Breaking the Cage: Traveling, Freedom, and English Society in Ḫṃlᵃṇḍᵉ Baṅgaymahīlā

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Summary

This article provides an analysis of Ḫṃlᵃṇḍᵉ baṅgaymahīlā ("A Bengali Woman in England"), a travelogue written in the 19th century by a Bengali woman named Krishnabhabini Das (Krṣṇabḥābinī 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.

Introduction

This paper examines a travelogue called Ḫṃlᵃṇḍᵉ baṅgaymahīlā¹ (1885) (“A Bengali Woman in England”), written by Krishnabhabini Das (Krṣṇabḥābinī Dās) in the 19th century during her long stay in England. Although married into a restrictive Bengali household, Krishnabhabini’s husband Debendranath Das (Debendranaḥ 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

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 (Sīmantitī Sen) introduction in Krṣṇabḥābinī Dāser Ḫṃlᵃṇḍᵉ baṅgaymahīlā, 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.