

*A Bengali Lady  
in England*  
by Krishnabhabini Das  
(1885)



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Translated, Edited and Introduced by  
Somdatta Mandal

Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing



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To my mother Srimati Swarnalata Das, another Bengali lady who visited England in the early 1950s; who told us so many stories about her experience, but never penned anything down...



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# ইংলেণ্ড বঙ্গমহিলা

বঙ্গমহিলা-প্রণীত ।

“বাল্লেরে শিশু, বাহু এই রবে,  
সবাই স্বাধীন এ বিপুল ভবে,  
সবাই জাগ্রত মানের গৌরবে,  
ভারত হুইই মুম্বায়ে রয় ”

কলিকাতা ।

শ্রীসত্যপ্রসাদ সর্বাধিকারী দ্বারা  
প্রকাশিত ।

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1885.

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*A Bengali Lady in England*

*By*

*A Bengali Lady*

Play the bugle, play with this tune  
Everyone is independent in this huge world  
Everyone is awake with their pride of dignity  
Only India sleeps!

Calcutta  
Published by Sri Satyaprasad Sarbadhikari  
-----

Printed by  
J.N.Banerjee & Son, Banerjee Press,  
119, Old Boytakhana Bazar Road  
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## FOREWORD

When, in 1882, teenage Krishnabhabini Das (1864-1919) left for an extended trip to England with her husband, leaving behind her six-year-old daughter, she regarded this as her self-sacrifice in the service of her long-suffering Bengali people. Even before leaving home, she took on uncomfortable English-style clothing, diet and deportment in order to prepare herself for that alien Western world. She determined to use her own challenging experiences in order to awaken and uplift her nascent nation, especially by improving the customary roles of women like herself. She wrote and published her discoveries and evaluation of Britain as a book, *England-e Bangamohila*, in 1885, even before her own return home. She would remain in Britain for a total of eight years, even as her in-laws married off her own distant daughter at age ten.

With this current volume, Professor Somdatta Mandal has added to her already impressive body of books and other publications by making accessible for the first time to Anglophone readers this significant book by Srimati Krishnabhabini Das. This translation enables non-Bangla readers to deepen our understanding of this key transitional period in India's and England's connected histories from the acute first-hand perspective of a woman traveller and published author.

One of the striking features of Krishnabhabini's fascinating account is how genuinely new and unfamiliar to her were her journey and life in England. By that time, men and women from India had been venturing to Europe for more than four hundred years. Even over the decade prior to Krishnabhabini's own visit, many Bengali men and at least half a dozen Bengali women had preceded her. Indeed, this was the second trip for her husband, Debendranath Das, having returned only months earlier after six years in England where he had narrowly missed entry into the Indian Civil Service and had taken a degree in mathematics from Cambridge University.

Krishnabhabini, although married at nine and home schooled by her in-laws, had herself long read and heard about England. But, even to educated middle-class Indian women, distant imperial Britain still seemed overwhelmingly intimidating. Determined to enlighten her Bengali sisters through her book, Krishnabhabini still seems to have hesitated to assert her own authority to do so, publishing anonymously. Even her first publisher

in Kolkata condescendingly prefaced the book by apologetically asking tolerance from readers for her misperceptions and simple language but applauding her sincere attempt.

In her account, Krishnabhabini repeatedly raises two central dilemmas. First, how can she and her compatriots preserve their own culture and values while simultaneously becoming Anglicized. As an example of this danger, she criticizes her contemporary, Ms. Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922), for having abandoned Hinduism to become a Christian ‘and hence degraded the Hindu race’. Initially, Krishnabhabini laments with shame how, through her own adoption of the ‘memsahib’ Englishwomen’s dress, she had distanced herself from her Hindu Bengali sisters. But she takes heart from her conviction that she has done so for their sake.

Krishnabhabini’s second dilemma is who should be included in her vision for the nascent Indian nation. As she first leaves Bengal and journeys by train to Mumbai, she notes both the stereotypical differences and also the foundational commonalities among middle-class Hindu women and men of India’s diverse regions. But she does not identify with people of lower classes or other communities living in India. Thus, her evocative account tells us much about her own personal perceptions and cultural journeys and those of many comparable people of her time and status.

