

Exploring Uncharted Territories: A Study of Bengali Women's Travelogues in the Colonial Period

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Abstract

This paper situates pioneering travel narratives of women in colonial Bengal and explores their multi-layered experiences and problematics of identity in relation to the centre-periphery dyad. It also unravels how translated accounts of Krishnabhabini Das and Durgabati Ghose in *A Bengali Lady in England* (2015) and *The Westward Traveller* (2010), respectively, explicate the development of their identities by juxtaposing an expanding consciousness resulting from their accumulated observations. Locating the nascent stages of women's writing in colonial Bengal, it brings to the fore complex issues of gender and mobility as well as the public/private dichotomy while navigating foreign shores, especially England. The paper also highlights how the power of the gaze lies with the colonised women who drew thorough comparisons between English society and contemporaneous Bengal. A critical investigation of the travelogues by adopting a postcolonial lens opens up the underlying intricacies of interactions, reflections, and dilemmas that the authors encapsulate in the narratives and thus help in contextualising their accounts in the larger sociocultural and political backdrop.

Keywords

Colonial Bengal, travel literature, gender relations, travel and identity, public space, translation studies

Introduction

Travel narratives are not mere reproductions of chronological description of incidents and may often be viewed as a rebellious (even subversive) act, therefore,

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interpreted as a process of self-actualisation (Mewshaw 2). The fluid spaces in travel literature provide a fertile ground for identities being constantly negotiated and moulded, and layers of meanings are unfurled in the complex process of recollecting the events and detailing the itineraries. Travel narratives seek to present the stories of men and women and record the minute details of their lives, and in doing so they represent the worldview and contingent realities in the converging worlds of alterity (Chatterjee, *Gender and Travel Writing* 59).

There have been several studies which have focused on the experiences of the travellers from the Empire and how it has unfurled a “new epistemology of scientific and rational inquiry” (Marriott 3). During the period of colonial exchanges in the early twentieth century, foreign travel became more commonplace in Bengal with increasing interest in exploring newer vistas, and a number of prominent Bengali men and women were travelling for the first time. It was due to the process of colonial expansion that the people from colonised lands could also travel to the centre and record their understanding of colonial culture, thereby problematising the dichotomy. This new mobility became an empowering condition for colonial subjects as travel writing formed a channel by which they were able to transform themselves from “objects of metropolitan spectacle to exhibitors of Western mores” (Burton 3). This led to the unsettling of the boundaries of the Empire and redefining of power relations in imperial culture.

Situating women in the politics of travel writing entails the discursive construction of gender and nation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Anderson 13). In the colonial period, not only European explorers but native Bengali men, and gradually women, became avid travellers. This brought the colonised and the coloniser in direct contact leading to the formation, re-formation, and transformation of variegated perceptions shaped by social, political and cultural forces. The act of travel could translate the insights of the colonial traveller through their engagements with the land of the coloniser wherein they blurred the centre-periphery dichotomy by travelling to the colonial core. More often than not female voices were relegated to the margins in the male-dominated genre of travel narratives. While crossing the *kala pani*³ or black water, women, whether alone or accompanied, transgressed the dogmatic patrifocal ideologies that segregated the home and the world.

While reviewing eighteenth and nineteenth-century travel writing by British women, Turner comments on the relative invisibility of women's experiences in the academic discourse. Facilitated by the opening of the Suez Canal (1869), British women had started venturing out from the imperial centre to the colonial centre on a rather perceptible scale, while colonised women mostly

³ Hindus believed that voyaging beyond the geographical borders would lead a person to lose his caste and, thereby, his position in society.

remained immobile (Harder, *The masters*). Extending the argument further in the context of travel writing by a few Bengali women who went to the heart of the Empire, it can be stated that these accounts revealed the reversal of the gaze, problematising the relation between gender and empire (Harder, *Female Mobility* 5). These works provided important insights into variegated perceptions about the narrator as well as the people they encountered and these interactions crystallised their conflicting identities.

By situating the emergence of women's travelogues in the context of women's writing in colonial Bengal, this paper contextualises the trajectory and significance of travel writing by women. It unravels the diverse multicultural interactions and unearths complex navigations and experiences from the perspective of the writer as well as the traveller. A critical reading of the selected accounts highlights the subjective position of women travellers as well as the problematics of identity, gender, and power relations.

