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RESEARCH ARTICLE



A GLIMPSE OF CULTURAL DIALOGUE IN NATION SPACES: A READING OF SELECT TRAVEL WRITINGS BY WOMEN FROM TAGORE'S HOUSEHOLD

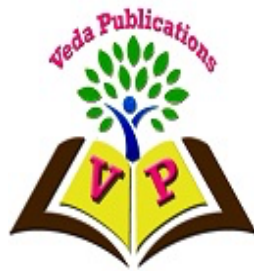
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ABSTRACT



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Mid nineteenth century Bengal witnessed a paradigm shift in the status of women. As a result of the changes, the newly evolving Bengali "Bhadramohila" stepped out from their 'Home' into the 'World'. As an outcome of their literacy and the opportunity to be outside, they gradually started recording their experiences through writings. This was the scenario when women from Tagore's household, dared to step out from their comfort zone and move across India often for Pilgrimage. Their travel accounts published in a form of memoir, dairy or as letters provide an understanding of the Bengali cultural dialogue as a part of the wider Indian culture. Individually all writings are significant because they record the cultural interaction as the women ignore their territorial boundary which had previously confined them within their home fold. In the contemporary time, the relevance of these travel writing is also due to the fact that the wider Indian culture is defined from the perspective of new Bengali women as an artefact of Bengal Renaissance. This article will attempt to define the way in which Bengali women traveller 'look', 'describe' and 'compare' a distant place standing in opposition to their native place.

Keywords: Culture, Nation, Pilgrimage, Travel, Women

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INTRODUCTION

Mid-nineteenth century Bengal was the time which witnessed a paradigm shift in the status of women in the domestic sphere. The 1850s brought in certain changes in the living condition of the people from what it was previously. With the oncoming of the Bengal Renaissance, advancement took place in the field of education, religion and in the domain of social practices and prevalent literatures of the period. Renaissance also had its influence on the position of the Bengali women. Prior to the Bengal Renaissance the Bengali women seldom articulated their presence. They existed solely as a machine of creation and recreation of the populace; they were a dependent stereotype, habituated to lead their life appended to men. It took a subsequent period of time to change the outlook of the Bengali women and the enlightenment brought in by the Bengal Renaissance was responsible to a great extent.

The men of Bengal responded more enthusiastically and naturally to the spirit of cultural upliftment and revival that accompanied the Renaissance than it was evident among the Bengali women. In fact, it was the Bengali man who was openly protesting against the social malpractices forced upon the woman. Social reforms took place in this era decrying child marriage, perpetual widowhood for the chaste Hindu women, sati or widow burning on the husband's funeral pyre, etc. In the time frame of nineteenth and twentieth century Bengal, the spread of formal education among women received impetus encouraged by various nineteenth century social reform movements; it was followed by the nationalist movement during the early twentieth century that once again emphasised

on the spreading of women's education. This reciprocal relationship between education and the changing status of women, as it has historically evolved over time, witnessed a paradigm shift in the domain of Bengali womanhood. As a result of these changes, we can find the emerging concept of the 'new Bengali woman' who crossing the 'threshold' of her 'home' stepped out into the 'world'. The women, on the one hand, were firmly rooted in their cultural tradition, were well aware of the Bengali customs, respected the old beliefs but, on the other, also had an exposure to the 'written word', debatable philosophies, most of which were common in west and in east; they were encouraged to voice their opinions and 'write' their experiences, a gesture that was seldom made to a Bengali woman before. She shed her veil and shattered the walls of the 'andarmahal' that had stifled and fettered her since centuries.

The women recorded their experiences in memoirs, letters, autobiographies, short essays, and travel writings that remain glaring instances of the changing 'face' of the Bengali woman from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. Within the corpus of travel writings by Bengali women during the period mentioned above, the experience penned not only speaks of the cross-culture encounters between India and the west, but also of the cultural interaction between the former and countries in the east such as Japan, China, Nepal and so on. England, Italy, and Paris are some of the prominent countries of the west where the women had travelled. The response of the writers to the eastern cultures is different from the way in which the western cultures had influenced them. The



difference encouraged me to also take into account the impact of the regional cultures as it had affected the women of Bengal when they had visited places within India, such as Delhi, Brindaban, the Himalayas, etc sometimes as pilgrims or as travellers. Some of the notable writings of Krishnabhabini Das's *England-e Bangamahila* (1885), trans. *A Bengali Lady in England* (2015), Durgabati Ghosh's *Paschimjatriki* (1936), trans. *The Westward Traveller* (2010), Chitrita Devi's *Onk Sagar Periyē* (1947), trans. *Crossing Many Seas* (2018), Hemlata Sarkar's (1910), Hariprabha Takeda's *Bongomahilar Japan Nepal-e Bangamahila Jatra* (1915) and many more.

