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MAKING SENSE OF FREEDOM: TRAVEL STORIES OF BENGALI WOMEN, 1900-1920

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Abstract:

Women's travel experiences in the first two decades of the twentieth century helped us to understand their dilemmas, restrictions, insecurities, and desires. Their autobiographies, writings in the periodicals, novels, stories are significant sources that I discuss in this paper. Women were increasingly becoming the travel partner of her male counterpart. This was the outcome of western influence that impacted social and gender relations in the colonial period. Also, it was a challenge to the 'effeminate Bengali' men by the 'manly Englishman' to situate the 'new woman' in a new social place to justify their modernity. Here I show the imprints of how women conceptualized freedom in the literary domain. This freedom of women was not either for their emancipation or their freedom. It was temporary in every sense. Domestic space remained the natural 'domain' for women. However, this experience of travel helped them understand and develop the meaning of freedom. In the heydays of the anti-colonial nationalist movement, freedom had several meanings to people in India cutting across class, caste, group and sectarian affiliations. My work contributes to that jigsaw puzzle by giving a narrative of what meaning freedom carried to the middle-class Hindu Bengali women.

1.0. Introduction

Scholars have widely worked on various themes focusing on travel literature. A fresh approach to literary studies like colonial discourse, gender, women's studies, postcolonial, and translation studies included travel and travel writings in mainstream historical or literary research works (Mohanty, 2003:ix). This paper aims to explore how women in India made sense of freedom in the first two decades of the twentieth century. In what ways did they react to the restrictions, dilemmas at home and 'freedom' in the world outside? How did it change the way women used to see themselves in relation to the wider society? Travel stories

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discussed here give us a foray into the changing worldview of women in the twentieth century. Particularly, they help us conceptualise what freedom meant to the women who were able to travel, going beyond the limited mobility. Writing travelogues itself can be seen as a literary method through which these women were celebrating their newfound knowledge. Moreover, their reminiscence of travel nurtured their exploratory self.

The major limitation of this study, however, is the class and sectarian affiliation of the women authors under discussion here. This paper represents the thought and intellectual world of Hindu Bengali upper and middle-class women. Meaning, at the outset, I leave out lower class, lower caste, and Muslim women from the present study. The nature of the topic and the sources determined the scope of this paper. The present work, then, is not a comprehensive study of Bengali women's thought. However, to what extent we can use 'Bengali women' as a uniform category needs further qualification to begin with. Mrinalini Sinha's work shows that for a brief moment in the late 1920s, Indian women articulated their identity in terms of Gender like never before. This was itself an exceptional moment in the history of women in India. Bearing this in mind, I refrain from providing an anachronistic account of 'women's thought' in the period when it did not exist as a separate uniform entity. Thus, the class and sectarian identity of the women writers discussed here help fathom their intellectual world better.

Geographically this study concerns undivided Bengal. The Bengal presidency was the center of nationalist politics under the British rule. The author's familiarity with the language of the region helped in grasping the intricacies of colonial and nationalist politics better. Colonial modernity impacted Bengal intelligentsia enormously. Bengali literature testifies to the robust literary culture that developed during colonial rule. The literary works that form my archive for this paper need to be seen in that framework. The present work will not be an exhaustive study of colonial politics and nationalist mobilization. However, they cannot be removed from the larger picture of intellectual currents of the age.

This article deals with autobiographies, novels, and stories written by women in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The number of prose written by women increased in this period. In the nineteenth century, woman authors mainly wrote poems, drama, and comedy. The production of prose and autobiographies were countable in numbers (Chakrabarty, 1995:1). This trend witnessed a reversal in the period under review here. Now, they were documenting their life experiences, travel narratives, opinion, and expressing their desires in a new light. We lack sufficient evidence of a similar trend from the nineteenth century. So here lies the importance of women's writings in the first decades of the twentieth century (Chakrabarty, 1995:3).

