

A Bengali Lady in England

1. Foreword

Readers¹! I am a complete stranger to you and live hundreds of miles away from you; yet, I have attempted to publish this book in its present incomplete and miniature form for your entertainment. I did not start writing this book either to achieve fame as an author² or to flaunt my knowledge. I have seen many new things which generated new ideas in my mind; I have tried to express those ideas as lucidly and with as much clarity as possible and present them in the form of a book. My language is not exalted enough, nor my ideas such as to make you forget your meals and sleep and keep you hooked to the book, as you do while reading plays and novels. Moreover, this book does not narrate any inspirational tales of heroes or heroines, or any classical or tragic saga. Here you will only find the differences that exist between an independent life and an enslaved one. This book does not contain any speculative narration, and if you read it attentively you might even be somewhat benefited by it. At least reading this will not harm you in any way. Nowadays India is becoming more and more intimate with England. Indian youth have many queries about England before they go there; such readers also may gather some important information from this book³.

¹ The author addresses both men and women separately here; using the form *pathokpathikagon*. It seems to be a deliberate action because most of the books, except the handbooks pertaining to maintaining good household and proper behaviour, catered to male readers. She specifically wanted to rope in women readers as well.

Also, the Bengali language is more gendered than English which gives the author the scope to address her male and female readers separately. But this is not available in English. For the purpose of translation therefore I have used the accepted English terms for the sake of readability. The places where the author addresses only the female readers have been translated as ‘My dear sisters’.

² Though Krishnabhabini uses the feminine form of author in Bengali, in my translation I have used the word ‘author’ instead of the archaic form ‘authoress’ which makes the language sound more archaic.

³ This prefatorial explication of the nature of her work seems to be a kind of justification for her writing as nineteenth century women were hardly encouraged to write.

My dear sisters! Like you, I too was confined within a house without any knowledge about my country or the world. I had tried to keep myself contented with a few mundane matters but failed. I yearned to know everything about my country. I became excited whenever I heard someone either going to or returning from England. I yearned to listen to the new experiences of that person; but unfortunately, the wishes of the subjugated women of Bengal are never fulfilled. So, I had to keep quiet. Such a curiosity regarding England might be there within you as well. I offer you this *A Bengali lady in England* to quench that thirst.

Here I have penned down both the good and the bad aspects of the British people according to my experiences. I have tried to present an unbiased account of the their lifestyle here, not taking into account the changes that occur in them when they are abroad, particularly in India. It is really difficult to be unbiased and critically analyse that country if we consider the differences that exist between England and India, and the kind of relationship that the British have with us. If the readers read this book with an open and unprejudiced mind, they can appraise how successful I am in giving an unbiased account of England here.

In the course of writing this account I have consulted some English books, monthly journals and newspapers regarding certain issues. I have also consulted a few of my trustworthy British friends concerning certain customs and conducts and tried to provide a faithful account. To reduce the chances of making mistakes, I have read a few books by some British as well as some foreign authors regarding how the British judge themselves and how the people of other nations look at them. Among those, one particular book on England, written by the great French scholar Taine¹, has proved to be very useful. I have been helped a lot by my husband in subjects regarding education, politics etc. He has read this book cover to cover making corrections and

¹ Krishnabhabini has drawn upon quite substantially from the English translation of Hippolyte Taine's work, *Notes on England*. See Appendix III for a detailed discussion on this.

required changes at a number of places, and by his advice I have also included certain new issues in this draft. Without his effort and care, I could never have published this book successfully in its present form.

2. From Calcutta to Bombay

On Tuesday, the twenty-sixth of September, at 8.30 in the evening, my husband and I reached Howrah¹ station to leave for Bombay and from there to England. I got on to the train with my face uncovered². Today, after much effort, I have prepared myself to bid farewell to my motherland and journey to England. Quietly, I took my leave from Calcutta³. The bell rang⁴, and the train made a loud noise as it moved ahead, taking all the passengers along. Calcutta and all our kinsfolk remained behind. There are so many passengers in this train, but is there any one as sad as myself? Probably none. Many of them are going for a change⁵ or for a short trip to places like Bombay, Jabbalpur, Allahabad. They will return in a month or so and can once again meet their own people. There's no reason then why they should feel sad. And similarly, there's no

¹ Howrah is one of the two terminal railway stations of Calcutta, the other being Sealdah.

