

Bengali Travel Writers of the Mid-20th Century in Search of an Asian Identity

Weronika Rokicka
(University of Warsaw)

ORCID 0000-0002-5207-8286

DOI: 10.54103/consonanze.139.c175

Abstract

This article looks into two Bengali travelogues, Syed Mujtaba Ali's *Deśe Bideśe* and *Jāpāne* by Annada Shankar Ray, to examine the identity transformation of travellers who undertook journeys from India to other Asian countries in the mid-20th century. Both writers, a Bengali Muslim in Afghanistan and a Bengali Hindu in Japan, find themselves in spaces alien to them, but as they keep discovering common history, culture and values of Asian societies they develop a strong sense of belonging. Encounters with people and historical artefacts inspire them to reflect on their own cultural identity. The article argues that the selected narratives can be read in the light of Pan-Asianism, a discourse that gained popularity in India in the first half of the century, and that Pan-Asianism itself can be considered an intellectual outcome of the liminal experience of societies undergoing rapid transformation during the fall of colonialism.

Keywords: Indian travel literature, Bengali travel literature, Pan-Asianism, liminality, Syed Mujtaba Ali, Annada Shankar Ray.

1. *Introduction*

Throughout the 19th and most of the 20th century Western Europe remained the most desired foreign destination for Indian travellers¹. However, rising anti-colonial sentiment made some eager to seek different routes or rediscover old ones. Among such travellers were Syed Mujtaba Ali (Saiyed Mujtabā Āli) and Annada

1. Sen 2005, 6.

Shankar Ray (Annadāsankar Rāy) who went to Afghanistan and Japan – countries that at some point in history were closer geographically and culturally to India than England or France, but which more recently had not been attracting similar crowds of Indian visitors as Europe. This article will look into Ali's travelogue *Deśe Bideśe (Home and abroad)* and Ray's *Jāpāne (In Japan)* to examine their changing attitude towards fellow Asians and the identity transformation the travellers experience during their journeys. It will argue that the period when they wrote their accounts, the mid-20th century, can be identified as a liminal era when societies and individuals were forced to rethink their identities amid a rapidly changing political landscape, driving some to embrace ideas such as Pan-Asianism.

The term liminality, initially used by Arnold van Gennep to analyse transition rites in traditional societies, was later adapted by Victor Turner to examine various cultural, social and political phenomena. Turner defines a liminal state as «betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial»². In this transitional stage which leads to a change or transformation, the liminal entities form «unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated comitatus, community, or even communion of equal individuals»³. Recently Bjorn Thomassen proposed his typology of liminal situations⁴ arguing that the term can apply to experiences of single individuals, social groups but also of entire nations or civilisations. They can happen in the timeframe of moments, longer periods or epochs, in spaces as diverse as specific places, buffer zones or regions.

2. Pan-Asianism in India

The fall of colonialism in Asia constituted a long political, economic and cultural process, and although it might be considered an era of liberation and hope, it also brought instability and insecurity. Borders shifted. Identities and loyalties were questioned. Countries and individuals remained in the transition period. From this liminal experience new visions of the world emerged to replace old ones. One of them was Pan-Asianism, the ideology or discourse «claiming that Asia can be

2. Turner 1991, 95.

3. *Ibid.*, 96.

4. Thomassen 2014, 90.

defined and understood as a homogenous space with shared and clearly defined characteristics»⁵.

One of the most influential Indian thinkers of this time to advocate for Asian unity was Rabindranath Tagore, an outspoken critic of nationalism and imperialism⁶. Fascination with Japan or China and in general with Indian influences in Asia was a larger phenomenon among Bengali intellectuals in the early 20th century⁷ but Tagore, with his numerous journeys across the continent, stood firmly as the greatest champion of Pan-Asianism. He travelled to Japan, Persia, Iraq and South-East Asia searching for a glimpse of shared cultural heritage, *i.e.* the legacy of Buddhism and Hinduism in the East and South-East Asia⁸. He calls the journey to Persia «my pilgrimage»⁹ claiming a common ancestry of Indians and Persians, as well as acknowledging the contribution of Persians to the South Asian cultural landscape.

