

Travel Literature: An Overview of Indian Travel writings and its Historical Background

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Abstract

Travel literature is one of the broad and popular genres of writing covering adventure, exploration, writing collections, memoirs, and centric fiction related to travel history. Such accounts enable one to know about various cities and countries and become familiar with varied cultures, behavioral patterns and their living conditions. It was found to start in medieval China, ancient Greece, and in early Arabic literature. Travel literature gain popularity during the Song dynasty of medieval China. In India, travels writings of Jean Batisse Tavernier, Ibn-e Battuta Hiuen Tsang and Fa-Hien illustrate the detailed historical background of Indian history, its culture and customs. Travel writing about India gains more popularity in the post-independence era. Writings of VS Naipoul (*An Area of Darkness*, *India: A wounded Civilization*, *India: Million Mutinies Now*), Vikram Seth (*From Heaven Lake*), Bill Aitken (*Seven Sacred Rivers*, *The Nanda Devi Affair* and *Footloose in the Himalayas*) and Willium Dalrymple (*City of Djinns* and *The Age of Kali*) are classical example of Indian travelogue literature. Today, travel writing has emerged as a highly popular and interdisciplinary genre, incorporating history, geography, literature, journalism, post-colonial studies, and anthropology.

Keywords: Travel writings, Indian History, Culture

Introduction

Travel has always been a human need and a desire since the dawn of civilization. Men used to travel in the past to find work, food, or to flee man-made or natural disasters like riots, war, or conflict. Nonetheless, some travelers set out on expeditions for fun, excitement, or simply curiosity. A few of these travelers had artistic tendencies, so they frequently wrote about their observations and experiences, which lead to the development of new genre known today as "travel writing." Travel can be defined literally as moving from one site to another over time, or as physically moving people between two or more locations for any amount of time, with or without the use of transportation. The term "travel" comes from the Middle English verb *travailen*, which means "to toil, to labor," and is derived from the Old French verb *travaillier*, which means "to labor, to work." Travel writing is a type of nonfiction literature in which the author documents his personal experiences, views, and interactions with the foreign places he visits. Travel writing is the result of a traveler's desire to share his or her experiential views with others. India has been a source of intrigue for foreigners, and this strong attraction has drawn pilgrims, academics, conquerors, missionaries, and other travelers to the subcontinent. India's distinctiveness and diversity have enthralled tourists from all over the world for millennia. The reports of early travelers seem to have established the

classical vision of India as an ancient nation of vividness, exotic beauty, and cultural diversity. India has been ventured by travelers both far and near, whether it is China, England, France, German, Holand, Persia or Arab nations. A number of these travelers have documented their first-hand observations of the locations they visited. The travelogue works of Hsuen Tsang, Yijing, Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, Ibn Batuttah, Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, Abdul Razzak, Fernao Mendes Pinto, and others provide a detailed overview of Indian history. In this document, attempted to assemble the most important travelogue texts that are considered fundamental sources for uncovering India's past.

Greek and Chinese Visit in India

Greek travelogues are the first records of foreign travel in India. The Greek historian Megasthenes, an ambassador of Seleucus who traveled to India in 305 B.C., was the first foreign visitor who paid a visit to Chandragupta Maurya at Patliputra, the capital of the Mauryan Empire wrote 'Indica' a book that described India in third century B.C. This book covered wide range of topics like Indian history, politics, religion, society, geography and economy of Mouryan Empire. Similarly another Greek traveler Ptolemy visited India during 130 A.D and wrote 'The Geography of India' in which he provides detailed account of ancient India, its geography, climate flora and political and social systems. In the fourth century, during the reign of Chandragupta-II, Chinese traveller Fa-Hian (405-411 A.D) came to India in search of the Buddhist text and wrote the book 'A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms, in which he gave an eye witness account of his travel in India and Ceylone and briefly elaborated the Buddhist practices and pilgrimages sites in central and South Asia. In the seventh century, another Chinese Buddhist Monk Xuanzang or Hsuen Tsang came to India in search of Buddhist text and studied in famous Nalanda University. He departed from India with numerous Sanskrit text on a caravan of twenty packhorses and wrote his book 'Records of the Western Regions, in which he gives the detailed account of urban life, architecture, social and cultural norms, eating habits of the natives, geography and climate of India. Another Chinese traveller, Yijing (635-713) came to India and wrote book: *A Record of Buddhist Practices Sent Home from the Southern Sea*. In the text he gave an account of his twenty five year stay in India and Srivijaya between the years 671 and 695 CE. Yijing account as traveller are an important source for the history of the medieval kingdoms along the sea route between China and India. He also gave accounts of the Gupta Periods. He was the student of Nalanda University, translated many Buddhist text from Sanskrit and Pali into Chinese.