Through Krishnabhabini’s thoughtful ethnography, we also learn much about English Victorian society and culture. Insightful outside observers like her can note and record customs and details that are so common-place for natives that they often remain unremarked. Her descriptions of the world of middle-class English households, as well as the indigenous racial and other cultural attitudes toward Indians and other foreigners, thus enrich our understanding of this transitional period for imperial England.

Readers of Krishnabhabini’s fascinating and significant book will therefore find much to learn from and savour.

Michael H. Fisher  
Robert S. Danforth Professor of History  
Oberlin College, USA.  
January 2015

## INTRODUCTION

### SOMDATTA MANDAL

The last three decades of the nineteenth century and the first few of the twentieth witnessed an explosion of travel writing from eastern India, particularly from Bengal. That Calcutta was the capital of British India till 1911 was, of course, one of its reasons. Situated almost seven thousand miles away from England, Bengal was the seat of British rule in the Indian subcontinent and curiosity about England, the imperial headquarters, was at an all-time high in the late nineteenth century, especially after Queen Victoria's Proclamation to her Indian subjects (1887) on assuming the title of 'Empress of India' and the celebration of her Jubilee in a grand fashion. The spread of English education amongst the middle class during this time also played a significant role in developing such narratives. It is through learning English that the enlightened Bengali of the new age learnt to see modern Europe. Thus, despite opposition from orthodox families and friends, special enthusiasm was noted among high-caste Hindus to travel to England and they wrote about their experiences in autobiographies, diaries, travelogues, religious tracts and memoirs (some of which first appeared as letters in Indian newspapers) and these are important to our understanding of Indian men and women and Victorian Britain. Also, in the year of the opening of the Suez Canal (1869), "as travel to Britain from India promised to become easier, the British Indian Association, an association supportive of British rule in India, established a department for encouraging both Muslims and Hindus to travel to Britain, not for trade or legal reasons, but for educational and scientific purposes" (Lahiri 110). Thus, an increasing number of them, especially from British India's western-educated urban elite, came to Britain in the late nineteenth century "to study, travel for pleasure, engage in social reform, or advance their careers." (Lahiri 111) Also, for many colonial tourists of the time, journeying to England was nothing new. England was not an alien place because they already knew about it through literature and from people who had visited the place (often referred to by a general term 'vilayet') but never wrote official travelogues.

Though travel has been primarily a masculine enterprise, women were not excluded. They also travelled, migrated, moved, often for the same reasons as men – their husbands or fathers or sons. The kind of experiences they related to and the metaphysical roads they travelled were quite different. Their writing was not seen as a metaphor for quest or as an act of empowerment; instead, their writings were seen as narratives of their journeys and representation of their personal experiences. Different critics offer different reasons for such a situation. In his introduction to *Routes*, James Clifford asks:

Does a focus on travel inevitably privilege male experiences? What counts as ‘travel’ for men and women in different settings? Pilgrimage? Family visiting?... How in such instances, does (women’s) ‘dwelling’ articulate, politically and culturally, with (men’s) traveling? (6)

As Clifford’s questions make it clear, the trope of travel narration begins with the basic gender difference and it assumes that men and women react differently once they venture outside their homes. Thus, their travel writings cross boundaries of gender and purpose.

Historically, women have been more associated with fixity, with home rather than the road. The women travellers to Europe worked to shape feminised personae characterised by conventionality, conservatism and domesticity even as they imitated a male-dominated tradition of travel and travel writing. Also in Bengal, the emancipation of women, inculcated to a great extent by the progressive Brahmo Samaj movement, made the weaker sex venture into Victorian homes. For many of these women, England and travel to England meant visiting the land of freedom and the journey gave them access to this freedom. Though Hindu women did not observe the *purdah* as did the Muslim women, they had, till then, remained largely invisible, confined within their homes and away from the public gaze. Their rightful place was within a domestic sphere and it was quite uncommon for a middle-class Indian woman to expose herself to the outside world or participate in activities and debates in a public domain. Though the very act of travel by a Bengali woman was a novelty and bore the signature of modernity, very few of them recorded their travels.

