Mapping the Female Gaze:  
Women’s Travel Writing from Colonial Bengal  

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I  

The recent critical attention devoted to travel literature enacts a logical transition from the ongoing focus on autobiography, subjectivity, and multiculturalism. Travel extends the inward direction of autobiography to consider the journey outward. Whatever be the journey’s motive, it changes both the country visited and the self that travels.  

The last three decades of the nineteenth century and the first few of the twentieth witnessed an explosion of travel writing from Eastern India, particularly from Bengal. That Calcutta was the capital of British India till 1911 was, of course, one of its reasons. Situated almost seven thousand miles away from England, Bengal was the seat of British rule in the Indian subcontinent and curiosity about England, the land of India’s imperial rulers, was an all-time high in the late nineteenth century, especially after Queen Victoria’s Proclamation to her Indian subjects (1887) on assuming the title of ‘Empress of India’ and celebrating her Jubilee in a grand fashion. The spread of English education for the middle class during this time also played a significant role in developing such narratives. It is through learning English that the enlightened Bengali on the new age learnt to see modern Europe. The dissemination of Anglophone education, augmented by Macaulay’s minutes of 1835 enhanced the interaction with the west. Many young men during this period travelled to England for secular reasons, particularly for professional advancement and employment. Also for many of the colonial tourists of the time, journeying into England was nothing new. England was not an alien place because they already knew about it through literature and from people who already visited the place but never wrote official travelogues. After the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, sea voyages to Europe and to England in particular, (often referred to by a general term ‘Vilayet’ in most of the writings) gained greater impetus and were recorded in a variety of literary forms ranging from diaries, religious tracts, personal memoirs, plain literary texts and even poetry.  

Though travel has been primarily a masculine enterprise, women were not excluded. They also travelled, migrated, moved, often for the same reasons as men – their husbands or fathers or sons. The kind of experiences they related to and the metaphysical roads they travelled were quite different. Their writing was not seen as a metaphor for quest or as an act of empowerment, instead their writings were seen as narratives of their journeys and representation of their personal experiences. Different critics have different reasons to offer for such a situation. In his introduction to _Routes_, James Clifford asks:  

_Does a focus on travel inevitably privilege male experiences? What counts as “travel,” for men and women, in different settings? Pilgrimage? Family visiting?...How, in such instances, does (women’s) “dwelling” articulate, politically and culturally, with (men’s) “traveling?”_ (6)
As James’s questions make it clear, the trope of travel narration begins with the basic gender difference and it assumes that men and women react differently once they venture outside their homes. Thus their travel writings cross boundaries of genre and purpose. For the dearth of women’s narratives Susan Bassnett believes that “the essence of adventure lies in taking risks and exploring the unknown, so it is hardly surprising to find that early travel accounts tended for the most part to be written by men, who moved freely in the public sphere” (225). Again, according to Inderpal Grewal, the discourse of travel as it is utilized by Indian men and women, containing as it does the ontological and epistemological questions of “comparisons” between “East” and “West” provides an excellent opportunity to understand colonial modernity in nineteenth century India not as “a universalized discourse but as a gendered one” (15).

This paper focuses on women’s travel writing from colonial Bengal resulting in the co-existence of conservatism and emancipation in the social history of the region. Though historically women have been more associated with fixity, with home rather than the road, the spread of English education for the middle class during this period also played a significant role in developing such narratives. It is through learning English that the enlightened Bengali of the new age learnt to see modern Europe. Also the emancipation of women, inculcated to a great extent by the progressive Brahmo Samaj movement, made the weaker sex venture into Victorian homes. For many of these women, England and travel to England meant visiting the land of freedom, and the journey gave access to this freedom. Though Hindu women did not observe the purdah as did the Muslim women, they till then had remained largely invisible, confined within their homes and away from the public gaze. Their rightful place was within a domestic sphere performing assorted household duties related specifically to caring of family members including the primary tasks of child-bearing and child-rearing. It was quite uncommon for a middle-class Indian woman to set aside her veil and expose herself to the outside world or participate in activities and debates in a public domain. Though the very act of travel by a Bengali woman bore the signature of modernity, very few of these travels were recorded by women.

The reason for such dearth of Indian women’s travel narratives is not far to seek. In an age when relatively few people travelled at all, the idea of a woman traveller was something of a novelty. Also their opportunities for travel were vastly different and they utilized travel in specific ways according to their class and caste status. Upper-class Indian women did travel abroad in the company of their families, sometimes accompanying their husbands, though very rarely alone. This gave them a sense of security and dignity that would otherwise probably be denied to them. Of the early women who crossed the ‘kalapani’ were the two Dutt sisters, Aru and Toru who travelled with their father Govin Chunder Dutt from 1869 to 1873. They went not only to see Europe but also to be educated there. Belonging to a westernized and wealthy Christian family of Calcutta, Toru left for England when she was hardly fourteen years old. Indira Debi Chowdhurani in her Puratani gives us some information about Jnanadanandini Debi’s experiences in England in 1879. Married at the age of eight to Satyendranath Tagore, the first Indian civil servant and the second son of Maharshi Debendranath Tagore, she travelled within India with her husband who even encouraged her to travel unaccompanied to England with her children. In
spite of the severe social disapproval that her husband received at the hands of fellow Hindus, Rajkumari Bandopadhyay had successfully travelled to Europe during this period. After becoming the first lady doctors in Calcutta, both Kadambini Ganguly and Jamini Sen went to England for further studies in 1893 and 1897 respectively. Sunity Devee, the Maharani of Coochbehar visited England for the first time in 1887 and she authored “My First Visit to England” and recorded several of her later visits in her book The Autobiography of an Indian Princess (1921).