² Married Women in 19th century Bengal kept their heads and foreheads covered with the loose end or the *aanchal* of their *sari*. Such a veil is known as *ghomta*. The act of coming out without the customary veil symbolises freedom, a step against the existing patriarchy.

³ Though the name Calcutta has been converted to Kolkata now I prefer using Calcutta because that was the English name of the city in the times of Krishnabhabini Das. For similar reasons, Mumbai is also referred to as Bombay.

⁴ In those days an iron bell was loudly rung by one of the staffs of the station to signify the train's departure as well as arrival.

⁵ In nineteenth century a number of people from Bengal went to healthier climate of the Western parts of India to improve their health. It had almost become a custom with the middle class Bengali population.

point in talking about those who are on their way home from abroad. But is there anyone like me who is leaving her own country for a long stay in a foreign one? None I think. So my heartache cannot be compared to that of anyone else's¹.

I started thinking of Calcutta, my childhood companion. Though I was not born in this city, I have been staying there since my marriage. I have known her for many years; today I snapped that old bond of friendship as I left. In a while we crossed the stations of Hooghly, Bardhaman etc. I was already familiar with these places. Previously, when I used to visit my parents' home, I would cross them, but then I had a veil over my face. Where is that veil today? As I raised my hand to draw my *ghomta*, I touched the hat instead. Looking at my new attire I felt a bit shy. Today none of my acquaintances can recognize me; they might as well salute me taking me for a *memsahib*². Amazing! What a great difference one's attire can make! I spent half of the night in contemplation and the rest of it in dreams. Soon it was morning again; and with day break my mind was occupied with the new scenes. On our either side were stretches of lush green fields, except for a few huts here and there. Half ripened harvest swayed lightly in the breeze; various kinds of birds chirped gaily as they stalked around the fields for their food; cud chewing herds of cows, tired of the scorching sun, were lazing under the trees; the calves, completely oblivious to the outside world, busy being suckled by their mothers. Such idyllic scenes can mesmerize anyone!

We crossed newer stations. The train stopped only at the important ones and at long intervals. When it stopped at a station at around eight in the morning for about half an hour, we got down for a stroll. I felt both very happy and sad at the same time. I was happy because I was

¹ The heartache that Kishnabhabini Das talks of is probably also of that of leaving her six year old daughter with her father-in-law in Calcutta. She was caught in a dilemma between her duties as a wife and those as a mother.

² A word used by Bengalis referring to either European women or the Europeanised ones.

free but felt sad at the same time for other Indian women who did not know the pleasure of freedom. As the bell rang we boarded the train once again. It started moving ahead. Eventually we reached Patna. There were ruins of few large houses near the station and the sight provoked a variety of thoughts in my mind. In the ancient times, when the Greek king, Alexander the Great, had attacked India for the first time, Mahananda was the king of Magadha. He ruled from the city of Pataliputra or Patna. This city had so much of glory and splendour then! I was shocked to see its present lacklustre state. There was a time when by virtue of being the capital city it was adorned with huge buildings and forts; now it lay quiet like any other common town.

At four in the afternoon we reached Mughalsarai. The station was terribly crowded. Later I came to know that the crowd comprised pilgrims, either going to Kashi (Benaras) or returning from there. Kashi, the chief pilgrimage centre for the Hindus was at a small distance from Mughalsarai. When I saw so many people going to this sacred place, I too wished to go there and see this old city once again. But this wish was not fulfilled. After a short while the train started moving once more, and I kept on thinking about Kashi. Gradually night fell. Since I could not look out anymore, it became difficult just to keep sitting within. The train reached Allahabad at around nine-thirty at night. This was much bigger than all the other stations that we had crossed till now; besides of course, Howrah. The station was very crowded and I found that there were quite a number of British among the officials present there. Allahabad is sacred for both the Hindus and the Muslims. The city of 'Prayag', situated at the confluence of the Ganga and the Yamuna is a famous site of Hindu pilgrimage since the ancient times, and the Muslims also consider Allahabad as the holy city of 'Allah' or their Lord.

