

The *Prawah* and the *Prabhav*: A Critical Study of the Inner and the Outer Travel Quests in Select Travelogues on the Ganga

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The River Ganga has enamoured a number of travellers and explorers who have made documentaries and written narratives about their experience with the majestic river. The stature of the quest with regard to the river has evolved since the past as in the preceding centuries the expedition was based on finding its source, and historically James Baillie Fraser is known for having first discovered the sources of the Ganga and the Yamuna. It may also be noted that until the early nineteenth century the true source of the four rivers was not known besides the two rivers, the Indus and the Brahmaputra. However in the contemporary times it has garnered attention for reaching the origin that includes an arduous journey amongst the non paved pathways. The origin cannot be a specific point from where the river emerges as the truest origin of any entity cannot be known physically. The inner and the outer quest relates to the assimilation of the self with the other. The two primary texts for study include Dennison Berwick's *A Walk Along the Ganges* and Steven Darian's *A Ganges of the Mind* that will be studied comparatively in context of their motives and conclusions. The paper proposes to study these written travel narratives in the manner of their intent in exploring the Ganga, one by means of walking along its banks and the other by probing the inner journey of the mind that comes across as a projection and not as the lived experience of the traveller.

A river is a perpetual traveller that is destined to flow into the depths of the ocean which stands still, and its everlasting flow has been the binding factor between the space of historical past, the present and the oncoming future. The *prawah*¹ refers to the flow of the river that has certain stages within its journey before reaching the sea, likewise the human lives evolve enclosing different stages and finally moves towards completion with physical death. It has many other metaphorical meanings that relate to the disruption of essence and the move towards existence as a being, or the realization of the fluidity of time space phenomenon. The *prabhav*² here refers to the cultures abounding the river Ganga and also the river's impact on the traveller as an individual being. The paper attempts to analyse whether the travellers themselves undergo the *prawah* or just retain the *prabhav* of their journeys. It is to ascertain the link

between the cultural and spiritual quest through the medium of river travel that not only includes physical displacement but is also inclusive of the inner journey. It will dwell on the mode of travel writing that eases the burden of literary narration which is not about furnishing plain details about the places the traveller visits, rather they engage in narrating the essence of their experience. So the traveller rather than being a mere receptor of knowledge thus becomes an agent of dissemination. Both the travelogues are written by foreigners and the motive of their quest for walking the Ganga differs: while one undertakes the journey to know more about the cultures of Ganga, the other is more interested in finding the unison between the East and West by employing Ganga as the thread of inquiry.

Pilgrimage is an important concept and a practice in relation to rivers and Ganga's origin holds special significance. It has been ascertained by some intellectuals that pilgrimage contributed towards determining the geography of certain regions and the established places of reverence denoted ritual bound spaces that became religiously, socially, economically and even politically influential. However, Makhan Jha differs in this context stating that the practice failed to "contribute to the empirical discourse of geography because its landscape was literary and subjective rather than literal and objective" (2). He also adds that the pilgrimage should "provide a gauge for measuring the complexity of societies and thereby play a part in constructing a typology of social forms" (3). While Victor Turner avers that pilgrimage takes place during the periods of "social breakdown" and calls it the "transitional periods" where the "pilgrims provide prototypes or pre-enactments of social patterns" (Jha 7). The traveler in this light carries the culture within him and is also in turn influenced by the others.

In *A Ganges of the Mind*, the author begins the journey from Rishikesh, and then towards the source making his intention clear by stating that in following the river from the beginning to the end he might come to know the "course of man's journeying". He also perceives the river as an embodiment of human life describing its flow as a witness to the rise and fall of empires and the struggle of power amongst them and their dissolution in the end mirroring river's mergence into the sea. Darian's journey is intended as internal and by travelling along the river he meditates on the river's course as a replication of the journey of the soul that is like a dew drop originating from the ocean and then becoming one with it (21). He gives an intriguing description of the Ganga's source saying:

It is a place of beginnings; for in Indian tradition, water-as a substance without shape-reminds us of the potential (*pralaya*) that all things have before they assume name and form... if only we could leave our yesterdays behind us: the iron habits, the image of ourselves that keeps us from reaching out beyond the prison of the mind. It is the illusion-the perception-of permanence, a perception shaped by language... so that we may see things not as we are but as they are. This is the true meaning of beginnings. (30)

On the surface of it, it denotes Indian spiritual philosophy but when one looks into it deeply- it comes across as a mere documentation and not his own experience. He engages in a discursive narration of it that transpires as the *prabhav* (narration). He himself encounters a near death experience when his bus hangs onto the hilly cliff and he feels it to be the “moment[s] between life and death”, where one begins to realise about the end, as man’s soul was born of water and shaped into a person later. There are two Gangas here one is the Ganga of water, the source of creation and that’s why sacred and the one of the mind that initiates the journey of consciousness, which is ideally the subject of travelogue but here it is the travel documentation that showcases the façade of inner experience.

