



# Travel Literature: A perspective on the history of Indian travel accounts and recent developments in the genre

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Received: 13 Aug 2022; Received in revised form: 05 Sep 2022; Accepted: 10 Sep 2022; Available online: 16 Sep 2022

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**Abstract**— *Travel writing is a literary genre that remain concerned with travelling accounts or records of a person. Such accounts enable one to know about different cities and countries and become familiar with varied cultures, behavioral patterns and their living conditions. Travel writings are being produced since time immemorial. India is a land of diverse cultures, languages, and food habits that remained a favourite destination among travel enthusiasts living both India and abroad. Many European, Chinese and Arab Travel writers like Jean Baptiste Tavernier, Ibn-e-Battuta and Hiuen Tsang have written at length about their experiences of travelling to India. They all have written works on India, its culture and the people that are living there. Their accounts are not reliable from the information point of view because they are based on whatever these travellers have seen or witnessed around them. They do not provide an actual image of India but rather presented an unrealistic portrayal of India in their writings. They have not focused on the adversities and social evils that were prevalent at that time. Earlier, travel writings remain a product of colonial enterprise. That is why there is a need for India travel writers to discuss their opinions regarding the impression of India and the people at large. Through this paper, I will try to show the history of Indian travel writings and works that are being done under this genre until now. At the same time, I will also discuss about the recent changes that are happening in this genre.*

**Keywords**— *Indian travel writings, diverse cultures, travel accounts, colonial enterprise, people travellers.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Travel accounts are non-fictional works of art that deal mostly with the personal experiences of the traveler and the writer. Travel literature is “a non-fiction prose form that depends largely on the wit, powers of observation, and the character of the traveler for its success. In past centuries, the traveler tended to be an adventurer or a connoisseur of art, landscape, or strange customs who may also have been a writer of merit” as defined by the Meriam Webster’s Encyclopedia of Literature. Travelling is an effort in which a writer explores a specific region or place, collects information and give observations about the place that they visit. These travel accounts are mainly about people, places and occurrences in a particular place that a traveler surveys. It is a conscious effort that is done by the traveller/writer to document his experiences in writing form for future reference to the readers. In the Cambridge Companion to

Travel Writing, Roy Bridges, critic on the approaches related to travel writing comments on the significance on this genre, “Travel writing has a complex relationship with the situations in which it may arose. It is taken to mean a discourse designed to describe and interpret for its readers a geographical area together with its natural attributes and its human society and culture” (2).

Indian travel writings astonishingly have a brief history as compared to other forms of writing. The entire Indian English literature which is so vast and diverse failed to produce even a single travel account before the beginning of the eighteenth century. If we see the history of Indian travel accounts, we find that thousands of merchants, monks, and mercenaries from the Indian subcontinent travel to different parts of the world for trade, commerce and explored different realms of the world. All these people who have travelled abroad do not even leave a single account of their traveling history. While exploring

different countries, they fail to witness the cultural differences which they find in foreign environments.

Travel accounts were unknown to the Indian literary tradition until foreign travellers arrive in India and wrote at length about India and its rich cultural heritage. That is why it is considered to be the effect of colonial pursuit. The elements of travelogues exist in the fictional accounts, digvijyas in the epics like Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the safarnamas, devotional accounts of the pilgrimages that are undertaken by the saints. Travelogues that are written by the foreign explorers such as Jean Baptiste Tavernier, Ibn-e Battuta, I-Tsing, Al-beruni, Nicolo Conti, Abdur Razzaq remain an important source for understating India and its history. In these accounts, as Amitav Ghosh observes, "There is a recognition that what is common sense for him (the traveller) need not be so far the rest of the world. For this recognition to exist there has to be a certain openness to surprise, an acknowledgement of the limits of the knowingness of the witness".

Travel literature is concerned more with the form of autobiography. If an individual has travelled throughout his life so his autobiographical and travel accounts may remain the same (4). Travelogue remains a less explored area until travel and the study of culture gain importance in literary circles. Such accounts help one to gain a clear understanding of humanity also. It helps us to clear our doubts regarding any region or culture that we have not investigated yet. Sometimes we may presume things about people, their culture and way of living. But the relationship of human beings with their natural environment and surroundings can also be studied through travel narratives.