The reason for such dearth of Indian women’s travel narratives is not far to seek. The opportunities for travel by women were vastly different from men and they utilised it in specific ways according to their class and caste status. Upper-class Indian women did travel abroad in the company of their husbands and families but very rarely alone. This gave them a sense of security and dignity that would otherwise be probably denied to them. They became companions to their husbands, interacted with

strangers and foreigners and often acted autonomously. Of the early women from Bengal who crossed the 'kalapani' were the two Dutt sisters, Aru and Toru, who travelled in Europe with their father Govin Chunder Dutt from 1869 to 1873. Indira Devi Chaudhurani gives us some information about her mother Jnanadanandini Devi's experiences in England in 1879. As the wife of Satyendranath Tagore, the first Indian civil servant, she was encouraged by him to travel unaccompanied to England with her children. In spite of the severe social disapproval that her husband received at the hands of fellow Hindus, Rajkumari Bandyopadhyay had also successfully travelled to Europe in 1871. Also, during this period, probably, Swarnalata Ghosh and Hemangini Devi had also broken new ground by travelling to Europe. Another ordinary housewife, Krishnabhabini Das, went to England with her husband in 1882. After becoming the first lady doctors in Calcutta, both Kadambini Ganguly and Jamini Sen went for further studies in England in the years 1893 and 1897 respectively. Sunity Devee, the Maharani of Coochbehar, visited England for the first time in 1887 and she authored "My First Visit to England" and recorded several of her later visits in her book *The Autobiography of an Indian Princess* (1921).

The journey of women from colonial Bengal to Europe in general, and England in particular, continued unabated at the turn of the century as well. The experiences of Sailabala Das, Jagatmohini Choudhury and Tapati Mukherjee (who was the great granddaughter of Shibnath Sastri) can then be added to full-length travelogues of Durgabati Ghose and Chitrita Devi that were published much later. All of them produced personal documents and organised their texts and mapped their selves according to their journey - geographic movement providing the root metaphor through which they made sense of their lives. Though clubbed under women's travel, each of these women travelled away from their homes with a different agenda and so, their narratives differ in length, style and content. In most cases, they negotiated new relationships and the differences between their roles at home and away from home. Also, though most of these women shared a western education, it was not always the case for others. While very few of them wrote professionally for publication, most of them recorded their experiences primarily for themselves or family, publication being only an incidental concern. But it gave them a voice, an agency, as they saw and narrated their experiences through a lens that was different from that of male travellers.

Incidentally, two women among them were the most informative about their travel. Pothum Janakumamah Raghaviah who described herself simply as a "Hindu lady from Madras", travelled to Britain with her husband in

1871. Her book, *Pictures of England* (1876), was based on letters she wrote in Telugu to the *Madras* newspaper. Apart from describing the many places she visited in Britain and giving her mainly favourable impressions of British society, she also provided personal insights into her daily routines, including walks in Hyde Park, visits to public baths and regular trips to the theatre. She was accompanied not just by her husband but also Indian servants. As Shompa Lahiri succinctly suggests, lack of testimony makes supposition difficult whether the experiences and reactions of Raghaviah's ayah differed from that of her mistress. (111)

The second woman's travelogue was, of course, by Krishnabhabini Das who also travelled with her husband to England in 1882 and stayed for a further eight years in London. Her book, *England-e Bangamohila* (A Bengali Lady in England) was written in Bengali and published in Calcutta in 1885. Interestingly, Das did not put in her name when she sent the hand-written manuscript from England to Calcutta for publication. Like her counterpart in Madras, either she did not feel the necessity or probably thought it to be a disadvantage to be labelled a woman writer. As mentioned earlier, women from colonial Bengal have been travelling to Europe and England in particular during the late nineteenth century but none of them wrote full-fledged travel narratives about their experiences. In this sense, this publication holds a unique position in being the first Bengali travel narrative written by a woman. In the comments that preface the book, the publisher, Sri Satyaprasad Sarbadhikari states:

The author of this book is living with her husband in England. I am publishing the manuscript according to her wishes. Except for changing a few occasional words, I have not interfered with her writing... The language of the book is easy and sweet. I believe this kind of unembellished and unemotional language is always desirable. (3)

Apologising for the errors that might have crept in, he further mentions that the printed proof-copies of the pages could not be corrected by the writer herself as she was still living in England. Maybe those could be rectified in the second edition when she would be present in India. He then appreciates the agenda of the writer in inculcating the lessons of self-discipline and governance in her countrymen. Even if all the information given in this book is incorrect, he cannot disagree with the author's "noble and honest attempt".

