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Breaking the Cage: Traveling, Freedom, and English Society in *Iṃlaṇḍe Baṅgamahilā*

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Summary

This article provides an analysis of *Iṃlaṇḍe baṅgamahilā* ("A Bengali Woman in England"), a travelogue written in the 19th century by a Bengali woman named Krishnabhabini Das (Kṛṣṇabhābinī Dās) (1868–1919). Despite being the most well-documented travelogue written at that time by an Indian woman, it was eventually forgotten until its recent rediscovery. The travelogue is a unique document authored by a woman in the colonial period in terms of its detail, exploration, and documentation of the socio-cultural aspects of English society. It is also an outstanding example of the ideas educated Bengalis had about England at that time. Moreover, the gendered perspective which this travelogue offers is a bright stroke of color on the variegated canvas of Indian/Bengali travel writing on imperial Britain.

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Introduction

This paper examines a travelogue called *Iṃlaṇḍe baṅgamahilā*[1] (1885) ("A Bengali Woman in England"), written by Krishnabhabini Das (Kṛṣṇabhābinī Dās) in the 19th century during her long stay in England. Although married into a restrictive Bengali household, Krishnabhabini's husband Debendranath Das (Debendranāth Dās) was an English-educated lawyer who encouraged and provided her education.[2] Her travelogue, an outcome of these educational endeavors, is a vivid documentation of her

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1 Except for book titles, I shall refer to Bengali terms and proper names in an Anglicized spelling for easier reading, but state the transliteration of the original Bengali words in brackets when they are mentioned for the first time.

2 For background information on Krishnabhabini, see Simonti Sen's (Sīmantī Sen's) introduction in *Kṛṣṇabhābinī Dāser Iṃlaṇḍe baṅgamahilā*, where she notes: "Krishnabhabini's educational life started with the enthusiasm shown by her husband. However, she never obtained any formal education at a school or college. The home was her primary area of education, and Debendranath was her headmaster" (Sen 1996: [27]). This and all other quotes from Bengali publications, unless otherwise stated, have been translated by the author of this article.

eight-year stay in England together with her husband. It is unique in that it is the only travelogue penned by a Bengali woman at the time which provides a detailed description of Bengali and English society. Furthermore, it can also be interpreted as a Bengali woman's claim to her own identity and individualism through writing. In the colonized and patriarchal Bengali society of the 19th century, Krishnabhabini's act of documenting her travel experiences and relating them to her readers — both as a travelogue and as a portrayal of the colonizer's society — definitely commands attention.

While in general only a limited amount of studies are concerned with the question of how colonized people perceived the colonizer (cf., e.g., Eschment and Harder 2004), there is no dearth of literature portraying the colonizer's view of the "Orient." The latter was particularly encouraged by Edward Said's ground-breaking book *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient*, which was first published in 1978 (Said 2001). In the case of India, both European settlers in the colonies and travelers wrote extensively about this British colony, doing so in letters, journals, memoirs, fiction, travelogues and other such texts which were sent back to their native country, often with the purpose of informing British society about the Indians. This literature is quite voluminous in comparison to the material produced by Indians. The lack of documentation by the colonized is even more acute with respect to female writers.[3] Krishnabhabini's travelogue thus serves as an invaluable documentation of 19th century English society through the eyes of an Indian woman.

This article analyzes Krishnabhabini's travelogue in the light of travel writing in 19th century Bengal, viz., as an emerging literary genre among the educated and affluent sections of society, and in terms of the author's impression of English society. The first section of the paper introduces the Bengali's stance on travel, travel writing, and the emergence of the English-educated class of Bengalis, of whom the author was a member. Based on this, the second section investigates Krishnabhabini's perception and analyses of English society in her travelogue.

Travel, travelogues, and traveling women in the 19th century

Georges Van Den Abbeele (1992) in his book *Travel as a Metaphor* calls the act of travel an "Odyssean enterprise" (Abbeele 1992: xv). This enterprise, namely traveling and its association with progress, freedom, and emancipation of the self, does not seem to have been a very popular idea with Bengali Hindus. In contrast to the "West's" preoccupation with travel and exploration, as expressed, for instance, in Homer's *Odyssey* (8th century BC), Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768), or Heinrich Heine's *Reisebilder* (1826–33), Simonti Sen points out the following (Sen 2005: 2):

3 There are many reasons for the largely prevailing silence of Bengali/Indian women in the literary scene, confinement to household duties and lack of literacy being the most important. More will be said about this point in the next section of this article.

