

**Durgabati Ghosh, *The Westward Traveller [Paschimjatriki]*. Trans. Somdatta Mandal. With a Foreword by Ashish Nandy. New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan. 104 pp. ISBN 978-81-250-3991-4.**

Durgabati Ghose's relatively brief account of her extensive travels to Europe in 1932 as translated by Somdatta Mandal is worth reading for several reasons: it is a very readable record of her impressions of the few months she spent in the continent; it is one of the few existent travelogue by a South Asian woman traveller of the period; it provides us glimpses of a lively mind encountering cultural others at a time when the divide between the east and the west was beginning to be bridged; every once in a while it amazes us with its probes into human relationships. For the most part, Durgabati is content to play the part of the Bengali wife of the period taking in the extra-Indian world predictably – passive, wide-eyed, excited and a little awed by the people and places she was coming across – but from time to time she impresses us as someone capable of interrogating stereotypes about gender, race and religion.

As Mandal informs us in her helpful "Translator's Introduction," even though the first extended travel narrative by a woman from Bengal was Krishnabhabani Das's 1885 work titled *England-e-Bongo Mobila* or *A Bengali Lady in England*, Durgabati's travelogue is distinctive because of her more modern outlook. The daughter of Girinda Sekhar Basu, who pioneered psychoanalysis in India, she came from a family that was "quite westernized" and was married into one that was also open to modernising. Her husband, in fact, was a bar-at-law and progressive in his outlook and someone who had encouraged her to write and travel. Her work, therefore assumes the freedom to express herself, although almost always she is quite content to be the conventional Indian wife. She is thus animated by the "lure of distant places" that she describes at the outset of her journey and her fascination with things such as the "wild beauty" of the Arabian Sea is revealing, but she is willing to remind herself every once in a while that she is a "Bengali woman used to getting up in the morning and concentrating on dutifully carrying out" her "household chores" and had thus no business getting carried away by everything that she saw.

While much of what Durgabati describes is just what you would expect of most travellers articulating their wonder at the tourist sights of Egypt, Italy, Switzerland, France and England, it is her occasional sharp-eyed recording of the differences between cultures that will be of most interest to the contemporary reader. In the streets of England, for example, she keeps noting how, on the one hand, English streets could be spotlessly clean and the traffic disciplined and, on the other, how an English mother would spit on a cloth that she would then use to wipe her son's face clean or use spit to stick stamps on

envelops. These latter glimpses of the other side of English society make her wonder: “These are the same people who take pride in calling themselves civilized.” She is also spirited in defending Bengali women from those who tended to slight them by unfavourable comparisons with English women. Her reasons: the English climate enabled the women of these parts to work harder; meals were served in England on schedule unlike in India; the meals consumed here were confined to a few dishes unlike the many courses that characterised Indian ones; and there was much less washing to be done – for this and other reasons! Nevertheless, she is inclined to be balanced in her discussion of Indian and European women, for she ends her “comparative analysis” at this point by noting how the English woman had to do much more than cooking but enjoyed more freedom and how “both men and women here understand the need for taking care of their health and so work as well as enjoy themselves accordingly,” unlike in her country where very few people exhibited such “comprehensive understanding.”

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of her record of her European tour is the way she is continuously discomfited by what can be called the European gaze. An Indian woman draped in a sari in the streets of Europe must have been a rare sight indeed in the 1930s, for from the moment she leaves Egypt and lands in Italy to the end of her journey she is scrutinised intensely quite often. In Genoa, Milan and Rome, for example, she repeatedly sees people staring at her. On one of these occasions, some women start following her group, making her feel “rather uneasy.” On the train to Switzerland, she realises that she was attracting so much attention because of her sari and her “Indianness.” Even in London, where one would have thought that Indian women would not be that much of a curiosity by the 1930s, she finds “windows on both sides of the street opened for people to have a look at us, as if we were street performers ready to perform antics with our trained bears.” Eventually, she took to wearing an overcoat over her sari so that she would attract much less attention. However, when she meets Anne Freud and her companion Ruth Brunswick, she reports that they were much taken by her dress and wanted her to show them “the different methods of wearing saris.”

Durgabati’s father had sent her letters so that she could meet a few of the famous European psychoanalysts of the day and her encounters with them are of as much interest to the present-day reader as her recording of the sights and sounds of the places she had visited. It is interesting for the postcolonial reader to note that Ernst Jones, Freud’s most famous English disciple, asked her whether Indians, if they ever won *swaraj* or independence, would want their treasures in the British Museum back. The meeting with Freud himself is rendered memorably not only because of the description of the “two huge furry dogs” that are his companions that so scare Durgabati, but also because of his query if her father, the doctor who treated “other people’s mental diseases”

knew about her “fear of dogs.” She replied that he did, surprising him. But he would have no doubt been much more surprised if he had ever found out her final thoughts on her encounter and his questions: “If I could speak fluent English, I would ask Professor Freud at least once what his own love of dogs signified.” Famous psychoanalyst that he was, what would he think of that question?

Durgabati’s *The Westward Traveller*, has its share of such sparkling moments, testifying to her wit and vivacious personality – aspects of her personality that come through despite the role of the conventional Indian wife and tourist that she adopts habitually. Looking at women dancers in Paris pirouetting on the dance floor, for example, she imagines that their “supple bodies made them capable of touring the whole world sitting on men’s shoulders.” When she sees lions and tigers being fed with salt and cabbage leaves in an English zoo, she exclaims wryly that “maybe like the Englishmen, the tigers here are also used to having salad with their meals!”

Somdatta Mandal’s translation is able to catch such moments in Durgabat’s narrative with ease. As she points out in her “Translator’s Note,” the translation is not only “an act of love” but also “part of an intended series of English translations of Bengali travelogues to the West” that will enable a new generation of readers to adopt “new perspectives to the occidental gaze.” Readers of Durgabati’s narrative will surely be looking forward to the publication of the other works of the series, for it is clear from it that there are good reasons to retrieve other such narratives from archives and family libraries and vaults. As the famous contemporary Indian psychoanalyst Ashis Nandy declares in his Foreword to *The Westward Traveller*, a new generation of readers may be able to deconstruct episodes like Durgabati’s encounter with Freud in such narratives and find in their “inarticulate defiant silences” “intimations of extra-ordinariness that undergirded their everydayness.”

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