

Breaking the Cage: Traveling, Freedom, and English Society in *Iṃlaṅḍe Baṅgamahilā*

Sukla Chatterjee*

Summary

This article provides an analysis of *Iṃlaṅḍe baṅgamahilā* (“A Bengali Woman in England”), a travelogue written in the 19th century by a Bengali woman named Krishnabhabini Das (Kṛṣṇabhābinī Dās) (1868–1919). Despite being the most well-documented travelogue written at that time by an Indian woman, it was eventually forgotten until its recent rediscovery. The travelogue is a unique document authored by a woman in the colonial period in terms of its detail, exploration, and documentation of the socio-cultural aspects of English society. It is also an outstanding example of the ideas educated Bengalis had about England at that time. Moreover, the gendered perspective which this travelogue offers is a bright stroke of color on the variegated canvas of Indian/Bengali travel writing on imperial Britain.

Manuscript received on 2013-06-13, accepted on 2014-01-20

Keywords: Bengal, Bengali writers, Bhadrak, England, gender, Krishnabhabini Das, travelogue

Introduction

This paper examines a travelogue called *Iṃlaṅḍe baṅgamahilā*¹ (1885) (“A Bengali Woman in England”), written by Krishnabhabini Das (Kṛṣṇabhābinī Dās) in the 19th century during her long stay in England. Although married into a restrictive Bengali household, Krishnabhabini’s husband Debendranath Das (Debendranāth Dās) was an English-educated lawyer who encouraged and provided her education.² Her travelogue, an outcome of these educational endeavors, is a vivid documentation of her

* The author would like to give credit to the two editors of this issue, Carmen Brandt and Kirsten Hackenbroch, for helping to shape this paper. Without their patience and generous effort this would have been a much more difficult task. The author is also grateful to Hans Harder and the anonymous external reviewers for their helpful comments and constructive criticism. Any unintentional lapses that remain are the sole responsibility of the author.

1 Except for book titles, I shall refer to Bengali terms and proper names in an Anglicized spelling for easier reading, but state the transliteration of the original Bengali words in brackets when they are mentioned for the first time.

2 For background information on Krishnabhabini, see Simonti Sen’s (Sīmantī Sen’s) introduction in *Kṛṣṇabhābinī Dāser Iṃlaṅḍe baṅgamahilā*, where she notes: “Krishnabhabini’s educational life started with the enthusiasm shown by her husband. However, she never obtained any formal education at a school or college. The home was her primary area of education, and Debendranath was her headmaster” (Sen 1996: [27]). This and all other quotes from Bengali publications, unless otherwise stated, have been translated by the author of this article.