> Hindu shastric (ritual/canonical) tradition either remained eloquently silent on the issue or explicitly condemned travel. In Bengali the word *travel* translates into *bhraman*, a derivative of the Sanskritic root word *bhram* meaning to make a mistake or to err. In this sense, *bhraman* can be taken to mean aimless or disoriented wandering, an act which would not normally be valorized in the Hindu tradition, which is heavily biased in favour of sedentariness.[4]

However, with colonialism, the very act of traveling came to be viewed in a new light when stalwarts of society like Swami Vivekananda[5] started associating travel with the reconstitution of the nation. In 1892, Swami Vivekananda wrote to Pandit Shankarlal (Paṇḍit Śaṅkar'lāl): "[W]e must travel, we must go to foreign parts. We must see how the engine of society works in other countries, and keep free and open communication with what is going on in the minds of other nations if we really want to be a nation again" (Vivekananda 1919: 2). Before the 19th century, the only Indians to visit England were limited to a few sailors, wet nurses, soldiers, or courtly elites traveling mainly on business and sometimes for pleasure. However, from the 19th century onward, England saw a steady influx of Indian students, intellectuals, professionals, and the likes lured by the expectations, promises, and splendor of the "land of dreams."

Travelogues on England written mainly by Bengali travelers can be said to have played a major part in increasing and maintaining people's curiosity about England, resulting in a stream of visitors who could afford to make the trip. The commercialized and flourishing print industry in 19th century Bengal produced numerous documents portraying English life and society, ready to be gorged by Indian readers. The amount of information available not only whetted the "native" appetite for more information, but also influenced people's opinion about England. Krishnabhabini's travelogue is quite in tune with the practice of her time where the sole motive was to inform and advise Bengalis — quite apart from the fact that it was penned by a woman.

Although Krishnabhabini seems to have been the only woman to write a full-fledged travelogue of her time, there were many affluent and notable Bengali writers already flourishing in the art of writing travelogues. Simonti Sen notes in her publication *Travels to Europe*: "[T]ravel writing emerged as one of the forms of modern self-expression. Thanks to print capitalism, Bengali travelogues came to be ensured of an eager grid of publishers as well as readers by the latter half of the nineteenth century" (Sen 2005: 1). Prominent figures like Romesh Chunder Dutt (Rameś'candra Datta) (1848–1909), Trailokyanath Mukherjee (Trailokyanāth Mukhopādhyāẏ) (1847–1919), Brahmabandhav Upadhyay (Brahmabāndhab Upādhyāẏ) (1861–

4 However, this refers only to Brahmanical dictates in the scriptures and does not reflect the physical mobility of the general population, which was normally guided by need and pleasure.

5 Swami Vivekananda (Sbāmī Bibekānanda) (1863–1902) was a Bengali Hindu monk and philosopher. He was instrumental in popularizing Hinduism and Indian philosophies in Europe and the United States.

1907), and Shibnath Shastri (Śib'nāth Śāstrī) (1847–1919) had already popularized travelogues on Britain.

Almost all these travelogues had a common structure and covered similar topics: detailed descriptions of the voyage to England, observations on cities, and the discovery of the "real" British people, who were critically compared with the Hindu "self." Learning from the British was also an essential theme of these travelogues. Krishnabhabini's travelogue was not notably different in its descriptions of English society; even her take on English women largely resembles the opinion held by her male counterparts. Nevertheless, its uniqueness is noticeable, as we shall see in later sections.

In general, however, traveling has mostly been either a privilege or an obligation for women, with colonial India being no exception. 19th century India saw a steady influx of British women accompanying their husbands, and in their case, it was a combination of an obligation (to stay with their husbands) and curiosity (about the unknown land), fraught with hazards (posed by the environment) and with a dose of amazement and pleasure. However, for the "fishing fleets"[6] — the derisive term assigned to British women coming to colonial India in search of a livelihood or husband — it was entirely out of compulsion.[7] The bleak socio-economic conditions at home drove hordes of English women to sail for the colonies (Perkin 1993: 6–7)[8]. For another group, namely the missionaries, it was a different sort of compulsion stemming from religious concern and the urge to "civilize" heathendom (Borch 2004: 282).[9] But for the Bengalis, it was more of a privilege to visit the land of their rulers, and even more so when the traveler was a woman.

In a similar way to the doctrine of separate spheres operating in Victorian England, Bengali society also kept women confined to the household; the only kind of freedom they ever experienced was private.[10] In general, a Bengali woman would be

6 Cf. Sen (1997: 358): "[…] shiploads of women, derisively called 'fishing fleets' would face the hardships of the sea voyage and come out to the East."