The journey of women from colonial Bengal to Europe in general and England in particular, continued unabated at the turn of the century too. The experiences of Sailabala Das, Jagatmohini Choudhury, Hariprabha Takeda, and Tapati Mookerji can then be added to full length travelogues of Durgabati Ghose and Chitrata Devi that were published much later. All of them produced personal documents and organized their texts and mapped the self according to the journey, geographic movement providing the root metaphor by which they made sense of their lives. Though clubbed under women’s travel, each of these women travelled away from their homes under different agenda and so their narratives differed in length, style and content. But what most of these women shared were a westernized education, some knowledge of English, and a family background that was more or less affluent and cosmopolitan. According to Inderpal Grewal, their travel also subverted colonial power by empowering Indian women in many ways -- “Such empowerment violated the object status and the silence that colonial rule and local patriarchies had imposed on Indian women” (160). While very few women wrote professionally for publication, most of them recorded their experiences primarily for themselves or family, publication being only an incidental concern. But it gave them a voice, an agency.

II

The Voyage and the Traveller

Since travel writing can accommodate many shapes, each individual narration of the above-mentioned women varied according to the nature of the person travelling. The basic question of course centers on why they were travelling in the first place. Though we find mention of their travels in letters, memoirs, and autobiographies, many women travellers did not have full-fledged travel books or narratives to support their voyages. In this sense Krishnabhabini Das’s 1882 travel to England, which resulted in a full-length travelogue called England e-Bongomohila, [A Bengali Lady in England], published in Kolkata in 1885 can be called a path-breaker of this genre. A literate, middle-class housewife, Krishnabhabini accompanied her husband Devendra N. Das to England much against the wishes of her conservative parents-in-law, and made London her home for almost eight years. Her book was published in Calcutta by her publisher Satyaprasad Sarbadhikari in August, 1885. The hand-written manuscript was sent to him and he apologizes for errors that may have crept in because the author was still at residence in England and could not correct the proof copies herself. Interestingly, the author’s name did not appear in the publication and it was just called ‘By a Bengali Lady.’ During his stay there, Devendra N. Das also
indulged in writing and wrote regular articles in several contemporary British magazines at the behest of his friends who wanted him to illumine the English reading public on different aspects of Indian life. These articles were collected and published in 1887 as *Sketches of Hindoo Life*. So where her husband, with his Orientalist agenda, was trying to educate his fellow Britishers with the myths, religion and lifestyle of the Indians back in India, his wife was trying to educate the fellow Indians about different aspects of British life – the English race and their nature, the English lady, English marriage and domestic life, education and the system, religion and celebration, British labour, trade, income, working class etc. This self-ordained mission of educating the people back home with the ground realities in England is what makes Krishnabhabini’s narrative unique. Ethnographic in its truest sense, she concludes her text with the following line:

> Even if one person in inspired by new ideas after reading this book, if he becomes aware of his own homeland and the foreign land, then I shall consider all this labour of mine to be successful (154).^8^

The only travelogue that reverses the direction of the journey from the ‘west’ to the ‘east’ but has characteristics similar to the other travel narratives mentioned here is Hariprabha Takeda’s *Bongomohilar Japanyatra* [A Bengali Lady’s Trip to Japan]. Hariprabha Mullick was a Bengali woman of Brahmo lineage who was married in 1906 to a Japanese businessman Uemon Takeda residing in Dhaka, East Bengal. Having left Japan, Takeda lost all contact with his family members. However, after six years of marriage and after setting up his own soap factory in Dhaka, he felt confident enough to venture a visit to his motherland. In 1912, both of them visited Japan by ship to fulfill Hariprabha’s long-cherished dream of meeting her in-laws, of seeing her real ‘home.’ Subsequently she wrote her travelogue in Bengali in 1915 about her four month’s sojourn in Japan. Like any middle-class housewife, her narration is filled with minute domestic details – she describes the everyday life of the family, the status of women, their attire, their cuisine, hair-do, the interior of the house, marriage and related customs. Her descriptions of various facets of Japanese life are interspersed with moving anecdotes of her interactions with her husband’s family and community, and especially her mother-in-law. As Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay rightly points out:

> …spatialization of time in Hariprabha’s narrative is foregrounded in the Bengali ‘women’s time’ revolving around *sangsar*. Home and travel are thus experienced as occurring under the same temporal regime of Bengali *sangsar*, in stark contrast with our colonial tourists for whom travel to the West involved a voyage through a temporalized space separating the ‘backward’ East from the ‘progressive’ West (311).

The travelogue published by Srimati Durgabati Ghose in 1936 is called *Paschimyatriki* [The Westward Traveller] and it refers to her travel to Europe and England undertaken along with her husband in 1932. Unlike Krishnabhabini, Durgabati Ghose came from a much wealthier background. As the daughter of the famous psychologist Girindra Sekhar Basu, and niece of Rajsekhar Basu
(Parashuram), her four-month long sojourn was a much more leisurely affair with Thomas Cook & Company arranging the itinerary for them. Interestingly enough, like Krishnabhabini’s narrative written half a century earlier, Durgabati does not mention the name of her husband even once throughout her work, not the actual reason for her travel. Written on the verge of India gaining her independence in 1947, is Chitrita Devi’s *Onek Sagar Periye* [Crossing Many Seas] which was published ten years later in 1957. Visiting England in the first ship that allowed civilians to travel after the restrictions imposed during the war, her narrative juxtaposes the serious and the mundane. While narrating several historical events, she also tells us how domestic concerns made her carry plenty of English tinned food from India to England fearing that war shortages might leave her family hungry.

