

## CHAPTER 4

### Depiction of Railways in Travelogues

Travel writing is a vibrant literary tool of awareness, a genre pulsing with cultural exploration and transition.<sup>1</sup> It is pivotal for unravelling the tapestry of history<sup>2</sup> and “a truthful account of an individual’s experiences travelling, usually told in the past.”<sup>3</sup> Human beings have long been fascinated by travel and distant locations. In light of this, travelogues have been used as primary sources to write history. As one of the important historical sources, it explains the geopolitics of the region of the particular time period along with the social and cultural environment as experienced by the travellers. In the modern period railways became a very important mode of travelling. Thus travelogues have been marked as an important source to draw socio-cultural, religious, and economic scenarios of that period. Travelogues garnered the appropriate attention and criticism in postcolonial discourse. There is some debate regarding how accurate all travelogues are as sources of historical data and history. Travelogues could be recognized as historical sources if they are not written from a fantasy perspective, if they reflect history and historical facts, and if they are written about and allude to some historical setting. In other words, since a traveller arrives as an explorer rather than a historian, travelogues cannot be regarded as history. If the author's enthusiasm, excitement, joy, and quest to learn about exotic locations drove him or her to write the travelogue, then the author's imagination must be portrayed in the account.<sup>4</sup> Though, one thing that is consistent with all travel writing is that attention lies on stories of real or hypothetical locales, it can be serious or hilarious, literary or journalistic, documentary or

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<sup>1</sup> Campbell, M. B. (1988). *The Witness and the Other World, Exotic European Travel Writing, 400-1600*. USA: Cornell University Press, p.11

<sup>2</sup> Anjum, F. (2014). Travel Writing, History and Colonialism: An Analytical Study. *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan*, 51(2), pp. 191-205

<sup>3</sup> Ahmed, F. (2022). Travelogues: The Truly Emerged and Innovative Literary Genre. *Advanced Multidisciplinary Scientific Research*, Vol 5, Issue 1, 2022, retrieved from [https://www.ijamsr.com/issues/6\\_Volume%205\\_Issue%201/20220205\\_110125\\_5015.pdf](https://www.ijamsr.com/issues/6_Volume%205_Issue%201/20220205_110125_5015.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Dadhich, A. (2018). Travelogues as Source of History: An Overview of Francis Bernier’s Travel Writings, *Dialogue: A Journal Devoted to Literary Appreciation*, Vol. 14(01), pp. 57-62  
<https://www.dialoguethethejournal.com/index.php/Dialogue/index>, retrieved on 3/08/2023

evocative, etc. But if one can separate the facts and factual information from it, it might provide historical sources in the written domain.<sup>5</sup> According to this assessment, it is not very difficult to locate diverse historical components in the travelogues of colonial and postcolonial travellers.

The arrival of the British in India marked the beginning of the prosaic genre of literature, in which travelogue writing was heavily influenced by the print media and, in many ways, the railways. It provided the tourists with the room and freedom to write about their travels. The introduction of railways as a new high-speed mode of transportation helped travellers forget about their torturous and time-consuming previous journeys and encouraged them to travel more between states. It occasionally turned into the travelogue's central focus. Its size, speed, enormous capacity, technology, and newly constructed railway related facilities have become the new subject. In addition to introducing the passengers to a new scenery, it gave them new insights into the new area's history, and socio-cultural significance, etc. Thus, this chapter explored how people viewed trains as a technological marvel for transportation, how they were referred to as people's favourite means of transportation, how they allowed home-sick Bengali people to explore new places as railways connected Bengal with other provinces, how Bengalis interacted with people from different cultural backgrounds and linguistic backgrounds and learnt from that, how women in Bengal were given the opportunity to travel independently and exchange knowledge outside of their home.

The introduction of railways in India during the colonial era was seen as a sign of technological advancement and sophistication by the Indian populace. The sight of a train, with its complex technology and cutting-edge engineering, had a great effect on the Indian population's collective imagination and cultural mentality. Trains represented a revolutionary leap in transportation speed and capacity compared to traditional modes of travel. The ability to cover vast distances in a fraction of the time it took by other means was awe-inspiring and contributed to the perception of trains as a technological marvel. The construction and operation of railways were closely associated with British colonial rule. The introduction of advanced technologies like trains was

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<sup>5</sup> Dadhich, A. (2018). Travelogues as Source of History: An Overview of Francis Bernier's Travel Writings, *Dialogue: A Journal Devoted to Literary Appreciation*, Vol. 14(01), pp. 57-62  
<https://www.dialoguethethejournal.com/index.php/Dialogue/index>, retrieved on 3/08/2023

seen as a demonstration of the technological superiority of the colonial power. This contributed to a sense of subjugation, as Indians witnessed the British harnessing cutting-edge technologies to control and govern the country. Trains and railway travel were depicted in popular culture, literature, and the arts. Trains were frequently portrayed by authors, poets, and painters as marvels of contemporary engineering, emphasising their impact on culture and the human experience. The idea that trains are emblems of technical advancement was perpetuated by this artistic rendition, especially by travelogues.

The railway building in Bengal greatly increased the connection between various parts of India. Major lines connected Calcutta to other metropolitan centres such as Bombay, Madras and Delhi. Due to their greater mobility, Bengalis were able to travel more freely and extensively over the Indian subcontinent. Travel became faster, more accessible, and generally more economical with the advent of trains. Bengali people were able to travel to different parts of India as a result of the emergence of new, faster travel options. The ability to travel with greater comfort than in the past made it simpler for people to document their experiences in travelogues. Nearly all travellers, from well-known Bengali scholars to ordinary people, sought to document their travels and wanderings for future generations. However, relatively few travelogues had the opportunity to be made available to a general audience. Bholanauth Chander, Devi Prasanna Roychowdhury, Sharacchandra Shastri, Shyamkanta Gangopadhyay, Panchkadi Ghosh, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay, Sri Nirmal Kumar Basu, Nagendranath Mitra, Sri Rasik Krishna Bandopadhyay, Kalkut, Shanku Maharaj, Padmanabha Ghoshal, Fakir Chandra Chattapadhy, and many others are few renowned male travel writers. Female travel writers such as Prasannamayee Devi, Nanibala Ghosh, Shanta Devi, Hemlata Devi, Ratnamala Devi also enumerated their experiences of their train travel.<sup>6</sup> They incredibly are noteworthy and crucial to perceive how women felt about their travels. For the travellers mentioned above, the train journey was a great excitement encountering several forms of diversities. From their vivid accounts, it is evident that railways accelerated the pace, rapidly bridging vast distances.