7 Cf. Sen (1997: 358): "From around 1860s onwards, sometime after the takeover by the Crown, English women started coming out in greater numbers to be resident wives in India," and "the colonies were sometimes viewed as offering 'spinsters' opportunities for marriage or for employment as governesses or missionaries" (ibid.: 356).

8 Victorian society was crippled by many evils at that time: poverty, lack of clinical facilities, an alarming child-mortality rate, child labor, which included working in dangerous occupations, lack of proper education, etc. Children, especially little girls, were subjected to strict discipline sometimes bordering on ruthlessness. Little girls were subjected to corporal punishment and taught to suppress their true nature and be more ladylike. For further references, see Perkin (1993).

9 Cf. Borch (2004: 282): "Even the missionaries were compelled by the humanitarian and religious concern to protect the indigenous peoples by Christianizing them and teaching them to live like Europeans [which] would assist the running of the colonies by assimilating them and making them governable. Conversely, many missionaries were favourably inclined towards colonial expansion, as this would bring more heathens into this position."

10 Cf. Banerjee (1989: 1044): "[…] equation of women with the home became the only kind of freedom — i e [sic], private — […]. […] actually, in the context of colonialism, they became the captives of a male fantasy — of their over-protectedness, over-possessiveness […]."

engaged in household chores from dawn till midnight. Depending on the financial state of her household, she might be able to afford a number of servants, but overseeing and controlling the staff and taking important household decisions normally remained in the hands of the mistress. This regime left her with little space or energy for anything else. In the context of the autobiography of Rassundari Dasi (Rās'sundarī Dāsī), another 19th century self-taught woman who was also called Rassundari Devi (Debī), Tanika Sarkar remarks: "The woman enters *sansar*[11] through the sacrament of marriage, the only sacrament that is available to her. For her, *sansar* is the unending flow of domestic work and responsibilities, primarily connected with cooking, serving, and child-rearing" (Sarkar 2001: 101f.). Another factor complicating the condition further was the lack of education and literacy among females.[12] Thus it is justified to say that for the majority of Bengali women, Britain and British society was either something unimaginable or unworthy of attention in their already overworked lives. A quote from a typical Bengali domestic advice manual for women called *Strīr sahit kathopakathan* ("Conversations with the Wife"), which was immensely popular in late 19th century Bengal, substantiates this claim:

> Wife: When you become a householder, you have to look out for so many things [...] you have to try so hard to protect your husband, yourself, your offspring, and your home from evil. At every step of the way you have to look after your husband's happiness; you have to work very hard to keep your husband's love. Is all this an easy task? On top of that, there are all these other things to consider — family relations, male and female servants, guests and beggars, the cow and her young, society, the government, and *dharma*[13] (Walsh 1997: 641).[14]

The emergence of the Bhadralok class

It is worth taking a look at the emergence of the Bhadralok class when assessing Krishnabhabini's travelogue, since she herself belonged to that class and her Bhadralok background surfaces quite strongly in her assessment of English society. The Bhadralok (*bhadralok*) — literally, "gentleman" — emerged with the introduction of the English Education Act of 1835, which was spearheaded by Thomas Macaulay. This class of English-speaking Bengalis is often considered to be a product of the early period of colonial education and is additionally credited with having pioneered the so-called "Bengal Renaissance," an era which witnessed local reform movements and the emergence of Bengali nationalism (cf., e.g., Dasgupta 2010). Although it is difficult to define the term "Bhadralok," since it was not a

11 The word "sansar" (*saṃsār*, literally, "family," "household," "world") refers to "household" here.

12 Cf., e.g., Tanika Sarkar in *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* (Sarkar 2001: 48): "A pious Hindu housewife, spending her life in a non-reformed domestic environment where no women ever learnt to read [...]."

13 Here it means "duty." Although *dharma* is used as an equivalent of the erstwhile foreign concept and term of "religion" today, it still also bears its original meanings related to ancient Indian philosophy and religion, namely "duty" (cf., e.g., Harder 2001: 180f.).

14 This translation of the Bengali original is quoted from Judith Walsh (1997).

homogeneous category, Tithi Bhattacharya sums it up quite effectively: "What made a man a *bhadralok* was his taste in the arts, his diction, his social values and, above all, his education" (Bhattacharya 2001: 162). It was knowledge of English and "Western" education that was the most important characteristic of the Bhadralok class.

