

## Two Writers, Two Worlds: A Comparative Exploration Of Rabindranath Tagore And Swami Vivekananda's Travel Writings Through Postcolonial Lens

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### Abstract:

There was a proliferation of secular travel narratives in colonial period. Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda traveled to various places around the same time, and that too to Western countries for which one had to cross the *kalapani* which was prohibited then. They have both documented their travels in their works. In this paper I have studied two such travel narratives, *Letters from a Sojourner in Europe* (2008) and *Memoirs of European Travel* (1947), each from these two writers respectively, based on their travels to Europe to understand how these intellectuals from postcolonial India perceive the West and presented the essence of India in the world arena as reflected in these travel narratives. While Tagore describes his experiences and perceptions on the European society and culture, Vivekananda's travels were a part of his mission to spread the essence of Hinduism and to promote a dialogue between Eastern and Western culture.

**Keywords:** Travel, Identity, culture, post-colonial theory, Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda

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Date of Submission: 02-12-2025

Date of Acceptance: 12-12-2025

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### I. Introduction

Travelling comes naturally to human beings. In India travelling for various reasons has been the norm for centuries. Texts as old as the Ramayana and Mahabharata mention tales of extensive travels. However, with the advent of colonialism, travelling to faraway places increased manifold. Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda were two distinguished sons of India who travelled abroad during the heydays of colonialism. They were contemporaries, born just one and half years apart. Both the authors have travelled several times abroad especially to Europe around the same time under the British regime and represented India on the global level. Both wished to achieve unity amidst diversity which has been a part of the Indian School of thought or philosophy since ages. Their travel experiences reinforced their beliefs about the affluence of their own country and they made all efforts to project India on the international stage.<sup>1</sup> We find written records of their travels in their travel narratives. These aspects have motivated me to undertake this research. In this paper, I have attempted to analyse two travel narratives: one from each of them in which they have narrated their experiences of travel to the Europe. These travel narratives are *Letters from a Sojourner in Europe* (2008)<sup>2</sup> by Rabindranath Tagore and *Memoirs of European Travel* (1947)<sup>3</sup> by Swami Vivekananda. Knowing more about these experiences is important to us as it gives us a perspective of how the colonized subjects perceived the colonizers in the latter's own lands.

Though both Tagore and Vivekananda went to Europe around the same time; yet there were differences in their approaches. While Tagore talked about European cultures and habits, Swami Vivekananda wanted to spread Indian culture and the essence of Hinduism in the world through dialogues and cultural exchange. Apart from knowing the perceptions of these authors about the West as reflected in their select travel narratives, these writings help in shaping counter narratives in response to the dominant Oriental narrative by the Occident.

This paper is organised in four sections. After this introductory section where we explain the motivation behind for undertaking this work, we present theoretical framework of the paper in section-II. We make detailed analysis of the relevant texts of Tagore and Vivekananda in section-III and finally, in section-IV, we present concluding observations.

## II. Theoretical Framework:

The theory of travel narratives and postcolonial theory are used here as the theoretical frameworks for the purpose of this study. We intend to make textual analysis and comparative study in this work. In his seminal work, *Orientalism*, Edward Said reflects on how travellers from Europe looked at the colonial people and the East in a certain prejudiced manner: as places surrounded by mystery, which is dangerous, and need to be civilized by the colonizers or the West. In other words, Orientalism is the exploration of the manipulative nature of the Western writings about the Orient in sustaining the imperial subjugation of the East by the West. According to him, Western travel narratives have played a pivotal role in shaping and reinforcing the prejudiced idea about the Orient. These narratives have portrayed the Orient as backward place that is very different from the West. According to Said (2003):

‘Orientalism [is] a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience. The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.’<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, giving the idea of the Orient a particular shape has helped the Europeans or the Westerners to have a distinct identity of their own. *Orientalism* being an eminent text in postcolonial studies have taken into account travel narratives to come to the conclusion on how these narratives play a crucial role in stereotyping the Orient by the Westerners; therefore, it is natural that we analyze travel narratives from the Orient in order to learn more about the counter narratives and how the Orient perceive the West in the postcolonial period.

