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Journeys and Meta-Journeys: Negotiating Travel Writing in *Sree Parabat's* 'Novels in Motion'

Ananya Saha

Travel writing as a genre tends to elude the practice of academic pigeonholing. Debates over what qualifies as travel writing par excellence, who is a traveller proper, acceptable ratio of fact and fiction et al have been engendered and proliferated. This paper is an attempt to create another lacuna in these porous walls of from the perspective of historical fiction. Herein, the texts that stand to craft this aperture are the works of the Bengali author named Prabir Kumar Goswami, alias Sree Parabat.

Sree Parabat (1927-2010) (SP hereafter), a proficient yet underrated Bengali novelist of the twentieth century has penned more than fifty novels in his lifetime. Among them, almost thirty can be identified as historical novels. He was an employee of the Calcutta Police force who retired as an Assistant Commissioner. With a nom de plume, he was an author by night; perhaps to avoid formal complications regarding his public office. Once celebrated enough to be adapted into successful Bengali cinematic rendition, most of his books are currently out of print. The author's son, Ambarish Goswami maintains an archival blog about his father's works. That and my personal correspondence via e-mail with the blogger have been my two faithful sources.

At a glance, the author's range of interest expands from the ancient age of Harshavardhana to the Delhi Sultanate; the Mughal empire to the Rajput dynasty. In most of these texts, the motif of travel is pivotal. In this paper, I plan to concentrate on a few of his novels that are written in the backdrop of the Mughal era. Additionally, I have taken the liberty of translating passages from the novels, wherever necessary. They are;

1. *Aravalli theke Agra* (1965) (From Aravalli to Agra)
2. *Mumtaj Duhita Jahanara* (1972) (Jahanara, the Daughter of Mumtaj) (Translation: Mine)¹
3. *Chitorgarh* (1977) (The Fort of Chitor)²

Presumably, travel has always been conspicuous in historical novels, irrespective of the language. It is not to claim that the other sub-genres do not incorporate travel tropes. But historical fiction, in certain instances allow grandiloquence in terms of scope. As a corollary, the great journey motif can be readily subsumed into the plot owing to war, trade, pilgrimage, royal marriage, exile and more. SP's novels show a reluctance to be stratified by strict generification, occupying the penumbra between historical and psychological. The author does not solely write about grand exploits by a personae of significance. Often, they are tales of ordinary individuals through whom one perceives the grand proportions of the plot. These narratives run parallel to the stories of grandeur, intersecting at the crucial junctions. There are reasons that one might call SP's works as 'novels in motion'. In my attempt to justify, these are the issues I would endeavour to address.

1. 'How' of the Journey: The three different modes, namely the physical, psychological, fantastical and their ramifications.
2. 'Who' in the Journey: The dialectics of the 'male' journey (ing) and the female journey (ing).
3. 'When' is the Journey? : The post-colonial temporality of the author vis-à-vis fictive pre-colonial visionary imaginative scope in the narratives.

Although the Mr Goswami (Jr.) could not specify the reason behind his father's choice of the pseudonym, I propose it was not random. 'Parabat' is the Sanskrit word for a 'pigeon', the messenger birds. The author uses this trope in the novel *Mumtaz Duhita Jahanara*. While discussing his works, I would proceed in the chronological order of publication. *Aravalli theke Agra* (From Aravalli to Agra) was published in 1965. The title of the text implies movement from one place to another. The era in which the author has set his novel is the late 16th century with the Mughal emperor Akbar on throne. The plot commences after Akbar carries out his successful conquest of Chittor in 1568. Rana Udai Singh flees to Aravalli where he had created the new royal residence at Udaipur. In the preface, the author states;

Historical events cannot be altered. To do so, one has to travel back into the womb of the past and try anew. Fortunately or unfortunately, humans lack the capacity to do so. Hence, that which had happened is beyond human ministrations. The Rajput history is no exception. There past is grand and proud. But like every other race, they witnessed defeat, which is all too natural. Because with the truthful stories of the rise and fall of great personae and races; history is documented. (SP) (Translation: Mine)

