Weaving Cityscapes with Oral Narratives:
A Study of Select Travel Narratives by Biswanath Ghosh

MUKULIKA DATTAGUPTA

Abstract: Despite of the fluidity in specifying the genre of travel writing, it documents a place, its people and their stories. This paper has selected three books by Bishwanath Ghosh – *Tamarind City: Where Modern India Began* (2012), *Longing Belonging: an Outsider at Home in Calcutta* (2014) and *Aimless in Banaras: Wanderings in India's Holiest City* (2019). The objective of this paper is to look into the use of oral narratives to collect the fragments of the history of a city in the form of stories and how these responses to individual memories lead us to a collective memory of a place.

Keywords: oral narrative, storytelling, memory, travel writing, cityscape

From Conquistadors to backpack explorers and pilgrims, throughout the ages travelers of different types with different objectives have travelled far and wide across the globe. Many such travelers have also kept an account of their journey and their experiences of new places and people, making a significant contribution into the realm of knowledge and in turn broadening its spectrum. Though for a long time travel narratives remained quite neglected as a repository of history and information, but in current times it is seen as one of the key components in the archive of historical information. On account of current postcolonial trends of globalization travel and tourism has also emerged as an important industry. Globalization has in turn helped to enhance the cross-cultural contacts between people, places and cultures. The industry of travel and tourism has played an important role in this whole phenomenon of postcolonial cultural contact. In this world of globalization thus travel narratives have earned a relevant place for themselves. There are travelogues, where the author is seen to rely on the oral narratives of the residents of a particular place. Thus considering oral narratives as a source of first hand information and identifying memory based individual stories as the path to reach out to the collective postcolonial history and experience of a city.

While having a discussion on globalization many scholars might trace back its roots to colonialism and the gradual rise of capitalism. The way travel narratives have responded to the current economic, social and political debates of this globalized world has made the study of travel narratives a prominent part in postcolonial studies. It is one of the major objectives of postcolonial studies to investigate into the impacts which were made due to the establishment of European colonies almost in all the continents, as it caused displacement of a huge number of people of various communities and nationalities under different circumstances and with different objectives. A study of various travel accounts

provides a very interesting path to trace the resultant cross-cultural interactions which took place due to these willing or unwilling movements of people. During the process of colonization oral narratives almost lost their importance to the emerging dominance of the written tradition. But again in postcolonial studies oral narratives seem to regain their place of importance to which travel narratives respond spontaneously. Travel narratives do recognize the importance of oral storytelling and also identify oral narratives as a repository of information and history. Thus in a travel narrative many a times these oral narratives turn out to be the contact point between the traveler and the place. These oral narratives set a point of negotiation between the traveler and the place. According to Carl Thompson:

> "If all travel involves an encounter between self and other that is brought about by movement through space, all travel writing is at some level a record or product of this encounter, and of the negotiation between similarity and difference that it entailed." (Thompson 10)

In Biswanath Ghosh's works such a point of contact and further negotiations form at both the cultural and linguistic levels. In the prologue of his book, the author justifies the title as a response to his childhood memory and identification with the city of Chennai. He associates with the oral narratives which he heard as a child from his father. He writes, "…my first impression of Madras, was formed on the basis of his (author's father) accounts, was that it was a city of tamarind trees. No other detail registered because of my inborn love for the taste of tamarind." (Ghosh, *Tamarind City* xiv) As we have already mentioned that how we generally tend to respond to our memories in oral narratives based on our own identification and understanding of a travel subject. From the above example it is clear that in such cases manyatimes we see a new place based on our memory and this recognition may get reflected in a travel narrative as well. Regarding his response to his memory of his father's account of the city and the oral narratives which he heard from his parents while growing up gave him a nostalgic impression on his arrival at the city. He says, "At times, walking the streets of Chennai, I wonder if I am walking over footprints left behind by my father way back in 1976." (Ghosh, *Tamarind City* xiv).