Travel writing and translation

Travel writing as a major domain of scholarship has widely expanded over the years, drawing on other disciplines like anthropology, sociology, history as well as cultural, literary, and gender studies. While ethnography deals exclusively with accounts of culture and social life based on observation, travel writing problematises this factual approach as the narratives not only reflect what a traveller views but also how they interpret it based on their cultural contexts. Critics like Hulme and Youngs have pointed out that "translation studies has brought another dimension to travel, giving thought not only to translation between languages but also between cultures" (9). Susan Bassnett emphatically stresses the links between travel and translation as she draws a parallel between the journey of translation as beginning "from one point in time and space to another" (106) while the physical journey is undertaken by the traveller in reality. Both journeys call for hermeneutic approaches as they involve various processes of uncovering and discovering. As traveller and author, they engage with different cross-cultural contact zones, and their travel, symbolically enmeshes some kind of translation between the language of the explorers, the undiscovered, the unknown, the new and unfamiliar (Cronin 106).

In a similar strain, the translator's cultural position plays an important role in the act of translation since he is actively involved in the production of the translated text. Before the translation of vernacular travelogues, the original texts in Bengali had limited readership, as it lay beyond the understanding of Anglophone readers. The unconventionality of their experiences and the representations are impacted by various levels of intercultural as well as linguistic mediations. These narratives also provide a glimpse into the complex cultural experiences of the authors who constructed their colonised identity while interacting with the imperial centre. The intricate relationship between translation

and mobility is evident as the translator continually moves between different cultures, languages and space, shaping the translated text. The notion of translation and identities can further be elucidated by engaging with Bhabha's concept of hybridity (162) and interstitial space. It also creates an in-between space that is significant for the evolving identity of the traveller and the translator. This can be further linked to the interrelationship between the original and the translated texts that operates in the in-between space or a third space (Batchelor 51-52) by transcending linguistic, spatial, and cultural barriers.

Theorising gendered experiences of travel

While there is a rich history of travel writing in the West, the Hindu *shastras* (religious precepts) often condemned the act of crossing borders and traversing western territories projected as journeying across the *kala pani*. Simonti Sen has pointed out that the word 'travel' translates to 'brhaman,' a derivative of the Sanskrit word 'bhram' (2) which means to err. By extending this meaning, 'brhaman' or aimless wandering for the sake of pleasure is often attached to the notion of impurity. In her comprehensive study of the travel narratives of Bengal, Sen has scrutinised the layers of literary as well as nationalist articulations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and traced the evolving concept of travel among affluent Bengali families.

Travel narratives produced during colonial times attempt to register the tensions between the coloniser and the colonised and encapsulate the challenges in understanding power relations. In her foundational work, Mary Louise Pratt emphasises the significance of the contact zone where "cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (8). It thus allows transnational encounter, thereby giving rise to the formation of opinions and ideas about the identity of the cultural Other. This contact zone provides a fertile space for interactions among people who are geographically, historically, and linguistically distinct and establishes a dynamic relation that challenges the hegemonic structure of the centre and leads to intersections of various trajectories and localities. The multi-dimensional experiences of women placed in the contact zone have hitherto received little scholarly attention.

Under colonial rule many socio-political changes along with improved facilities made travel a commonplace activity among the elite class and yet it was considered to be a male privilege. Although critical discourses on travel are generally steered by masculine definitions and experiences, travel writing by women has made forays into this male-dominated genre. In response to the hegemonic standpoint as projected by the colonisers, the travel narratives of Indian women offered a glimpse into colonised women's perspectives leading to the reversal of the gaze. Women's travel, "their sites of travel, modes of travel, their perceptions, the cultural value of their journeys became significant social

markers” (Gupta, *Travel Culture* 12). These nuanced accounts of their experiences differed vastly from those of their male counterparts and exposed the politics of negotiations in establishing their position in the historiography of colonised society.

