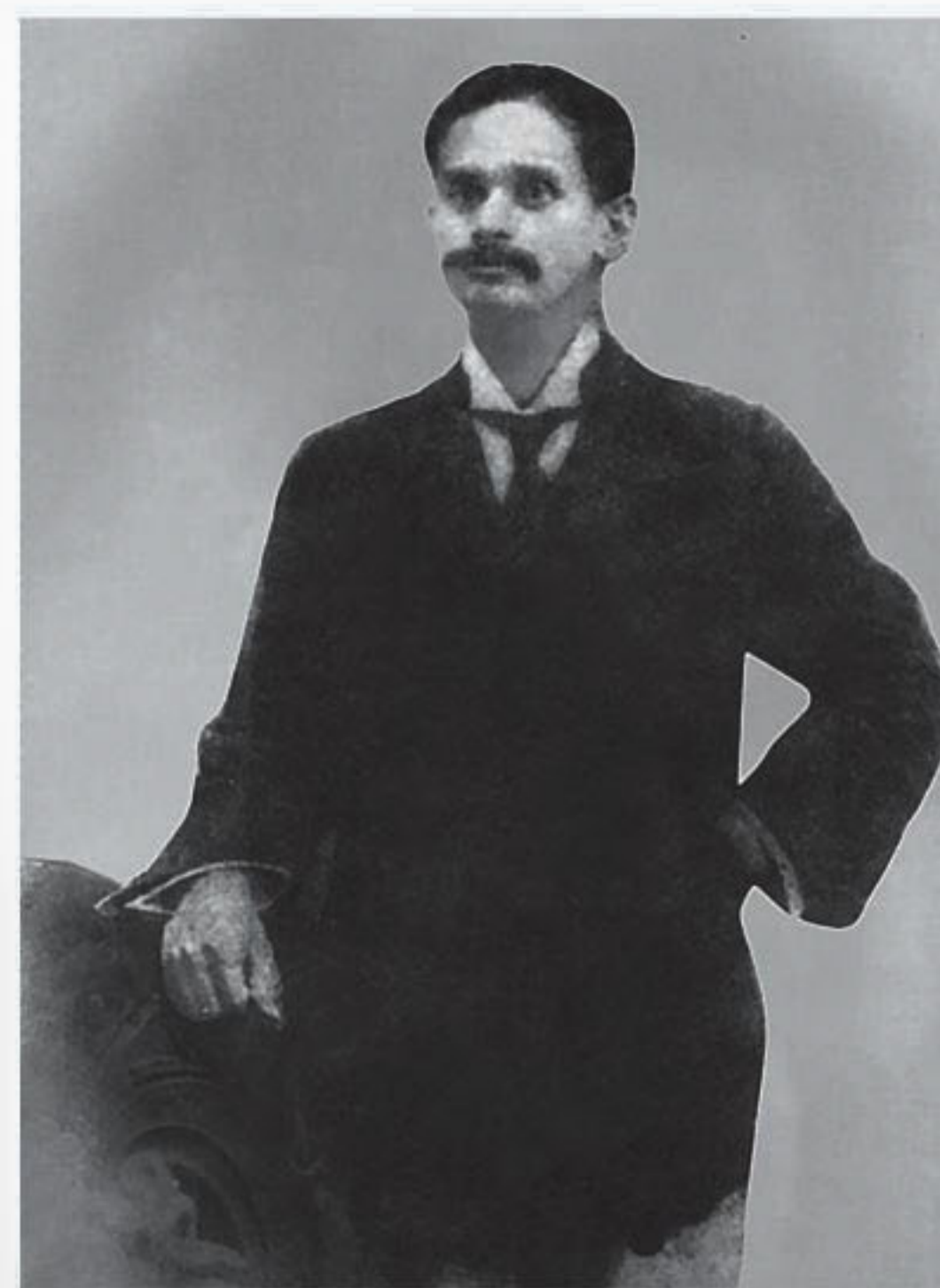




Dwarkanath Tagore
 (1794-1846) of Calcutta, Bengal.



Nawab AFM Abdur Rahman
 (1858-1933), Bar-at-Law, of Faridpur, Bengal.



Barrister Abdur Rasul
 (1872-1917) of Brahmanbaria, Bengal.