In his works Ghosh has tried to establish a kind of previous connection with the city of his quest. The connection seems to serve as the foundation for his works. He says, "As a child I would pay a visit nearly every year with my parents to see my grandmother, always taking the steam pulled Toofan Express from Kanpur, where I was growing up. But I absorbed almost nothing of Calcutta from those trips. The memories that I have relate mostly to our stay in the homes of various paternal uncles and aunts, who were scattered across the city and took turns in looking after my grandmother." (Ghosh, *Longing Belonging* 1) though he confesses, that "Calcutta, at best, had been a piece of old furniture stored away in the attic." (Ghosh, *Longing Belonging* 1), but at the same time his book relates his quest to understand the city by exploring its arteries and the people who are invariable parts of it. In *Aimless in Banaras: Wanderings in India's Holiest City* (2019) we get the accounts from a boatman along with the renowned professors of the Banaras Hindu University (BHU). From the stories and memories of 'extraordinary' people to the most 'ordinary' people he tries to extract the story and the collective memory of the city. In his travelogues Ghosh has tried to reconstruct the city in his memories. The interviewees of his travel narratives have also tried to reconstruct the city from their memories in their oral narratives which they have related to the author, be it Sunil Gangopadhyay on Calcutta or Kashinath Singh on Banaras or be it the comments of Muthiah, the Madrasman, on Chennai and Colombo.

A journey begins when we set one foot beyond our door step. This one step is actually our first step to run into a series of encounters of different tastes. By different, here we would understand our difference with 'the other'. At this juncture we may smell a sense of stereotyping but with a sense of hope for negotiation which brings a positive rather an optimistic note towards coping up with the cultural otherness. Ghosh talks about his encounter with a *Sikh* gentleman in the train, who seem to have quite a lot of stereotypical notions about the city of Chennai as well as about the people from the Southern states of India. This gentleman seems to believe that there is no life in Chennai and thus it is impossible to live there. He also seems to consider the case of civility of the people from the south Indian states as timidity or cowardice. (Ghosh, *Tamarind City* xviii) But while this whole conversation there is no display of aggression rather there is a possibility of negotiation in case of a debate based on experience. The author being a journalist reports this incident. He leaves it upon the readers to value judge the same.

Thus along with the sense of otherness there is also an understanding for that cultural otherness whereas, while discussing his connection with Calcutta, he emphasizes on the process of retracing his childhood memories of visiting the city with his parents during vacations. Thompson argues that this 'principle of attachment' may work at different levels and in different ways. He adds that generally travel writers find the use of simile at their direct disposal and thus, make a good use of it. (Thompson 68) It sometimes gives the readers a good ground for identifying and then assimilating the unknown with the known experiences and encounters of the travel writing. Experience of places, people and cultures could mostly be understood as a balanced blend of familiar and unfamiliar aspects. It is impossible for a single traveler to narrate the complete picture of a place, its people and culture. The narration of the traveler's experiences and encounters of a place, people and culture would thus tend to be a partial perception of the same. Thus we may say that it would be foolish to generalize a particular place and the culture of the communities of that place from the accounts of a traveler. But of course the importance of reading a travel narrative lies in the fact that they are capable of giving us the part of the larger picture of the unknown. In other words we may say that travelogues are not a general or the whole representation of the world and its realities, but a representation of a particular viewpoint which is just a part of the larger perspective of the reality of the world which consists of little dreams and aspirations of the individuals of a particular community, that in turn helps the reader to get the pulse of the place to a certain extent.

In his Author's note Ghosh has mentioned very clearly that the book actually is the documentation of his experiences and encounters of the city "between the spring of 2011 and the spring of 2013". (Ghosh, *Longing Belonging* ix) These experiences and encounters have helped the author to connect with the city of his memories and has also taken him beyond that. He says, "I have never looked at Calcutta that way. I have hardly known Calcutta for that matter. My visits to the city, first as a boy and much later as a son-in-law, have been too brief and protected to look beyond the visible."(Ghosh, *Longing Belonging* 12) He frankly admits the limitations of his childhood memories regarding the city and also states the reason for that. Thus in his quest to understand the city he takes up the journey to the places where he never went before. In his encounters with the people in these places has helped him in weaving a cityscape based on the stories of past told by the inhabitants of the city. He also refers to how the historical places become "the treasure house of stories". (Ghosh, *Tamarind City* 30) in this context a comment made by an army officer seems to be very significant, who was posted at Fort St. George in Chennai, he

says that the life of an army officer is full of travelling and thus is like a repository of anecdotes from different parts of the country and from the different communities they mingle with in the due course of their transferable job. (Ghosh, *Tamarind City* 15) Thus stories are seem to be everywhere and as a traveler to get hold of the bigger story of the city it becomes important for the traveler to learn to read a city through the stories and anecdotes that are related to it.

