

**Somdatta Mandal, ed. and trans. *Wanderlust: Travels of the Tagore Family*. Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2014. 401 pp. ISBN 978-81-7522-594-7.**

The book under review, *Wanderlust: Travels of the Tagore Family*, does a commendable work on two fronts: translation and travel writing – both important for academic and non-academic readers alike. Translation is a highly significant literary activity, the multiple facets of which include promoting intercultural understanding besides giving vent to creativity. While translation studies have picked up in recent years, travel literature still happens to be one of the lesser explored areas. In this sense, Somdatta Mandal's efforts compel attention for it focuses on one of the most significant travelogues of our times – the journeys undertaken by various members of the Tagore family. She has undertaken the laborious and massive job of searching original Bengali writings, translating them and re-arranging the material commendably well. Rabindranath Tagore was an inveterate traveller and a prolific travel writer in English and Bengali, and both are a known fact. However, to learn that the Tagore family, from Dwarkanath to Sumitendranath (including women of the family) undertook journeys and wrote of their experiences with childlike awe and wonder, and that too with simple, unassuming clarity, comes as a pleasant surprise.

Starting from Dwarkanath Tagore's two trips to Europe in 1842 and 1845 to Sumitendranath Tagore's travels to "Kasi-Allahabad-Lucknow" in 1940s, the travelogues cover roughly a period of one hundred years; and, significantly, of the nineteen entries included in this volume eight are by women of the family. Dwarkanath Tagore was the first male member to travel abroad, while his granddaughter, Soudamini Devi (1847-1920), the eldest daughter of Debendranath Tagore, was the first female member to travel and write about her experiences. Granted that these women mostly went on pilgrimages (except the few who went abroad with their husbands), but to be allowed to venture out of the house in the mid-nineteenth century speaks of the family's open-minded approach. The Tagore family – Rabindranath's grandfather, father, sons, daughters, nieces, nephews – were indeed, globe trotters, travelling across England and other European countries, the USA and of course a large part of India. We learn of the Punjab of that time, Kashmir, Solapur, Bombay (Maharashtra), the present day Himachal (Dalhousie) and the South and many more places.

The wide spectrum offered by these women and the richness of their images, contents and treatment reveal colourful perceptions. For example, Soudamini Devi's pilgrimages to Vizigapattam and Mathura-Vrindavan areas are unique in the sense that even ordinary matters acquire aura in her hands and

more so in the hands of the translator. Let us look at the beauty of the short, crisp sentences, “The place was Madhupur. It was autumn, clear white clouds after the rains, bright moonlight at night, the bed of shefali tree full of flowers, intoxicating smell of honey, one cannot stop appreciating the beauty of nature – during this time we were advised to go further west for a pilgrimage” (66). All the five senses are employed here in the Keatsian sense. In 1877, Jnananandini Devi went to Europe with her husband – the first woman in the Tagore family to cross the ocean. She describes the unforgettable experience of her first snow-fall in London when she ran out in a thin sari to collect snow-flakes; fell ill; was treated by Lord Lister, who later became the inventor of antiseptic. She also narrates some amusing encounters with the French language while in Paris. The lyrical prose of all these writers creates interesting patterns and is not an exclusive quality of women’s writing. Jyotirindranath, Abanindranath, Rabindranath all carry forward the legacy of painting word pictures and presenting a visual treat. Let us admit that Mandal’s translation does justice to the Bengali original.

Fairly diverse and colourful as these travelogues are, they have the power to evoke our emotions, each compelling us to admiration. Obviously, women travel writers offer the women’s point of view – the inner view of society that a male traveller may not notice. For example, Swarnakumari Devi is taken aback by the severe scolding a girl gets from her mother for her exuberant laughter (“Prayag Jatra” 114); Prajnasundari Devi describes the excitement of packing food items for the steamer journey from Kolkata to Kasi (“Jalapathey Kasi Jatra” 258); while Sushama Devi expresses her surprise on seeing kurta-pyjama clad women of Punjab which was a novelty for a sari-clad Bengali woman (“Srinagarer Pathe” 326). These are experiences typical to female gaze. But the male members compensate for it by giving us the descriptions of outdoor activities like tiger hunting (Jyotirindranath Tagore, “Hunting at Seildah” 85) which ends in a fiasco, or of business matters like running a steamer service from Barisal to Kolkata. It is here, in these realms of the fine art of writing that we often run into simple, straight-forward passages of beauty touching our aesthetic sensibilities.

