

## **Women, Nation and Society: Reflections from a Late Nineteenth Century Bengali Travelogue**

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The colonial period has been regarded as a water shade in gender relations because the colonial assumptions from its very beginning about Indian society were based on the ideas of India's 'effeminate' character in sharp contrast with its colonial counterpart i.e. 'colonial masculinity'.<sup>1</sup> This British justification of oriental 'inferiority' (effeminacy) and western 'supremacy' (masculinity) provided an useful ideological foundation for shipping on their civilizational 'mission' with an aim of their (British) permanent rule over India. So the position of women in Indian society emerged as the prime objective of the social reforms by the western educated Indian intellectuals of the nineteenth century. But the paradox was that these nationalist male reformers considered women only as a subject of their reforming campaign and failed to produce any equal platform for women on which they could initiate their struggle for emancipation. This dichotomy leads us to several questions about women's unequal positions. Even in the realm of academic discussions the historians and other social scientists treated feminine identity as constructed, instead of accepting it as natural and essential.<sup>2</sup> Partha Chatterjee argues that the issue of women reform despite of the vigorous attempts on the part of the male reformers during the first half of the nineteenth century had suddenly disappeared from the agenda of public debate toward the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> In his opinion this caused not because of the fact that it was vanished from the reform agenda or overshadowed by the more dominant and sensitive issues of political struggle, but by restoring the "women's question" in an inner domain of sovereignty, that was far away from the ground of political fight against the colonial state.<sup>4</sup> This inner domain of national culture was constituted in the light of the discovery of "tradition".<sup>5</sup> So, according to Geraldine Forbes, attempts for writing women's history have been made by the "subaltern school, originating in Calcutta and from historian interested in resistance in everyday life."<sup>6</sup> Scholars' endeavor is now directed to trace the origin of women's suffering, explain their present situation and contextualize their current dilemmas. Although the new researches pursuing by the historians have brought to light new course in writing about women's pasts and historicizing gender relations, for the women's movement, as Samita Sen has argued, history itself became a prime resource.<sup>7</sup>

Mass of literature was produced by the nationalist elite of the nineteenth century to relocate the status of Bengali women in the changing socio-political context. The new

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literature which emerged in Bengal in the nineteenth century has been marked by 'the theme of change.'<sup>8</sup> Henceforth women were to be represented in the arena of nationalism only in a "contributive" role. In this framework of conventional history "women worked within the boundaries laid down by men. The history uncovered in this way is a 'contributive' history."<sup>9</sup> But at the same time women also responded to set up their exclusively 'own' experiences and feelings though in a passive way. What we know of the lives of these nineteenth century women we know either from memoirs written later, remembered lore, or the accounts of others. Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban* (My Life), published in 1876 was the first autobiography written in Bengali which revolved around her day to day experiences as a house wife and mother.<sup>10</sup> Apart from that a large number of biographies and memoirs written by women herself can be found during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> These autobiographies, according to Partha Chatterjee, were not simply variants on men's autobiographical writing but constituted a distinct literary genre.<sup>12</sup>

During the second half of the nineteenth century travel writing emerged as one of the forms of modern self expression. Georges Van Den Abbeele points out that – ".....progress, the quest of knowledge, freedom as freedom to move.....salvation as a destination to be attained...." constituted "the motive of voyage."<sup>13</sup> In Bengali the word 'travel' does mean *bhraman* which signifies to make a mistake or to error. In the Hindu tradition residing away from home or banishment from home was regarded as a curse that had to face by an ill-fated person whereas pilgrimage provided the only justification for travel. But colonialism marked the point of departure in the orthodox belief. With the introduction of new socio-cultural and political ideas, travel received broader recognition as an important secular practice.<sup>14</sup> Henceforth, the colonial system of instruction resulted in construction of Indian mind by the ideas of an 'alienated self'- an alienation from 'traditional', 'unmodern' ways of living- as well as sense of 'freedom'- the freedom that enabled one to eschew the 'older ways' and form the space of a new culture and community.<sup>15</sup> Here the notion of travel centered round the discourse on 'home' and 'the world', a mobilization from isolation to 'freedom', transgressing the 'domain of the male' (*bahir* i.e. world) by typically the 'domain of the women' (*ghar* i.e. home which represents one's inner spiritual self).<sup>16</sup> This division or separation of domain, according to Parth Chatterjee, leads one to " an identification of social roles by gender to correspond with the separation of the social space into *ghar* and *bahir*".<sup>17</sup>

