***Travel Culture, Travel Writing and Bengali Women, 1870-1940*. Jayati Gupta. Routledge, India, 2020, 290 pages, Hardcover, Rs. 995**

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Travel Culture, Travel Writing and Bengali Women, 1870-1940 by Jayati Gupta focuses on the travel writings by Bengali women from the undivided Bengal province during the colonial period. The book is one of its kind as it forwards the unheard voices of these women, most of whom have never gained prominence in the field of travel writing study. One of the central reasons for such oblivion is the male predominance over the genre of travel writing, as travelling was often considered a male prerogative. Patriarchy has always imposed different restrictions upon the movement of women. The allocated space for women, according to the patriarchal notion, is the home, and henceforth women have always been associated with immobility and domesticity. On the contrary, freedom, recklessness, and a fondness for adventure have always been the best and ideal attributes of a man. Then there is no wonder that the earlier travel narratives that survived through the ages were predominantly male narratives where women had little or almost no role. But they were not completely absent from the texts either. In each period, numerous women travellers travelled as companions to their husbands or father, but the accounts of their experience of the journey have often been dismissed as "quotidian and self-congratulatory" (Gupta xviii). It was only after the late eighteenth century, as observed by Carl Thompson, when tourism flourished and became more widespread, that the opportunity for women to travel for pleasure and recreational purposes increased (169). Women started to travel and publish their travel accounts. But most of these accounts are predominantly Western travel accounts. As Mary Morris observed, "[E]arly women travel writers were women of the upper class in European society, invariably white and privileged" (Morris, quoted in Siegel 2).

For a long time, travel writing from third-world countries remained neglected in academia. It is only in recent times, along with the flourishing of postcolonial studies, that travel writing from third-world countries has gained a critical impetus. But still, a major part of the critical studies focuses only on male travel writings. Gupta brings a fraction from the huge corpus of women travel writing from South Asia into sharp focus. As she reflects, "Since South Asian women's travelogues have been largely excluded from critical studies of the genre, my attempt is to bring a fraction of these into the discourse and view these as complementary to masculine travel accounts that are acquiring somewhat more visibility" (xviii).

Gupta's book, *Travel Culture, Travel Writing and Bengali Women, 1870-1940*, veers around the travelling of Bengali women who wrote about England, India, and Japan. The book is mainly divided into three sections— "Westward Travels," "Travels in Aryavarta," and "Japan as a Site of Travel." Besides, the book also comes with a "Foreword" written by Geraldine Forbes, a "Preface," where Gupta discusses the making of the book and the aim of the book, and an "Introduction" that focuses on how the trope of travel has always been a part of Bengali literature and how the form of travelling has evolved throughout the ages.

The first section, "Westward Travels," deals with the westward journey of Bengali Women like Sunity Devee, Krishnabhabini Das, Jagatmohini Chaudhuri, Abala Bose, and Durgabati Ghose. Sunity Devee travelled to England in 1887 as the maharani of Cooch Behar with her husband, Nripendra Narayan, the Maharaja of Cooch Behar. In the excerpt, translated by Gupta, we get the vivid details of how she was accepted by the British people, especially the British Royal household. Her travel account abounds with the praise of English Lords and Ladies. Sunity Devee travelled to England at a time when the taboo of *Kalapani* crossing was staunchly prevalent in Hindu society. But she didn't face any social repercussions due to her certain class privileges, unlike Krishnabhabini Das, who had to face social ostracisation upon her return from England. Like Sunity Devee and Krishnabhabini Das, Jagatmohini and Durgabati Ghose both were fascinated by the English life and manner, as evident from the excerpts translated by Jayati Gupta in the book. Abala

Bose, too, praised the British in her travelogue for being "assiduous in work and play" (Bose, quoted in Gupta 88).

The second section of the book, "Travels in Aryavarta," deals with the travelling of Bengali women like Prasannamayee Devi, Nanibala Ghosh, Hemlata Devi, Subodh Kumari Majumdar, Shanta Devi through North India. Prasannamayee Devi's journey to Etawah belongs to the "hawa-badal" narrative – a narrative based on a journey purposefully taken to recuperate from ill health – as she was travelling to Etawah to recover from illness. Nanibala Ghosh's travel narrative, *Aryavarta* (1933), is enriched with the description of the heavenly beauty of Kashmir Valley. Hemlata Devi's account speaks of her travel to Kathmandu to accompany her husband, who practised medicine there. The book was written as a response to the readers' curiosity about Nepal, evoked by her previously published articles on Nepal in *Prabasi*. *Karachi Patra* (*A Letter from Karachi*, 1904) by Subodh Kumari Devi is written in the form of a letter to her brother, describing her travel experience in an unknown land and how she felt uncomfortable among the unknown people whose language she did not understand. Shanta Devi's travel account deals with her journey to Peshawar via Lahore. The narrative is full of in-depth observation of people and places she encountered during her travels. She also talked about how the railway could connect an entire nation and make people aware of the varied cultural diversity of the land.