At Allahabad we had to change our train. Here I boarded the compartment reserved for women. There was no other woman traveller in my compartment. My husband, after giving me

enough assurances, got into the adjacent one. I sat there all by myself. The night seemed a terrible one. Now I was a lonely woman in an entire compartment. I had fleeting thoughts – one by one I remembered my mother, brother and sister and my heart ached. Except for a few stations and fewer lights at intervals, nothing was visible outside. I stayed awake almost throughout the night. When it was nearly dawn, perhaps around four in the morning, I saw a light in the sky and looked out. I could see a beautiful comet. This did not seem to be the one that I had seen a few days back in Calcutta because this appeared bigger and brighter than that. Due to its brightness, the entire place seemed to be illumined with moonlight. People say that comets are ominous but I with my limited understanding cannot comprehend that how can the appearance of such a pure and serene celestial object harm this world in any way?

Slowly light spread throughout the sky and my spirit brightened along with it. I shed all my worries and sat near the window to enjoy nature's beauty. At six in the morning we reached Jabbalpur. The train stops here for about an hour. We learnt that we had to change the train once again. Many of you may know that the railway from Calcutta, which goes to places such as Delhi via Allahabad belongs to one particular company. The one going from Allahabad till Jabbalpur belongs to a different company and from Jabbalpur to Bombay, it is owned by still another. Many trains come directly from Calcutta to Bombay; no change would be required in that case. But it was our hard luck that we could not book in any such train and so we had to change our trains twice. I had heard that Jabbalpur was a very beautiful city and its environment was congenial to health. Once I saw the place I realised that it was the truth. It is surrounded by hills and has wonderful scenic beauty. I wanted to stay here for a few days and visit the marvellous waterfalls of Narmada, the marble rocks and the ruins. But as our ship was about to leave for England from Bombay on the twenty-ninth of September, we could not stay back. We boarded

the train immediately. The railway station at Jabbalpur is almost as big as Allahabad and Howrah. Here majority of the staff is Marathi. I had earlier heard and read that people belonging to different regions of India have different physical features and characteristics. But having lived in Bengal, I did not actually realise it till I saw it for myself. I found the people belonging to the north-western cities such as Allahabad or Mughalsarai looking very different from the people of this place. The Marathis are shorter but they are very strong, brave and valorous. Their very appearances revealed that they are not a subservient lot. I had also heard that they are extremely clever, industrious and enduring by nature. They wear garments made of coarse cloth coupled with an *odhni*¹ and a large turban on their heads. Most of them wear wooden shoes which look more or less like our own *kharam*² but tied to the feet with a leather or jute string. It amazes me to think of the diversity that exists within India. I thought that if a Bengali, a Marathi and a man belonging to the Western part of India go abroad, none shall be able to guess that all three belong to the same country; the reasons being firstly, all three of them are different to look at, secondly they speak in three different languages and thirdly, the three have diverse traditions and customs. Then how can the others make out that they are the sons of the same country? Again, if someone speaks to all three of them the person will find that the Bengali is clever, intelligent and educated. One can get a lot of news regarding British Empire from him and enjoy talking to him. But he is not very competent in work. If you converse with the people of the Western India, you will only get to hear the names of Lord Shiva and the Goddess Durga; they are neither clever nor educated but they have strength and courage. One of their chief qualities is that they are not cunning by nature. The Marathis are not as knowledgeable as the Bengalis, but they are

¹ A kind of unstitched cloth used as an accessory to the main dress, generally draped over the shoulders.

² In nineteenth century people in Bengal wore wooden sandals as wearing leather was not allowed in Hinduism.

intelligent, diligent, quite clever and efficient in all aspects. They are also brave and spirited. They reminded me of Shivaji and other Marathi heroes. I thought, these people belong to that race of brave hearts who tried to oust the Mughal rulers and regain India's freedom; whose weapons had killed numerous of those intruders; whose attacks were feared even by the mighty Mughal emperors and those who had ultimately brought down the Mughal Empire.

