At the Crossroad of Decolonial Studies: The Gaze of a Woman in a Travel Narrative in Colonial Bengal

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"…how one can think of Asia today through its conflicting modernities, wars, and a spectrum of differences, that nonetheless coexist with legacies of kinship and intimacy that are becoming increasingly harder to define in the age of globalization."

— Rustom Bharucha, *Another Asia: Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin* (xxiii)

"The potential of Asia as a method is this: using the idea of Asia as an imaginary anchoring point, societies in Asia can become each other's points of reference, so that the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt. On this basis, the diverse historical experiences and rich social practices of Asia may be mobilized to provide alternative horizons and perspectives. This method of engagement, I believe, has the potential to advance a different understanding of world history."

— Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as method: Toward Deimperialization* (212)

Introduction: South Asia as a Method?

This paper is partly a response to the two provocative propositions, "…how can one think of Asia today" taken from Rustom Bharucha's book *Another Asia*, and "The potential of Asia as Method," that Chen draws from "China as a method" (246), and re-signifies it with new content and objective. These two perspectives work as two operative axioms around which this paper is laid out. A gender angle based on a close reading of a selected travel narrative by a Bengali woman who travelled to Nepal at the turn of the twentieth century further qualifies the argument. What is at stake in this discussion is the inclusion of this 'gaze of a woman' and the salience of such a gaze in rethinking the question of the social within South Asian immediacies. An idea of South Asia through a married, educated and creative woman's gaze is not necessarily a sui generis. Still, it does throw up interesting tropes and affinities often overlooked by the male accounts. It compels one to explore newer possibilities of contextualising South Asian studies in registers that are not ethnocentric but rather exude new ethos. Both Bharucha and Chen tried to unearth networks of intimacies and affinities forged by various thinkers, primarily men (other than stray references to women), across Asia in the long nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These illuminating men (and women) from various parts of Asia travelled across Asia and wrote profusely about their experiences, friendship and commonality without lapsing into romantic idealisation or essentialisation. In retracing these threads of intimate encounters both in the past and the present, Bharucha and Chen have respectively opened up new vistas before decolonial studies in Asia. Their cumulative contribution, I want to argue, holds up one important signpost to how decolonial studies can reconfigure some of its conceptual paradigms from an Asian perspective. The discursive terrain that Bharucha and Chen roll out does not resort to conventional binary divisions. Their studies, in fact, speak volumes on the kind of relational bonds that used to exist among various thinkers in Asia, where consensus was as valued as dissension. These interactions produce a different panorama of heterogeneity where differences flourish across converging alterities.

The exchange between Okakura Tenshin and Rabindranath Tagore is one definite case in point.[1] Tagore had a very different understanding of Asia that often did not quite resonate with what Okakura and his contemporaries in Japan espoused. But, importantly, that did not stop them from meeting and sharing their thoughts on multiple occasions. In fact, the rich tribute that Tagore paid to Okakura in Japan in 1927 shows how collectively they meditated on their respective thoughts and experiments. Any project that searches for new

ideas about Asia has to get back to these profound exchanges of thoughts. Women, too, are a seminal part of these networks of interactions that span different spaces and temporalities. Women, who travelled to various parts of Asia, stayed in different places, and wrote in Bengali or English about their accounts have left behind a very rich and thoughtful repertoire. Decolonial studies in Asia will remain incomplete unless these works are engaged with. Many of the ideas within decolonial theory are still tilted towards Eurocentric paradigms, making interactions between nations in the Global South almost impossible without taking refuge to the Western episteme. This actually reminds us of what Dipesh Chakrabarty said long back in the 2000s: that Europe is both 'inadequate' and yet 'indispensable'. However, what Chakrabarty in 'provincialising Europe' did not exhaustively address is the issue of what happens when one takes up the object of inquiry from Asian societies, or to be more specific, South Asia. Would Europe still be indispensable? Does the question of 'inadequacy' at all arise? Or is it that when one operates only within European paradigms to investigate complexities of non-European spaces, reference to European epistemes becomes paramount? Subsequently, one may ask why we only fall back on Anglo-American or Westphalian references to discuss ideas of nation, democracy, culture, and social systems, which have been equally debated and argued by scholars who depended on Asian archives. Does it not show our unfamiliarity with the rest of the world and, therefore, haplessly taking refuge in works that deal with historical materials predominantly from Western Europe? Where does Asia, or for that matter, South Asia, figure in such references? Decolonial studies start from these polemics that postcolonial theory was handcuffed to European knowledge systems. As a consequence, what is required according to this line of thinking[2] is to keep the focus back on expanding the horizon of 'inter-referencing' (Chen 2016) within Asia. One needs to constantly prod how new perspectives embedded in differing contexts of Asia can synergise the field of decolonial studies. New influxes of concepts can only emerge when one engages with the kind of articulations that Bharucha and Chen have explored.