The third section of the book, "Japan as a Site of Travel," deals with the various journies of Hariprabha Takeda, Abala Bose, Saroj Nalini Dutt, Charubala Mitra, and Shanta Devi to Japan. Saroj Nalini Dutt travelled to Japan in 1920. Apart from describing the life and culture of Japan, a major part of her travelogue deals with the Japanese education system for women. As reflected by the extract translated by Gupta, the education system in Japan was not gender biased. Girls in Japan had equal rights to education as boys. The girls ' school in Japan reminded her of "the abysmal condition" (Dutt, quoted in Gupta 229) of the girls 'schools in India. Like Saroj Nalini Devi, a major part of Charubala Mitra's, Abala Bose's, and Shanta Devi's travelogues, too, focus on women's education in Japan. Shanta Devi, in her travelogue, also speaks about the women's health care system in Japan. While staying in Japan, she visited a Women's medical college and a maternity hospital and talked about how women engaged themselves in different healthcare services. Hariprabha Takeda's travelogue, *Bangamahilar Japan Jatra* (1915), stands out from the rest of the travelogues as it describes a "Bengali's journey to Japan but also because of Hariprabha's position as a member of a Japanese family" (Gupta 195) as her husband was Japanese by birth. Apart from the description of Japanese family culture and customs, her travel account also provides us with a vivid description of how the world war affected Japan.

Finally, Gupta concludes her discussion with the observation that though these women were travelling as companions to men (except Jagatmohini), the voice and the experience they were representing in these texts were not the cumulative experience of both parties but solely their own. It is through their own encounter that they explore the question of identity and gender equality. The act of coming out of the patriarchal convictions, thus, is a form of social revolution enacted by these women, which may be seen as the direct outcome of education and literacy. Travelling, therefore, brings with it an emancipatory and liberating effect for women. Rightly Gupta says, "Female mobility, therefore, was considered a liberating experience that was later inevitably linked to a historical trajectory privileging democratic practices and political freedom" (255).

If travel is considered a form of self-refashioning, by moving out of their socially sanctioned sphere and publishing their accounts, these women broke the patriarchal restrictions imposed upon them. Unlike the Western women who ventured out to seek freedom, these women were not looking for means to escape their social roles. According to Susan Bassnett, "[T]he woman traveller was somehow in flight from something, seeking to escape from the constraints of her family or her society" (Bassnett, quoted in Gupta xviii). Gupta rejects Bassnett's claim and argues that the middle-class Indian women who were

travelling out were not seeking freedom from family or social restrictions. According to her, "[T]hese women had acquired education and were seeking improvement in their marginalised position, both for themselves and for other women leading constricted lives" (Gupta xviii). All these women were propagandists of women's education as they realised that the real progress of the nation is not possible without the upliftment of women's condition, which is not possible without education. The extracts, all taken together, represent their collective endeavour for women's emancipation. As Gupta has commented, "[T]he extracts selected cumulatively project the concept of social transformation for women through building up networks and movements that could inspire collective actions" (256).

Thus, Jayati Gupta's *Travel Culture, Travel Writing and Bengali Women* can be read as an anthology of women's travel writing from the Bengal province that speaks about the rich tradition of vernacular travel literature and how women were a part of it. The book comes with translations of the selected excerpts, translated by Gupta herself, from the original Bengali travel texts by these women, which makes the book unique. Each translated passage is preceded with background information about the travel writer, which helps us to contextualise their writing in the contemporary scenario. As far as the translations are concerned, though they are done meticulously by Gupta herself, there always remain some questions in the reader's mind regarding the authenticity and accuracy of the translated text as the text loses its essence to some extent in the process of translation when it moves out of its original linguistic and cultural context. Yet again, translations are necessary for a wider audience who are not familiar with the original language, and by translating these age-old texts into a global language, Gupta ascribes a kind of cultural permanency to these texts.

The detailed archival research in the book helps the readers to understand the women's condition in colonial Bengal. But all the women discussed in the book belong to the upper-class Hindu and Christian families. Some of them are also part of "Brahmo Samaj." Gupta explains how, from the mid-19th century onwards, education for women was spearheaded by missionaries and the Brahmo reformists, who created the first concept of women's liberation. The association of those families with the Brahmo Samaj results in a liberal upbringing of these women and affects their education. The class privilege of these women plays an important role in shaping their experience of travelling. For example, upon returning from England, Sunity Devee did not have to face any social ostracisation, while Krishnabhabini was ostracised from her daughter and family for the taboo of *Kalapani* crossing. Being a Christian, Jagatmohini didn't have to face any social repercussions. But as time passed and the journey to the West became more frequent, the taboo faded. That is why we didn't find any mention of the taboo of *Kalapani* in Durgabati Ghosh's account. She was travelling to England much later than her predecessors, in 1932.

As evident from these accounts, all of Gupta's women belong to privileged cast and upper-middle-class Hindu and Christian families. Though the title of the book mentions "Bengali Women," as far as the subject is concerned, the book only focuses on the travel accounts of Upper-class Bengali women who hailed from privileged families. Despite Gupta's effort to change the mode of critical study on Travel Writing by making it more inclusive, the history of travel writing in South Asia still remains "a story of exclusions" (Gupta xvii) where a larger section of women travel writers still remains at the fringe of literary studies.

Nevertheless, the book is an asset in the field of Indian travel writing study as it portrays the importance of travelling in the context of women's education and female emancipation. The translated passages from different travelogues that span up to several decades portray how women's lives were changing. Many of these women were travelling outside of India to evaluate different socio-political institutions and skills that may be valuable in the upliftment of Indian society. As Geraldine Forbes has rightly commented in the "Foreword" of the book, "What makes this book especially valuable is the way in which

very different women engaged with the project of redefining the ideal woman and her role in the family and society" (Forbes, quoted in Gupta xiv).

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