



## AN EXPERIMENTAL META-TRAVEL TO “THE HEADQUARTER OF THE ABSOLUTE”: THE INDIA OF GIORGIO MANGANELLI

“KESİNLİĞİN GENEL MERKEZİ”NE DOĞRU DENEYİMSEL BİR ÜST-SEYAHAT: GIORGIO MANGANELLI’NİN HİNDİSTANI

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### Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the travel book *Esperimento con l'India* (Experiment with India) by Giorgio Manganelli, highlighting especially the features that make it a “meta-travel”, an experience that reshapes the traveler's previous literary, popular or stereotyped knowledge. In Manganelli's work, a gradual abandonment of the eurocentrism typical of the western progressive intellectuals can be seen, which facilitates a total immersion in the Indian context, its culture, and its spirituality. The trip starts from Bombay and ends in Delhi, passing through Goa, Madras, and Calcutta and it is a gradual displacement of the writer who is shocked by a culture so distant from his own. This estrangement is felt as a deep unease and a psychological illness, culminating in the traveler's total self-loss and absorption in the Indian reality. Manganelli's experience, perhaps the most interesting travel “experiment” of the Italian literature of the 20th century, is, therefore, a journey to a special dimension of India, different from other European travelers' accounts.

### Öz

Bu çalışma Giorgio Manganelli'nin “*Esperimento con l'India*” (Hindistan'la Deney) adlı seyahat kitabını incelemeye hedeflenmektedir. Özellikle bu eserin neden bir üst-seyahat ve başka bir deyişle, seyyahın var olan edebi, popüler ve stereotipli bilgilerini yeniden şekillendiren bir tecrübe olduğunun vurgulanması istenmektedir. Nitekim Manganelli'nin eserinde, Batılı ilerici entelektüellerin tipik Avrupa merkeziliğinden uzaklaşıp, Hint kültürü ve tinselliğine dalma süreci tamamlanmaktadır. Seyahat, Bombay'dan başlayıp, Goa, Madras ve Kalküta'dan geçerek Delhi'de biter ve kendinden o kendisine oldukça yabancı olan bir kültür tarafından şaşırtılan yazarın aşamalı bir devingenliği olarak addedilir. Yabancılaşma süreci, seyahatin Hint gerçekliğinde tamamen kaybolmasıyla zirveye ulaşan derin bir huzursuzluk ve psikolojik bir hastalık gibi hissedilmektedir. 20. yüzyılın İtalyan edebiyatındaki en ilginç seyahat “deneyi” olan Manganelli'nin tecrübesini, Avrupalı diğer seyyahların gerçekleştirdiklerinden farklı bir Hindistan'a doğru yapılan bir seyahat olarak görmek mümkündür.

### Makale Bilgisi

Gönderildiği tarih: 27 Ağustos 2018

Kabul edildiği tarih: 6 Kasım 2018

Yayınlanma tarihi: 28 Aralık 2018

### Article Info

Date submitted: 27 August 2018

Date accepted: 6 November 2018

Date published: 28 December 2018

### Anahtar sözcükler

Giorgio Manganelli; Seyahat Edebiyatı; Hindistan; Üst-Seyahat; Çağdaş İtalyan Edebiyatı

### Keywords

Giorgio Manganelli; Travel Literature; India; Meta-Travel; Contemporary Italian Literature

DOI: 10.33171/dtcjournal.2018.58.2.18

O fool, to try to carry thyself upon thy own shoulders!  
O beggar, to come to beg at thy own door!  
(Rabindranath Tagore, Gitanjali IX)

### Introduction

This article aims to analyze *Esperimento con l'India*<sup>1</sup> (1992) by Giorgio Manganelli, a travel account that has a considerable importance in contemporary Italian literature. Indeed, this book – which contains some articles written by the author for the newspaper “Il Mondo” during his journey in India in 1975 and published after his death in 1992 – is the testimony on Indian subcontinent and its people through an interesting and original perception. It was written more than half a

<sup>1</sup> All the quotations of *Esperimento con l'India* are translated by the author of this article, since the Manganelli's travel book does not have yet a translation in English. Moreover, all quotations from essays not translated into English are given in the original language and their translation, done by me, is shown in the notes.

century after the “Indian letters” of Guido Gozzano - now known as *Verso la cuna del mondo* (1912) – and seemed very different from the other two Indian *experiments* by Alberto Moravia – *Un’idea dell’India* (1962) and Pier Paolo Pasolini – *L’odore dell’India* (1962). However, the Manganelli’s reportage is more than a simple experience/experiment of otherness: it is more like an *autopsy* done by the Italian writer on his own identity as a *perplexed* western intellectual (Benvenuti 191). This process aims to intercept and dismantle the stereotypes about the Orient, typical of some European progressivist third-world-supporters – as, for example, Pier Paolo Pasolini who carried out some important works about India and Africa (*L’odore dell’India*, 1962, *Appunti di un film sull’india*, 1968, *Appunti per una Orestiade africana*, 1975) and developed interesting ideas about Third-Worldism in Italy (Tomelli).

For these reasons, we can consider the experience of Manganelli a meta-travel, a typology of travel books that appeared in contemporary literature and designated a new way of interpreting and representing the *travelled* space. This approach to journey must be considered an attempt to neutralize globalizing trends visible in post-modernity and a reaction to mass tourism. After all, anti-tourism is an unequivocal particularity of all meta-travels and comes up in many paragraphs of *Esperimento con l’India*. To understand this travel book thoroughly, we first intend to present some principal characteristics of meta-travels, specifically done in India in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Meta-Travel as an Experiment: The Case of Travels in India in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

It is possible that travel writing could be independent of travel experience itself, turns into a something else by overcoming temporality and spatiality of the simple movement and becomes a unique and referential experience, a metaphor of a knowledge and self-consciousness process (Kanceff 24). This idea is often reworked and thematized in contemporary travel literature, since traditional travel seems inexorably replaced by mass tourism in the era of globalization (cf. Boorstin; Enzensberger; Cassou). In this climate, it is inevitable that contemporary travel writers may have a polemic attitude towards tourist business and aggressively execrate some bourgeois conventions linked to vacations and package tours. For this, by trying new ways of traveling and denigrating everything that embodies tourism, these writers hope to rediscover a direct relationship with the authenticity of places.

Anti-tourism attitude of many travel writers is not only connected with a snobbish view of some “corrupted” social customs, but it is more a poetic research to find new narrative typologies that could give credibility to literary representation of space. Thus, travel books become an opportunity for experimenting new textual typologies that can show territory as an *other* space (Marfè 24-25).