The common link between these narratives is that all the four travellers were ordinary middle-class housewives who travelled as appendages to their husbands. Also, it is a dramatic tension between two disparate cultures that lies at the core of their narratives. Except for Takeda, the writers’ sense of wonder at encountering the ruling European race in their own country is tempered by maintaining a rational distance, one that was naturally fostered by conservative social upbringing, cultural difference and feelings of alienation and nationalistic pride. This was the typical example of the ‘third world’ woman who could never escape her culture.

When we read Sunity Devéé’s narrative, we notice a significant change in tone. Married to Nripendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur, Maharajah of Coochbehar, her visit to England was in the literal sense a royal affair. In the year 1887, Queen Victoria celebrated her Jubilee and as one of the loyal subjects to the Imperial crown, the Maharajah decided to visit England along with his wife. This is how she narrates the incident:

> India was anxious to show her loyalty to the Sovereign whose high ideals and humanity have endeared her to all her people. Many of our princes therefore decided to render their homage in person. My husband made his plans for this eventful year long beforehand, but he cleverly kept all of us in the dark as to his intention that I should accompany him to England. It must be remembered that the conditions of life among Indian ladies were very different in 1887 from what they are today….I think I am right in saying that I was the first Maharani to do such a thing, and I may as well confess that I dreaded the experience. I knew absolutely nothing about the journey (103).

In spite of her apprehension, she begins her journey by ship from Bombay along with her husband, her three children, her two brothers, Indian servants, two ADCs, her English private secretary and his family. In the ship she shares the same depression of leaving homeland with the other ordinary female travellers, feels miserable eating meat and also enjoys the infinite beauty of the ocean. Once in England, the demure Indian lady gets to meet not only the Queen-Empress herself, (“I was handed a message from Queen Victoria that she wished to see me at Court in my national dress”(105) )but lives and moves around in the true aristocratic style. The list of royal people she meets is mind-boggling. She learns to dress up in fancy gowns chosen by her husband, go to dances, balls, theatres, concerts, races, interacts with European royalty and almost “fancies (herself) as a fairy princess”(121). At the same time there
are several references to her uneasiness and awkward feelings in the presence of royalty. She is amazed at the motherly and domestic instincts of several royal women. On her homeward voyage, Sunity feels more mature – “I was different from the rather timid little person who had set out…”(135) and narrates in detail the “Varan (welcome) ceremony” back home with wonderful meals and congratulations continuously pouring in; “I don’t think any Indian woman ever had or ever will have such a welcome as I had that first time I returned from England. It is a glorious memory to have” (136-7). After this trip the Maharani visited England several times but none of those visits were as vividly described or as wonderful as her first trip. This was because most of the later trips were connected with disease, sickness and even death in the family.

A striking note of difference from these travel narratives is found in Sailabala Das’s “Bilat Prabas,” a record of her travel to England in 1906. For someone who was unmarried, for whom visiting England and studying there for two years was primarily “to find out about the education systems of advanced countries”(47) and subsequently disseminate that knowledge to spread women’s education back in Orissa, the tenor of her opening declaration is interesting:

My father Mr. Madhusudan Das, CIE, went to England in 1897. I could not accompany him on his journey because I was waiting for the results of my F.A. examination and also because I was not clear why I should undertake a trip to England. But since then, a strong desire to go to England arose in me. On occasions, when friends mentioned Indian women who had visited England, or when I read about them in newspapers, this desire grew stronger. I thought to myself that if God would ever grant me an opportunity, I would fulfill my desire to see for myself this prosperous country which had achieved worldwide fame, whose citizens had dazzled the world with impressive feats and whose manners were so keen to emulate. This was the country that ruled our motherland (47).

Subsequently when her father was “very enthusiastic about the idea and generously promised to bear all the expenses of [her] education in England,”(47) she contacted Mr. Earl, the Director of Education in Calcutta to give her the necessary permission. When the sahib asked her what she proposed to do after her return from England, she had replied, “My aim is to use my knowledge of methods of teaching for the education of the women in my country”(48). This according to her was to achieve in a small way her father’s “noble objective” of life.

III

Cartography and the Narrator

In all the travel narratives under discussion, the ‘I’-narrator occupies a dominant position because subjectivity is part of the inherent nature of the genre. Just as one is struck by the multifarious nature of the travellers, one is also struck by the similarity of travel descriptions. The first section describing the sea voyage is often monotonously repeated in each narrative. This was because, the sea voyages that took these travellers followed more or less the same routes – from Bombay they went
via Aden, Port Said, the Red Sa, Suez Canal, and if they did not go around Gibraltar and southern Europe across the Mediterranean Sea, disembarked in some port in Italy or Marseilles in France. Then they took the train through Switzerland or Austria or France to reach Calais. A steamer across the English Channel would land them at Dover or any other English port. Thus different versions of sunsets and sunrises over the ocean, of sea sickness, of merrymaking, singing and dancing by the Englishmen on board the ships, the monotony of travel and the observation of different co-passengers become a recurrent theme for all these narratives. For example, in her account of first seeing the Red Sea, Krishnabhabini wrote, “On waking up next morning I saw that we were in the Red Sea. I assumed it would be red in colour but like the Indian Ocean, it was also blue.” Exactly twenty five years later Sailabala Das almost repeats verbatim her idea about the Red Sea. She too thought that the sea would be red in colour. Again, like Krishnabhabini she is wonderstruck by the flying fish, the narrowness of the Suez Canal etc. Almost all the women also wrote a lot about the natural beauty of the sea and the infinite sky, the food, the constitution of the ship, etc. These formed part of the rites of passage.

