

### Appendix III

#### **Krishnabhabini's Use of Taine's *Notes on England***

“To reduce the chances of making mistakes, I have read a few books by some English as well as some foreign authors regarding how the English judge themselves and how the people of other nations look at the English. Among those, one particular book on England, written by the great French scholar Taine, has proved to be very useful.” (65)

Krishnabhabini's frank acknowledgement of her debts to Taine's *Notes on England* adds another interesting postcolonial perspective to the study of *Englancy Bangamahila* and requires a detailed exploration of the nature of its influence on her text. By using this text Krishnabhabini engages in a study of three different cultures with British being the focal point. Taine's comparison of England and France, Krishnabhabini's experiences in England and her awareness of the situation in Bengal, come together to make this text a rich ethnographic document. Her critical mind and a keen political awareness are evident from her well thought-out selection, rejection and adaptation of portions from Taine's text, as required for her pedagogic mission.

In 1872 Hippolyte Taine, the great French scholar and traveller to England published his *Notes sur l'Angleterre* as a column in the *Temps* in Paris and almost contemporaneously its translation, *Notes on England* was being published in England in The Daily News. Later, W. F. Rae once again translated this book from the French original and published it in 1885, the same year in which *Englancy Bangamahila* by Krishnabhabini Das was published from Calcutta. Krishnabhabini was probably familiar with the columns of the *Notes* published in The Daily News but Rae's subsequent publication of another translation of this work is perhaps a mark of the great popularity enjoyed by that book in that period.<sup>i</sup>

Krishnabhabini being new in England depends on the previously existing resources to gather documentary information regarding that country. She herself claims to have “consulted some English books, monthly journals and newspapers regarding certain issues” (60). So what can be more reliable for

her than Taine's writing on England to provide her readers with the details of British lifestyle. But she limits herself to using only factual data from Taine as their experiences and analysis of the British culture and lifestyle was very different as a result of their respective situatedness in terms of their countries' political, racial, social and cultural positions.

Some of the passages in Krishnabhabini's work are a direct translation from Taine's *Notes* which might give the readers a feeling that this book is a Bengali adaptation of Taine's. But a closer analysis dispels any doubts regarding the originality of the text. There are numerous examples where their use of similar information leads to completely different inferences regarding the characteristic traits of the British. The areas where she directly translates Taine are primarily enumerative and empirical but goes on to differ starkly at areas which involve a cultural comparison. She too, like Taine is constantly comparing every aspect of British culture with her own; what makes the text so interesting is that it shows the way in which a woman from the colonies, and hence a doubly marginalized individual, reads and interprets the culture and lifestyle of her rulers. This deflates the notion of European superiority and their racial pride. Given below are a few illustrations where Krishnabhabini has directly used Taine's information. These are randomly picked from the text to elucidate the ways in which Taine was used by this Bengali woman.

<i>Englancy Bangamahila</i>	<i>Notes on England</i>
<p>1. London is a vast city; the biggest in the world. It is about ten miles in length and eight miles in width. London is about four times bigger and eight times more populated than Calcutta. Forty lakh people reside here. One needs to drive continuously for four to five days to take a complete tour of the city but still one will</p>	<p>1. The population numbers three millions and a quarter; that makes twelve cities like Marseilles, ten cities like Lyons, two cities like Paris put together; but words upon paper are no substitutes for the sensation of the eyes. It is necessary to take a cab several days in succession, and proceed straight towards the south, the north, the</p>

<p>not be familiar with all its roads. Though London is already a vast city, it is still expanding. (109-110)</p> <p>2. According to the records in a year about forty thousand ships visit these docks and at a time there are about five to six thousand of them on the Thames or at the docks in London. (256)</p> <p>3. “In the country sides, the parsons visit the houses of their parishioners. They affectionately enquire after the education of the children and chastise them in case of any wrong doings. They preach against consumption of alcohol, talk to the people about their jobs and advice them on various issues” (225).</p>	<p>east, and the west, during a whole morning, as far as the uncertain limits where houses grow scanty and country begins” (15).</p> <p>2. A merchant who is the superintending the arrival of spices from Java, and the transshipment of ice from Norway, tells me that about 40, 000 vessels enter every year, and that on an average, there are from 5,000 to 6,000 in the docks or the river at one time. (31)</p> <p>3. When I walk to the village with the clergyman, he enters the houses, pats the little ones on the head, gets information about their progress, admonishes the bad boys, speaks against drunkenness, chats with the people about their concerns; he is their natural counselor” (195)</p>
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Many more such similarities can be found throughout the text but more interesting than these similarities are the differences in their interpretation of the British culture.

