

Travel as a Metaphor: A Short Introduction to the Travelogues on China Written in Bengali

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The first half of the 20th century unleashed a trend that saw Bengali personalities venturing beyond their enclosed boundary spaces. It all began with Vivekananda's travels to East and South-East Asia on his way to the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1893 as a Hindu representative from India.¹ This trend continued with Tagore's several consecutive travels to Europe and East and South East Asia.

Both their travelogues were bold and trendsetters in many ways. Vivekananda's voyage through the oceans (the so called forbidden water or *kala-pani*) violated the religious 'rules' codified by Hinduism. Similarly, he attempted to redefine Hinduism by alluding to its lost glory during his memorable speech at the Chicago Conference. His travelogue seems more like an account of an explorer than that of a Hindu representative taking a journey to the Parliament of the World's Religions. With his tongue in cheek humour and often-sharpened comparison between the people he met during his travel and Indians, he attempted to understand and criticize the conservative aspects of Indian society. In the 20th century with Tagore's understanding of the dissolving boundaries of the nation-state through literature and his idea

of universalism, this trend of crossing physical and ideological boundaries continued. Interactions with and among Asian countries increased to a great extent in the 20th century. Tagore's counter-nationalist position deeply influenced most of the travelers who traveled and wrote an account. Many of these travelogues acknowledge Tagore as an inspiration for their journey.

In the period spanning a century since, that is until the 2000s, about 25 Bengali travelogues, partially or entirely dedicated to China, have been written.² These travelogues can be categorized into four segments: travelogues written between 1900-1940 are mostly the account of travelers who went to China either

²The inception of a project on travel narratives was initiated under the coordinatorship of professor Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta as a part of the Centre of Advanced Study Programme of the department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University under the thrust area of 'Interactions with and among Asian countries' in 2005. The book titled the *Of Asian Lands: A View from Bengal : an Annotated Bibliography of a Century of Travel Narratives to Asian Lands in Bangla* (2009), jointly compiled by the author and Anjana Das is an annotated bibliography of twentieth century travel texts to Asian countries written in Bangla. There are texts related to travel in the South and South-east Asia and in East Asia. The traveler-authors come from an array of fields and include intellectuals, politicians, bureaucrats, linguists and people who travel for the sake of exploring a new world.

¹ Vivekananda's travel account *Paribrajak* came out in 1902.

with an intention to collect information for the British government or to fight for them (Kedarnath Bandyopadhyay in 1902³, Ashutosh Roy in 1900) or as an explorer who went to China and East Asian countries purely out of their own interest and to gather knowledge about the Chinese history and society (Indumadhab Mallick from 1904-05, Benoy Kumar Sarkar in 1914). Then there are travelers who got involved in revolutionary activities and traveled to know more about the anti-imperialist struggles in China and other East Asian countries (Ramnath Biswas from 1931-34, Bimal Mukherjee in 1926). From 1949 onwards, the number of travelers travelling to China suddenly increased to a great extent and this continued until the 1962 war. A large number from India traveled to China after being invited by the Communist Party of China in the late 1940's and 1950's. Many Bengali intellectuals as well as political activists like Gita Bandyopadhyay, Manoj Basu, Ksitish Basu, Debabrata Biswas, Sachindranath Sengupta and Hemanga Biswas traveled to China. After 1962, almost nothing was written and again after 1975 another new wave of travel to China began. Bengali intellectuals like Maitreyee Devi (c. 1975), Utpal Dutta (c. 1978-79), Chandana Mitra⁴ (c. 1970's), Kanak Mukhopadhyay (1980), Saroj Mohan Mitra (1984) and Suman Chattopadhyay's accounts discuss post Cultural Revolution China under communist rule.

Travelogues, 1930-1950

Below is a list of travelogues written between 1930 and 1950:

Title	Author-Traveler	Travel date	Publication date
<i>Maran Bijoyicheen</i>	Ramnath Biswas	1931	1941
<i>Lal Cheen</i>	Ramnath Biswas	1931	1943

³ The years mentioned here are the travel dates.

⁴ She traveled to China during the 1970's for a period of three months to study acupuncture. The introduction to her book "Willow Piner Chin" is written by Dr. Bijoy Kumar Basu, an important member of the medical team sent by Dr. Kotnis to China in 1938.