Another similarity is also found in the different versions of homesickness that are narrated in these travelogues. For instance, just before the ship was about to leave from Bombay, Krishnabhabini started feeling nostalgic about her homeland, not knowing whether she would ever return to India or not. She became emotionally overwhelmed and wrote:

FAREWELL

My favourite land! The jewelled land!
Leaving you for a long time.
Do not worry, mother! This unfortunate daughter
Is useless for you.
...
For many years there is in my heart
A secret desire of hope
To see beloved freedom
To go to the land where it lives.

Sunity Devee speaks of her emotions thus:

I cannot describe my feelings when I realized that I had actually left India, had passed another milestone on life’s road… I often had fits of depression and sometimes left the dinner table to relieve my feelings with a good cry (104).

Even the matter of fact and practical Sailabala Das did not find her departure easy. She mentions how she “felt terribly depressed” on the day as she “had to stay away from our country, our dear ones for two long years and live in an alien land”(49). She felt miserable:

Like a tornado, many thoughts tossed in my mind and I lost all self-control.
Hope, despair, joy, sadness, apprehension and love assailed the heart (51).
Durgabati Ghose seemed less homesick than her sister narrators, yet she too wasn’t very happy:

Everyone was bidding farewell to others. Most of the women had tears in their eyes. To be frank enough, my mood was also not very upbeat and so I sat on one side with a sour face.

Even within this similarity, one found exceptions varying on the perceptions on the nature of the particular person travelling. Thus while the middle-class housewife Krishnabhabini Das takes pain in explaining the terms stewart, deck, saloon, cabin etc., Chitrita states in her Preface “the fun of carrying a lot of provisions fearing that the war might ration those items – really like carrying stuff that are exported and usually beyond the reach of the locals.”

In most of the travel narratives from Bengal we get the description of voyages out and voyages in, where the beginning and destination points of journeys are physical places. These middle class travellers developed an aesthetic appreciation for the landscape and spoke of the places they visited in such a manner that the reader would be able to savor the exotic but unaffordable horizons of the west through accurate details. Thus most of the travelogues are full of touristy kind of information – actual names of places within the cities, the streets, the museums, the transport system, the ports, the hotels, the parks, actual train rides etc. Driven by the pure pleasure of seeing, they maintained an aesthetic interest-- emphasizing on a sense of place, space and landscape. For the layman, names of certain places of tourist interest feature more -- the Tower of London, the Westminster Abbey, the Thames River, or the Victoria Station. The narrators enjoy the novelty of new places and sights, natural wonders and man-made monuments, but their questing minds constantly search for something to learn. They are therefore more interested in human encounters and the difference that exists between races and peoples, their attitudes and their temperaments – especially in human cultural environments.

Though travel writing can accommodate many shapes and are multiple in form, it usually fluctuates between the poles of subjective experience and objectivity. Focusing on an accurate description of the ‘real world’, almost all of them are concerned with verisimilitude. Moreover, often written for a non-academic readership, most of these narratives are devoid of theoretical jargon and would spur on a desire to explore ‘Vilayet’ in greater depth. For example, Krishnabhabini’s first glimpse of London was excitingly impressive and she defines the physical dimensions of the city by making comparative assessments with Calcutta:

London is a huge city; no other country in the world has such a big metropolis. It is almost ten miles long and four miles broad. London occupies four times the space of Calcutta and its population is eight times that of Calcutta. About forty lakh people live here. If one tours London in a carriage for five or six days at a stretch, one would still not have had enough of sight-seeing; it is difficult, however, to find one’s way around. (39)

Subsequent comments make it apparent that the expansion of London was closely linked to several factors: the commercial success of a maritime nation, the
concentration of wealth in the hands of the middle-class, the rapid urbanization of Britain and the population shift from the country to the city:

On first acquaintance [with London] one may call it a ‘city of shops’, one may call it a ‘city of theatres’ or, one may call it a ‘city of riches’, but if one lives here for a while, one is at a loss to decide how to designate London, so I am not able to define it … Surely living in London is not a happy experience if one cannot afford large amounts of money. It is indeed a storehouse of riches and London is a city meant of the rich and life here can be enjoyed by the wealthy (39-40).

IV
Nuggets of History

In spite of their apparently monotonous description of minute personal details, these travel narratives often give us interesting insights of historical events and historical characters. Though most often told from personal perspectives, real people and real facts offer a lot of fodder for subaltern studies historians. For Chitrita Devi, the historical moment of her travel adds new insights. In the Preface to her book she states:

It was 1947. The middle of April -- the war had just ended. But throughout the world the footsteps of soldiers had not stopped. The earth was still shivering under their prowess. The shadow of the war still haunted the lives of ordinary people… It was at this time that a long cherished daydream of India was turning into reality.

When Chitrita started her voyage, the ships were just deserting their weapons and giving place to some ordinary passengers. With 1500 soldiers and 300 ordinary passengers the ship crossed four oceans and reached England in fifteen days. Though Chitrita’s narrative is filled with details of ordinary touristy information, of sights, sounds and smell of England, she was witness to a remarkable moment in history. She remembers listening to Lord Atlee’s speech at the House of Commons and becoming a witness to the independence of her motherland.