Between all post-touristic travel-writing typologies, meta-travel is the only one that allows the travelers-writers to make an open critique of the global tourism system. This kind of approach to space is based principally on the concept of “nomadism”. According to French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (472-475), while sedentary societies generally try to put elements of disorder under permanent control, nomadic tribes have a dynamic vision of the planet, favored of moving in a territory conceived as an infinite space. For this reason, nomadism and urbanization can be considered as two different ways to represent and perceive the world. In case of meta-travels, the traveler-writer establishes a new relationship with the territory, regardless of the route he intends to follow, through a progressive abandonment of the certainties of sedentary societies. Therefore, travel – like writing itself – has to give the possibility to revitalize the western cultural tradition and, for this, its point of arrival is a secondary element. The importance of travel lies in the movement itself, done by walking or by obsolete vehicles, like buses, slow trains and ships, instead of planes or fast trains. However, the fundamental aspect of meta-travels is not just the wealth of knowledge acquired during the route, but it is also the possibility of getting rid of stereotypes and previous ideas present before the departure. Through the discovery of the space, the writer can come to a better knowledge of him or herself and of the proper intimacy, because, as Gianni Celati expresses in *Verso la foce* (2002), “*anche l’intimità che portiamo con noi fa parte del paesaggio*”<sup>2</sup> (93). Thus, he or she becomes an individual immersed in a territory that often appears fragmented. Indeed, Luigi Marfè asserts in his fundamental essay on contemporary travel writing:

Il mondo attraversato dai metaviaggiatori è franto, disconnesso, ridotto a pulviscolo. La consecuzione di causa ed effetto appare sovvertita da un labirinto di influenze difficili da seguire. Anche la definizione dell’identità del soggetto diventa sempre più inconsistente, fino a ridursi al fascio di relazioni che instaura con il mondo che lo circonda. I resoconti dei metaviaggiatori descrivono

<sup>2</sup> “[...] even the intimacy we bring with us is part of the landscape”

una realtà che si muove secondo la regola dell'inverosimiglianza. I loro esperimenti vanno letti nell'ottica di un'estetica postmoderna, che cerca nella riflessione sul linguaggio la scintilla in grado di rimettere in moto l'invenzione narrativa. La scrittura non va quindi giudicata attraverso l'opposizione tra verità e finzione, ma in chiave estetica<sup>3</sup> (75).

Thus, meta-travels are spatial movements intended as textual adventures, which represent territory through conceptual stratifications that acquire progressively new significations and symbols. For this reason, one of the most desired destinations of the meta-travelers is undoubtedly India, always considered the *elsewhere* that impresses and displaces western travelers.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many Europeans have ventured in India to discover the beauties of its territory and then they have come back with notebooks and diaries full of notes that describe the emotions and impressions experienced on that journey. Moreover, between the 50s and 60s, after the independence process was completed (1947), India became a symbol of a reality completely different from that of the West and a kind of mirror to understand the world from which the travelers came and which they often repudiated. As Rossana Dedola expresses, "*l'esistenza di un diverso stile di vita nasceva dal rifiuto della società di massa, dalla sua morale perbenista, dal consumismo su cui si basava e dei suoi feticci: i prodotti del consumo, ormai diventati i nuovi dèi per cui vivere*"<sup>4</sup> (1). For this reason, in this period the Indian subcontinent becomes the favorite place to interrogate their identity for the writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Teltscher 194). V. S. Naipaul's travel books, Eric Newby's *Slowly Down the Gange* (1966), Derva Murphy's *On a Shoestring to Coorg* (1976), Mark Shand's *Travel with my Elephant* (1991) and Robyn Davidson's *Desert Place* (1996) are examples of this ideological trend.

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<sup>3</sup> "The world passed through by meta-travelers is fragmented, disconnected, reduced in dust. The consequence of cause and effect appears subverted by a labyrinth of influences difficult to follow. Even the definition of the subject's identity becomes increasingly inconsistent, until it is reduced to the bundle of relationships that he or she establishes with the world around it. The texts of meta-travelers describe a reality that moves according to the rule of unlikelihood. Their experiments should be read in the perspective of the postmodern esthetics, which is looking for a spark able to restart the narrative invention by a reflection on language. Therefore, writing should not be judged through the opposition between truth and fiction, but in an aesthetic key."

<sup>4</sup> "[...] the existence of a different way of life arose from the rejection of mass society, from its respectable morality, from the consumerism on which it was based and its fetishes: the products of consumption, now become the new gods for which humans live."

Things that amaze the western travelers are firstly the vastness of the varied and composite Indian territory and the suffocating and crowdy presence of the population. Subjected to a multitude of stimuli, the authors find themselves living in a visionary and exotic unreality, intercalated by moments of strong emotions caused by the Third World reality, infected by degradation, illness and deformation. Thus, India becomes the image of the *different* par excellence: in other words, everything that is not the traveler and that is unknown to him or her. Thus, in travel accounts about India we are faced with the duality of fascination and horror for a so strange and distant, but at the same time desired and pursued reality (Patat 40-41).

In Italy, the most representative texts about travel in India are the collection of various writings by Guido Gozzano and the two travel reports by Alberto Moravia and Pier Paolo Pasolini. These three texts undoubtedly represent different possible perspectives of Indian meta-travel, which demonstrate different approaches to the visited territory.

The travel book of Gozzano, appeared posthumously and known with the title of *Verso la cuna del mondo*, is characterized by a searching for the exotic and the original essence of the Orient. However, what emerges in the text is certainly the wonder and estrangement for a reality so different from what he is used to experiencing. The Gozzano's poetic shock looks like one that is generated by the reality that surrounds it. India therefore appears to the writer as the place where heterogeneous and irreconcilable presences coexist, are accumulated and juxtaposed (Sanguineti 134). For Gozzano, the important thing is not only the discovery of otherness, but it is above all the attempt to revivify a fabulous past, often abandoned to be replaced by a nostalgic re-elaboration of Orientalism.