2.0. Historiography

Mohanty's work concentrated mainly on the study of Indo-British cultural encounters through the experiences of travel (Mohanty, 2003). Freya Stark alerted her readers because she thought, for every traveller traveling is a reconstruction of

his/her own journey and followed by, of course, a new conclusion (Freya, 1954)‡. So, a writer of a travelogue rediscovers his/her authorial self while penning down the experiences (Ghose, 1998:1). Ghose's approach was critical towards women travel writers under colonial rule. According to her, colonial space was a gendered terrain and women's gaze was different from men. Her study focuses on nineteenth-century women travelers in India. Sen's study describes the Bengali traveler's narratives abroad, particularly in Europe between 1870 to 1910. Noted male personalities of Bengal like Trailokyanath Mukherjee, Romesh Chandra Dutt et al. were the subject of her study, and Krishnabhabini Das was the sole exception (Sen, 2005). Indrani Sen's work concentrates on the similarities and the contradictions that existed between the white women and the native one. Class, caste, race and female sexuality are some of the biggest concerns of her work (Sen, 2002:xi). All these works are insightful for the research on travel writings.

I build on their insights and explore the multifaceted sides of Bengali women's world by analyzing their narratives concerning travel. It helps the author to comprehend the intellectual world of Bengali women at the beginning of the last century.

3.0. Methodology and Sources

This research paper is based on women's writings in contemporary periodicals, autobiographies written at that time or later, novels and stories. For the constraint of space, I have chosen two autobiographies by Pratima Devi and Shanta Devi; one novel by Indira Devi; one travelogue by Bimala Dasgupta in the periodical *Bharatbarsha*; one story by an anonymous person in *Bamabodhini Patrika*. I discuss the travel parts of their writings and try to analyze the meaning of freedom and their consciousness about it.

4.0. Women in the Domestic Sphere

Victorian morality reshaped gender relations in colonial India. The expectation for women in the family was to remain in the domestic sphere. The home was the 'separate spheres', where they would be "protected and from all danger and temptation" from the outer space inhabited by belligerent men (Sen, 2002:2). A woman's primary role as a wife or a mother was unquestionable. Education for them was desirable, but it was always seen as secondary to their purpose in life. More often than not, the education of women was seen as a major cause for her widowhood. Additionally, scientific findings from the western world contributed to such negative connotations associated with women's education. It suggested education and the mental activity associated with it affect her reproductive functions. It was believed that girls would not be able to pursue any serious education because, for the development of their reproductive organs, they need to save their energy (Karlekar, 1993:91). The general conception was that uncurbed education hampered inherent women's nature (Desai & Krishnaraj,

‡ Freya Stark was an Anglo-Italian explorer and travel writer (1893-1993)

1987:150). According to Jasodhara Bagchi, “Women’s role in species reproduction has rendered ‘natural’ a process that is deliberately constructed in order to dominate them” (Bagchi, 1995:1). Rabindranath Tagore also asserted his opinion about the sexual division of labour, said nature, by making women mothers proclaimed their prohibition from the outside world. Furthermore, because they are staying at home managing child-rearing, the household works became natural to them. According to Tagore, this is not any kind of imposition by men but of nature (Banerjee, 1995:73).

So, all the above-mentioned theories in the colonial era- be it imported from the west or a native one- restricted women in the domestic sphere. Women were under the burden of the white race’s changing theory of ‘manliness’ (Sen, 2002:5). No matter how significant the role of the upper and middle-class Bengali intelligentsia was in the dissemination of political consciousness about British oppression, the Bengali *bhadralok* was belittled in the colonial discourse as ‘frail’, ‘unmilitary,’ ‘cowardly’ and “effete” (Rosselli,1980:121-148). For the ‘manly Englishman,’ the middle-class Bengali Hindus came to be designated as ‘effeminate babus’ who represented an ‘unnatural’ and ‘perverted’ form of masculinity (Sinha, 1995:2). The middle-class family had to cope up with the situation by placing their women in a modern way of life. They had to remould themselves as a ‘new patriarchy’. The ‘new woman’ had to bring changes in their conduct and activities at home and outside. Along with that, it had to match with the nationalist project of the ideal image of a woman (Chatterjee, 1993:127). The new patriarchal form demanded their women to be-reformed, rebuilt, civilized and rational as opposed to ‘traditional’.