In *Narmada: River of Beauty*, Vegad performs the circumambulation of the river Narmada and upon reaching the sea, he remarks philosophically that as the earth has three portions of water and one part land likewise the human physiology has the similar ratios too. And he asks whether “the throbbing of the sea” is the “heartbeat of Earth?” and that “we carry the sea inside us” (168). Now comparatively one may observe that in Darian’s description the shape of being is identified in terms of “iron habits”, “prison of the mind” and the “perception shaped by language”, whereas on reaching the sea, Vegad realizes the origin in actual terms. The beginning not only of the river but of the Time and this comes across as a deeper statement. Here the author has tried to engage with the *prawah* of life that is induced through travelling, and in Darian’s remark there is no felt experience of the self but a narrative of the borrowed term that he contextualizes within a certain framework.

In one of the travelogues on Ganga by Stephen Alter the concept of pilgrimage is dwelt upon critically apart from the religious piety. He dissociates from the idea of organised religion, saying it does not appeal to him and that his journey has not been undertaken as an act of devotion, he being an atheist, nonetheless he remarks that “doubt can often be as powerful a motive as belief”

(170). He sees himself as a pilgrim “who does not follow the prescribed tenets of any particular faith, but seeks to find the subtle and mysterious connections between human experience, mythological narratives, and natural history” (178). The travelogue is contemporary in nature as it mentions about the role of *kavars* that has not been mentioned in any of the recent travelogues on Ganga. He describes the group of kavars as a human river that carry the sacred water from Haridwar to other cities where the Gangajal is “presented as an offering to the lord Shiva, a rite of worship that re-enacts the myth of Ganga’s descent to earth” (122). The kavars in such a large number “seem unstoppable, like the swollen current of the Ganga itself. Their devotion reflects an unquestioning faith in god and a uniformity of belief” although he also agrees that the “ritual itself is innocent enough, carrying water from a river to a temple, but the symbolic force of all these men walking together gives the impression of a parade, a collective demonstration of power” (135). Theirs is the example of pilgrimage that is entwined with religion, faith and a personal quest ranging from material gains to getting accepted into the social denomination through the ritual. The kavars in reality hail mostly from the socially backward classes comprising of labourers, artisans, masons and others who choose to become the kavar in order to fulfil their wishes in terms of economy, family or work. During the month of monsoon they bring the water from Haridwar and some walk on foot while others cover the distance through vehicles and reach their destinations offering the Ganga to Shiva. However Alter’s journey is upstream that is towards the sources of the river known as the Char Dham Yatra. He observes that death as well as rebirth has formed an important part of the Hindu belief as the funeral pyres burn alongside the perpetual river’s flow. He describes the process of origin of the river Ganga in poetic terms saying:

By some accounts the moon is the true source of the Ganga, a circular vessel decanting her sacred waters into Shiv’s long tresses. As the moon spills its oblation from the night sky it gradually wanes, like a bowl of milk that is emptied of its contents, only to be refilled again and again. Shiv is often depicted with a crescent moon in his hair or surrounded by a pure white halo. As I sat and watched the full moon rise above the Bhagirathi Valley, reflecting off the white snow peaks and flowing river, I couldn’t help but imagine the goddess Ganga tumbling to earth, like a waterfall of light. (192)

The question arises regarding the choice of cross culture travel which Darian explains stating the contrast between the western world that prioritises

