

Cultural Representation and the Foreign Gaze in Sam Miller's *A Strange Kind of Paradise: India Through Foreign Eyes*

Harin J. Goswami¹, Dr. Om P. Joshi²

¹Research scholar, Department of English, Bhakta Kavi Narsinh Mehta University, Junagadh.

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Bhakta Kavi Narsinh Mehta University, Junagadh.

Abstract

This research paper examines the representation of Culture in Sam Miller's travelogue, *A Strange Kind of Paradise: India Through Foreign Eyes*. Travel literature has long served as the medium for mediating cultural exchanges and influencing perceptions of remote regions and people. Miller's account, which is based on his travels around India, presents a distinctive fusion of sociocultural criticism, irony, observation, and curiosity. Through his journeys across different cultures and landscapes, his engagement with history, and his observations of everyday life, Miller portrays an India that seems diverse, vibrant, and much too complicated to be summed up in simple terms. This study also demonstrates how his use of humour, personal anecdotes, and reflective commentary becomes a powerful narrative strategy that reshapes the way India is imagined in the text, while also deepening our understanding of cultural difference and identity. The researcher will use textual analysis for this paper. The objective of this paper is to explore Indian culture through the select work of Sam Miller. This study illustrates how foreign writers like Sam Miller show us the reality of India without any prejudices. Miller documents the reality of Indian people and places, his experiences while travelling from place to place, and he also goes deep into the history of India. Overall, the paper explores how Sam Miller's travelogue plays an important role in shaping wider discussions on how India is seen, represented, and interpreted by outsiders.

Keywords: Travel, Contemporary India, Culture, History

1. Introduction

Travel writing has long held a special place in literature because it blends movement, observation, personal experience, and cultural interpretation in a way few other genres can. From the earliest explorers to today's wandering writers, travellers have sought to make sense of new places through the stories they bring back, tales of unfamiliar landscapes, diverse ways of living, and encounters with people whose worlds differ from their own. Over time, these narratives have not only documented journeys but have also shaped how entire cultures are viewed, understood, and remembered. India is a striking example of this tradition. For centuries, it has fascinated foreign travellers, inviting praise, curiosity, confusion, and at times, crude misunderstanding. In this long tradition of writing about India, Sam Miller explored how the ancient Greeks, Romans, Chinese, Arabs, Africans, Europeans, and Americans came to a place where one can see diverse cultures, traditions, religions, beliefs, lifestyles, and clothing, with many historical sites. His

travelogue is not simply a record of places visited; it is also a reflective exploration of Indian culture, society, and history as experienced by a foreign observer.

The present paper focuses on how Indian culture is represented in Miller's travel writing. It examines how cultural life- belief systems, historical memory, social behaviour, everyday practices, and diversity are shaped through his narrative voice. Travel writing is never just about the act of moving from one place to another; it inevitably reflects cultural understanding as well. When someone travels into an unfamiliar region, they view what they encounter through the filter of their own experiences and upbringing. Everyday elements- such as what people eat, how they dress, the rituals they follow, the way they behave in public, and the customs that shape their lives become material for reflection and interpretation. In this way, travel narratives help influence how different cultures are understood and imagined beyond their own borders.

Historically, Western travel writing about India was closely connected to colonial power. Many colonial travel accounts presented India as exotic, backward, mysterious, or inferior. These texts often reflected the political and ideological interests of the empire. As Edward Said explains in his theory of Orientalism, such representations created an unequal relationship between the observing West and the observed East.

2. Objectives

- To examine how Sam Miller represents Indian culture, its diversity, everyday practices, social behaviour, and historical layers
- To understand how Miller's travelogue contributes to contemporary discussions on how India is perceived, interpreted, and portrayed by foreign writers in modern travel literature.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Methodology

- The qualitative research methods, such as implication, interpretation and critical analysis of primary text and secondary sources, were used for the successful completion of the paper.
- The research used descriptive and analytical methods.