Staying colonized for a long time India has gradually turned into a lifeless lump of flesh in religion and work arena. The children of Mother India are longing for food and nourishment... If we have to sow the seeds of rejuvenation into our motherland, the seeds have to be collected from the



flaming workplace of a living nation. There is no doubt that England is that living nation. (Publisher's note, 3)

The historian and critic Simonti Sen believes Krishnabhabini's travel account "is cast in the usual frame that separates the 'backward East' from the 'progressive West' and engages with all the stock-in-trade nationalist questions".(23) She further tells us:

...this very participation of a woman in an essentially masculinist project has a special interest of its own. As it has been for so many English women, for Krishnabhabini too mobility too became just the other name for freedom. But unlike that of the Victorian women travellers, travelling was for her a triple gesture of negation, negating the social restrictions on sea voyage applicable to both the sexes, transgressing the boundary of the home with which she was in iconic identity and, of course, writing which itself implied transgression of womanhood (even if the writing was in a language that reinscribed the patriarchal structure, which was the condition of her oppression). (23)

Also, it has to be kept in mind that women's travel writing usually crossed boundaries of genre and purpose – the personal documents by ordinary women. In this context, it is also interesting to see how Krishnabhabini, in trying to negotiate with her subjectivity, went even as far as questioning the dominant ideology that produced her and that she often reproduced. Her narrative, in this context, is rather unique because it not only describes her personal experiences of travel as an ethnographic document but also has a strong agenda for political rejuvenation of the motherland. As Jayati Gupta rightly points out, "dramatic tension between two disparate cultures... lies at the core of this account. The writer's sense of wonder at encountering the ruling European race in their own country is tempered by maintaining a rational distance, one that was naturally fostered by a conservative social upbringing, cultural difference and feelings of alienation and nationalistic pride".

### **Biographical details**

Before discussing the text, it is apt here to delve a little into the background of the author and the context in which she composed her narrative. Krishnabhabini Das (1864-1919) was a middle-class Bengali Hindu lady who accompanied her husband on his second visit to England in 1882. They lived there for eight years. The only child of her parents and born in a village called Choa in Murshidabad district of West Bengal, (some define her birthplace to be in a village in Nadia), the young

Krishnabhabini had little formal education at her parent's home before she was married off at the age of nine to Debendranath Das of Calcutta. In her in-laws' home, she started educating herself primarily at the behest of her husband. Though she never went to a school or college, she had ultimately educated herself so much that in later years, she was appointed an examiner of the University of Calcutta. (Murshid 98)

Born into a highly educated and respected family in Calcutta, Krishnabhabini's husband, Debendranath Das, was a good student. After graduating with a BA degree in 1876, like Satyendranath Tagore, Manmohan Ghose, Umeshchandra Bandyopadhyay, Surendranath Bandyopadhyay and others, he too went to England to appear for the ICS examination. He even passed the examination but according to new laws, he was found to be above age and thus, could not get the cherished ICS degree. Devendranath had a special interest in acquiring knowledge, especially learning different languages. Apart from several Indian languages, he was conversant in Greek, Latin, Italian and French. Living in London for several years, he started tutoring younger civil service aspirants. After returning to India in 1890 or 1891, he taught at Century College and many other institutions till his death in 1909.

Debendranath's father, Srinath Das, was a lawyer at the Calcutta High Court and a close friend of Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar. But this friendship, though theoretically supporting the cause of social reform inculcated by Vidyasagar, had no impact on his personal and family affairs. He ostracised his eldest son, Upendranath, for marrying a widow and his rigid mentality was indirectly responsible for the kind of life that Krishnabhabini eventually had to lead. Like many middle-class wives of the time who were sincerely dedicated to their husband's causes and wishes, Krishnabhabini too supported her husband's dream of going to England for higher education. While he was busy studying law in England, she decided to rear her two children on her own in his absence. A few years after the death of one of their children, Debendranath returned to Calcutta but unable to cope with the rigid social customs back at home, and enlightened by women's emancipation in England, he decided to go back and also to take his wife along with him, in spite of the opposition expressed by his relatives. According to Ghulam Murshid, probably Srinath Das had to show this apparent ostracism in order to keep his links with contemporary society intact. So, leaving their six-year-old daughter Tilottama in the custody of her in-laws, Krishnabhabini left for England with her husband in the month of September, 1882 and came back to Calcutta in 1890.