individuality, and India that values eternity. So the specific is placed against the general, initiating the author's awareness about understanding different selves that may have distinct language and concept of individuality, but are attuned to having universal values and spirituality. Although much had already been written about the Eastern wisdom he "wanted to experience for [him]self, to taste, to touch, to discover what role the great traditions and beliefs played in the normal course of people's lives" (Intro). But does travel quench one's curiosity to know the other- or does it end up setting up the queries within oneself. Being an American national he is already acquainted with the terms of individuality and the travel motive here is to learn more about the self, and to reintegrate his self with the larger world that he sees through the river Ganga in its final flow into the sea (19). However that quest of his does not resound with the reader. It comes across as a flagship of travelling along the Ganga and gathering information from the spiritual gurus. Later he confesses his position of privilege when he checks into the Taj Mahal hotel in Bombay and on the way comes across scavengers loading carts and the poor sleeping in the drain pipes and concludes that though India has solved its philosophic problems, the economic ones are still unresolved. In a similar vein the other travelogue *A Walk Along the Ganges* registers the outsider's view in travelling across the country where Berwick says, "It is true that we tourists are interlopers here.... We come with fresh films in our cameras, our lenses cleaned, our telephotos poised for bare female breasts and dead bodies floating in the river" and further adds that they seek to "see the 'real' India, the one we think we have not seen at the railway station or on the streets" (quoted 200). The act of clicking pictures and capturing the image freezes the scene into a certain frame, affecting the perspective of the onlooker. In his essay Pramod Nayar refers to the "visualist ideology" of a tourist who is directed to "see", in context of his reading of tourist brochures that present a "colonial image of the Indian landscape" (Italics, Mohanty 112) discussing it at two levels:

One, the 'aestheticization of the landscape' by casting it as a 'scene' or a painting. Rivers and topographical features, fauna and flora and such are portrayed mostly as 'pictures'...denote a freezing, in spatio-temporal terms, of the landscape....This aestheticization thus places the landscape into a frame, with well-defined boundaries...the awe-inspiring, even frightening, hills, rivers, forests...seem pleasant (because controlled) when thus viewed. The second level is the status of the watcher. The tourist is the watcher who scans the

landscape. The scanning confers a nearly panoptical power upon the watcher...Foucauldian gaze inextricably links sight with power...s/he is projected as a conqueror by the act of seeing....Thus, the viewing of a ruin is to participate in an awareness of history, of aesthetics, and the 'human condition'....The gaze is thus never an objective one, it is always interpretative. And interpretation is an act of power since it bestows a certain status upon the viewer/interpreter. (qtd. 113- 114)

The camera lens captures the still picture of the landscape and thus fixes the image of that of the wild. Likewise the tourist projects his quest onto the environment by selectively scanning it and appreciating its beauty. The traveller on the other hand participates in the process of contemplation by experiencing the aesthetics in nature. The travelogue thus becomes an extension of incorporating the dialogue between the aestheticized and the subjective rumination. Like Darian, Berwick also realises his paradoxical love for the country despite grappling with the Indian "squalor, languor and violence" and then resumes his calmer self by watching the tranquil flow of the river (195). The river provides the common ground for relating with their struggle of the exterior limitations to that of the inner expansiveness³. It is interesting to note that the narration is not necessarily the lived experience, so the ethos or the essence of feeling the flow of existence of the life is lacking in these narratives. It is a documentation of travel and not a travelogue which is a *samvaad*; a dialogue with the transitioning space⁴.

The Projection of Inner Quest

At Rishikesh, Darian asks a *sadhu* about the speciality of that place who explains that it is the sound, that never disappears and remains there in other forms so the ones who had meditated on its banks, they had "sanctified the place and [made] it easier for one to achieve *samadhi*"⁵ (44). He further delves into the concepts of being and becoming where west is related to the latter and the east with being so the Ganga acts as a medium of union between the two, his choice of the river rests on knowing about the Indian civilization and to contrast it with the given and spoken universal forms that he had mistaken for reality (49). He applies the concepts of *Brahman* and *maya* to the Indian art aesthetics and when he visits the sculptures at Mamallapuram he observes that their partial round protrusion from the stone characterises the *maya* manifestation and the stone's nature is that of *Brahma*. The engravings have

the fundamental quality of *maya*, making one realise the transitory nature of forms. In other words he comes to understand that in “religion, the mode of *Brahman* is water; in art it is stone” (57). *Sarga* is another name for *maya* that is concerned with manifestation of specific shapes while *pralaya* is the “matter in a latent or potential state” the *Brahman* that is implicit (78). The west, he says, is the *sarga* form while the east is the *pralaya* and to resolve these two visions he had chosen to come to India. One may say that the river represents the form of *Brahma* and we are the shapes of *maya*. The traveller meets a spiritual mentor who explains him the journey of mind working towards the unison between time and space. He says it can be experienced through pause, to immerse into the “depthless cavern of the mind”, where one gradually learns that “all the impressions rushing through the senses are anicca, impermanent” and therefore one should not disturb the calm (146). These are the instances where the information about the spiritual India is collected by him but nowhere one sees his evolution as a traveller or any impact on his subliminal sensibility. Travelogue is one that retains the idea and moves towards collective *prawah* which is an expansion.

