantime, Afanasy Nikitin has become a mythic figure, a hero of pseudo-historical novels and movies.*

**Keywords:** *Russia, the principality of Tver, India, the Bahmani Sultanate, 15th century, Afanasy Nikitin, "Travels Across (Beyond) Three Seas"*

**A**fanasy Nikitin<sup>1</sup> (the year of birth is not known – [presumably] 1474),<sup>2</sup> a Russian merchant from the city of Tver, is one of the few foreign travellers, known to us now, who visited India in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (presumably in 1471–1474), before Vasco da Gama reached the subcontinent

- 1 "Nikitin" is usually treated as a surname, but actually it is an archaic form of a patronymic. In the "Хождение", the author calls himself either just "Afanasy" or "Afanasy, Nikitin's son" [Хождение, 1986, с. 32]. In 15th century Russia, common people did not have surnames in the modern sense of the word.
- 2 Here and further, the dates of the life and travels of Afanasy Nikitin are given according to the calculations of the late Russian scholar Leonid Sergeevich Semyonov (1930–1986) [Семёнов, 1980, с. 25-28; Семёнов, 1986].

in 1498. We know very little about Afanasy himself. Almost the only source of information about this traveller and his travels are his notes, a kind of travelogue, which has come down to us in three somewhat different versions, copied by scribes of later centuries [Лурье, 1986].<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, though knowing very little, we may try and get a better understanding of the man, his voyages and his notes, by placing them in a broader historical context and by a “close reading” of those notes.

The 15<sup>th</sup> century, according to the traditional interpretation of the history of Europe, marks the transition from the (Late) Middle Ages to the (Early) Modern period. For Italians, it is “Quattrocento” (“the 400”), the age of humanist scholars who, following Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374), were busy retrieving the classical past from medieval oblivion and distortion. The Florentine humanist Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444) “invented” (by 1442) the division of European history into three parts (Ancient, Mediaeval, Modern) that we use till today. It was in 1469 (when Afanasy was on his way to India) that the first version of the term “Middle Ages” appeared in Latin (*media tempestas*). Various dates have been suggested as a symbolic borderline between the medieval and the modern: 1453, the fall of Constantinople; 1492, the “discovery” of America by Christopher Columbus (1451–1506); just 1500 or even 1517, the beginning of the Protestant Reformation by Martin Luther (1483–1546).

As the famous British historian Lord Acton once put it, the distinctive feature of the modern age (in Western Europe) was “the universal spirit of investigation and discovery” [Acton, p. 20]: not only the “discovery” of lands, unknown before, the geographical expansion, but also the discovery of new ways of thought and imagination, the expansion of mind, initiated by Italian humanists. Italians were often pioneers, among Europeans, in geographical discoveries as well. Especially the two merchant republics, Genoa and Venice, contributed, before and during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, to the widening of information (available to Europeans) about the rest of the world.

Thus, Marco Polo (1254–1324), a Venetian merchant, was one of the first Europeans to visit India (on his way back home from China). Niccolò de’ Conti (1395–1469), also a Venetian, a senior contemporary of Afanasy, lived about 25 years in various Asian countries, visited India more than once and even is said to have married an Indian woman. He came back to Italy in 1444, and his oral descriptions of his experiences were recorded (in Latin) by the humanist Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459). Marco Polo and Niccolò de’ Conti inspired their fellow Italian Christopher Columbus, a Genoan, and other travellers of the time.

One more Venetian contemporary of Afanasy, Ambrogio Contarini (1429–1499), was sent by the Venetian Republic, in 1474, with a diplomatic mission to Uzun Hassan, the ruler of Isfahan. On his way back Contarini followed, in the opposite direction, the rout of Afanasy along Volga. The Italian reached Moscow in 1476, where he had to stay four months, before coming back home in 1477. Unlike Afanasy, Contarini has written a very detailed report about his journey, published in Venice in 1487. In Moscow, Contarini felt very much like Afanasy in India: an alien in an exotic and not always pleasant land.