According to Nayar (2020):

‘Through the construction of an ‘Occidental exotic’, the Indian travellers appropriate a method of exoticization in order to creolize Europe/England. I argue in this chapter that the traveller even when paying attention to European history, art or places, reconstructs England as a space of the cultural Other.’<sup>5</sup>

The very act of travelling and writing about the Occident from their own perspective gives the narrator traveller an agency which they then use for the construction of an ‘Occidental exotic’.

On the other hand, Mary Louise Pratt (1992)<sup>6</sup> described the colonizer’s eye as the ‘imperial eye’. It means the particular way in which the European travelers and writers looked at the colonized lands and people and represented them in their works. This perspective helped them to maintain and justify their superiority and control over the colonized countries and people. Pratt also coins the term ‘contact zone’ which is ‘the space of colonial encounters.’<sup>7</sup> She says:

‘A “contact” perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among colonizers and colonized, or travelers and “travelees,” not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of co- presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power.’<sup>8</sup>

Thus, this is a zone where different cultures interact and react to each other. It is not only a place where the colonizers can influence the colonized people, but also a place where the colonized and marginalized people assert their influence and resist the dominant colonial power.

The travels of the Europeans or people from the Western countries to India to establish and continue the colonial rule were definitely not unilateral. Indians or the people from colonized countries also ventured out to Britain and to other western countries due to various reasons. These people thus had the opportunity to observe and interact with the colonizers within close quarters and in their own homelands, which in turn resulted in their own representation of the Orient. Fisher (2004) writes:

‘The mainstream of colonialism undoubtedly consisted of the movement of Britons outwards as they traded, conquered, and ruled India. Yet, a mounting ‘counterflow’ of Indians entered Britain, living there and producing knowledge in ways that compelled British responses... Some settled, but most returned after months or years of living in Britain, bringing back to India direct information about Britain’.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, Fisher in this book has tried to find out how Indians who went to England have represented themselves there, how they have interacted with the colonisers, and how these interactions have shaped the identities of Indian people abroad. He also says:

‘In particular, many Indians in Britain gained the perspective to see the full extent of British colonialism and to consider all of India, and all other Indians in Britain, as sharing much’.<sup>10</sup>

Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda were two such Indians who not only travelled to Europe during the peak of colonial rule in India, but they have also represented the Europeans in their travel writings based on their experiences abroad. According to Nayar (2020),

‘That the Indian ‘eye’—a trope in many Indian travel texts of the period —was capable of observing and commenting on English life itself was a marker of subjecthood that was not entirely constituted by the Empire.’<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, studying these narratives is important in order to know how the colonized subjects viewed the colonizers and how their perceptions evolved with their first-hand interaction with the Europeans in Europe. Thus, in the light of the above theoretical issues, we will discuss the travel narratives of Tagore and Vivekananda in the next section.

### III. Textual Analysis:

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) had an intense passion for travelling and has travelled extensively during his lifetime. In fact, he visited more than thirty countries during 1878-1932.<sup>12</sup> In his travel narrative titled, *Letters from a Sojourner in Europe*,<sup>13</sup> Rabindranath Tagore wrote about his experiences from his first travel to England.

From these letters we get his impressions of different people, their culture, and events during his stay in Europe. He gave his own account of the English life, as he perceived by residing in and mixing with middle class and upper-class homes and people, respectively. He also writes about the Bengalis who lived in England. These letters are filled with witty humour and portray a picture of the 19<sup>th</sup> CE English society and culture. Tagore constantly compared his new gained knowledge about various cultural things with his previous knowledge that he has culturally gained in India. Expectation versus reality is very apparent throughout his writing because the poet had this expectation that the people of England were intellectuals who were very intent in studying and reading books. However, he later realized that this was not the case. The women there were engrossed with dresses and fashion and men were working and the little discussions that took place were on political matters. He says that women discussed about frivolous things such as:

