

Declaration

I, Shrutakirti Dutta, hereby declare that the content of the thesis “**Imagining a Nation: Women’s Travel Writing in Late 19th Century Bengal**” has been written by me under the supervision of Dr. Paromita Chakravarti. No part of this dissertation has been published anywhere or used or submitted for any other degree.

Signature of the candidate

Date

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Imagining a Nation: Women's Travel Writing in Late 19th Century Bengal

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Introduction

W. J. T. Mitchell in his introduction to *Landscape and Power*¹ talks of landscape as a mode of identity formation, as opposed to a visual entity. He suggests that the idea of landscape shifts from a passive visual medium (either as an art form or text) to an active one which possesses the ability to construct the identity of that which it represents. The meaning of the landscape and its representation, thus, becomes secondary to what the representation achieves.

This theory can be applied to the travel writing that emerges from Bengal in the mid-nineteenth century. Travel writing as a genre becomes the site where reactions to, and ruptures from, colonial encounters play out to achieve two specific ends. One, travel writing facilitates the agenda to portray a cohesive, empowered idea of the nation through the geographical mapping of a glorious, mythic past. Two, the very form of travel writing allows the colonised Bengali traveller to adopt an ethnographer's position, thereby allowing them to adopt contemporary western ethnographical practices to turn their gaze back onto the "natives", positioning them closer to the coloniser than the (doubly) colonised.

Both of these ends are the result of reactionary responses stemming from a sense of powerlessness over self-identity which was plaguing Bengal at the time. To contextualise this, one has to understand Bengal's political reality in the mid-nineteenth century.

¹ W. J. T. Mitchell, introduction to *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 1.

Context

Following the growing unrest and dissent among Indians in the aftermath of the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857, the Bengali middle class's faith in the colonial encounter was shaken, exacerbated by stringent and racist government policies under Lytton's regime.²

Calcutta being the capital of the British empire in India had been at the centre of the colonial setup since the mid eighteenth century. The company's civilising mission had further resulted in a strong network of institutions, specifically colleges,³ dedicated to instructing the colonial subjects in a westernized curriculum that privileged the study of European history, political thought, literature, and philosophy.

Thus, the modern-day English educated Bengali men and women had access to discourses on law and governance which equipped them to look critically at the colonising effort and analyse the gulf between the nation as they knew it, and the non-existent national identity that they had. These ruptures begin to manifest themselves in works of literature by the late nineteenth century. Tanika Sarkar writes about the rise in satire towards British colonisers that began to feature in literature and popular culture in Bengal by the 1880's,⁴ along with critique of colonial economic policies and a general lack of faith in the British administration. Both reformist and revivalist forms of colonial criticism begin to co-exist, with the former targeting fiscal and administrative decisions taken by the government, and the latter resisting criticism of and alterations made to orthodox tenets and power hierarchies within Hindu theology.

²Tanika Sarkar, "Imagining Hindu Rashtra", in *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 171.

³ Hindu College (now Presidency University) was set up in 1817 to facilitate an English education. Calcutta University was set up in 1857.

⁴Sarkar, "Bankim", in *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, 140.

This shift plays out best in Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, who begins to move towards strong Hindu revivalist sentiments following his debate with Reverend Hastie in 1882. This sees a paradigm shift from his earlier works which were more aligned with Hindu reformist concerns of class and women's position within society, as explored in *Samya*⁵ and in *Prachina Ebang Nabina*⁶, respectively, to a more rigid, pro-Hindu stance in later works (such as *Anandamath*), which concerned itself with locating an "authentic Hinduism" which might contribute to the need of the hour – building a cohesive national identity. Thus, it follows that he launches the journal *Bangadarshan*⁷ around this time (1870), whose focus was Bengal and nationalist thought.⁸ Tanika Sarkar writes, "The map of India becomes the divine idol – at once sacred and vulnerable [...] In [Tagore's] vision, the magical wholeness which, since Bankim's hymn, had reduced the diversity of the parts to insignificance, is unpacked."⁹

Subsequently, we begin to observe the image of the *bharat mata* or *banga mata* taking shape. In *Anandamath* we see the imagery of the mother-goddess or *bharat mata*, who embodies the nation. This icon is later aggressively popularised within the Hindu nationalist movement in the early twentieth century. Prior to this, the first known instance of the iconography comes as early as 1866 in a satirical piece titled *Unabimsa Purana* by Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, first published anonymously in 1866¹⁰. In this, *bharat mata* is identified as Adhi-Bharati, the widow of Arya Swami, the embodiment of all that is essentially Aryan. A more popular instance of the icon of *bharat mata* in literature is seen in the play *Bharat Mata* by Bengali nationalist

⁵Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, "Samya" in *Bankim Rachanabali* Vol 2, ed. Kanchan Basu (Kolkata: Reflect Publication, 1999), 332-354.

⁶Chattopadhyay, "Prachina Ebang Nabina" in *Bankim Rachanabali*, 222-225.

⁷*Bangadarshan* was a monthly Bengali literary magazine founded and edited by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay in 1872. For detailed note, see appendix.

⁸For a detailed timeline of events in Bankimchandra's literary career, see Simonti Sen, introduction to *Travels to Europe: Self and Other in Bengali Travel Narratives, 1870 – 1910* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2005), 11-12

⁹Sarkar, "Aspects of Contemporary Hindutva Theology" in *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, 278-279.

¹⁰Sadan Jha, "The Life and Times of Bharat Mata: Nationalism as Invented Religion", Manushi, accessed 12 August, 2017, <http://manushi.in/docs/196-the-life-and-times-of-bharat-mata.pdf>.

Kiran Chandra Bandyopadhyay which was first performed in 1873¹¹ and embodied the image of a dispossessed motherland. Set during the famine of Bengal in 1770, it dramatizes the story of a housewife and later her husband who have to flee into the jungle and fall in with a group of rebels. A priest then takes them into a temple to show them Mother India. Emboldened by this, they lead a rebellion which culminates in the defeat of the British.

The impetus to construct such an image came from the impulse to represent a homogenous narrative of an otherwise pluralistic nation. It is not as if any sense of a *desh* or a country did not exist prior to this, but it is only at this time that it becomes politically significant to historicise the past and create a counter discourse to the one championed by the British empire which was contingent upon portraying India as a land of savages in need of modern governance and a civilising effort.

The idea of an Aryan heartland becomes significant by the mid-nineteenth century, because it provides within its space a cohesive sense of community, a common history, racial legitimacy, and the assurance of a robust, pre-colonial past. Within the Hindu revivalist agenda, *Aryavarta* offers a homogenous, Brahmanical, geographically verifiable space with which to anchor the idea of a nation.

This percolates into contemporary literature and political thought. Bankim writes *Vande Mataram*¹² in Sanskrit as part of *Anandamath*, published in 1882, with Tagore later composing its music. The song is first sung within a political context at the 1896 session of the Indian National Congress.¹³

¹¹Sadan Jha, "The Life and Times of Bharat Mata: Nationalism as Invented Religion", Manushi, accessed 12 August, 2017, <http://manushi.in/docs/196-the-life-and-times-of-bharat-mata.pdf>.

¹² For full text and translation, see Appendix B.

¹³"National Song", *Wayback Machine*, archived January 15, 2013, https://web.archive.org/web/20130115003651/http://knowindia.gov.in/knowindia/national_symbols.php?id=12.

In 1897 Swami Vivekananda delivers a lecture on "The Common Bases of Hinduism" which begins thus:

This is the land which is held to be the holiest even in holy *Aryavarta*; this is the *Brahmavarta* of which our great Manu speaks. This is the land from whence arose that mighty aspiration after the Spirit, ay, which in times to come, as history shows, is to deluge the world. This is the land where, like its mighty rivers, spiritual aspirations have arisen and joined their strength, till they travelled over the length and breadth of the world and declared themselves with a voice of thunder. This is the land which had first to bear the brunt of all inroads and invasions into India; this heroic land had first to bare its bosom to every onslaught of the outer barbarians into *Aryavarta*. This is the land which, after all its sufferings, has not yet entirely lost its glory and its strength.¹⁴

The 1899 Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English dictionary defines *Aryavarta* as “the land of the noble or excellent ones” and “the sacred land of the Aryans”, geographically locating it between the “eastern (Bay of Bengal) and western (Arabian Sea) seas, bound on the northern and southern side by the Himalaya and Vindhya mountain ranges”¹⁵ [parenthesis mine] respectively. The sources stated here are the *Manusmriti*¹⁶ and the *Rajatarangini*¹⁷. Slight variations exist in the mapping of the stretch of *Aryavarta*, contingent upon the text one

¹⁴"The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda/Volume 3/Lectures from Colombo to Almora/The Common Bases of Hinduism," *Wikisource*, last modified July 9, 2013, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Complete_Works_of_Swami_Vivekananda/Volume_3/Lectures_from_Colombo_to_Almora/The_Common_Bases_of_Hinduism.

¹⁵“Aryavarta”, Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary, 1899, accessed October 27, 2017, <https://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/scans/MWScan/2014/web/webtc/indexcaller.php?input=HK&output=SktRomanUnicode&citation=AryAvarta>.

¹⁶Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 56.

¹⁷*Rajatarangini* is a chronicle of the north-western Indian subcontinent, particularly the kings of Kashmir. It was written in Sanskrit by Kashmiri historian Kalhana in the 12th century CE. The work consists of 7826 verses, which are divided into eight books called *Tarangas* ("waves"). The *Rajatarangini* provides the earliest source on Kashmir that can be labelled as a "historical" text on this region. Although inaccurate in its chronology, the book still provides an invaluable source of information about early Kashmir and its neighbours in the north western parts of the Indian subcontinent, and has been widely referenced by later historians and ethnographers. For more, see: "Rajatarangini" *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica Online, Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2011, Web. 11 November 2017.

references. Jason Neelis's *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks* traces the changing geography of *Aryavarta* through the ages by examining literary and epigraphic evidence dating as far back as second century BCE, from Patanjali's *Mahabhasya* to the *Dharmasutras*¹⁸. Although in ancient times the idea of being an Aryan was determined through religion, culture, and language, and thus by extension *Aryavarta*, or the land of the Aryans, came to represent homogeneity across these registers, later Brahmanical interventions and a misreading of the *Rig Veda* following William Jones' translation (and popularisation) of the same, politicised the stretch to racially demarcate the *mlechha* (untouchable) from the racially "superior", with the understanding that the superior Aryan race dwelled in the north western part of India, and the aboriginal races whose lands the Aryans had originally invaded occupied the rest of India¹⁹. This idea gained traction in the 19th century among Western philologists and historians, Max Muller's work on the *Rig Veda* and origins of Sanskrit being particularly influential in popularising the theory of a common Aryan origin, although Muller himself believed a common Indo-European origin to be restricted to language alone.

With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, sea voyages via steamer ships becomes readily accessible. We can find sporadic and passing accounts of travel from before this time. For instance, one of the earliest instances can be seen in a collection of letters from Dwarakanath Tagore to his son Debendranath Tagore describing his experiences on his second visit to Europe, which were published in a short lived periodical *Bidyadarshan* in 1842. Around 1855 Ishwar Chandra Gupta's periodical *Sangbad Prabhakar*²⁰ published *Bhramankari bandhur patra*—an epistolary account of travel across various parts of eastern India undertaken

¹⁸Jason Neelis, *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks: Mobility and Exchange within and beyond the Northwestern Borderlands of South Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 76.

¹⁹See the "Arya-varna" "Dasa vana" comparison as discussed by Romila Thapar in "The Theory of Aryan Race and India: History and Politics," *Social Scientist* 24, no. 1/3 (1996): 3-29.