The approach taken by Alberto Moravia and Pier Paolo Pasolini – who traveled together in India between the end of 1960 and the beginning of 1961, accompanied by Elsa Morante - is rather different. That special and unrepeatable journey inspired their two deeply different travel books, *Un'idea dell'India* by Moravia and *L'odore dell'India* by Pasolini. From a conceptual point of view, while Moravia focuses on an objective and rational analysis of Indian reality and its social and economic problems, Pasolini seems more emotionally involved in the discovery of India and attracted by the spirit of adventure and the charm of misery and authenticity of places. In his book, Pasolini himself makes a comparison between his approach to the visited reality and that of his travel companion:

Io non so bene cosa sia la religione indiana: leggete gli articoli del mio meraviglioso compagno di viaggio, di Moravia, che si è documentato alla perfezione, e, dotato di una maggior capacità di sintesi di me, ha sull'argomento idee molto chiare e fondate<sup>5</sup> (32).

Thus, it turns out that India reported by these two writers is fundamentally filtered by their different way of conceiving and receiving the reality they visited. Both give a different view of the same reality that often appears unreal and inconceivable. At the base of this lies the fact that India becomes a stimulus for much more complex reflections that affect the knowledge of oneself and the deconstruction of the certainties of the West. We can notice the same process – brought to the extreme consequences – in the *Esperimento con l'India* by Giorgio Manganelli.

***Esperimento con l'India* by Giorgio Manganelli: an Experimental Meta-Travel to the Understanding of “Absolute”**

In 1975 Manganelli, upon the invitation of the newspaper “Il Mondo”, left for India, carrying out one of the journeys that he had most desired and feared to do and would represent an important stage in his experience as a traveler. The set of texts about this journey were collected for the first time by the editor Adelphi in 1992, using the title chosen by the author *Esperimento con l'India* (De Pascale 199).

The journey in Indian territory (*see Appendix 1*) starts – as had happened for previous travelers – from Bombay and continues towards Ajanta and Aurangabad. Because of the bad weather conditions, Manganelli, instead of going to Calcutta, decides to reach Goa, and then moves to Trivandrum, Cape Comorin and Madurai and finally stops at Madras. After having visited Calcutta, the writer ends his trip with a stay in Delhi. The travel book traces in a very precise way the route carried out by the writer. In this way, the progressive penetration of Manganelli into India coincides with the process of knowledge and self-awareness that affects the perception of the author and his relationship with otherness. Therefore, this travel-experiment is not just a movement in space, but it is above all a journey into the individual's interiority, a real circumnavigation around himself.

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<sup>5</sup> “I do not know what Indian religion is: you can read the articles of my wonderful travel companion, Moravia, who perfectly documented it, and, with a greater capacity for synthesis than I could have, has very clear ideas on the subject and founded.”

## The Crisis of the “Ideologically Perplexed” Intellectual and the Shock for the Unknown

There are many elements that make *Esperimento con l'India* by Manganelli a meta-travel: the crisis of the individual who thinks about himself, the encounter with an elsewhere that destabilizes the certainties of a western intellectual, the awareness of the disappearance of a strong ontology where the subject is not anymore the center of literary discourse and the decentralization of the colonialist and imperialist systems of thought. All these are elements that intensify an inner dissension in which the travel's itinerary mixes itself with the interior itinerary, creating a stratification of conceptual levels that are transferred both to the self and to the territory. The encounter of the India's otherness with Manganelli's selfhood creates a sort of chemical reaction that oppresses the soul of the author exposed to the *swampy* Indian air:

La porta dell'aereo [...] si spalanca, lentamente; fuori, alle cinque di mattina, è ancora notte, i soliti riflettori mimano una scena da gangster; ma è l'aria che invadendo l'abitacolo, avvolgendomi mentre scendo per la scaletta, mi annuncia che sono altrove. Conosco quest'aria, l'annuso e mi annusa; è l'aria tropicale, calda di erbe macerate, di animali, di fogne aperte, inasprita da un sapore di urina, di bestie in cattività; è un'aria che mi commuove, mi eccita per la sua qualità disfatta ed ingenua, la sua gravezza generatrice di fungosità, di muffe, di muschio; questa è l'aria dell'India, un'aria sporca e vitale, purulenta e dolciastra, putrefatta e infantile<sup>6</sup> (22)

Through these feelings, Manganelli arrives to a special and particular interrelation with the Indian subcontinent. This relationship is not affected by the “smell of sandalwood” of the “cleanish” *Siddharta* (1922) described by Hermann Hesse or by the “hygienic ghost” of Vedānta: “*io sono in India, alle soglie di una malattia continentale, di un luogo che con la prima zaffata d'aria mi bofonchia*

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<sup>6</sup> “The door of the plane [...] opens slowly; outside, at five in the morning, it's still night, the usual spotlights mimic a gangster scene; but it is the air that announces me that I am elsewhere by invading the passenger compartment, by enveloping me while I descend the ladder. I know this air, I smell it and it smells me; it is the tropical air, warm as macerated grass, animals, open sewers, exacerbated by a taste of urine, of beasts in captivity. This air touches me, excites me for its corrupted and naive quality, its gravity generating fungus, mold, moss. This is the air of India, a dirty and vital air, purulent and sweetish, putrefied and childish.”

*alcunché di disfacimento e di immortalità, di lebbra e di idoli*<sup>7</sup> (22-23). We can notice that in the quoted paragraph writer juxtaposes words – “putrefied-childish”, “decomposition-immortality” – that refer to a reality determined by western thought as opposites, oxymoronic and, consequently, irreconcilable. This is the sign that the writer starts to abandon a logocentric Aristotelian logic for “*un sofisma in cui verità e menzogna sono inscindibili*”<sup>8</sup> (Dedola 145).

In this new “sophistic” dimension life and death, decomposition and youth, caducity and eternity coexist without their co-presence creating an ontological contradiction: these conflicting categories’ commixture appears as a unique and totalizing reality that nullifies every illusory and mendacious sureness that western civilization tried to self-impose. Therefore, the annulment of western categories is in the mind of an *ideologically perplexed* intellectual an essential step to the discovery of the absolute. Manganelli sustains that while a European immerses him or herself in the Indian reality, he or she has “*l'impressione di immerger[s]i in una palude d'aria, e l'Europa sprofonda alle [sue] spalle*”<sup>9</sup> (22).