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<sup>6</sup> Devi, P. (1888). *AryavartaJanaika Banga Mahilar Bhraman Brittanta*. Kolikata:Kalidas Chowfhury; Ghosh, N. (1933). *Sachitra Aryavarta Bhraman*. Kolkata: Bibhutibhushan Basu Mullick; Devi, S. (1940). *Peshawar O Lahore*, Prabashi, Poush (Dec-Jan), 1347 B.S.; Devi, R. (-). *Himalay Paribhraman*(selected as text). Kolikata: Bhuban Mohan Majumder

The technological superiority of railways fascinated and astounded people so much that it has been portrayed in numerous ways and chronicled in the pages of many literary traditions. In this regard, Sri Ratnamala Devi's *Himalay Paribhraman* is noteworthy.<sup>7</sup> This travelogue includes illustrations of the experiences of rail travel. The passengers' experiences during their train journey to the Himalaya, as depicted in the travelogue, demonstrated their utter delight. As the train sped up and started to spit fumes like an alcoholic elephant, they let out loud shouts and sang "*Jay Badri Bishal*". Elephants are the strongest animals, and they become more vigorous when they are agitated. It is attempting to demonstrate the engine's strength, which subtly demonstrates the train's technological superiority over the conventional carriages that were in use in India at the time. The train is compared to a wild elephant in an effort to demonstrate the engine's might.<sup>8</sup>

Not only the efficiency of the power of the engine has been explained but also the speed of the train, which was another technological marvel that overshadowed the traditional transport system in India. The speed of the train is compared here with the speed of the air. The statement: "At the appointed time, the whistle of the train blew, and the train started to move at high speed as air," demonstrates two things- the sense of timing, which broke the stereotype lifestyle of the people of Bengal by giving them impetus, and the high pace of the transport system, which saved their travel time.<sup>9</sup> In a travel diary called, "*Paribrajaker Dairy*," Sri Nirmal Kumar Basu compliments the train's speed. The author asserts that everyone enjoys motion, especially that of moving objects like trains, which causes people's minds to be filled with a wide range of ideas. People view the moving train in different ways such as some individuals consider its enormous size, others focus on the desire to travel, others aghast at the high speed hurl slang exclamations, and many others draw the attention of their family members to watch the runaway speed of the train.<sup>10</sup> Thus objectifying the train travel, making the experiences of the travellers important to understand their mentalities.

Another travelogue by Soudamini Devi, titled, '*Tirtha Darshan*', showered immense praises on the railways. The narrator herself expresses her overwhelming joy at the speed of the train, and the

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<sup>7</sup> Devi, S. R. M. (-), *Himalay Paribhraman*. Kolkata: Annada Press, p. 2

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 1

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 2

<sup>10</sup> Basu, N. K. (1959). '*Basanta*', *Paribrajaker Dairy*, Kolkata: Vidyodaya Library Pvt. Ltd., pp. 11-12

sights that she views outside while looking out of the train. She was so impressed with its sophisticated, genius engineering that she compared it to the creation of God which connected the far flung regions reducing distance.<sup>11</sup> “God is the supreme power, and the wonder of God's creation is simultaneously admired for the innovative ingenuity of the British.”<sup>12</sup>

Dinesh Chandra Sen (1866-1939) another famous Bengali writer, educationist, and pioneer scholar of Bengali folklore collections, while writing the introduction to the book ‘*Uttar Bharat Bhraman-Samudra Darshan*’ he remarked: “*Now a days, many people travel to different places in India with the opportunity of the transport system. Most of the expenses that used to be spent on the festivals are now spent on the railways and steamers companies. During the Puja holidays, there is no puja pandal hopping, only travelling happens.*”<sup>13</sup> The question that needs to be asked is why people, ordinary or extraordinary, preferred to travel via train rather than through any other medium in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? Was train travel perceived as comfortable along with the people having a myriad of experiences both adventurers and mundane?

The attraction towards railways has been noted in many travelogues. Being unable to ride the train meant that their life was a ‘waste’ (*byartha*) without it. Travelogues which were real life experiences when corroborated with other emotional sentiment depicted in fiction also reflect similar responses. For instance, the statement of Apu in *Pather Panchali* becomes relevant in this context. After travelling by train, Apu remarked, “The person who can not ride the train nowadays, how will they survive?”<sup>14</sup> The similar sentiment gets reflected through Panchkodi Ghosh's travelogue, *Nabo Anurage*, where the writer considered railway travel as an educating experience. Despite the fact that he was an educated young adult, he felt ignorant, as his travels via train were limited to travelling within the Howrah-Hooghly region. While writing this, he knew that people wouldn't believe how important rail travel was. He is even embarrassed to be identified as an educated person, but still having the worst stigma in his life—of not availing the opportunity to travel by train.<sup>15</sup> The statement of Apu and the narrator of *Nabo Anurage* proves the people's

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<sup>11</sup> Devi, S. (2011). *Tirthadarshan*, PitriSmriti O Onayanya Rachana. Kolkata: Dey's Publishing. p. 48

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Gangopadhyay, S. (1913). *Uttar Bharat Bhraman*. Kolkata: Tara Press, Introduction part-I

<sup>14</sup> Bandopadhyay, B. (1972). *Pather Panchali*. Kolkata: Mitra And Ghosh Publishers, p. 174

<sup>15</sup> Ghosh, P. (1921). *Naba Anurage*, Hetha Setha, Parjataner Kotha. Kolkata: Mahila Press, p. 1

attraction, their positive views, and their attitudes towards railways. At the same time, it depicts people's awe and wonder at the superiority of scientific and technological invention, its mobility, and its ability to travel long distances in a short time. Many travelogues report that the introduction of railways brought forth a sense of admiration bordering to the point of reverence. This influence went beyond simple transportation, reshaping cultural narratives, socio-economic realities, and perceptions. The advent of railways opened a key chapter in India's history, illustrating both the benefits and drawbacks of technological development while the country was ruled by colonisers.