One of the most unpleasant events during her stay in England took place when, in their absence, the in-laws got her young daughter Tilottama married off at the age of ten. Though extremely hurt at this news, Krishnabhabini could do very little to prevent it. For someone who went on writing about women's education and liberation, who had come to view England as "the land of freedom and India as one of servility", she had to silently endure the pain of not being able to liberate her own daughter. After she returned to India, Das was unable to see her daughter and they spent their entire lives with different ideologies and on opposite paths. After the sudden death of her husband and her other child in 1909, Krishnabhabini spent the last ten years of her life immersed in social work, enhancement of female education, and building shelters for fallen women and widows. It is possible that this personal tragedy made her conservative again. She started penance that was undertaken strictly by Hindu widows and got involved in social work under the aegis of 'Bharat Strimahamandal'. She laboured a lot to educate women from conservative backgrounds but towards the end of her life, she detached herself once again from women's liberation movements. Three years before her death, in 1916, she established an ashram for widows. Her transition from a liberal feminist to a Hindu widow once again is perhaps best exemplified in her obituary published in *Modern Review* 25, nos. 1-6 (1919):

Hindu lady: with the selfless, pure and unostentatious devotion of the typical Hindu widow, she combined the method, energy and the spirit of active social service of the West. (Introduction, 31)

## **The Narrative**

As mentioned earlier, Krishnabhabini wrote her narrative in Bengali and the account was published in Calcutta in 1885 as *England-e Bangamohila*. This anonymous publication had the writer's name written simply as 'A Bengali Lady'. A Calcutta-based publishing house, Stree, reprinted this book in 1996 under the title *Krishnabhabini Daser England-e Bangamohila*, edited and introduced by Simonti Sen. In this edition, Sen added a detailed biography of the author along with samples from her other writings that were published later in life. One of the reasons for Krishnabhabini's deep interest in England was obviously because her husband had been living there. But from her writing, it seems she was also equally interested in seeing the outside world and it was a really sincere desire. Thus, for her, the terms 'travel' and 'independence' and also

leaving the 'home' and the 'purdah' become synonymous when she begins her narration:

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of September, Tuesday, at eight-thirty in the evening, I came along with my husband to Howrah Station to travel to England via Bombay. Today was the first time I opened my veil and entered the train. (6)

This 'opening of the veil' as a means of freeing herself from the constraints of her family and society is probably the first step in the discourse of freedom as mobility that enables her to construct her own sense of self. After the train journey, they reach Bombay on the coast of the Arabian Sea from where the sea voyage to England begins. Taking the most common route via Suez Canal and Red Sea, they disembark in Venice. Like in most other travel narratives, the emphasis on cartography and the description of the voyage that includes the explanation of terms like steward, deck, saloon, cabin, etc. take up the first few chapters of the book. From Venice, they take a train to Calais and then cross the Channel by ship to reach Dover. The long journey by train from Calais to London ultimately ended at Charing Cross station on the 20<sup>th</sup> of October, 1882.

After a detailed description of the journey, first by ship and then by train through different countries of Europe, Krishnabhabini shares the Indian visitors' first impression of Britain when they disembarked at London, the largest city on earth for much of the Victorian period. Once settled in London, she starts analysing the familial, social, political and economic lifestyle of the English in great detail. At the beginning of Chapter Five, she expresses different thoughts occurring in her mind:

It is a few months since I have come to England. I have started eating and dressing like the English; maybe if some native people saw me now he would make fun of me as a 'pucca memsahib' – let him do so, it will not affect me. (35)

She then focuses her female gaze on the city of London itself, which, viewed from the perspective of a foreigner, is often described in binary terms, where Calcutta becomes one part of the marker:

London is a huge city; no other country in the world has such a big metropolis. It is almost ten miles long and four miles broad. London occupies four times the space of Calcutta and its population is eight times that of Calcutta. About forty lakh people live here. If one tours London in a carriage for five or six days at a stretch, the sightseeing would not be complete. It is very difficult to find one's way around this city. (39)