‘Clothes and attire, ornaments who has a squint, who has a thick nose, whose lips are too full, whose little finger has a nail that is slightly crooked in one corner-these are the subjects of much merriment amongst the women here’.<sup>14</sup>

Further, education was not as widespread as he believed to be. Growing up, Tagore was fond of English Literature and believed the English people would be educated and interested in books and literature. Instead, what shocked him was that there were more abattoirs than bookstalls. The common people there in fact had no idea about Shelley or his writings. He realised that the working classes of England lacked humanity so much so that he says: “they seem to be placed only a step above animals...And it is difficult to describe how filthy they are.”<sup>15</sup>

He also went to the House of Commons and found the unnecessary commotion and indiscipline in the House very weird. He constantly compared that with the situation in India, and felt that even the students in Indian schools are more disciplined than the members of the Parliament. Tagore is found to be comparing and contrasting each and every aspects of English life with the Indian society and culture. He also noted the disrespect meted out to the Irish Members of the House. He was surprised that Members of Parliament are mostly not interested in the reasoning made by any of the learned members in his/her speech if that member belonged to different group or party. They vote in party lines. Thus, ‘Many a time patriotism is defeated at the hands of party-ism.’<sup>16</sup> Thus, it seemed to him that contrary to their claims they are more uncivilized than the Indians.

Tagore pointed out how he and other Indians get ridiculed in England for their native dressing styles. He even faced racial ridicule as evident from the following lines: ‘There are some who laugh in my face, and some call out “Jack, look at the blackies!” but all this does not bother me, I am not a bit ashamed.’<sup>17</sup>

He noted in pain the behavior of a section of the Indian Diaspora who in their desperation to be counted more akin to their adopted country, ridicule and belittle most of the things attached to their country of origin. He terms some of them ‘Ingo-bongo’. Homi K. Bhabha (1994) describes this behavior as hybridity, where the cultures of the colonizers and colonial subjects interact to create mixed or hybrid identities or cultures.

‘Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority - its rules of recognition’.<sup>18</sup>

Tagore was highly critical about these people in the way they make fun of the Indians, their customs and superstitions (meanwhile following the superstitions of the English people), and for paying very close attention to the appearance of things than going deep into their culture. He writes:

‘From this you may understand very well that those Ingo-bongos who wrinkle their noses at the many superstitions in our society are the ones who return from England with their coat- and pantaloons pockets crammed full of innumerable superstitions’.<sup>19</sup>

It may be interesting to refer Franz Fanon<sup>20</sup> in connection with this discussion. He also talks about this phenomenon where a colored colonized person, after they get exposed to the European education and cultures internalize this subjugation and want to overcome their inferior position by trying to pretend like the white colonizers and by distancing themselves from the people of their own race and culture.

Tagore has spent considerable amount of his writings on talking about women's liberation or freedom of women. He was surprised and appreciative of the way in which men and women mixed freely in the English society in various parties or social gatherings. He believed that this intermixing help the women to increase their knowledge base and get a platform to pose their own opinions and participate in various debates and discussions. Thus, he wanted this kind of freedom to be achieved for Indian women as well. He was deeply saddened by the fact that women in India in those days were not allowed to come out of their homes and mix freely with the male members of the society and gain knowledge and take part in intellectual discussions and place their own opinions on various intellectual subject matters. He says:

'Women are a part of the human race and God has created them as a part of society. To consider the enjoyment of free mixing between people to be a cardinal sin, to be unsocial and to turn it into a sensational matter is not only abnormal, it is unsocial, and therefore in a sense uncivilized'.<sup>21</sup>

While doing so, he got involved in a feud with the publisher of *Bharati* magazine. However, he stayed firm on his views on women's liberation. He wanted education for women and their presence in the public gatherings. This, he believed, would broaden their horizon of knowledge by participating in serious intellectual discussions and allow them exercise their basic rights as human beings.

Tagore was critical about the prevailing system of punishment and compulsory practice of showing respect by the children to the elders that they lose their natural inquisitive tendencies and end up developing into individuals who are very timid and obeying the authority blindly without questioning anybody.