This also can be seen from the life experiences of personalities such as those of the Tagore family. Dwarkanath Tagore, while staying in London, was impressed with the railways and aspired to have such transportation in Bengal.<sup>16</sup> He understood the importance of this new spacious, faster means of travel, which could facilitate business, especially in carrying coal and other commodities from the hinterlands to the ports of Calcutta as he was one of the well-known businessmen in colonial Bengal. Thereafter, he invested money in the Great Eastern Bengal Railway Company, which did not fructify during his lifetime. Rabindranath, like his grandfather, preferred train travel. In case he had to travel by any other means he expressed his resentment. For instance, once when travelling to Chota Nagpur by train, he had to get down at Giridih station, as there were no further rail networks from Giridih to Chota Nagpur. From there, he was forced to travel by *daak gaadi* (postal car), which was a traditional form of transport. He questioned remorsefully, "There are no more railways? From now on, I have to go by postal car ! It is driven by men. Is it called a car?"<sup>17</sup> The uncomfortable journey undertaken by traditional modes of transport has been discussed in memoirs. Rabindranath in his book *Himalay Yatra* also mentions that not everyone preferred train travel despite its comfort and speed. In support of this argument he narrates that his father Debendra Nath, preferred traditional transports such as boats, steamers and bullock carts which gave him 'mental satisfaction' viz-a-viz train travel. When Rabindranath recalled an interesting conversation with his father over train vs cart travel to Peshawar. Debendra Nath happily replied that cart travel was a very good idea; "is travel by train called travel?"<sup>18</sup> When Debendranath

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<sup>16</sup> Dey, C. (2013). *Purba Railer Pathe Bardhamaner Paschim Balaye*. Kolkata: Pub: Chhanda Dey, pp. 69

<sup>17</sup> Tagore, R. (1935). *Chotanagpur*, Bichitra Prabandha. Kolkata: Visvabharati Granthalay, p 22-23

<sup>18</sup> Tagore, R., *Himalay Yatra*, Jibansmriti, Prabanddha, Rabindra Rachana Samagra. rabindra-rachanabali.nltr.org retrieved on 21/9/23

spoke of his preference for carts to travel to Peshawar, Tagore argued that, “Father did not mention any difficulties or dangers that may arise in travelling by domestic vehicles.”<sup>19</sup> Though Debendranath referred traditional mode of transport, Rabindranath, according to his memoir, preferred railways to travel.

There are interesting accounts and narratives regarding the rail journey of Rabindranath Tagore. His full-fledged travelogues, letters, diaries, poems, songs, and essays gave many interesting experiences from his train travels. He had such an “association with the train journey from the age of 11 years and 9 months (on February 14, 1873) until his last journey from Bolpur to Howrah on July 25, 1941 that his “life became the night train.” As railways played a role in his literary works, he has many untold stories based on train journeys.

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<sup>19</sup> Tagore, R., *Himalaya Yatra*, Jibansmriti, Prabandha, Rabindra Rachana Samagra. rabindra-rachanabali.nltr.org retrieved on 21/9/23

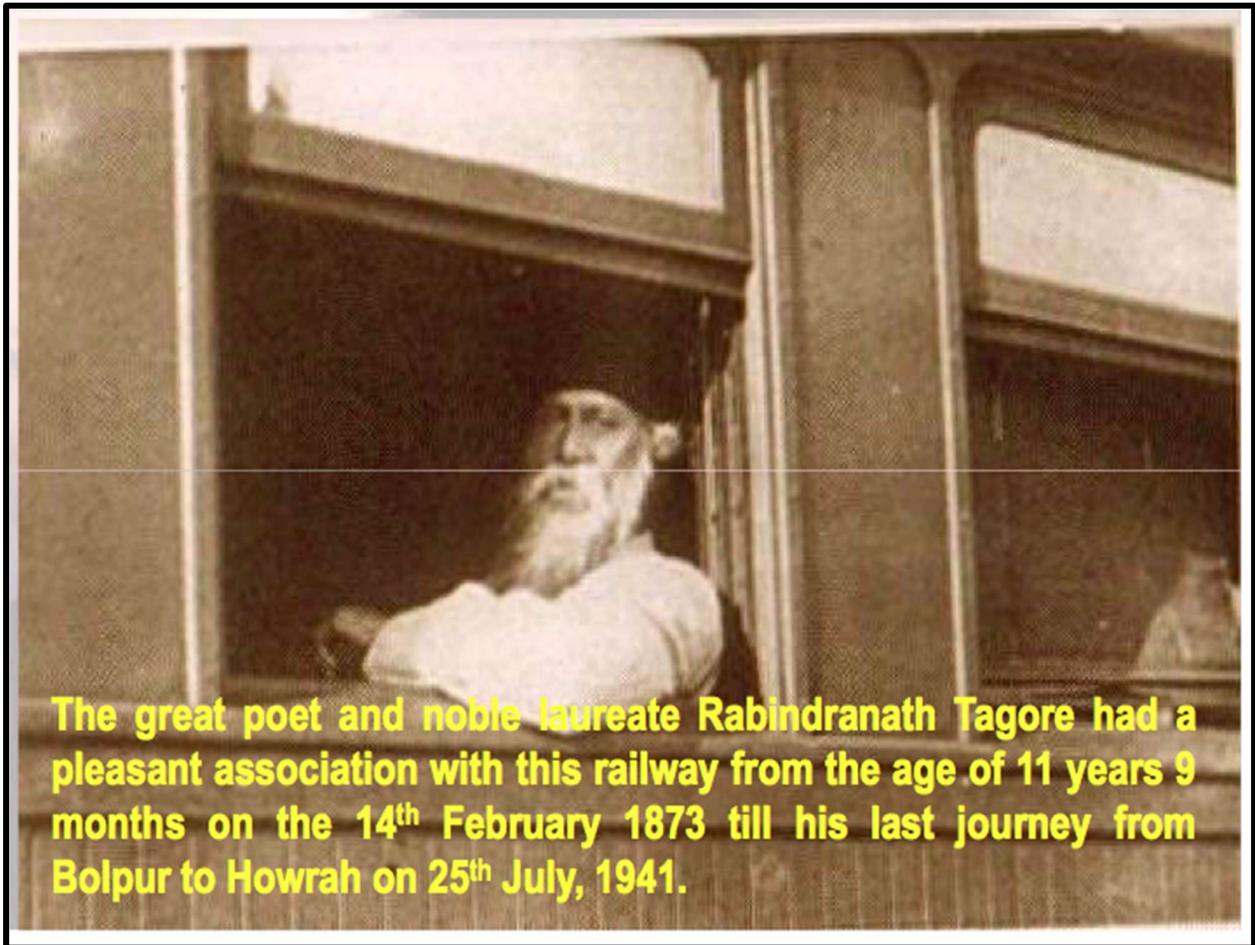


Image Courtesy: <https://er.indianrailways.gov.in/cris/uploads/files/1520500020307-Heritage1.pdf>  
retrieved on 5/6/2023