After the initial euphoria of the greatness of the city, the dystopic aspects also creep into her narrative. London is also the city of fogs so hellish that she “wishes to run away”; she sees through the richness and opulence of the city when she discovers the squalor and poverty of life in the East End area; she is depressed by the darker side of industrialisation where the workers and labourers live in shabby and cramped houses. She is repelled by British class pride: “In this country, a dunce who happens to be rich, thinks himself a very great man and hates a poor but learned man.” Like many other Bengali visitors to Britain during that time, she also believed that class divisions were more damaging and divisive than caste distinctions: “In our country, we only hear of rich men and poor men but in England we often hear of gentlemen and vulgar men.” She also notices the changes in the seasons, observes English social customs of marriage, the English people’s religion and festivities and also rural life with the farmers beyond the city. Three main areas reflected the gender equality enjoyed by English women: marriage, domestic life and sibling relations. She admires female education, writes about the election of parliamentary members, talks about Queen Victoria and her family, about British labour, trade, income and the working class. As Shompa Lahiri rightly points out, Das’s “position on the women’s question was influenced both by her own experience as a wife, daughter-in-law and mother and by her feminist advocacy of female emancipation in India developed along the lines of the suffragette movement in Britain” (117). She understands that materialism lay at the heart of many of Britain’s problems where “without money, it is impossible to be recognised as a gentleman” and this inevitably sacrificed moral and spiritual values. By the time she comes to the end of her narrative, her love for her motherland is stronger than ever.

I have seen so many new things in this country, learnt so many new subjects, gained so much new knowledge; but the more I see, the more I know, the longer I stay here, the more I remember India and my heart tortures me more. The more I compare the two countries, the more I realize the great difference between them and looking at the poor condition of India, I keep on suffering within. (150)

The prologue of the book consists of a four-line poem and is interesting because it is printed just beneath the title of the cover page. It is like a clarion call from a female nationalist whose agenda demands the subservient Indian nation free her from the shackles of imperial domination.

Play the bugle, play with this tune  
 Everyone is independent in this huge world  
 Everyone is awake with their pride of dignity  
 Only India sleeps!

There are several other sections in the book where the author bursts into bouts of poetry. Unlike the matter-of-fact reportage of the prose, this poetry is more personal and emotional in tone. For instance, just before the ship was about to leave from Bombay, she started to feel nostalgic about her homeland, not knowing whether she would ever return to India or not. She becomes emotionally overwhelmed and writes:

#### FAREWELL

My favourite land! The jewelled land!  
 Leaving you for a long time.  
 Do not worry, mother! This unfortunate daughter  
 Is useless for you.  
 ...  
 For many years there is in my heart  
 A secret desire of hope  
 To see beloved freedom  
 To go to the land where it lives.

At the end of Chapter 20, the last chapter in her narrative, Krishnabhabini ends her travelogue with a prosaic, matter-of-fact statement: "If even one person is inspired by new thoughts and feelings after reading this book, or thinks about his homeland and the foreign land, I will know that all my labour has been successful".(154) Just after this declaration, she breaks into poetic exuberance once again:

Here Mother! I have come to independent Britain  
 With lots and lots of hope  
 I thought I will win eternal peace  
 But Mother India! Where is happiness?

As mentioned earlier, Krishnabhabini went to England along with her husband on his second visit. During his stay there, Devendra N Das also indulged in writing and wrote regular articles in several contemporary British magazines at the behest of his friends who wanted him to illumine the English reading public on different aspects of Indian life. These articles were collected and published in 1887 as *Sketches of Hindoo Life*. In the book, the author made it clear that it was not the work of some

unknown Indian but penned by an erudite person -- Devendra N Das, BA, late scholar of Clare College, Cambridge, lecturer at the Birkbeck Institution, London. He states at the beginning of the book:

In these sketches I have tried to depict some phases of the inner life of my countrymen in India, and to make them as clear as possible to English readers.

He then elucidates:

I have often been asked by my English friends to describe the orthodox mode of worship in a Hindoo temple. Europeans have travelled throughout the length and breadth of India, visited almost all the places considered sacred by the Hindoos, and have lived and died in India; yet hardly any of them have been able to give an accurate description of the pujah, or worship, in a Hindoo temple. And the reason is not far to seek. 'None except strict Hindoos are allowed to step within the precincts of the Hindoo devalays, or abodes of gods, much less to join in the service conducted in them. It is with great pleasure, therefore, that I now recall my young days, which I spent in the city most venerated by the Hindoos — Benares. (1)

So where Devendra N Das, with his Orientalist agenda, was trying to educate his fellow Britishers with the myths, religion and lifestyle of Indians back in India – speaking about the jogee, the astrologer, the zamindars, the nautch girls, the folklore of Indian birds, infant marriage, the matchmaker, the Hindoo widow, funeral ceremonies, et al - his wife was trying to educate fellow Indians about different aspects of British life – the English race and its nature, the English lady, English marriage and domestic life, education system, religion and celebration, British labour, trade, income, working class, etc. This self-ordained mission of educating the people back home with the ground realities in England is what makes Krishnabhabini's narrative unique. When *England-e Bangamohila* was published, the author was not even twenty-five. In her introduction, she acknowledged the fact that she had taken help of many English books and journals in writing her narrative. Her husband had also helped her. In fact, she admits in the introduction that her entire account was read and revised by her husband. (6) But whatever help she received from different sources, the text remains an important document and a significant piece of writing.

