The last three decades of the nineteenth century and the first few of the twentieth witnessed an explosion of travel literature from Eastern India, particularly from Bengal. That Calcutta was the capital of British India till 1911 was of course one, of its reasons. The spread of English education for the middle class in the nineteenth century 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. Apart from the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, these 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, comparative analyses of the Orient versus the Occident, plain literary texts and even poetry.

This paper focuses selectively upon the vast resources of colonial travel writing from Bengal, written both in English and Bengali. But before I venture further I should like to say a few words about crossing the kalapani. During the nineteenth century the Hindu pundits had prohibited foreign travel. For any Hindu during those times, crossing the *kala pani* or the dark waters of the oceans and visiting Europe was not only a turmoil in his personal life but was equivalent to a social revolution. For many such adventurers, the return resulted in social ostracism or committing religious penance – *prayaschitta*. That the onrush of travel to the west persisted in spite of such hazards at home, speaks of the coexistence of conservatism and emancipation in the social history of Bengal.

Though the primary focus of this article is upon the late nineteenth and early twentieth century travel writings, as a prelude to the ongoing genre of travel writing from Eastern India, and particularly under the Bengal Presidency, I will first mention two eighteenth century narratives. The first is the well-known travelogue of Dean Mahomet, which appeared in print in two volumes in Cork, Ireland, in 1794 and whose extremely long title is self-explanatory –*The Travels of Dean Mahomet, A Native of Patna in Bengal, Through Several Parts of India, While in the Service of The Honorable The East India Company, Written by Himself, In a Series of Letters to a Friend.* Din Muhammad had emigrated from India to Ireland a decade earlier at the age of twenty-five, probably had converted to the established Protestant church in Ireland shortly afterward, and had married a young woman from the Anglo-Irish gentry. At the time he wrote his book, he lived in Cork in comfortable financial circumstances. In early 1793, when he advertised a proposal to publish his *travels* by subscription, and personally visited prominent families in southern Ireland to raise money for his venture, his social stature as an immigrant Indian was sufficiently secure, as Michael H. Fisher remarks, for “a total of 320 people [to entrust] him with a deposit…long in advance of the book’s delivery.”(137) Written in English, this narrative articulated Mahomet’s own knowledge of India for a primary audience of Anglo-Irish merchants, soldiers, and administrators associated directly or indirectly with the East India Company and its territories on the subcontinent, and therefore he positioned it in an intricate relation to the British discourse on India that had disseminated itself in the society around him. He placed
his *Travels* thematically, structurally, and stylistically on a continuum with the genre of the travelogue that dominated the discourse in the eyes of the British reading public of the time, but he reoriented the form rhetorically in order to represent a distinctly “Indian understanding of India.” Thus on the one hand, Din Muhammad started a new discourse about India in the same language, generic configuration, and stylistic canon as the British travellers in India, primarily the missionary and the merchant; on the other hand, however, he articulated his representation of an alternative Indian understanding of India explicitly as a counter-discourse to theirs.

The target readership of the other narrative, originally written in Persian and predating Dean Mahomet by twenty-eight years, is the fellow Indians. Titled *Shigurf Nama-e-Vilayet [The Wonders of Vilayet: Being the Memoir, Originally in Persian, of a Visit to France and Britain]* and written by Mirza Seikh I’tesamuddin, also employed in the service of the East India Company, it is a testimony of an Indian gentleman, proud of his lineage, well-educated in the traditional manner, who happened to live through the most crucial transition in Indian history. The Moghul Emperor Shah Alam II wanted to appeal for protection from His Britannic Majesty’s troops and since Robert Clive was not in power to execute it, a mission was sent to England led by Captain Swinton. As an Indian well-versed in Persian, Mirza was chosen to accompany the mission and thus began an extraordinary adventure for the Mirza that lasted nearly three years from 1766 to 1768, and provided material for a fascinating memoir. This is how he writes the preface to his narrative:

Fate took me to Vilayet some years back. An account of my strange experiences on sea and land ought to be entertaining and educative, if it weren’t sadly lacking in literary ability. In this year of the Hegira 1199 (1784 A.D.), as the unrest and anarchy all around makes me anxious, distressed and often so upset as to deprive me of reason, it is only at the insistence of friends that I, Sheikh I’tesamuddin, son of late Tajuddin of Panchnoor village in the Nadia district of Bengal, take up pen and paper to inscribe my impressions of the visit. I have used a very plain and restrained style, for I believe jugglery with words is a sign of the misuse of language and of intellectual self-indulgence (16).