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3 The book [Хождение, 1986] in which this essay [Лурье, 1986] is included, is, in my opinion, the highest achievement, till now, of Afanasy Nikitin studies in Russia.  
 Cf. an electronic version of the book in the internet: <https://litlife.club/books/218847/read?page=1>

*Indeed, the 15<sup>th</sup> century Russians, though related in many ways to the universe of Western (Roman) Christianity, were, nevertheless, a world apart.*

*In 988, Vladimir, the grand prince of Kiev, with the help of Byzantine Greeks (who called themselves "Romioi", i.e. "Romans"), baptized his subjects. Since then the Kievan state (or the "Kievan Rus" as it came to be called much later) became the north-eastern periphery of the European Christian world. The princes of Kiev had close matrimonial ties with other European rulers.*

*Thus, Vladimir's son Yaroslav, under whose rule Kievan Rus is said to have reached the zenith of its cultural blossoming and military power, married, in 1019, a daughter of the Swedish king Olof Skötkonung, one of the first Christian kings of Sweden (reigned in 995–1022). Yaroslav's daughters became queens of France, Hungary, and Norway; one of his sons married a daughter of a Polish king, another son married a daughter of a Byzantine emperor. Yaroslav's grandson, the Grand Prince Vladimir II Monomach (ruled from 1113 till 1125) married Gytha of Wessex, the daughter of Harold II, the last Anglo-Saxon king of England, who perished at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. Vladimir Monomach's sister Eupraxia (1071–1109), married, in 1089, Henry IV, the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.*

*But in 1054 the Great Schism between Rome and Constantinople took place, and this schism (aggravated by the sack of Constantinople by crusaders in 1204) eventually separated Russia from Western Europe as an Orthodox Christian country. In the first decades of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Mongols, first under Genghis Khan and then under his grandson Batu, invaded Russian principalities, the heirs of the Kievan Rus. Kiev itself was ravaged in 1240. The long period of the so called "Tatar-Mongol yoke" followed, which also separated a large part, the north-east, of the former Kievan Rus from Western Europe. From the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century till the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, this "North-East" was subordinate to the (so called) Golden Horde, one of the successor states of the Mongol Empire of Genghis Khan. Khan Uzbek, who reigned in 1313–1341 and under whose rule the Golden Horde reached its zenith, converted to Islam – and since then Islam was the state religion of the Horde.*

*In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, there were several centres of power on the territory of today's Russian Federation which interacted amongst themselves in an Orwellian way, i.e. changing alliances from time to time in almost perpetual efforts to overwhelm each other.*

*In the west, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania had gradually grown during the 14<sup>th</sup> century to become, at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the largest state in Europe (with its capital in Vilno/Vilnius). In the 1360s, the Grand Duke Olgerd (Algirdas) established his power over Kiev and territories to the south, down to the Black sea. In 1385-86, under the Union of Krevo, Grand Duke Jogaila converted to (Roman) Christianity, married queen Jadwiga of Poland, and was crowned the king of Poland. But the majority of the people in the Grand Duchy called themselves "Russians" (in Latin, "Rutheni") and remained Orthodox Christian. Later some of these people became the modern Russians; others, Ukrainians or Belorussians.*

*Some modern historians call the Grand Duchy of Lithuania "an alternative Russia", an "alternative project" for Russian history which never came true. At the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the*

*Grand Duke Vitovt (Vitautas, c. 1350–1430) wanted to become both the king of Lithuania and the ruler of the whole of Russia, but death destroyed his ambitious plans.*

*In the east, the Golden Horde gradually disintegrated, its peripheral regions emerging as independent states: the Kazan Khanate in 1438, the Crimean Khanate in 1441, the Astrakhan Khanate in 1466. The remaining nucleus came to be called the Great Horde, with the capital Sarai Berke (or New Sarai; in Arabic, Sarāi-al-Jadīd) on Volga, not far from today's city of Volgograd (the former Stalingrad, the former Tsaritsyn).*

*In-between, there were a number of Russian principalities, which were vassals of the Golden (Great) Horde. By the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the principality of Moscow, under Grand Prince (Duke) Ivan III (reigned from 1440 to 1505), triumphed over all other rival principalities (as well as over its long time overlord, the Horde), so that, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Ivan III's grandson Ivan IV, known as "The Terrible", could proclaim him self "the Tsar of the whole of Russia".*