Thinking about all these we left Jabbalpur. From here began the hilly region. There were hillocks on either side intermitted by deep gorges and forests. The terrain was quite uneven. In Bengal I had seen a few barren hills; so I had the notion that there could not be any vegetation on hills. But here I saw hills covered with various kinds of grass, climbers and plants. It was a pleasing sight. Had I been a poet, I could have written many wonderful books in praise of its beauty. If I were a painter, I could have delighted people by my paintings of this picturesque setting. Ranges of green hills on both sides seemed to be protecting the train from all adversaries. No one could cross that barrier and harm us. As we went further, we could see newer sceneries. Gradually we reached a more mountainous region. By now we had left the smaller hills behind and were moving through a region of higher mountains. Wherever I looked, there was an expanse of formidable mountain ranges. When the day drew towards its close, nature looked all the more beautiful. Now the train was moving along a tributary of the river Narmada. There were green hills on one side, crystal clear water on the other and a red sky overhead. The train moved along, sending tremours of its metallic sound all around its surroundings. I felt like stopping the train for a while to watch this beauty, but I could not.

Gradually evening set in. I was tired after being in the train for two consecutive days and nights. Since it was almost dark and I could not see anything properly, I sat quietly. Various thoughts came to my mind. I felt happy, thinking about the varied beauty of nature and I felt sad

at the thoughts of my caged sisters in the country. Like me they too would have enjoyed these magnificent scenes, but unfortunately however much they might desire, they were deprived of such happiness. Pondering over such matters I went on. Darkness covered all the beauty of nature. Apart from a few stars at intervals and the stars in the sky, there was nothing visible. Around that time we went through two big tunnels. While going through them it seemed to me that the train was fighting against the mountains, breaking through their phalanx. I felt very sad when it grew dark – why should there be night in this beautiful place? I had heard that the mountains here are very spectacular, but I could not see anything. Tomorrow, on the twenty-ninth, we shall reach Bombay and the fatigue of this train journey will be wiped away – this thought gave me some consolation. I spent the night half awakened and half asleep.

In the morning again I could see the houses, factories, and many other things around us. It seemed that overnight we have reached another world. There were no more green hills or uneven topography. As we proceeded, we saw buildings, people and factories. Factories on our either side emitted smoke. I felt elated that very soon the city of Bombay will be visible to us. Eventually it was nine; the train reached Bombay station. Porters came to take down the luggage. We got off as well. The station was crowded with people and various kinds of goods. We could not decide which way to go. My husband asked me to keep an eye on our luggage and went to arrange a hotel for our stay. If I had stood there today with my customary *ghomta*¹, so many people would have looked at me, but in our country English dresses have such an impact that no one dares to even glance this way. Everyone is scared. There were a number of hackney coaches

¹ A Bengali woman in her traditional dress would have seemed out of place in Bombay and would have invited people's gaze. An interesting point to note here is that though the English belonged to a different country people throughout India were familiar with them. Also, being the subject race, Indian dared not gaze at anyone dressed in their rulers' clothing. Just the opposite was true for Indians in England, whose traditional dresses called for unnecessary attention.

in front of the station. The coachmen kept pestering me to hire one. After my husband returned, we hired one and drove to a big hotel.

Bombay is very different from Calcutta. The roads here are cleaner. There were paved sidewalks along the roads, just as the ones at Chowringhee in Calcutta and the city itself seemed very neat and clean. Apart from bricks, the people here also use wood and stone for building their houses. Many buildings are six to seven stories high and the height of the respective floors was quite low. Instead of lime and mortar, the roof is covered with slate and has a slope. There is no facility for sitting or strolling on the roof. The residents here are mostly the Hindu Marathis and the Muslim Parsis¹; one can also find many people belonging to British, Eurasian or European² or other races. Almost all the main roads have shops on either sides and most of them are owned by the Parsis.