A study such as this will surely change the ordering of self/other, as it would bring to attention new optics and new conceptual vocabularies to render visible diverse thought geographies. It, in turn, promises to unleash newer templates of subjectivities across gender, caste, class, and ethnic identities. When Aditya Nigam (61) rues at the fact that theory has not been sufficiently 'decolonised' and no 'outside' to theory has been conceded, it actually prompts one to investigate this space of the 'outside' further. Let us quote Nigam to clarify the point. According to him, "There is no outside to capital, there is no outside to modern, there is no outside to politics and so on" (61). This paper attempts to navigate this space of the 'outside' grounded in South Asia. It takes up one significant travelogue by a married Bengali woman named Hemlata Sarkar, who travelled to Kathmandu in Nepal with her husband at the beginning of the twentieth century. She put down her memorable experiences in an independent country in some incredible words that finally took the shape of a book titled *Nepal e Banganari* (*A Bengali Woman in Nepal*), published in 1912. Incidentally, her husband, Dr. Bipin Behari Sarkar, was a doctor who went to Kathmandu to work in the hospital, and he was neither the first nor the last one to go to Kathmandu for professional reasons. Jamini Sen, another significant woman from colonial Bengal, went to Kathmandu almost around the same time to act as the doctor in charge of the newly established women's hospital in Kathmandu in 1899. She spent nearly a decade discharging her medical duties. She, too, wrote down her memories of Nepal in different journal entries that mainly manifest her agony when the daughter she adopted from Nepal prematurely died in Calcutta. What this present paper wants to do is not just add newer dimensions to decolonial theory by analysing these writings by women; it refuses to see these memoirs as only serving the interests of a prospective traveller, where a quintessential womanly self is at work towards discovering the "process of self-actualisation" (Mewshaw 8) in a foreign land. Therefore, for many years, researchers have approached these travelogues as the specimen of the first women's writings in South Asia. A typical understanding of the "gaze of a woman" (Butt 53) framework dominates these scholarly contributions, probably at the cost of seeing these women as thinking subjects who deliberated on social and political discourses.

Simonti Sen's (2-8) study of Bengali women's travel narrative is an aberration in this trend. She has suggested that there is a whole lot of possibility of approaching travel as an 'impure' act as the word travel in Bengali means *Bhraman,* a combination of two words, *Bhram* and *an.* The word *Bhram* means the capacity to wander purposelessly. *Bhram* leads to a world of illusion and mindless wandering. One wonders to what extent *Bhram* can potentially deconstruct the rationalistic frames through which travel narratives are primarily explained and understood (Anderson 7-19). How *Bhram* destabilises that understanding could be a significant point of consideration. However, from these musings, it can be said that *bhram*, at the least, implies a radical 'outside' to travel literature. Simonti Sen did not quite take it up or further elucidate her concept, but it has the potential to push one to rethink the very discipline of travel literature as an outlandish *bhram*. Purposeful and purposeless wanderings converge at the subjectivity of a traveller, more so if the subject concerned is a woman who is better exposed to the subtle complexities of a liminal space.

Chen calls for imagining 'Asia as Method' to expand the scope of what he calls 'inter-referencing' by drawing upon various theoretical optics that social scientists in Asia have devised. Since we are focusing on a travelogue that was written by a Bengali woman from the colonial capital of Calcutta on a temporary trip to the capital of an independent state, Nepal, can we also think of South Asia as a method that reflects her ponderings? The distance between Calcutta and Kathmandu collapses in such an imaginary. Instead, concepts of 'friendship', 'pan-Asianism', 'trusteeship', '*samaduhkhasukhata*' and '*minjian*' animate her narrative. Hemlata Sarkar's constant 'inter-referencing' of Kathmandu and Calcutta perforce brings the proposition of '*samaduhkhasukhata*' into the limelight. Swatasiddha Sarkar, in a recent book, has argued that decolonial studies can enrich itself by constituting a space for 'South Asian anthropology'. According to Sarkar, such a study can provide an

> (O)pportunity to develop our own cross-cultural perspective as a 'third eye', or as a 'mental window', towards non-Indian cosmologies, and, correspondingly, non-Nepali cosmologies and methodologies, to know each other anthropologically. (Sarkar 9)

The travelogue of Hemlata Sarkar and the journal entries of Jamini Sen can be seen as developing a unique perspective of seeing South Asia along these lines.