Travel accounts deal mainly with stories set either in India or abroad. They may talk about journeys that are undertaken by someone in any part of the world. These accounts concentrate more on explaining the social, cultural, political and environmental aspects of the region that they explored. Sometimes such explorations are done out of curiosity by the traveller to understand a foreign land and the people that are part of that region. If we talk about how a travel writer treats history, so they may see things differently. Aldous Huxley has given his own views regarding travelogues, "it is not done consciously. While representing another country, the travel writer is actually reproducing his own ideas and perspectives through series of events and encounters". Travellers could be segregated into the two categories; one category is of the historians and the anthropologists and second category is of the creative writers. William Dalrymple can be put into the first category as he viewed India, not through his perspective about India because he has researched well on the facts and events related to India. He sees India as a history buried in the ruins of time and his travel writings

showcase the effect of the past on the present. It is said that we can understand the present only when we go back in time. The second category includes those creative writers who presented India through a series of stories and the authenticity of the stories that are being told by them. Both Naipaul and Theroux come under this category. They both show India through a series of stories that they experienced while travelling or stories that are shared with them by the natives of the places that they have visited.

If we see how and when Indian travel writings came into existence in India so it was only towards the end of the eighteenth century that first travelogue written in any Indian language showed up. The first travel work was written in Malayalam by a Syriac Christian priest, Varthamanappustakam recounted his epic journey over several years from the Malabar coast to Rome via Sri Lanka, Angola, Brazil, Portugal. This valuable travel account would have not been lost if not been rediscovered in the year 1930. If we talk about the history of Indian writing in English, the first published work in Indian writing in English was *The Travels of Dean Mahomet*. It was first published in 1794. It describes the eponymous author's expeditions across India as a camp follower in the East India Company. Later, he also discusses his immigrant experience in England where he established the first Indian restaurant in 1810.

During the colonial era, travel writing about India was closely connected to the anthropological project of accumulating knowledge about a particular race and their culture. Some foreign travel writers give accounts and images of Indians to win a home audience for their respective works. However, some autobiographical works by Indian nationalist leader like Mahatma Gandhi whose work *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* deals with strong element of travel narrative in terms of describing how the writer deal with difficult situations while living in a foreign land.

Travel writing about India gains more prominence in the post-independence era. VS Naipaul wrote his Indian trilogy and the novels that were part of this trilogy were *An Area of Darkness*, *India: A Million Wounded Civilization* and *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. Naipaul through this trilogy discuss various aspects such as lifestyle and economic conditions of the country. Naipaul states in *India: A Wounded Civilization*:

"India is for me a different country. It isn't my home and cannot be my home; and yet I cannot reject it or be indifferent to it; I cannot travel only for the sights. I am at once too close and too far. My ancestors migrated from the Gangetic plain a hundred years ago; and the Indian

community they and others established in Trinidad, on the other side of the world, the community in which I grew up, was more homogeneous than the Indian community Gandhi met in South Africa in 1893 and more isolated from India” (12).

The renowned author Vikram Seth also has tried his hands at travel writing. Seth has written a work called *From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Sinkiang and Tibet* (1983) that documents his hitchhiking journey from Tibet to Nepal. But the travel writing flourishes more as a genre when international publishing houses like Penguin and Harper Collins opened their enterprises in India when liberalization was at its peak. This was also a period when naturalized foreigners mostly British came to influence Indian travel accounts. Bill Aitken’s produced several works regarding his exploration of India’s pious geography and natural surroundings. The works that he has written were *Seven Sacred Rivers* (1992), *The Nanda Devi Affair* (1994) and *Footloose in the Himalayas* (2003). William Dalrymple’s works such as *The City of Djinns* (1993) and *The Age of Kali* (1998) talks at length about Indian history as he goes deeper while researching facts about India.