I think many of my native sisters do not know who the Parsis actually are. In ancient times, the people of Persia worshipped the sun and its symbol, the fire. Like us, the Hindus, they too were idol worshippers. Later when the Muslims conquered Persia and started oppressing people to convert them to Islam, most of the Persians accepted that faith. A few of them ran away from there in an effort to save their faith and came to India and sought asylum from the King of Gujarat. The king in order to save their faith and honour granted them the permission to stay in his kingdom and continue practising their religion. Their descendents are known as Parsis today. They still follow their ancient religion as it was followed hundreds of years ago. They are very hard working, clever and industrious. Wherever you see them they are always busy working

¹ By the phrase 'muslim parsi' the author perhaps is referring to those people who though originally Persian, had later embraced Islam under the Mughal rule.

² The author uses the word '*firingi*' here which can mean an Anglo-Indian, Eurasian or a European. I have translated the word as Eurasian or European because the sense in which she uses it is not clear.

and they do not understand anything apart from their work and their self-interest. They have progressed much more in business affairs as compared to Bengalis and people in other parts of India. Like the China Town in Calcutta which is full of Chinese people and their shops, there are quite a few places in Bombay where there is a concentration of the Parsis and their shops. In common places such as banks, post offices, schools, and colleges too they are found busy with their work and many Parsis can also be seen walking around the streets. The Parsi women are not confined like us. I have seen them on roads, stations, shops, almost everywhere. They go out wearing very nice and decent clothes. Looking at their enthusiasm and perseverance, it does not seem that they belong to India. Wherever I go, I can see their shops or business centres. I have seen many Parsis in Calcutta but Bombay seems to be their own state. I have also heard that they own big shops in Aden, and many of them stay in London for their business. If the other communities of India emulate their qualities, then there shall be a better scope for the country's development.

As Bombay is near the sea it is easier to carry out business transactions from here with England and other European countries through the Suez Canal. The continuously blowing cool and healthy breeze from sea does not let Bombay be as hot as Calcutta; perhaps that is why people are more industrious here. Bombay is not inferior to Calcutta with respect to schools, colleges, hospitals, post-offices and banks etc. I have heard that the houses, trams, horse-carriages here are somewhat like those in England; just a look would tell us that Bombay is better fitted to be the capital of British India as compared to Calcutta. England is nearer to Bombay than Calcutta. The Europeans have stayed here for a longer period and possibly this makes Bombay look somewhat like a European city

The hotel in which we stayed was a seven storied one, built almost completely of wood and stone. It was quite well decorated, as the drawing-rooms of rich people in Calcutta. Almost all the servants of this hotel are either British or Indian Christians. The hotel is only a quarter of a mile¹ away from the sea. Sitting in the balcony I could see the limitless expanse of the blue sea, the bright sun overhead and the roads full of different types of people and vehicles. Bombay is about fourteen hundred miles² away from Calcutta, after travelling this distance for two and a half days we were very tired. So we thought that we would rest for a while in our hotel, but we heard that the ship would leave soon. After taking our meals, we left for the ship around two in the afternoon. Bigger ships could not come near the shore as it was shallow there; that is why, a couple of hours before our ship's departure, a launch or a small ship came and carried all the passengers and their luggage from the shore to the big ship.

At four in the evening we reached the larger ship and had to climb the ladder to arrive at the deck. This was a new scenario for me. So many times I had seen ships from a distance, but this is the first time that I am seeing how is it like from inside. The ship was full of people. On both the sides wooden ladders were placed and the people went to and fro over it; everyone was busy; trunks, letters, and sundry things were being loaded in it. Looking at one side I saw the city of Bombay. Hundreds of smaller boats were sailing near the shore where the water was muddy and greenish. On the shore one could see the people walking along and the moving vehicles and there were tall white houses, standing on the shore, craning their necks. One could keep on watching these. And on the other side as far as you could see, there was the deep blue sea, boundless in its expanse. But in spite of being infinite, it seemed that someone had drawn a

¹ The unit she uses here is '*poya*' which is approximately a quarter of a mile.