²⁰*Sangbad Prabhakar* was founded by Ishwar Chandra Gupta. See Appendix A.

by Ishwar Chandra Gupta himself, but fashioned as anonymous letters written to the editor of the periodical, Shyamacharan Bandhopadhyay. However, a greater frequency of travel did not necessarily bring about a proliferation in travel writing in Bengal. Instead, it was the impulse to fashion a new Bengali modernity, and the rise and evolution of vernacular prose, which facilitated it. Travel writing as a genre only becomes popular in the 1870s and 1880s, and this can be attributed to an amalgamation of several factors—the advent of print capitalism and easy access to printing presses, the proliferation of periodicals such as *Prabasi*²¹, *Bharati*²², *Bangadarshan*²³, *Kalpataru*²⁴, *Nabyabharat*²⁵ that made space for the publication of serialised travelogues or *bhraman kahini*, and the emergent perception of travel writing as a means of modern self-expression. Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay, in his essay “Writing Home Writing Travel”²⁶ surmises that this development owes credit to a larger symptom taking shape in Bengal at the time, that of the rise of vernacular prose, and with it the impulse to forge a cohesive national identity. Along with the emergence of the genres of novel, biography, autobiography and diary, travel writing as a genre comes to the fore as another tool to fashion a modern Bengali self. This ties in with what Benedict Anderson illustrates in *Imagined Communities*, where he traces a direct link between nationalism and a community’s access to mass vernacular literacy.

In Bengali literary traditions however, travel was not deemed the most popular activity, especially among orthodox Brahmins who feared that travelling outside the ambit of sacred Hindu geography would lead to moral and spiritual contamination. Simonti Sen traces the origins of the word “*bhraman*” (travel), which came from the Sanskrit root “*bhram*”, which

²¹ *Prabasi* was a monthly Bengali magazine founded in 1901 by Ramananda Chatterjee, who was also the editor. It ran for sixty years.

²²For detailed note on *Bharati*, see Appendix A.

²³ For detailed note on *Bangadarshan*, see Appendix A.

²⁴ For detailed note on *Kalpataru*, see Appendix A.

²⁵ For detailed note on *Nabyabharat*, see Appendix A.

²⁶ Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay, “Writing Home, Writing Travel: The Poetics and Politics of Dwelling in Bengali Modernity”, in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44, no. 2 (2002): 293–318, doi:10.1017/S0010417502000142.

means to make a mistake or be mistaken. Unlike in the western literary canon where travel or quests were valourised, as in Homer's *Odyssey*, the Hindu shastric tradition leaned in favour of sedentary lifestyles²⁷, with travel being undertaken either for religious purposes, or for trade. In 1858 Tarinicharan Chattopadhyay's *Bharatbarser itihas*, which was a seminal text of history at the time, outlines the contemporary perception of travel thus:

In earlier times, foreign travellers in India marvelled at the courage, truthfulness and modesty of the people of the Aryan clan; now they remark mainly on the absence of those qualities. In those days Hindus would set out on conquest and hoist their flags in Tatar, China and other countries; now a few soldiers from a tiny island far away are lording it over the land of India. [...] Then the Hindus would sail to Sumatra and other islands [...] Now the thought of a sea voyage strikes terror in the heart of a Hindu, and if anyone manages to go, he is immediately ostracized from society.²⁸

Much of the travel writing that did emerge and prove popular in the mid to late nineteenth century were those authored by Hindu, upper class, western educated males, who were often renowned luminaries, scholar, or litterateurs in their own right. Several of the travel accounts are those of men travelling outside India, usually to England. These works contained observations on western culture and a comparative study with India's own. Romesh Chunder Dutt wrote *Three Years in Europe: 1868-1871*, which was published in 1896. Both Rabindranath Tagore and Vivekananda authored various works on travel. An earlier account of travel writing was Bholanauth Chunder's *Travels of a Hindoo*, published in 1860 which chronicled his journey from Bengal to Punjab.

²⁷ Simonti Sen, introduction to *Travels to Europe: Self and Other in Bengali Travel Narratives, 1870 – 1910* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2005), 2.

²⁸ Tarinicharan Chattopadhyay, *Bharatbarser itihas*, vol. 1 (1858; reprint, Calcutta, 1878), 32.

Later in 1893, Jaladhar Sen's account of his travels was published serially in *Bharati*. This documented his experiences of travelling through pilgrimage centres at the Garhwal region of the Himalayas. This would later be published as the travelogue *Himalay* in 1900.²⁹

History of Women's Travel

Socially sanctioned forms of travel for women, however, had largely been restricted to pilgrimage³⁰. However, with the advent of the railways by the mid-19th century we have instances of women, usually from educated Bengali upper-class families, travelling for more secular reasons—for convalescence, their husbands' work, for leisure, or even for education. Aru Dutt and Toru Dutt went to England at around 1870 to pursue an education.³¹ In 1871 Rajkumari Bandhopadhyay, wife of social worker Shashipada Bandopadhyay, became the first Indian woman to visit England.³² In 1877 Jnadanandini Debi³³, along with her children, travelled by ship to England to accompany her husband for his work. In each instance, the act of travelling to a foreign land was deemed sacrilegious and transgressive, with the women facing extreme social backlash and, in the case of Rajkumari Bandhopadhyay, ostracisation. However, these acts set the way for further instances of travel, and more importantly, written accounts for the same.

²⁹Sandeep Banerjee and Subho Basu, "Secularizing the Sacred, Imagining the Nation-Space: The Himalaya in Bengali Travelogues, 1856-1901", in *Modern Asian Studies* 49, no. 3 (September 29, 2014): 609-49.

³⁰See, Kumkum Chatterjee: "Prior to the 19th century, people travelled to arrange marriages, to seek economic opportunity, but above all on pilgrimages. These earlier travellers usually travelled in large parties to ensure their physical safety on foot, boat, wheeled vehicles, and occasionally animals such as horses, donkeys, or camels." "Nature, History & Nationalism: The Travel Narratives of a South Asian Colonial Elite" in *American Journal of Semiotics* 12, no. 1 (Summer, 1995): 385

³¹Sonali Mukhopadhyay, *Paradhin Bharate Paradhin Nari: Bhraman Kathay Swadesh O Samajchetana* (Calcutta: Gangchil, 2018), 14.

³²Divya Shekhar, "Date with History: The Mysore Dewan Who Led Cauvery act Team 93 Years Ago", *The Economic Times*, February 23, 2017, <http://epaperbeta.timesofindia.com/Article.aspx?eid=31815&articlexml=Date-with-History-The-Mysore-Dewan-who-Led-23022017004036>.

³³ For detailed note see Appendix A.

Krishnabhabini Das travels to England in 1882, and writes *England e Bangamahila*³⁴. In 1894 Jagatmohini Debi sets sail for England, and in 1902 publishes *England e Saat Mash*.

Before being compiled as books, these travel writings were often published serially in periodicals like *Tattwabodhini*, *Prabasi*, and *Dasi*, lending themselves well to the epistolary form. Thus, several of these works mimic the structure of personal letters and often appear conversational in tone. Swarnakumari Debi's "Darjeeling Patra"³⁵ published serially in *Bharati* in 1886 is a fine example of this. In it she addresses her nephew and consistently maintains the tone and familiarity of one writing to a longstanding friend. She signs off each piece with the salutation suited to a letter. The series of letters begin thus:

I, a sea creature, am unable to provide you with a single drop of water, you who live in the desert, parched."— while this phrase might be blatantly untrue, I cannot quite deny the possibility of someone dying of thirst, even as they sink in a bottomless pit of water — having finally felt something similar myself. I have arrived in Darjeeling. Instead of being free as a bird to roam through the mountains — amidst the murmur of trees, the breezy weather, the cacophony of birds, the dense layer of clouds around me — I find myself bedridden.³⁶

This tone of lamentation is consistently maintained through Swarnakumari Debi's text. The more recreational aspects of travel are often undercut by description of practical inconveniences faced by the traveller. Perhaps this is done deliberately to temper the frivolity associated with travelling for leisure, as opposed to travel undertaken as part of a pilgrimage or for trade. Or as Kumkum Chatterjee in "Nature, History & Nationalism: The Travel

³⁴Krishnabhabini Das, "England e Bangamahila", in *Amadiger Bhraman Brittanta* Vol 2, ed. Damayanti Dasgupta (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2017), 53-319.

³⁵Swarnakumari Debi, "Darjeeling Patra" in *Bharati*, Vol. 12 (1888), accessed August 16, 2017, <http://crossasia-repository.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/389/>.

³⁶Swarnakumari Debi, "Darjeeling Patra" in *Bharati*, Vol. 12 (1888), accessed August 16, 2017, <http://crossasia-repository.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/389/>.

Narratives of a South Asian Colonial Elite” posits, to demarcate this type of literature as separate from the religiously coloured travel writing emerging from pilgrimage. Chatterjee traces a departure from earlier modes of travel around the mid nineteenth century. She compares two accounts of pilgrimages (1770/1857) and observes that while the former account is pivoted around the moral or religious impulse, the latter is concerned with “*bharat-darshan*”³⁷.

Another generic trope adopted by female writers of travel include extensive apologia as precursor to the text, or in certain cases, used as a refrain throughout the body of work. In the 1933 preface to *Aryabarta*³⁸, Nanibala Ghosh takes care to mention her complete disinterest in authoring a work of travel. She states:

In the past I have, on several occasions, travelled to various parts of the country, but I have never once felt the need to write about them. [...] I didn't really have much of an inclination to write about this visit to Kashmir either. But upon my husband's insistence, and also awestruck by Kashmir's natural beauty, something that I hoped to be able to share with my family and relatives — especially my one and only daughter and son-in-law with whom I yearned to share the pleasure of the beauty and comeliness of this place, — did I write this piece.³⁹

It is clearly important to Nanibala to situate the impulse to write and document what she sees as something extraneous to her own will and whim.

³⁷ See: Kumkum Chatterjee, “Nature, History & Nationalism: The Travel Narratives of a South Asian Colonial Elite” in *American Journal of Semiotics* 12, no. 1 (Summer, 1995): 385-86.

³⁸Nanibala Ghosh, *Aryabarta* (Calcutta: Kalika Press, 1933), accessed January 13, 2017, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.339261>.

³⁹Nanibala Ghosh, *Aryabarta* (Calcutta: Kalika Press, 1933), accessed January 13, 2017, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.339261>.

The solo woman traveller is also quick to draw the reader's attention to familial connection framing her travel. Girindranandini Debi dedicates *Dholpur*⁴⁰ to her father. Through this dedication the reader can infer that it is her husband's work that takes her to Dholpur. Prasannamae Debi dedicates *Aryabarta* to her daughter, Priyambada. She also mentions that she is travelling with her brothers, and discusses the circumstances surrounding her travel, specifically her illness:

Illness is never, under any circumstance, a pleasant experience for anyone. [...] But it is this illness that has been the reason behind my learning. The education and joy I received owing to my illness is a memory that I will hold sacred in this solitary life of mine. [...] Unfortunately, the climate of Bengal is not ideal for my current disposition. However, it is difficult to stay away from family and loved ones for a long time, that too in a land far away. Although, to save one's life one must sometimes leave them behind and travel to foreign lands. Illness is the main reason for my travel.⁴¹

The negotiation with oneself (and the reader) to justify the need to travel is prevalent in varying degrees in the works of the writers discussed in subsequent chapters. This could be symptomatic of women's writing in 19th century Bengal in general where discomfort with authorship and autonomy had to be performed by female writers. For example, Rashshundari Debi's *Amar jiban*⁴² which is an excellent example of the trope of apologia marking female authorship, where the author is constantly aware of the transgressive act of writing and reading. Another recurrent trope in these works of travel is the deliberate and frequent mention of works by other authors, and the female authors' familiarity with the same. Prasannamae Debi alludes

⁴⁰Girindranandini Debi, *Dholpur* (Calcutta: Barat Press, 1897).

⁴¹Prasannamae Debi, *Aryabarta: Janaika Bangla Mahila-r Bhraman Brittanta*, in *Amadiger Bhraman Brittanta* Vol 2, ed. Damayanti Dasgupta (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2017), 325.