4. India as a Diverse Cultural Space

One of the defining strengths of Sam Miller's travelogue is the clarity with which he conveys India's vast cultural diversity. Rather than approaching the country as a single, unified entity, Miller consistently highlights the coexistence of multiple cultures, traditions, and ways of life. His writing suggests that any attempt to define India through a single lens, whether linguistic, religious, or social, is bound to fail because India's identity emerges from its plurality. As he travels through different regions, he encounters a nation that refuses simplification and instead reveals itself through contrasts, contradictions, and countless local variations.

What stands out in Miller's representation is that he does not view these differences as divisions. Instead, he presents them as threads in a larger cultural fabric. In his account, India is a country that carries many identities at once. He resists the temptation to impose coherence where none exists, choosing instead to show the reader how complexity itself becomes India's defining characteristic. This perspective challenges outsiders' expectations, especially those who arrive with preconceived images shaped by stereotypes or selective media portrayals.

Miller also emphasises how India's cultural diversity is enriched by its long history. Ancient practices and

belief systems live alongside contemporary technologies and global influences. A person may participate in a traditional festival in the morning and scroll through digital media in the evening without experiencing these as contradictory. For Miller, this coexistence is not merely evidence of cultural layering but a reminder that Indian identity continuously adapts. And, India is a place where you can see centuries coexisting, where the future and the past walk side by side, often on the very same street. This observation captures the fluid nature of Indian culture, a culture not frozen in an earlier age but constantly negotiating old and new. According to Raymond Williams, culture is defined as “the way of life or the ordinary life” (Williams 54). By drawing attention to such contrasts, Miller corrects the outdated notion that Indian culture is static or unchanging. Instead, he portrays a country in motion, shaped by globalization yet deeply rooted in tradition. The presence of smartphones, malls, and international brands does not erase older practices; rather, they coexist with temple rituals, village customs, and indigenous storytelling traditions. This dynamic interplay becomes one of the most compelling insights of Miller’s travelogue. Ultimately, Miller’s depiction of India as a diverse cultural space encourages readers to appreciate the nation’s multiplicity. Through his encounters, India emerges not as a single narrative but as a mosaic complex, evolving and endlessly fascinating.

4.1 Religion and Tradition

Religious practices appear as an inseparable part of everyday cultural life. Temples, shrines, and street-side altars are not treated as exotic curiosities but as active, lived spaces that structure people’s routines. Miller describes how festivals bring entire neighbourhoods together, how rituals influence the rhythms of a working day, and how small gestures of devotion, lighting a lamp, offering flowers, or stopping momentarily before a shrine become woven into the ordinary flow of life.

Miller treats beliefs as meaningful expressions of how communities understand their past and surroundings. The tale of the king transformed into a pillar, Khambh Baba, reveals how culture often blends history, spirituality and imagination into a single narrative framework. He notes: Everyone used to know the story of the pillar (Miller 30), emphasising the collective nature of belief and memory. Miller's account continuously shows that India is preserved through oral tradition and local deity. These stories give ordinary spaces sacred significance. The pillar becomes a symbol of devotion. The ascetic practices of Saint Hirapuri reflect a cultural respect for self-denial and spiritual discipline. There is another story of Jesus in India that is not presented as an isolated myth but as products of nineteenth-century intellectual and religious exchanges. Miller notes that these stories “...need to be seen in the wider context of attempts to explain some of the striking similarities between Christianity and Buddhism...” (Miller 40), emphasising how societies make sense of strange customs by comparing them to their own.

There were plenty of travellers who talked about the religion and beliefs of Indian people. For example, Miller reveals how ritual and religion in India were often misunderstood, exaggerated, and exoticized by early European travellers such as Mandeville. His account presents India as a land of intense and unfamiliar religious practices, where people are described as worshipping “fire, snakes, trees and the sun.” Though this observation hints at the variety of Indian faiths, it reduces rich religious customs to a mere bunch of strange items worshipped. Out of this comes not a clear picture of Hinduism but rather a broken and often twisted reflection formed by the traveller’s narrow view.