WOMEN FROM TAGORE'S HOUSEHOLD

In this context Tagore's household is significant to mention, which had a great influence on the life and people of Bengal. The men in the household encouraged the women to cross the threshold. The 'new Bengali women' breathed freely the open air of the '*Bahir*' or the outside world for the first time. They were frequently seen in social spaces of the city – its street, market, station, school and colleges, journeying 'from a *nivritocharini* or domesticated being to *bhadramahila*, the Bengali New Woman...the...'reformed' New Woman who was conscious of her social existence in the urban space as the woman citizen' (Chakraborty 127); she became the soul of literary gatherings taking part in the "*baithok*" side by side with her mate, aspiring to share the same place with the Bengali '*bhadralok*'. Thus, "*bahir*", metaphorically also hints to the exposure she had to books, cultures, and men who were not always a part of the family. The introduction had its consequences. She still had her domestic self; she remained the nurturer and care-

giver inherent brimming with affection and tenderness. Yet, along with these were fused the desire to express herself, to journey beyond the known realms and to question the duties she was expected to fulfil. Relations apart, her identity was also extended to include her dreams, pursue her curiosity and explore herself. This side of her nature changed her outlook as she perceived the world. Notable change was found in her behaviour, appearance and, to some extent, in her attire also.

The portrayal of the women of Jorasanko Thakur Family by Chitra Deb in *Thakurbarir Andormohol* is by far the best example of transition that came with the Renaissance. Mention is made of Kadambari Devi, the wife of Jyotirindranath Thakur, who was much critiqued by the others for accompanying her husband each day to Gorer Math for a whiff of fresh air riding on her horse by his side (47). However, the wives residing within the inside premises of the Thakurbari heralded the new era not only by being apt in cooking, dressing her long tresses intricately, wearing the traditional outfit in new trends or garbing on men's clothes when they went out riding the horses, but were also found to be well read, equally dexterous with their pens (Deb 46). The "Bangali babu" happily bore the "white man's burden" (Kipling 321) in educating and enlightening their womenfolk as enthusiastically as the English coloniser had ideologically propagated that it was his responsibility to teach the Indians the ways of English culture that they considered superior to the one prevailing in the orient. The "Bangali babu" mimicked the English man, determined to maintain their status quo in the eyes of the English men; the former was much impressed by the intellectual acumen of the



English ladies. He too dreamt of Bengali women who could express her thought openly and have a share in the intellectual life he led. Thus, the role of the man as a bridge with the outside world and as a provider of information and the woman as a mute listener musing over the caprices that the 'outside' had in store was subverted. Schools were opened where women could receive formal education. It helped them in building a social identity apart from that she had within her domestic fold. They were also encouraged to further their interests by joining the universities and receiving degrees in Arts and Sciences. Many looked forward to aid the society as nurses, teachers and doctors. Soon, there was a batch of the philanthropic 'new Bengali bhadramahila' working alongside the men voluntarily assisting in the upliftment of the women who had been left behind. A clash was soon evident between the expectation that the conservative Bengali society wanted the woman to fulfil and the desire that the woman wanted to realise. It was still dictated that her place was in the home; her role comprised bearing children and caring for her family. Ideologies emphasised on female weakness and promoted motherhood as a woman's ultimate duty.

CULTURAL DIALOGUE IN NATION SPACES THROUGH TRAVELS BY WOMEN FROM TAGORE'S HOUSEHOLD

However, there were many who shattered the stereotypes and travelled within India and to the other countries as well. History remembers them not as mothers or daughters but as writers empowered to 'write' herself. Conversion to Christianity, in more ways than one, empowered the women to tear apart the veils of the rigid Hindu customs and traditions.