5.0. Travel: A Result of Western Impact

The influence of colonialism was felt in every strand of the lives of the colonized in India. The colony had to pass the litmus test of becoming Modern. The status of women, as is well known, was the marker and criteria for attaining that feat (Sinha, 1995). Earlier the opportunity and scope of travel were limited to the women. Rare occasions of pilgrimage and visiting relative’s place were the only exceptions. This changed in the course of time. The change in the communication system and infrastructure undoubtedly had a role to play in making travel convenient and a pleasurable experience in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. However, ideological change had a more significant role to play in enabling women to become part of the culture of travel for pleasure. Modern men wanted their wives to accompany them during their short and long trips. This was the result of the direct impact of western education. By this time, travel had become a sign of colonial modernity in India. The question of situating the ‘new woman’ in a new social space was the need of the hour, and that was justified by incorporating them in the sphere of travel (Sen, 2005:138). Travel and travel writings have a long history in the west, in contrast to India. Hindu *Shastric* (ethology) tradition always discouraged traveling and never allowed it to be an autonomous cultural practice (Sen, 2005 :3)- any traditional literature that bore

the concept of travel that must have a link with banishment or pilgrimage (Sen, 2005:2). So, in the Indian context, both the idea of travel and travel writing was the result of 'the western impact' (Sen 2005:5).

6.0. First Steps Taken: Turn of the Century

While the world of the women still revolved around the '*antahpur*' (inner part of the house), gradually, the outside world was revealing itself to the farthest corners of the domestic sphere. The vision of women about the outside world also underwent a significant change in the period under discussion here. The last half of the nineteenth century was the era of the rise of 'Nationalism'. It was also the time when the idea of a modern avatar of women as the 'New Woman' took root. The writing by women, however, was limited in number; we have to wait till the beginning of the last century to witness the growing numbers of women authors and their works. Sen revealed that travel writings in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century became a part of contemporary periodicals and a 'form of modern self-expression' (Sen, 2005:1).

In the first decades of the 20th century, women became conscious about social issues like higher education, health, maternity, age of marriage, etc and other domestic issues. Similarly, they became familiar with the issue concerning the outside world. The reading culture enhanced this process. They got to know about different places in the world through newspapers, magazines, and periodicals, etc. This further contributed to their zeal for exploring the unknown, and travel to new places was such a means for them. Despite the constraints of everyday domestic lives, women occasionally reached the threshold to the outside world.

7.0. Travel Narratives: Fictions, Autobiographies, and Travelogues

Women writers composed few travel stories in the last decade of the nineteenth century. As the Tagore family at that time was the astringent and bearer of modern thought, anticipation of modern women's examples in every sphere from them seemed natural. Travel experiences penned down by them was not the exception. Swarnamoyee, Gyanadanandini, Sarala Devi all make it to that list. Amongst the Indians, only the elite class families had the permission of traveling through the trains. '*Prayag Yatra*' and '*Samudre*' were two examples of Swarnakumari Devi's vast writings. Another famous travelogue of the nineteenth century's women's writing was Prasanyomoyee's '*Aryabartya*' (Sen and Ray, 1999). Each and every piece of writing gave a detailed description of the place they had visited,

Though women's autobiographies of this time were very few in numbers, autobiographies written by them in the latter half also gave us an overview of this period and their thoughts. Periodicals and magazines can also be observed in this regard. Women's autobiographies of the contemporary period also contained instances of travel and the excitement associated with it. They were the first generation who traveled to other parts of India and beyond the border. Earlier in their old age, women used to visit Kashi, Gaya, and other places of pilgrimages

mainly for religious purposes. However, soon that travel for women was becoming a pleasurable activity as well. The reasons for travel also expanded to women. For example, in Shanta Devi's *Purba Smriti*, politics (Kashi Congress, 1905) determined the course of travel (Devi, 2014:27).