The Voyage and the Traveller

Since travel writing can accommodate many shapes, each individual narration varies according to the nature of the person travelling. Just as one is struck by the multifarious nature of the travellers, one is also struck by the similarity of travel descriptions. This was because, the sea voyages that took these travelers followed more or less the same routes with the only difference that those who boarded the ship in Bombay missed the opportunity of seeing the Bay of Bengal or the India Ocean. For travellers who started their sea voyage from Calcutta, like Swami Vivekananda, Shivnath Shastri, or Aukshoy Kumar Nandy, descriptions of Sri Lanka and other islands in the Arabian Sea are added attractions. But from Bombay onwards, the route is more or less the same for all passengers—they went via Aden, Port Syed, Suez Canal, the Red Sea, 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. So different versions 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 becomes a recurrent theme.
for all these narratives. Even within this similarity, one found exceptions varying on the perceptions on the nature of the particular person traveling. Thus while the middle-class housewife Krishnabhamini Das\textsuperscript{vi} takes pain in explaining the terms steward, deck, saloon, cabin etc, Trailokyanath Mukherjee emphasizes on the minute description of the ship itself:

Most of my countrymen have no idea what a passenger ship is. It may be compared to a large house with all the comforts and conveniences of a high life. First there is the deck, paved with wooden planks, nicely fitted in, which before being cleaned and washed by a strong stream of water flushed through long India-rubber pipes…. Down below there are two long rows of cabins on either side of the vessel each containing two, three, or more berths for accommodation of the passengers… Thus a first class passenger ship is practically a well-decorated, well-furnished palace with all comfort and luxuries of civilized life.\textsuperscript{vii}

Keshub Chunder Sen’s diary\textsuperscript{viii} is filled with different interesting details:

There is a nice little menagerie on board the vessel, which affords fun to many of the passengers especially when they have little else to do. We have a young tiger remarkably tame, a couple of monkeys and some poultry. “ (9)

The concept of the “grand tour” indicated that travel for pleasure was an essentially upper and upper-middle class activity in the nineteenth century.

**Cartography**

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 travelers 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 --whereas a person like Akshoy Kumar Nandy narrates in much more practical terms. He gives detailed documentation of the places in London that is missing in many other narratives. The parks, the docks, the hotels, the city structure, the markets, the transport system, the list of museums, the franking and vending machines of London all are accurately described by him, and yet it does not read like a travel guide book. His narration is full of interaction with ordinary people be they boarders, or landlords or beggars or farmers.

**The Narrative and the Narrator**

Though travel writing can accommodate many shapes and are multiple in form, usually it 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. In some, the traveler devoted himself to describing his response to the place he visited than to
the trip itself, in other cases, they were more empirical, factual and object-oriented. Like European travel narratives in the eighteenth century, it too began with the popularity of the Grand Tour and gradually seemed to swing in the direction of the self. With the emphasis on the way the traveler related to the environment, the forms of the diary, journal, or letter – forms particularly suited to the immediate expression of personal experience – came to be increasingly prevalent. 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. Thus, some of these writings are rather flat, banal, diaristic prose and are plainly of dubious artistic merit. This was because during the colonial era under purview, the writers often conceived their primary task of passing on knowledge of the world, rather than, for example, deploying sophisticated narrative techniques or crafting fine descriptions. Judgmental statements of the Mirza fill his book – “I realized clearly that the French are a conceited race, whose conversation was always an attempt to display their own superiority and to unfairly belittle other nations.” (52) “Truly, the Firinghees can accomplish great things at little expense.” (67) “Both the French and the Hindus have such stupid and superstitious customs that they confound wisdom.” (92) “Allah has endowed the English with the greatest military might among all hat-wearing Firinghee nations “(25), he adds. Thus analyzing the point of view of each narrator exposes their culture-specific mentalities, their representations of ‘otherness’ and imagining of foreign countries.