The birth of the Bhadramahila: Krishnabhabini and her position

Apart from the awakening Bengali nationalism, paired with reforms influenced by "Western" ideals, this emerging Bhadralok class proposed a reform inside the household as well. By shaking off the patriarchal traditions of the past, its members aimed at making up for the loss of power and position in public life caused by the British masters. This included remodeling the Bengali woman in line with her Victorian counterpart.[15]

In her article "Textile Prison. Discourse on Shame (*lajja* [*lajjā*]) in the Attire of the Gentlewoman (*bhadramahila* [*bhadramahilā*]) in Colonial Bengal," Himani Bannerji also talks about the "changes in existing social relations and values" due to the colonial effect (Bannerji 1994: 171). Most of these changes revolved around the reformation of the "women and gender relations prevailing in the family, thus seeking to reorganize many of the existing social forms and functions" (ibid.). These changing gender roles also encouraged quite a few Bengali women to break their silence through writing. For example, the first autobiography by a Bengali woman — *Āmār jīban* ("My Life") by Rassundari Dasi, already mentioned above — was published in 1876.[16] Bengali women began writing for magazines and journals for recreation and entertainment as well as to advise and instruct their fellow women. Furthermore, Krishnabhabini was not the first woman to travel to Europe, although she seems to have been the first to write a travelogue based on her experiences.

Krishnabhabini Das was born in 1868 in a village called Kajlagram (Kāj'lāgrām) in the district of Baharampur in today's West Bengal. She was the only child of an educated father and was therefore encouraged to attain at least basic literacy. At the age of ten, she was married into an affluent but rather traditionalist household. Nonetheless, with the support of her husband, Debendranath Das, she was able to gain a proper education after her marriage.[17] Her husband was an accomplished

15 See Judith Walsh (1997: 643): "By the last decades of the century the penetration of that foreign [British] culture was so profound in urban centres like Calcutta that the entire world of Hindu domestic life and its most intimate relationships had become contested ground. What relationship should exist between a husband and a wife, how a mother should raise her children, even how kitchen spices should be arranged on a storeroom wall — all had become issues for debate and contestation."

16 See, for example, Tanika Sarkar's English translation of Rassundari Dasi's autobiography (Sarkar and Dāsī 1999).

17 For more background information on Krishnabhabini, see Sen (1996: [11]–[32]).

barrister who not only helped her with her learning, but contributed to her travelogue, too, as she states herself.

Iṃlaṇḍe baṅgamahilā: Krishnabhabini's travelogue

Krishnabhabini's *Iṃlaṇḍe baṅgamahilā* traces the author's journey from Calcutta to London via Bombay and Venice, Italy. It was published for the first time in 1885. While the first part of the travelogue is mainly about her inner thoughts and uncertainties about leaving her homeland and sailing to an entirely unknown territory, the second part of the narrative, which starts after she has reached London, is a more impersonal account about English society, the English character, and the landscape of the country. Interestingly, Krishnabhabini's observations are mainly confined to the working and affluent classes of English society; she largely avoids describing the poverty and squalor of England at that time. However, her selective description is understandable if one takes her travelogue as a treatise on development issues focusing largely on the diligence of the English.

Setting sail: preparation for the journey

In her introduction to *Kṛṣṇabhābinī Dāser Iṃlaṇḍe baṅgamahilā* (Sen 1996: [11]–[32]), Simonti Sen describes Krishnabhabini's life and the circumstances which prompted her to undertake her journey to England. Reasons can be found in Krishnabhabini's courage, resilience, and, of course, her love for her husband, whom she supported in his law studies in England after their marriage, and also in the stoicism which overcame her due to the loss of their first child during this separation. After her husband had come back from England and decided to return there, he was disinherited by his father, which caused him to feel a complete misfit in the old order of things. Krishnabhabini encountered a crossroads: her father-in-law refused to allow Krishnabhabini to take her daughter abroad, so she had to choose between her husband and her only child. With the former she could travel to England, with the latter she would remain at home, fulfilling her motherly duties, but also facing an imminent conjugal separation. Krishnabhabini decided to be with her husband, which might seem surprising or even self-seeking given the norms of the day. However, apart from the love she felt for him, another plausible reason for this sacrifice can be found in the following lines from a poem she wrote (Dās 1996: 14):

> Since long in my heart
> Remains hidden, a desire
> To see my dear freedom
> To visit the land [where] it resides.

It was the irresistible attraction of England's soil — the colonizer's land, the land of freedom — that encouraged Krishnabhabini to leave her daughter behind. Astonishingly, she remains silent about her child throughout the travelogue, even when referring to English children.