Pratima Devi, the daughter-in-law of Rabindranath Tagore, wrote how communication between 'antahpur' and the outside world was mediated through various religious events and festivals, such as 'Brata-Katha Katha', the festival of colours called 'dol-utsab' etc. (Devi, 1952:11). It provided them with the option of interacting and socializing with other women. Regarding the *Durgotsab*, Pratima Devi mentioned that women and girls from different houses used to go to relative's houses by palanquin. She described this 'stepping out' moment as an occasion of merriment and joy. The view of the outside that palanquin provided was no less than an exciting moment for the girls and women alike who had very few such opportunities available to them. Pratima Devi described that in this way, they realized the feeling of closeness/nearness with the masses; they felt liberated despite their separation by *Parda*. Usually, the role of the women's caretaker was to enforce a strict rule of *parda* during the daylight, but after sunlight, they were relaxed about it. She described "*ei sujog e gheratoper bandhon eriye khola hawate niswas fele banchto tara*" (Devi, 1952:31-32; 33). This is a clear instance of women negotiating patriarchal rules that prohibit their engagement with the outside world. Pratima Devi wrote that a bride's will were similar to that of a bird. She desired to have wings so that no one could confine her within the brick walls (Devi, 1952:16). Similar instances of expression of women's desire to explore were becoming common from the last half of the 19th century. Pratima Devi had cited a letter of Abanindranath Tagore written to her mother, Binayani Devi, which confirms that Binayani Devi, along with her children, went to Himachal Pradesh and visited Agra to see the Tajmahal. He suggested her sister visit Fatehpur Sikri, Sekendrabad and other historical places as well (Devi, 1952:77-78). This suggests that increasingly women were achieving mobility and exploring newer spaces. The role of the male in the family cannot be undermined here. But the important thing is to recognize that the desire of women to participate in pleasurable activity was getting recognized and respected. This is no small feat to achieve, particularly, when such instances were rather rare.

Shanta Devi expressed her joy of visiting Darjeeling. It was her first visit to the hills. She wrote that despite seeing mountains and seas multiple times, the first times were always special. She shared her astonishment of the toy train's speed and the nature of the hills (Devi, 2014:50). She also mentioned Birch hill, cart road, Darjeeling Mall road, Ghum and Kurseong, etc. and described her encounter with the landscape and nature of Darjeeling. Unlike common visitors who spent time in Darjeeling chatting with fellow travellers, Shanta Devi preferred to roam around the city and enjoy the natural beauty of the place (Devi, 2014:51-52). We need to pause for a moment and think about the massive meaning that roaming alone carried for a woman in an unknown city. At a time, when the movement of women was measured in every step, this was a symbol of huge digression. In our earlier

story, we saw how even looking through the window of palanquin was a censored activity for the girl/woman back home. Under such socio-cultural constraints, a woman's movement in an unknown city was no less than an empowering act.

The story *Abala* describes the story of Miss Abala Ghosh and her friend Latika's travel to Dalhousie. They had a male character as a guide in the story, but they denied his company and decided to trek the mountain by themselves. So, the story represented the exceptional 'other' character of women. When the male protagonist warned the women about the unachievable feat that they were trying to achieve, they defied his warning and went ahead with their plan. The women characters in the story clearly hold a different perspective than the male one and also an independent one. This story was published anonymously, and it won't be wrong to posit that the author in all probabilities was a woman. Irrespective of speculation about the identity of the author, the story represents the desire, goal and aspiration women could possess.

Norway bhraman is a travel story by Bimala Devi. She had visited London before traveling to Norway. She became aware of Norway during her stay in London. She had to spend a huge sum of money to fulfill her desire to visit the country. She describes how traveling a foreign land (a European country to be precise) is safe for women as opposed to other places in India. Her concern about the safety of women suggests how she thought of herself as a woman on the move. She could pass that judgment presumably after attaining a considerable experience of travel. Needless to say, like previous instances, her thrust to explore the unknown is evident here (Dasgupta, 1913:913-14).

During lunch, when she saw a crowd gathering, she was excited to see like-minded people having a zeal for travel. Here she also talks about racial discrimination. Bimala, along with her brother and niece were the people of darker skin and different from other white people in the surrounding. And, they became the topic of discussion among the fellow white travelers (Dasgupta, 1913: 915). She noticed they had become objects of gaze to the foreigners.