Therefore, one can appreciate the fact that Tagore was very receptive to what he finds good aspects of the western culture, just like he critiqued the things of Western culture which he did not like. So the world that Rabindranath Tagore has painted in this travel narrative include his aspirations of seeing things in its reality, though after visiting England, he realised that many of his high hopes and expectations did not match with reality. Also he realised the true face of the British Empire which is not as high and mighty as they claimed it to be to the natives in India. However, there were certain things like the freedom which the European women earned in the society along with men, fascinated Tagore and he wanted this system to be incorporated in India.

Swami Vivekananda, on the other hand, was aware of the importance of travel and exchange of ideas through free mixing of people of different cultures. In one of his letters to Pundit Shankarlal of Khetri written in 1892 he wrote:

'We have to travel; we have to visit foreign countries to learn the way their society and economy are being run. If we want to reconstitute ourselves as a nation, we have to freely mix with other nations....'<sup>22</sup>

This is why even being a Hindu monk he did not hesitate to overrule the prevalent restriction to cross the ocean. Swami Vivekananda's travelogue in the form of letters titled, *Memoirs of European Travels*<sup>23</sup> was addressed to Swami Trigunatitananda, who was the editor of *Udbodhan*. These letters were originally written in Bengali which were later translated by Swami Vivekananda's followers. He got extremely popular at the World's Parliament which led to him being invited for giving lectures. From 1893 to 1900, he spent five years travelling and lecturing in parts of America, England and France. The topics of these lectures ranged from him advocating for the need for India's economic upliftment and the preaching of Vedanta as the philosophy that can unite all human beings. These tours were successful in the sense that he garnered many followers, and was able to popularize Vedanta in America. Through his travels and lectures he was able to get rid of many misconceptions that the West had about the Indians and the Hindus. Catherine Rolfsen contended that "there is a thread which runs through his mission in the West, this being the re-representation of India in response to Orientalism."<sup>24</sup>

Vivekananda wanted to be true representative of whole of India to the West. But in Indian society there is a distinction of caste and class. However to the colonizers everyone is a native regardless what their position is in the Indian society. He therefore sarcastically thanks the British as they have been able to unite the fragmented Indian society under the umbrella of the term natives. He says:

Well, in our country we hear much about some people belonging to the gentry and some to the lower classes. But in the eyes of the Government all are "natives" without exception. Maharajas, Rajas, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras — all belong to one and the same class — that of "natives". The law, and the test which applies to coolies, is applicable to all "natives" without distinction. Thanks to you, O English Government, through your grace, for a moment at least I feel myself one with the whole body of "natives".<sup>25</sup>

He highlights the double standards of the colonisers who call the Indian society backward based on their caste and religious bigotries; however, they themselves were no less superstitious in their own society. He points out that with the kind of superstitions that their society observes, they cannot claim to be superior to the Indians. He recalled how once he visited a restaurant during his trip to America out of acute hunger, but he was not served a meal as no one would sit and eat with a native there 'for he will be outcasted'<sup>26</sup>. Vivekananda again sarcastically drew parallels between India and the West by saying that this incident made the Western society look very much like the caste-ridden India where untouchability persists.

It is important to know that Vivekananda came to realise that the Western society is not as advanced as the Westerners claim it to be only by coming to the West and observing the Western society and its people from close quarters. This is the reason why counter narratives written by native travelers to the West is important. It made the colonised subjects realise that the Westerners (Occidents) were not what they boast themselves to be.