Journeys Out: Hemlata Sarkar (1868-1943) in Kathmandu

In 1907, a Bengali woman hailing from a reformist family in Calcutta started contributing short pieces in Ramananda Chattopadhyay's Bengali periodical called *Probasi* from her then-current residence in Darjeeling. She wrote about her travel experiences in Nepal, where she went with her doctor husband, Bipin Behari Sarkar. Dr. Sarkar took a medical job in Kathmandu in 1904-05 to serve at the hospital. Dr. Jamini Sen, who went to Kathmandu a few years before Hemlata and her husband, encouraged them to take up the uphill journey to Kathmandu, especially when there were no proper roads to travel, and the transportation was frugal. Dr. Jamini Sen, on the other hand, was in Nepal to take charge of the newly built women's hospital in Kathmandu in 1899. Therefore, Hemlata and her husband already had a friend in Jamini Sen and other Bengalis who were stationed in Kathmandu to work as teachers, medics, and sundry, as well as other menial jobs in the royal palace.[3] Can we call these connections networks of debts that sprawled out across various sites in South and Southeast Asia? These networks of debts can be seen as constitutive forces required to forge any image of Asia.

After their arrival in Kathmandu, Hemlata took up her diary and recorded all minute details in segments that finally came as a book in 1912. The book was titled *Nepal e Banganari* (*A Bengali Woman in Nepal*). It evidently bears testimony to how travel literature written by

women in those days carried the 'woman's gaze' as one of its concept metaphors. Therefore, 'banganari' was featured as part of the title in several travelogues by women who went to England, Japan, Persia, and in places that are clubbed as Aryavarta.[4] In fact, the first travelogue in Bengali was titled *Englande Bangamahila* (*A Bengali Lady in England*), which Krishnabhabini Das wrote in 1885. The identity of 'Bangamahila' appears there as well, as it is this gaze that has been the focal point of the narrative. There is obvious reason to assume that Hemlata had this precedence in mind while writing her book. Moreover, Hemlata Sarkar's travelogue has a rigorous anthropological gaze at the centre of the text that also draws from the works of her predecessors in Bengal who, too, kept a thorough and inquisitive gaze to learn and illustrate the 'otherness',[5] and interstitially, rediscovers their own selves. These are some aspects that the researchers on travel narratives by women have already considered.[6] However, what concerns this paper is not how innovative Hemlata's narrative is or how far this narrative has successfully offset the dominance of male presence in travel literature. Rather, what this paper wants to focus on is whether an imagination of South Asia is evidenced by her accounts. How has South Asia figured in her travelogue, and what correspondences can this Asia possibly have with similar other illustrations of male intellectuals who travelled to different countries around the same time? Concepts such as '*samaduhkhasukhata*' and '*minjian*' will be invoked to better understand these connections and the operative space of women's gaze. Hence, these women were not just travellers who saw the 'other'; they were also thinkers who reckoned in the 'other' some similitude and commonality, which can potentially recalibrate the understanding of 'difference' and unravel newer coordinates of decolonial studies. Hemlata was as much concerned about women in Kathmandu as she was about the Buddhist lineage, the history of Nepal, the ordinary folks, and the internal world of the royal family. The natural beauty of Kathmandu moved her as much as she was enraged to witness the lack of basic infrastructure in Kathmandu, something that she enjoyed in the colonial capital of India, Calcutta. This further becomes evident from these words

> If anyone wants to visualize how *Sanatan* India was, Nepal could be their destination. No transportation (only the royal family had means to it in the valley), no railway, no electricity, no postal service, no telegram, no quality school, no college, no girls' school, no proper judicial system. There were only laborious farmers, workers, and animals who carried loads, easily available warriors and soldiers, and the family of Ranas who served the kings and queens. (Sarkar 150)

One of the refrains in all her experiences has been the constant wavering between her excitement at the fact that she was in an independent country even though it was under a monarchy and her despondency over what Kathmandu did not have, like proper roads, sanitation, drainage, school and others which colonialism in Calcutta brought. But before we jump to scrutinise her work further, some bit of biographical details are in order to bring to focus the milieu from where she came and what kind of processes of upbringing antedated her scholarly self that embarked on a blistering literary journey in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