In the early days of railways in this country, it became a cause of deep curiosity, wonder, and scepticism in the eyes of everyone, from children to intellectuals. Like other Bengali people, Rabindranath Tagore when travelling for the first time was warned by his nephew Satyaprasad who had previous experience of travelling by train. He apprised Rabindranath of the threats of travelling in the train and that if not taken care, the journey might not be a pleasant experience. Satyaprasad even briefed him of the special skills required to board the train. He said: “If you don't have any special skills, boarding the train is a terrible crisis. There is no protection if the feet are blistered. And when the train moves, one should sit down with all his strength of body, otherwise,

it gives such a terrible shock that one can be thrown off and nobody can trace where he is.”<sup>20</sup> (Translation Mine) With all these apprehensions, the poet first left Howrah station with his father for Bolpur on February 14, 1873. At the time of his journey, he was eleven years and nine months old. However, Rabindranath Tagore notes in his travelogue that the journey was comfortable and harmless. Travelogues have also covered how rail travel had changed people’s lives. The story of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi being thrown out of a railway compartment is too well known to be reproduced here. Similarly, even the inclination of Rabindranath Tagore, towards understanding life and establishing connections with it came from his experiences as a train traveller. In order to understand the influence of train travel, a small but significant episode of his life is mentioned here. Rabindranath Tagore’s physiology was such that he appeared older than his age, as he was taller and well built. It was and still is a rule in the railways that the children below the age of twelve had to purchase a half-ticket. Rabindranath’s ticket was purchased when he was not yet twelve years of age. While returning from Amritsar to Calcutta, a –ticket-checker asked Devendranath to see the ticket. Father and son were in the first class compartment of the train. The ticket checker saw one full ticket and one half ticket and stared at Rabindranath, doubting his age. They were joined by the stationmaster who also doubted the age of the boy. Not believing the claims of Devendranath, the ticket checker insisted that he should pay for the full ticket for Rabindranath.

As soon as Devendranath heard such words, he felt insulted. Without a moment's delay, he paid the charges for a full ticket for his son. The ticket checker gave Devendranath the receipt and change of money, which he (Devendranath) flung out in anger. This ticket-checker realised his mistake and left. The character of his father that was seen by Rabindranath that day in the train compartment remained forever in his mind.<sup>21</sup> Rabindranath Tagore’s train journeys throughout his life were innumerable, but some journeys really stand out. One such notable train journey was to Darjeeling in October 1887. He was the only male person in the family on that journey; all the rest were women. The poet was accompanied by his wife, Mrinalini Devi; his elder sister, Soudamini

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<sup>20</sup> Tagore, R. *Himala Jatra*, Jibansmriti, Prabanddha, Rabindra Rachana Samagra. rabindra-rachanabali.nltr.org retrieved on 21/9/23.

<sup>21</sup> Tagore, R., *Himalay Jatra*, Jibansmriti, Prabanddha, Rabindra Rachana Samagra. rabindra-rachanabali.nltr.org retrieved on 21/9/23.

Devi; his sister, Swarnakumari Devi; his two nieces- Hiranmoyee and Sarala; his one year old daughter, Bela; and one of their maid servants.

There was no railway connection from Calcutta to Darjeeling in those days ; one had to go to North Bengal through East Bengal. There was no bridge over the Padma river at that time; one had to cross the river by steamer and board a small metre gauge line to go to Siliguri. In other words, the journey to Darjeeling was not very convenient. On the other hand, since women were travelling with him, the baggage was more than usual, which added to the discomforts of the journey. Rabindranth Tagore in his travelogue also mentions his experience of travelling with women in great detail. It was generally expected that since a man was travelling with women, he would be more vigilant to ensure that women boarded their respective transport safely and that their luggage and other needs were taken care of. Rabindranath however sees travelling with his sisters as a difficult experience, where there was a lot of name calling and shouting, along with chaos and confusion. He humorously describes, *“That is, a grown up man like me should have had a lot more yelling and running around five female passengers than this. Very often, and here and there, I should have dismounted and strode across the platform, yelling in Hindustani language. That is to say, if a person takes the form of an angry madman, it would be a suitable form for a male person. Na-Didi was totally disappointed, seeing my coolness. But in these two days, I have opened and closed so many boxes, put them in place, and pulled them out of place. I have run after so many bags and suitcases, and so many suitcases ran after me like a curse. So many boxes and bags have been lost, so much has been regained, so much has not been found, and so much has been tried and is going on that no decent 26-year-old gentleman has ever seen.”*<sup>22</sup>

The same journey was described and eventually published in a newspaper by his sister, Swarnakumari Devi. She mentions that the chaos and confusion of a large party travelling by train led to them getting down at Ghum station, mistaking the Ghum station for Darjeeling station. She of course blamed her brother for this folly.<sup>23</sup> This tremendously pathetic train journey was not only written by Rabindranath himself, her elder sister, Swarnakumari Devi, spared no effort to spread

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<sup>22</sup> Tagore, R. (1945). Darjeeling Jatra Niye Indira Devike Chithi, *Chithipatra*, Vol. 5. Kolkata: Visvabharati Prakashan, p 88

<sup>23</sup> Devi, S. (2012). Darjeeling Patra, *Bhraman Katha*. Kolkata: published by Sandip Roy, pp. 106-107

the story of his younger brother's exploits. She published this rail related witticism in the magazine, *Bharati*.

