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**REVIEW OF SOMDATTA MANDAL, ED. *INDIAN TRAVEL NARRATIVES: NEW PERSPECTIVES***

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The study of travel narratives as a genre has received a boost with the emergence of new disciplines like Cultural Studies, Women's Studies and Postcolonial Studies. These cross-disciplinary fields trace in travel accounts not only a picture of contemporary society but also micro-narratives of agency and reverse gaze. While well-known travelogues written during the colonial period by men and women from the West usually project the imperial eyes, those of travellers from the East to the West reveal worldviews altogether different. The gaze of women looking at unfamiliar spaces obviously follows variant trajectories. The travel narratives of racially or ethnically marginalized individuals have more complex patterns. A diachronic study of travelogues would reveal distinct changes in material conditions of travel and attitudes of travellers. Advent of modernity, growing secularization of the travel as a process and consumerisation of the tourist sector have made travelling more comfortable but at the same time have robbed it of the old, pristine charms. The book under review displays some of these trends.

*Indian Travel Narratives: New Perspectives* offers multiple perspectives by covering accounts of varied travel experiences of the eighteenth, nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Set in both India and abroad, the travelogues in this volume speak of the unique experiences of men and women. While the earlier travel writers recounted the experience of their pilgrimages, the later writers usually responded to the call of the wild and sublime beauty. The volume under review comprises critical articles on different sorts of travel narratives. Some of them are outcomes of archival research, while most of the other articles show penetrating analysis and offer new

perspectives. Somdatta Mandal has done a remarkable job by bringing together into this anthology well-written articles on travelogues, both old and new, familiar and unfamiliar.

The collection contains twenty-three articles which are organized into five sections: General Overviews, Pilgrimages, Travelling within the Country, Travelling Abroad, and Miscellaneous. The first section contains three important articles which offer an overview of travelogues written over a period of a century. Jayati Gupta posits three travelogues, two written in Bengali and one in English, by three Bengali travellers – Vijayram Sen Visharad's *Tirtha-Mangal* (1769), Jadunath Sarbadhikari's *Tirtha Bhraman* (1853-7), and Bholanath Chunder's *Travels of a Hindoo* (1869) – in the interstices of various impulses related to geography, cartography, anthropology and ethnography, and addresses the issue of an alleged lack of historical consciousness in the Bengali psyche. She proposes that the travelogues may be studied as cartographical and historical accounts of gradually changing spaces of the colonial time. She points out that this historical sense is more indigenous than Western. The texts discussed are informed by a sense of *itihasa*. The Sanskrit word *itihasa*, which etymologically means 'so indeed it was', refers to the narration of events taking place during the narrator's lifetime and is more inclusive than the word 'history'. *Itihasa* includes in its fold genres like epics, myths, legends, family lores and the like. These breathe a unique life and style into the narratives. The effect of the advent of Western modernity which Gupta mentions in her essay finds an elaboration in the next article written by Simonti Sen, which describes the changing trajectory of travelogue writing in Bengali culture. Sen argues that the introduction of railways, telegraphs and other communication facilities whetted the Bengali desire to know the composite nation more intimately through journeys across the country. It resulted in the gradual secularisation of travelling. Sen includes in her analysis not only texts related to the genre of *Himalaya Bhraman* (Travel to the Himalayas) such as Umaprasad Mukhopadhyaya's *Manimahesh* but also secular travel narratives such as Bholanath Chunder's *The Travels of a Hindoo* (1869), Dharanikanta Lahiri Chaudhuri's *Bharat Bhraman* (1910), Prasannamoyee Devi's *Aryavarta: Janaika Bangamahilar Bhraman Britanta* (1888) and Syed Mujtaba Ali's *Deshe-Bideshe* (1949). Shrutakirti Dutta's essay on women's travelogues written in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is yet another important article in the volume. It focuses on the aspect of generic shift in travelogues. She traces the shifts of focus from moral-religious impulse to the motif of *Bharat-darshan* (seeing India). She also finds the motif of apology in the works of women

travellers like Girindranandini Devi or Rassundari Dasi. Like Jayati Gupta and Sen, she argues that a ‘geographically verifiable space’ (56) of India as a nation emerges in narratives like *Aryavarta*.