² The unit that she uses is '*krosh*', which is approximately two miles.

boundary across the sea with ships. All these together gave a feeling of some houses full of people afloat on the sea. I could not decide which way to gaze at. There were boats and people around our ship, almost all the people were Parsis, Muslims or Christians. It seemed that we had bid farewell to the Hindus on the shore itself.

I do not know if ever I would see Bombay again neither did it seem probable that I shall return to India at all. Thinking of these I came to the side of the ship overlooking the shore and kept watching. Thoughts of leaving India, the land of my birth and where I have lived for so many years, as well as thoughts of leaving my friends and kin made me restless. There was no end to the crowd of people. Gradually, it was six in the evening and I reflected that the ship had not yet started moving. Just then there was a siren to alert people that the ship would leave in another fifteen minutes. People other than the passengers finished their jobs quickly and started disembarking. Within ten minutes almost three-fourth of the people had left the ship leaving only the passengers and the crew on it. Again there was another siren – now the ship started moving.

Farewell

1. Oh my dear country! My *swadesh*¹ – the jewel! / I am leaving you for a long time. / Oh Mother! Do not think anymore of your hapless daughter, / when she could not be of any use to you.
2. I had hoped that my beloved and I / will work together for your upliftment, / but that desire has not been fulfilled. / It still lies dormant within my heart.
3. Gradually that hope is diminishing. / But, oh mother! Its memory remains, / which like a poison hidden in my heart / causes me pain.

¹ Swadesh means one's own country.

4. You might ask me, why/ are we leaving India. / I have no answer to that. / We are going abroad with many hopes in our hearts.
5. Since many days I have nurtured/ a secret hope in my heart that / to meet dear Freedom, / I shall go to the country where she resides.
6. I shall go to that place/ where the goddess of Freedom resides in every home; / where everybody is happy /and all live in peace.
7. Oh Mother! There is no chain of bondage/ around the necks of human beings there. / The sons of England enjoy happiness/ which is the gift of freedom.
8. I ardently wish to know why England, / which is so respected, civilized and well educated is deluded to oppress India and make her miserable¹.

3. From Bombay to Venice

The ship left on Friday, around six thirty in the evening; and as if in a play, the curtain rose to introduce a new scene of my life. I was leaving India for the first time. As the ship moved farther away, my heart grew heavier. It was not because I was afraid of the sea; instead, it gave me a new kind of thrill. But this pain was heart wrenching. India is my birthplace and I have lived here for all these years. I loved her with my entire soul. Looking at her down trodden condition, I blamed myself for being unable to do anything for her. And today, I do not know for

¹ The order of the lines in this stanza had to be changed to retain its proper meaning in English.

how long I was going away from this dear land.¹ With a lot of nerve I had hardened myself but a surge of grief swept away my brave front. There were tears in my eyes but I could not cry. Ashamed of being discovered crying by others, I tried to divert myself. But how shall I do it? I have cherished my beloved motherland for so many years; is it now possible for me to forget her so easily? As I kept thinking of all my relatives I wanted to get off the ship and run away. Then I thought that while reading history books, I used to hate the cowards who got scared and ran away from battlefields; so if I go back today, it will be an act of extreme cowardice and people will hate me for not being strong-willed. Thus arguing with myself and with a lot of effort, I took my leave from India. The ship chugged along. Why are the people of our country so scared of ships? Here I found so many passengers, and they are neither troubled nor anxious. And if talking of danger – well, danger is present everywhere. You can die of illness at your home or can even die of lightning. But, “if”² the ship sinks then you will die by drowning – this is the only difference. Gradually it became evening. Today’s evening appeared new to me.

That is Bombay - still visible, you cannot see anybody in particular or get any clear impression. But I can see some houses painted white. One by one all the lights were being switched on and those lights shone out through the windows of the houses. We were still within the bay of Bombay. On three sides there was the city with its tall buildings that appeared like saints in white robes meditating on the shore and the waves washing their feet. At times the waves were dancing around to disturb the meditating saints but they were so deeply immersed in their prayers that they did not bother. Slowly dense darkness engulfed the world. Stars appeared

¹ ‘India is my birthplace...dear land’ is originally a single sentence in Bengali. Since it is difficult to maintain such a large sentence structure in English, I have broken it into a number of smaller sentences. This process has been repeatedly followed in any such case in the text.