The World of a Woman Litterateur: Hemlata and Her Milieu

Hemlata's entire family was known for their heretical thoughts and reformist zeal. Her father, Pandit Sivanath Sastri (1843-1919), was a renowned scholar who took on the Brahmanical forces in Bengal to create a space for women to pursue their goals independently. Shastri's involvement in the construction of various schools for women and in the development of the Brahmo movement left some indelible imprints on Hemlata. Later, her marriage with Dr. Bipin Behari Sarkar only aggrandised that process. Hemlata studied at Bethune College in Calcutta and received scholarships way back in 1889. She was also conversant in Sanskrit and used to recite poems from Sanskrit scriptures. Besides this travelogue, her other seminal works spanning nearly two decades include a history of India for children, one biography of her

acclaimed father in 1921, another biography of Brajendra Sundar Mitra and her travel accounts in Tibet, among others. She also regularly contributed various kinds of pieces to a children's periodical called *Mukul*, which her father started to publish in 1895. Therefore, she was educated and had the necessary creative exposure to later write and make a mark for herself. It is undoubtedly quite extraordinary of her to do all these at a time when women were not allowed to pursue education, and the conservative Brahminical elements in the society vociferously opposed liberal education for women.[7]

Hemlata's other major contribution includes her efforts in constructing a school for women in Darjeeling after she returned from Nepal and went to the hills of Bengal. When her daughters were not allowed to pursue education in a missionary school, Hemlata decided to establish a privately run girls' school in 1908. It was the first of its kind in the Darjeeling district, and the school was constructed out of the munificence of three women who belonged to three different royal families in Coochbehar,[8] Burdwan, and Mayurbhanj. Later, Hemlata aptly named the school Maharani Girls' High School, which continues to operate to this day. When such a dynamic and versatile figure had to go to Nepal, it was quite natural that she was not going to sit passively and only assist her husband. Instead, she penned her experiences and threw up some vivid and enduring images of the hill. She mentioned that the name Kathmandu conjured various mysteries and wonders among the residents of Calcutta, and through her travelogue, she wanted to dispel that.

Hemlata's decision to go to Kathmandu was itself an act of defiance in the very first place. She took the call to go out of the *antahpur*[9] as some of her predecessors did, and that definitely had a considerable spillover effect on other women who were forced to live within the confines of their homes. She explains at the beginning of her book that she primarily wrote to acquaint her readers, which included many women, with Kathmandu to expel all fears and misconceptions. When the book came out in 1912, it had separate segments on the people of Nepal, religious places in Kathmandu, Buddhism in Nepal, Buddhist scriptures found in Nepal, religiosities and national festivals, the beautiful surroundings of Kathmandu, history of Nepal, archaeological evidence, the royal family and the long lineage, and finally, in conclusion, her tribute and obeisance to the great Bada Maharani of Nepal who died in 1905. These sections apparently betray a fantastic narrative of travel written with alacrity and acute observational power. Her narrative has been structured around some tropes that unfold an image of South Asia where history, religion and culture ceaselessly flow into each other, enriching the texture of the text that unpacks various nuggets of everyday life of the common folks. Her constant mention of the common people also betrays a different sense of community and belonging. The following section further elaborates on this aspect.

Bengali Woman in Nepal: Home and the World

> (C)ivilized heroic independent Hindu Jati has become so subjugated and emasculated that all contemporary civilized races show pity towards them. Only two states have so far worn the bright signs of freedom on their neck. Among them, Nepal is the most important one. It is spread widely in the lap of the Himalayas and looks like an opulent garden of nature. It has diverse indelible beauties and is blessed with abundant natural resources. On the northern side of it are the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas, and on its feet are dense forests inhabited by dangerous animals and snakes. The Himalayan ranges are insurmountable for men. In the *Puranas*, these ranges are described as abodes of Gods and Goddesses. The almighty has made Nepal inaccessible, and hence they are still independent.[10] (Sarkar 157)

There are multiple strands interspersed in this dense passage from Hemlata's book. The very first line introduces Nepal not just as an independent state but also as a place where the 'civilised', 'heroic', and 'independent' Hindu *jati* inhabit. This reference to Hindu as a *jati* (race)

that is 'civilised' is clearly drawn from the structure of sentiments that she inherited being a resident of colonised India. She finds in Nepal members of the Hindu *jati* who are not subservient and infantile, in comparison to the state of Hindus in India. This description definitely echoes the colonial projections that depicted Hindu males as being emasculated and effeminate, something that Ashis Nandy extensively argued in *Intimate Enemy*. It is as a member of this colonised Hindu *jati* that she enters Nepal and exults at the potential of this same Hindu *jati* in an independent country. This contrast at the very inception of the text then takes her through a series of comparative frameworks as she continues to vacillate between home and the world. A shared sense of belonging enables her to see the Himalayas as the divine abode. Even though she reproduces some archetypes and sees Nepal through the prism available in her home, her description attains a different significance as she goes along and explores diverse features of social life in Kathmandu. For example, she sees and appreciates the cosmopolitan side of Kathmandu. She writes, "The capital of Nepal, Kathmandu is a multi-racial city; different races live here" (156). She gives extensive physical descriptions of various races and their facial and bodily appearances, which also points to how she is already in possession of a metropolitan outlook that the colonial modernity introduced to her.[11] While describing the women, she notes,