Maharajadhiraja Sir Bijay Chand Mahtab
 (1881-1941) of Burdman, Bengal.

Of reverse travellers and travelogues

WAQAR A KHAN

This feature article is a sequel to an earlier essay of mine entitled "Early Indian Voyagers to Vilayet" published in *The Daily Star*. In this essay, I shall briefly mention a few notable Indian travellers who went to Britain, including those who later wrote about their varied exposure and experiences there on their return home to India, between 18th to mid-20th centuries.

However, only a few of their writings can strictly be classified as a travelogue. With a rare exception, most of these writings were merely chapters in an overall autobiography or memoir, culled from letters, essays and diaries of these Indian travellers to England. Writing of letters from England to near and dear ones in India or, making entries in diaries during their sojourn, was very much en vogue then by educated Indian visitors and settlers to Britain, especially during the Victorian (1837-1901), Edwardian (1901-1907) and Georgian (1907-1935) eras. In fact, writing and maintaining of diaries by both sexes were regarded as a hallmark of education, sophistication and culture

navigation (coal-fired steamships), the hitherto long sea voyages between India and Britain were drastically reduced to months only. This for the first time also saw a substantial increase or reverse flow of travellers from India to Britain as students, employment seekers, transient visitors and even as itinerant tourists.

Travelogue or travel literature has always been a large field in western literary tradition, particularly in the study of cultural contacts and in the making of images, impressions and stereotypes. However, most travel literature in the past on India focuses on the western perspective of the "other" or the "European gaze". Representations of Europeans by Indians during the 18th and the 19th centuries, the era of colonial hegemony, are few and far between. Unlike the Arabs, Persian and the Ottoman Turks who were in contact with Europeans from early on, it was not until the 17th century that Indians came into closer contact with Europeans through their trading companies on the western and eastern seaboard of the Indian subcontinent.

British colonial subjugation, especially in regards to Bengal. It is surprising to note that at the time of the partition (1947) of British India, literacy in the subcontinent stood at an abysmally low rate of 3 percent only. Therefore, one can easily postulate what it must have been like during the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries.

However, writing a travelogue was not the Indian's forte, even for those few who were literate enough. Moreover, most of the writings emanating from the major religious groups (Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, *et al*) focused primarily on mythological or religious themes. Furthermore, two other things retarded the development of the travel-writing genre.

Firstly, the Munshis (scribes) or professional court writers of Indian rulers since time immemorial wrote in a fanciful, panegyric style, that is, writing in fulsome praise of their masters, thereby, too often extolling the non-existent virtues and benevolence of even the most despotic of rulers or overlords. Such writings were unabashedly full of hagiographical platitudes. On the other hand, writing of poetry and recitation in Persian and Urdu was much more en vogue and highly appreciated in the court cultures, especially amongst the Muslim rulers and nobility. Therefore, critical inquiry or objectivity on varied subjects of the arts/humanities did not develop till much later in the 19th century, with the introduction of modern English education.

Secondly, even in the late 19th century, there was a dearth of sponsors, financiers and printing opportunities for gifted, aspiring writers who came from ordinary backgrounds to publish their manuscripts. The printing press, which became commercially available from the mid-19th century in India, was still expensive and used by the fortunate few only. It is widely acknowledged today that for the first 150 years, since the entry of Indians into Britain beginning from the early 17th century as transient visitors, no travelogue as such was written beyond what passed through the medium of the oral tradition on their return to India, and that too, told as fanciful or exaggerated stories to the wonderment of gullible Indian listeners in urban centres and villages of our subcontinent. Thus, the first few travelogues written by Indians, which became available amongst the select few in India, emerged during the late 18th century onwards.

However, it should be recalled here that early Indian travelling overseas, especially by upper-caste Hindus, was initially inhibited/forbidden by the taboo of the Kala Pani (crossing of the sea/ocean resulting in the loss of caste), whereby, in the initial years of the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries, more Indian minorities had travelled abroad, including Parsis, Indo-Armenians, Indo-Portuguese (Luso), native Indian Christians and Muslims—all of whom had cultural and religious ties to lands west of India.