It need not be reiterated that the contents of Rabindranath Tagore’s Europe Probashir Patra (Letters from Europe), Europe Jatrir Diary, or Paschim Jatrir Diary (The Diary of the Westward Voyage) would be entirely different from Shivnath Shastri’s Englander Diary or Paribrajak Chandrasekhar Sen’s Bhu-Prodokshin O Paschimanchal Paridarshan ( titled by himself as Shanne’s Tour Round the World). Again, Aukshoy Kumar Nandy’s Bilat Bhraman is quite different from most of the other narratives and the reason was probably because of the different background from which he belonged to. While most men crossed the black waters in pursuit of knowledge, Nandy ventured to England in 1924 for a purely capitalist enterprise. Owner of the famous Imperial Jewellery Works in Calcutta, Nandy had been invited by the Bengal Government of that time to participate in the British Empire Exhibition in London which would be inaugurated by King George V. With his shrewd business acumen, Nandy refused the government sponsorship and decided to take part in the exhibition on his own – as a private and individual enterprise. The six-month long exhibition, where he sold jewellery to all and sundry, made him return to India with a profit of twenty thousand rupees, a considerable sum in the year 1924 and was highly praised by Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy for being a Bengali business entrepreneur. Nandy’s narration informs us that among his reputed customers and visitors at the exhibition were Queen Mary, wife of King George V, and the Queen of Spain who bought a “Binapani armlet” from his stall. It is therefore no wonder that his narrative would be of a different flavor than the other Bengalis of his time. He spends his time visiting various factories in Glasgow, Birmingham, Manchester, Belfast, Liverpool and other places and found deficiency in the Indian packaging system. He also realized that the amount of English goods that have to be used daily in India could be balanced by exporting similar amount of goods from India. Otherwise it was easily understood that that India’s economic wealth would go down.

**Nuggets of History**

As mentioned in the case of Mirza Sheikh I’tesamuddin, travel narratives from Bengal often give us interesting insights of historical events and historical characters. Though most often
told from personal perspectives, the real people and real facts offer a lot of fodder for subaltern studies historians. Take the case of Keshub Chunder Sen whose interactions with people in London included John Stewart Mill, Aldous Huxley, Max Muller, Lord Lawrence, the Dean of Westminster, and a whole lot of people from the Unitarian Church. When he attended a public meeting of the female Suffrage Society at Hanover Square, he is delighted to see so many lady speakers – “some of them spoke beautifully with no less rhetoric than fluency – and that they are so earnestly fighting to get admission into Parliament” (48-49). But about two weeks later, when he visited the House of Commons, Sen was 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)

For Chitrita Devi, the historical moment of her travel adds new insights. In the Preface to her travelogue *Anek Sagar Periye [Crossing Many Seas]*, 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 travelogue, 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. “During that time the House of Commons would sit at the House of Lords because its own building had been destroyed by bomb attacks”. (7)

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 breakdown 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)
Sometime historical characters feature in these narratives in very casual ways. In *Paschimjatriki*, Srimati Durgabati Ghosh narrates one humorous incident. While leaving Calcutta, her father, Girija Shankar Bose, a renowned doctor, had written an introductory letter to a friend of his in Vienna who also happened to be a famous psychologist. When Mrs. Ghosh 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 psychologist 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 with gold. He was very pleased to meet his friend’s daughter and after exchanging pleasantries, went out for a walk in the garden. The rest of the story goes thus:

After that we came back and sat in the room. Two huge furry dogs ran in. One jumped into his lap and the other put up his two feet on my lap and tried to climb up. I was stiff with fear. I did not have the habit of living with dogs but kept quiet due to courtesy. Picking up an ivory statue of Lord Vishnu from his table, he said, “Your father had once sent this to me.” Suddenly the dog gave a loud bark and jumped upon my lap. Forgetting everything and pushing him out of my lap, I stood up from the chair. Dogs in these countries were used to getting hugs from visitors, so why would he listen to me? Considering me a spoilt sport, he started barking louder. The professor understood my situation and he quickly locked the two dogs in one room. They kept on barking loudly and banging the door.

“Are you afraid of dogs?” he asked me.

“Yes, I don’t have dogs. I am very scared of them.”

“Why are you afraid?” he asked further. “I myself feed the dogs by making them sit on my lap. Your father treats other people’s mental diseases, does he know about your fear of dogs?”

“Yes, of course he knows,” I added. “He himself does not have any dogs.”

The professor was really surprised to hear this.

