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Autor: Linsmayer, Charles
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“The desire to break down boundaries”

In 1982, Lukas Hartmann published a book about a journey to India, which is still enchanting.

CHARLES LINSMAYER

Lukas Hartmann's novels are often set in distant countries. For example, “Die Seuche” (1992) contrasts the medieval plague in Bern with the Ugandan AIDS sufferer Sam Ssenyonja, while “Die Tochter des Jägers” (2002) takes place in the Kenyan big game hunting areas of the 1920s, and the painter John Webber travels the South Seas in “Bis ans Ende der Meere” (2009). “Abschied von Sansibar” (2013) describes the childhood of a princess on the same island and “Ein Bild von Lydia” (2018) is mainly set in Florence and Rome.

Experienced personally: India 1980

Only one book features Hartmann sending himself to a distant country: “Mahabalipuram. Als Schweizer in Indien” (1982). The trip took place in the winter of 1980/81 and had India as its destination: a country the author had already visited on behalf of an aid organisation, but which he now privately explored by train, bus and bicycle. As soon as they arrived in Bombay, he and his wife Silvia felt thrown into the throngs of people. This had nothing in common with the poetic wonderland of childhood. Suddenly they were confronted by an “exotic raggedness”, masses of people sleeping in the streets and crippled beggars, got lost “in the trampling of thousands of feet around themselves” and became “gradually indistinguishable, faces among faces, in the darkness of the night”.

Hartmann's words are able “to withstand the impact of the unknown”, the NZZ wrote, “but at the same time they are steeped in it, and this explains to a large extent the fascination of his book”.

The traveller's account had a very specific and personal purpose: “Travelling in order to awaken. A journey to the unknown? Or into oneself? The desire to break down (internal or external) boundaries. To be on the road for weeks, not to make commitments (and the difficulty of not making commitments)”.

Keeping an eye on Switzerland as well

This search for self is also connected to the fact that a substantial part of the book is dedicated to faraway Switzerland: “Thinking about Switzerland. Here of all places? Right here. Here I depend on a nameable identity like a second skin.”

Thus the experiences in Trivandrum in the state of Kerala, where they meet a German dropout, the chemist Dr. Subbarao and also little Moli, who tries to attach herself to them like a limpet, are always juxtaposed with reflections on Switzerland: for example on 1 August and the Swiss national consciousness, and before they visit the temple of the goddess Meenakshi in Madurai, Hartmann mentions the moment that he looks forward to most in Switzerland in 1981: bathing in Lake Gerzen on warm summer evenings. The stay at Broadlands, a lodging house in Madras that once housed the harem of a nabob, is contrasted by the image of the Bernese onion market, where mechanical orange-red trunked animals suck up the confetti mountains under the motto “keep Switzerland clean”. But in Mahabalipuram, before the beginning of a wild festival, the full moon rises out of the sea, paints the sky bright orange and “quite unpoetically, takes on the colour of cheese; it could be a Camembert...”

The perspective on Switzerland may have changed in the almost 40 years since the publication of this travelogue, but the spontaneous glance at India, which is enchanted in a dazzling, vivid sense by the curiosity, the receptiveness but also by the hunger for experience and the sensuous narrative exuberance of a talented chronicler, remains as relevant as ever.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: “Mahabalipuram” has been out of print for years and can only be found in libraries or antiquarian bookshops.

CHARLES LINSMAYER IS A LITERARY SCHOLAR AND JOURNALIST IN ZÜRICH



“Without being able to retreat and process my experiences by writing, I would be helplessly exposed to the deluge of images and the intense rush of India. Fear of being wiped out by sudden, everlasting impressions; fear of dissolving in the never-experienced. So I continue to write, to write along the boundaries of what is still bearable.”

(From: “Mahabalipuram. Als Schweizer in Indien», Arche Verlag, Zürich 1982)