We find Swami Vivekananda in support of taking whatever advantage that Indians can take from the British rule in India for its betterment. He calls for the Indians to grow together and let a new India emerge from the humble abodes of the disadvantaged masses of India. He did not have any expectations from the upper caste Indians who he believed are representative of the past and that India's future lies in the hands of the downtrodden. These lower caste poor people are smarter workers than the Europeans. He says:

'Let her (New India) arise — out of the peasants' cottage, grasping the plough; out of the huts of the fisherman, the cobbler, and the sweeper. Let her spring from the grocer's shop, from beside the oven of the fritter-seller. Let her emanate from the factory, from marts, and from markets. Let her emerge from groves and forests, from hills and mountains'.<sup>27</sup>

Swami Vivekananda highlights how 'These common people have suffered oppression for thousands of years — suffered it without murmur, and as a result have got wonderful fortitude.'<sup>28</sup> He compares their tenacity with the Hindu mythical creature *Raktabija*, a demon that could renew himself or someone like him from its own blood even after being killed multiple times. This proves their indomitable spirit and immense strength and makes them eligible to be the successors of India. He talks about empowering this section of people for the greater good of India.

Like Tagore, Vivekananda also noticed cultural differences in which women function in different countries. In the West women were not allowed to show their feet even though they could expose half their busts. In a similar manner in India, women had to cover their heads, with no such distinctions about whatever they wear.<sup>29</sup> During this journey to the West Vivekananda meets with an American couple whose behavior and certain disgusting habits revealed in the ship made Vivekananda feel that the people in the West might be less civilised than the Indians, even though ironically, they claim the exact opposite.<sup>30</sup> Thus even before setting his foot in the lands of the West, he started realizing the truth and double standards of them, by simply observing some of them and their activities in his ship. Vivekananda reminded that the colonizers and the people of the West look down upon the Indians or the natives; however, it is from their wealth and resources that they have got prosperous in the first place. He says:

'That India, the India of "natives", is the chief means and resources of their wealth and civilisation, is a fact which they refuse to admit, or even understand. We too, on our part, must not cease to bring it home to them. Just weigh the matter in your mind'.<sup>31</sup>

In fact he even pays tribute to the working and laboring poor people of India whose intense hard work have resulted in the uplifting of humanity in general. Further, according to him, 'Europe began to advance from the date that learning and power began to flow in among the poor lower classes.'<sup>32</sup>

Vivekananda could discern differences among different European countries. He seemed to admire the French civilization more than the German one. Especially he seemed to be at awe of the French culture and fashion:

'French civilisation is full of nerve, like camphor or musk — it volatilises and pervades the room in a moment; while German civilisation is full of muscle, heavy like lead or mercury — it remains motionless and inert wherever it lies. The German muscle can go on striking small blows untiringly, till death; the French have tender, feminine bodies, but when they do concentrate and strike, it is a sledge-hammer blow and is irresistible.'<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, the world that Swami Vivekananda created in this travel narrative reflects just like Tagore how the Europeans or the people from the West who behave like they are much superior to the Indians are actually just like any other human beings with flaws.

Swami Vivekananda has established himself as an important figure by spreading the Indian philosophy of Vedanta in the West. In his lectures, speeches and writings he had introduced these concepts which were extremely popular amongst the European intellectuals and paved way to enlarge the popularity and acceptance of Indian philosophy in the West. In fact, Romain Rolland, a French writer was so enthralled by Swami Vivekananda's teachings that he even wrote his biography. He reportedly admired his thoughts on the synthesis of the East and the West in terms of thoughts and learning. His teachings have also led to the establishment of various centers for Vedantic learning across Europe in places such as United Kingdom, Germany and France which have provided learning opportunity for intellectuals there. His speeches on 'The Vedanta Philosophy' and 'The idea of a universal religion' were particularly very popular. His thoughts on the universality of religion promoted inclusiveness amongst people which was admired by the people in the West and they started viewing India with a new found respect and admiration. Martin Kämpchen (2013) has pointed out how Swami Vivekananda could assimilate opposing views and people and bring them into a sense of harmony.

His aim of preaching Hinduism in the West can be considered as an act of dealing with Orientalism. He wanted to elevate the position of India in the eyes of the West, which he already did with his speeches earlier during his trip to America. However, unlike Tagore whose descriptions were more picturesque and detailed than Swami Vivekananda who meditated on the histories of the places and things which he saw. Also Vivekananda tried to link most of the things he saw with the Indian Hindu mythology and sometimes with other popular world mythologies as well.