The question of a woman’s travel narrative and consolidation of her identity in the corpus of colonial writings provides multiple viewpoints with respect to her myriad experiences beyond the border. Moreover, these views were not generally influenced by the already existing ideas about the Orient and the Occident, which made their textual voices more impactful through their encounters and exchanges. The relative construction of the idea of the self in the travel narratives by these women ensues from the construction of the ‘other’, which operates in the space that a travelogue creates. Such sites open new ways of thinking and visualising space, which Soja termed as ‘thirdspace’, where spatiality is recognised as a ‘social product’ as well as a ‘shaping force’ (Soja, *Postmodern Geographies* 7).

In this regard, Foucault’s idea of heterotopia referring to “spaces that provide an alternate space of ordering while paradoxically remaining both separate from and connected to all other spaces” (Topinka 55) is relevant. Heterotopias can be looked upon as a site of resistance where existing ideas and newer understanding collide, leading to further formation and reformation of reveries and physical journeys. Thus, the minds of women travellers become a fertile site for heterotopic reveries where they could juxtapose the imaginary foreign shores and their native land. From this perspective, travel narratives appear to be a highly polemical subject from a woman’s perspective and the act of travel as well as its documentation signifies “a new form of gender power for women” (Murmu, *Words of her Own* 246). This approach proves to be a useful tool while analysing the chosen texts as the paper explores how this has resulted in a sense of awareness and confidence, giving a boost to female subjectivity as it can be interpreted as an act of self-actualisation based on the imagined ‘self’ in respect to the ‘other’ which will be analysed later.

Travelling women, thus, become the focus of a scrutinising gaze and, at the same time, revert the gaze by acquiring the power of surveillance. Berger’s concept that delineates the subject/object binary between active male and passive female can be critically evaluated in the context of women’s travel writing, where women act as the surveyor and the surveyed. Travel accounts by women attempt to dismantle this binary through the positionality of women’s gaze and voice. This renders the surveying women as both powerful and powerless by destabilising the fixed notions of being an object of the gaze and a gazing subject. Women’s travelogues also lay bare the politics of gender and class, which, while being

distinct from that of the *zenana* or *andarmahal*,⁴ led women to negotiate with the conflicts and contradictions evident in their experiences during travel. So, the writings of Bengali women travellers are representative of the broader perspectives and deeper intricacies related to gender, culture, travel, and the empire.

Bengali women as travel writers

The 'Woman Question' (Evans; Sneider; Stanton & Cobbe; Thompson) in the West was closely linked to the position of women in the society which encompassed issues of suffrage, education, and emancipation. Wide-ranging debates of these changes impacted the roles of women in public and private lives, and some of the European women even travelled to the colonies inspecting the lives of Indian women in the *zenana* (Ghose, *Women travellers* 8). A particular streak of global modernity can be found in the adventurous trips of single western women who interacted with well-educated Indian women and played crucial roles in developing different organisations (Allen 83). In this connection, the 'Women's Question' (Chatterjee, *The Nationalist Resolution*; Mazumdar 1) in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bengal can be addressed through the problematic paradigms of modernity. Travel and access to public space were indispensable parts of the idea of modernity, and Bengali women at that time ventured out of their private quarters and documented their observations as travel writers. The ideas of alternative modernity and multiple modernities (Appadurai 46; Chakrabarty 2) can be referred to in this regard to challenge the Eurocentric concept of modernity which shaped the figure of the New Woman in the West. Bengali women did not blindly mimic the established Western ideals but tried to refashion these complex notions and moulded it to suit their context through selective assimilation and appropriation of colonial modernity. Thus, the New Woman, shaped by exposure to the outer world, was different from the colonial woman and embodied several complexities and mediations. Recently, a vast range of studies on social reform has been undertaken by historians and literary scholars who have concentrated on women's condition (Bagchi; Ghosh; Gupta, *Women, gender and sexuality*) and literary contributions (Moitra; Harder, *Female Mobility*) in colonial Bengal.

Further, diverse forms of life writings such as autobiographies and travelogues slowly developed and started emerging from various social groups. According to Kadar, life writing is a kind of expression about the self that primarily focuses on autobiography, but includes letters, diaries, journals, and even biography (5). Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have pointed out that autobiographical writing generally refers to self-referential writings and the terms

⁴ *Zenana* or *andarmahal* literally translates into 'inner palace'. It was the women's quarters of aristocratic or royal households, where the ladies and their attendants lived in seclusion.