I still remember that memorable day. It is written in the pages of history. Lord Atlee read the white paper on India – the promise of granting freedom to India. Listening to him, my mind was perturbed. It was nice to hear it, but not entirely so. Somewhere a snag seemed to remain. So at last our country was really free! Something that was just imagination a year ago appeared in reality – but what kind of coming was this? What a diluted taste it had, a kind of bredown appearance. It seemed that after leaving all her dress and finery behind, independence appeared dressed in ordinary garb and with a bowed forehead. It seemed as if someone just dropped a divided nation in our worshipping beggar’s palms. Why couldn’t we jump up and pluck the fruit ourselves? Why did we have to buy our own wealth from the black market?

Churchill stood up to support his opponent – probably for the first time in his life—and said, “This was our own plan. We have been planning this for a
long time as to when and how we can give India her freedom. That the opposition party has accepted our scheme makes us happy. (8)

This same House of Commons had evoked a different kind of reaction from Keshub Chunder Sen, who in 1886 had been appalled by the total exclusion of ladies from the visitor’s gallery:

They have a separate place for them on the opposite side which is hidden from the public view by a wooden partition with small openings in it, and which is thus a parliamentary zenanah!! Why this meaningless exclusion in the land of female liberty? (63)

Sometime historical characters feature in these narratives in very casual ways. In *Paschimjatriki*, Durgabati Ghose tells us that while leaving Calcutta, her father, Girindra Sekhar Basu, a renowned psychologist, had written an introductory letter to a friend of his in Vienna who also happened to be a famous psychologist. When she hunted out the professor and went to meet him, she was in for a shock. Reading about him in newspapers and journals, she had imagined that the world-famous Sigmund Freud would be someone very impressive in appearance. But instead, he was an old, simple and ordinary looking man who held a burning cigar in his hand and whose teeth were all framed in gold. He was very pleased to meet his friend’s daughter. Ghose then narrates a funny incident. When she becomes scared of his two dogs, Professor Freud asks her to get psychoanalyzed. She wryly comments whether Freud’s love for dogs also signified something special and whether he too needed some psychoanalysis.

Perhaps the best representation of history and real life historical characters is found in the narration of Sunity Devee. As mentioned earlier, her visit to England in 1887 to attend the Jubilee of Queen Victoria made her interact with all the high and mighty people of Europe at that time. Her narrative is so full of names—Her Majesty Queen Victoria, HRH the Princess of Wales, now Queen Alexandra, HRH the late Duchess of Tech, the present Queen, the Princess May, Sir Ashley Eden, Lady Salisbury, Prince of Wales, King George of Greece, the King of Denmark, Grand Duke of Hesse, Duchess of Connaught, Emperor Frederick of Germany, Prince William, Princess Beatrice, Prince Henry of Battenberg, Lord Dufferin— that one sometimes feels lost in regalia. It is interesting to note that Sunity was not dropping these names at random but had personal interactions with them.

V

**Juxtaposing Binaries**

For most travel narratives the lines between the autobiographical, the anecdotal and the ethnographic gets blurred. The search for self-expression and the reformulation of identity are common elements in the work of many of these women travellers. Whenever they came into the “contact zones” they started narrating things in binaries. By appropriating aspects of European travel discourse, particularly the set of oppositions between Self and Other, east and west, home and abroad, we and they,
most travel narratives by Indian women also emphasized the binary of tradition and modernity. This last binary became a central trope of modern formations along with the production of the ‘free’ modern woman. A dominant narrative is the contrast between the Indian women shown as victims of static tradition and culture and the modernity of European women within a European culture marked by mobility and speed. Fluctuating between the poles of subjective experience and objectivity, most of the women narrators took recourse to comparative analyses, and interestingly enough, usually upheld the values and norms of her home society. On many occasions, Calcutta, the city that was familiar to them, would be used for literally sizing up the ‘other’. Examples of intercultural encounter and making value judgments can be multiplied. Take the writings of Chitrita Devi for instance. “At this moment I feel that we reside in two opposite poles – totally different kinds of blood are running in our veins,”(48) she mentions at one place. She then states:

It is strange how the East and the West have accepted two opposite ideas in their social customs. In the East the responsibility of being sober, polite and serving others fall entirely upon the womenfolk, and the right to be strict, rude, to threaten and to accept being served is reserved by the man. As a result no one in our country is used to thinking about the pleasures and comforts of women. It is totally the opposite in the West (64).

On another occasion, sitting at a scenic spot on a Swiss hilltop she realizes that –

The lifestyle values of the East and the West are diametrically opposite. In India all the good places on the top of the mountain or near the river are used for building temples, but in Europe, they build hotels and cafés. The Europeans believe in bodily comfort through which to reach the mind. The aim of the Indian is to deny bodily pleasures but fill the mind with happiness (100).

Sometimes the human interactions and value judgments also lead to the breaking up of utopian notions of the West. The difference between the ideal and the real disturbs the narrator. “In my humble writings on England I have focused more on her people than on the country herself – this is because the country is not a clod of earth – the earth and man unite to make it so…. (12) says Chitrita Devi. Later, on her return journey she stopped at Vienna and attended the P.E.N. Congress where she found surprisingly that the Indian and the Pakistani delegates would constantly move together. Also, “whereas the ordinary delegates expressed a strange attitude of respect mixed with curiosity in their urge for knowing India better, the highbrow English and American writers covered up their ignorance and disrespect towards India beneath a thin layer of polished politeness”(128).

