

**Somdatta Mandal, ed. *Journeys: Indian Travel Writing*. New Delhi: Creative Books, 2013. 326 pp. ISBN 978-81-8043-101-2.**

We all seemed to have grown up with the impression that South Asians were, at least in the past, homebodies, averse to travelling to other parts of the subcontinent as well as to distant lands. We also know of ancient religious restrictions against sailing across seas because of *kala pani* (literally, black water), a taboo that kept most people of the region from travelling overseas for centuries. Almost all that we were aware of for far too long was of travel from the west to the east. Indeed, most people thought of people from the subcontinents as such sedentary individuals, that except for pilgrimages to shrines and holy places, or for education, they were thought to have rarely ventured outside the confines of their own districts. And yet here is this fascinating book, over three hundred pages long, full of mostly absorbing essays describing voyages made by intrepid Indians in the nineteenth as well as the twentieth century to all parts of the world, for all kind of reasons.

Take “Vishnubhat Godse’s *Majha Pravas: A Travel Extraordinary*,” the first essay of Somdatta Mandal’s collection of essays, *Journeys: Indian Travel Writing*, as an example. Godse’s travelogue, written in 1884-85, but covering events such as the “Sepoy Mutiny” on the basis of first-hand observation, is an absorbing if all too brief and bit too sedate and noncommittal discussion of what is not only the first travelogue written in Marathi, but also “one of the earliest works of modern Marathi prose” (32). The much more lively and critically astute third essay of the collection, Sudev Pratim Basu’s “Hunting, Travel and Mascara: Women Hunter-Travellers in British India, 1837-1916,” not only deals insightfully with the exoticising accounts of three British memsahibs who had travelled on diversionary tiger hunts, but also comments interestingly on the 1916 narrative of Sunity Devce, the Maharani of Cooch-Bihar, that is “full of tongue-in-cheek digs at the British perception of the tiger” (67) written by an Indian woman who had been privileged to be part of such “hunt-tourism” (63). Her narrative is, of course, quite different from those of the three English women who provided their “mem-sahib” perspectives on such outings, but it is apparently no less captivating. The same Maharani’s sharp-eyed 1921 narrative, *The Autobiography of an Indian Princess*, is treated in quite charming detail later in the collection by Amrita Satapathy who appreciates the Maharani’s fresh and original account of her extended stay in Victorian Britain and her ability to adapt herself “in the land of the colonizers with an agility of spirit and enthusiasm” (291).

Indeed, the range of travel narratives covered by the twenty or so essays in the volume as well as the descriptions of the travellers undertaking voyages to distant lands, whether abroad or in the Indian subcontinent, is nothing short of

amazing. Jasbir Jain's excellent discussion, "Guru Nanak's Travels: Journeys of a Seeker" offers us insights into the "Udasis" or spiritual journeys of the fifteenth-century seeker in quest of "meaning and for Truth" is instructive and illuminating because of the way Jain underscores their "significance for their contribution to the making of Nanak and his faith" (75); it is also elegantly written and perceptive, as when she praises insightfully Nanak's discourses for "their dialogicity and openness" (83), and when she notes the outcome of the journeys in the maturing of the savant, "Experience, exposure and travel together forged the self, a self without ego, capable of looking both within and outward" (83). Another Indian traveller in quest of enlightenment featured in Mandal's collection is Rahul Sankrityayan. As Rameshwar Mishra notes helpfully about this "globe-trotter" (87), he was an indefatigable traveller who crisscrossed Asia and Europe, travelled extensively in the middle of the twentieth-century not only geographically but also "in the realm of ideas" (93), although one wishes that Mishra had dealt with these ideas and thrown light on them and their place in Sankrityayan's evolving sense of religion as insightfully as Jain did in her essay. In fact, a reading of Mishra's essay which follows Jain's directly in the volume suggests that the collection is not only diverse in its coverage but also that the quality of the analysis of the essays in it varies quite a bit.