⁴²Rashshundari Debi, *Amar Jiban* (Calcutta: College Street Publication Pvt Ltd, 2002).

to *The Travels of a Hindoo*⁴³ by Bholanuath Chunder, even suggesting amendments to his text subsequent to her own visit to those places. She expresses familiarity with Bankim's works, quotes Shelley's poems, and engages with articles published in *Statesman*. Swarnakumari Debi quotes lines from Browning's poetry, and mentions Tennyson. She ensures the reader knows about the ubiquitous presence of western literature in her life, as she describes a regular evening at her house where everyone gathers around to read excerpts from Victorian poets. These instances perhaps betray a certain anxiety in the authors to prove their scholarship and worldliness to their readership.

Thus, several complex facets come together in the travel texts authored by women during the late 19th century. Chapter one looks at the emergent discourse around nationalism in Bengal which travel writing contributed to and engaged with, through a close reading of Prasannamae Debi's *Aryabarta: janaika banga mahilar bhraman brittana*, published as a book in 1888.

Chapter two analyses the colonised travel writer's impulse to "other" the subjects of their work, adopting the ethnographic impulse of the Western traveller and turning the colonizer's gaze back further, and through the act of acquiring and disseminating data about the "people of Hindustan", distancing themselves from those very people. The texts discussed are Girinidranandini Debi's *Dholpur*, published in 1896, and a short essay by Subarnaprabha Debi, "Taj Mahal", published around 1885.

The conclusion looks at the authors' gendered position within the tradition of travel writing, which in turn informs their perception and depiction of the landscape around them and politicizes their work. Further, by looking at the evolution of women's travel writing (by examining Nanibala Ghosh's *Aryabarta* published in 1933, nearly half a century after

⁴³Bholanauth Chunder, *The Travels of a Hindoo to Various Parts of Bengal and Upper India* Vol 1 (London: N. Trubner & Co., 1869), <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.100107>.

Prasannamae Debi), we find that landscape and its affect are largely influenced by their representation which, within the context of late 19th century Bengal, is motivated and subsequently problematized by the confluence of colonialism and the Bengali women writers' unique subjective position.

Chapter One

Mapping a Historiography for the Emergent Nation

Written under the pen name Niharika, Prasannamae Debi's *Aryabarta*⁴⁴ was first published serially in 1885 as *Aryabart-e bangamahila* in periodicals *Alochona*, and later *Nabyabharat*.⁴⁵ It chronicled Prasannamae Debi's journey across various parts of Uttar Pradesh and Delhi. In 1888 it was compiled and reprinted as a book, and titled *Aryabarta: janaika banga mahilar bhraman brittanta*. This became the first book on travel written by a Bengali woman. It can be approximated that Prasannamae Debi was born in 1857, in Haripur, Bangladesh. She was initially taught to read by her father, and was later instructed in English and Music by a British tutor. She was married briefly, but returned to her parents' house after her husband was proven to be clinically insane. It was after a bout of illness that she set out to travel across North Western India as a means of convalescing. She sets out with two of her brothers.

The book is divided into two sections. The first chronicles her journey through parts of Uttar Pradesh and Delhi. The second is about her journey through Bihar. The chapters within these sections are named after the places visited or departed from (Etowa, Vrindavan), or in some instances, the site or artefact seen (*Lauhadwar* or Iron gates, *Hamam*). It is interesting to note that the chapter that concludes her time in Delhi and Uttar Pradesh, and thus marks her journey back home, is titled "*Swadeshahimukhe*" or "Towards own country". Here the use of the term "*swadesh*" is significant. Prasannamae Debi's journey had been within India, she had not been

⁴⁴ The version I refer to is Prasannamae Debi, *Aryabarta: Janaika Bangla Mahila-r Bhraman Brittanta*, in *Amadiger Bhraman Brittanta* Vol 2, ed. Damayanti Dasgupta (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2017), henceforth referred to as *Aryabarta*.

⁴⁵ Damayanti Dasgupta, *Amadiger Bhraman Brittanta* Vol 2 (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2017), 321.

to “*bidesh*”, a term reserved for lands outside India, usually Europe, and yet she uses the term to include any place outside Bengal. By extension this suggests that the lands she did visit, although within India, were deemed foreign or alien. Often she speaks of the loneliness of living outside her homeland, “*probash*”. Thus “*desh*” (country) to her is interchangeable with Bengal. This is a symptom of a larger and pervasive sense of alienation from parts of one’s own country which exists among Indians at this time, underlining a fractured sense of national identity. There is a disjunct and inherent suspicion between Bengalis and the rest of the nation, a prejudice which runs both ways. Bholanauth Chunder illustrates this in *Travels of a Hindoo*:

“No class of men had found themselves so insnared all of a sudden in the meshes of danger as the Natives of Bengal, who then happened to be serving or trading in the Upper Provinces. It was the Bengalee who had ushered in the foreigner to the land, and he must suffer now for his crimes. [...] Now that things have returned to their old order, many Bengalees are up here again. Turning the tables, they are now seen to give themselves high airs, and to lord it over the crestfallen and cowed down Hindoostanis.”⁴⁶

This absence of a communal sense of nationhood becomes a recurring theme in the essays of Bengali writers at this time, most prominently in Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s 1880 essay “Bangalar itihash”⁴⁷ where he draws attention to this lack by sensationally stating that India has no history. He is of course quick to make concessions for textbooks of history circulated among school children, particularly Rajakrishna Mukhopadhyay’s *Banglar itihash*⁴⁸, published 1874. However, he criticises the abridged, perfunctory nature of the book, lamenting its limits of unearthing the true, glorious past of Bengal. Fourteen years later, Ramananda Chattopadhyay

⁴⁶ Bholanauth Chunder, *The Travels of a Hindoo to Various Parts of Bengal and Upper India* Vol 1 (London: N. Trubner & Co., 1869), 344, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.100107>.

⁴⁷ Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, “Bangalar itihash,” in *Bankim Rachanabali* Vol 2, ed. Kanchan Basu (Kolkata: Reflect Publication, 1999), 289-291.

⁴⁸ Rajakrishna Mukhopadhyay, “Banglar itihash,” in *Bangadarshan* (Calcutta: Messrs J G Chatterjee and Co., 1874).

makes a similar complaint in “*Aitihashik tirthajatra*” about the nebulous sense of nationhood pervasive among the citizens.

There are several sites in India that have memories of ancient poets, that have been witness to ancient history. Many centuries ago foreigners would make their way here to see these sites. Even today there are many who come from all over the world to visit these distinguished places. Yet, we who live in this country, we who live among these places, we take no notice, we remain ignorant of them.⁴⁹

The political motivations behind bringing to focus the absence of historical awareness among Indians, and the recurring call for the need of the hour—an Indian historiography—among Bengali writers and thinkers require some context.

Firstly, it must be noted that when Tarinicharan Chattopadhyay speaks wistfully about “earlier times”, he is in fact referring to the Vedic age, and this temporal representation is one that is shared by his contemporaries. A trend begins to emerge by the mid nineteenth century of tracing Indian history through the template of European historiography, wherein the period of Vedic civilisation is seen to be a time of prosperity and enlightenment, much like the European perception of classical antiquity.⁵⁰ The dark middle ages coincide with Muslim rule, and present-day India is perceived as the renaissance. This linear, decidedly European representation of history infiltrates the upper class, English educated consciousness and discourse by the mid nineteenth century. Partha Chatterjee traces a paradigm shift from Puranic history to modern historiography in *The Nation and its Fragments*⁵¹, underlining the decreasing onus put on destiny and divine will when explaining ruptures and loss in political warfare, and charting the rising proclivity to narrativise events in history through the lens of causality.

⁴⁹ Ramananda Chattopadhyay, “Aitihashik tirthajatra,” *Dasi* Vol2 (Calcutta: Brahma Mission Press, 1893) 23.

⁵⁰ Prasannamae Debi best exemplifies this in the chapter “Jumma Masjid”. See: *Aryabarta*, 376: “O ancient Delhi, ancient Indraprastha, ancient Rome, ancient Athens, ancient Ayodhya -- where are you today? Alas! Where have you gone?”

⁵¹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993).

Secondly, while debates on the origin and history of India had been around since the end of the eighteenth century, especially among post Enlightenment Europeans who had been taught to equate knowledge with power, and thought it their duty to know about the history of the lands they were colonising, the study of Indology in Europe and the discovery of the Vedas in early nineteenth century accelerated this interest. Philologists since early nineteenth century were speculatively tracing Indo-European linguistic roots to Sanskrit. An important work among English educated Indians and British imperialists at this time is Max Muller's "The Last Results of the Sanskrit Researches in Comparative Philology" which made definitive claims regarding linguistic genealogy, and extended this claim to the ethnology and history of India. Muller believed in the theory of monogenesis and asserted that the Aryans had one common origin in Central Asia and spoke a common language before diverging in two groups that made their way to Europe and Iran several centuries later.

We may divide the whole Arian family into branches, the northern and the southern. The northern nations [...] have each one act allotted to them on the stage of history. They have each a national character to support. Not so the southern tribes. They are absorbed in the struggles of thought [...]⁵²

It was largely believed that the Aryans who travelled towards Iran, later settled in India. Romila Thapar in her essay "The Theory of Aryan Race and India: History and Politics"⁵³ charts this trajectory of the Aryan myth making.

The theory of Aryan race became endemic to the reconstruction of Indian history, and the reasons for this is varied. [...] The Aryan theory also provided the colonised with status and self-esteem, arguing that they were linguistically and racially of the same

⁵² Max Muller, "The Last Results of the Sanskrit Researches in Comparative Philology," in *Outlines of the Philosophy of Universal History Applied to Language and Religion* Vol 1, ed. CCJ Bunsen (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1854) 132.

⁵³ Romila Thapar, "The Theory of Aryan Race and India: History and Politics," *Social Scientist* 24, no. 1/3 (1996): 3-29. doi:10.2307/3520116.

stock as the colonisers. [...] The complexities of caste were simplified in its being explained as racial segregation, demarcating the Aryans from the others.⁵⁴

Upper caste Hindus quickly seized on this connection. The theory of the Aryan race levelled the racial playing field, aligning them with the colonisers, and othering the “*dasas*” or indigenous people of India who were thought to make up the population of the lower castes and untouchables.

These factors come together at a fortuitous moment in Indian history, capitalising on the emerging interest in Indology, and the need to situate the remedy for the absence of a cohesive sense of nationhood within the Aryan theory. Thus, when Bankim, and later Ramananda, talk of Indian history or the absence of the same, it is this delicate juncture of proto-nationalist impulse that they are speaking from. This remedy is made possible through the harnessing of a larger discourse of same-ness which traces a unified Hindu lineage. This serves two purposes at once—one, it provides relatable and uniform context to the country, and two, it traces a glorious and robust history that predates the colonial era, and thus establishes India as capable of autonomy. This theory begins to gain traction in India since the mid nineteenth century, later to form the backbone of Hindu nationalist thought and identity.

I argue that in 1885, Prasannamae Debi through her politically charged travel writing in *Aryabarta* was engaging with this specific strain of history making and contributing to the proto-nationalist consciousness of her times.

