

## Revisiting Krishnabhavini: England and India

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The year 1885 is probably remembered by many in India as the year when the Indian National Congress was founded. In the same year was published a slim volume in Bangla called *Englondey Bangamahila*. The volume was published anonymously.<sup>2</sup> It sank into oblivion shortly thereafter. Those were extremely Iswarchandra Vidyasagar's efforts to remove the ban on Hindu widow remarriage had borne fruit in the 1850s, legally at least, but Bengali Hindu society was still grappling with the social repercussions of the reform. In the late 1860s were published Vidyasagar's tracts against Hindu Kulin polygamy—this, too, was part of the intellectual ferment of the times in which this book was published. In addition to this was the nascent nationalist movement which manifested itself in the formation of an Indian National Congress, a body that would begin with negotiation and argumentation and would go on to get caught up and play an important role in the struggle for swaraj or independence.

In this kind of an ambience, it is perhaps not very surprising to note that the anonymous volume went out of sight without leaving too many ripples in the fabric of its times. Yet, a close scrutiny of this text seems to indicate that it is an important text to take note of, for it textualises the tensions of its age and sees the playing out of several discourses and conflicts related to questions of gender, colonialism and East-West relations. The text was excavated in the late 1990s by Simonti Sen, but again it does not seem to have attracted the kind of scholarly and critical attention that I feel it deserved.

*Englondey Bangamahila* was written by Krishnabhavini Das, a housewife who accompanied her

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<sup>2</sup> The book carried the Bangla legend, 'Bangamahila-pronito,' which, in English translation, means 'written by a Bengali woman.'

husband to England and spent several years there in the face of social censure for travelling across the *kalapani*.<sup>3</sup>

Such was the fracture that her sojourn created even within her own family that it changed the lives of the couple forever, and indeed deeply problematizing the mother-daughter relationship between Krishnabhavini and young Tilottama, who was married off as a child by Krishnabhavini's father-in-law without her or her husband getting a chance to intervene in the matter.

*Englondey Bangamahila* is not a scholarly work, yet it contains much of interest to the scholar and student of literature and society in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It constitutes what is probably the first full-length travelogue by a woman writing in Bangla and therefore is a landmark text historically. More importantly perhaps, *Englondey Bangamahila* textualises the colonial subject's reception of the colonial centre and underlines the location of the author on the colonial periphery. It is a valuable record of the ways in which a woman from traditional Bengali Hindu society in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century sought to map the colonial Other, tried to understand England in terms of the differences and similarities she identified with the Indian (read Bengali) context, and made it her mission to communicate these realities to her avowed female readership back home in Bengal.

It is clear from the text that the author has a very specific readership in mind. Time and again she addresses women in Bengal, who she imagines would be confined within the four walls of the *antahpura* or the private space, thirsting for knowledge about the world outside, but deprived of it thanks to the caprices of contemporary patriarchal Hindu society. In many ways, Krishnabhavini's text can be read perhaps as a work that opens up new possibilities and throws into relief the need for social reform in India. This, of course, immediately casts her in a vulnerable mould, open to being criticized for being appreciative of the colonial centre and even open to being labelled a colonial collaborator. A careful reading of *Englondey Bangamahila*,

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<sup>3</sup> *Kalapani* literally means 'the dark waters' and refers to the sea. In traditional Hindu society, travelling across the seas to a distant land like India was tantamount to losing one's status and was equated with a form of pollution that called for excommunication.

however, shows that its author is far from being a collaborator—she is critical of ‘home’ and appreciative of the ‘world’ when she perceives a lacuna in the former that can be remedied by looking at the latter. Likewise, there are several sections where she is indeed critical of elements of English lifestyles, family life and attitudes as she encounters them during her sojourn in England.

Krishnabhavini’s travelogue is written in all of twenty chapters and focuses on various aspects of her travels. Notably, she begins by talking about the very act of leaving home and setting out to explore the world outside—England itself makes its presence felt in her travelogue only after the first few chapters, in which, among other things, she reflects on the feeling of freedom and emancipation that travel imbues her with, her journey to other parts of India and finally her journey through other countries onwards to London. Later chapters focus on issues as diverse as English women, English marriage and domestic life, the city of London, education in England, the role of religion in England, work ethics and the class divide in contemporary England. Clearly, it is a wide gamut of aspects she takes on in this text which must be labelled quite ambitious in the context of contemporary writing from Bengal about the colonial centre.

One also notes with wonder that the author of *Englondey Bangamahila* had no access to formal education as a child, as indeed was the norm for many girl children in tradition Hindu societies in those times. The literary sense and linguistic acumen were clearly later developments in Krishnabhavini’s life. Nevertheless, what is most remarkable in her travelogue is the perspicacity with which she observes the myriad aspects of England and the ease with which she reads England to throw light on Bengal. Travel writing invariably comprises a complicated process of selection—it is certain specific aspects of one’s experiences as a traveler that one chooses to textualise, and there is a politics to this selection as well as to the concomitant omissions and silences.