Both Individual memory and collective memory are dynamic in nature. Memory of any kind involves real experiences and events along with an understanding of the same in the current context. It could be very well argued that manyatimes memory also displays a kind of selective nature in terms of what to remember and thus is liable to any kind of change, but at the same time "acknowledging memory as subjectively (or socially) reconstructive does not mean that it is per definition unreliable and that the notion of truth is inapplicable." (Altanian 13) In other words we might say that memory could be a truthful account of past and thus is deeply related to the history, which in turn makes it responsible towards the past it is relating to. We must not neglect the fact that memory refers back to certain social relations and events like memory related to certain dates and events. For instance, in his interview to Ghosh, Sankar mentions his experience of war during 1942, he then refers back to his early memories of public transit in Chennai and then tries to compare it with the current scenario and he follows the same process while comparing the current education system with the previous one. (Ghosh, *Tamarind City* 208-209) Sankar reconstructs the city from his memory on the basis of these points of social references and he follows the same pattern while comparing the city of his memories with the current cityscape of Chennai. In this case the stored memory functioned as a storehouse of knowledge. This knowledge refers to the postcolonial history of a particular cityscape and gives the listeners a firsthand record of the previous cityscape of the same city. With the narrator of the story based on his/ her memory the audience/ the reader gets the chance to stand face to face with both past and present and in the process establishes a connection with the narrator. Story telling by responding to one's memory is a medium to establish a direct social connection between the narrator and the listener.

Traveling experiences might sometimes turnout to be quite bewildering for the traveler as they might be drastically different from what the traveler might have experienced till date. This could be truer when it comes to the travelling of a completely unknown place, people and their culture, but sometimes it could be true for the cases where the place may be not so unknown to the traveler. Thus travel experiences even to a considerable known place might also turn out to be estranging some times. This estrangement might take place in different forms ranging from horror, despair to a sense of absolute delight. According to Carl Thompson under such circumstances the traveler sometimes looses the language and fails to express himself/herself while documenting such an experience or encounter. Ghosh says, "…even planned books rarely go as per plan." (Ghosh, *Aimeless in Banaras* 47) Thompson also adds that at this juncture the author faces "two challenges, of comprehension and of communication.." (Thompson 67) The objective of a travel writer is to make sense of his/her own experiences and to relate the same experiences and encounters of the travel to the reader in an identifiable manner.

While we discuss and talk about stories of experiences and encounters in terms of their importance as the historical repositories the question of authenticity haunts us, as the postcolonial world comfortably tends to deny any possibility of oral documentation. Thus the authenticity of once memory and hence one's story are always brought under

scrutiny. To deal with the issue of truthfulness and authenticity travel writers generally tend to use the phrases like 'I went', 'I saw', 'I spoke' and many such first person verb forms. From the above quotes it is clear that Ghosh's words are also not an exception in this regard. The use of first person verb forms help the authors to exercise the capacities of an eye-witness, by emphasizing the presence of the author at the very moment he/she is trying to discuss. In other words this could be considered as a process to claim an ownership of the experiences and the encounters of the author as a traveler. Despite the efforts of the author to prove his/her narratives as the authentic one the sense of suspicion remains till the end. But on the other hand reading a travel narrative may also engage the reader with the author on the basis of belief and trust. Also through this use of first person verb forms the narrator tries to articulate the world of his/her own thoughts and feelings. For instance Ghosh makes an ironic comment relating physical labor with being poor and rich. (Ghosh, *Aimless in Banaras* 20) He makes several significant comments on life and death in his works. While discussing the cremation grounds of Banaras and Calcutta especially in the context of Banaras he relates his meditations and philosophical understandings of the human cycle of life and the concept of Shiva in this regard. During his conversation with Kailash, who says, "…sometimes I carry burning wood (from a pyre) home even to cook. Only last night we cooked rice and daal and chokha on wood from a pyre." (Ghosh, *Aimless in Banras* 114) and on hearing the author reacts, "…I would say you are Shiva!" (Ghosh, *Aimless in Banras* 114)

In the process of preserving, telling and listening stories language plays an important role, also language cannot be considered separately from the cultural aspect. In fact language is not just a means of communication but also a cultural vehicle of the respective community. While discussion on travel narratives how can we ignore the linguistic aspect of the new encounters and points of negotiations. Ghosh gives us a glimpse of this otherness of the language according to the place and the people who use it. He talks about a simple English word 'Mansion'. The general impression related to the word does not match with Ghosh's encounter with it on his arrival at Chennai. He relates, "The mansion, I discovered, is the common name for a lodge meant for bachelors and single men. I subsequently got to learn that there were scores of single men in Chennai who had attained old age living in these mansions." (Ghosh, *Tamarind City* xx) Similarly there are stories regarding the origin of certain words for instance the word dubash has come into existence from the word *dobhash* or the interpreter. (Ghosh, *Tamarind City* 49). Similar is the case of origin of the word nautch that came from the simple word *naach*. (Ghosh, Longing Belonging 197) These instances highlight the stories of postcolonial linguistic formation of new words and new connotations of the words of our day-to-day understanding of the postcolonial linguistic experiences and encounters.