The beginning of *Aryabarta* is marked by a letter to Prasannamae Debi’s daughter, Srimati Priyambada debi, which is then followed by a short preface. The letter summarises the recurring subjects of her travelogue—mainly, Indian history and Aryan supremacy. The letter

⁵⁴ Romila Thapar, "The Theory of Aryan Race and India: History and Politics," *Social Scientist* 24, no. 1/3 (1996): 7.

reads like an exhortation to her readers to acknowledge and revel in the singular greatness of India. In a thinly veiled diatribe directed towards colonial rule, she implores her daughter to question the cause behind the nation's deterioration under the British empire. While lamenting the moral and spiritual decrepitude of the nation that has been brought about under colonial rule, she lists women from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, as well as figures from Indian history, to act as foil and be perceived as role models, alluding to them under the blanket term "Arya-nari" or Aryan women. The discourse around empowerment and Aryan women which Prasannamae Debi capitalises on had already been crystallised with the foundation of the Arya Nari Samaj in 1879, which hoped to train Hindu women in the ideals of Sita, Draupadi, etc.⁵⁵ Thus, Prasannamae Debi also develops a narrative of heroism surrounding Aryan men and women from the very beginning, and this tone carries through the rest of the text as well. The letter is an emotionally charged piece through which Prasannamae Debi makes her views on her contemporary political climate known. The letter to Priyambada begins thus:

The glorious tales from ancient India about the Aryans are not myths and fables when there exists running proof from Vindya to Himgiri, the tales of which are still incessantly sung by Ganga, Yamuna, Sarayu. The remains of the past that I saw in Ayodhya, Hastina, Indraprastha—we may lament the loss of that sacred terrain and the days of glory, but we can never dismiss it as a figment of our imagination, or a product of mere fiction.⁵⁶

A large part of the travelogue focuses on the past, but there appears to be a strain of anxiety running through the letter of this past coming under threat of delegitimisation. Indeed, this anxiety is one that is shared by Prasannamae Debi's contemporaries who are looking at

⁵⁵Sivanath Sastri, *History of the Brahma Samaj* Vol II (Calcutta: R Chatterjee, 1912), 18, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.151398/page/n31>.

⁵⁶ Prasannamae Debi, *Aryabarta: Janaika Bangla Mahila-r Bhraman Brittanta*, in *Amadiger Bhraman Brittanta* Vol 2, ed. Damayanti Dasgupta (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2017), 323.

history for affirmation of self-reliance and “*bhoot bharater gourab kahini*” or “India’s past glories”.

In “Banglar Kalanka” Bankim talks of the general perception of Bengalis as “forever feeble, forever cowardly, forever effeminate, inclined to run away when faced with the prospect of a punch.” He considers Macaulay’s representation of Indians⁵⁷ a significant factor in propagating such a stereotype. There are two things to note here. One, both Prasannamae Debi and Bankim often use Bengal and India interchangeably. Two, neither of them appear to contest the veracity of such a statement, both agreeing that Bengalis in the present time are indeed a cowardly race. However, both squarely attribute this condition to the violence and repercussions of colonisation:

...there are several reasons for such a fate for the Bengalis. If you kill someone and call them dead, then those words still ring true.”⁵⁸

“Since our very birth we, the children of slavery, appear to suckle on fear, along with our mother’s milk.”⁵⁹

They are also quick to protect India’s past from falling within the ambit of such a representation. Within a paragraph of conceding to Bengal’s present state of weakness, Bankim asserts:

Those who say Bengalis have always had such a character, have always been weak [...] are lying. [...] We have not found any historical evidence to substantiate [this] [...]

⁵⁷ Macaulay’s “Minute Upon Indian Education”, published in 1835, which asserted “We have to educate a people who cannot at present be educated by means of their mother-tongue. We must teach them some foreign language.”

⁵⁸ Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, “Banglar Kalanka,” in *Bankim Rachanabali* Vol 2, ed. Kanchan Basu (Kolkata: Reflect Publication, 1999), 292.

⁵⁹ Prasannamae Debi, *Aryabarta: Janaika Bangla Mahila-r Bhraman Brittanta*, in *Amadiger Bhraman Brittanta* Vol 2, ed. Damayanti Dasgupta (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2017), 343.

However, we have found ample proof that in the past Bengalis had great physical strength, they were *tejaswi*, and victorious.⁶⁰

Thus, when Prasannamae Debi capitalises on the existing theory of the Aryan race to substantiate claims to a more prosperous past for India, we can understand that her motivations for doing this stems from the same defensiveness exhibited in Bankim two years earlier. Notice that evidence and substantiation appear to be the common refrain in both “*Banglar Itihash*” and *Aryabarta* when addressing the discourse surrounding Indian history, whether to disprove an unflattering representation of the nation or to stake a claim to a prosperous one. This can be seen as an influence of western modes of scholarship, one that set the precedence of privileging rational knowledge systems over indigenous ones. Unlike pre-colonial modes of history-writing where events and misfortunes appear pre-ordained, such as in Mrityunjay Bidyalankar’s *Rajabali* (1808)⁶¹, which was the first printed text of Indian history in Bengali, by the mid-nineteenth century ideas of legitimacy that is situated within a nexus of verifiable facts become imperative to lend credence to any claim. It is for this reason that the need to provide irrefutable proof of greatness (and not merely assert that the past was great) becomes a fixation in Prasannamae Debi’s letter, as well as in her text.

Further, she deliberately creates a framework of longing and desire around images and knowledge of India’s past.

Ever since I was a child I had nursed in my heart an intense yearning to see the historically significant sites of my motherland.⁶²

[...]

⁶⁰ Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, “Bangalar Kalanka,” in *Bankim Rachanabali* Vol 2, ed. Kanchan Basu (Kolkata: Reflect Publication, 1999), 292.

⁶¹ Mrityunjay Bidyalankar, *Rajabali* (Serampore: Serampore Mission Press, 1808).

⁶² Prasannamae Debi, *Aryabarta: Janaika Bangla Mahila-r Bhraman Brittanta*, in *Amadiger Bhraman Brittanta* Vol 2, ed. Damayanti Dasgupta (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2017), 325.

...then my childhood dream, my heart's most cherished hope began to awaken. The exploits of the ancestors, history's main land, India's pilgrimage site, these visions began to fan the flames of my desire to see the glory days of India's past...⁶³

By doing this, she not only continues to draw attention to the larger symptom of India's alienation from its own history (by underlining a literal lack of access to the significant geographical sites), she also negates potential debates and doubt about the actual existence of this illustrious past. The fact that it existed is never in contention within the universe of Prasannamae Debi's text. As she travels from Agra to Indraprastha to Delhi, each evidence of decline and ruin becomes proof positive that there existed something better before this. Further, by situating her claim to this better past within the scope of a travelogue, and thus capitalising on the informally scientific, non-fictional nature of the genre, she manages to imbue the idea of this past with a degree of certitude.

In sharp contrast with the characteristic pragmatism of the genre she works within, Prasannamae Debi chooses to use myth and religion as a recurring anchor for her text. She invokes religion to make sense of her landscape, making use of her knowledge of Hindu sacred texts to map or pivot her immediate geographical location, and sharing anecdotes along the way. Drawing from these sources, she informs the reader about the etymology of a place:

When Sri Krishna was travelling from Vrindavan to Mathura, there was a plan afoot to kill him. But Krishna is an avatar of Vishnu, and so he overcame all obstacles and defeated Kansharaaj in a battle, thus becoming Mathura's king. Since then this place has been called 'Ranabhoom' (Battlefield).⁶⁴

Despite Prasannamae Debi's tendency to look for and provide factual evidence about India's past, the boundaries of myth, lore, and facts often overlap and become indistinguishable

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 328.

⁶⁴ Prasannamae Debi, *Aryabarta: Janaika Bangla Mahila-r Bhraman Brittanta*, in *Amadiger Bhraman Brittanta* Vol 2, ed. Damayanti Dasgupta (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2017), 353.

within the narrative of her text, not unlike Bidyalankar's *Rajabali*. Partha Chatterjee presents the latter text as an example of Puranic History⁶⁵ where events are portrayed as mediated by divine will, and subject to the vagaries of dharma. While Prasannamae Debi is cognizant of cause and effect (we will return to this idea when looking at her portrayal of British soldiers in the section "*Durga*"), and subscribes to the western tradition of history writing, nevertheless, she deliberately allows certain elements of Puranic historic tradition to inform her narrative. Much like in *Rajabali* where myth and contemporary events seamlessly coexist, Prasannamae Debi too allows her description of landscape to run parallel to events in Hindu epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. This contrast is most telling when she leaves Vrindavan and arrives in Indraprastha. Towards the end of "*Biday*" ("Farewell") she describes in great detail (and equanimity) the political reality of India, alluding to stringent policies of firearms and currency put in place by Lord Lytton. The moment she enters Indraprastha, however, her tone shifts completely and she juxtaposes figures from the epics onto existing topography:

Indraprastha is where wealth, respectability, happiness, heroism and freedom converge; a beloved memorial and relic of past feats. Here every atom seems to have the footprint of Vima, Arjuna, Yudhistir — every particle of dust seems to convey the purity of their life.⁶⁶

She visualises vignettes from the past, accessing them from "memory". However, the memory accessed is not a personal, but a collective one. Note that she has never visited these places until now. She thus draws upon a wealth of information pre-configured through her reading of the shastras and epics, which she then juxtaposes with contemporary geography, in order to lend credence to the past:

⁶⁵ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 77 – 81.

⁶⁶ Prasannamae Debi, *Aryabarta: Janaika Bangla Mahila-r Bhraman Brittanta*, in *Amadiger Bhraman Brittanta* Vol 2, ed. Damayanti Dasgupta (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2017), 369.

While standing in front of the mosque, now surrounded only by silence and darkness, I felt myself transported to the past. Through the lens of my imagination, I was able to see scenes from the past floating all around me, as if alive.⁶⁷

On her way to Mathura, for instance, she encounters flora and fauna and describes them thus:

On the way to Mathura, on the vast expanse of greenery, there were baby deers resting or gazing curiously, ready to prance off at the slightest sound. Now you see them, now you don't! What a pleasant sight! On seeing this, the image of Tapaban⁶⁸ from the past crossed my mind.⁶⁹

Even though Prasannamae Debi asserts that she is not on a pilgrimage, and instead is merely visiting some of the pilgrimage sites, her representation of the landscape around her is consistently spiritually inclined. In certain sections of the text, the language affected by her is one of devotees falling into a trance.

When I was in Mathura I seemed to drown in a pool of memory and dreams [...] and the sound of the Yamuna would lull my reminiscing heart to sleep. I passed my days immersed in hopes, dreams, and memories...⁷⁰

In Mathura she perceives a “serene beauty and solitude” that allegedly perfectly aligns with her mind. Adopting a narrative of helplessness, she says she finds herself immersed in thoughts of the past owing to the influence of her surroundings. It is as though her reconstructions and representations of these places are outside the ambit of her agency, and she is merely the mouthpiece for a historical narrative that predates her:

⁶⁷ Prasannamae Debi, *Aryabarta: Janaika Bangla Mahila-r Bhraman Brittanta*, in *Amadiger Bhraman Brittanta* Vol 2, ed. Damayanti Dasgupta (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2017), 376.

⁶⁸ *Tapaban*: A forest generally used for meditation; a place of shelter for holy men and ascetics.

⁶⁹ Prasannamae Debi, *Aryabarta: Janaika Bangla Mahila-r Bhraman Brittanta*, in *Amadiger Bhraman Brittanta* Vol 2, ed. Damayanti Dasgupta (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2017), 349.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 352.

In the blink of an eye the light from the oil lamps lit everything up as though it were day. The singers began to chant sweetly in unison. Immediately, the incessant noise died down and everything became silent. Immersed in the love of Hari, countless number of people began to quietly, reverently, pray [...] The very air is not brave enough to penetrate this silence. Unable to blow through this place, it too becomes entranced in the goodness of Hari and sings his sacred songs across every door at Mathura. We were wonderstruck by this fantastic scene, this earnest, heartfelt reverence and the supernatural sound of the *kirtan* [...] From here we went to see the evening prayers at Bisram Ghat, which resulted in us drowning in yet another *Indrajaal*.⁷¹

The nation of Prasannamae Debi's imagination is evidently uniformly Hindu, filled with references to Hindu mythology and consistently analysed against the backdrop of sites that are sacred within the *Smṛiti* texts. She frequently quantifies the value or splendour of the topography around her with respect to its connection with incidents within Hindu sacred texts. She approaches the landscape with a degree of bias and is prone to representing Hindu sites of worship in an inherently positive light. Her description of these places makes them appear almost prelapsarian in their purity. This is how she frames the landscape on her way to Vrindavan:

It is as if Nature had laid bare her beautiful self and scattered with abandon bundles of beauty along this majestic path for travellers to chance upon. There are no ailments, sorrow, frustration, or pain in this world. All is wonder, all is sweetness. [...] Grief-stricken lives are healed here. It is indeed the Aryans who are the true poets. It must have been with the intent of knowing living, breathing poetry, that they began the tradition of pilgrimages.⁷²

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 355. Prasannamae Debi appropriates the language of mysticism in her description of prayer. She capitalises on the European notion of the East being the site for spirituality and philosophy (as claimed by Max Mueller in "The Last Results of the Sanskrit Researches in Comparative Philology"), instead of subverting it.