In *Jane Eyre*, the reference to “Juggernaut” reflects a Victorian Christian tendency to use non-Christian deities as symbols of moral otherness. Brocklehurst’s claim that a Christian child could be “worse than many a little heathen who says its prayers to Brahma and kneels before Juggernaut” reveals how Hindu gods were invoked to mark religious inferiority. In reality, Juggernaut refers to Jagannath, “Lord of the

Universe,” a revered form of Krishna worshipped at Puri. The Jagannath temple represents living Hindu practice centred on darshan and pilgrimage. The annual chariot procession, often misrepresented by colonial writers as a site of ritual suicide, shows how religious rituals were misunderstood and sensationalised. The temple’s restriction on foreign entry- “No foreigners. Only Hindus” emphasises religion as a boundary of sacred belonging rather than ethnicity or nationality. This is the tradition of Jagannath Puri Temple. Moreover, Miller visited several other temples, and he was fascinated by the diversities and expanded his knowledge of other religions, beliefs, rituals and traditions.

4.2 Food

The food, especially spices, functioned as a powerful cultural bridge between India and the Roman world. The development of the Indo-Roman trade route did not merely move goods; it reshaped perceptions. As he notes, India was no longer imagined as “a semi-mythical land, the edge of the known world” but came to be recognised as a tangible source of valued food products. Among these spices, particularly pepper, occupied a central place in everyday Roman life. Food here is not presented simply as sustenance but as a cultural object loaded with meaning. Mainly Pepper was “used not only as a flavouring, but as aphrodisiacs and preservatives.” This indicates how Indian food items entered Roman culture at multiple levels, mixed into perfumes, medicine, and burned in religious rituals. The use of spices in perfumes and medicines further shows how food crossed into areas of health and luxury, blurring boundaries between nourishment and pleasure. The burning of spices in “religious rituals” reveals an even deeper cultural role. Food from India was absorbed into sacred practices, suggesting that Indian products carried symbolic value beyond their physical properties. Spices became offerings, fragrances, and ritual elements, integrating Indian food culture into Roman spiritual life. In this way, food acted as a silent but powerful medium of cultural exchange.

Through everyday consumption and ritual use, Indian food helped shift India’s image from a distant mystery to a culturally influential land whose flavours, scents, and substances became embedded in Roman society. Also, Ibn Battuta’s descriptions of eating coconuts and mangoes can be seen in this travelogue.

4.3 History

One of the central ways Miller deals with history is by recognising its layered nature. India, for him, is not defined by a single historical narrative but by the coexistence of many. Ancient civilisations, medieval kingdoms, colonial rule, independence struggles, and modern political shifts all contribute to the texture of contemporary Indian identity.

The Chinese monk Tripitaka's journey blends religious devotion with early ethnographic observation. While travelling “in search of holy relics and Buddhist law,” he records detailed impressions of people and places, revealing how cultural identity was often understood through regional character. His descriptions, such as Kashmiris being “handsome in appearance, but... given to cunning,” reflect the tendency toward generalisation common in early travel writing, yet he also makes an effort to distinguish between regions rather than treat India as a single entity. Tripitaka’s admiration grows as he approaches major Buddhist centres, particularly Nalanda, where he is “awestruck” by its architectural grandeur and intellectual life. His vivid descriptions highlight India’s long-standing cultural association with learning and spirituality. The continued presence of Buddhist pilgrims at Nalanda and Bodhgaya today shows how these cultural and religious connections have endured across centuries, linking ancient travel narratives to living traditions. He repeatedly observes how the past continues to inform the present, shaping how people see themselves and how the nation negotiates its place in the world.