It seems evident that Manganelli tries to carry out a real empirical experiment which results in a sort of challenge imposed to himself – a self sometimes split and deconstructed, sometimes ecstatic, demoralized and inwardly sick – in a territory that continually creates a physical and metaphysical shock. As Gaia De Pascale claims, the writer’s approach to India appears as a test not only on the capabilities of the intellectual as a traveler, but also on the potentiality of the writing itself, “*uno sforzo di continuo impegno conoscitivo e stilistico che si rivolge letterariamente in una prosa barocca, densa di immagini, che nulla vuole escludere o censurare*”<sup>10</sup> (199). Thus, Manganelli’s writing first looks like an intricate intersection of ludic, ironic and parodic components developed through those ideas that the writer proposed in *La letteratura come menzogna* (1967). In this fundamental essay, he claims to love literature above all because it becomes a space of freedom, subject only to

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<sup>7</sup> “I’m in India, at the threshold of a continental sickness, of a place that mumbles something of decomposition and immortality, of leprosy and idols with the first whiff of air.”

<sup>8</sup> “[...] a sophism in which truth and lie are insoluble”.

<sup>9</sup> “The impression of plunging in an air swamp, and Europe collapses behind [his or her] back.”

<sup>10</sup> “[...] an effort of continuous cognitive and stylistic engagement that turns literally into a baroque prose, full of images, that wants to exclude or censor nothing.”

language, which weaves “*una rete di avventurose isoglosse, sgargianti e silenziose [...] un pieghevole velo di verbi*”<sup>11</sup> (*La letteratura come menzogna* 216).

This literary “playfulness” is already visible at the beginning of the book where a dialogue is reported between the narrator and an imaginary friend of him (the alter ego of the author) who is about to leave for India. As Giuliana Benvenuti asserts, in these first pages the reader is confronted in an inner dialogue, a sort of monologue: indeed,

Manganelli ci presenta un io osservato da un altro io che è parte dello stesso io, introducendo quello che sarà il motivo dominante del suo esperimento con l’India, ovvero la decostruzione del personaggio che dice io, del personaggio viaggiatore come centro unificante dell’esperienza e della scrittura<sup>12</sup> (194).

The writer presents an alter ego overexcited for the experience that is about to happen, but, at the same time, heartbroken and dismal because he is aware of being transported by a series of literary stereotypes related to the Indian reality. Therefore, “*l’India è una grande addescatrice [...] è insieme tragica e mite*”<sup>13</sup> (12-13) for him; it is a reality composed by Lotus flowers, ascetics, idols, curry and sacred cows. While defining the fascinating narrative which presents India in this stereotypical way as a bad example of literature, the imaginary friend of the narrator admits that

Non è facile rinunciare a tanta, e così generosa cattiva letteratura. Perché non si rinuncia ad un grande amore? Perché, letterariamente, è cosa infima. E ti dice anche, chissà mai chi: vieni a cercare i luoghi delle tue precedenti reincarnazioni<sup>14</sup> (12).

In this passage, the idea of literature as a lie returns: by deconstructing the concept of *absolute literature*, the author affirms that writing primarily transmits fascinating falsehoods and only empirical experience leads to the knowledge of the

<sup>11</sup> “[...] a network of adventurous, gaudy and silent isoglosses [...] a foldable verbs veil.”

<sup>12</sup> “Manganelli presents us a self observed by another self that is part of the same self, by introducing what will be the dominant motive of his experiment with India that is the deconstruction of the character, the traveler character I would say, as a unifying center of experience and writing.”

<sup>13</sup> “India is a great tempter [...] it is at the same time tragic and mild.”

<sup>14</sup> “It is not easy to give up so much on such generous bad literature. Why do not we give up a great love? Because, literarily, it is a very bad thing. Also, who knows who tells you: come and look for the places of your previous reincarnations.”

fragility of the real, to the fullest of its complexity. Thus, only the “experiment with reality” allows to arrive at the deconstruction of oneself and to cancel oneself in the swampiness of the *heterodox* absolute.

### **Indian Meta-Travel as Discovery of the Aporias of Reality**

There is no doubt that from the beginning of *Esperimento con l'India* the reader feels like to attend to a meta-travel. Indeed, as we have previously expressed, this kind of journey makes the experience of space coincide with the abandonment of the traveler's certainties and, at the same time, it allows for the reconfiguration of the European cultural traditions. After all, this is possible because traveling is a way of knowing analogous to writing (Marfè 72-73). The same discourse is also valid for the experience of Manganelli who did not go to India with the security of some *progressive intellectuals* who believe they can understand and judge the East. The writer is wary of this kind of intellectual who basks in a Eurocentrism that lays its foundations on logic, history, dialectics, and the idea of progress:

L'Europa si è specializzata in se stessa: ha cercato di fare del resto del mondo un deposito di bric-à-brac, di soprammobili esotici [...]. Il mitteleuropeo sta nella sua lucida acropoli dell'io' e progetta il 'futuro migliore'. 'Irrazionale', ecco una parola in cui capita ancora di imbattersi, anche se ormai è stanca, svilita. Tra catechetica e burocratica; parola schiettamente europea, tra sprezzante e riflessiva<sup>15</sup> (*Il lunario dell'orfano sannita* 39-40)

Manganelli is aware that by reaching India he is going to have an encounter with the so called “irrational”; so it is normal that his metaphoric *slight suitcase*, which does not contain a camera, does also not contain metaphorically the words “progress”, “rational” and “human”. As Rossana Dedola affirms, in the Manganelli's travel book, “*manca l'ottica che rifiuta la fantasia creatrice e guarda la realtà attraverso una lastra di vetro, dietro l'obiettivo del razionalismo pronto a giudicare tutto ciò che non conosce e non capisce come 'irrazionale' o 'mistico', e dunque 'reazionario'*”<sup>16</sup> (144). In this case, according to the writer, the intellectuals affected

<sup>15</sup> “Europe specialized in itself: it tried to make the rest of the world a deposit of odds and ends, of exotic knick-knacks [...] The Central European stands in its lucid acropolis of the “Self” and plans the “best future”. “Irrational”, here is a word in which it still happens to come across, even if it is now tired, debased. It is a word clearly European, between catechetical and bureaucratic, contemptuous and reflective.”

<sup>16</sup> “There is not the prospective that rejects creative imagination and looks at reality through a glass sheet, behind the lens of rationalism, and is ready to judge everything that it does not know and does not understand as ‘irrational’, ‘mystical’, and thus ‘reactionary’.”

by such progressive Eurocentrism cannot understand the idea that diversity teaches an alternative way of interpreting the reality, existence, death, time and space.