The advent of railways not only spurred the Tagore family to venture into uncharted territories and explore diverse cultures but also empowered countless other Bengalis to embark on similar journeys of discovery. Albeit, travel went against the long brahmanical tradition which was based on the notion of purity and pollution. Travel is referred to as *bhraman* (ভ্রমণ) in Bengali, which is a derivation of the Sanskrit root word 'Bhram', which means to err or commit an error. In this sense, the word "*bhraman*" can be understood to signify aimless wandering—a behaviour that is typically not praised in Hindu tradition, which is greatly biased in favour of sedentariness.<sup>24</sup> According to the authoritative Brahmanical opinion, travelling meant being exposed to the unclean auras of foreign people and influences, drinking impure water, consuming food from unrighteous lands, and walking by road that were polluted by the passions of men of all castes and classes, carrying with them uncertainties, fears, and discomforts caused by homelessness and insecurity.<sup>25</sup> Hence travel meant to make errors. Moreover, at that time, outside of travel for religious purposes or for trade, secular travel or travel for leisure was never encouraged.<sup>26</sup> Shyamkanta Gangopadhyadhy, in his travelogue, *Uttar Bharat Bhraman*, has mentioned the reasons why Bengalis would prefer not to travel abroad. The writer here shows how travelling was disfavored by the Bengali men because of their innate love for a comfortable life. Their travelling was impeded either because their women would not be able to bear their absence or because the men were duty bound towards taking care of their parents, children and even neighbours. Besides the lack of psychological motivation, the writer also ascribes lack of money or the fear of the unknown as factors due to which Bengalis did not give up their indoor lifestyle. However, railways changed all that. It enticed Bengalis to leave their homes and venture outside of their comfort zones in order to "move in a more extended orbit, to enlarge the circle of his acquaintances, to see variety in human nature,

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<sup>24</sup> Sen, S. (2005). *Travels to Europe, Self and the Other in Bengali Travel Narratives, 1870-1910*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, p. 2

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. pp. 2-3

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

and to divert their attention."<sup>27</sup>

Noted Bengalis shared experiences of their exposure to different and new geographical landscapes in their travelogues. They wrote of how the experience made them reconsider their understanding of places and people that they had known so far. For instance, the Himalayas became a reality for Soudamini Devi, which was made possible because of the train journey she undertook. She wrote in her memoir, *Darjeeling Yatra*, that she had understood Himalaya as gigantic with reference to her giant acquaintance named-Ramashankar Kamar (man of huge physique) as *parvat* (mountain). However, she was able to capture the magnanimity of the term huge or gigantic only once she saw the Himalayas.<sup>28</sup> Rabindranath Tagore was known to have travelled across India by train since he was eleven years old. His many accounts showcase his experiences of his train travel. Railways as a transport facilitated him to enjoy the beauty and new landscape of the Himalayas, Giridih, Darjeeling, Chotanagpore and many other places.<sup>29</sup>

Similar observations were made by Shyamkanta Gangopadhyay's *Uttar Bharata Bhraman* in his travels towards north India. He writes about the topography of Gorakhpur, which was different from that of Bengal. He laments that the lush green, gold producing Bengal could not be found any more and barren wasteland was all around, like a desert. He further observes that in the United Provinces, barren deserts stretched endlessly, devoid of forests, wildlife, or the sweet melodies of birdsong. He unwittingly makes a comparison between the United Provinces (UP) and Bengal, where he finds that the villages of UP were clustered together, linking their homes like urban dwellers to fend off the threat of decoys and bandits, unlike the spacious villages of Bengal. He humorously writes that the dwellings in Gorakhpur were so cramped that even a diminutive figure like his would brush against the ceiling. The dwellings were also not properly ventilated to alleviate the dry climate. The travelogue vividly described myriad geographical, climatic, and societal

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<sup>27</sup> Chunder, B. (1869). *The Travel of a Hindoo to Various Parts of Bengal And Upper India*, vol 1. London: N. Trubner & Co., p. 141

<sup>28</sup> Devi, S. (2011). 'Darjeeling Yatra', *Pitrismriti O Onyanya Rachana*. Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, p. 71

<sup>29</sup> Tagore, R., *Himalay Jatra*, Jibansmriti, Prabanddha, Rabindra Rachana Samagra, rabindra-rachanabali.nltr.org retrieved on 21/9/23; (2007), '*Dash Diner Chuti*', Kishor Rabindra Rachanabali. Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh Publishers, p. 592; *Chotanagpur*, Bichitra Prabandha, Kolikata: Visvabharati Granthalay, pp. 22-23

disparities that provided invaluable insights into the region.<sup>30</sup>

Padmanabha Ghoshal's *Railpathe Bharatbhraman* is another travelogue that focuses on 'newfound' landscapes that he witnessed during his train journeys. He describes his journey from Bengal, Jharkhand and Bihar region, where explains that after Sitarampur, one branch line went through Barakar to Pareshnath. Along that line there were a series of coal mines, from where the bulk of the coal was supplied to the East India Railway Company. He further recounts that many barriers of burning open-pit mines changed the scenario of the landscape of those areas. The Pareshnath Temple at the foot of the mountain was an attraction for the pilgrims.<sup>31</sup> Sharacchandra, in his travelogue '*Dakshinapath Bhraman*', portrays varied topography of the southern Indian region during his train journeys. He gives informative details about Raipur, Nagpur, Khandoa, Vindhya Parvat, Narmada, Avantidesh, Ujjayani, the State of Holker, Indore, Ratlam, the Gaekwad estate of Gujarat, Bharuch, Surat, Bombai, Pune, Nasik, and other places in present state of Maharashtra. The travelogue served as an important guide for the general public.<sup>32</sup> Soudamini Devi (1847-1920), sister of Rabindranath Tagore, while travelling to Visakhapatnam by train, observed the moving topography of Orissa and then Andhra Pradesh. She was enamoured by the natural views of hills, trees, and rivers in these two states. The moving beautiful and different sights on both sides of the railway line made the author marvel at the changed scenery which was different from Bengal.<sup>33</sup>

Shyamkanth Gangopadhyay's *Uttar Bharat Bhraman* is an important travelogue describing north India. Gangopadhyay travelled by train and gave a detailed descriptions of rail lines and the areas along the lines. The distance covered by train included cities such as Goalanda via Murshidabad, Maldah, Katihar of Purnia, Bhagalpur, Sahebpur, Munger, Barauni, Samastipur, Dwarbhanga, Mujaffarpur, Hajipur, Chapra, Savana, Thaoi, Gorakhpur, Gonda, Bonrabaki of Faizabad, Daliganj, Kanpur, Awadh, Rihilakhand, Berili, Mojamabad, Nazibabad, Dehradun, Haridwar, Punjab, Lahore, Jammu, Kashmir, and Himalaya. The places he travelled in six months have been

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<sup>30</sup> Gangopadhyay, S. (1913). *Uttar Bharat Bhraman*. Kolkata: Tara Press, p. 29

<sup>31</sup> Ghosal, P. (1921). *Railpathe Bharat Bhraman*. Kolkata: published by Biharilala Ghosh, pp.13-14

<sup>32</sup> Shastry, S. (1904). *Dakshinapath Bhraman*. Kolkata: Bengal Medical College Library, pp. 5-337