'life writing' or 'life narrative' are more inclusive of the heterogeneity of self-referential practices (4). Although life writing can be perceived as accounts focusing on an individual's narrative, it can potentially reveal the broader outlines of political, cultural, and social changes occurring in the respective time periods.

The expression of women's selfhood has found multi-layered articulations in the pioneering texts of the times. Arguably the first Bengali autobiography that came to light was Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban* (1876) (translated as *My Life* in 1999). Continuing this tradition, *Amar Katha* (1912) by Binodini Dasi (translated as *My Story and My Life as an Actress* in 1998) was an autobiographical account of a famous theatre actress of Calcutta. Other notable autobiographies of this period include *The Memoirs of Dr. Haimabati Sen: From Child Widow to Lady Doctor* by Haimabati Sen (translated and published in English in 2000) and *Jibaner Jharpata* (1942-1943) by Sarala Devi Chaudhurani (translated as *The Scattered Leaves of My Life: An Indian Nationalist Remembers* in 2009). The popular Bengali periodicals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century also began targeting women audiences and initiated discussions on social, political and educational themes alongside personal, domestic and international topics (Banerjee 160). *Bambodhini Patrika* (1863-1922), *Bharati* (1877-1926), *Mabila* (1897-1915), *Antahpur* (1898-1903), and *Prabasi* (1901-1964) were some of the leading periodicals which championed women's concerns and provided a platform for raising their voices. Swarnakumari Debi's *Darjeeling Patra*, published serially in *Bharati* as early as 1886 was a remarkable instance in the form of travel writing by a woman (Dutta 17). Thus, the tradition of Bengali women documenting their travel experiences within the country and recounting domestic journeys can be traced back to the early nineteenth century (Murmu, *Prasannamayee Devi* 34). This wide range of writings reveal how the women not only focused on autobiography or life writing which often confined them to domestic and private preoccupations, but they had taken pains to document their experiences across *kala pani*, thereby developing their worldviews. This expanded their horizons, symbolically and literally, as they crossed boundaries through inter-continental and intra-continental journeys.

Hariprabha Takeda, a Brahmo woman (follower of Brahmoism, an offshoot of the Bengali renaissance which was an intellectual and reformist movement) married to a Japanese man, ventured to undertake the strenuous journey to Japan in 1912 and recorded it as *Bangomahilar Japan Jatra* (1915) (translated as *The Journey of a Bengali Woman to Japan* in 2019). She was the first Asian woman to publish an account of Japan and considered to be the second in the world in respect to the British traveller Isabella Bird's *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* (1880). Apart from Hariprabha's text, another significant account by a woman visitor to Japan around that time was that of Saroj Nalini Dutt, which was posthumously published as *Japan e Banganari* (A Bengali Lady in Japan) in 1928. Shanta Devi's *Japan Bhromon* was serialised in a magazine, *Prabasi*, in 1937.

Hemlata Sarkar recorded her experiences in the form of *Nepal e Banganari* (A Bengali Woman in Nepal) (1912) which was first collated in the form of essays in *Prabasi* before being published as a book. *Parashye Banga-ramani* (Bengali Woman in Persia) by Saratrenu Devi is an example of a woman's experiences and critical observations in Persia (Ray).

Encounters with the West predate the forays that Bengali women made in other Asian countries. Krishnabhabini Das' *Englancy Bangomobila* (1885) (translated as *A Bengali Lady in England* in 2015) is a pioneering travel narrative as it is the first full-length account of England by a Bengali woman. However, the narrative may be viewed as blurring the boundaries between genres as Sengupta mentions that "it is also the only documentation of her years in England, and can be read as a kind of life writing or autobiographical writing" (13). Being the first full length travelogue by a Bengali woman, it has been critically discussed and widely analysed by scholars as it is almost an ethnographic account of the English people and their land by a female colonial subject. Krishnabhabini extensively studied the French scholar Hippolyte Taine's *Notes on England* (1874) and uses it as a source to give accurate information to her readers who were primarily women confined within their private space (Sengupta).

