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**TRAVEL CULTURE, TRAVEL
WRITING AND BENGALI
WOMEN, 1870–1940**

Jayati Gupta



Though Indians have been travelling for centuries, documentation of their travels has been scarce and far between. Travel narratives are intimately linked with the construction of identity. Occupying the space between fact and fiction, they expose cultural fault lines and reveal the changing desires and anxieties of their own and of the reader. Since the beginning of this century, books and articles on Indian travel writing have become quite conspicuous by their growing number and rapid pace. At present, Indian travel writing in all its variety has also become an established genre of academic discipline encompassing history, sociology, anthropology, memoirs, adventure tales and many more areas. Also, as part of postcolonial studies, this protean genre has given rise to many new books that

specialise in particular areas of this field of study.

Interestingly, one notices that by and large in most cultures across the globe, early travel is ‘gendered’ as the act of journeying is considered to be the prerogative of the male. In several South Asian cultures like that of the Indian subcontinent, other than the pilgrimage or *tirthyajatra* as well as the Muslim Hajj to Makkah, travel was linked basically to economic necessities, trade and trading, which were almost exclusively masculine professions. Women’s travel, their sites of travel, modes of travel, their perceptions, and the cultural values of their journey became significant social markers in the socio-cultural ethos of Bengal much later. In the Indian sub-continent from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, increased mobility led to a general proliferation of travel; and consequently its documentation, albeit small in number, was seen in the writings of women as well.

This book under review, part of a series on Travel Writing being published by Routledge, chronicles travel writings of Bengali women in colonial India and explores the intersections of power, indigeneity, and the representations of the “self” and the “other” in these writings. It documents the transgressive histories of those women who stepped out to create emancipatory identities for themselves. Covering a total period of seventy years, it brings together a selection of travelogues from various Bengali women and their journeys to three specific destinations – to the West, the *Aryavarta*, and to Japan in the East. These writings challenge stereotypes of the “circumscribed native woman” and explore the complex personal and socio-political histories of women in colonial India. The Bengali identity of the women is reiterated in the narration and often in the title of the travelogues which mentions the *banganari* or *bangamahila*, inscribing both the region and the gender into the texture of their perceptions and representations.

Divided into three parts, the first section of the book begins with Westward travels of five women namely Sunity Devee, Krishnabhabini Das, Jagatmohini Chaudhuri, Abala Bose, and Durgabati Ghose. *Bilet* or *Vilayet*, or specifically England or Britain and by extension Europe were their travel destination. Out of these travelogues, only the one by Sunity Devee, the Maharani of Coochbehar, is written in English. In 1887, for the first time she accompanied her husband Nripendra Narayan to Britain to attend the golden jubilee celebrations of Queen Victoria. The travel narrative “My First Visit to England” is part of her autobiography entitled *The Autobiography of an Indian Princess* (1921). Apart from giving us a brief bio-note of each of the contributors, the author has translated select sections of the other narratives from Bengali in order to give the reader a first-hand experience of the travelogues. Krishnabhabini Das travelled to England in 1882 along with her husband, and wrote *England e Bangamahila* in 1885. In 1894, Jagatmohini Chaudhuri, a Bengali Christian widow set sail for England for a period of seven months, and in 1902 published *England e Saat Mash*.

Abala Bose travelled to England for the first time in 1896 along with her husband Jagadis Chandra Bose and wrote several articles which were published in different periodicals. Durgabati Ghose, daughter of the famous psychologist Girindra Sekhar Bose, travelled to Europe and England along with her husband in 1932 and published her travelogue *Paschimjatriki* in 1936.

The second section entitled “Travels in Aryavarta” once again consists of five entries of Prasannamayee Devi (Chaudhuri), Nanibala Ghosh, Hemlata Devi (Sarkar), Subodhkumari Majumdar and Shanta Devi (nee Chattopadhyay). “Aryavarta” comprised a much disputed expanse of Northern Bharatvarsha and the Himalayan kingdoms. From Prasannamayee Devi in 1888 to Nanibala Ghosh in 1933, these travellers from Bengal travel to the north and north-west regions of India, mapping the same landscape but within diverse narrative frameworks, and in so doing, dramatically (and one could argue deliberately) alter the land they wish to represent. Their subjective position as women writers further inform and complicate their work, as do the contemporary political framework of the time they respectively inhabit. What the reader is left with can conservatively be termed travel writing, but can equally and with ease inhabit the genres of memoir, political writing, and ethnographical study, among others. For example, the recurring subjects of Prasannamayee Devi’s narrative are Indian history and Aryan supremacy. Another generic trope adopted by female writers of travel include extensive apologia as precursor to the text, or in certain cases, used as a refrain throughout the body of work. In the 1933 preface to *Aryavarta*, for example, Nanibala Ghosh takes care to mention her complete disinterest in authoring a work of travel.

Section Three records selections of five narratives of Bengali women who visited imperial Japan, which was the heart of a culturally vibrant Asiatic civilisation and though the geographical space remains the same, here again the travelogues differ according to the reason for each woman’s visit. Thus the narratives of Hariprabha Takeda, Abala Bose, Sarojinalini Dutt, Charubala Mitra and Shanta Devi are all different from one another as they all arrived with preconceived ideas of the place against which they assessed their familiarly lived realities.

In her essay entitled “Travel Writing and Gender”¹ the notable critic Susan Bassnett specifically draws our attention to what she terms as “the female gaze” and shows us how travel narratives differ radically when the writer is a woman. In most cases travelling with male members of her family, her focus, point of view and narrative content differ a lot from the narrative of a male writer. Apart from differing from male writers, they are also different from more orthodox socially conformist women. Unlike their menfolk, middle class Bengali

¹ Susan Bassnett, “Travel Writing and Gender” in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*. Eds. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs. Cambridge University Press, 2002: 225-41.

women, living in an era that still primarily assigned them the role of the angel of the house, had to defend their travels. In her detailed introduction to this book, the author Jayati Gupta also poses a series of questions. She asks whether these primarily vernacular travelogues can be read as sharing a complementary, feminine or feminist point of view, alongside the larger volume of travel texts by men. She also questions whether these travel texts reflect the education of Bengali women or, more importantly, record their own views and ideas about emancipation, identity, modernity and nationhood. Almost all the women who travelled from Bengal went along with their husbands, several of whom went either for touring or for official work. The travels within the country were primarily for pleasure, but here also the women travellers did not venture alone. Similar was the case with those who visited Japan. Just as the masculine tradition of travel writing was considered to reflect public and professional concerns, the feminine tradition was considered to fall into private and personal sphere. The importance of the everyday for these women writers has often been noted. They wrote about their experiences in plain and simple matter-of-fact style and they assumed the readership to be family, relatives, and friends rather than a discerning public.

Reading these travelogues from a feminist, postcolonial perspective, the present volume highlights how these women from different castes, classes, and ages confront the changing realities of their lives in colonial India in the backdrop of the independence movement and the second world war. The author draws attention to the personal histories of these women, which informed their views on education, womanhood, marriage, female autonomy, family, and politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Engaging and insightful, this book will be of interest to students and researchers of literature and history, gender and culture studies, and for general readers interested in women and travel writing.

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