A genre of travel writing prevailed during the second half of the nineteenth century which mostly dealt with the experiences of the male travellers.<sup>18</sup> It is only Krishnabhabini Das, a Bengali women who left substantial travel account in this period.<sup>19</sup> Krishnabhabini Das (1864-1919) received education from her husband and accompanied him on his second visit to England. They lived there for eight years. Krishnabhabini wrote her travel experiences in Bengali and the account was published in Calcutta in 1885 as "*Englancy Bangamahila*". But this publication had the writer's name written simply as "*Bangamahila-pronito*"- i.e. written by a Bengali Lady. This book later on is edited with an introduction by Simonti Sen and a preface by Partha Chaterjee. (Published by Stree, Calcutta, 1996)

At the very outset of the travelogue Krishnabhabini very clearly stated her objective in writing this. In her own words: "Readers! Though I am totally unknown to you and staying hundreds of miles away from you, I have stepped in to present in front of you this small and incomplete book to give you some pleasure.....I have seen several new things and these have generated many new ideas within me, I am trying to hold them together at leisure and describe them lucidly in simple language.....the differences between an independent and a colonized nation can only be seen here [in this book]. Now a day the relationship between England and India is gradually increasing. Many young Indians become very much eager to know about England before coming here, so many of them would come to know a few things from this book."<sup>20</sup> Addressing particularly the female readers Krishnabhabini asserted: "I think like me many of you are curious to know about England, to fulfill that desire I dedicate this book *Englancy Bangamahila* (A Bengali Lady in England) to you."<sup>21</sup>

The scientific attitude of Krishnabhabini becomes prominent when she talked about her effort to remain impartial and objective in writing her travel account. In fact this was not very much common characteristics of the travellers or even the autobiographers of late nineteenth century Bengal/India. In her own words: "I have written about all the good and bad side of the English that I have experienced. I have tried to be impartial in my judgment so far I can, leaving aside the transformation they undergo at the time of their living abroad, especially in India. It is very difficult for me to assess the virtues of the English people because there are so many differences between India and England and in their relationship as well. Forsaking all the prejudices if the readers go through this book with a broad mind, then they will be able to understand that how far I have been successful in my impartial judgment."<sup>22</sup>

Krishnabhabini gave detail description of her journey from Calcutta to London. When the ship was about to leave Bombay for London she extended her 'farewell' in a poetic manner which reflected not only her deep love for her motherland but also the grave concern and understanding of India's backwardness in comparison with Great Britain.

*For many years there is in my heart  
A secret desire of hope  
To see beloved freedom  
To go to the land where it lives.*

.....

*I will go where the goddess of independence  
Resides there in every house  
With happiness in their wide heart  
Where everyone wanders with breath of happiness.*

.....

*With a lot of desire, I want to see  
With what power Britain is so worshipped  
Trampling poor India with her feet  
Clutching education and civilization to her heart.<sup>23</sup>*

Krishnabhabini, like the other Bengali/Indian travellers had to face both the dream and the fear of a community that at once saw itself as an inferior 'other' of Europe and differentiate from it. This paradox consisted of a wholesome acceptance and recognition of British excellence and superiority in most matters of ethical and worldly concern with its overall achievements in regulation, control, development, dynamism, democracy and egalitarianism which generated high expectation. On the contrary, the colonized Indian's reactions and imaginations had reflected simultaneously in the ambiguities of - "shame in the subjecthood, backwardness and worldly impotence, and pride not in the perverse sense of reaction or hitting back, but in the more sedate sense of having memories and a sense of belonging to cultural norms and forms that one cherishes and cannot live without."<sup>24</sup> After coming to England the colonized people designated themselves as 'we' in contrast with the 'other' European.