Tagore elaborates on the future of the world in a number of his writings and speeches, often focusing on the role of Asia in the new world order and envisaging glorious years ahead. At the same time he firmly believes that he lives in an in-between period of historic shift. He writes in his letters from Persia in 1932:

Today we are born at the end of an epoch in the history of humanity. Perhaps in the drama of Europe the scene is being changed for the fifth act of the play. Signs of an awakening in Asia have slowly spread from one end of the horizon to the other. [...]. If the new age has indeed come to Asia, then let Asia give voice to it in the own special idiom of civilisation¹⁰.

However, for Asia to succeed in the future, it must look back at and learn from its distant past, ancient times, when all the regions of the continent remained connected and lived peacefully, exchanging ideas and goods. India must work towards the re-establishment of this lost link¹¹. In a speech in Singapore in 1927 Tagore calls upon his fellow Asians to awake:

5. Stolte-Fischer-Tiné 2012, 65.

6. Sen 2010, 63-74.

7. Gooptu 2018, 200.

8. Bose 2011, 13-15.

9. Tagore 2003, 33.

10. Tagore 2010, 28-29.

11. Lahiri 2013, 140.

We have our common interest in a new era of rejuvenation for this ancient continent whose children we both claim to be – a continent which once was the cradle of great civilisations and the source of the streams of spiritual truth which still feed the life of the greater part of the human world and therefore we in the name of Mother Asia have come to lay our claim to you – the inheritors of a luminously glorious past that has given to man profound systems of philosophy, high codes of social and political ethics, a profuse wealth of inventions and creations of beauty that have their endless inspiration for all time to come. We have come to ask you to awake into a full consciousness of the great personality of your race and lead it to a future which will rescue Asia from its age-long humiliation of obscurity¹².

Although undoubtedly an influential figure Tagore was not the first and not the only Indian opinion-maker advocating for Asian unity. The discourse remained a part of mainstream political thought in the interwar period, with India soon claiming to be the leading force in the Pan-Asian movement¹³. However vague or incoherent the ideology might be, it seemed appealing in this liminal era when the old world order was crumbling.

3. *Search for an Asian Identity in Bengali Travel Writing*

Besides prominent figures like Tagore, other Indians travelled to Asian countries and subsequently wrote their accounts of their journeys. As a young graduate Syed Mujtaba Ali (1904–1974) worked as a teacher in a college in Kabul in the late 1920s. After spending a year and a half in Afghanistan, he later took more than a decade to finalise his memoirs, published in 1948 as *Deśe Bidesē* (translated into English as *In a Land Far from Home*). Annada Shankar Ray (1904–2002), a renowned writer, attended an international literary conference in 1957 and extended his stay to see a bit more of Japan. His book *Jāpāne* was released the following year. Both travelogues are now considered Bengali travel writing classics¹⁴.

At first glance Afghanistan and Japan seem exotic to the travellers. Ali describes the Afghan landscape: «You would not be able to spot, even with the most powerful binoculars, a single green leaf in this land through which we were travelling. All you could see was thick turfs of burnt yellow dry grass on the rock faces,

12. *Ibid.*, 151-152.

13. Stolte–Fischer–Tiné 2012, 75.

14. Rabbi 2013, 208.

here and there»¹⁵. Ray, on the other hand, is a bit afraid of typhoons and earthquakes¹⁶. The language barrier is a challenge for Ray while Ali speaks Persian and apart from a few awkward moments generally easily communicates with the Kabulis.