On the whole though, readers of *Journeys: Indian Travel Writing* will find plenty of reasons to be thankful to Mandal for assembling such wide-ranging discussions of Indian travel writing in one volume. The next essay Mandal includes in her collection, Sajal Kumar Bhattacharya's "Sagas of Two Bengali Globetrotting Cyclists," is a very rewarding piece for the reader, for it features two unusual travellers: Bimal Mukherjee, who in 1926, set out to travel in a bicycle across thirty countries for fourteen years in 1923 and then wrote about his, for those days, "astounding achievement" (95) in a Bengali book many decades later; and Bimal Dey, another Bengali, who took a similar tour almost fifty years later. Bhattacharya's essay is well-worth reading for its discussion of these two cyclists and their peregrinations as well as Mukherjee's acute comparison of the differences as well as the similarities of the two, "in order to explore how different socio-political contexts and subjective priorities of travellers may create utterly different spaces out of the same geographical locations visited" and to suggest how varied contexts and priorities ultimately can "problematise" any consideration of "the genre of travel writing" (95).

At least two essays of *Journeys: Indian Travel Writing* show how Indians had first travelled to Europe and then returned home to write about their experience even in the eighteenth century. The first two books discussed by Kaiser Haq in his suggestive essay, "Encountering Vilayet: Accounts of Europe by Mirza Sheikh I' tesamuddin, Mirza Abu Taleb, Rabindranath Tagore" thus introduce us to intrepid eighteenth-century Indian Muslims who had travelled to Britain.

The first of these two was Mirza Ptesamuddin, who went on a diplomatic mission for the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II, the second, Mirza Abu Taleb Khan, was in England on a private visit. Haq finds these accounts written by the two Mirzas to be “invaluable” contributions “to cultural history as they reflect the views of the pre-colonial South Asian mind during a momentous transitional period” (256). Clearly, both of these travellers wrote at a time when the British had established a presence in some parts of India but had not yet begun to consolidate their imperial interests in the subcontinent. Zerin Alam’s “Travels of Colonial Muslim Women from India” is also of interest for the second of her two subjects who is a woman called Atiya Fyzee Rahman, for it shows a Muslim Indian woman travelling to England for educational purposes in the early years of the twentieth century and writing about her experience from “a gendered colonial framework” (233).

At least three of the essays of *Journeys: Indian Travel Writing* deal in whole or in part with the travel writings of Rabindranath Tagore. Not only was he the most famous Indian writer of the twentieth century but he surely was also the most indefatigable of Indian travellers of his time. He crisscrossed the globe repeatedly, moving from west to east or vice versa almost obsessively over the years as he tried to bridge the two hemispheres in his life as well as works. As Haq observes in the essay cited above, Tagore’s travel narratives have a special place in his vast oeuvre, for they record the way he “transcended... narrow confines” of home and became so “triumphantly a Universal Man” (263). In “Travel as Self-Discovery: Tagore’s *Letters from a Sojourner in Europe* and *Chinnapatra*,” Syed Manzoorul Islam analyses two of the poet’s early travel narratives to conclude acutely how such writing for the poet was always part of a “complex motion of self-discovery” that prepared him “for the world and the public roles he was to assume in the years to come” (126). As Islam observes, whether sojourning in England or settling down in his estate in Shilaidaha, East Bengal, Tagore kept developing imaginatively, among other reasons, because of his travels. The continuous growth of the poet’s mind is reflected vividly in his accounts of the journeys he undertook then. In his succinct but suggestive piece, “Rabindranath Tagore’s Passage to Java: Rediscovering Greater India,” Himadri Lahiri shows us Tagore connecting philosophically the world that he saw in his travels to Southeast Asian countries to the culture and civilisation of India. What Lahiri seems to be indicating in his essay is that when a mind like Tagore’s is reflecting on the sights and sounds he comes across in his excursions he does so from a perspective that is rooted in his homeland – home and the world are inevitably interwoven in the consciousness of this intrepid and endlessly interesting voyager.