Krishnabhabini's critical view on English socio-political and cultural supremacy very often brings comparisons and set of contrasts – such as 'English activity' and 'Indian indolence', 'English organization' and 'Indian confusion' which reflected the inevitable ideological exertion of the west of its construction as "a singular western self identity"<sup>25</sup> placing within it several cultures of different parts of the world. Krishnabhabini on entering the Museum addressed her readers that one could see alongside the statue of the Egyptian and Assyrian deities a stone carving of the heavenly court of Indra (the king of Gods in Hindu religion). Moreover, she experienced that it was a matter of great regret that such sculpture which could be invaluable keys to Hindoostan's ancient times were left to lie in the arena of oblivion, and had it not been for the efficient English race, they would still have been lying so.<sup>26</sup> Despite of having shrewdness and selfishness in their character, the authoress pointed out that by their efficiency, industriousness and courage the British turned the whole world in their feet and the Indian inferiority and subjection caused by the lacking of these characteristics by the Indians.<sup>27</sup>

It is pertinent to mention here, as Peter Robb has argued, that these concepts of race did not apply only to anthropological or ethno-linguistic analysis, but infected whole realms of perception and policy, particularly in the middle and later decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup> The nature of British imperialism and its implications in the colonial sphere was 'almost completely dualist and materialist'<sup>29</sup> which stresses the western virtues and non-western (other's) evil. The list of virtues of a typical Englishman, in Krishnabhabini's writing, seemingly endless. These 'hyper-active' and 'hyper-efficient' individuals were possessed of an acute sense of independence and discipline. But a noticeable protest can be seen in Krishnabhabini's travelogue in criticizing the non-feminine characteristics of British women – like, lack of politeness in attitude, lacking the sense of sacrifice, affection, modesty; in sharp contrast with the Indian women's great virtue of restoring their centuries old traditional values. She emphatically pointed out the power and courage of Hindu women which were suppressed by the elements like, lack of freedom and education.<sup>30</sup> Thus it was now the west that came to be constructed as a 'model of lack,' the co-sharer of that place that had hitherto been exclusively possessed by the East. Krishnabhabini underlined the erosion of human values from 'the land of freedom' which provided the critical civilizational differences. So a new idea or a sense of nationhood germinated not only among those of Indians who rejected the west but also among the admirer of the west who found their standard of politics, education and

professional and scientific knowledge were far superior of them. In this respect she could maintain her own distinct identity, her sense of herself as Indian and also the Indian values and interests.

Travel from home to the external world caused the construction of new homes and the transformation of individual attitude and perceptions. An investigation of the distinctive features of the travelogue leads to one's self discovery which "in turn reveals a number of illuminating parallels between the structures of ..... female identity and narratives of emancipation...."<sup>31</sup> For Krishnabhabini, the terms 'travel' and 'independence' and also transgressing the boundary of 'home' as well as '*pardah*' become very much identical when she narrated: "I came along with my husband at Howrah station to travel to England from Calcutta via Bombay on 26<sup>th</sup> September, Tuesday, at eight thirty in the evening. Today I entered into the train opening my veil."<sup>32</sup> This 'opening of the veil' as an indication of freeing herself from the prevailed subversions of the society is the first step towards freedom which provided the factors for the construction of her own 'new' sense of 'self'. Thus "the history of women's narratives cannot be understood by referring to an abstract ideal of 'feminist' consciousness but can only be addressed by considering the complex inter-play between the social and material conditions affecting women's life and the relatively autonomous influence of dominant cultural representations of gender, which do not simply constitute 'external' determinants but are embedded at the deepest level of psycho-sexual identity."<sup>33</sup> Here Krishnabhabini's self discovery indicates not only her 'psychological transformation' but also adds some more social implications in the realm of gender issues.