The turn of the century witnessed more expeditions to the West that resulted in a rising number of travel accounts. Sunity Deves, the Maharani of Cooch Behar, penned *The Autobiography of an Indian Princess* (1921) and mentioned her visit to attend the diamond jubilee celebration of Queen Victoria. Jagatmohini Chaudhury's *Englande Sat Mash* (Seven Months in England, 1902) was a record of the experiences of a Bengali Christian widow who journeyed unaccompanied to the heart of the British Empire. In colonial times, England was a popular destination for Bengalis who ventured to the West. As their identity was shaped in response to the English Other, very few accounts of travels to alternative destinations in Europe exist. Bimala Dasgupta's *Norway Bhromon* (Travel to Norway, 1913) is one of the examples which solely focused on a specific European country and later a revision of the book incorporated another section entitled *Denmark Bhromon* (Travel to Denmark). Durgabati Ghose's *Paschimjatriki* (later translated as *The Westward Traveller* by Somdatta Mandal in 2010) was published in *Prabasi* in seven parts from *Ashwin* (mid-September to mid-October) to *Chaitra* (mid-March to mid-April) in 1935 and later in the form of a book in 1936, hinting that women's travelogues were gaining prominence and there was an upcoming market for it amongst educated readers (Gupta, *Travel Culture* 13). Durgabati mentions how she voyaged through many European countries from the "evening tea-joints and dance bars, swimming pools, clubs and flower gardens" (31) in Lucerne to taking a train through Austria to reach Calais in France. In the mid-1940s, Chitrita Devi also traversed through English cities namely Bristol before moving across European cities like Paris, Helvetia, and Vienna.

The following section aims to analyse how Bengali women travellers scrutinised a different culture and narrated their English encounters by comparing the Home and the World to bring out the differences and similarities between their homeland and the land of the coloniser. These instances helped in shaping their identity in relation to the self and the other as these complex negotiations are persistent tropes in almost all the travel accounts. Breaking away from the fixity of home and travelling to England opened uncharted avenues for them and helped them in mapping the self during the course of their physical and metaphorical journeys.

Identity, gender relations, and social mores

During the colonial period, Bengali women travellers who were trapped in the feminine domestic space ventured abroad and developed “a sense of shared identity with other women” (Friedman 44) at home and it resulted in a tension between the individual identity and shared identity. It was in relation to the colonial centre that travelling women could carve their identities, subject positions and put forth their narratives. Their accounts reflected an interesting juxtaposition of public and private spaces which shaped their subjectivity against the centre-periphery dyad. This new dynamic interstitial space enabled the formation of contact zones which helped them question the structure of colonial authority and to understand the cultural differences between the coloniser and the colonised from a subjective female gaze. Mobility from the domestic confines to the vastness of the outside world is a voyage that reconfigured the concept of boundaries for them and it is a sentiment reiterated by other women travellers of the time (Gupta *Travel Culture*). Crossing the spatial vastness symbolically helped the women in breaking away from prevalent societal beliefs and through this transition empower themselves. These explorations in the travelogues can be interpreted as a quest to claim the author’s identity in a predominantly male-centric genre.

This section mainly examines the experiences of Durgabati Ghose and Krishnabhabini Das in England and highlights that although separated by decades, their experiences have deep-rooted thematic connections. Durgabati Ghose’s *Paschimjatriki* (1936) or *The Westward Traveller* (2010) is written in the form of a diary which records her adventures chronologically, indicating important events, and is interspersed with photos of the places she visited. Almost like a journal, it contains vivid details and minute descriptions of her experiences. She extends apologies for her amateurish writing, showing a clear awareness of her lack of expertise in formal writing as she sought to justify herself in certain situations. Further, the acquisition of the colonial language seemed to be a barrier which often silenced her in public. This is evident when she meets Professor Freud and expressed her inability to speak fluent English (Ghose 73). As pointed out by Ashis Nandy, the inadequacy in English that Durgabati felt could hint that

the metropolis had its own language and that refused to be hers at crucial moments (x).