Section II of the book is devoted to “Pilgrimages” and contains three articles. For the Hindus the Himalaya is not only a spectacle of sublime beauty but also a site of religious significance. There are innumerable shrines, scattered across the mountain range, including those in Badrinath and Kedarnath. Devoted Hindus used to brave difficult mountain terrains to reach the remotest corners of the region to visit and worship deities. Out of these visits emerged several travelogues. Nilanjana Sikdar Datta discusses some such narratives in her interesting article: Swami Akhandananda’s *Tibbater Pathe Himalaye* (On the Way to Tibet in the Himalayas) which is based on his 1887 travel experience (published in 1939), Swami Apurbananda’s *Kailasa O Manastirtha* which is based on his travel experience in 1939 (1988/89), Umaprasad Mukhopadhyay’s *Pancha Kedar* (1986), Narayan Sanyal’s *Pather Mahaprasthan* (1992), Saroj Kumar Bandyopadhyay’s *Kailasa O Manasa Tirtha: Sekal O Ekal*. Sanyal’s narrative speaks of his visit to Kedarnath in 1964 and Badrinath, while Bandyopadhyay’s is based on his 1986 visit to Kailasa and Manas Saovar. Sikdar Datta shows how these narratives reveal the transformation in the routes and material condition of travelling as an explorative act, and how the motive of *bhraman* (travelling) itself has undergone changes. Saptarshi Mallick discusses William Carey’s travel memoir *A Missionary Tour in The Hugli and Howrah Districts[,] Lower Bengal – India; With Illustrations and Maps* (1888). He brings out the contradictions between Carey’s stated mission and his insular observations about the land and the people found in the book and argues that Carey basically subscribes to the broad imperialist discourses of the time. In contrast to the earlier essays in the section which analyse mostly nineteenth and twentieth century Hindu pilgrimage texts, Shafana Shafi’s essay explores two Muslim pilgrimage memoirs written in the new millennium – Parvej Sharma’s *A Sinner in Mecca: A Gay Muslim’s Hajj of Defiance* (2017) and Asra Q. Nomani’s *Standing Alone in Mecca: A Pilgrimage into the Heart of Islam* (2006). These two twentieth century diasporic texts are approached from the anthropological theories of liminality and *communitas*. This interesting essay problematises the identity of diasporic Muslim authors in the context of American reality and brings out the dynamics of religious and sexual politics.

The next section “Travelling Within the Country” contains eight essays, four of which are on the narratives of travel to the Northeast, a relatively neglected area in the study of Indian travelogues. Bhaskar Jyoti Gogoi analyses an early eighteenth-century text titled *Tripura Buranji* (1724) written by Ratna Kandali Sarma and Arjundas Bairagi who visited the court of Ratnamanikya, the king of Tripura, as the envoys of King Swargadeo Rudra Singha of Assam. Gogoi has done a commendable job by bringing the text to the notice of the readers spread across the globe. Indrani Bandyopadhyay discusses several narratives, mostly written recently, of travel to Tripura which offer contemporary perspectives in contrast to the one discussed by Gogoi. Shibashish Purkayastha discusses *Backpacking North East India: A Curious Journey* (2017) written by Abhijeet Deshpande who covered the length and breadth of the region as an ‘accidental nomad’ during his four-month tour. Rosy Chamling analyses Nandita Haksar’s *Across the Chicken Nest: Travels in Northeast India* (2013) as a ‘countertravel,’ a genre that goes beyond mere landscape description to unravel the histories, politics and contemporary conditions of the region and the people who live there. The other articles in the section discuss Rabindranath Tagore’s *Chinnapatrabali* from the point of view of production of landscape and identity construction (Sarvajaya Bhattacharya), the Himalayan travel narratives of Bill Aitken, a naturalised Indian, from the perspective of ‘ecomasculinity’ (Raj Gaurav Verma), two ‘train travelogues’ of Monisha Rajesh’s *Around India in 80 Trains* (2012) and Biswanath Ghosh’s *Chai, Chai: Travels in Places Where You Stop But Get Never Off* (2009) (Siddharth Dubey), and lastly the production of Calcutta/Kolkata as a discursive space in Amit Chaudhuri’s book *Calcutta: Two Years in the City* (2016) and Biswanath Ghosh’s narrative *Longing Belonging: An Outsider at Home in Calcutta* (2014). Siddharth Dubey’s is a very insightful essay on the train as a vehicular, secularised space which accommodates multiple groups of travellers coming from diverse regions and different ethnic, religious, class, and caste backgrounds. Sarmadhikari approaches the two representations from the point of view of gaze theory. He chooses particular spatial zones of Calcutta (such as Park Street and North Calcutta) and festivals (such as Durga Puja, Christmas and the New Year).