<sup>33</sup> Devi, S. (2011). *Visakhapatnam*, Pitrismriti O Onyanya Rachana. Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, p. 45

described elaborately in the travelogue.<sup>34</sup>

*Banglay Bhraman (1940)*, in two volumes, is a travelogue published by the Eastern Bengal Railway Broadcast Department, which gives a detailed account of the places through which the rail lines traverse.<sup>35</sup> The book begins with the topographical history of Bengal since its ancient period. The boundaries and area of present Bengal, its natural bounties, its forests, rivers, flora and fauna, minerals and agricultural products, industrial products, its inhabitants, languages and cultures have been informatively described. The travelogue also mentions the observation Up to 1920, the book included a brief geographical summary of every region in East Bengal that was nearby, along with information on its socio-cultural makeup. Thus, the book can be regarded as a useful travel guide for individuals in Bengal and from other regions.<sup>36</sup> The second volume of the same is rich in information regarding the lines expanded from Howrah to the north, west, and south areas of Bengal.<sup>37</sup>

Thus we can say that travelogues have provided important insights into regional social norms, customs, traditions, festivals, and rituals, highlighting the region's cultural diversity. Few of the travelogues highlighted upon the attire worn by men and women and the regions that they travelled. For instance, Sri Rashikarishna Bandyopadhyay in his travels to Orissa gives a vivid description of the attire worn by the men and women in his travelogue, *Bhramankarir Bhraman Brittanta*.<sup>38</sup> He specifically noted that although British machine-manufactured textiles had flooded the market, yet the sale of that *swadeshi* textiles had become popular after the Swadeshi movement, in Odisha, where the timeless *charkha* found had its place in both affluent and modest households alike. Unlike Bengal's preference for finer fabrics, Odisha favoured coarser weaves, although a wave of modernization saw an emerging taste for finer textiles among the educated elites. Women adorned themselves in three distinct styles of attire: one mirroring the draping of men's *dhotis* by tucking

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<sup>34</sup> See *Uttar Bharat Bhraman (1913)*. by Sri Shyamkanta Gangopadyay for more details.

<sup>35</sup> See for details: Basu, A. (1940). *Banglay Bhraman*, Vol-1 & 2. Kolkata: Eastern Bengal Railway Broadcast Department,

<sup>36</sup> See for more details: Basu, A. (1940). *Banglay Bhraman*, Vol-1. Amiya Basu, Kolkata: Eastern Bengal Railway Broadcast Department. pp. 45-170

<sup>37</sup> Basu, A.(Ed.). (1940). *Banglay Bhraman* Vol. 2. Kolkata: Eastern Bengal Railway Broadcast Department. pp. 66-194

<sup>38</sup> See for details: Bandopadhyay, R.K. (1887). *Bhramankarir Bhraman Brittanta*. Kolikata: Somprakash Jantra

one end of the saree between the legs like Marathi women; another that of the Hindustani style, elegantly draping the saree's pleats in front and adorning it over their right shoulder; and the last that of the Bengali style. Traditional attire for men Bandyopadhyay observed was termed as '*Pinda*', while that of the women was referred to as '*Sahala*'. He writes that the usage of towels bore a striking resemblance to the practices that of Bengal.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly Saratchandra Shastri also highlighted the attires worn by women that he saw on the Bhusawal railway station. He observed that the women were exquisitely dressed, adorned with beautiful accessories and colourful attire. Women had draped their sarees like *dhotis* worn by men. He also wrote about how the graceful Marwari women delicately navigated the station despite their lengthy veils.<sup>40</sup> Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay in his book *Dwipamay Bharat* also observed women's attire and their behaviour when travelling to Tamilnadu. He has written about how girls dress and behave in Tamilnadu. He was quite surprised to see girls and women walking about without any veil or purdah. He was pleasantly surprised to note that in the Tamilnadu society women were treated with respect even by "native and foreign men." This was in contrast to Bengal where women were suppressed by the male family members or relatives, who did not allow women to show their faces to other men.<sup>41</sup>

**The issue of seclusion practised by upper caste women of Bengal is a well established fact.**<sup>42</sup> Bengali women were not as free to intermingle with male relatives and unknown individuals, particularly while travelling. Those who could afford, i.e. the elite women, could not leave their house on foot to go to the stations but ride in palanquins. For instance, the women from the Tagore family, also had to travel in palanquins to go to the railway station.<sup>43</sup>

**Along with diversities mentioned above few travelogues observed the varied food culture from different regions while travelling.** Food we consume is a crucial marker of ethno-cultural identity. The region where a community lives determines food habits and preferences, which

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<sup>39</sup> Bandopadhyay, R. K. (1887). *Bhramankarir Bhraman Brittanta*. Kolkata: Somprakash Jantra, pp. 85-6

<sup>40</sup> Shastri, S. (1904). *Swachitra Dakshinapath Bhraman*. Kolkata: Bengal Medical Library, p. 26

<sup>41</sup> Chattopadhyay, S. (1940). *Dwipamay Bharat*. Kolkata: Book Company Limited, p. 24

<sup>42</sup> Sarkar, T. (2020). Intimate Violence in Colonial Bengal: A Death, a Trial and a Law, 1889–1891. *Law and History Review*, 38(1), pp.177-200

<sup>43</sup> Deb, C. (2016). *Thakurbarir Andarmahal*. Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, p. 2

ultimately define the palate-taste culture of a group. In the train travel, the passengers were exposed to different eating customs and diverse cultures. This in turn led to a variety of circumstances that foster an especially favourable environment for intercultural dialogue. Trains at that time did not frequently provide a choice of onboard dining options that could represent local flavours and cuisines. But at the stations, there were different sets of arrangements for food for different communities. To introduce them to different tastes and culinary traditions, passengers got the chance to sample delicacies that they might not have otherwise had. Train journeys required the passenger to halt at many stations, each of which provided regional meals and snacks. Thus, it helps to explore possibilities and learn about the regional cuisines. For example, while travelling through north India, Shyamkanta Gangopadhyay, who was a Brahmin, was not eating much in Punjab because he was not sure who had prepared the food. While looking at the cuisines of Punjab, he poignantly observed the richness of the food which was in congruous with the climate of the region. In his travelogue he compared the cuisines and food habits of the people of Bengal and Punjab. He writes, *“Nothing is more important to Bengalis, than rice, which is both their favourite and basic food. Along with leaving the lap of my ever-beautiful, green, riverine Bengali mother, I have also left the delicious Bengali food. Since wheat flour is always used in these regions, rice is only occasionally found in the United Province and Punjab. Hindustanis and Punjabis hold the realistic belief that rice lacks nutrition and only has transient effects. As opposed to Bengal, where the atmosphere is always toxic, their (Punjab's) culture is perfectly matched to their environment. They do not perceive sickness as a living entity. Their climate seems to be such that if a Bengali lives in this condition for a long time, his disease will be cured without medication. Their food is easily digested because of the climate. Why, then, does Bengal's plain vegetarian stuff satisfy their hunger except for elephant-sized bread that is half an inch thick? They digest rice very quickly, which causes them to become ravenous very quickly. I also ate mung lentils here. Bengal does not produce this enormous grain; only Punjab does. Punjab has such a healthy climate that we didn't feel sick even after consuming this dal. However, we would have become ill if we had eaten the same lentil while we were still in Bengal.”*<sup>44</sup> Despite being a Brahmin, he critically examines the unconventional nature of Punjabis against the orthodox nature of Bengali Brahmins especially related to food. He notes that the Punjabis did not follow many food