It is also interesting to note that after the publication of this work in 1885, Krishnabhabini did not publish anything for the next five years. In the meantime, she got the opportunity to educate herself further and mature as an individual. Just before returning to her homeland in 1890, she

published an article in *Bharati* and *Balak* entitled 'Strilok O Purush' (Women and Men) in which she admitted that her outlook on life had changed over the years and some of her ideas expressed in *England-e Bangamohila* were immature. In this narrative, she had briefly acquainted her readers with Mary Carpenter, Lady Baker and Lady Bassey; but in the second phase of her writing, she wrote about women's liberation in England in greater details. She wrote that the position of women in society and the relationship between men and women seemed to have been determined and fixed forever but of late, there had been turmoil in civilised society in this regard. She believed that the awareness of female emancipation that had emerged in India over a few decades was actually a result of the influence of civilised society. She also wrote about the women's liberation movement in England in two other articles "Engrej Mohilar Siksha O Swadhinotar Goti" (The Education and Emancipation Movement of English Women) and "Songsare Narir Kshamata" (The Power of Women in the Family). The two women whom she particularly mentioned in these articles were Mrs Fossett and Mrs Besant and she expressed her hope that they would also be instrumental in the introduction of voting rights for women. The idea behind her writings was that women can establish their authority only through agitation and not through tears or appeal.

Before concluding, it is worthwhile questioning the significance of Krishnabhabini's travelogue once again. The obvious representational strategy of travel writing is to create alternatives and oppositions in terms of which the representation can be given its necessary force and poignancy. Krishnabhabini's account is not an exception. When Indians wrote about their European travels, the frame of opposition was expressed through a simple binary of 'we'/'they' – 'we', here, often conflated to denote Indians or even Easterners and 'they' indicated sometimes the English and sometimes the European or the Westerner in general. Where does Krishnabhabini stand vis-à-vis other women who travelled to the West in the latter part of the nineteenth century? Unlike Pandita Ramabai or Anandibai Joshi or Cornelia Sorabji from Maharashtra who went to England with the sole aim of higher studies, then denied to women scholars in India, Krishnabhabini was one of the scores of middle-class Bengali women who went to England for no special purpose but usually as accompaniments of their menfolk. But at the same time, these women also appropriated aspects of European travel discourse, particularly the set of oppositions between self and other, East and West, home and abroad. In her analysis of women's travel narratives, Rita Felski describes a contemporary model in which



...female self-discovery is depicted as a process of confrontation and dialogue with a social environment. Although the text often emphasizes internal growth and self-understanding rather than public self-realization, only by moving out into the world can the protagonist become critically aware of the limitation of her previously secluded existence and her unquestioning acceptance of the circumscribed nature of women's social roles. (135)

Because of travelling to a new place, this separation from the community of origin becomes very important for women like Krishnabhabini Das who can then see both gender and self in relief. Thus, the significance of this first-ever travelogue by a Bengali woman from colonial Bengal cannot be overestimated.

### **A note on the translation**

As mentioned earlier, Krishnabhabini's intention of writing this narrative was primarily her self-ordained mission to impart knowledge to the people back home in India. Having lived in England for about eight years, her in-depth observations were often unlike the first impressions of awe and wonder of other travel narratives. So, it is full of comparisons between 'us' and 'them', and in some places, quite repetitive in style. In order to retain the nineteenth-century style and at the same time, provide the essence of her thoughts, the translation is, in some instances, not done in a verbatim manner. Nevertheless, an attempt has been made to remove any disparity between the original and the translation as far as possible.