In this context, the novelty of a meta-travel such as that of Manganelli comes from the fact that it matches the *Bildung* of travel to the progressive liberation from that cultural background which is the heritage of western thought. Therefore, it emerges that the world proposed by the meta-travelers is a fragmentary, disconnected and disintegrated space, where the categories of cause and effect are subverted into a labyrinth of symbols and signs impossible to interpret and the identity itself of the subject is increasingly transformed in an inconsistent entity. The author defines his travel books as “*un nuovo genere letterario, [...] critica geografica e geocritica, [...] che consisterebbe, per l'appunto, nel trattare un luogo alla stessa maniera con cui trattiamo sostanzialmente un libro*”<sup>17</sup> (*La penombra mentale* 23). So, for the writer, the world would seem basically like a book to browse: “*viaggiare è attraversare segni, immergersi in volumi fitti e brulicanti, popolati di scritture mobili, di disegni dotati di respiro; il mondo è un immenso libro, che il lettore percorre riconoscendovi registri, sovrimpressioni, spostamenti di segni artificiali*”<sup>18</sup> (Ferroni 10079). Moreover, traveling means making an experiment through a concept of divine alternative to what is known. As Manganelli says, the concept of travel must be re-meditated according to this logic:

Mi viene la tentazione di dire che viaggiare è un po' come leggere, ma non è vero. Viaggiare è fare degli esperimenti in teologie alternative. Ecco, il buon viaggiatore è politeista. Fa degli esperimenti con degli altri dei che non appartengono al suo Pantheon o al Pantheon a cui egli si è adusato. [...] Mi vengono in mente certi miei viaggi, soprattutto in Oriente, dove è molto chiara questa frequentazione, questo entrare in templi (templi non fisici ma templi comunque) di cui tu sai solo una cosa: che lì troverai alcunché di “numerose” a cui

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<sup>17</sup> “[...] a new literary genre [...] geographic critique and geocriticism [...] that would consist, in fact, in treating a place in the same way as we essentially treat a book.”

<sup>18</sup> “Traveling is crossing signs, plunging into thick and swarming volumes, populated with mobile scripts, with breathing drawings; the world is an immense book, in which the reader travels through recognizing registers, overlays, displacements of artifice signs.”

tu sei abituato (Manganelli, *La penombra mentale* 200-201)<sup>19</sup>.

Consequently traveling leads also – and above all – people to change themselves, and their appearance: the experience of travel on one side mystifies the sedentary *self*, on the other it destroys, transforms and makes it unrecognizable and illusory. Something similar happens to the reluctant traveler-Manganelli during his journey in India: “*C’è qualcosa di lievemente assurdo nell’immagine di un professore milanese e grasso in volo da Goa a Trivandrum. [...] I viaggi hanno una loro vocazione mistificatrice o illusionistica che li rende favolosi e intossicanti. Per viaggiare dobbiamo cambiare travestimento*”<sup>20</sup> (71).

However, during his experimental travel the image of India – which at the time of departure Manganelli considered as “*un grande magazzino dei simboli, uno sterminato paese in cui da ramo a ramo metaforico balzano scimmie allegoriche*”<sup>21</sup> (20) – changes hand in hand with the crumbling of that *disguise* of professor-writer-traveler. As Giuliana Benvenuti affirms, Manganelli’s travel book is an essential thematization of the transit where “*la partenza [...] assume gran parte del proprio significato da ciò che viene lasciato alle spalle, dal passaggio da una situazione psichica ad un’altra contrastante alla prima*”<sup>22</sup> (199). Mainly, it is the duty of the writer to abandon his previous knowledge and try to interpret this *empire of signs* – using a barthesian expression – by becoming aware of the impossibility of understanding and deciphering everything that is seen. For this, in many moments the writer-traveler finds himself feeling a sense of anguish and discomfort, like the one during his trip in plane to Bombay: “*Devo dire che l’aereo ha fatto quanto poteva per mettermi a mio agio: mi ha servito un decoroso cibo, e l’ha consacrato con un bicchiere di Chablis e un bicchiere di Nuits-Saint-Georges. Trovo il pensiero molto*

<sup>19</sup> “I am tempted to say that traveling is a little bit like reading, but it is not true. Traveling is an experiment of alternative theologies. Behold, the good traveler is polytheistic. He experiments other gods who do not belong to his Pantheon or to the Pantheon to which he is used. [...] I remember some of my travels, especially in the East, where this frequentation is very clear, this entering in temples (not physical temples but temples anyway) about which you know only one thing: that you will find there nothing of the “numerous” things to which you are used.”

<sup>20</sup> “There is something slightly absurd in the image of a Milanese and fat professor flying from Goa to Trivandrum. [...] Travels have their own mystifying or illusionistic vocation which makes them fabulous and intoxicating. To travel, we must change disguise.”

<sup>21</sup> “[...]a department store of symbols, an endless country in which allegorical monkeys leap from one metaphorical branch to another.”

<sup>22</sup> “[...] departure [...] takes much of its meaning from what is left behind, from the transition from one psychic situation to another contrasting with the first.”

*delicato, ma non sono calmo*"<sup>23</sup> (16). During his wanderings in a large part of the Indian territory this feeling of distress and anguish is amplified. Therefore, those trips become suffered journeys, characterized by a sort of *sentimental asphyxia* that the author only accepts as necessary condition at the end of his experiment. It is clear that "*come definisce il titolo, la sua [di Manganelli] permanenza in India è un esperimento, in cui le cose vanno provate e il viaggiatore stesso è messo alla prova*"<sup>24</sup> (Wolfs 120).

### **The Suffering of Soul: An Ascetic Exercise for the Neutralization of Western Preconceptions**

Even though he feels constantly uncomfortable in the Indian reality, the author ends up surrendering and accepting stoically the disturbing diversity of the surrounding environment from the beginning of the journey: we clearly see it when he is taken on a highly improbable, air-corroded, *deserted* bus at the airport in Bombay. In the Manganelli's imaginary, this humanized bus "thinks" about death with its handles that are missing, and its lights that do not light up. While the metaphysical bus – as an unhealthy expression of insomnia – is subjected to a slow and inexorable decomposition reflecting on its existence, phantasmagorical vultures crowd around him:

In qualunque parte del mondo, quel soggiorno sulla corriera deserta e disfatta, protetta dal volo cruciforme degli avvoltoi, sarebbe condizione affatto sinistra: ma lì a Bombay è stranamente eccitante, un luogo così denso e fitto di immagini terrestri, immagini inconsuete, come se fossi approdato in un pianeta della luci ignote e impossibili<sup>25</sup> (23).