Indeed, Somdatta Mandal’s diligence in putting together this volume to mark the way Indian travellers have attempted to bridge different parts of the world over time is testified repeatedly by the wide net she cast in collecting

these essays. Two sections of her book thus contain essays on Indians writing books on their excursions to lands in the east and west of the subcontinent as well as the United States. Simonti Sen's "Exploring the East: Indumadhab Mallik's 'Travel to China'" can be off-putting for lines such as "it was essentially about privileging the scopic drives underlain by notions of categorization and control" (143), but the reader who is not thrown off by such prose will be rewarded by this account of an untiring traveller's visit to Burma, the Malay Peninsula, Hong Kong, China and Japan in the early years of the twentieth century. Sen's essay traces Indumadhab's progress as he notes down what he saw everywhere from a psyche that had opted to be not only nationalist but also modern. Madhurima Mukhopadhyay's "Searching the 'Ideal' in Japan: Women, Education and Nation in Two Bengali Travel Narratives" follows two Bengalis voyaging in Japan, Sureshchandra Bandhyopadhyay and Sarojinalini Dutt. These writers had recorded in the early decades of the twentieth century, among other things, the status of women in the Japan they had travelled to, but always with an eye to the state of women's life in India. Unfortunately, Mukhopadhyay's conscientious analysis of the account left behind by these travellers is marred by sentences such as, "Education, women and Nation have been synthesized in the writings of both the writers" (177). Mala Pandurang's "Travel Writing as Humanist Intent: Vikram Seth's *From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet*," in contrast, is fluently written and her description of the way "autobiography, economics and art" (185) are interwoven by Seth in his narrative of his visit to a remote land will no doubt be of interest to the novelist's many fans.

Mandal did not neglect gathering accounts of voyages Indians made to the west in compiling her book on travel writing by intrepid travellers of the subcontinent. One of the more interesting essays she presents to readers is Daniel Majchrowicz's "Travelling for Reform: Shibli Nu'mani's Journey to Constantinople." This is an essay that offers a thoughtful as well as compelling account of a "paradigmatic example of travel writing," written in the genre of the *safarnama*, from the late nineteenth century written by a Muslim thinker who reports on what he saw in Constantinople, Egypt and Syria" (197), if only to remind readers of his faith in his own country of the necessity of "religious and social reform" (197).

Indeed, readers of this volume on travel writing are reminded again and again how thoughtful voyagers inevitably write self-consciously from their location even as they survey distant lands dutifully. The point is reinforced by the essay that follows the one by Majchrowicz, Shakil Rabbi's "The Resistance Traveller: Anti-Colonial Rhetoric and Hospitality in Syed Mujtaba Ali's *Desh Bideshe*." Rabbi's analysis of the Bengali work by Ali, a celebrated traveller and raconteur of Bengal, makes clear that he admires Ali for writing about his visit to Afghanistan from the perspective of a colonised subject who finds much to

admire in people who have repeatedly resisted successfully imperialist ventures to annex their land even at great costs to themselves. But while these analytical essays on westward voyages undertaken by the likes of Shibli Nu'mani and Mujtaba Ali are well-worth reading, Mandal should have thought twice before including the essay by Pradeep Trikha, "Traversing through the Relics of Mohenjo-Daro." This is because Trikha's interpretations of two recent excursions to this world heritage site by Om Thanvi, an Indian who writes in Hindi, and Alice Albinia, who once lived in Delhi, are rendered unsatisfactory by uncritical observations and poor writing. For instance, Trikha identifies the Bangladeshi singer Runa Laila as a "sufi" singer and comes up with lines such as "Albinia's account ensures nothing but discourse on feeling the spirit of the river that is revered not just in historical times but even today by the people living around it" (230).

But it would be unfair to expect all the twenty essays of a collection such as *Journey: Indian Travel Writing* to be uniformly interesting and it is best to conclude by thanking Somdatta Mandal for presenting to readers such a wide-ranging collection on Indian travel writing and for bringing to our notice the peregrinations of little-known Indian travellers as well as celebrated voyagers of the region. The essays she has brought together will definitely add to our growing knowledge and interest in the transnational imaginings of Indians encountering the world outside their homes in the last few centuries. Hopefully, her book will also be seen as a valuable addition to the growing critical literature on travel narratives worldwide as well as a noteworthy contribution to the history of Indians moving across their subcontinent as well as the globe, extending their perceptions of their homes vis-à-vis the world, and embracing modernity even as they become more and more conscious of forging an identity of their own.

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