Unveiling herself: Krishnabhabini explores and experiences freedom

Krishnabhabini's thoughts throughout the journey and afterwards focus centrally on one issue: freedom. This also applies to the mode of dressing — she is out of her "purdah"[18] and free to look around. The veil which has been limiting her vision has been removed, and this is seemingly the first step toward her freedom. Krishnabhabini recollects (Dās 1996: 7):

> [E]arlier, when going to my father's place, I would veil my face while crossing this [railway] station, but where is my veil today? My fingers touched my cap while I intended to adjust my veil and that made me slightly embarrassed. Today even my acquaintances will not be able to recognize me and might even bow to me or fear me and keep their distance, thinking me a memsahib. What an amazing difference dresses can make!

The physical restriction of the veil reminds one of Mary Morris's deliberations on the dress of "Western" women in her essay "Women and Journeys. Inner and Outer": "I find it revealing that the bindings in women's corsets were called *stays*. Someone who wore stays wouldn't be going very far" (Morris 1992: 25). Besides this, travel is "more than just an act of physical movement, travel also implies transience, transgression, and deviance" (Cheng 2004: 125). This is also the case for Krishnabhabini at many levels: she transgresses the conventional role of a mother, of a housewife, of a Hindu woman. Taking care of the household (*saṃsār*),[19] which is one of the prime duties (*dharma*)[20] of a Hindu wife, becomes less important when the desire to know the unknown drives Krishnabhabini out of her familiar domestic domain.

She imagined England as the land of freedom and desired to witness this freedom first-hand. Her anticipation and desires gained a concrete form after she started living in England (Dās 1996: 129):

> If someone asks me, "You have seen many differences between India and England; which one do you think is most touching?" I will briefly say that England is the foundation of free life, and my India is captive. It is said that even if a slave treads on English soil, he becomes free. Even I have had similar feelings since I started breathing the air of England and living with free people; I have become aware of a new feeling in myself.

Regarding freedom for women, Krishnabhabini is not as radical as she is practical: she is skeptical toward a sudden freedom for women and grants Indian men the leading role in this process (Dās 1996: 80):

18 The term "purdah" (*par'dā*, literally, "curtain") has a double meaning: it can denote the exclusion and seclusion women practiced at that time, but it can also refer to the veil of the female dress, as in the quote by Krishnabhabini.

19 See note 11.

20 See note 13.

> Indian men are afraid to free their women, thinking they have lived in a state of dependence which has made their minds so weak for so long that they will not be able to handle their freedom and use it judiciously. This is true to an extent. […] [T]hey have fallen into such a state of weakness and debility that unless carefully led by men, they will never make any progress.

However, although sensing a feeling of freedom, Krishnabhabini actually perceives English society as something where utopia and dystopia coexist. For this very reason she sometimes oscillates between these two extremes while describing her host society. This will become apparent in the sections below.

English society as a role model for Bengal

The new feeling of freedom in Krishnabhabini gave rise to reformist thoughts and comparisons between *iṅga* (English) and *baṅga* (Bengali) society. The courageousness, virility, energy, ability, and willingness to work hard, and the unity and studiousness ascribed to the English character are praised and compared to Bengalis' alleged love of ridicule (Dās 1996: 36):

> Everyone [in Bengal] can ridicule, and in most cases it is rooted in superstition and inexperience. The habit of ridicule that our countrymen have has been a prime factor in blocking the development of our country. If a person lays his hands on a new initiative, the whole country ridicules and dismisses him […].

She also criticizes Bengalis' alleged lack of respect for other people, their laziness, and their inability to learn from mistakes: "We do not see our faults, and even if we do, we do nothing to rectify them" (Dās 1996: 52). In contrast to the proclaimed weaknesses of Bengalis, Krishnabhabini states that "[t]he excellent sense of duty and responsibility [among the British] and a Briton's love for his country and fellow countrymen are commendable" (ibid.). According to her, the British may ridicule others, but their inherent sense of unity is the reason behind their successful imperialistic missions. The British love for traveling in order to explore new lands also attracts her, since she could easily relate her own hungry spirit for exploring and experiencing new things to it.

English women: to imitate and to differ

Krishnabhabini is detailed in her analysis of English women. Contrary to the popular belief in Bengal that English women were lazy (apparently due to the inactivity of many resident English women there), Krishnabhabini describes their activity, comparing it with the inactivity of middle and upper middle-class Bengali women (Dās 1996: 73–74). Additionally, she emphasizes the benefits the latter could have from incorporating such hard work and patience in their own characters. According to Krishnabhabini's assessment, the blessedness of the English female lies in the fact that she is educated.