The surreal situation narrated in this passage demonstrates that in his experiment with India, Manganelli is determined to abandon the superiority complex of westerners who believe they can always easily understand everything about the Orient. However, Manganelli's India is not only the land of spirituality, as

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<sup>23</sup> "I must say that the plane did what it could do to make me comfortable: it served me a decent food, and consecrated it with a glass of Chablis and a glass of Nuits-Saint-Georges. I find it very gentle courtesy, but I am not calm."

<sup>24</sup> "[...] as the title defines, his [Manganelli's] permanence in India is an experiment, in which things must be tested and the traveler himself is put to the test."

<sup>25</sup> "In any part of the world, staying on a deserted and defeated bus, protected by the cruciform flight of the vultures, would be a sinister condition: but in Bombay it becomes strangely exciting, a place so dense with terrestrial images, unusual images, as if I had landed in a planet of unknown and impossible lights."

it appears in western collective imaginary influenced by books like *Siddharta* by Herman Hesse or Indian religious poems, especially *Rgveda* and *Vedānta*. Indian culture, in fact, has not lost his *terrestrialness* despite being inclined to the divine and it has maintained a direct relationship with its excrements, its primordial dirt and its “monsters” (D’Aquino 80). In the beginning of *Esperimento con l’India* the writer affirms that

Questo mondo [...] non è accidentalmente sporco: lo è in modo essenziale, costante, pacato; ma questo sporco non è il nostro, l’ombra di una civiltà che ha catturato le proprie deiezioni in gabbie di immacolata ceramica, ma lo sporco originario, aurorale, quello sporco che abbiamo tradito, come abbiamo tradito tutt’intero il nostro corpo, i nostri peli, il sudore, le unghie, i genitali, lo sfintere<sup>26</sup> (25).

Another passage in the last pages of the book reads:

I mostri: in tutta l’India vedrete mostri, ma a Calcutta dovete affrontare la loro esistenza come uno dei temi di questo modo di esistere. Noi europei, ho sentito dire, siamo permissivi. Alcoolici, droghe e genitali. E con i mostri come ce la caviamo? Abbiamo aperto i nostri cottolenghi? [...] In India il mostro è “a casa”. In questo paese che non conosce l’orrore, l’uomo dell’orrore può uscire dai nostri ghetti mentali, dai nostri incubi, e trascinarsi ai nostri piedi<sup>27</sup> (99-100).

The recurrent attention to misery and monstrosity is linked to a research addressed to Death and to Nothingness, concepts that are at the center of the author’s poetics. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the writer-traveler feels relieved – nearly reassured – that in India death, decomposition and monstrosity are considered as an inescapable part of human life: “*Che pace, che onestà, questo commercio col mostruoso. Nulla nel mondo è più mostruoso di questo rifiuto del mostruoso; chiudeteli nei ghetti, non dobbiamo vederli, non esistono, sono*

<sup>26</sup> This world is not accidentally dirty: it is dirty in an essential, constant, calm way; but this dirt is not like ours, the shadow of a civilization that captured its own excrements in an immaculate ceramic cage, but the original and auroral dirt, the dirt that we betrayed, as we betrayed our bodies, our hair, the sweat, the fingernails, the genitals, the sphincter.”

<sup>27</sup> “The monsters: In all India, you will see monsters, but in Calcutta you will face up to their existence as one of the themes of this way of existing. I heard that we Europeans are permissive. Alcohol, drugs, genitals. And how do we manage the monsters? Did we open the doors of our hospitals? [...] In India the monster is “at his or her home”. In this country, which doesn’t know what is horror, the man or woman of horror can come out of his or her ghettos, of our nightmares, and he or she can drag him or herself to our feet.”

*impossibil*<sup>28</sup> (100). Monsters give the opportunity to access a *dehumanized* human dimension, a symbol of everything repressed and deleted from the cultural memory by all western civilizations (Benvenuti 209). In other words, Manganelli's experiment is a kind of escape from the hygienic comfort of opulent western bourgeoisie, which has forgotten its corporeality, its excrements, its cadavers and its monsters. Therefore, in *Esperimento con l'India* the writer exalts the Indian people's *terrestrialness*, proposing a natural and genuine relationship with one's own body and an incorrupt and atavistic contact with one's own excreta as a positive sign.

Not only the contact with dirt and human aberrations but also the Indian approach to sexuality impresses the writer. The sexual behavior is generally considered as a normal component of the daily life, devoid of all taboos that western mentality imposed on it for centuries. Prostitution is a natural practice, not rejected, but inserted into a social system used to mix sacredness with carnality. The world into which the writer has been plunged is not afraid of showing the most unclean parts of the human body – whether they are excreta or genitals – because they are the expression of an *original* condition of the reality. The *monstrous* legality governing the prostitution streets in Bombay are an expression of a particular connection with an ostentatious and sacralized carnality that could scandalize “*il viaggiatore adorno di pezzi di cristianesimo*”<sup>29</sup> (32). In this place, the traveler

Nota la processione di ragazzi che celebrano una qualche divinità con sistri e statuette, e non avverte nessuna discontinuità; in questo luogo non esiste “peccato”, e ci si chiede per quale tramite sia stata elaborata quella sorta di codice che conserva alla prostituta qualcosa di più complesso della mera dignità, un diritto di esistere e di consistere che coabita con quel caldo odore di riti e di malattie e che orna e deforma il luogo delle prostitute<sup>30</sup> (32).

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<sup>28</sup> “What peace, what honesty is this relationship with the monstrosity! Nothing in the planet is more monstrous than this rejection of the monstrous; close them in the ghettos! We must not see them, they do not exist, they are impossible.”

<sup>29</sup> “[...] the traveler adorned with bits and pieces of Christianity.”

<sup>30</sup> “He notes the procession of boys who celebrate some divinity with sistrums and statuettes, and he feel no discontinuity; in this place there is no “sin” and one ask him or herself how they developed this code that gives to the prostitute something more complex than mere dignity, namely an existing and consisting right, which cohabitates with that warm smell of rites and of diseases and which adorns and deforms the place of prostitutes.”

Manganelli is amazed not only by the respect towards the sacredness of prostitution, but also by the absence of mercy developed in a context characterized by strong contrasts. Thus, this insensibility seems to lay at the bases of Indian society: annoyed by the insistence of beggars, he tries to “*ricorrere a strategie più indiane*”<sup>31</sup> (34). After analyzing the behavior that the Indians take towards them, the writer notices that

L'indiano non è sensibile, non si disgusta, non si annoia, e non conosce sensi di colpa. [...] In quella società, in quella cultura non c'è posto per la pietà individuale, non c'è quella dolorosa, disperata carità che lega l'Occidente al naturalmente morituro: né il mendicante, lo sventurato, ha pietà di se stesso. I segni della malattia e della miseria non sono “sventure”: vengono da lontano, vanno lontano; migrano dà vita a vita, certificati dagli interventi degli dèi<sup>32</sup> (35-36).