Thus, Kamalmani Thakur, the wife of Gyanendromohan Thakur, became the first Bengali woman to travel across the Kalapani in 1859. Later, she had travelled to London along with her husband and daughters to avail the advanced medical treatment that west had offered. Khetromohini Dutt, liberated by the Christian traditions, had also travelled to France, Italy and England in the company of her husband Gobindachandra Dutt. The decision contributed to the making of the two great Bengali poets – Aru Dutt and Toru Dutt, the two daughters of Khetromohini. Not only did they receive western education, but they also moved freely in the cities of Marseille, London and Cambridge to further their learning. They were the pioneers, the first Bengali women who sharpened their sensibilities with their introduction to foreign education and Toru Dutt became a prolific writer, the first Bengali woman writing novels and poems both in English and in French. Harihar Das' *The Life and Letters of Toru Dutt* (1921) is a mnemonic record of a versatile writer that she was. The Brahmo Samaj also had notably contributed in helping women to free her from the stifling Hindu traditions. Rajkumari Bandopadhyay, the wife of Sashipada Bandopadhyay, had dared to travel to London even when she was great with child wishing the child to be born in a foreign land; she was a begetter of a son and suffered no complications in spite of the tedious journey undertaken. Here, she had spent her time in the company of famous literatures, Mary Carpenter being one of them. Jnanadanandini Devi had also made a similar decision in 1877. However, her decision was more rigorous because not only was she with child but she was also determined to travel alone to London breaking the bounds of a conventional Bengali household. Her



attitude towards life changed drastically with the interaction she had with the western culture for two years and a half spent in her stay in England and in France. Hemangini Devi, wife of Umeschandra Banerjee – the notable Congress leader and barrister of Bengal – had also ventured to travel to London without her husband. The peril of the situation was greater because apart from the throes of carrying an unborn child, she was the mother of four young siblings who accompanied her. Her rash decision of settling in England had a significant impact on her life and on the lives of her four daughters who got the opportunity to be educated in some of the renowned colleges and Universities in London and in Cambridge.

Although the women of the Tagore family do not have travel writing as such, short essays of Soudamini Devi, Jananadanandini Devi, Swarnakumari Devi, Hiranmayee Devi, Sarala Devi, Sobhanasundari Devi and Sushama Devi give another perspective of India. Most of them were accompanied by other travellers. Jnanadanandini Devi (1850-1941), the wife of Satyendranath Tagore, did not limit herself to the territory of India and explored the West. Apart from her noteworthy contribution to the style of wearing a sari, she sailed alone with her three children to England without her husband and was accompanied by her servants. She stayed in England for two and a half years. Years do not have any written documentation by the travellers. Indira Devi Chaudhurani, in her book *Puratani* (1879), mentioned her mother's travel as a form of memoir, naming the chapter "Bilater Katha". Accounts of the travellers' visits to the sites of pilgrimage are secular commentaries and an appreciation of intricate

artistry that they found engraved in the walls and the pillars of the temples, as well as the stone idols that occupied the inner premise. Poverty and indolence that religion, especially Hinduism, encouraged among the devotees does not escape notice; cruelty and pain hidden behind the beauty of the Taj Mahal affect them as it had done during the time when the monument had been built.

Soudamini Devi (1847–1920) was the eldest daughter of Debendranath Tagore. Some fragments of her travels were periodically published in the family magazine *Bharati* (1877-1926). Despite all of her travel within India, a distinguished change has been noticed as she interprets the places from a woman's perspective. "Vizigapattam" (1914) opens with a pilgrim's perspective and her vivid description of nature as she journeys by train. The first-person narrative account notes that people visited the pilgrim spots in groups, and she was no exception. One thing that becomes clear from the fact is that women were not expected to travel by themselves. She was either accompanied by a male to whom she is related in a group where there were others to help her if she was in need. Indian women travellers in the mid-nineteenth century were intellectually enlightened but were essentially dependent on society for acceptance. The "New Women" can be seen as females who had intellectual liberation but needed the courage to assert themselves. As she travelled, she was interested in the surroundings.