Female education, a product of the "Bengal Renaissance," was the driving force behind Krishnabhabini's reformist thinking. Like many other reformers of her time, she believed education to be the basis of women's upliftment and freedom. Krishnabhabini wistfully describes how tutors in England attend to the education of both boys and girls and that the same amount of money is spent on them. These descriptions were clearly meant to serve as examples to women and men at home (in Bengal) and as potential guidelines for the formation of the "new woman." In general, this category of the "new woman" was an emerging reformist ideal of Krishnabhabini's time; the imagined "new woman" was the adequate companion for the Bengali "gentleman" — educated and free-thinking.[21] She was meant to be significantly different from both her old, intensely domesticated local version and the foreign "Memsaheb."[22] Partha Chatterjee gives a comprehensible picture of the "new woman" in the late 19th century and states that she would have "[...] the typically bourgeois virtues characteristic of the new social norms of 'disciplining' — of orderliness, thrift, cleanliness, and a personal sense of responsibility, the practical skills of literacy, accounting, hygiene, and the ability to run the household according to the new physical and economic conditions set by the outside world" (Chatterjee 1993: 129f.).

In accordance with the definition of the "new woman," the condition of Bengali women and their relation to their husbands also became a topic of much discussion at that time. Narratives from the 19th century are replete with stories of idle Bengali men's preoccupation with cards and prostitutes, while the women lead a secluded existence inside the household.[23] Krishnabhabini laments that in England conjugal life is completely different from Bengal: except for when the man is working, couples live, eat, and read together. They go out together and share domestic responsibilities. Compared to this, conjugal life in Bengal is extremely depressing. The confined wife does not know how the husband spends his time, and vice versa. The mistress of the house feels threatened and scared by the mention of her husband. Even though the wife loves her husband and provides him with food and other comforts, she does not receive any proper treatment in return. Thus, according to Krishnabhabini, the real relation between a man and his wife is understood by very few people in Bengali society (Dās 1996: 94–95).

Krishnabhabini realized that the liberation of Bengali women and a "real relation" between them and their husbands could never be achieved and maintained without education. And by education she meant not only literacy, but also technical and vocational education — education which would permeate beyond the pages of books

21 See the section entitled "Birth of the Bhadramahila" above.

22 "Memsaheb" (*mem'sāheb*) is a shortened form of "Madam Saheb" (literally, "Mr. Madam"), a term used to denote white women in India.

23 For a detailed description of 19th century Bengali households and prostitution, see Sarkar (2001: 23–94) and Banerjee (1993: 2461–2472).

and make people aware of their surroundings. As a marker of an advanced society, the author remarks on the sound system of education that England has, especially for women. Krishnabhabini wistfully observes that there is no dearth of educational institutions for women in and around London,[24] and women compete and often surpass men in terms of educational excellence (Dās 1996: 74–75). Krishnabhabini also argues against the division into female and male disciplines. For her, women are equally adept at studying subjects like law, science, and mathematics, which are otherwise reserved for men. She witnessed this gender equality in England where women were not only lawyers, scientists, and scholars, but also housewives. She praises the education and success women can gain in Britain (Dās 1996: 75):

> Women ranging in age from seven to twenty-five also go to school here. Some are not even satisfied with that, and like their educated male counterparts, continue learning till the end of their lives. […] [T]hese days, the best English novels[25] are penned by women.

Krishnabhabini believes that the freedom of the individual and the development of one's country are two sides of the same coin, one facilitating the other. As a result, she views freedom for Bengali women and the freedom of India not as two different goals, but as a unified one to achieve the development of Indian society. In the way Krishnabhabini relates education to more than just literacy, she also regards freedom for Bengali women as more than obtaining a good education; access to freedom is a wholesome process for the mind and body, she claims. She writes that English girls receive training not only in education but also in extracurricular activities like sports and music (Dās 1996: 75). She stresses the need for physical exercise and compares the strength of English women with the physical frailty and weakness of their Bengali counterparts.

While images of immorality on the part of English women existed in the colony, Krishnabhabini asserts from first-hand experience that English women are not immoral at all. Hence she raises her voice in favor of free mixing between adult men and women, which would make the relationship between the sexes easier and better, she believes. Krishnabhabini praises the virtue of the English woman who maintains her virtue and purity even while mixing freely with men, whereas the Indian woman has to hide behind the "purdah"[26] to remain virtuous. She concludes from her observations in England that men there do not harbor any impure thoughts about women, which is due to their freedom of interaction with them (Dās 1996: 79–81).

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24 As stated earlier, even though Krishnabhabini is very detailed in her description of London as a city, we are left clueless as to where she actually stayed.