Sunity Devee wished to make Europeans realize “how proud India is of her women, and how well they have merited our pride.” She admits that many Indian customs are “full of colour and life, but few people of the West realize their inner and more sacred meanings”(33). Contradicting the progressive nature of English women she believed that many Englishwomen had no idea of the love that existed “between Indian wives and their husbands” and even goes on to state that Indian girls of
thirteen years of age are “more advanced than her Western sisters” (42). On a different instance, she judges English royal women on the basis of her Indian motherly instincts:

I was once invited by the late Duchess of Connaught to lunch with H.R.H. at Windsor Castle. It was indeed a great honour, as the Duchess did not ask anyone but me. I was touched to find a King’s daughter, a Queen’s daughter-in-law, living like a very ordinary mother in her own home. I would have given much for my country-women to have seen the Duchess that day, with her little children (118).

Durgabati Ghose was enamored of the ways in which the British police performed their duties, the systematic movement of the London underground. While traveling in the streets she realized that compared to men, women travelers were much more in number. She even noticed the beggars on the streets, the poor children begging for pennies near the Thames underground, but one English lady’s behaviour shattered all her utopia about Vilayet:

One day I was travelling by bus. An English lady was sitting next to me with her small child. While playing, the small boy had dirtied his face. The educated mother instantly brought out her handkerchief, spit on it and cleaned her son’s face…..Besides this I have seen English gentlemen using their spit to fix stamps on envelopes, to remove stains from overcoats, to seal envelopes etc. These same people take pride in calling themselves civilized and educated. Even the sweepers of our country, who are constantly cleaning dirt, would not feel like cleaning their children’s face with spit. (73)

For Krishnabhabini, the novelty of the city of London soon started to wear out and the initial euphoria about the place melted down. With the typical instinct of a woman, she could feel the pulse of the deprived and the marginalized and her penetrative gaze saw well beyond the façade of a materially vibrant domestic economy. She toured the different sectors of London during her long stay in England and was struck by sharp contrasts and a rigid social hierarchy. To her it must have seemed almost like the caste-ridden society back home:

The wealthy live in the west and south-west sectors of London. It is almost impossible to find lodgings here. Besides if one were to find one, it is generally too expensive….In this sector the streets are broader and cleaner than those in other sectors and there is a larger concentration of shops with expensive items on display. In fact, the place is so full of rich persons and costly things that it does not seem that even a single poor person lives in London. The Queen’s palace and that of the Prince of Wales, Parliament House, Government offices and several other impressive buildings are all located in this quarter (40-41).

Her image of London undergoes a radical change when she visits the Eastern fringes of the city known as East End. What she sees there is a picture of contrasts, a depressing scene of dirt and urban squalor, sub-human living conditions that were the darker side of industrialization. This was a stark and realistic picture of cramped and
unhealthy living quarters, narrow lanes and alleyways, shops selling substandard consumer items. No gentlemen walked these dirty streets where workers and labourers lived their lives. She also mentions that it was dangerous for foreigners to venture into these areas because not only were the people physically dank, dark and dirty, but were also morally degraded. This was the London that harboured an underworld of crime, violence, and drunkenness. Thus in the case of all the three narrators we see that after the initial sense of wonder, reality sinks in and often shatters the utopian vision and hope with which they had begun their journey.

For Sailabala Das, the juxtaposition of the ‘English in India and the English at Home’ is unique when writes:

> From my father and my friends I had learnt that the English who lived in England and the English one came across in India belonged to two different races. In other words, anyone who has socialized with the English at home would find that the English in India had little in common with them. Since I mention two races of the English, I must differentiate between them. …However, writing about the English in England is necessary, for domestic women and others do not know anything about them (61-62).

She even differentiates between the servants in England and in India -- “Servants in England are more wretched than beggars in our country for the latter have at least a hutment where they can shelter themselves. Servants in England have nowhere to stay except in the house of the employer” (62).

VI

The Female Gaze

In her essay “Travel Writing and Gender” Susan Bassnett explains why women travellers are categorized as doubly different. “They differ from other, more orthodox socially conformist women, and from male travelers who use the journey as a means of discovering more about their own masculinity”(226). So, were these women exceptional? Did they perform feats that no normal woman could be capable of carrying out? In his essay, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Woman Question,” Partha Chatterjee argues that the male nationalists ‘resolved’ the issue of the ‘woman question’ by placing women in the space of home/spirituality in opposition to the male and material world of the marketplace”(147). Thus, being brought up in the feminized space of domesticity, women travellers assumably had a different gaze than their male counterparts. Unlike their menfolk, middle class Bengali women, living in an era that still primarily assigned them the role of the angel of the house, had to defend their travels. Almost all the women who travelled from Bengal went along with their husbands, a majority of whom went to England for higher education. They were primarily housewives and therefore their social background, gender expectations usually expressed the impressions of one culture viewing another. Thus we get issues of gender, race, professionalism, symbolic content, gendering of the text (the feminization or masculinization of the landscape or peoples in it), the personal agendas of the authors, the context and relevance of the work to the larger picture of
imperialism or colonialism, and what women did or did not achieve through their work. 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.

For Krishnabhabini the situation was unique because as a young bride married at the age of ten, she had to rear two children on her own in her husband’s absence, while he was busy studying law in England. On the death of one of their children, Debendranath returned to Kolkata but was ostracized by his father, a very common phenomenon of middle class Hindu rituals during that era. When Debendranath decided to take his wife along with him back to England, they had to leave behind their daughter Tilottama under the custody of her grandfather, who got the girl married off at the age of ten. From this point onwards the mother and the daughter spent their entire lives on different ideologies and different paths. For Krishnabhabini, the terms ‘travel’ and ‘independence’, leaving the ‘home’ and leaving the ‘purdah’ become synonymous when she begins her narration:

On the 26th of September, Tuesday, at eight thirty in the evening, I came along with my husband to Howrah Station to travel to England via Bombay. Today was the first time I opened my veil and entered the train.