However, both narratives are dominated not by the feeling of alienation but by the sense of belonging. Ali and Ray mention common challenges facing their homeland and the countries they visit such as the fight for political and cultural recognition in the world and standing up to colonial powers or Europe more in general. Ray invokes the Russo-Japanese war of 1905: «I was born in the year of Japan-Russia war. It was Japan who won, but we too felt so proud. Have you seen that? Asia defeated Europe!»¹⁷. It is worth pointing out that the Japanese victory gave a significant boost to the pan-Asian movement at the time¹⁸. Later Ray adds with pity: «Growing up I focused on the West, not on the East. I was thinking and reading about America and Europe. I did not look eastward»¹⁹. The changed context of newfound independence requires one to become familiar with the rest of the continent, he claims. Meanwhile Ali, leaves a couple of unfavourable comments on the Europeans and especially the British in his account *i.e.*, «You could not explain the attitude of the British minister without mentioning this sense of “snobbery” and the idea of “nobility”»²⁰. The image of Afghanistan he paints is of a melting pot of Asia, where many cultural influences and ethnicities meet, and of a country of fierce people who would not refrain from unimaginable violence if attacked or invaded²¹. On the other hand, Ray emphasises that Japan was able to stand up to the European powers because it succeeded in modernising itself economically and culturally and emerged as one of the most successful countries in the world²².

15. Ali 2015, 43. Ali 2018, 46: *Ekhan bās yācche yekhān diye sekhān theke dūbin diye tākāleo ekṭi pātā paryanta cokhe paṛe nā. Thākār madhye āche ekhāne-okhāne pātharer gāye halde ghāser paūc.*

16. Ray 1959, 5.

17. *Ibid.*, 11: *Rusjāpānī juddha ye bachar hay se bachar āmār janma. Jāpāner jāygarbe āmrāo garbi hayechilum. Dekhcho to! Eśīyā hāriye dila Iuropke!*

18. Stolte–Fischer-Tiné 2012, 69.

19. Ray 1959, 12: *Baṛa hate hate āmi kintu pūbamukho nā haye paścimmukho haye uṭhi. Tā-khan Āmerikār kathā bhābi, Iuoper kathā paṛi. Pūbadike tākāine.*

20. Ali 2015, 243. Ali 2018, 213: *Imrejer ei ‘abhijātye’, ei ‘snabāri’ chārā anya kono kichu diye Britis rājdūter manobṛttir yuktiyukta artha karā yāy nā.*

21. Rabbi 2013, 208.

22. Ray 1959, 31.

However, instead of elaborating on the wrongdoings of colonialism both authors focus on how much Asians from different regions have in common. The similarities they identify are of two kinds: shared history or cultural heritage and common values and patterns of daily life. Forgotten routes and a mutual past across Asia fascinate them. Mujtaba Ali explains to his readers: «The history of Afghanistan’s north, meaning Balkh and Badakshan, was linked to Turkistan beyond Amu Daria river in Central Asia (Bakshu in Sanskrit); the western region of Herat had connections with Iran; and the east, meaning Kabul and Jalalabad, was intrinsically linked with India and Kashmir’s history»²³. He picks various examples of historical figures, events and cultural phenomena to prove his argument: Alexander the Great, Gandhara art, Buddhism, Islam and above all Emperor Babur whose memoirs he reads on the way. He criticises Indian historians for «putting a big full stop» at one point of the common past of the regions and ignoring the Muslim heritage in India²⁴. Although Ali identifies as Muslim, he considers all elements of South Asian cultural heritage his own. And this is clearly shown in his recollection of an Indian concert in Kabul:

In a booming voice he sang, “Jawan shawam. I will be young again, I will regain my youth if only I get a kiss”. The room was filled with mad dancing – I could see Shiva dancing with Parvati, breaking his meditation. One boom after another – “Jawan Shawam, jawan shawam”. That was not the old man with his sitar, it was like the Mongol dancers who were jumping, drawing lines in the air with their legs, thrusting out their chests, creating a whirlpool with their long hair. I saw Shah Jahan coming out of the Taj Mahal with Mumtaz, holding hands. They were young again, ending their centuries of separation²⁵.