Durgabati's travel account unveils myriad views of a colonised Bengali woman, her cultural contact with the Other and emerging reflections by providing a critical assessment of her voyage to Europe. The narrative voice of the author recorded an expanding consciousness as she explored an imagined land that was generally beyond the reach of the *bhadramahilas* (women belonging to the educated elite class of Bengali society) of the time. She emphasises both the positive and negative aspects of the countries in Europe that she visited but this section will focus on her experiences in England and juxtapose them with other Bengali women travellers who went to England around the same time. Through a close analysis of her travel narrative, it can also be perceived that the text underscores cultural tensions which can be situated aptly within the prevalent literary discourses of the time.

Durgabati hailed from a distinguished family in Calcutta, her father being an esteemed psychologist and, her uncle, a man of letters. Although in the course of the narrative, she casually mentions accompanying her husband, his name or profession was not revealed. The fact that their itinerary was planned and managed by Thomas Cook and Company showed the affluence that they travelled with and this distinguished Durgabati's experiences from other contemporary Bengali women travellers of the time. The prearranged schedule of her sojourn indicates the social class that she belongs to and the journey was undertaken as a leisure trip, unlike Krishnabhabini Das who stayed in England for a period of eight years with her husband. Krishnabhabini's husband played a more active role in her literary endeavour as she acknowledges in the Prelude that her husband had helped her "in understanding issues related to education and politics; he has even revised and corrected a few sections" (Das 2). Travel narratives by women in colonial Bengal were often meant for personal pleasure while publication and public readership were incidental occurrences, although certain accounts such as Krishnabhabini's narrative was written specifically to educate the audience by providing them with an image of England.

Since Krishnabhabini resided in England for a period of eight years, it gave her an opportunity to read about their culture, geography and traditions in detail along with experiencing it in person. Her observations and experiences coupled with extensive reading about England helped her to provide minute descriptions of the land of the colonisers to the readers, thereby creating a thirdspace for them. In order to identify herself with her female readers, she mentioned that she used to be confined to the household but her innate desire to explore the world made her break away from such confinement. Her individual identity as a woman enjoying relatively greater freedom compared to her fellow sisters at home contradicts the identity that she gains in solidarity with them (Sengupta 15). Moreover, she remarked that her literary pursuit was to educate

women about the “new objects she witnessed, and her lived experiences” (Chatterjee, *Gazing* 65) which many women in Bengal might be curious about.

Durgabati laid bare the romantic idealism associated with England that she carried within herself and conveyed her experiences through a discourse that was set against the cultural frame of India. She charted the territorial details of early twentieth century heterotopic England through a female subjective exploration and also chronicled the minute description of the society that she witnessed by referring to the conditions and customs of her English counterparts. Nandy mentions that the way she recounts her adventures highlight how “Bengali domesticity, interpersonal patterns and femininity played out outside their natural locale” (ix). As she ventured to cross the threshold, a sense of liberation could be found through travel as the account suggests. Durgabati appreciated the status of an Englishwoman as she was allowed to go out for work but added that it was due to the climate and prevalent family system that offered them more autonomy and encouraged them to work harder. Although she appreciated the freedom enjoyed by Englishwomen, she also spiritedly defended Bengali women against comparisons (Ghose 47). This was an important issue as she identified with the women of contemporary Bengal who were detached from the public space and contrasts their position with Englishwomen.

Further, she critically evaluated the conjugal relationship that she perceived there and marvelled at the liberty and the degree of independence that a woman exercised in her marriage. The idea of freedom and mobility is explicit when she specifically mentioned that in England the husbands do not “screen” or maintain a close watch on the visitors even when they are not at home, unlike contemporary Bengal where women would not speak to men unaccompanied by someone (Ghose 48). Krishnabhabini also drew attention to how women in England were treated and there was no strict demarcation between the inner and outer parts of a household. The fact that husbands and wives went out at the end of the day together for merriment was also novel to her, as it was contrary to the prevalent social codes at home (Das 68). Continuing her observation, she highlighted the characteristics of Englishwomen which included cleverness, efficiency, and literacy, equipping them to maintain and run households as well as contribute in other spheres.