This ‘opening of the veil’, directly related to the discourse of freedom as mobility, enables her to construct her own sense of Self. Once settled in London, different thoughts occur in her mind and she states:

It is a few months since I have come to England. I have started eating and dressing like the English; maybe if some native people saw me he would make fun of me as a ‘pucca memsahib’ – let him do so, it will not affect me.

When Hariprabha comes to Calcutta on her way to board the ship for Japan, she is quite happy basking in the role of a dutiful Bengali wife, in spite of her Brahmo literate self. When she goes shopping for warm clothes, she writes, “For the first time in my life, I physically went to the marketplace like a memsahib” (5). Years later, the Bengali feminine view was put to test once again. On the deck of the ship in which she was travelling, Chitrita Devi sees several English ladies sunbathing in bikinis:

They relax on the deck, play flash, drink at the bar – all these sometimes caused a repulsion in me. I feel why am I travelling to this uncivilized world. What is the difference between them and the inhabitants of Zulu island?” (24)

A much more polished way of narration is found in the writings of Durgabati Ghose. Moving around in a royal style all across Europe with Thomas Cook Company arranging her itinerary, Ghose’s experiences are quite different from those of her other fellow Bengali women travellers. But like the typical Bengali woman, she makes several minute observations that are missing from men’s travelogues. On a
visit to the Regent Park Zoo, she notices that lettuce and salt were also given to the lions and tigers along with their raw meat. “Like the sahibs, probably the tigers were used to having salads for their meals,” she wryly comments. On another instance, her keen sense of observation is noticed when she tells us about two huge signboards on the streets of London. One showed the head of a cow, below which was written—“Home-killed – Come and buy a few pieces.”(67) Among the plenty of advertisements of Indian curry powder, one was really funny. It showed a native Oriya cook squatting on the floor and grinding Indian spices on the stone. So when did cultural stereotyping begin? Even a serious traveller like Sailabala Das cannot escape the observation of minute and irrelevant details. She tells us how the English ate a lot more than the Indians – “The English were highly favoured by the goddess for appetite. Those who get to see the quantity of food that the English consumed will find what I say incredible” (56). She even observed how “no matter where they find themselves – at home, abroad or on board – they[the English] must change into something before they have a meal”(57). Sunity Devee is “greatly interested” in what she saw at Buckingham Palace, but also “shocked at the low-cut gowns worn by the ladies present”(109).

From such random examples it therefore becomes clear that the genre of women’s travel writing tended to contain slightly different features, such as apologies for what women travellers claimed to be the amateurish nature of their work and justification for why they travelled at all. While women travellers tended, like men, to uphold the values of empire, they also sought to enjoy the escape from life at home. But what they narrated was usually related to detailed descriptions of customs, religious practices, habitat and dress codes they encountered in their travels. In other words, they could afford to be more ‘ordinary.’ Their experiences in Europe and England in particular illustrate how “Englishness” was made and remade in relation to imperialism. Their accounts offer revealing glimpses of what it was like to be a colonial subject in fin-de-siecle Britain. Their narratives shatter the myth of Britain’s insularity from its own construction of empire and show that it was instead a terrain open to continual contest and reconfiguration. Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay emphasizes another significant dialectics of how the traveller’s gaze was configured:

If we follow our traveler’s anxiety-ridden gaze, we see that they did not look at all aspects of the West in the same way. When they looked at the political institutions, technology, work-culture, etc., that is to say the so-called ‘outside,’ they were, in general, immensely appreciative and eager to learn. But as soon as their gaze turned to the ‘inside,’ to various forms of interiority – home, intimacy, women, courtship, marriage, child-rearing, and so on, they became critical observers weighing and analyzing carefully. This was a necessary consequence of the inside/outside divide (302-3).

An interesting aspect of the female gaze is also seen when the narrators often wrote about the reverse trend. Thus instead of being observers they themselves turned into the observed. Far from being “seeing subjects,” they often felt that they were turned into mobile exhibits. They often complained about intrusive states, patronizing gestures, and occasionally even abuses. For example, Durgabati Ghose narrates how
in Italy she was a butt of ridicule and lewd behaviour from other women in the streets. Even before visiting England for the first time, Sunity Devee was scared of the gaze when she wrote, “I was going to be a stranger in a strange land, and I was sensitive enough to dread being stared at, for I well knew that this must be my fate in London” (103). Once there, she narrates what happened on the morning of the Jubilee celebrations when they were driving towards Westminster Abbey and she became looked upon as the ‘Other’:

As we drove to the Abbey I was struck with the perfect behaviour of the crowd. It was a hot, dusty drive, and I was glad of the shade of my parasol. Suddenly a shout arose. “Put down that sunshade, please, and let’s have a look at you.”

“Don’t,” whispered the Maharajah, “you’ll get sunstroke.” I hesitated. “Come now, put it down.” I closed my parasol, and as I did so was heartily cheered. “That’s right,” roared the good-humoured crowd, “Thank you very much.”

(111)

VII

Within the limited purview of this paper, I have cursorily discussed travel narratives by women from colonial Bengal from different decades to emphasize how these travelogues differed from those of their male counterparts, and though concerned with verisimilitude, resulted in a different gaze altogether. Before concluding, there are a few points to reiterate upon. Firstly, the texts mentioned here represent just a random selection from a large quantity of women’s travel writings from colonial Bengal and are in no ways meant to merit or demerit individual writings. This article in its own humble way tries to analyze the formation of colonial modernity through the discourse of primarily European travel and what subject positions are created out of these Bengali women’s experiences of travel. The sheer diversity of women’s travel writing resists simple categorization. It also tries to show, as Bassnett elucidates, “the need for so many women travel writers to reinvent themselves in the age of empire derived from their reactions to their position in a hierarchical society of unequal opportunity” (239).