> The ordinary women of Nepal wear pieces of clothes which run for twenty to thirty hand lengths. They wrap themselves with it and fold it multiple times in front. The remaining parts are tightly fastened around the waist. The upper part is covered with shirts, shawls or simple drapes. There is no excessive use of *anchal* and no *purdah* over their heads. This style of dressing and lack of *purdah* make it clear that the ordinary women of Nepal were free of the customs of purdah and segregation. (Sarkar 160-161)

Later on, she describes the hairdressing styles, bangles, pearl necklaces, and so on. She mentions that women of all classes used to wear them. Nevertheless, when she sees how polygamy has been accepted alongside slavery in Nepali societies, she expresses her utter disgust. Among all the things that particularly drew her attention regarding the condition of women is the absence of the *antahpur*, which kind of liberates women from all restrictions of the private world and allows their appearance in public spaces. Women, as Hemlata underlines, can interact with their in-laws without inhibition. With some tinge of sarcasm, she mentions that no woman remains a widow in Kathmandu as re-marriage is common, as are extra-marital affairs. Finally, she also notes that women in Kathmandu are not used to prolonged fasting. Therefore, many of the rituals that women in Kolkata are forced to observe are missing in Kathmandu.

The aforementioned descriptions can be read as prototypes of how the self-other binary works in a travel narrative. However, a deeper investigation will also show that Hemlata is actually mobilising these comparative frameworks to realise the question of women's subjectivity at a time when European modernity has already injected a certain template of women's emancipation. Hemlata is refusing to buy that template. In fact, her attention was drawn towards how women in Kathmandu look "blessed with luck in their marriage" (Sarkar 161). Bada Maharani, who died in 1905, represents this more than anyone else. According to Hemlata, Maharani was an 'ideal wife', an 'ideal mother' (200-201) and a great philanthropist. About the conjugal life, this is what Hemlata wrote: "Their conjugal life was extremely blissful; they had a deep love for each other" (200). She also ecstatically mentions that this conjugal bliss is present across classes and castes. Therefore, even though Hemlata is using comparative frameworks, she is doing it to envision a different pan-South Asian understanding of women's issues; both the desire for the abolition of *purdah* and the attainment of an ideal marital life form two contrasting ends that converge at the identity of an independent, married, South Asian woman. Her encounter with this image of a free married woman holds up the notion of 'enlightened domesticity'[12] that many women writers who first started writing about women in colonial India *sotto voce* refer to. This actually relates to the idea of 'Sansar',[13] which

takes precedence over an individuated self. The other way of putting it would be that women like Hemlata conceived of emancipation in the converging alterities of individual self and domestic togetherness, where one begets the other. Hemlata's narrative is replete with these moments of symbiosis and productive ambiguities to negotiate the sentiments of a colonised Hindu woman. The fact that her husband, Dr. Sarkar, and her friend, Jamini, went to Nepal to develop the healthcare system reiterates how networks of affinity operated across social spaces in those days. The structure of the nation reified these affinities and turned them into enclosures.

The Old Asia that Rabindranath Tagore spoke about, which undoubtedly had its own share of romantic idealism and infelicitous filtering of information, did hold up a new possibility. Tagore was harping on a sense of beauty, '*sundar*' that he drew from his Upanishadic readings. This beauty encompasses all forms of life, generating in them its essential substance and elixir. This sense of all-encompassing beauty takes Tagore close to an unsurpassable horizon of humanitarianism in Asia, in spite of the divides and differences that abound in Asian societies. For Hemlata, these differences intermittently surfaced in her writings. But the difference between what women in Kathmandu experienced and what their counterparts in Calcutta had to undergo takes the form of '*samaduhkhasukhata*' and what in Chinese thinking is called '*minjian*'. Both these terms will be described later in the essay.