I kept on thinking to myself that if I could speak English very well, then I would ask Professor Freud what his own love of dogs signified. As a famous psychologist, what did he say about this?" (117)

**Juxtaposing Binaries: Utopia and Dysopia**

Apart from a lot of emphasis given in these narratives on actual places, most travellers thought of and spoke in binaries, comparing and contrasting the western culture with their own. Differing from the first world travellers, the narrators were more politically outspoken, more aware of the power dynamics of colonialism and neocolonialism (in however naïve ways possible), and more attuned to the dichotomies of East and West, Third and First World. Since reading accounts of travel lets us participate in acts of intercultural perception and cultural construction in processes of understanding and misunderstanding, we can evaluate the situation in these writings with the question of the relation of the self to the world. Fluctuating between the poles of subjective experience and objectivity, most of the narrators take recourse to comparative analyses. Mirza Seikh I’tesamuddin’s narrative is full of such comparisons. “Sobhan Allah!” he says, “How ironical is fate! Those who only yesterday were suppliants for forty bighas of land are today masters one half of India and brought to their knees a host of proud and arrogant chieftains! “In India the wealthy citizens employ gong-bearers to signal the different hours, but in Vilayet people of all classes keep
track of time.”(130) “Unlike Bengal, tax and revenue collectors in England do not resort to extortion.”(111).

It is interesting to note that of whatever ilk the narrator was, he or she usually tended to uphold the values and norms of their home society. 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).

Aukshoy Kumar Nandy, who made it his mission to meet as many people and see as many factories in England during his one-year visit states:

In India we feel shy and reserved to speak to Englishmen, even fear to speak the mind, but in Vilayet, we do not have to do that. We can talk to people in a straight-forward manner. I cannot remember having been looked down upon because we are a subservient nation – instead they have shown more respect and sympathy to me as a foreigner(69).

Travel extends the inward direction of autobiography to consider the journey outward. It also intersects provocatively with studies of multiculturalism, gender and subjectivity; for whatever the subject’s motive – tourism, study, flight, emigration – journey changed both the country visited and the self that travelled. Though the writers struggled for new tongues and original ways of telling their stories they could not be free of history, family, language, and tradition. In spite of such heterogeneity and varied approaches, one notices a common sense of wonder at arriving at a wonderful place. “The ladies were lovely as houries; their beauty would have shamed even fairies into covering their pretty faces.”(53) wrote Mirza. In Europe Probashir Patra, Rabindranath tells us how before coming to England he had, like a fool, expected that everywhere in that tiny island he would find Gladstone’s fiery speeches, Max Muller’s analysis of the Vedas, Tyndall’s scientific theories, Carlyle’s deep thoughts etc. “Fortunately I have been disillusioned.” he adds. Keshub Chunder Sen, the leading exponent of Brahmoism was often appalled at external manifestation of colonial wealth: “Civilization does not satisfy our belly so much as it makes outward dhoom dham.”(5) When he arrived at Marseilles, Sen was awestruck:
It is the first European city we pass through. I cannot help being struck with astonishment, everything is so unique, so peculiarly beautiful, so perfectly belatee. The hotel is a grand thing, being a six-storied richly furnished house with innumerable rooms and attendants. Of course we conduct ourselves in an imperial style.(43)

Later when the ship arrived in England, Sen wrote in his diary, “Welcome London! The Lord be glorified!” (45) The traveller Chandra Sekhar Sen in his book Shanne’s Tour Round the World wrote:

At five o’clock I reached London. It is John Bull’s country, John Bull’s own city, so I decided to call it Johnbulia. It is not possible for a humble person like me to describe Johnbulia. Things that are not seen at any other place in the world, even any other European country cannot take pride in such things, John Bull has managed to tie them up in his own land. (25)

“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) “My first desire to go to England was to study their human behavior,” wrote the entrepreneur-traveller Aukshoy Kumar Nandy. He was surprised when the English people ask him several questions about Indians – their worship patterns, their custom of having several wives, their caste system, their orthodoxy in certain social customs etc. He also asked his readers to keep one thing in mind, and that was:

We cannot judge the English race according to the ordinary English-Indian relations in India. In their own country, the English behave like human beings – and in their conquered country, like a lord. Both the parties in such master-servant relationship forget real humanity or worldly love. (70)

Srimati Durgabati Ghosh 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 traveling 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)
Thus in most cases we see that after the initial sense of wonder, reality sinks in and often shatters the utopian vision and hope with which most of these travelers had begun their journey.