Taine, the French thinker, historian, literary and art critic, visited England as an invited dignitary to Oxford while Krishnabhabini, a Bengali Hindu middleclass woman goes there as the wife of one Devendranath Das, a doubly marginalized subject in search of values which made England the largest

empire in the world. So one is European, white, male with the best education and scholarship and another is from the colonies, brown and female, without any kind of formal education. No two individuals could illustrate the postcolonial binaries better than these two personalities. Yet, Krishnabhabini is not awed by this illustrious scholar. Her interpretation of the British society is not influenced by Taine's or anyone else's representation of the same. Her intelligent and perceptive mind can look beyond the colonial politics and understand for herself what lies in the heart of the British culture to make them what they were at that time. Her interpretation might have some gaps, but those are her own, formed by her understanding of her own society and its relationship with the British; not shaped by any external agency. This is most evident in the different responses that Taine and Krishnabhabini have towards British hospitality and affability. Taine, quite predictively, finds them most hospitable, going out of the way to help foreigners, "In the first place, I have never found the English selfish and discourteous, as they are represented to be. In London and in the country I have inquired my way hundreds of times; every one pointed it out, and several gave themselves trouble, accompanying me far enough to put me in the right path" (105). He also goes on to say that he has never encountered anyone laughing at the blunders he made in speaking English. But Krishnabhabini has a completely different experience to share. She comments on their attitude towards the foreigners, "If they find a man who happens to be different from them, they stare at him as if they are looking at an animal. Sometimes even the elderly people join the children in making fun of such people and commenting derisively. I have heard from a foreigner that initially when she could not speak proper English, the shopkeeper, instead of being compassionate laughed at her and made fun of her" (128). These difference, though very important, are also quite obvious given the difference in their nationalities and the politics of colonialism. Taine's fair complexion shields him from the stares of other similarly white-skinned British people while Krishnabhabini, a brown woman, will definitely attract stares of the passersby. Another example that she includes in her text shares a similar experience of another Asian, a Chinese (128). What is admirable is that she does not take such a behavior for granted and records her disapproval in quite strong words here. These differences are very

important from the perspective of postcolonial studies as they point at the racial prejudice of the Europeans created by them and perpetuated by their colonial politics.

There is another significant level of consciousness that we find in Krishnabhabini Das which adds to the complexity of her interpretation of Taine's text – that of being exploited by the colonisers. Her awareness of extortion being at the root of British prosperity is something that the Frenchman Taine, belonging to another similar coloniser country fails to understand. Taine while describing the vast fleets of ships anchored or waiting near the docks of England talks about the excellence and opulence of cargo brought by these vessels from various parts of the world. But it is Krishnabhabini who points at the underlying extortion by the colonial power that aids to such overflowing merchandise in these ships. She writes,

Stand aside and look at the boats sailing in all directions and ships waiting in queues. It seems that they have raised their heads above water to proclaim to everyone the extent of *British industriousness and mercantile power*. One has come from Russia carrying freight of about eighty maunds, a certain other has come from India, another from Africa or America, carrying various kinds of merchandise within them. None contain less than ninety to hundred maunds. Anyone looking at all these mercantile ships, assembling from all the four quarters of the world, will be amazed at the British industriousness... *It sends shivers down the spines to even think of the amount of wealth these ships extort from other countries.* (Emphasis added). (256)

Being at the receiving end of colonial extortionist policies, Krishnabhabini can feel its horrors while Taine only found magnificence and an admiring wonder at the swelling trade and commerce of England. Though she uses Taine's figures to quantify the volume of British merchandise, she starkly differs in her analysis of the same data. This is a remarkable achievement for a Bengali woman from nineteenth century who has almost no prior exposure to the world. It also points at her awareness regarding world politics which helps her to understand the relative position of the three countries of England, France and India. In

the same passage, it is interesting to note that Krishnabhabini focuses on the ‘industriousness and mercantile power’ of the British, qualities which she would want her fellow countrymen to achieve.