Indeed, for many members of the westernised/anglicised Indian elite of the 19th century, travelling to Britain and other countries of Europe was perceived not only as a mark of modernity and progressiveness, but also as a key means of reforming and modernising their own communities in India by providing information about cultural, economic, and political developments in the advanced regions of the western world. In the mid-19th century, notable Indian travellers came mostly from the aristocracy/landed gentry and the newly

emergent upper middle classes, who were mostly male. Their British friends, tutors and mentors in India greatly encouraged such visits and interactions with Europe to "expand their mental horizon". Occasionally, such visits of Indian men to Europe were also accompanied by their family members.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, four eminent Bengalees from the Bengal presidency—Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), Dwarkanath Tagore (1794-1846), Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) and the poet-laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)—were the greatest pioneering cultural ambassadors from colonial India who left a lasting impression in Britain, USA and Southeast Asia. However, regardless of their sojourn in Europe, USA and Asia, none of the above Indian luminaries, with the exception of Rabindranath Tagore, left behind for posterity any worthwhile written impressions of Europe or the USA, as such. Earlier in 1881, Tagore had already published an epistolary account of his impressions of Europe named *Europe Prabasi Patra*. Accounts of his later travels to China, Japan, England and USA as the first Indian/Asian Nobel laureate can also be found in his letters and essays. It must be recalled here that no Nobel prize-winner before or after Rabindranath Tagore has ever received such grand receptions, rich plaudits, overwhelming accolades and extensive media coverage worldwide.

It is a matter of great pride for us Bengalees on both sides of the divide (Bengal) that the very first Indian/Asian to qualify for the Imperial/Indian Civil Service (ICS) in 1863 and, that too, by sitting and competing in equal terms with Britons in exams taken in their own turf in London, was none other than Satyendranath Tagore (1842-1923), the eldest brother of the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore of the famous Jorashanko branch of the Tagore clan, Calcutta. Incidentally, the first Indian/Asian barrister to qualify from England in 1862, Gyanendramohan Tagore (1826-1890), also belonged to the illustrious Tagore clan of Pathuriaghata, Calcutta. Such exemplary feats of excellence in those difficult days did the then subject race in India proud. However, none of these two gentlemen have left a definitive account of their stay in England beyond letters that I am aware of.

Provided here as reference material for readers and prospective researchers is an interesting chronological list of notable Indian travellers who visited Europe and elsewhere, some of whom also wrote travelogues. Mentioned against their names in parentheses, wherever possible, are their arrival dates and duration of stay in Europe (read England), including the titles of their book and year of its publication: Mirza Sheikh Itesamuddin (1766-69) wrote *Shigurf Namah-i-Vilayet*, 1799; Munshi Ismail (1771-73); Mir MIH Abd al-Amin (1774-77); Joseph Emin (1780s) wrote *Life and Adventures of Joseph Emin*, London 1792; Sake (Sheikh) Dean Mohamed (Cork, Ireland, 1784; London, 1807) wrote *The Travels of Dean Mahomet*, 1793; Mirza Ahmad Khan (1789); Mirza Abu Talib Khan (1800-02) wrote *The Travels of Taleb in the Regions of Europe*; Maulana Ahmad Allah (early 1800s); Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1830); Yousuf Khan Kambalposh (1836) wrote *Ajaibat-e-Farang or Tareekh-e-Yousfi* (Wonders of Europe, 1842); 'Prince' Dwarkanath Tagore (1842); Luft Allah of Malwa (1844); Princess Victoria Gouramma (1844); Maharaja (1852); Maharaja Duleep Singh of Punjab (1853); Nawab