23. Ali 2015, 87. Ali 2018, 84-85: *Āphgānisthāner uttar bhāg arthāt Balkh-Badakhshāner itihās tār sīnanta nadī Āmudariyār (Grik Akṣus, saṁskṛta Bakṣu) opārer Turkisthāner saṅge, paśchimbhāg arthāt Hirāt añcal Irāner saṅge, pūrbabhāg arthāt Kābul Jalālābād Khās Bhāratbarṣa o Kāśmīrer itihāser saṅge miśe giye nānā yuge nānā ran dhareche.*

24. Ali 2015, 89.

25. Ali 2015, 138. Ali 2018, 122: *Hunkār diye geḃe uṭhlen, Joyān śaom. Tāhale āmi joyān haba - ekṭi cumban pele luptu yauban phire pāba’. Sabhāsthal yena tāṇḍab nṛtye bhare uṭhla – dekhi Śankar yena tapasyā śeṣe Pārbatike niye unmatta nṛtye mete uṭhechen. Hunkārer par hunkār – ‘Joyān śaom’, ‘joyān śaom’. Kothāy bṛddha setārer ustād – dekhi sei joyān maṅgol. Lāph diye tin hāt upare uṭhe sūnye du-pā diye ghanghan dherā kāṭche, ār du-hāt mele buk cetiye mātā pichane chūṛe kālo bābri culer ābarter ghūrṇi lāgiyeche. Dekhi Tājmahaler darjā diye beriye elen Śāhjāhān ār Mamtāj hāt dharādhari kare. Nabīn prāṇ, natun yauban phire peyechen, śatābdīr bicched śeṣ hayeche.*

And finally, the way in which he bids farewell to Afghanistan is a testament to how diverse Ali's identity is. Visiting the grave of Emperor Babur, a man born in Uzbekistan, who died in India and was buried in Kabul, Ali writes: «Standing next to the tomb I always felt I was visiting the grave of an ordinary man, possibly even a relative of mine»²⁶. And there he recites for his symbolic forefather a poem by Rabindranath Tagore followed by a verse from the Koran.

Annada Shankar Ray also wanders in time and across cultures during his journey to Japan. He describes his feelings during a visit to Horiyuji temple: «The bus was moving towards the 7th century. From the past farther into the past. One more step closer to India»²⁷. Buddhist temples in Tokyo, Kyoto and Nara make him realise how close Japan and India had been in the past. This leads him to conclude: «Just like now what starts in Europe goes far beyond Europe, in the Ajanta period what started in India went far to the north, south and east parts of Asia, just not to the west»²⁸. He identifies other cultural similarities as well: to his surprise a form of the caste system existed in Japan too²⁹ and wood print art reminds him of Bengali patua paintings³⁰.

Discovering and appreciating common cultural heritage and history constitute a substantial part of both writers' narratives and it can be considered the intellectual side of the experience of togetherness. Equally significant for both travellers is the more private and sentimental side that comes from the observation of everyday life and interactions with people. Syed Mujtaba Ali captures for example how seasons and nature are different yet similar in both countries. «The spring in this country could be compared with our monsoon. There, the parched earth waited eagerly to flourish into a new life with the touch of early monsoon. Here the earth went into a deep slumber in winter and opened her eyes with the first sun of spring»³¹. Roaming around the bazaars of Kabul also makes him feel at home.

26. Ali 2015, 276. Ali 2018, 242. *Kabarer kâche dârijye mane hay âmi âmâri mato mâtir mânuş, yena ek âtmajaner samâdhir kâche ese dârijyechi.*

27. Ray 1959, 114: *Bâs calla saptam satâbdite. Atita theke âro atite. Âro ek pā Bhârater dike.*

28. *Ibid.*, 118-119: *Âdhunik yuger prabâha yeman Iurope ârambha haleo Iuropei âbaddha nay temni Ajantâr yug chila Bhârat theke sùru kare Eşyâr uttare dakşine pûrbe prasârta, kintu pasçime simâmbita.*

29. *Ibid.*, 65.

30. *Ibid.*, 67.

31. Ali 2015, 199. Ali 2018, 175: *Edeşe basanter sañge âmâder barşâr tulanâ hay. Sekhâne grişmakâle dharanî taptasâyane pipâsartâ haye pare thâken, âşârhasya ye-kono dibasei hok indrapurîr nababarsaṅ bårtâ peye natun prâṇe sañjibita han.*

«People who had been to the old bazaars of Agra, Amritsar or Benaras, would know what they look like»³², he claims.