**The Female Gaze**

Unlike their male counterparts, 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. These women were primarily housewives and therefore their social background and 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. These women wrote about their experiences in plain and simple matter of fact style and even had to defend their travels. Krishnabhabini Das, who visited England in 1882 and wrote the first full-length travel narrative called *Englande Bongo Mohila* (1885) was of course, not the first one to transcend the boundaries of the home and the world. Before her, the two Dutt sisters, Toru and Aru had travelled with their father Govin Chunder Dutt from 1869 to 1873. Indira Debi Choudhurani in her *Puratani* gives us some information about Rabindranath Tagore’s sister in law, Gyanadanandini Devi’s experiences in England in 1879. Even Rajkumari Bandopadhyay has successfully travelled to Europe during this period. But none of these women travellers had full-fledged travel books or narratives to support their voyages.

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 Krishnabhamini, 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.

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 traveling 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 Ghosh who travelled in 1932 and whose father, a famous doctor in Bengal had a lot of contacts in Europe. Moving around in a royal style all across Europe with Thomas Cook Company arranging her itinerary, Ghosh’s experiences are much different from those of her other fellow Bengali women travelers. 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 masalas on the stone.” So when did cultural stereotyping begin?

It is therefore 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.

Religion

Most colonial travel writings have a large component of observations on religion. Mirza’s narrative begins with an invocation to Allah but interestingly enough, a lot of his descriptions are colored by religious evaluations too. So the sight of the statue of a mermaid is considered “a bad omen” for him. “May Allah in his infinite mercy prevent anyone from seeing a mermaid, for it is a kind of genii.” (48) he wrote. His visit to the ‘beautiful city’ of Oxford made him so happy that ‘the bird of joy built a nest on the bough of [his] heart” and he goes on to described its ancient ‘madrassah’.

Keshub Chunder Sen’s diary is full of details about his religious mission abroad, especially his meetings with members of the Unitarian Church. On the 15th of February 1870, the day he leaves by steamer from Garden Reach, he enters in his diary: “May He help me to fulfil the great mission with which He has entrusted me!” But even before reaching his destination, while still at sea, Sen entered in his diary:

How interesting is the sight of this small floating congregation! How encouraging it is to think that the name of the Almighty One is chanted on the bosom of the Arabian Sea, and that in the midst of a small floating family composed of diverse races we are all enabled to sing the glory of our common Father, and echo back the solemn and sacred chorus of ‘Sathyam’ which is being chanted at this moment by our Brahmo brethren in the different parts of India! How kind is the Lord unto us! But oh! How forgetful we are of His mercies! May the True God be glorified in all lands and on the high seas! (16)
For Shivnath Shastri, another upholder of Brahmoism, the case was the same but for a practical and shrewd businessman like Aukshoy Kumar Nandy, it was surprising to learn that people who returned from Vilayet would say that there were no religious beliefs there. Of all the people he met, most of them were actually quite religious. As a practicing Hindu, one of his observations sounds very interesting:

The Europeans are more familiar with the Islam religion—maybe because there are similarities with Christianity. Also, maybe as a free nation, they look down upon the religion practiced by a bonded nation – so Islam and Buddhism have a certain position in that country. Every child knows the life story of Lord Buddha or Prophet Muhammad. But a lot of them do not know much about the Hindu religion. The appeal and recognition of Hindu philosophy is limited within a few educated people. (63)

Conclusion

Before concluding, there are a few points to reiterate upon. Firstly, the texts mentioned in the purview of this article represent just a random selection from the huge quantity of travel writings from colonial Bengal and are in no ways meant to merit or demerit individual writings. 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. The critic Simon Gikandi 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.” For the scores of travel narratives from Bengal, Dwijendral Lal Roy’s famous line “Bilet deshta matir seta, sona rupar noy” [“The country of Bilayet is made of earth and not gold or silver”] serves as an apt pointer of such an evaluation.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:


iii Swami Vivekananda, “Parivrajak”. The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (B) Vol. VI.


v Aukshoy Kumar Nandy, Bilat Bhraman. Calcutta: Economic Jewellery Works, 1929. All translations from Nandy’s
work and other Bengali writers quoted in this article are mine. Accurate rendering of the meaning and style into English is always not possible but I have tried to convey the same without departing very far from literal translation.


vii Trailokyanath Mukherjee, *A Visit to Europe*. Kolkata, 1902.


ix The narratives are based on Tagore’s travels to the West in 1879-1880.