Karim Khan wrote *Siyahatnama* or *Book of Travels*, in 1855, about his visit to England; Masih al-Din Khan (1856); Gyanendramohan Tagore (1862); Satyendranath Tagore (1863); Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1869); Syed Ameer Ali (1869); Rabindranath Tagore (1878); Nawab AFM Abdur Rahman, Bar-at-Law (1880); Nawab Sir Sayyid Wasif Ali Mirza of Murshidabad (1887); Barrister A Rasul (1888); Fath Nawaz Jang, whose original name was Mahdi Hasan Khan, was a high official of the princely state of Hyderabad. Khan was sent to London in 1888 on official tour. He kept a detailed diary of his year-long travels. His journal was first published from London in English for private circulation and was later translated into Urdu as *Gulgasht-i-Firang* (Roaming in the Garden of Europe, 1889) (to date, I have not seen such a detailed and meticulously kept diary in English by any early Indian traveller to England); MK Gandhi (1888) wrote *My Experiments with Truth* in 1925; Barrister Sir Ashutosh Chaudhuri (1893) wrote *A Handful of Reminiscence* in 1908; Swami Vivekananda (1895-96); Sarojini Naidu (1895); Maharajadhiraja Sir Bijay Chand Mahtab of Burdman (1908) wrote *Diary of an European Tour*; Pandit Nehru (1907-1912) wrote *An Autobiography* in 1936. All three publications by Ashutosh, Gandhi and Nehru include sections on periods spent in England. There was also an intrepid, prolific travel-writer named Lal Singh, whose travelogues include *Meri Vilaiti Safar Nama* (My Travels in England), 1931. And lastly, a notable autobiography with a travel dimension by the travel writer, explorer and scholar Rahul Sankrityayan called *Meri Jivan Yatra* (My Life's Journey), 1944.

There were also two prominent enforced travellers from colonial India to Victorian England for political reasons. They were the young boy Maharaja Duleep Singh and the little Princess Victoria Gouramma. Both arrived as children and were presented to Queen Victoria who became their godmother. She adored them. However, none of them left behind any account of their checkered lives led in England.

It is worthwhile to recall three Indian luminaries of British India whose names have already been mentioned above. They are: Barrister Sir Ashutosh Chaudhuri, Nawab AFM Abdur Rahman, Bar-at-Law and Barrister A Rasul, all of whom, although based in Calcutta, hailed from East Bengal, that is, from Jashore, Faridpur and Brahmanbaria respectively, in Bangladesh. Abdur Rahman, the eldest son of the illustrious Nawab Abdul Latif (1828-1893) of Faridpur, in particular, was one of the earliest Indian barristers who was called to the Bar in London in 1880, when future barrister MA Jinnah (1876-1948) was only four years old.

Epilogue: This essay is specifically addressed to the younger generations of aspiring historians, memoirists, research-scholars, translators and writers in Bangladesh, in the fervent hope that they will eventually take up this subject matter with keen interest and, in the exuberance of their youth, unveil for others this fascinating, yet largely unknown literary genre, that is, travelogue or early travel-writing on Europe produced by our sub-continental in the past centuries, by accessing and painstakingly translating their original travelogues and publishing them, preferably both in the English and Bengali languages, for a much wider readership within the country and overseas.

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Maharaja Duleep Singh
 (1838-1893) of Punjab.



Princess Victoria Gouramma
 (1841-1864) of Coorg, Karnataka.

in those days.

Although Indians have been travelling to Britain ever since the early 17th century, it was actually the Britons in the service of the East India Company (EIC) who came in droves as seekers of fortune and employment in India. Over the centuries, these Britons came mostly as merchants/traders, soldiers and administrators. Following the handing over of the Diwani of Bengal to the East India Company in 1765, the need for human resource in varied fields and capacities from Britain increased considerably. Following the Great Indian Rebellion of 1857, when the crown-in-parliament in England formally took over the administration of India from the Company in 1858, heralding the last great colonial empire in the modern era, known as "The British Empire in India" or popularly as the British Raj (1858-1947), the flow of Britons increased manifold. Furthermore, with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, and introduction of advanced maritime

Thus, travel writing as a genre is relatively new to the sub-continental literary and cultural tradition, whereas the oral tradition of storytelling (including oral histories) is an age-old, unique non-literary genre like in many other traditional societies of the world. There are ample reasons for it. Historically, the illiteracy rate in the Indian subcontinent, especially in the past, has always been vast. However, from ancient times the plethora of spoken languages/dialects continued to promote oral communication, thereby facilitating storytelling, singing, dancing and participation in indigenous folk theatre. Also, our sub-continental societies were hopelessly feudal and medieval in character well into the mid-20th century, which considerably impeded the growth and development of human resource, especially of the vast multitude of wretchedly dirt-poor underprivileged classes, the serf-like peasantry. Added to this dilemma were more than 180 years (1765-1947) of