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## ORIGINAL PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The author of this book is living with her husband in England. According to her wishes I am publishing her manuscript. Except for occasionally changing a few words, I have not interfered with her writing. If one corrects the proof of one's own work then it is usually free of errors and the quality and brightness increases a lot. But circumstances prevented this book from that advantage because the author, living in England, could not check the proofs herself. Hence, instead of enhancing the quality of the book's publication, it has caused deterioration in its standards. I hope she will be present in India when the second edition will be published and supervise the production of *A Bengali Lady in England* herself. The language of this book is very simple and sweet. I believe this kind of unembellished and unemotional language is always desirable.

Even if all the information given in the book is not correct throughout, one cannot disagree with the author's noble and honest attempt. Staying colonised for a long time India has gradually turned into a lifeless lump of flesh in religion and the work arena. The children of Mother India are longing for food and nourishment. Everyone probably understands this pain in depth. What will this understanding achieve when we have turned immobile after remaining subservient for a long time? If we have to sow the seeds of rejuvenation into our motherland, the seeds have to be collected from the flaming workplace of a living nation. There is no doubt that England is that living nation. The strong bonding that fate has forged between India and England especially demands that India draws the sap of rejuvenation by taking shelter in England. There is no other choice. Maybe this is also the desire of the author of this book. But there is a great danger in seeking the seeds of that life-force from England – the Indian son might lose his soul and select poison instead of manna. This fear is not baseless because I see that the lure of the external world is difficult to overcome. The author has also made us aware that the great man who is willing to sieve the nectar out of the poison will be capable enough to imitate the free English race and by practice relieve India of her miseries. We have benefitted a lot from this young writer. She has examined both the inner and the outer worlds of a free race and has pointed out to us step by step the basic ingredients of a free nation. Her book is readable from the beginning to the end. The last few chapters are especially valuable. Thus

readers will have to appreciate the author's hard labour, the genuine love for her countrymen, and the insights offered in her *A Bengali Lady in England*.

Calcutta  
1<sup>st</sup> August, 1885.

Sri Satyaprasad Sarbadhikari  
Publisher

# CHAPTER ONE

## PRELUDE

Readers! Though I am totally unknown to you and am residing hundreds and hundreds of miles away from you, I have, nevertheless, ventured to put in front of you this small and incomplete text to provide you with some pleasure. I, the author of this book, did not start writing it to win fame or to express intelligence; I am witnessing many new things and these have evoked many new ideas within me. I am trying to collect them at leisure and describe them in simple, lucid language. There are no grammatical embellishments in this effort; neither does it have the feeling of tempting you to breathlessly read it at one go without food or sleep as you would do for a play or a novel. It does not contain the exciting narrative of a brave hero or heroine, nor the primary emotions expressed in epics; the differences between an independent and a colonised nation alone can be seen here. This book does not have descriptions of unnecessary subjects and if you read it carefully, you will be benefited. At least you will not lose anything and it will also not harm you. Nowadays, the relationship between England and India is gradually improving. Many young Indian men are very eager to learn about England before coming here; so, many of them might be able to learn a few necessary things from this book.

My female readers! I was also cloistered in a house like you; I had no relationship with my country or the world. I would try to pacify my mind with a few things, but could not do so. I would be enticed to know in detail about things happening in the country, and if I ever heard someone going to vilayet or returning from there, my heart would jump for joy. I felt eager to go and meet these people and hear about all the new things they had seen and heard there. But the wishes of unfortunate and colonised Bengali women are never fulfilled and hence, I had to keep quiet. Maybe like me, many of you are curious to know about England and to fulfill that desire I am dedicating this book, *A Bengali Lady in England*, to you.

I have written about all the good and the bad things that I saw in English people here. I have tried to be as impartial as possible in my judgment of English manners and customs, leaving aside the

transformation they undergo once they are abroad, especially in India. The big difference between India and England and the relationship of the English with the Indians make it extremely difficult for me to analyse the virtues of the English people. Hence, if you do away with all such prejudices and read this book with a broad mind, you will be able to judge how far I have been successful in evaluating things in an impartial manner.

I took the help of some English books, periodicals and newspapers in the composition of this book. I even consulted a few trusted English friends to help me write what is real, what is true. In case I am mistaken in my evaluation, I have even read a few books written by English as well as foreign authors where they describe their impressions about English virtues and vices. Among them, I have been greatly helped by a book on England written by the famous French intellectual, Monsieur Taine. My husband has helped me considerably in understanding issues related to education and politics; he has even revised and corrected a few sections of this book; and according to his advice, I have added new topics in several places. This book would not have come out in its present form without his labour and care.