Arab Visit in India

Around the tenth century A.D., travellers from Arab and Islamic countries began to visit India. The Arab invasion of Sind in 712 A.D. began a period of Muslim conquest and influence on the subcontinent. With the decline of the Byzantine Empire, the major routes of trade come under the control of Arabs. In 712 A.D Sindh was invaded by Arabs and it was marked as an era of Muslim conquest and influence in the subcontinent. An Arab merchant Sulayman al-Tajir (851-916 A.D), wrote his observations and experiences about India in his book, *Akhbar al-Sin wa-al-Hind* and Al-Masudi (957 A.D). In 1017, Abu Rayhan al-Biruni (1017-1030 A.D), an Islamic scholar well versed in physics, mathematics, astronomy and natural sciences came to India with Mahmud of Ghazni during one of his raids on India and write a travelogue *Tarikh al Hind* after exploring the Hindu faith practices in India. He earned the title al-Ustadh in recognition of his remarkable description of early eleven century India. Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, was medieval Italian explorer, entered India as an envoy to the Great Khan of the Mongol Empire. He

compiled a report of his trip to the Mongal Empire in his book *Ystoria Mongalorum* (1240s). He was the first Europeans to try to chronicle Mongol history. Other early travel books include the *Rihla* of the Moorish traveller Ibn Batutta (1304-69) which provide a detailed account of the social, cultural, and economic life of the time of reign of Muhammad bin Tughlaq. Some other travelers of fifteenth century India are Shihabuddin al-Umari (1348 A.D), an Arab historian from Damascus, recorded his travel accounts of Indian history in *Masalik al-absar fi-mamalik al-amsar*. Similarly *Malta-us-Sadain wa Majma-ul-Bahrain* (1440) written by a Persian traveller Abdul Razzak give a brief account of Calicut's society and culture. The best travel writing literature in India in the sixteenth century comes from autobiographies such as Babur Nama (1529), authored by Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty. It contains information about his life, battles, politics and travels. It has descriptions of places he visited flora and fauna and the technique of hunting, fishing and gardening, geographical overview of Fergana, Transoxiana and description of Hindustan. Babur's daughter Gulbadan Begum (1523-1603) wrote Humayun Nama (1585) which is about his brother Humayun's reign in India

European Visit in India

During 1500-1580 A.D., a number of travelers from Portugal and Italy like Varthema, Barbosa, Paes, Nuniz and Cesare Federici visited southern India specially the Malabar Coast and the Kingdom of Vijayanagara. The foundation of the East India Company (1600 A.D.) resulted in a number of narratives on India by captains, merchants, and diplomats, which formed many of the most enduring Indian travel writing. The first English merchant traveler arrived in India was Ralph Fitch (1583), travelled to the Eastern provinces, Allahabad, Banaras, and Patna. His travelled account was published by Richard Hakluyt in the second edition of his *Principall Navigations* (1598-1600). Samuel Purchas reprinted the account in his famous *Purchase His Pilgrimes* in 1625. A Portuguese explorer and traveler Fernao Mendes Pinto (1509-1583 A.D) visited India and write an autographic memoir of his travel in his book *Pilgrimage*, published posthumously in 1614. Furthermore, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, a French merchant, provided a detailed description of his travels to India in his book *Six Voyages*, which became well-known as a travel tale. He went to India for the first time in 1641. Tavernier's initial narrative was published in French from Paris in 1675. His description of the *Six Voyages* was translated into English, German, Dutch, and Italian. Tavernier's study is essential for shedding insight on Mughal India. Other travelers who visited India and documented rich information about its people and culture include Thomas Coryate, Nicholas Minucci, John De Thevenot, and Dr. John Fryer. In the early eighteenth century, two envoys of Assamese king Rudra Sinha named Ratna Kandali and Arjundas Bairagi went to the court of King Ratmanikya of Tripura for his help during the invasion of Bengal, recorded their travels on foot through cahar and foothills of Mizoram in Tripura. It has the records of the landscape, habits, dress, manners and beliefs of the people deirties and temples and the intrigues for throne within the court in Tripura. Vartamanappustakam, also known as Romayatra, is Paremmakkil Thoma Kathanar's first Malayalam travelogue, written in the last quarter of the 18th century. The author's journey from Kerala to Rome includes detailed descriptions of sites and moving stories. It is regarded as a ground breaking piece of literary prose in Malayalam. Similarly, Bijoyram Sen's *Tirthmangal*, written in the late 18th century, is an early Bengali travel story about a pilgrimage undertaken by the poet's patron. In the eighteenth century, due to the British impact, more and more Indians travelled to Europe. The first written accounts of travel to Europe include Mirza Sheikh Itesamuddin's *Shigurf-Namah-i-Vilyat Nama* (Travels in Britain, 1799) and Mirza Abu Talib Khan Isfahaani's *Lubbu-s-Siyar*, which was translated into English in 1814 as *Travels in Asia and Europe* during