A comparative study of the two texts also brings out the undercurrent of the race for superiority that existed among the European nations. French themselves indulged in social drinking yet Taine is quite critical of the British preference for strong liquors. There is an oblique reference to the cultural superiority of the French in the form of their predilection for lighter spirits, “our Bordeaux wine and even Burgandies are too light for them” (57-58). On the other extreme is Krishnabhabini’s complete abhorrence for any kind of alcohol, in keeping with the ethos of the nineteenth century Bengali middleclass society which considered drinking as one of the surest path to destruction.

Krishnabhabini not only interpretes the British but she also briefly talks about her interpretation of the French people, particularly their women, as she crosses the French port city of Calais during her passage to England. she writes,

Many of the French men are quite handsome, and the women are humble and shy. They do not belong to the *babu* class. The poor women work as hard as their husbands do – they till the fields, draw water and help their husbands in many such arduous tasks. Their faces reflect simplicity and a sense of freedom which endeared these French women to me. *I have heard that the French mothers are as caring and loving towards their children as our Indian mothers are...* From their very childhood the French women are educated as well as taught their culture. They develop a fine taste, *wear only such clothes as would suit them, and do not make oneself look unsightly by wearing something just for the sake of it.* I have heard that they are *obedient towards their parents and never marry against their wishes...* The poor people too are extremely modest and I have heard that like the poor people of England, *they do not behave like beasts after getting drunk.* They are

quite thrifty, they spend according to their earnings; *because of this thrift, they usually do not suffer in drought.* (Italics mine) (103-104)

The italicized portion in the above passage highlights the qualities which Krishnabhabini will later find lacking among the British, as a complete reading of the text reveals. Many of her comparisons seem to have been taken from Taine's *Notes on England* or they might also be the stock response that the nineteenth century world had towards the French. She also similarly describes the Italian women and can find certain familiarities with them. She writes, "Women of this country are mostly good-looking. Like us, they have wide face, black hair and black eyes. Their complexion is quite fair but not pale. They appeared to be very humble and artless, and I felt like addressing them as *didi*" (95). So even before she takes up her original agenda of analysing the British lifestyle and culture, Krishnabhabini gives her readers a glimpse of other European cultures. The importance of these passages is that they help Krishnabhabini discover many Europes within the Europe as opposed to the postcolonial binary of the Europe versus Non-Europe.

Just as there are numerous examples scattered in the text where one can trace similarities, there are ample instances of differences as well. What comes out of an informed and critical reading of both the texts is that the similarities between the two texts are only on the surface. Though Krishnabhabini uses certain sections of Taine's *Notes*, her intellectual and emotional positioning vis-à-vis the British is very different from Taine's relationship with them. Taine, a member of another coloniser country is on a visit as an invited guest to a similar country but Krishnabhabini is in the land of her conquerors with her husband who has come here in search of a career. She has an important agenda behind writing her text – to make the people of her country realize their own faults and the virtues of the British people. Therefore she is extremely cautious of the subjects she chooses and the way she treats them. This is probably also the reason behind her ignoring the discussion on British painting and poetry though Taine spends a considerable part of his book on them. She has gone to England to learn about the traits that make British

such a powerful race and therefore she focuses only on those aspects of British culture and lifestyle, ignoring the rest.

Taine is not the only source that Krishnabhabini uses, though he is a major one. Krishnabhabini is familiar with texts written by both Europeans and Indians and she uses those texts along with her own understanding and experiences in England to forge a completely new one. Some of the authors who can be identified or are quoted in the text are Thackeray and Romesh Chandra Dutt. She also makes use of various English dailies. Apart from these there were other contemporary writings on England available which she might have read to gather information and improve her understanding of the British as a race. All these make her text a rich cultural document and help her to provide her readers with as authentic an appraisal of the British culture as possible. Taine occupies the chief place in her background research but does not at any point overshadow the persona of the *Bangamahila* or the Bengali lady.

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<sup>i</sup> In this discussion I have used W.F. Rae's translation of Hippolyte Taine's *Notes on England* as the columns in the Daily Times, coming out in 1872, could not be accessed. There is another translation of Taine's *Notes* published in 1958 by Edward Hyams but since it is a much later work, I have not taken that into account.