⁷² Prasannamae Debi, *Aryabarta: Janaika Bangla Mahila-r Bhraman Britanta*, in *Amadiger Bhraman Britanta* Vol 2, ed. Damayanti Dasgupta (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2017), 357.

In the chapter “*Durga*” or “Fort” when she encounters a group of British children playing, she instinctively likens them to Aryan children, commenting appreciatively on their appearance and comparing them to Shakuntala⁷³ and Vikram. “The way the children of the brave-hearts used to play during the days of India’s past, we only find that in the *Puranas* and in the pages of history, but here, seeing these children playing so freely and without fear evokes traces of the Aryan race of the old days.”⁷⁴

At various junctures in the text Prasannamae Debi endorses the idea of an Aryan nation, which, by extension, is a Hindu one and Prasannamae Debi’s text certainly adds to this majoritarian discourse.

On her way to Indraprastha and Delhi she stops at a hotel that is owned by a clergyman and run by Muslim staff. However, despite acknowledging a long and fruitful association between Hindus and Muslims in the past, she is unable to trust them, and documents her uneasiness throughout her stay:

...we took up residence on the second floor of a hotel run by an English clergyman. He made sure all the arrangements were in place so that we had to face no inconvenience. The clergyman was a gentleman [...] there was nothing amiss in his hospitality. Even though for a long time we have had close associations with Muslims, and they are something akin to our brothers. Even though in the old days there have been sacred unions between a Hindu Rajput daughter and the Mughal sultan, even though Hindus enjoyed pride of place in the Badsha’s *darbar* and were respected for the same, and even though till today so many local rulers are glorified in light of the great Muslim emperor of Delhi, and yet I could not tell you why I simply could not trust the Muslim boys at this hotel. Even when I could see them busy with their own work, I could feel a suspicion and unease in my heart. It is unfortunate that an orderly Muslim man could not earn our trust despite delivering neat and perfect service to us. The upper floor of our hotel was occupied by Maharaj Holkar’s men, which finally made us feel safe.⁷⁵

⁷³ In the *Mahabharata*, Shakuntala is the wife of King Dushyanta and the mother of Bharat.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 343.

⁷⁵ Prasannamae Debi, *Aryabarta: Janaika Bangla Mahila-r Bhraman Brittanta*, in *Amadiger Bhraman Brittanta* Vol 2, ed. Damayanti Dasgupta (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2017), 367-368.

In sharp contrast, we see Prasannamae Debi's perception of a holy-man whom she encounters in Mathura. She likens him to an otherworldly being—"aparthiba". The reader is informed that he speaks Sanskrit and inspires the deepest respect and reverence from those around him by virtue of his demeanour. Using phrases "pure, sober visage, steady expression" and "tender expression filled with gravitas", Prasannamae Debi affords him legitimacy thus:

He is not like the usual holy men we see on the streets. What the shastras deem a true life of an ascetic, he has adopted that life and has dedicated his life to spirituality and to disseminating wisdom.⁷⁶

The common denominator in either instance is Prasannamae Debi's encounter with an unknown male. And yet there remains a stark disparity in their representations within the text, thereby proving her inherent prejudice towards those outside the ambit of her "*desh*", one that is shared by her contemporaries as well.

Thus, Prasannamae Debi through her travel writing begins to construct a Hindu national identity which very much borrows from the majoritarian sensibility of her time. She uses the tools of her colonial education to challenge existing representation of the nation, all the while being constantly vigilant about mobility and the compromises made to the same owing to her colonised status. She uses the term *swadhin* (free) twice to describe the children at the fort, comparing them with Indian children who are "the sons of slaves, suckling on milk and fear". She resents the double standards of gatekeeping at the fort that allows British officials to pass through, but requires that Indians provide government sanctioned passes.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Prasannamae Debi, *Aryabarta: Janaika Bangla Mahila-r Bhraman Brittanta*, in *Amadiger Bhraman Brittanta* Vol 2, ed. Damayanti Dasgupta (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2017), 350.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 342.

Prasannamae Debi finds India's deliverance in its history⁷⁸. Using the metaphor of wind, she asserts that disseminating knowledge about the nation's past glories is the only way to inspire new agency and life among the people of India. This echoes the same sentiment that was the foundation behind Bankim's indignant claim "India has no history"⁷⁹, and the one Ramananda will later repeat in *Aitihashik tirthajatra*. If we are to apply the antiquity-dark ages-renaissance approach (and indeed the consistent call for a "*punarabishkar*" or "rediscovery" in these texts does support this theory), then in order to have a renaissance or a re-birth there has to be unmistakable knowledge of a birth to begin with. To this end, Prasannamae Debi proceeds to create a repository of past deeds through her account of travel in *Aryabarta*, using memory as a trope in her writing. In so doing, *Aryabarta*'s centre begins to shift from travel, to include history and politics in its scope. One could argue that travel is Prasannamae Debi's excuse to create a text of Indian history, one whose credibility remains unscathed because it tethers its assertions to tangible, spatially verifiable structures.

⁷⁸ See: *Aryabarta*, 369. "Even today, the winds that have blown for generations through India go from door to door singing songs of our incomparable past -- it is as though breathing new life into the unfortunate, enslaved, dying children of the Aryans were its sole purpose. If through the elixir of these songs of our past this ever-faithful wind is successful in imbuing India with new life, and awakening it from its narcotic slumber, only then will it be satisfied."

⁷⁹ Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, "Bangalar Itihas," in *Bankim Rachanabali* Vol 2, ed. Kanchan Basu (Kolkata: Reflect Publication, 1999), 289.

Chapter Two

Travel Writing as Ethnographic Practice in 19th Century Bengal

In this chapter we explore the ethnographic impulse in 19th century travel writing as exemplified through the works of Subarnaprabha Debi (1885) and Girindranandini Debi (1896). Moving away from the nationalistic impulse that imbued the writings of Prasannamae Debi, we focus now on the other strain of travel writing emerging in colonial Bengal, one that has at its core the scientific impetus to classify and disburse knowledge.

Systems to gather knowledge about a community or people were in place since pre-colonial times, as Christopher Bayly argues in *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870*.⁸⁰ Network of spies, mid-wives, astrologers, gossip mongers in bazaars, all contributed to providing information about the people of India to the Mughal courts, and later to company rulers. Early 17th century account of India by British travellers, while motivated with the aim to understand the unknown, often adopt a narrative of wonder when encountered with the unfamiliar, falling into orientalist tropes of exoticising the land and its people.⁸¹ Pramod K. Nayar, in his essay "Marvelous Excesses: English Travel Writing and India, 1608–1727."⁸² argues that this exoticisation (which he calls "the marvelous") is tempered at its core by an increasing need for a "scientific and rational

⁸⁰ C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁸¹ Henry Lord, *A Discovery of the Banian Religion and the Religion of the Persees: A Critical Edition of Two Early English Works on Indian Religions* (Edwin Mellen Press: 1999).

⁸² Pramod K. Nayar, "Marvelous Excesses: English Travel Writing and India, 1608–1727" in *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 2 (2005): 213-38.

account”⁸³. However, these pre-colonial methods of knowledge gathering were never formalised, and by the 18th Century, lost favour with the advent of the field sciences.⁸⁴

Simon Schaffer in his essay “Scientific Discoveries and the End of Natural Philosophy” notes the paradigm shift that occurs in the West in the late eighteenth century that marks the transition from classical research to mature scientific programmes.⁸⁵ This shift extends to the secondary sciences as well and we begin to see the formalisation of earlier knowledge systems, with a growing interest in surveys, cartography, geographical explorations, and ethnographic interests. Within the Indian context, it becomes crucial for the colonizers to have a firmer understanding of the territory they are now in charge of ruling, and thus the Survey of India is set up in 1767 to consolidate the territories of British East India Company.

Moving forward from the tradition of the Grand Tour, accounts of exploration now began to require scientifically ratified data. By the mid-19th century, British civil servants began to combine imperialism with modern science, and embarked on ethnographic surveys of the people of India. Kamlesh Mohan states:

As practitioners of the Enlightenment theory of knowledge, [they] began a scientific exercise of enumerating and classifying Indians. The underlying belief was that control of society was dependent upon the precise knowledge of the composition and location of its members in a taxonomic system.⁸⁶

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 214-215.

⁸⁴ Kapil Raj, "Colonial Encounters and the Forging of New Knowledge and National Identities: Great Britain and India, 1760-1850" in *Osiris* 15 (2000): 119-34, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/301944>.

⁸⁵ Simon Schaffer, “Scientific Discoveries and the End of Natural Philosophy” in *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 16, No. 3, (Aug., 1986) pp. 387-420. See: Between 1760 - 1795, with the discovery of Uranus, Oxygen, electrostatic inverse square law, photosynthesis, it becomes increasingly difficult to substantiate the perception of scientific discovery as being the work of a lone, heroic researcher and his own psychological and intellectual output, as opposed to it being the outcome of a structure of study and analysis.

⁸⁶ Kamlesh Mohan, "The Colonial Ethnography: Imperial Pursuit of Knowledge for Hegemony in British India (Late 19th to early 20th century)." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 63 (2002): 829, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44158151>.

Thus, we see “the first attempt to apply to Indian ethnography the methods of systematic research sanctioned by the authority of European anthropologists”⁸⁷ with Herbert Hope Risley being appointed to conduct the project titled Ethnographic Survey of Bengal, in 1885. This would culminate in the 1891 book *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*.⁸⁸

These ethnographic surveys and their resultant indices were frequently cited in government documents and became pivotal for the British imperial power to control and police the people of India. Prior to this we have several publications about Indian ethnography, the more prominent being the photographic documentation of 1868, undertaken by John William Kaye.⁸⁹ It is within this intersection of science and exploration that I situate the generic modifications of travel writing among the 19th century Bengali literati.

Marking a strong departure from Prasannamae Debi’s polemical writing in *Aryabarta*⁹⁰ is Subarnaprabha Debi. She writes a short essay “Taj Mahal”⁹¹, which is published in the periodical *Sakha*⁹² in 1885/1886. Both women publish writing around the same time, and they talk about the same architectural structure,⁹³ their representation of the structure produces vastly different results. In case of Prasannamae Debi, the reader is taken through her reflections on mortality, her reservations about lives of excess, her musings on love — all of which arises

⁸⁷ Herbert Hope Risley, Preface, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal: Ethnographic Glossary Volume 1*, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/TheTribesAndCastesOfBengal>

⁸⁸ Herbert Hope Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal: Ethnographic Glossary Volume 1*, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/TheTribesAndCastesOfBengal>; Note: Risley, like Muller, was a proponent of the Aryan theory of race which classified people as fair skinned Aryans or dark-skinned aboriginals.

⁸⁹ John William Kaye, *The People of India: A Series of Photographic Illustrations, with Descriptive Letterpress, of the Races and Tribes of Hindustan*, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/peopleofindiaser02greauoft/page/n6>

⁹⁰ Prasannamae Debi, *Aryabarta: Janaika Bangla Mahila-r Bhraman Brittanta*, in *Amadiger Bhraman Brittanta* Vol 2, ed. Damayanti Dasgupta (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2017).