the Years (1799-1803). These narratives supplied two-way information, as they depicted Europe for Indian audiences on the one hand, and European readers received an account of India. *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* (1794) was the first travel narrative written in English about India by a non-European. It covers the author's voyage through India as a soldier in the British East India Company from 1769 to 1784. Dean Mahomet was born in Patna, Bihar, and served in the East India Company's Bengal Army. He moved to Ireland in 1784 at the age of twenty-five and married an Anglo-Irish woman there. Dean Mahomet was among the Indians who sailed West between 1600 and 1850. In the late eighteenth century, a large number of female writers appear. Eliza Fay traveled to India and wrote about her experiences in *Original Letters* (1817) about sati and other Indian traditions. Other prominent female travel writers who visited India included Maria Graham, Emma Robert, and Fanny Parkes.

The first written accounts of travel to Europe are of two Indo-Persian travelogues: Mirza Sheikh Itesamuddin's *Shigurf-Namah-i-Vilyat Nama* (Travels in Britain, 1799) and Mirza Abu Talib Khan Isfahaani's *Lubbu-s-Siyar*, which was translated into English in 1814 as *Travels in Asia and Europe during the Years (1799-1803)*. Towards the end eighteenth century onwards an abundance of travel books were written by Indians in English. Some important eighteenth and nineteenth century travel texts in English by Indians include: J. Nowrojee and H. Merwanjee's *Journal of Residence of Two Years and a Half in Great Britain* (1841), Isuree Das's *account of a voyage to England and America* (1851), R.C. Dutt's *Three Years in Europe* (1872), Keshab Chandra Sen's *Diary in England* (1886), Bholanath Chanda's *Travels of a Hindoo to Various Parts of Bengal and Upper India* (1869), Trailokyanatha Mukharji's *A Visit to Europe* (1889), Nandalal Dasa's *Reminiscences-English and Australasian* (1893), B. M. Malabari's *The India Eye on English Life* (1893) and G. N. Nadkarni's *Journal of a Visit to Europe in 1896*. Jehangir Kothari's book "Impression of a First Tour Around The World" (1898) provide a written account of their travels to the United states of India. Mahapandit Rahul Sankrityayan's *Volga Se Ganga* (1944), Fanny Parkes's *Begum Thugs and White Mughals*, Gordon Sinclair's *Khyber Caravan: through Kashmir, Waziristan, Afganistan, Baluchistan and Northern India 1936* - an account of 1934 travels in British India, E. M. Forster's *The Hill of Devi* (1953), Eric Newby's *Slowly Down to Ganges* (1966), Robyn Davidson's *Dessert Places* (1996) are some other travel writings on India that reflect various kinds of images of Indian subcontinent. Travel books by Indians penned not only in English but also in other Indian languages like Malayalam, Bangla, Urdu, Hindi and Persian. Some of them are Moolji's *Englandman Pravas* (1860) and Damodardas's *Chinni Musafari* (1890) in Gujarati; Bharatendu Harishchandra's travel accounts between 1871 and 1879 in Hindi; Kirki Venkataramana Sastry's *Dakshina Bharti Yatra* (1890) in Kannada; *Chingthangkhomba Maharaja Ganga Chatpa* by Wahangba Madhabram in Manipuri; Pandita Ramabai's *Englandcha Pravas* (1883-85) and Pavaji's *Vilayatcha Pravas* (1890-92) in Marathi; Sasibhusan Ray's *Dakshinatyabhramana* (1896) in Oriya; Kanpati Naidu's *Valinatai Chintu* (1899) in Tamil; Mandapaka Parvateeswara Sastry's *Bobbili Vari Yatra Viseshalu* (1887) in Telugu; Yusuf Khan Kambalposh's *Ajaebat-a-Farang or Tareekh-e-Yusufi* in Urdu are some of the example of the nineteenth century travel writings in various languages.

Travel writings by Indian (Post-Independence)

After independence, Indian travel literature gained attention, and they were primarily written in English, with a focus on 'Post Coloniality' and the 'East-West Axis'. According to Sachidandan in *Travel writing in India*, travelogue writing in India had developed due to 'colonial encounter', English education and faster mode of transportation. In modern period, R.K Narayan's *My Dateless Diary: An American Journey*

(1964), and *The Emerald Route* (1980), V.S. Naipaul's *The Middle Passage* (1962), *An Area of Darkness* (1964), *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1975) and *India: A Million Mutinies* (1990), Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *In an Antique Land* (1992), *Dancing in Cambodia and at large in Burma* (1998), *Countdown* (1990), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *Jungle nama*, Vikram Seth's *From Heaven Lake*, Bill Aitken's *Seven Sacred Rivers*, *The Nanda Devi Affair and Footloose in the Himalayas* and William Dalrymple's *City of Djinn*s and *The Age of Kali* are classical example of Indian travelogue literature.

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