*But till the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the principality of Tver, on the upper Volga, competed with Moscow (and with Vilno) for the honour to become the centre of "the whole of Russia". Under Grand Prince Boris Alexandrovich (who reigned from 1426 to 1461) the Tver principality reached the height of its power and hopes for supremacy. In 1453, a local monk Foma (Thomas) wrote "The Eulogy of the Pious Grand Prince Boris Alexandrovich", in which he called his patron "the second Constantine" and the city of Tver "the third Rome" (as "the second Rome", Constantinople, had been captured by Turks). It was only later, when Tver lost the competition for supremacy over "the whole of Russia", that the idea of "the third Rome" was transferred to Moscow. The next prince of Tver, Mikhail Borisovich (1453–1505, reigned in 1461–1485), whose blessings Afanasy Nikitin got for his travel, was the last prince of the failed "third Rome". In 1485 Ivan III (Mikhail's brother-in-law) annexed Tver to Moscow. Mikhail Borisovich fled to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and died there 20 years later.*

*The principality of Tver, along with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, may be considered one more "alternative project" for Russian history which has failed to get realised. And Afanasy Nikitin, a merchant from Tver at the height of its glory, may be considered an "alternative project" of the homo rossicus, which project, alas, never came true either.*

*The "long 15<sup>th</sup> century" in the history of Russia is also the century long agony of the Golden Horde: in 1380, the Moscow Grand Prince Dmitry defeated Mamai, the ruler of the Golden Horde, at the legendary battle on the Kulikovo Field, and in 1395 Timur defeated Tokhtamysh, the Khan of the Golden Horde, devastating the capital of the state, Sarai, and its other cities. In 1480, Ivan III confronted Khan Ahmad on the Ugra river (the so called "Great Standoff on the Ugra river" - in Russian, "Стояние на Угре"), which symbolised the end of the "Horde yoke" over Russia. In 1502, Mengli I Giray, the Crimean Khan, struck the final blow to the Great Horde. Its last Khan, Sheikh Ahmad, fled to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.*

*The "long 15<sup>th</sup> century" in India also opens with Timur: in 1398 he sacked Delhi. In 1526, Babur, a descendant of both Timur and Genghis Khan, regained what he considered his hereditary right for power over Delhi and so started a new period of Indian history.*

Afanasy reached the subcontinent presumably in 1471, when it was divided in many states, at war between themselves.

Strangely enough, in the notes of Afanasy, as they have come down to us, there are no exact dates, no indications of the years during which he travelled. The anonymous writer (or copyist?) of the *letopis* (annual chronicle), in which the notes of Afanasy were included, remarks that he has got the notes in the year 6983 (i.e. 1474/1475 A.D.; in Russia till the 18<sup>th</sup> century the years were counted from “the creation of the world”) [Хождение, 1986, с. 5, 43]. The dates of the travel itself were reconstructed, in different ways, by scholars in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The text of the notes, as we have it, is not too long. The longest of the three versions has about 7000 words. The language is rather archaic. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, translations into modern Russian were undertaken to make the text understandable for common readers. One of the striking features of the notes are several passages in Arabic, Farsi and a kind of Turki. In the available manuscripts these passages are transcribed in Cyrillic. But it is quite probable that originally they were written in the Arabic script. Afanasy could obviously speak (and, probably, write) Farsi and some Turkic dialect, otherwise he would not have been able to make his way through the “Oriental” lands. Although his notes have been studied by modern scholars for about two hundred years, the work must be far from completion. In particular, the passages in “Oriental” languages, particularly in Turki, seem to require more study and comments. The Turkic language used by Afanasy is now called “Khorezmian Turkic”. It was the literary language of the Golden Horde and is considered, by linguists, a preliminary stage of the Chagatay language, in which, later, Bābur wrote his “Bābur-nāma” and his ghazals.

Afanasy started from his native city of Tver with a group of other merchants, presumably in the spring of 1468. They floated down the Volga river all the way to Astrakhan, passing without problems the lands of the Moscow principality, of the Kazan Khanate, of the Great Horde, and most of the Astrakhan Khanate. In the city of Nizhny Novgorod the merchants joined the party of Hasan Beg, the ambassador of the Shirvanshah to Ivan III, on their way home. But near Astrakhan the flotilla was plundered by local pirates. Afanasy managed to reach Derbent (the city port on the Caspian sea), but lost everything he had taken from home. There was no way back for him. The only way out was to go further in the hope to make some profit. It was this hope that eventually – and quite accidentally – brought him to India. He wrote: “... Because of many misfortunes, I went to India, for I had nothing to take to Rus, no goods being left” (“Азь же от многия беды поидох до Индѣя, занже ми на Русь пойти нѣ с чем, не осталось у меня товару ничего”) [Хождение, 1986, с. 13, 26, 38, 52].