Krishnabhabini's investigation on the English women inevitably brings about certain pertinent questions/issues that influence the whole arena of discourse over Indian women's social status with the sharp contrast of its colonial counterparts that had to react in an allegedly different manner. Krishnabhabini remarked-"Many people of our country treated them [the English women] as unchaste women. Because, they roamed around freely in the streets, fields and in the gardens and interacted with the men without covering themselves under the veil. Their [Indians'] illusions would be removed if they come here. If the English women would not have been god-fearing then there would not be any progress and pride of the English nation or they wouldn't be admired by the other nation.... Here the English women freely mixed with the men, talked with them and despite of doing these those who do not give up the invaluable identity of their femininity, they are the most worthy of getting praised and they have more power in their heart and religion."<sup>34</sup> The most important thing to mention here is that Victorian notion of female sexuality was organized around the dichotomy between 'chaste' and 'whore' which were applied, or rather projected in a totally opposite way in the colonial sphere by the colonized people. Thus the Victorian travellers translated this notion of sexual classification into their own idiom.<sup>35</sup> Krishnabhabini makes a sharp breach in the understanding of Victorian notion of chastity and whorishness by the colonized people which simply negated as well as stigmatized women's public sphere. Mentioning the value of psychological (more specifically educational) and physical care and multifarious physical activity of the English women Krishnabhabini made a spirited critique on the division of feminine and masculine subjects.<sup>36</sup>

Krishnabhabini had stressed the differences between the household of England and India. She regretted the fact that – “The Indians were totally unknown to the actual meaning of domestic life. The wife remaining confined within the domestic affairs did not know about the external affairs of her husband and the same way husband did never come to know about the conditions of daily life of his wife. While their husbands were passing a cheerful life by smoking and playing cards and went on outings with their friends, the wives had to remain always busy in their confined domestic life....There were very few people in our country who really understood the actual meaning of the relationship between husband and wife.”<sup>37</sup> Krishnabhabini perceived the English system as the most desirable contrast. In England, she wrote apart from the husband’s regular hours of work, the two stayed together, roamed together and read together.<sup>38</sup> Family life in England appeared before her eyes as one of real happiness which emphasized the equality of both man and woman. Moreover, she asserted that the most striking difference between India and England, she experienced- “.....while England is the land of freedom India is one of servility. It is said that even a slave, immediately after setting his feet on the soil of England, becomes free. I myself experienced a different feeling as long as I inhaled the free air of England.”<sup>39</sup> Krishnabhabini’s perception of “servility” would not be applicable identically with her male counterparts of India or according to Simonti Sen, had nothing to do with the objective situations of political domination or independence. This originated from “a de-contextualized spiritual divergence running through a timeless East and timeless West.”<sup>40</sup> Durba Ghosh comments that “indigenous women, who were often without full names, were assumed to be voiceless, denied rights or exercising any agency”<sup>41</sup> in their domestic life. Krishnabhabini’s experience of English society led her to the arena of self realization where she came across about the limitations of her previously secluded existence and her unquestioning acceptance of the circumscribed nature of women’s social roles.<sup>42</sup>

Krishnabhabini’s travelogue, like the other travel narratives, carries a significant value in the genre of personal accounts written by the women because it not only manifests the transformation of her ‘self’ but also incorporates the period i.e. second half of the nineteenth century with its varying degrees of comparisons between the changing socio-political and cultural contexts of England and India. This perhaps has led Parha Chaterjee to argue that – “.....it is difficult to explain why the facts of social history and the development of new cultural norms for the collective life of the nation, rather than the exploration of individuality and the inner workings of the personality, constitute the overwhelming bulk of the material of these life stories.”<sup>43</sup> During the time of her staying in England Krishnabhabini could not restrict herself as a mere distant observer of English society and culture. For the better understanding of the foreign land and its different aspects she “[had] taken help of some English books, periodicals and news papers...”<sup>44</sup> On the one hand she critically described the much developed British society, economy and the strength of the British people who dominated the whole world, on the other hand she was equally aware of India’s backwardness and colonial subjectivity. A striking feature of Krishnabhabini’s account was that she had never been swayed by the influences of British prosperity and power. Moreover, though she talked about English supremacy, at the same time she put forward India’s age old culture and tradition, which were, according to her, by no means inferior to the west. According to Jayati Gupta: “The