It is curious how the author debunks the conventional expectation of readers by saying that 'truthful stories' are the creators of history and not vice versa. He continues;

Unlike Rana Pratap who was a courageous exception within the Rajput royal lineage in those days; there must have been many brave personalities who remained unsung by history. History has remained mute about them. As a representative of those nameless valiant men and women, certain characters have assumed central roles in this novel. The historical personae have been referred to in order to highlight the significance of these characters. But it has been endeavoured to keep the references to historical events and personalities as factually intact as possible. (SP) (Translation: mine)

Presumably, the author himself has not attempted to create a piece in 'travel writing' in all its glory. Perhaps it is not possible as well as the author writes of times where his presence would be obviously impossible. Paul Fussell, in his conventional discourse of 'travel writing' defines the genre as '... a sub-species of memoir in which the autobiographical narrative arises from the speaker's encounter with distant or unfamiliar data, and in which the narrative –unlike that in a novel or a romance–claims literal validity by constant reference to actuality.' (Fussell 203) By that definition, any claim on behalf of the novel to 'travel writing' is discarded. Through my personal correspondence, I have come to know that the author has grown up in different places within West Bengal and Bangladesh. He has also travelled as necessitated by his profession. But the catalyst for his literary production has been purely imaginative. Yet, to singularly consider Fussell's definition might narrow one's perspective. Carl Thompson argues Fussell himself is limited by his own prejudices as he considered travel writing a repository of lesser merits. (Thompson 212)

The first novel is divided into three sections: 'Mewar', 'Agra' and 'Fatehpur Sikri'. The protagonist is a nineteen year old Rajput boy named Jeet Singh. His father Ajit Singh dies in battle, bequeathing his sword to his son in his final moments, along with a word of advice. He recommends him to favour his intelligence in future battles over the Rajput code of honour. Jeet is bewildered as it is unthinkable for the honourable Rajput soldier. Soon, he leaves Chittor and joins a nomadic artillery faction. The group comprises of more than five hundred gunslingers and their families who are physically journeying to Aravalli. The band of gunmen hails from Kalpi. Loyal servants for generations to the Shishodiya clan, they have been exiled for long in order to protect the secrets of their guerrilla strategy. For some characters such as Jeet, the journey continues beyond Aravalli. For Leelavati who is the daughter of the former leader Gopal Singh and Jeet's love interest, fate has much movement in store. Jeet decides to become a spy for Pratap alias Kika, the son of Udai Singh. Mary Louise Pratt in her book titled *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* discusses her idea of a 'contact zone';

[...] social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today [...] 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 travellers and "travelees," not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power. (Pratt 4-7)

It is possible to identify a semblance of a 'contact zone' in this novel, especially on the plane of physical travel. Herein the phrase 'asymmetrical relations of power' gains significance. In an instance, knowledge or the lack of it debunks the conventional power imbalance. After joining the Mughal ranks as a spy, Jeet manoeuvres his way into becoming the royal favourite. But the emperor dabs his affection in a pinch of salt. In order to assess Jeet's loyalty, he invites him to a fencing duel. At one point during the confrontation, the emperor deliberately unhands his sword, feigning fatigue. This is how the passage proceeds.

Jeet recognized the golden opportunity. If he wanted, he could obliterate the Mughal Empire in a moment, within these secluded woods next to Sikri. Mewar would be safe with the foe's death. The Chittor fortress can be re-seized with much ease. Rana Pratap would be crowned as King and from his throne of Chittor; he would extend his dominion over the entire landmass of Hindustan [...] but no, he could not. If his contender is unarmed, he has learned how to strike him dead; especially if the other has uncovered his identity as an infiltrator. But the emperor is unaware of that. If he knew, he would not have invited him to a duel. Neither would he have thrown away his sword.