Journeys In: The *Re*turn

In all the travelogues that women wrote in colonial Bengal, one common strand has been their appreciation of hard-working people who toiled in fields, grew crops and subsisted on them. Prasannamayee Devi, in her visits to Northern India, Bimala Dasgupta in Kashmir, and Saroj Nalini Dutta in Japan, drew our attention to this singular labouring aspect of the respective communities. In a somewhat similar vein, Hemlata in Nepal took note of this,

> It won't be an exaggeration to say that Nepalese are farmers. All the households cultivate paddy and vegetables for their yearlong consumption in their respective lands. There are not many unfed people in Nepal like in India. Most of the houses have a cow or a bull, sometimes unpolished rice, golden wheat, and leafy vegetables. (Sarkar 160)

What further struck Hemlata was that the people across caste and class participated in agriculture, something that she could not imagine within the casteist society of India. Moreover, the cultivation of food was seen as something way better than working for the colonisers. This observation smacks off what she finds lacking in Calcutta and what, as an independent nation, Nepalese are following. These snippets of home fleetingly surface in Hemlata's observation, commentary and incisive remarks. The issue of the food crisis, lethargy of the gentrified Bengali Bhadralok, and constraints of the caste system contributed to Hemlata's gaze, and it was not limited to her only. These recurred in memoirs and travelogues of Prasnnamayee Devi, Saroj Nalini Dutta, Krishnabhabini Das, and others as well. It was not only that they were carrying their home, and therefore their gaze was mediated by it, but they also discovered a different cartography of home that is spatially much wider and embraces Pan-Asian values. Prasannamayee, for example, named her travelogue 'Aryavarta', which indicates her desire to own a space that, in turn, shapes her belongingness. These imaginaries are, therefore, as much about journeying out as they are about journeying in. They leave home only to *re*turn to a different home. These opposite movements create a penumbra, by the side of which they discover their subjectivity contingently. Indira Ghose (17) was of the opinion that these travel writings in the colonial period were "retrospectively composed."

These travelogues are narrativised accounts of unfamiliar landscapes, customs, people and cultures, which led to 'self-discovery' and 'transformation of the authorial self'. Ghose is not alone in underscoring the self-centricity in these writings, thus ascribing to them

a solipsistic centripetal force. According to this line of argument, whatever these women see and record is, therefore, predicated on self-referentiality. Kathmandu, in Hemlata's description, is as much about the place as it is about the memories of home that lurk on and interfere. One can consult the works of Barbara Korte and Prasun Chatterjee to understand this point further. Prasun Chatterjee (71), in particular, sees in these writings the convergence of two worlds that the author saw and the one she belongs to. Susan Bassnett (7-16), on the other hand, can offer a different problem of translation to study travel literature. How experiences of foreignness are translated and processed, how these authors, while constantly indulging in processes of translations, navigate otherness and difference can become the topic of research. Translation is definitely one significant register through which one could re-read these works. However, what needs to be further emphasised is how, in Hemlata's writing, an image is floated that inadvertently performs an act of subversion. Her narrative, in its quest to find commonality in difference, actually ends up reversing the colonialist/orientalist gaze. Hemlata constantly mentions how underdeveloped Kathmandu is, and in spite of the esoteric origin of its name,[14] Kathmandu has been affected by the impact of modernity that colonialism ushers in South Asia. Nepal is independent, but the British presence in Nepal and its cultural practices have started to corrode the local culture (198). Thus, large constructions are coming up, and a whiff of immorality is palpable in the air. To her dismay, influences of Western culture crept in at the cost of the spiritual-esoteric Kathmandu. Hemlata writes, "The biggest market of all in the city was Indrachak. One might mistake it for Burabazar of Kolkata. The market was full of imported goods from abroad" (158).

This consumerism is transforming Kathmandu. Its lineage and the glorious past are at stake. There is an attempt to find a similarity between what Calcutta witnessed after the arrival of colonial modernity and what Kathmandu awaited in the near future. This underlying desire to find commonality in the midst of difference is present throughout the narrative. In fact, two separate sections in the travelogue discuss the waning presence of Buddhism in Nepal and how Hinduism's aggression makes it a diminutive sect. She is proud of the Hindu identity, but that does not prevent her from commenting on how Shankaracharya invidiously burnt the Buddhist texts. Hemlata could sense a pan-Asian spirit in Buddhism. What 'Aryavarta' has been for Prasannamayee, Buddhism is for Hemlata. Thus, she mentions that Buddhism in Nepal is different from that in China, India, Japan, Tibet, and Sri Lanka. Buddhism in Nepal is mixed up with Hinduism, and the dividing line is fuzzy. Inter-religious marriages are allowed, and the Hindus and the Buddhists treat the same religious places as their holy shrines. Therefore, Buddhism was another marker of commonality that spread across Asia and took different forms. Buddhism is a living site of converging alterity. Hemlata's narrative is woven with numerous instances where she is actually on a quest to uncover nodes and points of convergence. The enormous amount of energy she spent gathering all information related to caste division, Brahminism, architectural innovations, the history of Nepal, Buddhism, temples and religious practices demonstrate an incipient imaginary of social anthropology.