Miller's travels take him to numerous historical sites, temples, forts, ruins, old markets, and colonial buildings, each of which becomes a point of reflection. Miller visited the Somnath temple and tried to understand Hinduism, and when he walks through the temple, he is not merely cataloguing architectural details. He is trying to understand the stories behind them, the people who built them, and the worlds they once sustained.

Colonial history also forms an important part of Miller's reflections. Administrative systems, educational institutions, legal frameworks, and even urban planning reveal how deeply colonial ideology shaped modern India. Yet Miller does not treat colonialism as the defining story of India; rather, he positions it as one layer among many. He acknowledges the violence, hierarchy, and cultural imposition associated with British rule, but he also recognises how Indians adapted, resisted, and reinterpreted these influences. In this sense, history appears as a dynamic process, not a fixed narrative of domination.

Equally important is Miller's respect for India's ancient civilisational heritage. He is consistently drawn to stories that stretch back thousands of years, from the Indus Valley civilisation to classical Sanskrit traditions. What stands out in his writing is his awareness that Indians themselves often carry an intimate connection to the ancient past. For Miller, this connection is not about nostalgia; it is part of the living cultural imagination. He sees this continuity in religious rituals, storytelling traditions, philosophical ideas, and artistic forms that have travelled across centuries. India's long historical memory, he suggests, contributes to the sense of depth and resilience that characterises Indian cultural life.

4.4 Identity and Cultural Difference

Miller's travelogue often reflects on cultural differences. As a foreigner, he is constantly aware of his outsider status. Yet he does not use this difference to create distance. Instead, he uses it to ask questions about identity, his own and that of the people he meets.

Modern Indian identity, which has been reciprocally overlaid onto the ancient history of the subcontinent...being a foreigner, and being seen as a foreigner are subjective matters, ones that are old as the hills, matters of mood and perception, belonging and nostalgia, language and colour, that long pre-date those key determinants of modern foreignness: one's place of birth and one's passport. (Miller, 56)

Miller's insight leads us to question the anthropologically rigid, modern concept of identity and the capitulation of a single Indian nationalism to a past that was anything but (language, looks, memory, emotional belonging trumps birthplace, passport, etc.). Certainly, this unsettles the nationalist and colonial frameworks that attempt to make sense of the past in a postcolonial era. But by questioning a rigid notion of belonging, Miller's insight invites us to approach history from a more nuanced and complex perspective. It is a reminder that concepts of insider and outsider existed long before the nation-state and that these notions continue to shape our perceptions of culture today. Language, caste, class, religion, and region all play a role in shaping how individuals see themselves and are seen by others.

5. Conclusion

This paper has explored how Indian culture is represented in Sam Miller's *A Strange Kind of Paradise: India Through Foreign Eyes*. Through close textual analysis, the researcher has examined how landscapes, everyday life, history, humour, anecdotal narration, and reflective commentary shape the cultural portrait of India in the travelogue. Miller presents India as diverse, vibrant, and deeply complex. He avoids simplistic definitions and acknowledges the limitations of his own foreign perspective. By documenting real people, lived spaces, personal experiences, and historical contexts, Miller offers readers an image of India that resists both romantic idealisation and harsh stereotyping. This study has demonstrated that A

Strange Kind of Paradise significantly contributes to the broader discourse on the representation, construction, and interpretation of India in Sam Miller's contemporary travel writing.

References:

1. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 2012.
2. Bhattacharji, Shobhana. *Travel Writing in India*. Sahitya Akademi, 2008.
3. Das, Nandini, and Tim Youngs. *The Cambridge History of Travel Writing*. Cambridge University Press, 2019.
4. Miller, Sam. *A Strange Kind of Paradise: India through Foreign Eyes*. Vintage Books, 2015.
5. Thompson, Carl. *Travel Writing*. Routledge, 2025.
6. Williams, Raymond. *Culture and Society: Coleridge to Orwell*. London: Hogarth.1987.