Durgabati’s narrative presented an in-depth portrayal of the cultural attributes, attire and the economic condition of the people in those places that she visited. Durgabati belonged to a social class of women who hailed from an enlightened and liberal background such as the other women travellers of the time like Krishnabhabini Das, Sunity Deves, and Chitrita Devi. Reversing the colonial gaze, Durgabati dismantles the binary of civility and uncivility, refinement and crudity as she was disappointed in certain aspects that she witnessed around her in England. While travelling by bus, she noticed a woman using her spit on a cloth to rub and wipe “her son’s face clean” (47). She found

this contradictory as she gazed at the clean streets and disciplined traffic on one hand, while on the other she observed the lack of cleanliness. Here, the power of the gaze lies with Durgabati's observations and it challenges the Eurocentric notion of civility and being "civilized" (47). This politics of the gaze is reflected in Krishnabhabini Das' account where she being the female spectator gazed at the coloniser's way of life in the heterotopic space and thereby came up with "her conceptions of *bilet* or the foreign land" (Chatterjee, *Gazing* 53). She made a distinction between *bhadralok* and *chotalok* based on their belonging to the affluent class or the poorer section "who were shorn of all civilizing ideals" (Das 39). According to her, the metropolis was a congested space and a "city of shops" and "city of wealth" (Das 37), a place meant for the affluent classes due to the lure of consumerism. Therefore, the city "made the deprived acutely aware of their deprivation" (Chatterjee, *Gazing* 67) which acted as a blow to Krishnabhabini's presumptions about the metropolis. This reveals the disillusionment that she experienced regarding the civility and refinement of the English elite. While overstepping the binaries between the margin and the centre, she also subverted the colonial gaze which symbolised breaking away from the hierarchies of imperial control.

Durgabati recounted an uncomfortable experience of being under surveillance when she wore a sari and, eventually, resorted to wrapping an "overcoat" (78) over the sari so that she would attract less attention. Here, the gaze confers the privilege of power upon the colonial spectator and this endows the narrator with the ability to construct perceptions and meanings by what she witnessed around her. However, the act of wearing an overcoat was a response from the colonised subject to the centre and an attempt to negate the colonial gaze. Her acute sense of observation was exercised through her anecdotes, as on one occasion when she happened to visit the Regent Park Zoo, she spotted the imperial implications of colonial culture by observing how raw meat, lettuce and salt were being served to the lions and tigers. She further commented, "May be like the Englishmen, the tigers here are used to having salads with their meals" (Ghose 51). This wry remark showed the complex cultural binary and the narrator's response to the awareness of a distinct *sahib* culture which she could not familiarise herself with.

The power play exercised in the binary of being visible and invisible was a fluid one and evident in the manner Durgabati viewed the English people and their etiquettes, while at the same time she was the object of their scrutiny for her unique sartorial appearance and mannerisms. She was continuously discomfited by the gaze while being stared at repeatedly and her 'Indianness' aroused much curiosity as she narrated how "windows on both sides of the streets opened for people to have a look at us, as if we were street performers ready to perform antiques with our trained bears" (Ghose 57). The travelogues show how meticulously they gave vent to experiences in a foreign land which brought

contradictory opinions as well as intensified the connection with their own culture. These concerns regarding sartorial representations stemmed from how the cultural other is perceived and their experiences problematise the question of the identity of a woman in a foreign land. As Krishnabhabini comments: “If a person’s appearance differs, they stare at him as if they are staring at some beast” (Das 110).

In this respect, Durgabati recalled an incident when a group of young boys would pester them for pennies, while some small girls touched her sari and exclaimed how beautiful it was (Ghose 57). She was also critical of England’s economic status by referring to a group of beggars and the lack of civility of the English people which hinges on the dichotomy between the reality and her imagination. This sort of reaction and reception intensified the need to belong and when she met any Indian, she instantly connected with them owing to a sense of camaraderie. In this way, she discovered her ‘self’ by noting the differences between the cultures that collided and converged. This also led to a clash between her anticipation of an imagined Europe being an ideal society and the discontents that emerged from her failed reconciliation with the reality.