The truly emotional experience of unity for both travellers comes from the intimate relationships they manage to form with local people. Mujtaba Ali makes a lot of friends but one very particular bond he has is with his servant Abdur Rahman who stays by his side from the beginning to the end. «In festivity, in celebration, in famine, in revolution and if I consider the last farewell as the funeral, then Abdur Rahman joined me at my funeral too»³³. In Japan Ray travels in time visiting Buddhist shrines but the pivotal moment of his narrative comes when he stays at the house of a local teacher, Mr Todo, and his family in Kyoto. He enjoys their hospitality, observes their daily routine and is astonished to hear mantras as they pray together³⁴. Nowhere has he felt so close to Japan and at home than at Mr Todo's house. He states: «When one heart is drawn towards another, all barriers vanish. I have loved Japan and Japan has loved me»³⁵. He ends his stay in Kyoto with a poem (printed in a local newspaper according to the author). One of its lines reads: «I suddenly came to the Land of the Rising Sun. I got love and went back in love»³⁶.

Such strong focus on the positive side of their experience does not make the writers completely overlook cultural differences. However, some alien or incomprehensible elements of the local culture are presented as rationally explicable. Geishas and their presence in public spaces leave Annada Shankar Ray feeling shocked but he easily accepts the explanation that these are educated women who took up the profession to support their families³⁷. Other differences are deemed to be simply weird, funny or just a manageable annoyance. Ali's servant's behaviour provides material for many anecdotes. Ray finds the institution of taxi dancers in clubs strange but amusing. And in the end, even the dangers of Kabul are downplayed as a part of life.

32. Ali 2015, 117. Ali 2018, 106: *Amṛtsar, Āgrā, Kāśīr puron bājār yārā dekhechen, e bājārer gathan tāder bujhiye balte habe nā.*

33. Ali 2015, 303. Ali 2018, 266: *Utsabe, byasane, durbhikṣe, rāṣṭrabiplabe ebatī ei śeṣe bidāyke yadi śmaśān balī tabe Ābdur Rahmān śmaśāne āmāke kādh dila.*

34. Ray 1959, 137.

35. *Ibid.*, 139. *Hṛḥay yakhan hṛḥay ṭāne takhan muhūrte sab bādḥā sare yāy. Jāpānke āmī bhālobesechi, Jāpān āmāke bhālobeseche.*

36. *Ibid.*, 179: *Suryodayer deśe // haḥhāt, āmī ese // bhālobāsā pelem ebatī // gelem bhālobese.*

37. *Ibid.*, 29; 71.

4. Conclusions

Travel is almost by definition a liminal experience. A traveller leaves his native land and culture, spends time in an unfamiliar environment, often facing difficulties on the road. And then he/she is reintegrated with society, although generally as a changed person. Both travelogues presented here, *Deśe Bideśe* by Syed Mujtaba Ali and *Jāpāne* by Annada Shankar Ray, touch upon the issue of transformation experienced as a result of travel. This is directly articulated in the latter as Ray reflects about his changing worldview and attitude towards Japan. He even goes as far as to declare that the journey made him an advocate for stronger ties between Asian societies: «We need to build bridges between India and Japan, [professor] Shinya Kasugai told me. Most probably I won't be able to build bridges but certainly could form bonds»³⁸. Syed Mujtaba Ali avoids such unequivocal statements. Nevertheless, the final scene of his travelogue is profoundly emotional. He looks out of the plane window and sees the unmistakable figure of his servant: «His turban was dirty, as we did not have any soap for such a long time. But I felt Abdur Rahman's turban was whiter than the snow and whitest of all was Abdur Rahman's heart»³⁹. Ali had to flee Afghanistan due to an eruption of political violence, but he leaves the reader with an expression of love for the country and its people.

As this article demonstrates the selected travelogues of Bengali writers who travelled to other Asian countries in the mid-20th century have a strong Pan-Asian message. They are accounts of men in the liminal situation of travel but also individuals living in the liminal era, in the in-between of two political world orders, when Pan-Asianism was flourishing, providing an alluring vision for the future. And although the authors refrain from mentioning the ideology or those who advocated for it, their travelogues seem very much at one with the spirit of the epoch.