One of the most significant sections of *Englondey Bangamahila* seems to be this chapter translated for this issue of *Sahitya*, the CLAI journal. This chapter (Chapter 12) is titled “Ingraji Bibaho O Garhasto Jobin” (English Marriage and Domestic Life). This is a chapter that weaves

in an intricate network of information, documentation, analysis, comparison and self-reflexivity. Among other things, it details aspects of English Christian marriage for the benefit of readers back home, reflects upon the true purpose of marriage and also makes a critical appraisal of the relationship that accrues between husband and wife, man and woman in the space she is a visitor to. Needless to say, in doing all of these, Krishnabhavini resorts to the all-too-familiar practice associated with travel writing—her comments and appraisals of England are doctored by her concerns with the realities of the space she locates herself in, i.e., Bengal, or in a larger sense, India.

Thus, the very first sentence of this chapter throws into relief the identity of the author as an outsider, an observer implicated in a set of social practices different from those available in the land being visited. The author begins with a sentence that is seen to be shadow-boxing as antithesis with the phantom of an unmentioned thesis—she mentions the fact that no one in England, be it man or woman, marries against his or her wishes. This is meant to immediately invoke the context of contemporary Bengal and to highlight how different things are in England, at least as far as marriage and familial relationships are concerned—which, indeed, is the abiding theme of this chapter.

By invoking her own context, Krishnabhavini may be thought to have been attempting to posit her text as a corrective discourse. And that is indeed a reading that the rest of the chapter, replete as it is with reiterations of the differences between England and India, supports. The very first paragraph makes this abundantly clear in fact—it goes on to narrate how the English marry only relatively late in their lives, only when they have earned enough money to fend for themselves as an independent social unit and only after they are sure of their feelings for their prospective partners. Again, these references immediately invoke the contemporary Indian context and highlight the contrast between the two spaces. The joint family structure and its disadvantages are coaxed into the spotlight although by default—and that is quite natural as this is not officially a treatise of social reform Krishnabhavini pretends to write but a travelogue after all. So, too, is the contemporary practice of child marriage, which was one of the abiding symbols of the conflict between tradition and modernity in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal—no wonder then that the

practice finds direct mention, although in passing, in the very first paragraph of this chapter itself.

“English Marriage and Domestic Life” goes on to narrate how an English romance is sparked off and how it gradually meanders towards marriage and elucidates on how young men and women decide on their partners for themselves after experiencing each other’s companionship for a substantial period of time. Implicit in this rather long narrative of the trajectory from acquaintance to courtship to marriage is a comment on the modicum of freedom enjoyed by the young in England and the relative free mixing between men and women—something that the author finds almost totally absent in contemporary Bengal, at least among the group she belongs to.

Even as she details the trappings of the wedding ceremony, Krishnabhavini indulges in an intriguing exercise in translation—she tries to read the rituals of the Christian wedding in terms of their similarities and differences with the trappings of the Hindu wedding. Thus, she translates back concepts such as ‘bridesmaid’ and ‘best man’ to what she considers cultural equivalents—‘nitbor’ and ‘nitkonye’. This is, indeed, a strategy she persists with, and all through the chapter we find the travel writer striving to explain the foreign to her readers using a kind of Shleiermacherian domesticating strategy.<sup>4</sup>

One of the most powerful things we encounter in this chapter as a result of Krishnabhavini employing this strategy is the scathing commentary on social and cultural practices in Bengal. This, in fact, constitutes one of the very few sections where the context of Bengal is invoked directly rather than in passing. A fairly substantial text is dedicated to exploring the state of marital relationship between man and woman in contemporary Hindu Bengali society. The subject position of the author of *Englondey Bangamahila* is evident here as perhaps nowhere else in this chapter. She elaborates in some detail the relationship of fear and submission that characterizes so many marital relationships in Bengal in those times and the lack of physical and

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4 See Friedrich Schleiermacher, “Über die verschiedenen Methoden des Übersetzen,” trans. André Lefevere, in *Translating Literature: The German Tradition from Luther to Rosenzweig*, ed. André Lefevere (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1977).

emotional intimacy caused by the watertight division between the public space, which masquerades as a male preserve in 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial Bengal, and the private space, which was considered to be the dominion of women and to which the latter were expected, nay compelled to restrict themselves to on most occasions.

This immediately gives the author the occasion to draw a contrast with the marital relationship as she perceives it in England. If fear, hierarchy, domination and power are what characterize the contours of this relationship in Bengal for Krishnabhavini, then it is camaraderie, companionship and equality that characterize its English incarnation for her. Almost expectedly, this leads to a rather idealized picture of English domestic life, and such idealisations are generally seen to suffer from their own aporias. While that is true at least to some extent, and there is no denying that the rosy picture of English marital life painted by the Bengali woman in England is indeed only one side of the picture, it would perhaps be just too simplistic to term this an act of colonial collaboration, or to read this as blind, uncritical admiration for everything English. Far from being so, the text is a conscious attempt at whetting the Bengali appetite for change by positing this idealized picture. It may be termed a willing suspension of disbelief of sorts, an enforced illusion of a false naivette involving a specific type of censorship carried out with a clear objective in mind—to posit an alternative, one which the author feels it is her duty to paint in as attractive a light as possible so that the desire for change is vindicated and bolstered. The politics of this strategy is clearly more overt than it may seem at first glance, and the author, in spite of the partial comments on England, betrays a rare clarity as far as her real objectives are concerned—to read her in any other light that ignores her clarity of purpose would be to seriously shortchange her and deny her of what is clearly her right.