Krishnabhabini, on the other hand, decided to change her sartorial appearance and adopt western attire and “out of a concern not to evoke negative response, she mentions how ashamed she was of wearing a hat and that such outwardly change did not transform her inner being” (Murmu, *Words of Her Own* 254). This tradition of adorning western attire was adopted by Sunity Devee, the Maharani of Cooch Behar, who accompanied her husband to England and met several members of the royal family. The grandeur and mannerisms that she saw during this meeting impressed her. She fused both styles as she was comfortable in “white and gold brocade gown” as well as “*crêpe de Chine* Sari” (Devee 63). She also mentioned that the queen specifically asked her to appear in her “national dress” (Devee 162).

It is evident that Durgabati carried forward Krishnabhabini’s legacy as there are certain similarities in the way they portrayed the women of England, their mannerisms, and culture. However, at the same time Durgabati’s critical tone is later reflected in the narrative of Chitrita Devi who “did not use England as the norm against which to judge Indian life” (Chaudhuri 178). Travelling literally and metaphorically along the coloniser’s terrain and questioning the political and racial hierarchy, the quest for identity remains an important element in the experiences of women travellers. They moved beyond national boundaries and reconfigured their experiences through travel writing that is crucial in scrutinising the imperial project. They challenged the discursive construction of spaces and places by referring to their subjective identity as modern yet different from the colonial woman. Their critical assessment poses an epistemic challenge to mimicry, thereby, bearing a symbolic resistance to the colonial enterprise. This is also connected with the ideological notions of nation, race, and geopolitics.

The act of setting foot in England is like entering the metropolis and the heart of the British empire that controls the discourses of the colonial regime as well as the construction of national identity. These travel accounts are an interesting study as the narratives began with their awareness of domesticity and, subsequently, embraced the sense of freedom by transgressing geographical boundaries. The texts problematise the question of asserting the importance of women's voices while negotiating cross-cultural interactions through a global network of journeys. Thus, these travelogues situate colonised women's voices in the wider struggle to redefine geographical boundaries and ideological notions of the home and the world.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the nuances of travel and sites of contestations and mediations by tracing the history of Bengali women's travel narratives in the context of centre-periphery negotiation. The irreconcilable divide between the colonial projection of supremacy and colonised women's attempts to challenge the internalisation of that supremacy is encapsulated in the travel narratives of women who ventured into the territory of the coloniser during this time. Such discussions brought private musings to the public and was charged with political relevance as part of the colonial discourse. Breaking away from the shackles of domesticity, their critical writings about diverse experiences reflect their excitement, opinions and, sometimes, displeasure and provide a fertile ground for explorations to uncover spatial, racial, and locational politics. Travel offered these women a space for gazing, perceiving, and expressing one's opinions and establishing their identity in the context of being in the imperial centre as a colonised subject, encountering the coloniser in their own land and attempting to turn the gaze upon them.

The travelogues question colonial hegemonic ideas and subvert the binaries such as 'coloniser' and 'colonised', 'us' and 'them' at multiple levels. Women's travel accounts laid emphasis on the differences between cultures by drawing oblique comparisons. Situating their experiences in the tradition of Bengali women's travel writing puts into perspective the trajectory of colonial discourse and the important issues that the women were raising around this time. The translated texts cannot be rendered as merely Bengali women's travelogues but could be interpreted as exploring the problematics of the gaze and identity. In a broader perspective, their perceptions help in conceptualising Indian identity with respect to the Other simultaneously with the representation of the Self. Through the account of their engagements and experiences, they reclaim and renegotiate not only colonial space but also hegemonic discourses. For a colonised woman, travel to the core of the British Empire and concurrent descriptions challenge the colonial power and gendered structures and

representations, where her gaze and voice are her only tools to narrate experiences and contest established discourses.

The analysis of Bengali women's travelogues in the colonial context, thus, unfurls multiple layers of subversive implications and centres on the dichotomy between freedom and bondage. They integrate fragments of memories, synthesising these into a narrative for literary pleasure while addressing complex social and gender issues. This paper offers an insight into the existing body of critical works and adds a new dimension which might be helpful for the intertextual analysis of travelogues authored by Bengali women who visited other countries and continents, and could expand the scope of further research in gender, postcolonial and cultural studies.

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