There are five articles in the next section “Travelling Abroad.” Vijay Prakash Singh textually analyses Bimal Dey’s *Mahatirther Shesh Jatri* (The Last Time I saw Tibet, 1982) and Sarat Chandra Das’s *Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet* (1902). Somdatta Mandal discusses several travelogues written by Bengali authors who journeyed to China and Japan in the early decades of

the twentieth century. The works of Ashutosh Ray, Indumadhav Mullick, Benoy Kumar Sarkar and Rabindranath Tagore, all of whom visited China between 1900 and 1924, and Suresh Chandra Bandyopadhyay, Manmathanath Ghosh, Rabindranath Tagore, Hariprabha Takeda, Sarojnalini Dutt, who visited Japan between 1905 and 1929 come under the purview of her essay. Sajal Dey makes a very useful comparative study of Rabindranath Tagore's *Russiar Chithi* (Letters from Russia) (1931) and Saumyendranath Tagore's *Jatri* (The Wayfarer) published in 1950. The two Tagores held divergent views regarding the post-revolutionary Russia. Sucheta Sankar V.'s article explores three women writers' narratives written in Malayalam – C. Kuttan Nair's *Njan Kanda Europe* (1936), Annamma J. Vellapalli's *Njangal Europiloode* (1954), and Susie's *Keralamakkal Europil* (1964). These record their impressions about Europe. From a discussion of the texts mentioned above, the author of the article argues that "women travel writers, as agents of mobility/textuality, author them as spaces of witness, contestation, and reconciliation" (276). Meera B analyses the African travelogues of Tatapuram Sukumaran's *African Poorvadeshangalil* (1986) and Paul Zacharia's *Oru African Yatra* (2005). *African Poorvadeshangalil* is about Sukumaran's trip to Tanzania and Zacharia's *Oru African Yatra* is about his travels from South Africa to Egypt in 2000. Both these authors were influenced by S. K. Pottekkat's travel writings in two different ways.

The last section of the book – "Miscellaneous" – contains four essays. Gaana Jayagopalan's unique essay explores Samanth Subramaniam's travel narrative *Following Fish: Travels around the Indian Coast* (2010) from the discursive framework of Bruno Latour's actor-network theory. The narrative pivots on the act and discourse of fishing, and Jayagopalan argues that the littoral space is by nature interstitial, interconnecting as it does, the seascape with human beings and the overall socio-cultural ecology. This is substantiated through five paradigms: fish as/and food; fishing as commerce; fishing and cultural history; fishing and identity; and finally, fish as fish. In the next article Upamanyu Sengupta discusses Ramkumar Mukhopadhyay's Bengali narrative *Dhanapatir Sinhalyatra* (2010) which is based on Mukundaram Chakrabarti's *Kavikankan Chandi*. In this essay too the coastline acts as a unique space which offers scope of digression into multiple stories and myths. Norden Michael Lepcha's piece offers us an overview of travel writings of Solon Karthak who is a well-known Indian Nepali writer. Lepcha observes that Karthak's development

of *Niyatra* (subjective travelogue) is his contribution to mainstream Nepali literature. In the last article Koushik Mondal explores the world of Goopi-Bagha films from the point of view of postcolonial queer theory and argues that the films resist the Orientalist construction of India as an ‘exotic other,’ and builds up a contesting picture of the nation space.

*Indian Travel Narratives: New Perspectives* familiarises the readers with the rich storehouse of travelogues written in both Indian languages and English. This reviewer feels that some articles on travelogues written in some other Indian languages such as Hindi, Oriya, or Marathi would have lent more variety to the volume. Nevertheless, as it stands, this anthology of well-researched articles is an important addition to the critical literature on Indian travelogues.

#### WORKS CITED

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