Brian Hatcher, in one of his recent lectures in Kolkata, later published as a booklet, highlighted a very important point about Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar that holds significance in this discussion. He argues that Vidyasagar devised a unique format for doing sociology where he incorporated anecdotes and vignettes alongside rigorous data to invent what he calls "imaginative sociology" (Hatcher 24). In his words,

> I also coin the phrase "imaginative sociology" to highlight the contribution of Vidyasagar's own distinctive literary and creative gifts […] the term "imaginative" is meant not to diminish the validity of Vidyasagar's arguments, but to alert us to the fundamentally creative ways he adopted a new set of disciplinary tools to address the problems of his day. (Hatcher 24-25)

Vidyasagar's purpose was to stoke up sentiment to mobilise the emotive apparatus of his readers. Therefore, he included many incidents which cannot be factually proved. He packed

these incidents with solid data and sound analysis. This is a significant departure in social anthropology in India, as Hatcher is trying to show how a method of social research emerged from Vidyasagar's works long before the formal discipline was established in India. The details that Hemlata has collected and the analytical framework that she uses also echo some elements of 'imaginative' social anthropology. Hemlata is straddling the two worlds of imagination and everyday interaction to intensify the emotive appeal of her narrative. Even though Hemlata has used a fairly rationalist structure to compose her narrative, she does not stay aside from her narrative. She is a participant observer, and her stake in the narrative is quite evident. Her search is for similarity across differences.

Sudipta Kaviraj (259) explains a complex process through which similarity as an idea was conceived by Bhudev Mukhopadhyay in colonial Bengal. He shows this by an example of logic. Suppose there are two societies, A and B, and they are different from each other; the only way commonality can be established between them is by comparing them to society C, a 'third space'. By implication, even though A and B are different, their mutual difference from C brings out the similarity between them. This resonates in Hemlata's comparison of colonial Bengal with independent Nepal and how there potentially exists a possibility of forging similarity in contrast to social structures that colonialism tried to enforce in India. Hemlata sees Nepal and India through this lens of a 'third space' that colonialism in India embodies. This actually pushes her to explore *sadrsya* (resonance) in difference and alterity. Bhudev Mukhopadhyay (7) in colonial Bengal invoked the idea of *samaduhkhasukhata* (a commonality of happiness and suffering) to render an alternative framing of sociality that can buttress the cohabitation of opposites in Indian *samaj* (society). The shared values of *sukha* (happiness) and *dukha* (sadness) work as ties that crisscross differences in a transversal position. The women of Nepal and the women of Bengal crisscross along a line of love and devotion in Hemlata's rendering. To what extent this can ensure empowerment would depend on how empowerment is understood and on what terms and epistemic registers. This idea of *samaduhkhasukhata* bears an uncanny resemblance to what Chen describes as *minjian*, a commoner's society. According to Chen (237), "Minjian" roughly describes a folk, people's, or commoners' society, but not exactly — because while *min* means people or populace, *jian* connotes space and in-betweenness."

Hemlata, in her rigorous accounts of the Nepalese society and its people, veers around this horizon of the commoner's society. In fact, Hemlata finds that there is no discontinuity between the commoner's society and the inhabitants of the royal palace. *Samaduhkhasukhata* as an axiom operationalises *minjian*; Bhudev clutched onto this idea of *samaduhkhasukhata* as a counter to *gemeinschaft* in the Western cognitive sphere. *Samaduhkhasukhata* adds an element of compassion and collective suffering. Therefore, Kaviraj is right in seeing in Bhudev a monumental effort to reverse the Orientalist gaze. Bhudev looked back to the West with his own understanding of sociality premised on South Asia. This understanding of sociality looms large over Hemlata. Her travelogue reveals an image of South Asia, where differences and similarities cohabit and converge based on compassion.

Conclusion: How far is Kathmandu from Calcutta?

In 1907, after staying in Kathmandu for over two years, Hemlata had to *re*turn as her husband was seriously ill.[15] They went to Darjeeling to improve Bipin Behari's health. Another significant chapter of her life was waiting there to unfurl. Finally, when Hemlata decided to *re*turn, many of her initial excitements for an independent Hindu Nepal subsided. In fact, she was caught in a dilemma. She could see both the pros and cons of colonial Calcutta and independent Kathmandu. But is not this dilemma one of the hallmarks of the history of South Asia at her time? Partha Chatterjee (29-52) ironically uses the phrase "love and fear" to underline how this dilemma defined the collective unconscious at that time. Hemlata was very much part of this duality that split the intellectuals of her time. By the time she left, the Kathmandu sojourn had already teased an imaginative social anthropologist out of her.