Before and after Afanasy, Russians did travel to faraway lands and sometimes described their voyages; most often they made pilgrimages to some holy places like Jerusalem or Constantinople. But the notes of Afanasy start with the striking words: “Here I have described my sinful voyage beyond (or across) three seas...” («Се написах свое грѣшное хождение за три моря...») [Хождение, 1986, с. 5, 18, 32, 43]. At home, Afanasy might have read traditional stories about India, stories that had come to Russia from Byzantium. In those stories India was a fabulous land, situated not far from the paradise. The real India, where Afanasy lived about three years, did not remind him of paradise.

He stayed most of the time in the Bahmani Sultanate, saw the capital city of Bidar and some other cities.<sup>4</sup> At that time, a war between the Sultanate and the Vijayanagar Empire took place. So Afanasy got some information about Vijayanagar as well. As a written source for the history of the Bahmani Sultanate and Vijayanagar, the notes of Afanasy must have lost their value. But these notes remain a valuable human document, a report about cross-cultural contacts in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The Russian scholar Yakov Lurye (1921–1996) justly called Afanasy's notes "a sad book" ("невесёлая книга"), written by a "loser" ("неудачник, бедолага"), who "got engaged in a hopeless business" ("впутавшийся в безнадежное дело") [Лурье, 1986, с. 74-75]. Indeed, Afanasy got no material profit from his "sinful voyage" to India. He had hoped to find there some goods which he would be able to sell in Russia. But, to his regret, he realised that in India "for the Russian land no goods are there" ("а на Рускую землю товару нѣтъ") [Хождение, 1986, с. 8, 21, 34, 47]. Judging by his notes, Afanasy felt very ill at ease in the Bahmani Sultanate. He was, of course, much impressed by the grandeur and richness of the capital, Bidar, and the glamour of the rulers. But he did not fail to notice that the common people were poor and miserable. On the whole, he disapproved of local customs and mores; his remarks about them are very harsh. It seems that he mixed more with local Muslims, with whom he could communicate in Farsi and with whose religion he was well acquainted.

But he also made acquaintances with some Hindus, and they took the foreign guest to the Shaiva shrine called "Parvat". According to Afanasy, "it is their Jerusalem, what for Muslims is Месса" [Хождение, 1986, с. 10, 24, 36, 49].<sup>5</sup> Afanasy gives a detailed, though somewhat ironic description of the shrine. The huge stone figure of Shiva, with the right hand up in the air, reminded him the statue of Justinian in Constantinople (some modern scholars surmise that Afanasy might have travelled to Constantinople; others think he might have seen a picture in a book). Afanasy evidently discussed with his Hindu acquaintances the issues of faith and, again, did not approve what he heard and saw. "In India (he wrote) there are eighty four faiths, and all believe in the boot.<sup>6</sup> And people of different faiths do not drink, nor eat, nor intermarry with each other" [Хождение, 1986, с. 23, 36, 48]. By "faith" here Afanasy evidently meant "caste".

The major problem for him in India was preserving his Orthodox Christian identity. To Muslims he introduced himself as Yusuf Khorasani, but on one occasion his true identity was revealed, and he hardly escaped (according to his notes) conversion to Islam. To his Hindu acquaintances Afanasy himself revealed that he was Russian and Christian; they evidently did not mind. Some modern scholars suppose that Afanasy, like Niccolo de Conti before him, did convert to Islam. But other scholars object, saying that, if this had been the case, Afanasy would not have been

4 The Bahmani Sultanate (like the principality of Tver in the Russian case) may be considered an "alternative project" for Indian history which failed to get realised. The Bahmani Sultanate was, in some important respects, similar to the later Mughal Empire. But the Bahmanids, unlike the Mughals, failed to build a pan-subcontinental imperial structure, and their Sultanate has come down into history only as a remarkable "regional" phenomenon that lasted less than two centuries (1347–1527).