Hiranmayee Devi, the granddaughter of Debendranath Tagore, looks at the Bandel Church with the acumen of an architect and at the richly decorated inside with the eyes of a poet. She narrates graphically the religious performances akin to idol worship offered to Mother Mary and also notes with wonder the Roman Catholic practice of confessions. The melodious church music brings back to her mind the Magh festival of the Brahma Samaj. “The song touched our hearts,” she writes, “and made us feel we were in some enchanted place” (192). She visited the church again one evening and writes candidly, “In that half-light, half-shade, the Mother was standing amidst the sky with the child in her arms. Down below the Ganges was flowing down at her

own pace and it seemed as if she was carrying the love in her heart for the whole world” (193). What more do we need to reiterate secular approach?

There are eleven male members whose travel writings have been included here, all written in first person narration except Dwarkanath Tagore’s entry which is in the third person and has been assembled by Somdatta Mandal from his memoirs and other sources since the original diary is untraceable. Though Dwarkanath’s two journeys to Europe were business trips, the document does not restrict itself to drab business matters but narrates a life that was as respected in London as it was at home in Bengal. Dwarkanath made a place for himself in the society of European countries he visited. Literary figures like Dickens and Thackeray were his friends; he socialised freely with men of letters and high political standing and became the centre of attraction for the Englishmen. Significantly, Queen Victoria was also fond of him; she mourned his death deeply and ordered a befitting burial for him.

Most of these travelogues – first published or serialised in Bengali magazines of their time, like *Tattwabodhini Patrika*, *Bharati* and *Punya* – are written in an unpretentious style, as if the child in each of these authors has awakened on seeing the vast panoramic world. In their eagerness to share their experiences and the sense of delight, we can mark their simplicity. What can be simpler and yet deeper than Debendranath Tagore’s description of his first day aboard a ship en route Moulemin, “I had never seen the blue colour of the sea water before. I kept on watching the beautiful sights by day and night amid the continuous bright blue waves and remained immersed in the glory of the eternal spirit” (29). On the other hand, Rabindranath’s travel pieces contained here have introspective quality, “I feel the separation between the ship and my own life,” he writes in “Crossing the Ocean” and goes on to brood on death, infinity, human courage and the trials and tribulations amid life’s beauty.

The selections in this book have humour, fun, poetic descriptions, history and philosophical observations; they speak of moral and spiritual strength, sympathy and pathos, sublimity and serenity, and of nostalgia and pining for home. For example, Soumendranath’s experience at a dance party at the University of Sorbonne has subdued humour while Rathindranath, the eldest son of Rabindranath, expresses his awe mixed reverence for the Kedarnath temple. The pieces also record embarrassing moments the writers may have faced by their actions or words and their reverberations and reactions back home. These include incidents like Dwarkanath Tagore’s words uttered at a party in London expressing his gratitude for the British rule which he regretted later and Sarala Devi’s unsavoury experience in Mysore that was criticized in the Calcutta press as being the natural consequence of a young woman from a wealthy family working so far away from home.

With an aptly worded “Preface” and neatly arranged excerpts, the book opens up a treasure before the readers. Each entry has a brief introductory note

about the travel-writer, illustrated with his/her photograph. But the quality of photographs and the sketches illustrating some of travelogues leaves much to be desired. Perhaps it would not be that difficult for the publisher to find some brighter and clearer pictures of the illustrious family. The translations show Somdatta Mandal's clarity of thought and her firm grasp on both the languages – Bengali and English. The book can be of great interest not only to Tagore scholars and readers but also to non-Bengali readers generally. Kudos to Prof Mandal for this valuable work; I speak specially for the non-Bengali readers who can now savour these precious writings.

By and large, the Visva-Bharati production is good but for the editing part which needs to be taken care of in its next edition (and I am sure the book will run into many editions). The typos are jarring and are not expected in such a work of enormous importance. For example, just one line on page 141 has two spelling errors: “observations” (for “observations”) and “ganged” (for “gauged”), and three mistakes of Capital letters. The cover design with a facsimile of an old travel-route map and the inset photograph of Rabindranath Tagore is evocative. However, the editor's name, overshadowed by the various inscriptions, needs to be prominently placed.

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