In a flash, Jeet interred his sword into the ground and stood still.

- 'Well done Jeet Singh.'
- 'You? Suddenly....'
- 'Yes. I quit all of a sudden testing you. Many have told me that you have come here as a spy. I was uncertain as well. Hence the invitation to duel. Now my doubts have been cleared. You must be thinking that I have acted like a fool. But no. Here, see.'

The emperor fished out a miniature gun that has been tucked away at his waist. Jeet has never seen such a miniscule gun and he could have sworn; only a handful of people in India have seen something like this.

The emperor smiles, 'I received this as a gift from a British priest. Brilliant piece of armoury, this one. Imagine, they are armed even if they are missionaries. Your sword could not have blocked the bullet.

Jeet regretted. He knew that even if the emperor was over-confident, if he would have attacked the moment he unhanded his sword, he probably would not have had the chance to fire his western weapon. Never. But he failed to seize the opportunity that was laid bare by the emperor's arrogance. In his hesitation of stooping lower than a spy, to the level of being a clandestine assassinator, he had let go of his chance. (SP 621-22) (Translation: mine)

Jeet is required to blend in with an unfamiliar socio-cultural context which he often does uncompelled. He is not ashamed to confess that he is awe of the emperor, whose personae is dynamic. When Rana Udai Singh flees Chittor, the two young generals Jaimalla and Patta defend the fortress till death. Jeet is speechless upon encountering their statues in Agra, erected upon the Emperor's order. It might have been a propagandist move on the administration's part. But Jeet's perception of the gesture is innocent. Although covert agent for Kika, he is also young and impressionable.

Pramod K. Nayar, in his essay titled "Touring Aesthetics: The Colonial Rhetoric of Travel Brochures Today" broaches the engaging idea of 'ontopology' which can add further nuance to Pratt's 'contact zone'. He writes, 'The body of the tourist becomes a new topos where the landscape finds another ontology, or existence. This kind of "ontopology" to borrow a Derridean portmanteau term, with its psychoanalytic imagery, is itself extremely fascinating for the problem of identity.' (Nayar 117) Although he refers to a first-hand tourist and travel brochures, it might be applicable to the travelling characters of SP. Jeet is not a tourist writing a first-hand travel account, yet his identity undergoes metamorphosis as he travels and explores throughout the narrative. The 'transculturation' which Pratt mentions perhaps occurs owing to this reason; as identified by Susan Bassnett in "The Empire, Travel Writing, and British Studies".

The writer acts as a kind of translator, reading the signs he encounters on his journey and endeavouring to translate them for his target reader. Indeed, it is helpful to think of travel writing as closely linked to translation, for a similar relationship obtains in that there are two distinct poles- the culture of the writer and the culture that is depicted, and only the writer has access to both.' (Bassnett 7)

Bassnett's argument is palpably directed to the traveller-writer and Jeet is only an imaginary figure. He travels, but does not narrate as the novel uses a third person omniscient narrator. It reverts to the idea of what qualifies as travel writing. Jan Borm differentiates between 'travel book' and 'travel writing' in his 'Defining Travel: On the Travel Book, Travel Writing and Terminology'. For him, 'travel writing' is a 'collective term for a variety of texts both fictional and non-fictional whose main theme is travel'. (Borm 13) Furthermore, Thompson argues, 'It will be apparent that the modern travel book is a flexible genre encompassing some highly diverse material. Its variant forms, indeed, arguably begin to stretch and problematize the definition of the genre...' (Thompson 19) Furthermore, the writer-narrator duality is further discussed;

[...] the travel book typically begins with the narrator setting out from his or her home, either in search of some specific goal or else generally seeking adventures, new experiences and interesting stories. On the road, and occupying the liminal position of traveller, the narrator undergoes important, possibly life-changing experiences, before returning home to be reintegrated into his or her own society. Usually, moreover, he or she returns enriched, either literally or metaphorically, by the journey; after all, the very fact that a narrative is subsequently produced is implicitly a statement that these adventures had some significance. (Thompson 17)

We notice that he has specifically used the term 'narrator' and not writer. Hence, the possibility remains that these two personas might be different from each other. Furthermore, the work might not necessarily be a documentation of the first person authentic travel experience, yet can be a piece in travel writing.

