



Full Length Research

Crossing the Thresholds: Unsung Bengali Travelogues by Women

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Accepted 28th February, 2022

Abstract: It is a common perception that women in general and Indian women in particular were by and large confined within the narrow space of domesticity. The trope of being imprisoned or “a caged bird” and dreams about stepping out into the world. Travelling, whether on pilgrimages or on secular journeys was considered as a liberating experience that gave women immense freedom. In Bengal, the most obvious reason for travel was “tirtha” or pilgrimages to holy places which the typical middle-class Bengali families undertook. Travelling beyond the boundaries of one’s homeland could be for many reasons. Bengali women like Krishna Bhabini Das, Hariprabha Takeda, Chitrita Devi travelled after their marriages, accompanying their husbands. The travelogues by these Bengali women in colonial period bore testimonies to the openness of the mind of the women who came out of the womanly barriers of the closed society. These travels gave them a much wider view of the world.

Keywords: Travel: Foreign Land: Women: Bengali.

Cite This Article As: Mondal, D. (2022). Crossing the Thresholds: Unsung Bengali Travelogues by Women. American Journal of Multidisciplinary Research in Africa, 2(2): 1-4.

1.0 Background of the Study

No journey is purposeless. Those who wander aimlessly harbour a secret desire to know the unknown. Those who migrate for work or education do so to avail better opportunities and build good lives. However, rarely does one hear of voyages which are undertaken with the explicit desire to understand the root of white supremacy, although in the 1880s a 20-year-old Bengali woman named Krishnabhabini Das did precisely that. She accompanied her husband to London intending to observe and document the lives of the British – the colonisers of India—and study the cultural differences between the Indians and the Britishers. Her observations were published as a travelogue titled *Englandey Bangamahila* in 1885, which was subsequently banned by the British government because its content was deemed dangerous by the authorities.

Although autobiographical in nature, Das rarely speaks about her everyday life in London and focus her lens on the lives of the British citizens in this travelogue. She talks about refugees, asylum, immigration and religious persecution. She explains in her book, how the British, despite their many shortcomings, do not disturb those who flee their own country and take refuge in England and co-exist with them peacefully. The most significant contribution of Das' book is the way she compares the condition of Indian women to that of their British counterparts. In one of the poems in the book, Das laments,

In Europe, where ever I go

*I find women equal to men,
Contrarily in unfortunate India
Her place lies at the feet of the men.*

Despite her progressive notions, she is also full of moral values and judgement. She denounces the British society is its class hierarchy. She is disgusted by the ill-treatment of the lower class by the upper class. However, while she acknowledges the fact that there exists similar caste-based discrimination, which is a very problematic statement to make. However, it is hard to say what her stance is on the caste system, which changed rapidly in India in the late 1800s, under the British Raj. Hariprabha's marriage took her to the Far East. Since they were based in Dhaka the first lap of the journey involved travelling by train to Narayangunj and from there by a steamer to Calcutta. At bottom her travelogue is a diary. The couple visited Japan in 1912. On their way to Japan, the Takedas spent a night in Calcutta with a Japanese family. Hariprabha could not eat her meal properly because garlic was used in the curry. Like most high-caste Hindu women, onion and garlic were taboo for Hariprabha. Thus, although she was a Brahmo and literature, her own self-image is that of a dutiful Bengali wife. When the ship calls at the first Japanese port, she is euphoric: *I feel great today, because I have set foot in Japan* (p.18). Eventually, she arrives at the railway station of the small town where her husband's family lives, and is greeted by her in-laws. An over-whealed Hariprabha writes: *We came home by rickshaw*. This simple sentence can shatter the tranquil scenario of our labored scholarship on *border-crossing* and hybridity. She uses the Bengali word bari (home), she considers her parents-in-law's house to be her unquestioned, true home and not a place of mere temporary sojourn.

The focus of her gaze is on small, domestic details. The cooking of rice, understandably, takes up a lot of space. A prized quality of the Bengali wife is the ability to deliver properly cooked rice—achieving that delicate balance between soggy and firmness. Hariprabha gives elaborate descriptions of how rice is husked from paddy in Japan and how that is different from Bengal. The Japanese way of cooking rice is

mentioned thrice in the text, approvingly, because Hari Prabha was fond of soggy rice, which also seems to be a Japanese favourite.

The recognition of Japanese *otherness*, however, was not hindrance to feeling at home in her in-law's place or in Japanese culture at large. Her descriptions of various facets of Japanese life are interspersed with moving anecdote of her interactions with her husband's family and community. Her mother-in-law herself did Hari Prabha's share of the household chores, saw to it that she ate her favourite items, scrubbed her in the bath, covered her in warm blankets at night and never allowed her to touch cold water. Mr. Takeda's brother's wife often left her child with Hari Prabha and the whole clan went out of their way to make her welcome. When Hari Prabha talks about such pampering by in-laws. To be treated well by in-laws was considered to be a great luck and to be pampered by them was a matter of fortune. Hari Prabha 's in-laws came all the way to Kobe to see her off. After a tearful parting, she ends her book with the observation, *I do not want to take leave of such a simple, affectionate mother-in-law. Through a foreigner, she showered me with affection, tenderness and care, as if she was my own mother. I want to live with her the rest of my life. But, alas, there just is no such philosophy!*

The female perspective not only complements that of the men, but the female gaze even adds another dimension to the representation of physical objects and the interactions with human subjects in a foreign locale. This is apparent in Chitrita Devi's discerning gaze that absorbs and critically engages with details pertaining to the alien environment that she encounters on her travels.

Contextualising Chitrita Devi's travel text within the framework of social and political developments in India, Europe is likely to give it greater value. Her travelogue *Onek Sagar Periyee*, published in 1957, is a collection of seven different travel narratives where she tells us about her experiences in foreign lands. It was in April 1947, Chitrita Devi travels to England, Europe, Paris and Switzerland and on the midnight of 14th August when India kept her *tryst inclined*, she desires to be back home in Calcutta, even if just for a day, to participate in the celebrations marking the end of British colonial rule. She voyaged to England as British Indian subject but came back as a citizen of a fledgling Independent nation.

2.0 Conclusion of the Study

This study found that apart from the sense of wonder in visiting a new land, she is also fortunate to attend the historic parliamentary debate at the House of Lords where she listened to Churchill and Lord Atlee's speech where he read the white paper on India, promising to give her independence. Throughout the narrative the author is more interested in describing the manners of people in England than on scenic descriptions per se. Travelogues by these women reveal that women also developed a critical and comparative mind while exposed to different cultures and society, these travelogues of the colonial period depict a new set of realization, consciousness and social values emerging among women during this period. In case of foreign tour, Bengali women compared the situation of India and foreign land, searched self-identity.

3.0 References of the Study

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