"Every moment new scenes appeared and disappeared before our eyes. Watching the hide and seek Mother Nature was playing with us, we reached our destination at four in the afternoon" (63)



Soudamini Devi frequently includes general information about the locations of her travels in her narrative account. Readers can get a vivid picture of the history of the fact that the place was initially ruled by the Dutch and then by the British. In the faraway state of India, the female gaze revealed intricate details about their lodging. The house was modest in size, two stories high, and located directly across from the water. The outdoor area can be plainly seen from where you are seated on the verandah. Even around ten o'clock in the evening, a piercing shout of joy can be heard coming from the outside. There were numerous Hindu pilgrimage sites nearby. King Narasimha built a few gods and goddesses on top of a hill, but getting there required climbing a lot of stairs. The intricate details of the idols do not escape her notice. In the contact zone, cross-cultural interactions of the Bengali women travellers with other Indian cultures display them to be keen, curious and eager, unlike the English traveller who found nothing appreciating in the architectural uniqueness sculpted during the times of the Indian kings.

Soudamini Devi's grooming in the 'inside' space makes her so vulnerable and susceptible to adverse circumstances that the endurance expected of a traveller in the outside space seems to be a challenge for her. Her adherence to the dictums of the Bramho Samaj makes her an objective commentator of a secular India where there was no religious intolerance. In the little mosque close to the Hindu temple, a handful of Muslims went to pray. The Roman Catholic Church testifies that there were also Indians who preferred the religion introduced by the West. The same sky that stood as a backdrop of the

temple and the mosque seemed to be equally beautiful, with the alien architecture of the Church looming in front of it. Religious tolerance is also noted in Satyendranath Tagore's dependence on Moti, the Muslim servant, who was their versatile aide in the course of their journey. Indira Devi Chaudhurani mentions in the memoir of her mother *Puratani* (1879) that Moti cooked for her mother because she was uncomfortable taking the food provided on the ship, and her father had sent the servant with some money to Ahmedabad to look into the comforts of their stay before they arrived (91).

However, in one instance, a reader can also discern the influence of the primary sentiment that resulted in the formation of the Bramha Samaj. She writes:

I do not know what kind of feelings this scene would arouse in the mind of a Hindu, but I felt a deep respect for the one and only Brahma. The truth was that God existed within everyone, the euphoria that the idol worshipper had was merely a superstitious belief reared from childhood. (64)

The idols of gods and goddesses that she had appreciated in the Hindu temple were more for their aesthetic beauty than from the awe and reverence that they create in a worshiper. In Vrindaban, she finds the idols depict human emotions. She describes Radha turning her face away in anger and Krishna pleading at her feet to placate her. Here, she perceives a picture of a spiritual India where Nature unites the believers, adding a touch of serenity as the sun and moon rise and set every day (65). It indicated a harmonious coexistence of a group of diverse believers. Soudamini Devi extends the meaning of



"spirituality" to indicate a sense of unity and nationhood instead of associating it with vague religious adherence. In the description of India found in the narratives of Bengali women travellers, when travelling within India, one finds that Krishnabhabini Das was struck by the diversity of culture and landscape as she travelled from the eastern half of India to the western regions; travels made Soudamini Das realise another aspect of nationhood which had to do with the inherent spiritual unity in spite of the religious and cultural diversity that India boasts of. It made her philosophic.

Her essay "Tirtha Darsan" (1914) speaks of her journey by train to Madhupur in the month of autumn. Night in the train compartment did not scare her. Although Soudamini Devi appreciates the technological development that came with the Imperial rule, she remains apolitical in the essay, having nothing to do either with the propagation of the colonial policies or the refutation of the same. It is an undeniable fact that the budding of the English culture in Bengal brought a significant change in the lives of the Bengalis.

Despite the river Ganga's prominence in Bengal as a whole and the women of the Tagore household may have frequently used it for travel from one ghat to another, women's travel narratives rarely mention it. It is noteworthy that Soudamini Devi made a note of a section describing a lovely evening spent aboard a big river boat on the river Yamuna. The main purpose of the trip was to see *Aarti* on the eve of Ramadan. Nothing is described here as the boat sailed over the calmness. But everyone's attention was drawn to the large lantern on the riverbed and the boy and girl dressed as Ram and Sita. She

described how the turtles popped up close to the ghat steps to eat the Bengal grams scattered on the water.