The duality of the writer-narrator identity is further queered as we come to the second novel titled *Mumtaj Duhita Jahanara* (1972). Herein, the narration is in first person executed by the crown princess Jahanara as she writes her journal over the years. With this novel, we begin to look at the second tier of journey in SP's works, the psychological. The protagonist is a journeying female figure. Unlike the earlier novel, herein the lead character is a historical figure of significance. Jahanara (1614-1681) was the child of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan and his wife Mumtaj Begum. Jahanara has been the cynosure of literary attention over centuries. Andrea Butenschön, the Oriental scholar and translator from Sweden has written two historical novels about the royal figure in English. Katherine Lasky has also penned a volume dedicated to Jahanara as a part of her *Royal Diaries* series. SP allows Jahanara be the mouthpiece of her own story as she journeys through life, cooped up in the royal harem.

In the former novel, Leelavati travels from Chittor to Aravalli, then to Dholpur as the wife of the aged general Jainal Singh. Till then, her travels are bereft of personal agency. But after she is widowed, she cross-dresses, adopts a male persona and travels to Fatehpur Sikri in disguise with hopes of reconciliation with Jeet. Jahanara travels too, but within boundaries of royal safeguard as the capital is shifted between cities. But her journey is mostly psychological as her sensitive consciousness takes imaginary flights to her late mother's quarters in Agra Fort when she is in Delhi, and to her estranged lover, King Chhatrasaal of Bundelkhand. The ornately bound journal which is a gift from her father becomes the repository of her repressed sexuality, which might be considered a meta-journey. Additionally, she enjoys rare escapades aided by Koel, her loyal lady-in-waiting. For both women, their first love is a sculptor who works at the site of the Taj Mahal. In order to meet him, Jahanara disguises herself as a common Rajput woman. But, can one afternoon's escapade from the palace by Jahanara be called 'travel'? Following from Thompson's earlier argument where he refers to 'adventures of significance'; the journey is crucial to the characters themselves and to the plot of the novel. For Jahanara, it is a once in a lifetime event, an instance of active sexuality on her part as she goes in person to meet her consort.

The relationship between princess and her lady-in-waiting adds another interface to the idea of the 'contact zone'. Sarah Mills writes in her seminal work, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel writing and Colonialism* about how the liaison between the colonizer and the colonized is transformed when the author is female. In this case, the author is not but the narrator is female. Mills argues;

These narrative positions are ambivalent, both drawing on the dominant discursive formations and yet being excluded from full adoption of them because of their position within

the discourse of the 'feminine'. Through elements such as humour, self-deprecation, statements of affiliation, and descriptions of relationships, which stress the interpersonal nature of travel writing, these texts constitute counter-hegemonic voices within colonial discourse. (Mills 22)

In the colonial discourse between the Mughal princess and her Rajput lady in waiting whose father served the Emperor's army, the contact zone is familiarized to the edge of intimacy. Jahanara dons the treasured garb of Koel's deceased sister during her escapade. After the completion of Taj Mahal, the artist is forbidden to create another such work of art and his right thumb is dismembering. While plagued by insanity, he is accompanied by Koel to his home in Bengal by the princess' permission who perhaps desires to live vicariously. Michel de Certeau in the work titled "Spatial stories" opines that 'every story is a travel story' (Certeau 89) and the very act of penning it down is a journey by itself, which might be a tad simplistic, broadening up the definition of 'travel writing' beyond critical reach. Yet, it might be pertinent for Jahanara and her narrative.