Travel narratives are too fluid a genre to have a specific definition of its own. Also its fuzzy boundaries as a genre liquefy it in terms of specifications. Many travel narratives carry certain geographical details to emphasize on the aspect of authenticity of the narrative. This is not a new practice. As there are some evidences of travelers to keep a record of the geographic details of the places they have been to. This reminds us of travelers like Al-beruni, who has recorded every geographical detail of the place he got to visit in India. He has also added description of a particular geographic location as described by many ancient Indian scriptures and texts. For example, he says, "The holy much venerated ponds are in the cold mountains around Meru. The following information regarding them is found in both the *Vâyu* and the *Matsya Purâòas…*" (Sachau 551) In the

case of geographic description Ghosh's works are also not an exception; in his works he has given a vivid description of the roads and streets. Ghosh not only give the proper geographic location of the street or lane or road he is talking about, but at the same time he describes his feelings and experiences on seeing the events taking place in a street once at a time. Following is the description of what he saw on a Pongal afternoon near his mansion within a few hours of his arrival in Chennai, "That afternoon, when I ventured into the adjacent street in search of a mobile phone connection, I ran into a sea of people. …The men look menacing with their thick moustaches. The women wore flowers in their hair and on their faces sweat-smudged talcum powder or a yellow tan left behind by turmeric paste. I had never thought the term 'rubbing shoulders' could be so literal. I began to feel giddy. …I felt like a child lost in a village fair who was desperately trying to spot his parents. …The main road turned out to be South Usman Road, and the street branching off it, which nearly choked me, Ranganathan Street." (Gosh, *Tamarind City xxi*) Such city mapping seems to be a prominent feature of Ghosh's works. In another instance he is giving a brief postcolonial mapping of Dharmatala and says, "DHARMATALA is one of the first neighborhoods to come up in Clive's Calcutta, separated from the calm of the Maidan by the busy Chowringhee Road. …The taxi drops me at Metro Cinema on Chowringhee Road. From there I turn into SN Banerjee Road and begin my search." (Ghosh, *Longing Belonging* 75) Ghosh also refers to some monuments and buildings and locations looking for the postcolonial history that is preserved in architecture. Bitter and Weber would say, "ARCHITECTURE CAN CARRY MEANING, hold memories, and make history….Such histories live most tangibly at the scale of the city, but they are also expressed at a national level, where architecture can be deployed to reinforce or to challenge collective social memory." (Bitter and Weber 39). In his quest to trace back the ever changing postcolonial cityscapes of India like Chennai and Calcutta he has referred to the history of forts like Fort St. George of Chennai, where he found the evidences of the beginning of postcolonial India and Fort William of Calcutta that witnessed so many ups and downs in shaping the postcolonial cityscape of Calcutta. Ghosh has also taken a look into churches and cemeteries that too had a story of postcolonial India to narrate.

Ghosh has talked a lot about certain landmarks of a city, from the 'holiest' to the 'unholiest' in his books. In *Aimless in Banaras* he talks a lot about Vishwanath Gali, the lane which leads the pilgrims to the famous temple of Kashi Vishwanath, in *Longing Belonging* he speaks of Sonagachhi as well as of College Street and in *Tamarind City* he elaborates Mylapore. He describes Mylapore through smells and scents and says, "I smell the flowers and the vegetables even before the autorickshaw driver has deposited me on the edge of one of the four streets that form a rectangle around the Kapaleeswara temple." (Ghosh, *Tamarind City* 126). In a similar fashion he describes the Kalighat Road of Calcutta and says, "…the road, which is lined up with shops selling items of worship, shops selling musical instruments, shops selling household needs, such as umbrellas and steel trunks, hawkers selling vegetables…" (Ghosh, *Longing Belonging* 69) While waiting for his turn to enter the Vishwanath temple he narrates his experience in the queue and says, "Chatter fills up the alley containing the queue. My ears can tell that Tamils, Telugus and Bengalis – in that order – outnumber the others. The voices, irrespective of the language, betray impatience…" (Ghosh, *Aimless in Babaras* 12) All these streets and lanes have their own distinct smells, population and above all their own signature stories of pain and pleasure to tell, hidden by a façade of their face value. In the documentation of Sonagachhi