#### IV. Concluding Observations:

While concluding, it will be apt to highlight Nayar (2020) regarding Indian travelers and travel writings of the post colonial period:

‘They (the Indian travelers) wanted to see Britain and Europe firsthand, judge what their colonizers told them, discover what colonizers did not say, and transmit information to other Indians. They negotiated conventions of travel literature in resistance to and in compliance with generic expectations, creating hybrids that drew on guidebooks (in an age of guidebooks), local histories, autobiography, and ethnography’.<sup>34</sup>

Our discussion of the designated travel narratives of Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda revealed the answer to our research questions: how the colonized subjects viewed the colonizers and how their perceptions evolved with their first-hand interaction with the Europeans in Europe? Their travel experience has helped in shaping their opinion about the West and as a result of that it has helped in shaping the perspectives of the readers of these travel narratives as well. Therefore, these narratives offer counter to the dominant Western one sided narratives featuring the colonized countries as underdeveloped, uncivilized and mysterious in comparison to them. Here we can also see that both these travelers were aware of their colonial native status and they observed the colonizers minutely in order to know their reality and have revealed many times in their write-ups, how their sense of superiority than the rest are mostly based on false representation. Both of them were postcolonial writers who have portrayed their own two different worlds of experiences in their respective travel narratives. Their travels to the West can be seen as instances where the colonized subjects took an active part in refuting the dominant Orientalist discourse. Both the authors criticized various aspects of the Western cultures highlighting their claim to be superior than the Indians were baseless and false. It is also important to note that both of them wanted to raise the perception of India in the eyes of the Westerners, but at the same time they wanted to assimilate the good things that the Western civilization has to offer in Indian culture. At the end, we may conclude that while Tagore describes his experiences and perceptions on the European society and culture, Vivekananda’s travels were a part of his mission to spread the essence of Hinduism and to promote a dialogue between Eastern and Western culture.

#### Notes:

1. Kämpchen, “Sourya O Samanwayer Barta”, 57-58.
2. Tagore, Rabindranath, *Letters from a Sojourner in Europe*, translated by Manjari Chakravarti, Visva-Bharati. 2008.
3. ‘Memoirs of European Travel’ is included in Vivekananda’s, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. Vol. 7, 140-222.
4. Said, *Orientalism*, 1-2.
5. Nayar, *Indian Travel Writing*, 15.
6. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Routledge, London 1992.
7. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 6.
8. Ibid., 7.
9. Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain*, 1.
10. Ibid., 7.
11. Nayar, Pramod K. *Indian Travel Writing in The Age of Empire 1830–1940*, 11.
12. Dutta, K and A. Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man*,
13. Tagore wrote these letters for home and these were published in *Bharati*, a noted Bengali magazine, serially between Vaisakh 1286 B.S. and Shrawana 1287 B.S. (between April 1879 and July 1880) and later it was published as a travelogue, *Europe Prabasisir Patra*, in 1881. Manjari Chakravarty translated it in English as *Letters from a Sojourner in Europe*, which was published by Visva-Bharati in 2008.
14. Tagore, Letters, 37.
15. Ibid., 39.
16. Ibid., 51.
17. Ibid., 49.
18. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*, 114.
19. Tagore, Letters, 65.
20. Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans, Charles Lam Markmann. (Pluto Press. 1952).

21. Tagore, Letters, 88.
22. Vivekananda's letter to Pundit Shankarlal of Khetri written on 20.9.1892 and collected from *Swami Vivekananda Vani O Rachana* (in Bangla), Vol.6, 268-69.
23. Vivekananda, Swami, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. Vol. 7, 140-222.
24. Rolfsen, Catherine, *Resistance, Complicity and Transcendence: A Postcolonial Study of Vivekananda's Mission in the West*, 18.
25. Vivekananda, Swami, *The Complete Works*, 156.
26. Ibid., 157.
27. Ibid., 162.
28. See note 27 above.
29. Ibid., 167.
30. Ibid., 173.
31. Ibid., 185.
32. Ibid., 197.
33. Ibid., 205.
34. Nayar. *Indian Travel Writing*, 12.

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