The well-maintained garden in Mathura arrested their senses, and she spent an entire day roaming and exploring it. A woman's aesthetic sense is easily stimulated by the natural beauty and the colour and fragrances of flowers found here, and Soudamini Devi was no exception. Sarala Devi's (1872-1945) "On the Way to Chirag Fair" (1926) also displays a woman's fascination for public gardens. She describes the maps of the garden, the trees, and the gestures of the people who visited it (285). A tourist might not take much interest in the history of a place, but reading books reminds her of myths and the history associated with the place she visits. In every temple Soudamini Das visited, she found the tale of Kaliya Daman sculpted either on the walls or the pillars. The readers are introduced to fragments from the great Indian Epic, *The Mahabharata*. The episode narrated by Soudamini Devi is that of Lord Krishna killing his maternal uncle Kangsha to liberate his parents from his atrocious cruelty. If the Bengali women traveller had not intellectually delivered, she, in all probability, would have had less interest in knowing the place historically.

They took a car to visit Vridaban, two to three hours by road from Mathura. Visitors are drawn to the enormous temple and its vibe in general. Customary bathing for the symbolic purification of a pilgrim's soul was a ritual. Although Soudamini Devi believed in the teachings of the Brahma Samaj, the inherent customs of a Hindu household make her prefer a holy dip in the Ganges with the automatic exaltation "Ma Ganga". Turtles were less numerous



here. The two ponds outside the temple were seldom cleaned, although they were considered holy. The tale goes that when Radhika and Bishakha were thirsty and longed for a draught of water at night, Lord Krishna, not knowing where to find water, dug two ponds with his flute to quench their thirst. The water was contaminated with an unhealthy green colour. Visitors often sipped it as blessings as Brahmin pujaris filled cups in exchange for money. If the pilgrims were penniless, only some water would be sprinkled on their heads. Hinduism also compelled women to strictly adhere to principles that were expected of men. The experience during the arti is an instance she states:

Compared to men, the influence was stronger upon women. During the arti, I saw only women standing with folded palms paying obeisance to the lord, and after it was over all of them bent down with great devotion. (69)

The position of women in the Indian patriarchy becomes clear. Among the Hindus, women were treated inferior to men. They are encouraged to be superstitious and made to believe that it is their sacrifice, piety, dedication and devotion that is important for the well-being of the family and also to give birth to a small heir. The picture presented by Soudamini Devi was nothing exceptional as women pay their respect in return for prosperity and male offspring. Readers automatically get a glimpse of the malpractices and unhygienic conditions that perforated Hinduism in the first decades of the nineteenth century, which naturally led to the Bengali intellectuals favouring an organisation that would be governed more by logic and reason. In the

formation of the Brahma Samaj, they found the answer.

The secular nature of travel made her visit the Taj Mahal. Intrigued by it, she visited each and every tomb and read all that was archived on the marble wall. She was mesmerised by its beauty and grace. On another separate day, she visited Diwan-i-Khas, Diwan-i-Aam, and the Sheesh Mahal of the monarch. The water fountain attracts her attention. However, the torments of the Muslim women in the Mughal palaces are recalled as she moves from one chamber to the next. Although the feminine gaze does not take account of the architectural technicalities of the monument, the paradoxical truth hidden in the historical beauty of the monument does not escape her notice. The voice of the woman is stifled, and every cry is walled in by the grandeur of the emperor's palace. Behind the walls are unwritten scenes and dark rooms where the queens are punished if they offend the emperor (70). Their stifled voice is inimically centred on the edifice of death, the Taj Mahal itself. Her female psyche is also saddened as she comes across instances of torture, such as the room where Aurangazeb had imprisoned his father. Interestingly, another fact is revealed. Religion has always subverted women. Islam had never protected its women or encouraged intellectual liberation. Similar to the practices that Hinduism had encouraged among its women. Besides the library room, the secret lane for meeting Jahangir's mother draws her attention.

Peaceful coexistence between the Hindus and Muslims denies the Mughal rule is emphasised as well. For instance, the worshipping room of Akbar's Hindu wife, Jodhabai, where there were idols of



Ganesha and other deities, inspires the narrator. The pilgrimage moves beyond popular itinerary, and after crossing three to four miles beyond Agra, they visit Jodhabai's bathing ghat, Kailash, in the Yamuna River. There was a Shiva temple on the bank of the same ghat so that Jodhabai could worship the lord after purification. The old banyan tree makes the place ideal for worshipping. Soudamini Devi and others willingly took part in all the rituals and listened to the histories narrated by the Brahmin priest. They felt the essence of the place, and the peaceful surroundings touched their souls deeply. Interaction with the local culture takes place as they watch an amateur theatre performance by the "*bhadralok*". It was an episode from *The Mahabharata* about *Bhisma* and his promises. The enactment was probably in Hindusthani; the Bengalis did not understand the language but tried to comprehend the episode by watching the performance. The flavour of the songs was lost for them. However, the interest, receptivity, patience and tolerance of the travellers to a non-Bengali Indian culture cannot be overlooked.