Manganelli, having arrived at this conclusion, decides to put into practice an experiment: he intends to see if he can decontaminate himself from the feelings of piety and mercy characterizing Christian West and accept poverty, misfortune and monstrosity as divine punishments of faults committed during the reincarnation circuit. The author-traveler tries to overcome the ambiguity and misunderstanding that underlies the relationship between the westerner and the beggar: in this utilitarian connection, the one who lives on almsgiving does not fully understand the attitude of the one who is taken by pity. He or she only knows that by exploiting the sensitivity of the foreigner, could have an advantage. The conclusion reached by Manganelli is that

Il mendicante [...] va accettato nel modo anonimo con cui veniva accettato il sudiciume delle casupole; esso non è sentimentale, né presume di avere dei diritti in quanto povero, ma solo ha capito che l'occidentale, per ragioni che gli sfuggono, si turba della sua condizione e per lenire il proprio turbamento gli dà dei soldi. Il comportamento occidentale gli è probabilmente incomprensibile e

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<sup>31</sup> “[...] apply strategies that are more Indian.”

<sup>32</sup> “Indian is not sensible, is not disgusted, doesn't become bored, and doesn't know feelings of guilt. [...] In that society, in that culture there is no place for individual mercy, there is no painful and desperate mercy that links westerners to the dying person: nor does the beggar, the unfortunate, pity himself. The signs of illness and misery are not “misfortunes”: they come from far away, go far away, migrate from one life to another life, certified by the interventions of the gods.”

lievemente sospetto, ma usato con abilità e distacco un occidentale può essere di qualche utilità<sup>33</sup> (37).

So, Manganelli understands that in India there are no Christian categories of “piety”, “mercy”, “salvation” and “neighbor”, and this fact creates a kind of trauma in the mind of the writer-traveler. The only way to comprehend the Indian mentality is accepting this inconceivable situation and working through the emotional impact of a culture completely opposite to the western one.

### **External Experience and Inner Uneasiness**

In the imaginative panorama of the Manganelli’s India, there are also the *soft*, comfortable, and estranging images besides horrific ones. For example, the statues of the temples in Auragabad e Ajanta stimulate in the author a sense of peaceful beauty that fascinates his imagination. Indeed, according to the author these figures “*hanno trovato quel sottile, pacifico quanto sevizante sentiero che consente di sognare ed essere svegli, di non vedere pur con l’occhio spalancato, di essere immersi in un sonno che non esclude né rinchiude*”<sup>34</sup> (51).

Another comfortable as well as alienating experience is the stay in Goa, “*luogo riposante, anche se menzognero rispetto al contesto indiano*”<sup>35</sup> (55). Goa is, in fact, a touristic bathing area and a former Portuguese colony, which over time has not changed so much: “*resta quella bizzarria che è sempre stata: di altra lingua, di altra religione, di altra architettura*”<sup>36</sup> (59). All these images evoked by Manganelli in his travel book on India, are part of the complexity of a territory causing a progressive sense of uneasiness, anxiety and aphasia in the narrator. The illness of Manganelli is not a physical dysfunction, but a spiritual pain:

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<sup>33</sup> “The bagger [...] must be accepted in the same way the filth in a house is accepted; he or she is neither sentimental, nor presumes to have rights as a poor human. The bagger has understood that the westerner is disturbed by his or her condition for reasons that escape him or her, and the westerner gives him or her some money to alleviate his or her own uneasiness. Western behavior is probably incomprehensible and slightly suspicious, but a westerner, handled with ability and aloofness, can be of some use.”

<sup>34</sup> “They found that fine, peaceful as well as savaging way that allows one to dream and be awake, to not see even with the wide open eye, to be in a sleep that does not exclude or enclose.”

<sup>35</sup> “[...] restful place, even if it is mendacious compared to the Indian context.”

<sup>36</sup> “it remains as that quirk it has always been: of another language, of another religion, of other architecture.”

Sono a Madras e sto male; oh il mio corpo non centra, moderatamente efficiente ai suoi compiti con diligente monotonia [...]. Per quanto mi sia sgradevole sopporlo, l'anima, il di dentro, la fodera è quel che soffre. La mia competenza in angosce si trova di fronte qualcosa di inedito. Ho la sensazione che il tempo si trasformi in un muro, e che per invecchiare io debbo procedere dentro quel muro<sup>37</sup> (92).

This sentiment of spiritual anguish progressively develops and grows because travelling is situated in the double impossibility of understanding fully what he sees and leaving completely behind all his cultural background. Manganelli is on the threshold, in an *in-between* condition, so much so that for him India is a *labyrinthine intersection*. This territory exposes the writer-traveler to numerous contradictions, to a vital and continuous perception of otherness and of an enveloping sacredness, which mobilizes the imaginative faculty of dream (Benvenuti 214). The writer is transported by the sacredness of that land composed of temples, relics, visions, conversions, and reincarnations, in which all cities appear dead and alive at the same time. To experience this, he eventually has to abandon his *western aggressiveness* and surrenders to the dilatation of his soul that suffers from being relegated to “*un corpo subitamente diventato di molte misure più angusto*”<sup>38</sup> (94).

Traveling in India becomes an opportunity to change, transform and renew one's self despite invasive homologation and the monoculture derived from the globalization. For this reason, experimenting India means to carry out meta-travels: the writer-traveler strives to get away from his own cultural background, the preconceived ideas of a misleading eurocentrism and of orientalist literature to understand otherness more completely. Therefore, it is legitimate to maintain that Manganelli finds a direct relationship with his own soul and a spirituality that he did not believe he had fundamentally due to the trauma of his encounter with the *other*. India – the “*ombelico del mondo*” (82), “*navel of the world*”, and the “*casa madre dell'Assoluto*” (20), “*headquarter of the Absolute*” – becomes an essential

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<sup>37</sup> “I am in Madras and I am sick; oh, this is not about my body, moderately efficient in its tasks with diligent monotony [...]. As unpleasant as it is to suppose it, the soul, the inside, the cover is what suffers. My competence on anguishes is faced with something unprecedented. I have the feeling that time is transformed into a wall, and that to grow old I must proceed inside that wall.”