The Outer Journey: The Cultural Quest

The river Narmada has witnessed the evolution and devolution of certain species and civilisations and has certain places belonging to the ancient times. In the book *Narmada: The River of Joy*, Vegad refers to a place called Putalikhoh in the state of Madhya Pradesh that has rocks “adorned with pre-historic drawings that are about 20,000 years old” (5). He further adds that it offers “a scaled-down version of the expansive rock art of the Ajanta Caves in Aurangabad...no caves [but]...drawings...etched on the flaky surface of the rocks...” which become visible by wiping off with a wet cloth (6). This makes him ponder over the primitive man’s inclination towards art and about how it was used as a means of survival. Denis Dutton, a philosopher of art opines that art evolved as an adaptation having appealed to our intuitive preferences while science appealed to the strong inclination, curiosity and is limited to the external sphere, while art studies the ingrained aesthetic patterns too (8). Likewise Brian Boyd, a professor of literature avers that the arts offer durability, variety and appeals to our intelligence and social emotions which evolved much later and induced creativity in the form of religion and science (414). Therefore arts emerged as a means of survival and the rivers have been a witness to the same.

In Berwick's *A Walk Along the Ganges*, the motive of the travel rests on exploring the mysticism of Ganga as a goddess and its cultures. His journey begins from the Ganga Sagar towards the source in Gangotri. He not only observes the people during the travel but also engages in pondering over the colonial past of the Ganga region and the factors that aided in establishing the foothold. Concerning history, he talks about the invasions in India from Central Asia, Iran and Afghanistan in 6 and 7th ct. A.D. and avers that under the Mughals there was no sense of Indianness and "by the end of the 17th ct., they controlled almost the whole country". There was continuum of the internal trade where "wheat and rice from Bengal and Bihar were required up country to feed the great cities of Agra and Delhi, with the rivers being the arteries of trade" (163). As in the year 1658, when the East India Company opened a trading post in Patna where the ships weighing "300-500 tons sailed the Ganga and its tributaries carrying cloth, metals such as imported copper and lead, and food-grains" (163). The reference is also made to Jim Corbett who came in 1898 to the present state of Bihar which was a forest and he hired the local labor to clear it so as to transship goods and ferry across the river (150). The choice of Calcutta as the hub of trade was due to its humid climate and fertile soil that were propitious for jute cultivation and the abundance of water was an added advantage.

However Berwick sees the shift in the power mechanism in terms of exportation of the Indian religious practices to the west, and says, "I wondered what had happened to Western Christianity to cause thousands of people to see God through this branch of an alien religion? Now, paradoxically, the West was receiving missionaries from India" (100). At the same time he is critical of the Indian administration and the lack of morality where when he is overcharged for being a foreigner and given accommodation that is not according to the price charged, and he comments that "the incessant claims of poverty by the Government of India looked less credible when at the same time so many opportunities for development, employment and prosperity were missed altogether or thoroughly messed up" (309). Although this criticism is not limited to his subjective self rather he comes across various other places where the locales complain about the lack of services by the government, one such instance is that of Bihar where people deplore the health services and the lack of electricity in the rural areas. It may also be noted that the time of his travel is around the year 1985-86 when the Ganga Action Plan had not been implemented as yet and the surrounding areas were neglected so when he stays at a house in Bihar he remarks that "almost one quarter of the electricity generated in Bihar

in 1981 was either pilfered by illegal wire-taps or lost in transmission” (155).