Prajasundari Devi's (1897-1905) "*Jalapathay Kasi Jatra*" (1897) [trans. "A River Trip to Kasi" (2014)] records her journey from Calcutta to Kasi in a steamer boat. It was in the rainy season that she ventured out accompanied by her father. We get a glimpse of the fragile female who quaked with fear as lightning flashed against the sky, strong winds blew, and the rains came pelting down. The surging tide of the Ganges made her prefer to retire inside the cabin, only to be urged by the two men, her father and the boatman, to enjoy the cool exterior sitting on the steamer's deck. The Bengali women travellers had no exposure to the bleak weather conditions.

The scorching sun, frosty winter and high winds made them anxious enough to anticipate the worst and long for the comfort of the inside space. Prajasundari Devi could remember reading Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and was reminded of the shipwreck. She knew deep down that the sea storm and strong winds blowing over the Ganges were different things, but she still lost peace of mind during her journey to Varanasi. She is practical as she writes, "though the Ganges was nothing compared to the ocean even then sailing in a small boat during a storm was no dangerous" (258) and knows the foolishness to apprehend the worst, but she could not brush away the fear that subdues her excited spirit. Usually, the Bengali women travellers took the train from Howrah to Allahabad as they moved to Varanasi. The scenic landscape, the crowds of people, and the mingling of cultures meet the eye. The baggage they carry is light as food in stations is available for the travellers. However, Prajasundari Devi's journey by steamer was more structured travel. Provisions such as rice, lentils, flour, sugar and spices had to be taken along with utensils (259). The watery backdrop did not have much interest for a traveller's eye, and books, pens and inkpots were also taken to pass their time (260). They determined the length of the journey and moved at a leisurely pace, staying in the village of Patali for ten days (279). Difficulties were also faced as the waterway was more sojourned than the journey by a train. Help was scarce. The steamer ran out of coal on one occasion as they approached Kasi. However, Prajasundari Devi's father found around eighty maunds while bathing, and they managed to reach Mungher (280). Prajasundari Devi, like any Bengali woman traveller, probably preferred a more predictable circumstance. Although she does not give



her subjective opinion as she had during the heavy rains, she must not have been comfortable facing one crisis after another during the course of the journey. One is reminded of travellers encountering varied hardships in the older days when they went on a pilgrimage, and reaching the destination was seen as an achievement after the adventures of the way.

Some fragmentary travel experiences of Swarnakumari Devi (1856-1932), the fourth daughter of Debendranath Tagore, were published in *Bharati* (1912). Her travel accounts are also secular, and many times, she travelled within India as a pilgrim, and one of her destinations was Allahabad. As she steps into the outside space and boards the horse carriage to depart for the Howrah station, she faces strange emotional turbulence exposed to the noisy chaos and rushing movements of the passengers and porters. The station seems like the endless sea (104). She does not forget Socrates dada, the whimsical (107) travelling companion, who made the journey more amiable. She reminisces about her first train journey.

After that what joy I had felt in seeing the widespread world in front of my caged eyes, when I saw for the first time the sun rises in the early morning shy, when I saw the first sunrays fall on a small range of hills near the vast expanse of the open green fields... I have travelled by train several times after that, seen so many new sights, but have never felt that kind of happiness again. (109)

Freedom pervades her senses, and she feels the upsurge of resistance that lay couchant in the heart of a Bengali woman for long:

All my hope was in vain. I also thought that though there was a lack of Aryan blood in the Bengali heart, there was instead a rise of Aryan blood in the Bengali women- it swelled up at the beating of a flower, something that would not have happened earlier when beaten with difficult weapons... God did not permit me even one drop of water though I was sitting inside an ocean. (104)

A Bengali woman confined within the "andarmahal" had little scope to be acquainted with the real geography, and Swarnakumari Devi was no exception. She is as naïve as her little Ranu, who understands a mountain as something that rises up against the sky as her mother could best think to define it as a big heap of earth similar to a mud mound in their garden. She wonders what an ocean would be like because she had never sat on its shores.