In spite of the popularity of travel writing, it has been marginalized by literary scholars for so long that there is not a recognizable canon of travel literature of colonial times from Bengal. Travel writing is in some ways an inherently postmodern form in its stress on the relationship between subject and object, its tension between fact and fiction, its consciousness of genre and tradition, its textualization of experience so that travel and writing go hand in hand. Question therefore arises whether situated in a postcolonial, glocalized world, can these works be studied from critical and/or pedagogical perspectives so that some kind of ‘occidental’ theory as opposed to ‘Orientalism’ can be built up? Since for a long time the hybridity of travel writing meant it was not taken seriously, it is time we considered the relative aesthetic appreciation for this genre. In his book, Simon Gikandi’s states that “cultures produced on the margins of a dominant discourse might actually have the authority not only to subvert the dominant but also to transform its central notions” (xv). For the
scores of travel narratives from Bengal, Dwijendral Lal Roy’s famous line “Bilet deshta matir seta, sona rupar noy” [“The country of Vilayet is made of earth and not gold or silver”] serves as an apt pointer of such an evaluation.

Notes

1 For example, Prince Dwarakanath Tagore, Raja Rammohan Roy, Michael Madhusudan Dutt and many others had been to Europe before 1870.

2 When Sasipada Bannerjee proposed to take his wife Rajkumari to England in 1871, they were stoned by the Hindus of his caste when he went to pay a farewell visit to his ancestral home. See Meredith, 239.

3 Kadambini Ganguly became a doctor in 1886 and went to England in 1893 leaving her husband and family behind. In this sense, though ten years later, she shares the same records with Anandibai Joshi of Maharashtra who left her husband behind and went to the United States in 1883 to obtain a medical degree. Incidentally Pandititu Ramabai Saraswati also went to England in 1883.

4 A Bengali by birth, Sailabala Das (nee Hazra) (1875-1968) was adopted by Utkal Gaurav Madhusudan Das, the maker of modern Orissa. In 1907, she was the first woman from Orissa to go to England for higher studies and later made a significant contribution to female education in the state. Since Orissa remained part of the Bengal Presidency till 1936, Sailabala’s writings are considered here to be part of the colonial Bengal tradition. Through her writings and activism, Sailabala occupied the public space as few women of her time did. From England she sent a series of letters to her father that were serially published in Utkal Sahitya under the heading “Bilat Prabas.” For further details see Sachidananda Mohanty, Early Women’s Writings in Orissa, 1898-1950: A Lost Tradition. Sage, 2005.

5 In her narrative Englande Sat Mas (Seven Months in England), Jagatmohini Chaudhury is said to have tried to write like George Thompson’s narrative of a voyage to India written in 1842. Like the Dutt sisters, she too believed in the empire writing back. Like many women of her time, she too had internalized not just histories and geographies written by Europeans, which formed part of the school curriculum in British Bengal. For further details see Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay, 300.

6 Hariprabha Takeda was a Bengali woman of Brahmo lineage who was married to a Japanese gentleman residing in Dhaka. In 1912, she visited Japan to meet her in-laws and wrote her travelogue Bongomohilar Japanyatra in Bengali in 1915. Though she is the only example of a woman travelling ‘east’ instead of ‘west’ and also because travel for her was not a ‘displacement’ of leaving ‘home’ because she was actually going to visit the ‘home’ of her husband, nevertheless her narrative has to be discussed because of the analysis of women’s point of view. For further details see Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay, 309-11.

7 As the great grand-daughter of Shivnath Shastri, Tapati Mookerji shared the Brahmo lineage. During the 1930s, she went to England along with her father Bijoli Behari Sarkar who was completing his FRCS degree there. At the young age of eleven, a serialized version of her Bilater Diary, giving an account of her travels in England appeared in a magazine in Calcutta. Mookerji also went to the US in the early 1960s when she won a prize for an essay she had written under the aegis of the Committee of Correspondence, New York. Apart from meeting a lot of women from Africa, that is when she also met Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt.

8 Unless otherwise stated all translations from the original Bengali texts are mine.

9 In Imperial Eyes, Marie Louise Pratt defines the “contact zones” as “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other
and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict”(6).

10 According to Inderpal Grewal, ‘home’ in the colonial discourse is seen as ‘England’ and Indian spaces as ‘harem’ in which Indian women saw themselves within a contentious and uneven relation to nation articulated as ‘home.’ Both ‘home’ and ‘harem’ are, she argues, relational nationalist constructs that require the deployment of women and female bodies within the antagonistic and comparative framework of colonial epistemology. She also interchanges the idea of the harem with terms such as zenana, purdah, or antahpur (5).

11 For instance, the reason, and experience of the travel to England that Sunity Devee undertook in 1887 can be contrasted with her father Keshub Chunder Sen’s visit in 1886. As a pioneer of the Brahma Samaj movement in Calcutta, Sen’s narrative, Dairy in England describes his interactions with people in London that included John Stewart Mill, Aldous Huxley, Max Muller, Lord Lawrence, the Dean of Westminster and a whole lot of people from the Unitarian Church. As the wife of the ruler of Coochbehar, one of the princely states in India that remained a loyal subject to the British crown, Sunity’s interaction was with the nobility and royalty of Europe and England. Even in her later trips to England when she went for the treatment of her husband and sons, she primarily interacted only with the royal and upper class gentry.

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