The third tier of travel is the fantastical or supernatural, even these terms are not strictly interchangeable. In the first novel, as the herd of gunmen reach Udaipur and start settling down, the acting leader Yashvant Singh proposes a marriage between Jeet and Leela. But he is hindered as he journeys into the future through a vision, aided by the divine deity of Chittor who warns him against it. This is how the conversation between him and Chittoreshwari proceeds.

Yashvant felt ill even within his subconscious state of mind. He pressed his temples with both his hands. Just no, it seems like he heard the words of God. Insurmountable words of God. No matter how much one tries to override them, one would be defeated.

- What are you saying? What did you just say, mother? This cannot be true. If that happens, Leela would not survive.

Yashvant does not receive a reply. The unknown woman keeps mum. Slowly he raised his head. Batting his eyes open, he realized that he had gained his sight back. The western sky is bloodied with the rays of the setting sun. He looked around frantically. No. No one is here. He stood up and searched thoroughly. No one.

In replacement, the air is heavy with a fragrant aroma. The scent overpowers the mind like her melodious voice. Yashvant is familiar with this aroma. It has filled his nostrils every time he has visited the holy abode of the mother of Chittor. He cried. He wept like child. He has been hurt many a times in his life. But never has he cried like this. These were the tears of submission, annihilating one's ego, pride and arrogance. (SP 242-43) (Translation: mine)

The event of an encounter with the deity recurs in the third novel, *Chitorgarh*. The protagonist, Prince Hamveer is a prominent travelling character in the novel. Chronologically among the three novels, this one is set further back in the past, during the era of the Delhi Sultanate. Hamveer has been brought up in exile, owing to the Sultanate attack. In one of his solo journeys, Hamveer has an encounter with a female deity who challenges him to a duel. Though he is defeated, she bestows him with the blessed ancestral sword of Bappaditya. But it is not Hamveer's exploits which is the fulcrum. Bhawani, a distant female relative of the prince has inherent clairvoyant capacities, augmenting her impalpable journeys. The prince dreams of restoring the glory of Chittor in all its tangibility. But Bhawani claims that she sees the fortress of Chittor in her visions while grounded in Kelwara. This is how the conversation goes when she admits her powers to Hamveer.

Bhawani suddenly turned grim. She came closer to Hamveer and admitted, 'You know Hamveer, I can see Chitorgarh.'

Hamveer, utterly shocked, asked, 'What? What did you say?'

'Yes. I really can. See, Chittor lies in that direction, right? When all of you are asleep at night, I go to the rooftop of the palace all by myself. I stare into the darkness. At first, I can see nothing. Then slowly, I see garlands of light. Then you know, I am able to see everything ... I see Padmini, sitting still and weeping. I see the engulfing flames of *jawahar brata*. No, do not think I imagine all these. I see them as I see you right now. I see the battles of Gora and Badal, I see your father, who looks exactly like you. Would you please ask your mother for me, if that is true? [...] It is alright for you to disbelieve, but please do not poke fun at me.' (SP 26-27) (Translation: mine)

Bhawani perhaps acts as a surrogate divine presence. She possesses a quality akin to shamanism which not only makes her capable to see the past, but also the present. If it had just been the past, one might have dismissed her visions as figments of overactive imagination. Bhawani strongly claims that neither are they dreams, nor they are tall tales. She claims that she sees a young widowed girl who roams morosely in the halls of the Chittor fortress. She claims that the girl is the daughter of the enemy King Maldev who serves under the Sultan. Apparently everyone is rude to the widowed 'unlucky' girl. Bhawani says that she is torn between her sympathy for the girl and disgust towards Maldev's traitorous family. Incidentally, her words turn out to be true as Hamveer's bride from Chittor reveals that she had been previously widowed. Unfortunately, Bhawani's propensity towards fantastical exploits claims her life as she slips from the palace gable while trying to visualize Chittor.