She noted such instances of racial discrimination frequently and waggishly. She did not shy away from including them into her account. She elaborated on the issue very lightly in her writing, but it was very clear that she was well aware of the fact (Dasgupta, 1914 :218). In a foreign land, people were staring at them as they were the black people there. She was witty in her remark that whenever they landed in a new place every time they had a friend as automatically attracted by their skin colour. As they were looking different in that land, the travel guides showed more interest in them, and that made the co-passenger annoyed. Another place she mentioned was Gudvangen. Again she humorously talked about the white gaze (Dasgupta, 1914:220). She said the white people treated them as if they were new and a different invention of God. So, in a foreign land, though they were not facing gender discrimination, they confronted racial discrimination.

She was well aware of the phrase that North is 'the land of the midnight sun', and when Bimala saw sunlight at eight o'clock at night, she realized that the phrase is true. She expressed her excitement when she talked about their journey towards

Norway. She spoke of the stone mountains in the ocean, which the experienced sailor smoothly crossed. She also felt cold while moving towards the North. She wrote that the people were so mesmerized by the beauty of nature, that no one was worried about meals. She described their confusion about the time after seeing the sunlight at night with great humour. The places she mentioned in her writing were 'lake Upvan in Merck' and Trollhattan. Her writing contains a romantic depiction of Norway's nature. Another place she mentioned was Romsdal. There she met a Norwegian family where a lady of the family described their lifestyle. She said after the sunset, they faced a very hard time. Her travelogue included mourning for her unfree nation. She concluded her thought by witnessing the people peaceful and happy that they are not dependent on people like India (Dasgupta, 1914 :877; 883-84; 915; 917-19).

There is an exceptional travel account by Monikabala Raychowdhury. She shared her travel experience in Ranchi. She gave every detail. She expressed the beauty of nature and her experience of the train journey. She also mentioned stations like Kharagpur, Adra, Jhalda on the way to Ranchi. She mentioned the dense forest of Jonnahar and gave every detail of Ranchi town like Treasury House, Pretoria Road, Palace of Lat Saheb, Ranchi office, district School, Post office, and Tagore House (Raychowdhury, 1914:23-27). So, at that time, when it was infrequent for women to come out of their home and travel to see their desired places, this kind of travel experience frequently shared by women in *Bamabodhini Patrika's* pages proved that some perspectives were changing gradually.

Saratrenu Devi's *Parashye Banga-ramani* is an essential narrative regarding this discussion. In the beginning, she expressed her excitement of boarding a ship for the first time. It was sporadic for a Bengali woman to travel to Persia, she mentioned (Devi, 1916:120). It seems that by that time the concept of disrespect and untouchability (becoming mlechha) regarding the crossing of the black water (*Samudralanghan*) by the Hindus had got relaxed since Saratrenu wrote that many considered her fortunate as she could be with her husband through thick and thin. She provided a detailed itinerary of her travel. Saratrenu noticed the numerical lack of women boarders. She noticed a few Maharashtrian and one Muslim woman. The second class had no woman passenger. Her travel experience was very interesting and different in a way that she continuously compared her findings in a foreign land with the native one. She noticed that the Trams from Keamari at Karachi port to the marketplace were inferior in comparison to the trams of Kolkata or Bombay city. She further compared the building structures, shops, and roads abroad with Kolkata. She even noticed and documented the price of daily essentials and noted how they were different from Kolkata.. She mentioned at a point when she and her husband were unwell, she got huge help from co-passengers of another religion. She had no taboos about inter-dining. The crossing of socio-religious restrictions can be seen as a by-product of travel. Thus, travel as an activity had a role in altering the lifestyle and habits of people (Ray, 1916: 120-21; 123-24; 130).