of Calcutta the author comes face to face with the story of origin of the street which says, "I introduced myself, upon which he (an elderly taxi driver at the taxi stand) had put the news paper aside and smiled. 'The street has a name, Durga Charan Mitra Street, but people know it as Sonagachhi. Do you know why it is called Sonagachhi?' 'No, I don't.' 'That's because at the other end of the street is the *mazaar'* – tomb – 'of an Islamic preacher called Sunaullah Ghazi, who was known by the locals as Sona Pir Baba. It is because of him that this place came to be known as Sonagachhi…'" (Ghosh, *Longing Belonging* 276-77) This instance depicts the fact that an oral narrative holds the history of a place and how every landmark has a story to tell. In the same section of this book when the author engages in a further conversation with the same taxi driver, Shankar, he relates his story as well as the stories of the people of this particular street. He also shares a lot of his experiences and encounters, with the author and in the process we get to see how the author connects himself and his readers with the oral narration of one's experiences and encounters which manyatimes turn out to be a part of the bigger history of a particular street.

Such landmarks also include places like Coffee House in Calcutta and Pappu's Tea Shop in Banaras, where stories are born. Both spots are famous as *adda* zones. While talking of Coffee House the author writes, "The Coffee House too is an institution by itself; not just because it belongs to College Steert, but also because it has institutionalised the Bengali's favourite pastime: *adda*. …your credentials as a Bengali intellectual aren't impressive enough if you haven't done *adda* at Coffee House at some point in your life. …Many a famous Bengali had once upon a time has spent his evenings in Coffee House…" (Ghosh, *Longing Belonging* 47-48) This landmark of postcolonial Calcutta is quite comparable to Pappu's Tea Shop which is also considered as "an institution" (Ghosh, *Aimless in Babaras* 195), where the intellectuals of Banaras like Kashinath Singh come to have a cup of tea and then pen down the stories about the city in the books like *Kashi ka Assi*, that is weaved around the characters of Banaras whom the writer had encountered at Pappu's Tea shop. In search of story of the cities Ghosh has explored these landmarks as well and have tried to dig into their history and the events which they have witnessed.

These stories took Ghosh to the families who have added to the history of the city of his quest. The story of these families contains a big chunk of the history of the particular city. Stories of the Appah family, told by one of the family members, contain the history of the formation of the city Chennai. Appah family was the pioneer family which settled in Madras (Currently known as Chennai). The family history is very much like the grand beginning and flourishing of a single family and then the financial decline of the same, though it sounds like a very clichéd kind of a story but in the story of ups and downs of a family contains the story of a child and his experiences of the city while he was growing up depicting a picture of the ups and downs in the life of a city as well. (Ghosh, *Tmarind City* 52-56) Similarly on the other hand the city of Calcutta which is also known for its signature sweets especially *rosogolla*, whose history is actually the story of the Das family. Again the author speaks to one of the family members, who relates an oral history of the family as well as the history of the sweet and thus a chunk of the postcolonial history of the city which is still preserved in the form of family stories. (Ghosh, *Longing Belonging* 221-238) Be it the language, the landmark, the people, the locality, a family, an individual or even food habits all these parameters are involved in understanding the history of a place. Every story hidden in relation to all these parameters is one of the stories which the particular place has to tell.

In *Aimless in Banaras* Ghosh points out, "Each man has a different story and different ancestry, but right now they are collectively reaching out to their respective ancestors through a priest who is guiding them through the rituals mechanically." (Ghosh, *Aimless in Banaras* 94) A city begins at a certain landmark and then gradually spreads whereas; the place of its origin remains neglected. As a priest a traveler tries to unearth the stories of the past form the neglected city as well as from the upcoming and emerging new sections of a city. Ghosh as a traveler has tried to dig into the postcolonial construction and reconstruction of a few Indian cities by collecting the fragments of history in the oral narratives of the people and the places which came up while responding to their individual memories to draw a bigger picture of collective memory of the city itself.

Adamas University, Barasat, Kolkata

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