25 Krishnabhabini uses the term *nabanyās*, which signifies the "new age" novels.

26 See note 18.

Critique of English society

Krishnabhabini's assessment of English society is anything but homogenous in tone. Besides acknowledging the admirable attributes of the English character mentioned above, she is also a vehement critic; over-enthusiasm with respect to materialism, which she says the English display, could be harmful to humanity, for instance. She criticizes the English obsession with money, which she observes "is their most revered deity" (Dās 1996: 49). She remarks that compared to countries like India, China, Germany or France where education and intellect is still greatly respected, the English only care about money. Qualities such as love, pity and sympathy are lacking in the English heart, Krishnabhabini claims. The class system, functional in English society, which is based on economic segregation, is even more depressing than the Hindu caste system (Dās 1996: 49–51).

Here it appears that despite all her enthusiasm in defying conventions, Krishnabhabini is criticizing English society from the standpoint of a reformist Bhadramahila. An unmistakable tone of anger and disgust is apparent in her narrative when she describes how England has swelled to affluence at India's expense and how the English are shamelessly proud and egotistical even though the wealth they have acquired has only been "borrowed" (Dās 1996: 50):

> […] and this is the money gained from colonial enterprises which makes the English so proud. Expanding their empire and huge wealth has made them blind with pride. These people think that the whole world is under their feet and every *jāti*[27] on Earth is inferior to them.

Alcoholism among the English is such a serious concern to our author that she dedicates an entire chapter to English drinking habits. To add a dash of humor, she comments that when they are drunk, the French talk, the German sleep, but the English fight (Dās 1996: 100). In her chapter entitled "Alcohol or Poison," she poses a question (ibid.):

> There are so many educated men in England and they are relentlessly sucking out money and resources from other countries. Why, then, are there so many poor people in this country? And why are they in such a degenerated state? It is not easy to answer this question. But gradually one learns that the only reason for this inevitable poverty is alcoholism, and it is due to alcohol alone that the lowly people in England behave like animals.

Her critique of alcohol seems to be linked to Krishnabhabini's own cultural background: drinking has always been condemned in Hindu households, and in 19th century Calcutta, alcoholism and prostitution were often seen as the two primary evils which had plagued Bengali society. Krishnabhabini further writes that hypocrisy, ridicule and distrust of foreigners are also striking features of the English

27 The term *jāti* can have several meanings, depending on the context (e.g., "caste," "nation," or "race"). The best translation here is "nation."

character, with their snobbery and lack of warmth sometimes degenerating into heartlessness (Dās 1996: 51):

> The English heart is lacking in the softer emotions of love, compassion, humility and sympathy. One feels like their heart is stone cold. These people are not easily moved and perturbed by slight things. The average Briton is not even moved by the sufferings of his kinsmen. Quite often these people torture the weak and do not sympathize with the unfortunate. However, a show of courage and strength tames them […]. Like dogs […] some bow their heads to the power of the stick.

She also develops a critical eye while observing white women: part of her critique is aimed at the cosmetic artificiality of the English woman's body: "The fairness of their skin makes up for their lack of beauty and grace; cosmetic artificiality and improper dress sense paralleling that of English women is hard to find elsewhere" (Dās 1996: 76). With her ideas of mellowness, moderation, prudence and sometimes even self-negation, Krishnabhabini finds English women's desire for clothing and accessories excessive, with most of them having no aesthetic sense about their dress, but an enormous desire to display whatever they choose to wear: "I cannot appreciate an English woman's taste in this regard. Very few women can dress tastefully. In general, English women do not possess any sense of what suits them" (ibid.). The artificiality of English women's dress is baffling, criticizes Krishnabhabini. With the help of a corset, crinoline, or suchlike, "they alter the shape of their body to such an extent that it becomes difficult to determine who has a nice figure, and this is normally achieved at great physical discomfort and even pain" (Dās 1996: 77). Sarcastically the authoress remarks that for an English woman, dressing "comes before her sustenance" (ibid.). It should be stressed at this point that the authenticity and impartiality of Krishnabhabini's judgment of English society is called into question not only by today's informed readers, but also by the author herself. Thus she writes (Dās 1996: 6):

> [T]aking into consideration the vast differences between India and England and the existing relationship between the Indians and the English, it is very difficult for me to remain impartial in evaluating positive and negative English qualities. If the readers abandon all prejudices about them and are liberal in their judgment, then they will be able to gauge the extent of my success.

Her impartiality of judgment in describing English characters and customs calls for an open mind. Nonetheless, she continues her observation that the white woman is shrewd, fickle, rude, loud, inhospitable and lacks manners when interacting with guests and strangers — a certain haughtiness akin to their male counterpart (Dās 1996: 78). Her writing is actually fraught with sweeping generalizations. For example, she concludes: "*No other* European women are as fickle and talkative as the English" (ibid., author's own emphasis).