38. *Ibid.*, 64. *Setu bādhte habe Bhārater sañge Jāpāner, balechilen āmāke Śīniyā Kāsugāi. Setu bādhte pārba nā hayto, kintu rākhī bhāte pārba.*

39. Ali 2015, 303. Ali 2018, 266: *Bahudin dhare sabbān chila nā bale Ābdur Rahmāner pāgrī maylā. Kintu āmār mane hala caturdike barapher ceṣe śubhratar Ābdur Rahmāner pāgrī ār śubhratam Ābdur Rahmāner hṛday.*

References

Primary Sources

- Deśe Bideśe* = Syed Mujtaba Ali, *Deśe Bideśe* (1948), Niu Ej Pābliśārs Prāibhet Limited, Kalkātā 2018.
- Jāpāne* = Annada Shankar Ray, *Jāpāne*, Em. Si. Sarkār ayāṅḍ sons prāibhet limited, Kalikātā 1959.

Secondary Sources

- Ali 2015 = Syed Mujtaba Ali, *In a Land Far From Home*, tr. by Nazes Afroz, Speaking Tiger, New Delhi 2015.
- Ali 2018 = Syed Mujtaba Ali, *Deśe Bideśe* (1948), Niu Ej Pābliśārs Prāibhet Limited, Kalkātā 2018.
- Bose 2011 = Sugata Bose, *Rabindranath Tagore and Asian Universalism*, in *Tagore's Asian Voyages, Selected Speeches and Writings on Rabindranath Tagore*, Nalanda Sriwijaya Centre-Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore 2011, 10-18.
https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wpcontent/uploads/2015/07/nsc_tagore_booklet_small.pdf (last access 13.10.21).
- van Gennep 1972 = Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (1960), University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1972.
- Gooptu 2018 = Sarvani Gooptu, *Japan and Asian destiny: India's intellectual journey through contemporary periodicals 1880s-1930s*, in I. Banerjee-Dube, S. Gooptu (eds.), *On Modern Indian Sensibilities. Culture, Politics, History*, Routledge (South Asia Edition), Abingdon 2018, 198-216.
- Lahiri 2013 = Himadri Lahiri, *Rabindranath Tagore's Passage to Java: Rediscovering Greater India*, in S. Mandal (ed.), *Journeys: Indian Travel Writing*, Creative Books, New Delhi 2013, 127-142.

- Mishra 2012 = Pankaj Mishra, *From the Ruins of the Empire. The Revolt Against the West and the Remaking of Asia*, Allen Lane Penguin Books, London 2012.
- Rabbi 2013 = Shakil Rabbi, *The Resistance Traveller: Anti-Colonial Rhetoric and Hospitality in Syed Mujtaba Ali's Deshe Bideshe*, in S. Mandal (ed.), *Journeys: Indian Travel Writing*, Creative Books, New Delhi 2013, 207-222.
- Ray 1959 = Annada Shankar Ray, *Jāpāne*, Em. Si. Sarkār ayāñḍ sons praibhet limited, Kalikātā 1959.
- Sen 2005 = Simonti Sen, *Travel to Europe. Self and Other in Bengali Travel Narratives 1870–1910*, Orient Longman, Hyderabad 2005.
- Sen 2010 = Amartya Sen, *Tagore and India*, in Aakash Singh & Silika Mohapatra (eds.), *Indian Political Thought: A Reader*, Routledge (South Asia edition), Abidgdon 2010, 51-72.
- Stolte–Fischer–Tiné 2012 = Carolien Solte, Herald Fischer–Tiné, *Imagining Asia in India: Nationalism and Internationalism (ca. 1905–1940)*, «Comparative Studies in Society and History» 54.1 (2012), 65-92.
- Tagore 2003 = Rabindranath Tagore, *Journey to Persia and Iraq: 1932*, Vishva-Bharati, Kolkata 2003.
- Tagore 2010 = Rabindranath Tagore, *Letters from Java*, Vishva-Bharati, Kolkata 2010.
- Thomassen 2014 = Bjørn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern. Living Through the In-Between*, Routledge, Abidgdon 2014.
- Turner 1991 = Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969), Cornell University Press, New York 1991.