<i>Moskow Theke Cheen</i>	Gita Bandyopadhyay	1949 (November)	1952
<i>Cheen Dekhe Elam</i>	Manoj Basu	1952 (Peace Conference in Beijing)	1953
<i>Naya Chine Challish Din</i>	Ksitish Basu	1952 (Peace Conference in Beijing)	1953
<i>Abismaraniya Cheen</i>	Sachindranath Sengupta (Dramatist and Journalist)	1953 (delegate of Bharat SantiSamsad)	1954
<i>Antaranga Cheen</i>	Debabrata Biswas	1953 (16 July-27 August)	1978
<i>Swadeshe Bideshe Churashi Batsar</i>	Bijanraj Chattopadhyay	1954	1958 (1st publication), 1975
<i>Abar Cheen Dekhe Elam</i>	Hemanga Biswas	1957 and 1974 ⁵	1975

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⁵ Hemanga Biswas traveled to China twice, once in 1957 and then in 1974. He described both his travels to China in the travelogue *Abar Cheen Dekhe Elam* published in 1975.

Travelogues, 1949-60

Travelogues written between 1949 and 1960 are of immense importance. They are very similar in nature. This series starts with the travelogue of Gita Bandyopadhyay who traveled to China to participate in the Pan Asian Women's conference held in Beijing. In the 1950s about 6 travelers from Bengal traveled to China with professed political purposes. As an outcome of a mission mostly backed by the left leaning authorities, most of the travelogues eulogize the new era of China under the governance of Mao Zedong. The narratives are full of similar tropes, traits and motifs.

One of the most remarkable travelogue was *Moscow Theke Chin* (from Moscow to China) by Gita Bandyopadhyay, which among others, also discusses post 1947 India and its attempts to understand the true meaning of freedom. Bandyopadhyay, a Communist Party and MARS (Mahila Atma-Raksha Samiti) member, actively participated in the various Afro-Asian women's solidarity campaigns in Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) from the 1950s to the 1970s. She voiced the discontent expressed by the Indian leftist women's movement against Nehruvian policies that failed to consider the sufferings of working class women and neglected the rights of women affected by the feudal system of land distribution in India. A powerful, yet marginally discussed woman activist from Bengal, Bandyopadhyay traveled to Moscow en-route to China in 1949 to participate in the Pan-Asian Women's conference held in Beijing. She described her meeting with women activists like Betty Millard and Marie Claude Vaillant-Couturier in her travelogue. Although her narrative is replete with stereotypical images of happy farmers, workers, prosperity of industry, agriculture and education, it is an important testimony to the political awareness among Chinese people and the communist movements across Asian countries. Her travelogue was published much later in 1952 as her papers were in the custody of the Indian immigration office.

The travel account by Manoj Basu (*Chin Dekhe Elam – I Saw China*) and Ksitish Basu (*Naya Chin e Challish Din – Forty Days in*

New China) (both published in 1953) narrate their journeys to Beijing to attend the International Peace Conference in 1952. Both the travelogues muse on very similar yet interesting images of land reformation, growing industrialization, revolutionized education, health and agrarian systems. These travelogues discuss the young painter Maqbool Fida Hussain who was a part of the Indian delegation and his paintings on China that were exhibited in Beijing and attracted high praise and international attention. Another delegate of the Indian Peace Council, Sachindranath Sengupta visited China in July 1953. His travelogue *Abismaraniya Chin* (The Unforgettable China), narrates his meetings with Mao Zedong and other communist party leaders. Much similar to the other travelogues written in the 1950's, this one too describes the so called progressive measures taken up by the Communist Party of China in the field of labour, health, education, farming, and so on. Their writings harp on China's achievements in land reformation, using vernacular languages as the medium of instruction for higher education, rapid industrialization and new kinds of entertainment keeping their utilitarian aspects in mind.