⁹¹ Subarnaprabha Debi, “Taj Mahal” in Damayanti Dasgupta, *Amadiger Bhraman Brittanta* Vol 1, ed. Damayanti Dasgupta (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2016).

⁹² *Sakha* was an illustrated, monthly magazine for young boys and girls first published in January 1883. For detailed note, check appendix.

⁹³ See: “Taj Mahal” in Prasannamae Debi, *Aryabarta: Janaika Bangla Mahila-r Bhraman Brittanta*, in *Amadiger Bhraman Brittanta* Vol 2, ed. Damayanti Dasgupta (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2017).

from her encounter with the Taj Mahal. Her prose is dense, formal, and given to ornamental flourishes. When describing the craftsmanship of the monument, this is what she says:

...seeing that beloved structure in front of me, with my own eyes, my heart began to feel I know not what. Awestruck by its beauty I stood transfixed, wonderstruck. For a moment I stood there, staring blankly at the craftsmanship of this tomb, whose glory was comparable to Amarabati, and I began to wonder...⁹⁴

The reader is not provided any historical data about the structure, nor facts about its construction. There are two allusions to other writings about the Taj Mahal in Prasannamae Debi's text, one that was published in *The Statesman* and the other in an unnamed work of poetry by an English woman. These works are alluded to not for reference or to provide a resource, but to establish a point of view against which Prasannamae Debi may represent hers.

In sharp contrast we have Subarnaprabha Debi's essay which is about the same length as the earlier text, but it reads less like travel writing and more like an encyclopaedic entry about the Taj Mahal. She provides detailed data about the monument and the area around it, the logistics behind its construction, and includes its distance from Bengal along with the measure of time taken to travel via the railway:

Agra is 842 miles from Kolkata—previously it would take a long time to walk there from Kolkata. When Lord Lawrence was our governor general, he used horses that ran very fast but even then he couldn't bring news from Agra to Kolkata before 15 days. Now with the advent of railways it has become a lot more convenient to travel. Now it takes only 30 hours to reach Agra.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Prasannamae Debi, *Aryabarta: Janaika Bangla Mahila-r Bhraman Brittanta*, in *Amadiger Bhraman Brittanta* Vol 2, ed. Damayanti Dasgupta (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2017).

⁹⁵ Subarnaprabha Debi, "Taj Mahal" in Damayanti Dasgupta, *Amadiger Bhraman Brittanta* Vol 1, ed. Damayanti Dasgupta (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2016), 103.

This fantastic monument can be seen in its glory near the bank of the river Yamuna, no more than 2 miles from Agra. The *toran* or *fatak dwara* (gate) through which you enter into the Taj Mahal appears very high and looks extremely beautiful. This *toran* is made up of red stones; the artwork on them is beautiful too. There are three more *torans* like this on the other three sides. Once you have crossed the *toran* you will find a *choubachha* (deep water storage) made of marble. This *choubachha* has a fountain every 2 or 3 feet. These fountains have waterplay even now. The wide paths on either side of the *choubachha* are covered so densely with trees that even when the sun is very harsh outside, the heat does not penetrate through. Three sides of the Taj are flanked by the garden, the fourth side has the Yamuna. The garden is very beautiful. One can see cinnamon trees, sandalwood trees, among others.⁹⁶

Arrangements for the construction of the Taj Mahal began in 1630. Securing precious stones alone took 17 years; after that 20,000 people toiled for 17 more years to construct this enormous entity.⁹⁷

Taj had two silver door frames which had more than 10,000 nails on it, and each nail had a mohar perched on top. But none of that remains now. It has been almost 80 years since the *Jath* made away with it and melted it down.⁹⁸

At a glance one can see the keen mathematical precision with which she chooses to visually map her text. There is little room for subjectivity within her work. This proclivity to substantiate the written word with irrefutable data betrays a scientific bent of mind. Indeed, Subarnaprabha Debi's history corroborates this assumption. She was the sister of scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose, and her son was the physicist Debendramohan Basu. She studied at

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 104.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 105.

⁹⁸Subarnaprabha Debi, "Taj Mahal" in Damayanti Dasgupta, *Amadiger Bhraman Brittanta* Vol 1, ed. Damayanti Dasgupta (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2016), 105.

Bethune school and later became editor of *Bangamahila Samaj*.⁹⁹ She also wrote sporadically for the children's' periodical *Sakha* (later *Sakha O Sathi*).¹⁰⁰

In 1897 Girindranandini Debi publishes *Dholpur (Rajput Jaati-r Samaj Chitra)*¹⁰¹ through one Surendramohan Borai. The only information we have about the author's personal history is from the dedications page of the book where she writes to her late father and informs the reader about her father's initial concerns about marrying his daughter off in a distant land. She adds that those concerns were later put to rest and she dedicates the book to him and his love of literature and drive for social welfare. Thus, we can surmise that Girindranandini Debi arrives in Dholpur with her husband, owing to his work.

The text is entirely descriptive in nature, giving us accounts of the culture, climate, rites and rituals, attire, food habits, customs, diseases, and the people of Dholpur. There is little to no analysis of the material Girindranandini Debi gathers, and her rare personal comments, if any, usually comes in the form of criticism of cultural practices that she is unfamiliar with or finds superfluous. She places Hindi terms within quotes and usually provides an explanation in the line itself. There is no separate gloss provided.

The text is divided into five chapters, with further subdivisions in each. These subdivisions are arbitrary and follow no consistent theme. The text may well be treated as an encyclopaedia of rituals and customs of Dholpur. The chapters and subdivisions are as follows:

Chapter 1

History and geography; Forms and types of invitation; Hosting and entertaining; Servants and slaves; Attire; Food - *Pakki/Kachhi*; Female infanticide

Chapter 2

⁹⁹ Damayanti Dasgupta, *Amadiger Bhraman Brittanta* Vol 1 (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2016), 209.

¹⁰⁰ In April 1894 *Sakha* was amalgamated with *Sathi* (edited by Bhubanmohan Roy) and the magazine was henceforth known as *Sakha O Sathi*.

¹⁰¹ Girindranandini Debi, *Dholpur* (Calcutta: Barat Press, 1897)

Shimul fruit; *Aandhi* (type of storm); *Bitora* (type of puja); Song for the monsoons; *Narasingha*; *Tarpan*; *Navaratri*; *Chandipath* and festivals; *Hekur* Puja; *Raaj Darbar*; *Sharat-mela*; Dances and songs; *Jhenjhi* wedding; Diwali; Chanderi saree; *Holi-milko*; Holi within the *antahpur*; *Shitala* Puja

Chapter 3

Birth of a prince; *Badhai*; *Shasthi* Puja; *Nazar* and *Bakshish*; *Indera* Puja; *Totka* (charms and superstitions); *Rakkhesh Bandhan*

Chapter 4

Weddings; Engagement; *Godbhara*; *Shagun*; *Maroj* (*mandap*); *Bhataiya*; Farewell song; *Gouna*; Wedding night; *Samdharo*; Cremation and *Shradhha* (*Terahi*)

Chapter 5

Fauna; Hunting and weaponry; *Bhuja* Puja

Most of the focus of the text is on matters of religious significance, especially pujas, as well as rituals surrounding marriage, pregnancy, childbirth and childrearing, and finally, practical matters of housekeeping. Owing to her gender, her points of entry into Dholpur might have allowed for greater access to and understanding of rites and customs specific to women, thus explaining the disproportionate focus paid to them when by contrast we are given very little information about contemporary politics and administration, with only one mention of Firat Singh's abolition of the practice of infanticide. However, at the very beginning we are provided the historical data of Dholpur, which lists the genealogy of the monarchy and current administrative system. Further, as in Subarnaprabha's text, here too the first chapter begins by mapping the exact location and geographical boundary of Dholpur:

Dholpur is a small state — between Agra and Gwalior. The Chambal river (which in the past was called Charmannati) is its southern boundary and Badhganga is its northern

one. The state is long along the east-west stretch, about 100 miles, and the breadth along the north south stretch is about 32 miles.¹⁰²

While the output of this text can't be termed "scientific" in the traditional sense, it certainly is a detailed work that exemplifies the colonial proclivity for collection and classification of data. The proto-ethnographic impulse of the text comes through in Girindranandini's encyclopaedic entries about items used in religious ceremonies, detailed notes on the attire and ornaments of men and women, the description of their physiognomy. She also takes care to mention the and in the form of her narrative, mainly, her affectation of an impersonal tone through the text and the structure of chapterisation of the text.

It must be noted that Girindranadini Debi's method of describing the people of her own country often veers close to the template adopted by colonial travellers and ethnographers. While this may be attributed to a significant change in the manner in which the Bengal literati began to perceive themselves vis-a-vis the "others" in their own land, it could also have to do with internalizing and affecting certain styles of writing with a specific audience in mind. While Girindranandini does not explicitly adopt the tone of "the marvelous" within her narrative, nevertheless she consistently maintains a degree of distance and alienation from the subjects of her writing. Here it must be noted that, like Prasannamae Debi, Girindranandini Debi too views Bengal as "*desh*", and firmly adopts an othering approach in her narrative when describing the people of Dholpur. At several points she makes meaning out of what she encounters by comparing it to what she has known — customs, and food traditions are understood through their similarity to or dissonance from what is prevalent in Bengal:

There are two types of meals here—"Pakki" *luchi*, *kochuri*, *papad*, sweets, etc. Much like the food of our land, except they don't serve *daal*, cook without oil and turmeric,

¹⁰²Girindranandini Debi, *Dholpur* (Calcutta: Barat Press, 1897), 1.

and include *dahi vada*. Second, “*Kachhi*”, or what we call a feast [...] Here they have a custom of singing for every occasion. We sat down to eat and their song started. Such horrendous song, I hardly have the words to describe it! What is the reason for this custom, or what its use is, I cannot tell you.”¹⁰³

Notice that Girindranandini Debi’s affectation of the impersonal tone slips when encountering customs or practices that are morally or aesthetically dissonant from her own. There is little to no proclivity to engage with or understand the practices of the “other” beyond the demands of a reporter. This tendency to perceive the “other” in relation to the “self”, with the self permanently being the centre, and all else configured with respect to it is, at its core, a colonial, hegemonic impulse. Edward Said explores a similar power imbalance between the “Occident” and the “Orient” in *Orientalism*¹⁰⁴, an imbalance through which European culture continues to grow in strength and identity by comparing itself favourably to that of the non-West. Girindranandini Debi’s ethnographic gaze, and her conscious othering of the people and customs of Dholpur achieves the same end as that of the imperialist ethnographer reporting on the “natives of India”.

Perhaps this was a deliberate manoeuvre on Girindranandini Debi’s part, thereby allowing her to align closer to the coloniser than to the colonised. Within the text of *Dholpur*, the Rajput men and women she describes are twice removed – first, owing to their colonised status, and second, through the gaze of the writer – and their status as twice removed is ensured because of her framework of language and representation. In *Heterologies: Discourses on the Other*, Michel de Certeau speaks of “The text [which] accomplishes a spatializing operation which

¹⁰³Girindranandini Debi, *Dholpur* (Calcutta: Barat Press, 1897), 12-13.

¹⁰⁴“The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’; thus, the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal.’ [...]The Oriental lived in a different but thoroughly organized world of his own, a world with its own national, cultural, and epistemological boundaries and principles of internal coherence. Yet what gave the Oriental’s world its intelligibility and identity was not the result of his own efforts but rather the whole complex series of knowledgeable manipulations by which the Orient was identified by the West.” Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 40.

results in the determination or displacement of the boundaries delimiting cultural fields (the familiar vs. the strange) [...] one that establishes the text's difference [...] gives it 'credibility' in the eyes of its readers, by distinguishing it both from the condition within which it arose (the context) and from its object (the content).¹⁰⁵

Thus, it becomes essential for Girindranandini Debi to adopt a narrative of distance, in order to lend credence to her ethnographic effort.

