Reactions of Two Bengali Women Travelers: Krishnobhabini Das and Chitrita Devi

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Since the late nineteenth century, many Bengali women from educated upper- and middle-class families have traveled abroad. Many have written about their journeys, revealing a sense of adventure and excitement. In the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, two Bengali women traveling in London and Bristol employed a reciprocal gaze in order to represent the Europeans—and specifically the British—for readers back home.

Krishnobhabini Das (1864–1919),1 who traveled to England with her husband in 1882 and returned to Calcutta in 1890, was one of these travelers. Her memoir Englande Bangamohila (A Bengali Lady in England),2 published in 1885, described the socioeconomic, political, and cultural life of the English in the context of colonialism. She was not the first Bengali woman traveler to England, but she was one of the first Bengali/Indian women to describe the life of English men and women in Britain.

More than 60 years later, in 1947, the well-known Bengali periodical Probasi published an article titled “Bristoler Katha” (Story of Bristol), by Chitrita Devi (dates unknown).3

Because the author identified herself as Devi, a title of respect for women, and did not indicate her last name, it has been a challenge to discover information about her life and activities. But Chitrita Devi’s article attracted my attention for several reasons.

First, it was published in 1947 (Bengali year 1356), the year in which India became independent and three years after World War II ended. Yet the tone of the article indicated that Chitrita Devi and her family made their journey before 1947, for she described how her British acquaintances in Bristol discussed whether India should be granted independence.
Toward the end of World War II, the British Labour government wanted to grant India its independence whereas the Conservative party resisted this move. Chitrita Devi’s description of the discussion about India’s future between the followers of these two political parties demonstrated the split attitude of the British public toward the subcontinent, a fact that made the article all the more interesting to me. Regrettably, it has been difficult to pinpoint the exact date of this Bengali family’s travel. The second reason that her article interested me is that it was focused on Bristol, a city in which many Indian reformers, including Raja Ram Mohan Roy (b. 1774 in Bengal and d. 1853 in Bristol), had met progressive British intellectuals and reformers in the mid-nineteenth century. Finally, as mentioned, the article was published in Probasi, a journal founded in 1901 by Ramananda Chatterjee (1865–1943), a well-known Bengali nationalist. During the Raj, Probasi was popular among Bengali intellectuals and at one point had 345 subscribers—a significant readership for a regional language periodical of that day. In 1907 Ramananda founded Probasi’s sister journal in English, the Modern Review. He edited both journals until his death in 1943, and the tone of both was highly nationalistic. Indeed, because of Ramananda’s reputation as a nationalist, the British often searched his editorial office.

This chapter compares and contrasts Das’s Englande Bangamohila with Chitrita Devi’s “Bristoler Katha,” works that constructed the England of their respective eras as a “contact zone.”

4 Das wrote her travel narrative at the height of British imperialism while Chitrita Devi wrote hers during its waning, when the empire was in economic crisis in the aftermath of World War II. In the process of comparing India with Great Britain, and the Indians with the English, the women developed their complex identities as authors/agents, as I will explain.

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Biography of Krishnobhabini Das

In 1864 Das, an only child, was born into a conventional and affluent Hindu family in rural northern Bengal. At the age of ten she was married to Debendranath Das. She was at that time completely illiterate, a common situation for young women of her status. 6 During her lifetime, in most of India, especially in Bengal, many fathers followed a long-established tradition of Gauridan, which consisted of arranging, when their daughters and granddaughters turned nine, for a marriage to occur before the girl had her first menstrual period. Gauridan was considered a religious act. After the girl reached puberty, the couple was expected to consummate their union.

Unlike his father, Srinath Das, a successful lawyer in the Calcutta High Court, Krishnobhabini’s husband was not traditional. After receiving