Indira Debi's novel *Sparshamani* moves us by a detailed description of many places of the North and West India. Her descriptive eye assured that it was Indira Debi who witnessed all the places by herself. The way she narrated every account - be it historical background of the place or all the routes she went through-- was evidence of her knowledge of the outside world. In her novel, the male protagonist Satinath went for weather change to the places she described. At first, she told about Bankipur in Bihar where he witnessed Siddhapith pilgrimage, a statue of Maa Kali (Goddess Kali), Har-mandir, Golghar(round-house), Patna College, Khuda Bakhsh Library etc. She noted down the local customs, oral tradition and folklore of the place she was visiting. She also gave details about the library and its historical significance. After that, she talked about the Taj Mahal and Moti Masjid in Agra. It was the description of one's first visit to Tajmahal. She gave a tribute to the artists who had contributed to the wonderful mausoleum. The beauty of the Tajmahal in the moonlit night was also depicted by the novelist. Moti Masjid (pearl mosque/Agra Fort) was so well described that the readers could feel his/her presence there. Her imagination of the historical past was like a poem. She also showcased her knowledge of Indian history from time to time. Her description of the Taj Mahal, of course, comes with a general narrative of the Mughal rule (Debi, 1919:101-3).

Next, she mentioned Jaipur and Ajmer in her novel. She gave an account of the structural traits of both the town. She described the daily procession of the king of Jaipur and mentioned the discipline of the crowded procession through the eyes of her protagonist. She did not forget to introduce the readers to the elaborate drainage system of the city. From this written account, one can trace her narrative capability, which bore both historical and literary sensitivity. Further, she mentioned places such as- Chittor, Dakor, Ahmedabad, Prabhas, Veraval, Porbandar and Junagadh. It comes with the routes that connect them. She cited all the spectacular places one should visit amongst the cities mentioned above and towns and wrote their specialties, traits and mythical stories related to them (Debi, 1919:103-6).

The issue of the freedom of women also occupied a place in her novel in the description of women of *Kathiawar* region. She compared the women of Kathiawar with the beautiful women of Ravi Varma's paintings. They hold fearlessness in their eyes. She talked about their charming personalities like Bengali women and, at the same time of their potential of carrying multiple watery pots on their heads and one in each hand (Debi, 1919:106). So, in terms of travelogue, the novel is also very relevant. It can well be posited that the novel was based on the author's encounter with these places.

8.0. Conclusion

After analyzing the background and the travel stories, one should be clear about women's mobility between domesticity and temporary freedom. Their sense of freedom was different from the one that the anti-colonial nationalist movement propagated. Reading books, periodicals, magazines of their choice after finishing

their domestic duties or going to a relative's place by a palanquin stood for freedom for the women we see here. Sometimes they had the luck to visit their father's place for a few days. That was a familiar symbol of freedom for married women. Similarly, traveling to a shrine such as Puri or Kashi with their elders was freedom to them (Priyambada Devi, 1900). On the other hand, their desire to become a free bird and independent human being was expressed in their writings. Abala is a classic case for our purpose, where the writer did not have the courage to reveal her name though one could be sure about the writer's gender. So, the meaning of freedom has an obvious limitation. And all the other real experiences depicted here were instances of women enjoying temporary freedom and, most of the time, guided by a male figure-- Pratima Devi, Shanta Devi all were accompanied by male counterparts. Bimala Dasgupta talked about the insecurities of a woman traveling through her own country. Bimala and Shatarenu, though traveled abroad, were accompanied by male guidance. So, freedom was temporary for them. Their consciousness was developed through these experiences, no doubt, and their writings influenced the fellows.

Women's autobiographical writings were one genre where one can trace the transcendent viewers. Women's travelogue contributes to the field of female identity in the public world. Firstly, they produced a public self in print. On the other hand, they situate a traveler's persona in the public world of travel. In doing so, their writings reject the dominant construction of gender (Ghose, 1998:8). The novels, stories written by them sometimes hold her real experiences through protagonists or expressed her unfulfilled desire as depicted in the tale Abala. Education and wider exposure that the women in the early twentieth century got by reading periodicals and other works in print, changed their worldview significantly. Therefore, the timeframe under discussion is significant for understanding the growing women's consciousness. And travel stories written by them reflected these changing phenomena really well.

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