Some publishing houses’ editors have something to say about travel writing and its increasing importance in the present times. “Initially, a lot of travel authors came from outside India, “said Elizabeth Kuruvilla, executive editor at Penguin Random House India. “The perspective they provided was a bit different in the sense that they tend to spot a lot of things that are overfamiliar to those seeing it every day. But then, the intimacy of the insiders’ point of view is also interesting. You need to be a special kind of person to be able to analyse the familiar and present it afresh to those who see it every day”. The books that provided the insider viewpoint also started appearing in the 1990s. Pankaj Mishra’s *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana* deals with changing moral customs and the portrayal of middle-class India in small towns remains a landmark work in the history of travel writings. Through this work, the writer sarcastically records the changes in the mindset of people resulting in the changed outlook of people living in small towns across India starting from Mandi in Himachal Pradesh to Kattayam in Kerala. We may find some Indian writers who try to reverse the colonial discourse by travelling abroad to share their experiences. The writer like Irwin Allan Sealy through his work *From Yukon to Yucaton: A Western Journey* (1994) talks about his travel experience across the United States along the migratory trail of indigenous Americans.

Many eminent writers both from India and abroad have written about their travel experiences along with the

length and breadth of India. Not all travel experiences are similar to each other as people may have different perspectives regarding travelling and the places that they visit. Each place does not have similar food habits, cultural similarities and dress patterns whenever we visit some new country or town. We all are different in the practices that we follow and the culture that we uphold. Some of the travel books are written either by foreign authors or by Indian authors. *The City of Djinns* by William Dalrymple describes the author’s travel history of India through Delhi during writer’s six- year study on this country. He studies the history of India through the people whom he meets during his stay in the country. It gives a perfect description of the ancient past by explaining it with the present scenario of the nation. It remains an important source for studying the history of India.

*Following fish: Around the Indian Coast* by Samanth Subramanian, it’s a recording of the journey through the coast of India. The entire focus of this book remains on the role of fish in the lives of people in the community. The writer discusses about tasty dishes that are made out of fish and it also talks about culture, people, lifestyle and economic conditions of the community that lives there. *Travellers’ Tales India: True Stories*, it’s a collection of forty-nine stories by eminent writers like William Dalrymple, James O, Reiley and Larry Habegger. These stories are a mixture of good and bad experiences that becomes a perfect guide for travel enthusiasts. It also records details about culture, food, lifestyle and social conditions of the country (Frederick).

We can say that many travel books have been written until now and they deal with different aspects of Indian life. Teesta Guha Sarkar, senior commissioning editor at Pan Macmillan India said that travel books by writers such as Vikram Seth and Amitav Ghosh gradually gave way to a wider range as writers began to experiment with this new genre and we got books like Chitrita Banerji’s *Eating India*, Samanth Subramanian’s *Following Fish*, Srinath Perur’s *If It’s Monday, It Must Be Madhru!*. Nowadays people are writing travelogues just for the sake of leisure and turn their travel accounts into writing. When someone wants to write about their travelling experiences then they have to go for to-do the list. Ghosh has rightly observed, “You try to get inside the skin of the place. And a place is really made by the people. When you go as a tourist, you’re blind to the local people. But when you’re travelling for a book, you meet various people who define the character of a place. An itinerary is really not the best way to achieve this” (no.p).

### CONCLUSION

Through this paper, I have found that travel writings work as a mirror for understanding any country and region. This form of writing tries to bridge a gap between different places, their people, culture, dress patterns that defines our identity as an individual. We can see that travel accounts help one to explore regions that are unexplored until someone visits them. Nowadays people are writing not just travel books but they are also making travel blogs of their journeys. The scope and future of travel writing is far-reaching and it does have a wider range too. These days people are taking more delight in reading anecdotes related to someone's travelling experiences. We are in need of such travelogues that will be more focused on India, its sub regions and its diversity as a multilingual nation. There is scope to invent many kinds of itineraries exploring different geographies and cultures. We can say that travel accounts do have the mass appeal that helps one to understand various aspects of someone's culture, their value system to view any nation in a different or newer way.

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