The politics of such a representation aside, both Girindranandini Debi and Subarnaprabha Debi illustrate through their travel writing an intuitive understanding of collecting and classifying data, allowing their texts to intersect both literature and field sciences.

¹⁰⁵ Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourses on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 68.

Conclusion

The previous chapters have illustrated the two different approaches to travel writing that emerged from the same space and time, and from among the same class of travel writers. The two apparently discordant attitudes to travel writing – one, as the tool to fashion a cohesive national identity, and two, as the tool to classify and bring to relief the pluralities within the nation – were both symptoms of colonial encounter and oppression.

Moving almost half a century forward, to the year 1933, we observe a firmer place for ethnographic interest within the space of travel writing. Nanibala Ghosh's *Aryabarta* is published in 1933, by Shashibhushan Ghosh of Dhapdhapi (24 Parganas) and Messrs. Gurudas Chatterjee and Sons, Cornwallis Street, Calcutta. It is priced at rupees two, and the text is accompanied by reviews from contemporary luminaries, as well as newspapers such as the *Amritabazar Patrika* and *Anandabazar Patrika*, among others. The reviews praise the text as an upstanding work of travel literature, and several are quick to point out the scarcity of travel writing by women.

A short critique of Nanibala Ghosh's *Aryabarta* by one Sri Binaykumar Sarkar at the very start of the text betrays the contemporary proclivity to prefer a more clinical approach to travel writing. Sarkar's credibility is established as a "Renowned Professor and Litterateur", and he goes on to say the following about the work:

This book about travelling to Kashmir – 'Aryavarta' is an excellent specimen of Bengali literature. Srimati Nanibala Ghosh is a seasoned writer. In the book we find routes for travel and rivers, mountains, forests, and a drive to make friends with a varied group of men and women. Because of this, it is as though Kashmir's towns and neighbourhoods are floating before my eyes. [...] The writer isn't given to random

expressions of thoughts and feelings. She has preferred instead to provide us with accurate details. Along with this has come to the fore some of her poetry that is sensitive. The people of Bengal will consider this text a gem among travel writing for many years to come.¹⁰⁶

Through this short critique we see clear lines drawn between “literature”—an exclusive category that affords space for subjective observations—and travel writing. Moreover, we see mindfulness and concern about the legacy of travel writing in general.

Indeed, Nanibala’s *Aryabarta* is a work of precision, comprising a detailed page of contents, 38 half tone photographs of the places visited, an itemised list of said photographs, and an appendix¹⁰⁷. The appendix alone is testament to the work’s scientific disposition. It is subdivided into three sections to chart, respectively, the travel routes between Jammu and Srinagar, Rawalpindi and Srinagar, and Havelian Abbottabad and Srinagar. Nanibala includes the distance between stations in miles, the altitude from sea level in feet, and abbreviations for important stops for each station, with the key provided below: [P] post office, [T] telegraph office, [R] rest house, [H] hotel, [Dh] dharmashala, [D] dak bungalow, [toll] toll gate, etc. Apart from this, at various points within the text she provides practical data about room rent and ticket price:

The tariff for an inter-class ticket from Howrah to Rawalpindi via Saharanpur is 28 rupees and 10 anna. The Dehradun express left the station at 10:10PM.”¹⁰⁸ P7 [26]

Then at Kashi:

¹⁰⁶Nanibala Ghosh, *Aryabarta* (Calcutta: Kalika Press, 1933), accessed January 13, 2017, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.339261>.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Nanibala Ghosh, *Aryabarta* (Calcutta: Kalika Press, 1933), accessed January 13, 2017, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.339261>.

The next morning, on the 14th of Baishakh (May), at around 11AM on a Monday the train reached Benaras Cantonment. [...] A panda approached us. It was for the best, we decided to travel with him. He took the two of us to ____ Mukhopadhyay's travel lodge on Dashashwamedh Ghat. The fare to Dashashwamedh Ghat is twelve anna by a horse drawn car, and one rupee by bus. The coolies are relentless here, and talking to them made us lose our cool. Coolies and their persistence is the same everywhere, except in Kashmir. Coolies come fairly cheap there, and are available for as little as one paisa. [...]

The owner of the lodge is a good man. The house too is quite nice, located right on the river front. [...] If you go through the pilgrimage and accompanying rituals with the pandas of the Mukhopadhyays, then the room rent is waived. Otherwise, each room is priced at one rupee a day.”¹⁰⁹

Most of the text follows a similar tone and propensity for detail. There is a total of four chapters. The first focuses primarily on housekeeping, logistics, and their departure from the station. The second section begins with their journey to Taxila to see the ancient ruins, through Jawlian, Mohra Moradu, and Sarkop. In the third section Nanibala and her husband visit Haruyan, Tanmarg, Gulmarg, and stay on the houseboat on Dal Lake before proceeding to Jammu. The final chapter focuses on their stay in Jammu and the journey home.

Although the text is titled *Aryabarta*, it has little in common with the 1888 text by the same name which was authored by Prasannamae Debi. The former could be considered a travel guide

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*

to Kashmir filled with historical and statistical data, and the latter a proto-nationalist work of travel. What, then, is the cause behind such extreme difference in representation?

In the 1880's, at the start of Bengali nationalism, merely the geographical limits of a nation no longer sufficed to provide a united sense of national identity. The plurality of the colonised nation is sought to be reconciled within the imagined space of *Aryavarta*. Fifty years later, with a firm evolution of nationalism in Bengal, and with the availability of other avenues such as the Swadeshi movement to channelise nationalistic fervour, the onus is no longer solely on the terrain of *Aryavarta* to provide a mythic and glorious anchor to the nation's people. Instead, the writer of travel is free to engage with the more pragmatic aspects of journeys, and indeed produce texts with the aim of facilitating journeys for the people of the nation. One no longer needed to *imagine* the sacred land, one could simply follow the train routes provided in appendices to visit it. Thus, landscape and its affect become contingent upon their representation through travel literature.

However, it would be erroneous to assume that the unifying (or classifying) efforts of travel writers in mid and late 19th century Bengal occurred unproblematically. In Prasannamae Debi's text we find recurring evidence of an insulated sense of Self vis a vis the Other. Even as she proceeds to chart common ground for the nation, she slips into familiar registers of "*desh*" which she uses interchangeably with Bengal, and "*bidesh*" which demarcates all lands outside it. In Swarnakumari Debi, there is explicit evidence of prejudice towards inhabitants of other lands, based simply on their demeanour and attire¹¹⁰. This compromises the unifying (and at times, homogenising) impulse behind these accounts of travel. Within Girindranandini Debi's

¹¹⁰Swarnakumari Debi, "Darjeeling Patra" in *Bharati*, Vol. 12 (1888), accessed August 16, 2017, <http://crossasia-repository.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/389/>

structure of classification we find lapses and inconsistencies where her personal voice comes through.

The point of congruence for these texts come not from their generic similarities, but from the shared position of their authors—upper class Bengali women with access to education, travel, and leisure. Each writer navigates her gendered position differently, and is uniquely affected by them. In the case of Subarnaprabha Debi, there is no engagement with her subjective position. In Swarnakumari Debi and Prasannamae Debi we find the adoption of writerly tropes that are axiomatic for women’s writing at the time. In Girindranandini Debi we do not find direct engagement with her subjectivity, but her position as a woman traveller allow her points of entry into spaces not afforded men, and therefore a more nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of the women in Dholpur¹¹¹. In Prasannamae Debi we find, as ever, the most assertive engagement with the women’s question. She invokes the *Arya-nari* of ancient India and posits them as role models to aspire to. She recognises her unique position as a female travel writer, and anticipates differences in representation within her writing because of the same. She also predicts readership interest in her text owing specifically to her subjective representation:

“Women in Bengal otherwise restricted to the *antahpur* venture out sometimes to travel the world as part of a pilgrimage. But we rarely come across any account of their travel, and their distinct experience of the landscape, the feelings that are evoked in them upon witnessing the wonders of this world, the thoughts triggered in their minds when encountering the creations of man, and the many unanticipated events encountered by them along the course of travel. Perhaps it is because of this that what I have ventured to write about the things that I saw, might be of interest to some.”¹¹²

¹¹¹ This evokes similarities, in so far as the writer’s position is concerned, to that of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who wrote about the Turkish Baths.

¹¹²Prasannamae Debi, *Aryabarta: Janaika Bangla Mahila-r Bhraman Brittanta*, in *Amadiger Bhraman Brittanta* Vol 2, ed. Damayanti Dasgupta (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2017), 324.

Prasannamae Debi is deeply critical of the lack of formal education that she sees among Hindustani women, but equally self-reflexive about the condition of women in Bengal, attributing a lack of optimal progress to the existence of child marriage.

Thus, we find that the narrative homogeneity aspired to within these travel texts—either through the deliberate construction of a unified nation, or the fashioning of a modern self-identity via the appropriation of western methodological practices within the domain of travel—is undercut by the subjective position of the women writers of travel.

Appendix A

An alphabetised list of travel writers, significant luminaries from Bengal, and 19th century Bengali periodicals mentioned in earlier chapters is provided below for convenience, along with brief notes where available.

Amritabazar Patrika is one of the oldest daily newspapers in South Asia and the oldest in Bangladesh. It was started by Sisir Ghosh and Moti Lal Ghosh on 20 February 1868 and was originally published in the Bengali script. It later evolved into an English format published from Kolkata and other locations such as Cuttack, Ranchi and Allahabad. The paper discontinued its publication in 1991 after 123 years of publication, although it was relaunched in Dhaka in 2006 where it is now published in Bengali once again.

Bangadarshan was a monthly Bengali literary magazine founded and edited by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay in 1872. Publication of the magazine ceased temporarily in 1874, and then again in 1883, to be revived by Sanjeeb Chandra Das (1877) and Rabindranath Tagore (1901) respectively.

The magazine had a defining influence on the emergence of a Bengali identity and the genesis of nationalism in Bengal. Many of Bankim's novels were serialized in this magazine (including *Anandamath*), which also carried work by writers such as the Sanskrit scholar Haraprasad Shastri, the literary critic Akshay Chandra Sarkar, and Rabindranath Tagore. It carried many articles on the *Puranas*, the *Vedas* and the *Vedanta*, as well as serialised novels, stories, humorous sketches, historical and miscellaneous essays, informative articles, religious discourses, literary criticisms and reviews.

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894) was an Indian writer, poet and journalist. Chattopadhyay is widely regarded as a key figure in the literary renaissance of Bengal. He attended Mohsin College and Presidency College, graduating with a degree in Arts. He was one of Calcutta University's first graduates. He later also acquired a degree in law. He was appointed Deputy Collector of Jessore in 1858, and later Deputy Magistrate. Chattopadhyay started publishing a monthly literary magazine *Bangadarshan* in April 1872, of which he was editor. He authored several works of fiction as well as important political essays. His notable works include *Durgeshnandini* (1865), *Kapalkundala* (1866), *Samya* (1879), *Anandamath* (1882), *Debi Chaudhurani* (1884).

Bharati was a family magazine started by Jyotirindranath Tagore in 1877 under the editorship of Dwijendranath Tagore who was the editor for seven years, and was succeeded by Swarnakumari Debi, Hiranmaee Debi, Sarala Debi, Rabindranath Tagore, Manilal Gangopadhyay, Sourindramohan Mukhopadhyay, et al. A recurring theme of the essays published in *Bharati* was love for the country.

Bholanauth Chunder (c. 1820s - c. 1890s) was a Baniya by trade and caste, a Subarnabanik—a gold-merchant—in particular. A landlord of some eminence, he was a member of the Asiatic Society of Bengal as well as the Brahma Samaj. One of the proponents of the Young Bengal Movement, he was educated at Hindu College. His first significant journey was to Dhaka in 1843, and his most famous publication, *The Travels of a Hindoo to Various Parts of Bengal and Upper India* comprised of travel writings for journeys undertaken between 1845 and 1866.