The scenic beauty of the changing landscape is more elaborately detailed – the clear sunny sky, the series of little thatched houses amidst the trees huddled together and basking in the sunshine. Chilled air and the mild breeze announced the oncoming spring. Farmers busy themselves cultivating the fields, and voices calling out to each other could often be heard. However, amidst the beauty, the division of class and caste does not escape her notice. She mentions the water peddlers or "bhari" who were only empowered to carry drums of water to the houses of the Brahmins (111). The washerwoman toiled hard, beating the clothes on a wooden board. She was sad to see the dirty, tattered clothes that the woman wore. Probably, Swarnakumari Devi lived the



life of the "bhadramahila" in the "andarmahal" of a "banidibari" where the servants were cleanly attired and did not reek of poverty, which was a part of the bitter reality. She had never seen the exploitation of human labour and the troubles they faced to make their end meet. Her casual comment shows her ignorance of the real human situation:

Like people who only found fault with others, she too spent her life cleaning dirty clothes of other people and did not feel it was necessary to clean her own clothes. (116)

"Darjeeling Patra" (1889) is a letter she sends to her brother from Darjeeling, a hilly district in Bengal. The letter noticed a range of socio-cultural representations of the places of her travel. The entire letter has the metaphor of a "caged bird" (118), which symbolically represents her sickly condition as she fought to keep her last breath as well as the detrimental condition of Bengali women shackled to domesticity. However, Mall Road became a point of everyday visits when she stayed in Darjeeling to better her health. The greenery on both sides of the road leading to the Mall enthralls her. She mentions about the people she came to know. Du_ Babu's daughter impressed her because she could ride the horse like any English lady wearing a sari. However, Du_ Babu was cynical, preferring the English clothing, which made it more convenient for the rider. She appreciates the way in which men keenly extend their support to their womenfolk, trying to educate them in the ways of the outside world. Du_ Babu praised the Marathi style of draping sari, which allows women to access mobility like men.

Her description of Darjeeling would make one think that she was describing an unreal place and

that it existed only as a fragment of her imagination. However, the writer does not fail to reveal her dissatisfaction when she finds the land bereft of green. In another letter from Sholapur in 1892, Swarnakumari Devi mentioned her dissatisfaction with the place (128). The place was located close to the sea but had no ponds. The distance of twenty-four hours from Calcutta and Darjeeling was equally tiring. The sensitive mind of the traveller was not prepared to take in the extreme change that met her sight. The woman's expectation of finding artistic architecture is foiled, and the beauty of Bombay, the cityscape, is all that she has to remain satisfied with. The roads are wide, streets are clean, shops are decorated, and houses are generally multi-storeyed and have beautiful gardens (129-130). She had to remain contended with the dull realism of daily lives that unfolded before her. She observed the weavers' family, who lived a little distance from their house. A group of women wearing dirty saris used to greet them while straightening the coloured cotton yarn with two pieces of wood. Sometimes, men and women were found carrying piles of wood on their heads. Public mobility meant a couple of "tongas" or horse-drawn carriages or bullock carts which trotted away speedily. Men wore turbans and had long moustaches. Midway was Motibagh, where men gathered to play tennis. The appearance of the people reminds the author about the "bargis", the much-feared Marahatta horsemen who had invaded the western part of Bengal and ravaged villages for ten years (1741-1751): "Their heads were shaven, the tuft of hair curled up, their physique strong and well-build, faces very determined which revealed a kind of 'nothing to fear' attitude" (133). The presence of the men probably intimidated her instead of comforting



her. She also becomes a spectator to the procession of Muharram, where the Muslim participants mask and paint themselves. They dressed like tigers, danseuse, monkeys and also as English men and women (133). Swarnakumari Devi's observation reminds one of the Bhaktinian carnivalesque and colonial mimicry in the hubs of English domination as the natives display a staunch resistance ridiculing the English domination.