<sup>38</sup> “[...] a body that subconsciously becomes narrower.”

place for comprehending the Earth in the mental dimension of the author. The writer's own words regarding Calcutta are fundamental in this regard:

Ho visto Calcutta; Calcutta non è “bella”, nel senso che una definizione estetica diventa fatua davanti a uno dei luoghi chiave per l'interpretazione del pianeta. Calcutta è un luogo totale nel quale l'essenza mitica della città si cela e si svela; la città si propone come luogo simbolico, magico, come pagina da interpretare, come tessuto di significati, di allusioni, di fantasticherie<sup>39</sup> (31).

What Manganelli learns in India is that the elsewhere is not necessarily far away, instead it is often inside every human being, and an absolute truth does not exist. According to the writer, in fact, “*le cose salde e immobili crollano, ciò che non ha requie permane intatto*”<sup>40</sup> (104). Therefore, the writer's meta-travel should be considered as an opportunity to rediscover one's self by questioning all certainties that a person acquired during the growth. What Manganelli hopes for is an annihilation of absolute certainties defended by western logocentric thought to establish a naive relationship with reality in order to give it a new interpretation. In this way, the writer proposes the experience of his journey to India in a new perspective, giving the territory new connotations and narrative potentialities.

## Conclusion

As this article aims to demonstrate, it is possible to conclude that on several occasions in his meta-travel in India, Manganelli tries to cross a threshold beyond which new self-consciousness can be modelled through a traumatic, shocking and complex relationship with the elsewhere. Therefore, while the writer's self is progressively lost in otherness, the last ironic defenses against the charm of India collapse. For that reason, at the end of his experiment the writer concludes that it is time “*di cominciare ad occuparsi dell'India*” (104), by inviting the reader to make an experience similar to the one described in his travel book, to understand - if it is really possible - a territory deeply misunderstood to date. Consequently, *Esperimento con l'India* exceeds the contingency of the territory to leave space to writing again as a testimony of a unique and unrepeatable experience. Therefore, it

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<sup>39</sup> “I saw Calcutta; Calcutta is not 'beautiful', in the sense that an aesthetic definition becomes fatuous when it comes to one of the key locations that can serve as the basis for the interpretation of the planet. Calcutta is a total place in which the mythical essence of the city is hidden and unveiled; the city proposes itself as a symbolic, magical place, as a page to be interpreted, as a fabric of meanings, of allusions, of fantasies.”

<sup>40</sup> “Firm and immovable things collapse, what has not rest remains intact.”

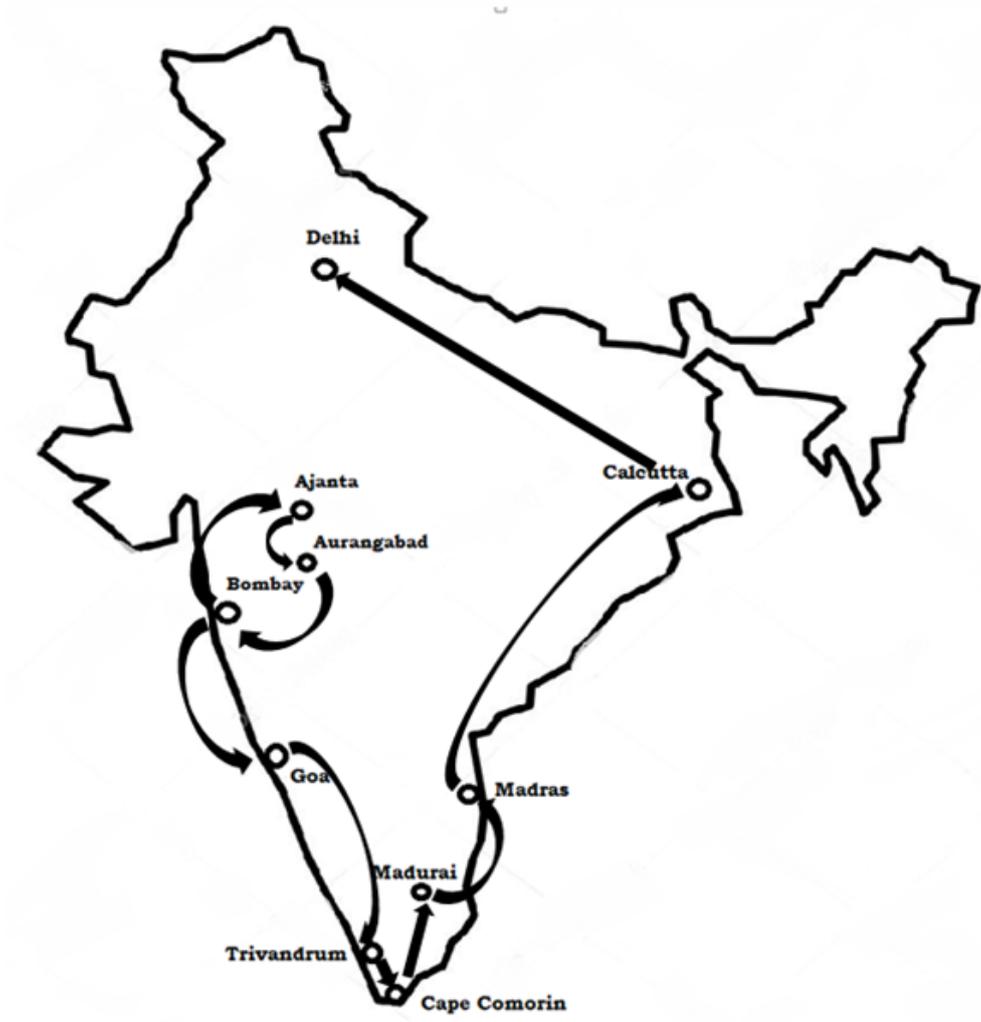
is not a coincidence that the Indian experiment of Manganelli ends with the observation with the sense of necessity to get away from prejudices and preconceived knowledge formed through literature, clichés or tourist leaflets. His alternative proposal is to start looking at otherness with eyes ready to accept metamorphosis, change and trauma regarding the unknown. Manganelli seems to succeed in this challenge and, for this reason, *Esperimento con l'India* remains an exemplary proof demonstrating the attempt of many contemporary writers to get out of the mass tourism's banality and to find new strategies for narrating about space, the world and the unknown and desired elsewhere.

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**Appendix 1**



*Manganeli's Travel Route in India (figure by Cristiano Bedin)*