Dasi was a monthly magazine started by Ramananda Chattopadhyay in 1892. It ran for three years before increasing its scale of production in 1895. Rajnarayan Basu's memoir was first published here, as were essays by scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose.

Girindranandini Debi: Very little biographical data is available about Girindranandini Debi. She is the author of *Dholpur*, which was published from Calcutta in 1888. It is a travelogue about her time there. It can be surmised that she was travelling with her husband owing to his work.

Jaladhar Sen (1860 - 1939) was a peripheral figure of the Bengal Renaissance notable for his literary output. Having been greatly affected by the deaths of his wife, daughter and mother in quick succession in 1887, he spent a few years as an ascetic in the Himalayas before returning to Calcutta in 1891. He then became a teacher and continued in the profession until 1899, when he chose to engage in the field of journalism. He wrote 42 books of several kinds—including novels and travelogues—and was twice elected vice president of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad in his lifetime.

Jnanadanandini Debi (1850 - 1941) was a social reformer who pioneered various cultural innovations and influenced the earliest phase of women's empowerment in 19th century Bengal. Jnanadanandini was married to Satyendranath Tagore in 1857. Jnanadanandini's brother-in-law Hemendranath Tagore took charge of her education. She was also tutored briefly by the famous Brahma educationist Ayodhyanath Pakrashi. In 1881 - four years before the establishment of the Indian National Congress—Jnanadanandini published an article titled *Ingrajninda O Deshanurag (Criticism of the British and Patriotism)*. In 1885, Jnanadanandini Devi established *Balak*, the first children's literary magazine in Bengali.

Kalpataru was a monthly magazine published in 1881 under editorship of Apurba Krishna Dutta.

Krishnabhabini Das (1864 – 1919) was born in Murshidabad and educated at home. She married Devendranath Das at the age of ten, and accompanied him to England in the year 1880. She wrote about her experience in England in *England e banga mahila* which was published in 1885. She wrote in magazines *Bharati*, *Prabasi*, *Bamabodini*, and the *Sadhana*.

Nabyabharat was a monthly magazine which was first published in 1883. Debiprasanna Roychowdhury was the editor at the time. It ran till 1925, passing from him, to his son, and finally to his wife.

Nanibala Ghosh: Little to no biographical data is available for Nanibala Ghosh, although we learn from Nalini Ranjan Pundit's review of *Aryabarta* that Nanibala's husband was Shashibhushan Ghose, and that he was a long-time friend of the reviewer. We also learn that Nanibala had lost her son a few years prior to her journey, and dedicates the book to his memory.

Prabasi was a monthly Bengali magazine founded by Ramananda Chatterjee in 1901, who was also its editor. The magazine ran for over sixty years and published many important Bengali authors, including Rabindranath Tagore who published regularly in it from 1914 until his death. There were over 350 contributors during its existence, including most of the major poet and prose writers of the day.

The magazine published excerpts from books, poetry and one-act plays, reviews and essays, serialized fiction, and also included articles on history, art, archaeology, sociology, education, literature and literary theories, scientific topics, and travelogues. *Prabasi* was known for its art and illustrations. It was the first ever periodical in Bengali to feature a reproduction of a photograph on its cover purely for the sake of illustration. The sister magazine of *Prabasi* was *Modern Review* which Ramananda Chatterjee launched in 1907, targeted to English-speaking Indians.

Rashshundari Debi (1810-1890) was the first writer of an autobiography in the Bengali language, also becoming the first Indian woman to write an autobiography. She was born in Potajia, then in the Pabna district of Bengal (now part of the Sirajganj district of Bangladesh), to a Vaishnavite household. She was educated in Bengali and Persian by missionaries who would conduct classes—mostly for boys—at her home. She taught herself to read and write. She wrote her autobiography *Amar Jiban* in 1876.

Romesh Chunder Dutt (1848 - 1909) was a highly acclaimed litterateur, political economist, and historian. He joined Presidency College in 1866, leaving for England in his fourth year, and returning to India as a barrister in 1869. He became the first Indian district magistrate in 1883. Dutt was a member of Bangiya Sahitya Parishat from 1895, falling out with the colonial government in 1897 over racial discrimination, and joining the Indian National Congress in 1898. He wrote *Three Years in Europe: 1868-1871*, which was published in 1896. His works in history and economics include: *A Record of Progress during Hundred Years, 1785-1885*, *Civilisation in Ancient India*, *Economic History of British India*. His works in Bengali fiction, which were allegories based on India's past valour include: *Bangabijeta*, *Maharashtra Jiban Pravat*, *Rajput Jiban Sandhya*, etc.

Sakha was an illustrated, monthly magazine for young boys and girls. It was first published in January 1883, under the editorship of Pramada Charan Sen. Following his death in 1885, the

magazine was edited by Sivanath Sastri, Annadacharan Sen, and Nabakrishna Bhattacharya. The magazine was later renamed *Sakha O Sathi*.

Sangbad Prabhakar was a Bengali daily newspaper founded by Ishwar Chandra Gupta in 1831. Publication ceased in 1832, to be resumed again from 1836. During this time it used to be published thrice a week, but became a daily eight years later in 1839. *Sambad Prabhakar* covered news on India and abroad and put forward its views on religion, politics, society, and literature. It was the first Bengali daily newspaper, and also the first to publish writings by Bankimchandra Chatterjee and Dinabandhu Mitra. Following Ishwar Chandra Gupta's passing in 1859, it was run by his brother Ramchandra Gupta.

Subarnaprabha Debi (Unknown - 1932) was one of four sisters of scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose. Her father, Bhagaban Chandra Basu was the deputy magistrate of Faridpur and a stalwart within the Brahmo Samaj. Subarnaprabha Debi was one of the earliest students of Bethune School, with contemporaries such as Kadambini Basu, Abala Basu, Sarala Das, et al. She was the editor of *Bangamahila Samaj*. She was a regular contributor to the children's magazine *Sakha*, later *Sakha O Sathi*, and *Mukul*.

Swarnakumari Debi (1855 – 1932) was the daughter of Debendranath Tagore. She was primarily educated at home. She was the first female novelist in Bengal, with her first novel *Deepnirban* being published in 1876. *Deepnirban* assisted in rousing the national spirit. Thereafter she wrote extensively—novels, plays, poems and scientific essays. She was the editor of *Bharati* from 1884 to 1895, and then again from 1908. She was actively involved in politics, and in 1889 and 1890 served the Indian National Congress. She is credited to have composed the first opera written in Bengali, *Basanta Utsav*, in 1879.

Tattwabadhini Patrika was a monthly newspaper established by Maharshi Devendranath Tagore on 16 August 1843 as a journal of the Tattwabadhini Sabha, and continued publication until 1883. Published from Kolkata, India, it was edited by Akshay Kumar Dutta. Luminaries like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Rajnarayan Basu, and Rajendra Lal Mitra were closely associated with the newspaper. It was the leading contemporary newspaper to publish essays pertaining to social reform and science.

Appendix B

The original text and translation of Vande Mataram is provided below.

Vande Mataram

(Sanskrit)

vande mataram

sujalam suphalam

malayajasiitalam

sasyasyamalam

mataram

subhrajyotsnapulakitayaminim

phullakusumitadrumadalsobhinim

suhasinim sumadhurabhasinim

sukhadam varadam mataram

saptakotikanthakalakalaninada karale

dvisaptakotibhujairdhtakharakaravale

avala kena ma eta bale

bahubaladharinim namamitarinim

ripudalavarinim mataram

tumi vidya tumi dharma

tumi hrdis tumi marma

tvam he prana sarire

bahute tumi ma sakti

hrdaye tumi ma bhakti

tomari pratima gadi mandire mandire

tvam hi durga dasapraharanadharini

kamala kamaladalaviharini

vani vidyadayini
namami tvan

namami kamalam
amalam atulam
sujalam suphalam
mataram

vandemataram
syama saralam
susmitam bhusitam
dharanim bharanim
mataram

Vande Mataram
(English)

I bow to thee, Mother,
richly-watered, richly-fruited,
cool with the winds of the south,
dark with the crops of the harvests,
the Mother!

Her nights rejoicing in the glory of the moonlight,
her lands clothed beautifully with her trees in flowering bloom,
sweet of laughter, sweet of speech,
the Mother, giver of boons, giver of bliss!

Terrible with the clamorous shout of seventy million throats,
and the sharpness of swords raised in twice seventy million hands,
who sayeth to thee, Mother, that thou art weak?
Holder of multitudinous strength,
I bow to her who saves,

to her who drives from her the armies of her foemen,
the Mother!

Thou art knowledge, thou art conduct,
thou our heart, thou our soul,
for thou art the life in our body.
In the arm thou art might, O Mother,
in the heart, O Mother, thou art love and faith,
it is thy image we raise in every temple.

For thou art Durga holding her ten weapons of war,
Kamala at play in the lotuses
and Speech, the goddess, giver of all lore,
to thee I bow!

I bow to thee, goddess of wealth,
pure and peerless,
richly-watered, richly-fruited,
the Mother!

I bow to thee, Mother,
dark-hued, candid,
sweetly smiling, jewelled and adorned,
the holder of wealth, the lady of plenty,
the Mother!

Appendix C

Two entries from Nanibala Ghosh's *Aryabarta* is provided below. One is a table of contents charting the route from Jammu to Srinagar. This includes distance between stations, distance from sea level, and important sites. The other is a list of hotels and temples in Srinagar, along with their addresses.

These have been provided to exemplify the sheer detail and precision with which information was gathered and disseminated by her.

1. Jammu to Srinagar

Vehicle: Motor or Tanga

Name of Station	Distance between stations in miles	Distance from sea level in feet	Important sites for the traveller
Jammu Tawai (Northwestern Rail Station)	1366 miles from Calcutta	1200	[P], [T], [R], [H], [Dh], [D]*
Jhajhar	19	3000	[P], [R]
Udampur	20	2000	[P], [T], [R]
Dharamthal	13	3700	[P], [R]
Batot	25	3800	[P], [T], [R]
Ramban	17	2400	[P], [T], [R]
Ramsu	16	4100	[P], [D], [Ch]
Banihal	9	5700	[P], [T], [R]
Banihal Pass (tunnel)	19	9000	-
Munda	11	7000	[R]
Bherinag	2	6500	[P], [R]
Anantanag	21	5300	[P], [T], [R]
Abantipur	13	5250	[P], [R]
Srinagar	18	5250	-

[P] post office, [T] telegraph office, [R] rest house, [H] hotel, [Dh] dharmashala, [D] dak bungalow, [Ch] Chata.

Srinagar has several hotels, *dharamshala*, and temples, the list and address of which is provided below:

1. Ned's Hotel: Near Polo Grounds, Srinagar, Kashmir.
2. Khalsa Hotel: Pahelapur, (First Bridge), Srinagar, Kashmir.
3. Kashmir Hindu Hotel [on a boat]: Pahelapul, Srinagar, Kashmir.
4. Punjab Hindu Hotel: Pahelapul, Srinagar, Kashmir.
5. Muslim Satara Hotel: Pahelapul, Srinagar, Kashmir.

The places listed below allow one to stay for 70 days without tariff.

1. Sanatandharma Pratap Bhavan: Pahelapul, Srinagar, Kashmir.
2. Shikh Dharmashala: Pahelapul, Srinagar, Kashmir.
3. Badrinath Dharmashala: Srinagar, Kashmir.
4. Aryasamaj Mandir [College Section]: Hajuribagh, Srinagar, Kashmir.
5. Aryasamaj Mandir [Gurukul Section]: Hajuribagh, Srinagar, Kashmir.
6. Dashanmikhara: Pahelapul, Srinagar, Kashmir.
7. Narayan Math (for Bengali *sadhus*): Near silk factory, Srinagar, Kashmir.
8. Durganag Mandir (for *sadhus*): Below the Shankaracharya mountain, Srinagar, Kashmir.
9. Rambagh (for *sadhus*): Near Fold Canal, Srinagar, Kashmir.

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