When it comes to topics of morality and self-restraint, Krishnabhabini almost ridicules the method of courtship that English women employ: "They almost go mad looking for husbands […]" (Dās 1996: 78). She also criticizes the minor role that

parents or guardians play when it comes to arranging a suitable match for young women. However, in the entire discussion about women and society, Krishnabhabini speaks in two unmistakable tones: one is a directive, reformist tone announcing the rights and wrongs of English society to her own countrymen as examples. The second tone seems to be her obvert emphasis on the quality of self-denial that was the norm of the day, as Himani Banerjee (1994) points out in her article "Textile Prison. Discourse on Shame (*lajja*) in the Attire of the Gentlewoman (*bhadramahila*) in Colonial Bengal" (Banerjee 1994: 178):

> Essays such as Krishnabhabini Das's "*Strilok O Purus*" ["Strīlok o puruṣ"] (Women and Men), or articles in [the journal] *Bamabodhini* [*Bāmābodhinī patrikā*], explicitly connect shame and "civilization" with de-sexualization and a de-physicalization, enjoining women to be actively self-denying.

The concepts of civility, decorum, and modesty were intricately associated with the concept of morality and the female body. Banerjee further notes (Banerjee 1994: 175):

> The body and social reproductive activities of middle-class women are primarily viewed through the lens of ideologically class-gendered notions of appropriate behaviour or decorum projected as morality. The main moral terms are *sabhyata* [*sabhyatā*] (civility), *sobhanata* [*śobhanata*] (decorum/propriety/decency) and *lajja* [*lajjā*] (shame/modesty).

Thus Krishnabhabini's critique of female courtship behavior (as well as English materialism) has a direct and intimate connection not only with the Hindu religious concepts of *tyāga* (renunciation) and *titikṣā* (forbearance and patience), which were of central importance in women's domestic training and their upbringing in contemporary Bengali society.

Concluding remarks

The discussion so far will have given the reader a fairly clear idea of the content of *Iṃlaṇḍe baṅgamahilā*: Krishnabhabini's critical observation on English society is detailed and picturesque, and at the same time it reflects the author's mind. In spite of all her efforts to distance herself from her travelogue, Krishnabhabini is still very present in her opinions and evaluations. The travelogue is easy to read and understand, which obviously serves one of its purposes, i.e., to reach out to the masses. However, following Hayden White (1978), one can remark that in the hands of the historian, historical events provide certain subjective and circumstantial components which are "*made* into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them [story elements] and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motif repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like […]" (White 1978: 84, original emphasis). All these techniques have been amply used by Krishnabhabini in her travelogue. She willfully or unintentionally focuses on certain features of the English character and English society and interprets them — all for the enhancement of knowledge and

reformation of the Bengali character modeled on the English masters. The pictorial description not only of the landscapes, but also the people enhances the pleasant, story-like quality of the narrative.

Krishnabhabini Das came back from England after eight years. She had left her child in order to stay with her husband and had donned the English gown and talked about freedom of women. However, her relation with her daughter remained strained till the end. Also, Krishnabhabini never had the opportunity to implement and witness the fruition of her ideals and ideas on women's liberation and education in her own daughter, Tilottama (Tilottamā). Although seriously ill after losing her only child, while her husband was planning a second marriage, Tilottama clung to her resentment of her mother by refusing to go and live with Krishnabhabini. Tilottama died in 1909. After Debendranath's death the same year, Krishnabhabini retreated from her active life to focus on philanthropy and the strictest codes of widowhood. Her later treatises on women's freedom have a more cautious tone to them, putting considerable emphasis on women's duties and self-discipline. Thus for Krishnabhabini, England remained a conglomeration of ideas, some to be accepted and others avoided. Her overwhelming occupation with the idea of freedom failed to mature or contribute to her own liberation in life, remaining more at the level of societal ambition. However, her preoccupation with the condition of Bengali women is a prominent feature of her writing, and her travelogue is witness to her effort to come up with the attributes of an egalitarian social system which would not only spell out greater freedom for women, but would also obtain and sustain it.

Krishnabhabini's travelogue is consequently not only a valuable source of information when investigating how somebody from the "Orient" perceived the "West," or at least English society, i.e., the society of the colonizer, but above all, what expectations and realizations an "Oriental" woman had before and after her journey to this alleged "land of freedom." The little background information about the turbulent life of the authoress and her conflicting ideas about the colonizer's society and her own allow us to draw a picture of a highly curious, open-minded, yet critical woman in search of her place in society, torn between the alluring freedom the colonizer's society had to offer for women and the love of her own country.

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