5 My late friend Hari Vasudevan identified this "Parvat" with the Shaiva shrine in the city of Shrishailam on the bank of the Krishna river [Vasudevan, 2014, pp. 305, 337].

6 "Boot" is of course the Persian word, meaning "idol".

able to return home, because apostasy was severely punished in 15<sup>th</sup> century Russia [Лурье, 1986, с. 76-78].

There are very striking passages in Afanasy's notes, in which he expresses his views about differences between human faiths. He first puts down his final conclusion in Farsi (as if being afraid to express such a bold thought in his native tongue): "Rāst dīnī khudā dānad" ("[Only] God knows the true faith") – but then repeats the statement in Russian: "А правую вѣру богъ вѣдает" [Хождение, 1986, с. 15, 29, 55].

Critical as he was in his judgements about India, Afanasy was not less critical about his homeland. It is remarkable, that some of his most biting comments about Russia are also written in Farsi. At one place Afanasy writes that powerful people in Russia are corrupt and adds in Farsi: "[Russia] rāstī kam dārad" ("[In Russia] there is little truth") [Хождение, 1986, с. 14, 27, 53]. No Russian translation follows.

Nevertheless, by the end of his stay in India, Afanasy became very homesick. In the end, he managed to reach Persia and from there went to the Black sea (the third sea of his voyage). Some Turks robbed him of all his possessions (except his notes), but finally he crossed the sea and landed in Kafa (now Feodosia), the Genoan colony in Crimea. Modern scholars suppose that it was in Kafa that Afanasy finalised his notes.

From Kafa, together, probably, with some other Russians, Afanasy started for Tver, but, as the above mentioned letopis states, "died, having not reached Smolensk" (in 1474) [Хождение, 1986, с. 5, 43]. The principality of Smolensk, from 1404 till 1514, was a part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. But the notes of Afanasy were passed to Moscow.

The notes, though included in some local annual chronicles, remained, obviously, little known till the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Nikolai Karamzin (1766 – 1826), the famous historian, unearthed them ...<sup>7</sup> After that, they were read, of course, by scholars and students, but hardly got wide renown. It was only in the late 1950s, when Nikita Khrushchev and Jawaharlal Nehru initiated the "friendship" between the USSR and independent India, that Afanasy Nikitin became really famous as one of the symbols of the "centuries long" (pre)history of this "friendship". A lot of fiction (novels) and fictions (myths) have been created about Afanasy since then. The place of honour belongs, probably, to the Soviet-Indian movie "Pardesi" ("A Foreigner"), shot in 1957. It was, in fact, a pious fairy tale, which had almost nothing in common with the reality. Fairy tales are, of course, fun, but, as Afanasy, Nikita's son, would say, they "rāstī na dārand" ("do not contain the truth").

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7 For more details see my paper (in Russian) [Серебряный, 2020].

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### Путешествие Афанасия Никитина в Индию: факты и фантазии.

**Аннотация:** Путешествие русского купца Афанасия Никитина в Индию в 1470-х годах часто упоминается, особенно по официальным случаям, как доказательство “многовековых” связей между Россией и Индией. На самом деле, случайный приезд одинокого купца из Тверского княжества в султанат Бахманидов был эпизодом, не имевшим никаких последствий ни для России, ни для Индии в течение нескольких веков. Сам Афанасий Никитин умер на обратном пути домой. К счастью, его записки, которые он вёл в Индии (и/или по пути домой), сохранились и были переданы в Москву. Но они оставались малоизвестными вплоть до начала XIX века, когда историк Николай Карамзин (1766–1826) нашёл их в одной монастырской библиотеке. Однако еще на протяжении почти полутора веков эти записки (в XIX веке получившие название “Хождение за три моря”) не привлекали большого внимания ни исследователей, ни широкой публики. Серьезное изучение записок Афанасия Никитина началось в России только в 1940-х годах. Многие еще предстоит сделать. Между тем Афанасий Никитин уже стал фигурой мифической, героем псевдоисторических романов и кинофильмов.

**Ключевые слова:** Россия, Тверское княжество, Индия, султанат Бахманидов, 15-й век, Афанасий Никитин, «Хождение за три моря».