Sudipta Kaviraj, back in 2010, in his seminal work, *The Imaginary Institution of India*, wrote a full chapter on the legacy of Bhudev Mukhopadhyay in social anthropology. He is of the opinion that Bhudev performs a valiant act of reversing the social gaze in an attempt to build up his image of Hindu society. Bhudev used Hindu anthropology to look back on the Occident. Kaviraj termed it as a "Reversal of Orientalism." Let me quote Kaviraj to realise the sheer power of his words

> (S)ocial theory done through concepts of an Indigenous tradition: historical and anthropological reflection about the self and the other, starting with a recognition of the contingency of these concepts themselves. I have labelled this project, which Bhudev outlined with admirable clarity, the idea of reverse anthropology. (Kaviraj 257)

Hemlata's book can be seen as a manifestation of this 'reversal' optic. She wrote this book with an image of Hindu society in mind. This, however, did not prevent her from critiquing the oppression of Buddhism at the hands of Hindu leaders. This probably clarifies the point that any attempt towards decolonial studies is incomplete unless it embarks on a parallel process of "deimperialisation" (Chen xi). This is where Hemlata moves ahead of Bhudev in appointing a double perspective of appreciation and self-critique. The thrust for deimperialisation can bring to relief the inner desires for control and internal colonialism. As a woman, she was better placed to understand the subtle grids of power. Finally, what Swatasiddha Sarkar meant by urging us to think of a 'periphery-periphery' relation to rethinking social anthropology in South Asia resonates in Hemlata's narrative in the mould of a travelogue.

Notes

[1] However, the imagination of Asia in Bharucha and Chen deliberately avoids romanticised notions like the "civilizational hypothesis" (Bhattacharya 2011) or the claims of putative "ideals of the east" (Okakura 1912) that some fictive Old Asia supposedly represented.

[2] See Nigam (2020) and Chakraborty (2021).

[3] Hemlata mentions in her travelogue that, "There are many Bengalis in Nepal on account of work. Some of them are doctors, some are teachers. Someone as Sri Rajkrishna Karmakar has been working here for many years, making guns, cannon etc. for the kings. The *Buddhijibi* (intellectual) Bengalis are present everywhere" (152).

[4] One can consult the works of Murmu (2009) and Gupta (2020) for more on this.

[5] In writing the "Foreword" to the translation of Durgabati Ghose's travelogue *The Westward Traveller*, this is what Ashis Nandy (2010, ix) writes: "(T)he romance of Europe she carried within her and communicated to her readers in a slightly out-of-breath tone […] was partly a discourse on India and partly a respectful, *sotto voce* argument with Europe within the cultural frame of India for the sake of Indians."

[6] Consult works of Sen (2005), Ghose (2010), Nandy (2010), etc.

[7] *Rabibasariya Niti Vidyalaya* (Sunday school for training in moral values), where Hemlata studied, was one among a few handful of schools that admitted women for education.

[8] Maharani Sunity Devi from the Cooch Behar State contributed handsomely for this school to come up. Sunity Devi's contribution to the construction of schools for women in different parts of Bengal is also noteworthy.

[9] The private world that is designated for women in Hindu households; it is also known as *Zenana* in the Muslim community.

[10] All the passages quoted from Hemlata's books in this article are translated by the author from the original Bengali. The original Bengali version is taken from Sarkar (151-202).

[11] Hemlata mentions in the book that she had consulted the works of Dr. Oldfield, Wright, Houghton, and Hodgson, along with others, to collect facts about the history of Nepal.

[12] For more on this, one can consult the works of Bhudev Mukhopadhyay's *Samajik Probondho* (Essays on Society) and Sudipta Kaviraj (2001, 254).

[13] For example, there are many references to *Sansar* in the works of Kailashbasini Devi, who is considered the first Bengali woman to write a book of essays in the vernacular. See Chakraborty & Chakraborty (2018).

[14] Kathmandu refers to a cottage made of wood at the heart of the city. This cottage was meant for the *fakir*, the itinerant *bhikshu*. When Hemlata went there, she saw that this cottage was still in place near the palace, as a reminder of the spiritual past that makes the city essentially secluded.

[15] There is another version of this return from Kathmandu, which is much less felicitous than what this clause of illness warrants.

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