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<sup>44</sup> Gangopadhyay, S. (1913). *Uttar Bhrat Bhraman, Samudra Darshan*. Kolkata: tara Press, pp. 80–81

restrictions like Bengalis. He ascribes this to the ‘little ethnic diversity’ in Punjab.<sup>45</sup> It is unclear as to what he meant by ‘little ethnic diversity’, but perhaps, since the caste system was not rigidly followed in Punjab, the food restrictions were also relaxed.

People from different origins frequently share seats or train compartments with passengers. Discussions on eating, customs, cultural customs, and traditions from other regions of the nation was a normal form of conversation. Once, Rabindranath and Sunithikumar Chattopadhyay had to take a 40-hour train ride from Bengal to South India to reach the islands of Southeast Asia. Two European railway employees travelled with Shri Chattopadhyay in the same compartment. During the discussion on literature and other subjects, a discussion on South Indian food was also brought up. When the train came to a stop at a station close to Madras, Shri Chattopadhyay noticed a Tamil Brahmin shopkeeper serving hot *dal bora* (a type of fried meal consisting of lentils), rice-flour pies (*idli*), and curry (*sambar*) from a table in front of the Hindu refreshment room on the platform. It was served with milk and hot coffee. With aluminium and metal bowls, a large number of Tamil and Telugu travellers arrived to purchase the food. The two Europeans, who worked for a railway company and had become accustomed to diverse food services, due to their travels, praised their outstanding coffee and *dal bora*. However, they alleged that Tamil Brahmins did not sell food or even serve coffee in their cups and considered them as untouchables. Hence, those two European employees of the railway asked the author, who was a Brahmin, to bring some food and coffee from the stall.<sup>46</sup> This leads to the easy deduction of a few facts. First, the poet became familiar with the most well-known South Indian dishes, including *bora*, *idli*, and *sambar*. Second, there was a system of separate refreshments at each station. Brahmins, Hindus, Muslims, and Europeans had distinct arrangements for refreshments, just like in North India. Third, the British were also treated as untouchable by the Indian Hindu Brahmin community. They did not eat and sell food to people of other castes, i.e., caste predominance was equally observed in South India as in North India.

Railway travel provides a unique experience for passengers to learn about other languages and due

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<sup>45</sup> Gangopadhyay, S. (1913). *Uttar Bhrat Bhraman, Samudra Darshan*. Kolikata: tara Press, p. 83

<sup>46</sup> Chattopadhyay, S. K. (1940). *Dwipamay Bharat*. Kolikata: Book Company Limited, pp. 2 -3

to the diverse and interactive nature of the environment. The passengers from Bengal for instance, more than often, witnessed Hindi being spoken when they travelled towards north-western part of India. Padmanabha Ghoshal describes it beautifully in his travelogue, *Railpathe Bharat Bhraman*. He wrote that the passengers of the Chord Line would be familiar with the usage of Hindi language terms when they would cross over from Bengal to Bihar, by coming to Lakhisarai. For instance, he notes that *Luchi* was called *Puri*, Water was called *Pani*, Guava was called *Amrud*, Ghoti (small water pot) was called *lota*, *Dori* (rope) was called *Rassi*, *kheer* (rice-milk pudding) was called *Khowa*, Orange was called *narang*, thickened-sweetened milk was called *Rabri*, Sweeper was called *Bhangi*, Road was called *Sadak*,.... people who served water or sweets in the compartment were called *Paniwale* (someone who serves water) or *Mithaiwale* (someone who serves water). According to the author, each region of north India had its own dominant dialect, such as Urdu in Nagad, Hindi in Kashi, Rangari in Dakshin, Brajbhasha in Vrindavan, Gurmukhi in Punjabi, Multani in Multan, Marwari in Marwari, Kashmiri in Kashmir, Pashto in Peshawar, and Theti among lower class individuals.<sup>47</sup> Shyam Kanta Gangopadhyay, in his book, *Uttar Bharat Bhraman*, also discusses the difficulties of travelling if one does not know the regional language. He states, after crossing Katihar (now in the district of Purnia in Bihar), Bengali could no longer be heard in the train. Hindi speaking people began to proliferate. But it was challenging for individuals from distant regions to learn Hindi.<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, a relationship between Bengali and numerous regional languages was formed with the beginning of rail-travel. Similarly, during his travels across Bihar, Gangopadhyay also wrote of his encounters with the local passengers who were miffed that he didn't speak fluent Hindi. He said he met a court official from Bihar on the train and was impressed by his eloquence and syntax, and learned a lot about the Hindi language from him.<sup>49</sup> He faced similar challenges when he travelled to Punjab. He shared his experiences in his travelogue. In order to communicate he had to rely either on his co-passengers or had to speak in English, which only few could understand. He mused that had he not known English, his problems would have surmounted.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ghoshal, P. (1921). *Rail Pathe Bharat Bhraman*, Bangla Bihar O Kashi Bibhag. Kolikata: Shri Biharilal Ghosh

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 24-25

<sup>49</sup> Gangopadhyay, S. (1913). *Uttar Bharat Bhraman, Samudra Darshan*. Kolikata: Tara Press, p. 108