Travel narrative as a genre

The discussion of travelogues must consider travel narrative as a genre in itself. Travel writings were hardly accepted as a 'sub-literary' genre and was mostly considered to be the documentation or archiving of the individual traveler's random experiences. While writing, the travelers in general do not impose a rigid or pre-determined structure to their random, nonlinear and almost chaotic experiences because that would hinder knowledge production for the readers. A travelogue, highly interdisciplinary in nature, is an embodiment of different discourses, which would help the reader to constantly broaden their horizon and understand another country and culture. A travelogue can raise questions on the traveler-author's own ideas of the self and the other and his/her subsequent attempt at creating binaries. While we, as readers, question the subjectivity and ideologies in a travelogue, the author as a traveler and a foreigner in another country can constantly answer our queries by revealing his/her

plethora of experiences. Problem arises when the reader tries to corroborate the traveler's narrative with the historical reality. Travelogues alone do not provide us with significant points of authentication. For example, as described in his narrative, the traveler Ramnath Biswas met a significant revolutionary figure, Raja Mahendra Pratap who was residing in Beijing during the Sino-Japanese war. Raja Mahendra Pratap was indeed residing in Beijing in between 1931-1934. But it is unclear if Ramnath met him in Beijing. It is even more difficult to figure out the true identity of the person named Wang who followed and helped Ramnath Biswas throughout his journey.

Similarly, Gita Bandyopadhyay, on her way to Beijing to attend the Pan Asian Women's Conference, met Marie Claude Vaillant-Couturier and Betty Millard who actively participated in the post-world war women's movements. No cross evidences can be found to validate these personal narratives. The people mentioned in the travelogues eventually become an integral part of the narrative. Their obvious presence and ambiguous identities often lead us to question the authenticity of such meetings and unsettles our preconceived notion of travelogues as a fictional or non-fictional genre. The historicity and the fictionality of the travelogue as a genre offer it a significant spot in between fiction and non-fiction.

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As it happens with the genre of travelogues, the time between the traveler taking his travel and then writing about it, can have a significant time lapse. Travel narratives showcase a unique juxtaposition of real experiences and memories. The aforementioned travelogues possess three significant stages in the portrayal of the evolution of a travel narrative. The first stage is the traveler's journey. When the traveler travels, s/he goes through a range of experiences, some expected and mostly unexpected. The second phase starts when the

traveler experiences, learns and unlearns over a period of time. Then s/he writes them down in a diary form. The final phase starts when the entire course of the travel is over. Now the traveler starts writing the travel account while keeping a particular readership in mind. In this context, the target readership is mostly the Bengali middle-class who tend to day-dream about traveling far and wide. Without any exception, during their journey all the travelers have kept a diary or notebook. When the traveler-author writes about the travel, s/he takes that travel once again through memory lanes. As readers we can experience the journey in the narratives of Ramnath Biswas (1931-34), Gita Bandyopadhyay (1949), Ksitish Basu (1952), Manoj Basu (1952) and Sachindranath Bandyopadhyay (1953) as they reminisce about their experiences while describing their travel to China. There is a significant time lapse involved in this process, and as a human being the thoughtful traveler might choose to reveal or to conceal events s/he finds interesting or disturbing. Since the process of reminiscence is not linear, a chance of fabrication in the narrative may appear frequently.

The Bengali travelers in the 30s were keen to observe anti-imperialist movements around the world and that worked as an essential factor to keep their narrative away from blatant generalizations. While writing, none of the travelers imposed a structure to the chaotic situation because that hinders knowledge production. The traveler's identity and his political and cultural position always determine the discourse he is engaging with by making the traveler susceptible to fall into a self and the other discourse. We might question the validity of the author-traveler's 'authority' to comment on a place while traveling there as an explorer. A traveler like Ramnath Biswas, who was particularly cautious not to make any such mistakes also fell into the loop while commenting on the nature of the Chinese and Indian women. While coping with the freshly attained independence, the travel writers of the forties and fifties often have residual memories and underlying anxieties of the colonial times. Subsequently a tendency to get used to a new era full of hope is seen among the travellers and it was mostly induced by the inspiring messages of the political leaders and the

contemporary national heroes. The journey of nation building that started with the independence seems to have become a metaphoric extension of the journeys the travellers will take up in the post-independence era. In the fifties, most of the travels taken were sponsored by the political parties. Almost always a fragmented, partial, ideologically biased and customized understanding of China has been narrated by the travelers. But it is undeniable that these narratives from India testify that an attempt to understand China epistemically was initiated and it continued until the disruptive era of Indo-China war. Travelogue becomes the only way to transfer the knowledge produced by the author's experience to the readers and it remains the only way to acknowledge and understand people to people contact between India and China even in the most turbulent times. ■

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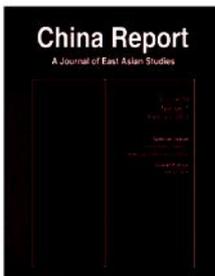


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