Apart from Darjeeling, Srinagar and Kashmir are other places where many Bengali women travellers have travelled. Sushama Devi (1881-1964) found Kashmir to be the heaven on earth with soft snow clothing and green. "Srinagarer Pathe" (1916) [trans. "On the way to Srinagar" (2014)] notes the racial discrimination as an English Lady fidgeted travelling with dark-skinned Indians accompanied by two dogs in the same compartment (326). However, when eminent Indians came to meet them as they crossed different stations, the Lady realised that Sushama Devi and her family were not ordinary Indians but respectable Bengali "*Bhadralok*". Her attitude changed, and she willingly shared cakes and sweets with the writer's nephew. The writer and her family felt bad and could not ignore the prejudice the woman had previously displayed. A calm resistance is offered as they take pleasure in ridiculing the Lady openly in their native tongue: "We were enjoying the undesirable anger of that lady. My sister and A__ started making fun of her in Bengali" (326). For the first time, we find that cross-cultural encounters turn bitter for the traveller. Unlike the Marathis and the Parsis, who openly interacted with other cultures, Sushama Devi finds the Punjabis different. The common Punjabis mocked a "sari-clad foreign

woman" as "*sariwallis*". She was also sensitive to the change of clothing as the train stopped in Amritsar. She describes it as a land of turbans where irrespective of class or caste, all men wore a white turban on their heads (329). The clothing of men and women was almost similar, and they wore regular pyjamas and knee-length kurtas made of everyday clothing. Rarely did she come across a Punjabi woman wearing a sari, and she was elated when she came across one. Sari-clad women accompanied by men make her proud, and she writes:

In my sister's house I had also seen a few upper-class Punjabi ladies wearing sari and this made me assume that probably modern genteel Punjabi ladies found the sari more beautiful, attractive and expressive of feminine beauty than their traditional pyjama kurta and took to wearing it. Frankly speaking a woman wearing male clothes like the pyjama kurta seemed a bit awkward in our eyes. (330)

The fondness of the Bengali women travellers for open green spaces, delicate artistry and historic architecture is common in their narratives as they move within India. Curiosity about other cultures and foreign religions is also noteworthy. Hiranmayee Devi's (1868-1925) schooling in Doveton and Bethune prompted her interest in Christianity, and "Bandeler Girja" (Bandel Church) (2012) is a short prose narrative that the Christian rituals of worship. Although the Church was conservative in entertaining the Christians alone, she had been allowed to attend the services on a day in November dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Hindu rituals form a comparative frame of reference as she tries to extend her understanding



of the rites performed by the Church. The melody of the choir during confessions reminds her of a merry festival from her childhood days (190). She is also touched by the serenity of the paintings from the Bible on the walls of the Church and cannot help feeling the presence of the all-pervasive Mother standing tall and calm in the sanctum sanctorum. The attire of the priests, their performance at the altar, the offerings, the burning candle and the incense, furthered her spiritual experience, differentiating it from the clamorous noise during Hindu rituals. An intonation of universal beauty is felt as the Holy Mother and the Holy River unite the similarity of the human heart irrespective of the place to which they belong or the religion they believe in:

At the time the evening sky was full of differently shaped clouds. In that half-light and half-shade the Mother was standing amidst the sky with a child in her arms.

Down below, the Ganges was flowing down at her own pace and it seemed as if she was carrying the love in her heart for the whole world. (193)

Bengali women in the "andarmahal" are taught to be homemakers and are encouraged to take an interest in cooking. Soudamini Devi (1847–1920), in her travelogue *Vizigapattam*, mentions that she served an entire banquet of "meat, luchis, malpoas, papad and many more items" to introduce the Bengali cuisine to the Dutch family living next to them. In the matter of cross-cultural exchange, Soudamini Devi introduces the Europeans in the outside space, the palate of the Bengali "andarmahal" that had influenced her culturally. The familiarity of relationship that the women have in the

"inside" space bonds also make her long for the same during public interactions. She feels more comfortable when the children of the Dutch family address her as granny.

CONCLUSION

Thus, to conclude we can say that from the selective reading of the travel writings and travel narratives of the Bengali women from Tagore's household, it is evident that they were free from cultural prejudice as they "gazed" at the other foreign culture. Mostly, they are subjective experiences of the travellers. The female travellers gave a realistic description of the twentieth-century Indian societies. They were open to cross-cultural influences. Overall, the travel accounts of Bengali women from Tagore's household have significant expanse of prospect for future research.

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