The author has the advantage of situated in posterity from where he fictively gazes at pre-colonial ages. With agency of the supernatural omniscient presence and exceptional mortal exploits, the author perhaps tries his hands at what might be identified as proto-secularism with the hint of a nationalist nostalgia. When the seemingly unworthy son, Sujan Singh of the aged king Ajay Singh leaves Mewar, the majestic presence of the deity gifts the latter a glimpse of the future. But whether the vision is rooted in documented historical discourse remains unsubstantiated.

- ... Sujan would go on to be the progenitor of a powerful dynasty, whom the posterity would know as the Marathas. They would rule this land by the glory of their saffron flags. Even Rajasthan would admit defeat in confrontation with them. But that day is far away still.

- Is this how you bless us, divine mother? That the sun of Mewar would set?

- You are Ajay Singh, the Rana of Mewar. But how important is Mewar in comparison to this great land of Bharat? The ethnic war between many races is going to evolve this land. And when that is done, there would be no discrimination. There would be neither Hindu, nor Muslim. All would have just one identity, the natives of Bharat. (SP 50) (Translation: mine)

The words may sound a tad exaggerated; especially coming from character that assumes divinity. But the expression is tamed rendered credible when Koel discusses her personal philosophy with Jahanara.

- Koel, have you ever thought of this nation's future?

- How do I comprehend such high thinking, princess? We are all busy with our personal interests.
- I would not believe you even if you say that. You have never worried about this nation's future?
- Let me be plain, princess. No, I am not anxious in the least bit.
- Of course. In fact, you are a Hindu. Why would it tug your heart if the Muslim faith is being polluted?
- But you did not ask me about faith. You asked about the nation.
- But they are inextricably intertwined here. Aurangzeb's kind of faith would rupture the peace of the Hindu subjects. You do not know how terrible the consequences of that can be.
- I have thought of that, princess. Than I have found a strange solution for myself. If even the others are not content by it, I am at peace thinking the same.
- What solution is that?
- Princess, in the backdrop of all eternity, whether it is Aurangzeb, or the Mughal dynasty; they are immaterial. This world as if with its magnificent pace is running towards its destiny. When it reaches the destination, it will achieve consummation. And to reach it, the pace that it has adopted is bound to create certain sparks. Personalities like Aurangzeb create these dynamics. Perhaps this is means to a better end. The strength of that pace is amplified by this.

I stared at Koel unrelentingly, vanquished. I felt she is on a higher plane than I am. Softly I said, 'Koel, you are a philosopher.' (SP 172-3) (Translation: mine)

Sachidananda Mohanty in 'Beyond the Imperial Eye', the introduction to the collection of essays titled *Travel Writing and the Empire* claims that by looking at the 'pre-history of an imperial discourse', we are robbed off the 'lazy comfort of teleology'. (Mohanty xii) He argues that 'travel is not always foredoomed to a colonial gaze and can aspire to look beyond the imperial eye...' (Mohanty xviii). SP's works, situated prior to the commencement of the Colonial Discourse, whether qualified as travel writing or otherwise, possibly justifies Mohanty's claim by their own merit, through the dialectics of travel read anew.

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End Notes:

1. The translation for the other two titled have been provided in Mr, Ambarish Goswami's blog. The translation of this particular title is mine.
2. In the blog, both the transliterated and the translated title use the spelling 'Chitor' for the place. But for the rest of the article, I have chosen to use the more accepted spelling 'Chittor'.

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BIO-NOTE

Ananya Saha, PhD Scholar, Centre for English Studies, JNU. Fellow under the UGC -SAP-DSA (I) programme for the department. Research area comprises of Japanese popular culture, with a focus on manga and globalization. Other academic interests include Translation theory and studies, Fandom studies, Irish Literature, African- American Literature, Feminist studies, Performative theory, and 20th Century Bengali Novel.

Email: aries.jnu@gmail.com