writer's sense of wander at encountering the ruling European race in their own country is tempered by maintaining a rational distance, one that was naturally fostered by a conservative social upbringing, cultural differences and feelings of alienation and nationalistic pride.<sup>45</sup> Side by side, Krishnabhabini was very much emphatic and realistic in terms of finding the remedies of India's servility and according to her this could only be possible through the means of – 'change' and 'development' and not only in the mere exaggerations of India's 'golden past'.<sup>46</sup> She also asserted that to combat against the foreign domination Indians should give up the superstitious and harmful false practices borrowed from the old generations and to modernize themselves to acquire the equal status in claiming of India's independence. She critically remarks that the Indians should first judge themselves that whether they were capable enough to get hold of independence and to restore it.<sup>47</sup>

The front cover page of the book '*Englandey Bangamahila*' (1885) consists of a four line poem which aptly clarifies the very attitude of the authoress in writing this book.

*Play the bugle, play with this tune  
Everyone is independent in this huge world  
Everyone is awake with their pride of dignity  
Only India sleeps!*<sup>48</sup>

There are several other sections in this book where the authoress expresses her feelings and experiences in poetic manner. At the end of the 'Last Words' (i.e. the last chapter of the travelogue) her inner feelings took a poetic turn which again depicted the character of British domination upon India.

.....  
*I can see here immense wealth  
Flooding in England  
Coming from India  
Making India poor forever  
It will never be returned.*<sup>48a</sup>

Thus this travel account of a nineteenth century Bengali women deals not only with the difference between England and India but more importantly gives a critical assessment through the exclusively women's eye which has a great significance in understanding Bengali/Indian society at the time when nationalist protest was about to take a concrete shape. Here lies the historical value of this travelogue written by an eye-witness. This also provides the elements of historical writings on women based on women's account. So in writing the history of women, Bharati Ray remarks: "[T]he information about women has to be collected principally from women's writings, which will reflect their own views and self perception, and interpretation of available data must aim to understand women in their own terms."<sup>49</sup> Krishnabhabini in her travelogue not only talked about the colonial oppression but at the same time criticized the patriarchal domination in Indian society and categorized it as one of the major factors of India's social crises and backwardness. She appealed to her male fellow Indians who might take the responsibility for the up gradation of Indian women's condition by extending freedom to women.<sup>50</sup> Krishnabhabini, though criticized the patriarchal hegemony, was not fully able to deny that, in fact depended upon the patriarchal sympathy which according to her,

would be generous enough to approve freedom for women. Though in a sense Krishnabhabini was never revolutionary in her outlook, yet always claimed for the equal status of women in society. Krishnabhabini's 'consciousness' about her society though resulted in a 'voice' of change against patriarchy, but not in its total subtraction.<sup>51</sup> This was perhaps due to the fact, as Partha Chaterjee argues, that- "...the very theme of disclosure of self remains suppressed under a narrative of changing times, changing manner, and customs, and changing values."<sup>52</sup>

Krishnabhabini's perceptions about India's subjectivity under foreign rule sometimes placed the Muslim and British domination in an equal position i.e. with their alien character.<sup>53</sup> Even her expressions after witnessing the English prosperity and pride and in sharp contrast with India's servility and poverty under those factors, aggravated the construction of her nationalist feelings in terms of religious identity i.e. India's ancient 'golden past' which, as she argued, was fostered by the Hindu religion. Here 'nationalism' emerged as a counter force not only to fight against the British exploitation but also to acquire an equal 'psychological stimulae' to stand in front/against the British pride and glory. So to consider this travelogue, like many other personal accounts, or in a much broader sense to reconstruct the history of women the ahistorical glorification or negation of any event or the circumstances should be investigated on the historical parameter of objectivity.

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51. Regarding the relationship between 'consciousness' and 'voice' Julie Stephens argues that: ".....consciousness relies on voice to be recognized and generated yet there can be no voice without consciousness." in Julie Stephens, *Feminist Fictions: A Critique of The Category 'Non-Western Woman' in Feminist Writings on India* in Ranajit Guha (ed) *Subaltern Studies VI* (Oxford University Press; first print; 1989; sixth impression; New Delhi 2005) p.97.
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