While travelling through the remote areas, Berwick doesn't act like an outsider rather he chooses to smoke *beedis* in order to gel with the locales and understands that the “cigarettes are a status symbol in the countryside” (153). Whenever he stops by, the family members gather around him and listen to his account with awe and wonder just because his language is foreign to them and they keep asking him about his caste and whether he has his father's permission to travel thus. These questions appear odd to him but they transition a cultural gap between their spaces. It gives a peep into the Indian rural culture where patriarchy laid down the rules for the others. This even leads to the question about the agency of travel, the means of exploring the other regions rooted in a culture that gives one the freedom to engage in such a quest. Later he also admits of the lacunae of not knowing the Hindi language better, that acts as a barrier between him and the country people as he aptly puts it “without a better knowledge of Hindi, I was gradually becoming remote from my surroundings, like a tourist passing across a land without contacting its people” (154). Although he walks the entire length of the river Ganga to maintain the continuum of the pilgrimage and meets people along the way that had been the major attraction for him unlike Amritlal Vegad who becomes a part of the tradition of circumambulating the river Narmada and in the process enters the cultural landscape and relates, co-relates his imagination and at times questions his cultural bearings. While Berwick craves for his own space and privacy and feels agitated at the end of his five and a half months long journey “of repeating answers to the same questions” (282). There are a series of his bad experiences where he frets about getting basic daily needs from “the noisy, smelly lanes” (285) or the “DINGY HOTEL in Ramnagar” (upper case 307). Subsequently he realises that his irritation is arising from the physical fatigue. At the end he comes to the conclusion saying “the formalities of worship and dogma were irrelevant” and its purpose was to “uplift the worshipper, not the deity being worshipped” and he further says that the Indian belief of revering the Ganga river as a goddess is “no different from millions of Roman Catholics believing that the bread broken during Mass is the actual body of Jesus Christ” (202). Here the journey becomes a travel when the destination is set and the course of completion is predicted, the walk is aimed towards walking and not entering into the cultural communion of the river.

Comparatively the journey courses of both the travelogues have different directions as in the *Ganges of the Mind* the pattern of travel is from the

source to the sea while in *A Walk Along the Ganges* it is the other way round. Both the authors contemplate the wisdom gained at the end of their journeys. While Berwick reaches the source he ponders over the meaning of river Ganga for him after walking miles and says it has “personal reverence” for him. Though he doesn’t claim to have understood the importance of the river for the Hindus, he rather regards her as a “symbol of something far greater than mere human endeavour” and does not categorise it as a goddess either, by saying “I doubted there could be any connection between spiritual and temporal, except for a Great Spirit in the Sky in which all Creation exists” (351). For Darian on the other hand, the Great Spirit is the *Brahma* that he associates with the East and when Berwick reaches Gaumukh at the height of 14,600 feet, he feels light headed, “subdued and silent” (380). As Darian had written at length about the source, here Berwick says he felt out of it and the encounter with the river’s origin stilled him. While in his narrative, Darian comes across the devotees at Ganga Sagar who seek oneness with the still ocean and say ‘we are Ganga’. For him the contention is between the Odysseus who is associated with the struggle for reaching the destination and the Buddha who has overcome the *maya* and has assimilated with the *Brahma* having the wisdom of surrender. He wishes to embrace both ends saying, “Let me be Ganga, returning unformed and tranquil to the Great Oneness” and addresses the Ganga as the river of his dreams, urging it to flow forever and wishes that it “Never, never, never, reach[es]...the sea” (182). So the inner and the outer quests coalesce where when it reaches the sea and gains restorative tranquillity (*Thehraav*) while the source subdues and prepares for the onward *prawah* of life.

End Notes

- 1) One of the aspects of *prawah* relates to the form that is distinct from the structure in context of its invocation of universal innate pan human nature. Literally it refers to the flow of river and in the paper it is used in reference to the realisation of humanness within oneself and the acceptance of life without the binaries. In this manner it may relate to the spiritual abstractions.
- 2) The effect is literally called the *prabhav* and in the paper it relates to the shape of the travel writing that follows certain schemata or a pattern. The motive or the ideology also forms a part of it. As the *prawah* lies within the river, the cultures abounding it form the *prabhav* part too as the river impacts the culture of the ghats.
- 3) The exterior limitation is used in reference to the marketed space of the ghats and the squalor around. The inner expansiveness relates to the realisation of the beyond, that sees the form of the space and not the shape of the place.

- 4) The writing forms the third stage of representation as it is followed by the perception of the traveller and then its experience. The object outside becomes the subject of writing and the travelogue is the one that keeps the lived experience stimulating through the writing and then it becomes a dialogue with that time space curvature in particularity. There is not just plain recording of the events as one travels, rather it engages the memory, experience and the cognition too. The *bhav* (essence) of the space is realised in such manner.
- 5) Osho, one of the prominent spiritual figures of India was more popular for his non conformist teachings and in the essay “The Alchemy of Places of Pilgrimage” he states that a *tirtha* was a unique invention by the ancient civilisation and that it has a deep and symbolic significance. The sacredness of the *tirth sthanas* is justified by him as he agrees that there are certain places of high density consciousness and the low density ones and when large numbers of people gather at one particular place their consciousness is charged. The reason for the establishment of such places according to him was due to such creation of “powerfully charged fields of conscious energies, so that anyone could easily begin his inner journey” (44). The place is accordingly charged with such energies and that affects the consciousness of people.

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