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 23 & 108-09

Another example is that of Soudamini Devi who while travelling to the Himalaya by train up to Darjeeling, met one European Army Major General in her coach. Soudamini Devi and her friend, since they knew English, could easily converse with him. Soudamini Devi felt that these conversations broadened her horizons as well as his. There were so many things that she would not have been able to experience because of lack of time. Sharing or exchanging stories while travelling or after the travel often led to creation of stronger bonds with unlikely humans. In her travelogue, for instance, Soudamini Devi writes of her conversation with the aforementioned Major General and how they bonded over the food that they shared. She also specifically mentions that the General felt that the bond ran far deeper than their shared travel. She writes of his belief, *"We are Aryans and you are also Aryans, but due to the location of the country, our skin colour has become white and your colour has turned black. He recalled an incident when he once travelled to Dhaka, several females were taking a dip in the river when, all of a sudden, one of their well-known girls got off the boat. I think she had recently returned from a long absence abroad and was greeted by her friends. One of the girls on the pier was so overjoyed to see her that she began to cry. However, when one of our girls returns to her family after an extended absence, they only say, "Good morning, Clara. How are you?"*<sup>51</sup> (Translation Mine)

The above narrative is significant in supporting the claim that train communication offered a forum for the exchange of knowledge and sharing of each other's points of view and cultures. As Sharacchandra Shastri writes of a debate between passengers while he was travelling in a train. When other passengers noticed his head knot and flat shoes, thinking of him as a *shastri* (the one who knows *shastras*), they discussed Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, Bharvi, Magha, Sri Harsha, and Vanabhata. This provided him with both entertainment and the opportunity to learn and exchange ideas.<sup>52</sup>

Currency is an important medium of exchange, which facilitates trade—buying and selling of goods and services. In colonial times British had introduced uniform currency in India, but the princely states continued to circulate their own-independent forms of currency. Exchange rates were worked out by different parties at stake. While travelling on a train through British India and

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<sup>51</sup> Devi, S. (2011). Darjeeling Yatra, *Pitri Smriti O Onyanya Rachana*. Kolkata:Dey's Publishing, pp. 72-3

<sup>52</sup> Shastri, S. C. (1904). *Dakshinapath Bhraman*. Kolikata: Bengal Medical College Library, p. 3

intersecting princely states, the passengers were baffled by the terms used in the local languages for rupee and other coins by the vendors at the stations. Padmanabha Ghosal for instance mentioned in his travelogue: “In Kalyani, saying *paisa* indicates double money; in Magadh, saying *taka* means double money. For this reason, *taka* should be treated as the rupee, double *paisa* as the half-*anna*, and *paisa* as the *poa anna*, ‘*sikki Pai*’ (one fourth of rupee) is referred to as *chha'dan* and *adha pai* (half a rupees) as *adhela*. In the western part of the Indian subcontinent, a *paisa lohaya* is equivalent to 28 *gondas* (1 *gonda* = 20 in number/*paisa*). It corresponds to 18 *gondas* in Gorokshpuri as well.”<sup>53</sup> The above statements prove that travelling to other states helped passengers not only learn about new topography but also new languages and new modes of money transactions. The phrase "new landscape" figuratively describes not only the actual topography but also the social, cultural, and intellectual contexts to which colonial Bengali people were exposed via train travel. It denotes a wider and more varied range of experiences than only those found nearby.

It's interesting to note that early travel is largely gendered in most cultures around the world because mobility outside the confines of the house is viewed as the privilege of the male. Other than the pilgrims' *tirthyatra* and the Muslims' Hajj to Mecca, travel in numerous South Asian cultures, including that of the Indian subcontinent, was closely associated with economics, trade, and trading, which were exclusively masculine vocations. It took a long time for women's travel, as well as their destinations, perceptions, and the cultural significance of their journeys, to become key social markers in Bengal's socio-cultural ethos. Since the mid-19th century, there has been a general expansion of travel on the Indian subcontinent especially by women. As mentioned above, some of women's writings also documented their travel, albeit sparingly.<sup>54</sup>

As mentioned in the previous chapter, railways made it easier for women to leave their houses, whether for religious pilgrimages or for procreation. It was expected that this would expose them to new situations and a chance to partake knowledge which was denied to them for centuries. Some of the women travellers who could write articulated their adventures and sense of freedom in their

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<sup>53</sup> Ghosal, P. (1921). *Railpathe Bharat Bhraman*, Bangla Bihar O Kashi Bibhag. Kolikata: Shri Bihari Lal Ghosh, pp. 24-25

<sup>54</sup> Gupta, J. (2021). Travel Culture, Travel Writing and Bengali Women, 1870-1940. *Asiatic*, vol. 15(1), June, 2021, pp. 211-214

respective travelogues. Few Bengali women during the colonial era wrote of their experiences in the form of travelogues such as Prassannamayee Devi (Chaudhury), Nanibala Ghosh, Shri Ratnamala Devi, Soudamini Devi, Swarnakumari Devi, Leela Majumder, and others. These authors had the freedom and space to write about their travels. This allowed them to shed light on their various experiences and versions of the places that they saw. Women were given some liberty and power over their movements due to the development of independent rail travel. Women could plan their journeys according to their requirements and were less dependent on male relatives for making travel arrangements. As rail travel was normalised by the early twentieth century, some women (mostly educated) could travel in groups without male company or escorts. This is evident from Ratnamala Devi's travelogue *Himalaye Paribhraman* where the writer and her five other females travelled in 1924 from Kolkata towards the Himalayas, visiting via many north Indian pilgrimage-centres.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, Soudamini Devi, travelled with her male acquaintances to Darjeeling. She described her journey to Darjeeling in her travel writing, "*Darjeeling Yatra*." It portrays Soudamni Devi as independent, brave, intelligent, and smart. Her narration style and interactions with the other male passengers gave the impression that she was an independent and empowered lady.<sup>56</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, the portrayal of railways in colonial Bengali travel writing offers a vivid and comprehensive account of the revolutionary effects of this technological advancement. The travelogues display a variety of viewpoints, from awe-inspiring admiration for the engineering marvel to critical views on the social, cultural changes caused by the railways. According to the travelogues, railways changed the Bengali way of living and also allowed them to experience a variety of landscapes and socio-cultural practices. Bengalis had little experience of travelling outside of their country prior to the establishment of railways, with the exception of trade and religious journeys. But the travelogues reveal that Bengalis, both men and women, gained a reputation as travel addicts ever since the development of the railways.

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<sup>55</sup> Devi, R. (-). *Himalaya Paribhraman*. Kolkata: Shri Bhuman Mohan Majumder, p. 1

<sup>56</sup> Devi, S. (2011). *Darjeeling Yatra*, Pitrismriti O Onyanya Rachana. Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, pp. 71-76