² The quotation marks have been used by the author in the original itself to stress on the word.

in the sky. As I looked at the city, it seemed as if it had worn a garland of stars. I looked towards the sea again – friction between the ship and the water at times made phosphorous glow like stars. It seemed that we were sailing through the infinite sky.

All the lights of Bombay gradually faded away. I looked around to check whether any were visible – but no, I could not find any. I tried again but failed. Within this last hour we had lost the sight of Bombay. Now there was a void in my heart as I felt steering away from my country, India. I was leaving *swadesh*¹ today – that *swadesh* for which people travelled hundreds of miles to return to her. It was that land which the people yearned for even when they lived abroad; and it was that *swadesh* which no one wanted to leave. I did not know when I shall get to see her again. When all these thoughts were troubling me, I suddenly saw a light at a distance. I felt very happy thinking that Bombay hasn't been completely lost yet. But when I asked my husband about it, he said that this light was not from Bombay. There were lighthouses built near some particular shores for the convenience of the ships. This light was coming from one of those. The light brightened and dimmed alternately reflecting my state of mind. I was surprised. Standing in this silent, deep sea, was it shivering out of fear? No, perhaps it was not as much a coward as a weak Bengali woman. Had it been scared like us, how could it stand in the sea, alone and resolute, and show way to the mariners? I heard that it glows alternately because there is a mirror like glass, fitted at its top, which rotates. When light falls on that glass, it glows as brightly as the sun. The lighthouse from a distance looks like a pillar but I have heard that it closely resembles the monument of Calcutta. There are stairs inside it and at the top there is a big circular room containing the light. There is a room downstairs in which a man stays. Every evening he lights that lamp. He is in complete charge of the lighthouse.

¹ The idea of 'swadesh' and motherland – *janani janmabhumi ch swargadapi gariyasi* (the motherland is even better than heaven) were important concepts popular among the late nineteenth century intelligentsia

We were very tired; so we went to bed as soon as it was night. The ship swayed gently but I felt neither uneasy nor giddy. Many people suffer from dyspepsia on ship, they cannot eat anything and even if they do, they immediately throw up. I have heard that this seasickness is as agonizing and weakening as vertigo. Some people get cured in a few days but many take a long time to get well. There are perhaps only a handful of voyagers who are not affected by this. It is difficult to find the reason behind this. There is always a mild swaying of the ship and it increases if the wind is stronger. Firstly, many people cannot tolerate this swaying. Also, the high salt content in the water and air of the ocean makes people suffer from digestive disorders. To add to all these a very foul smelling oil is used in the machine rooms and at other places of the ships. Perhaps all these cumulatively cause seasickness. But it is very surprising that, children are almost never affected. I had not slept for the last three nights, so I thought that I should fall into a deep sleep now. But for some time my sleep was disturbed by various thoughts. After a while I fell asleep. This was my first night in the ship.

I woke up at six in the morning. Just then a 'steward' knocked at our door and my husband got up to take our tea and biscuits from him. I left my bed and had some of those; thereafter I went to the 'deck'. Now there was only the sea all around, neither the city nor houses were visible – it was blue everywhere. Not even a bird was there in the sky. If one looked towards the sea, one could see just the waves, each following the previous one even before it broke up – one after the other. But these waves were not very big ones. The sea was almost calm now except a mild stir, disturbed as if by the ship.

There were not many passengers in this ship; twenty-five people in the first class and only fourteen in the second. The vessel was neither very big, nor very small; it was about twelve

and a half yards long and seven and a half yards in breadth¹. The top of the ship is called ‘deck’. There was no covering over it. When there was too much of heat or rain, the sail was used as cover. On the deck there was the captain’s room, kitchen, and some small machines here and there in between. Downstairs, on one side there were small rooms like those in a train, known as cabins, and a big, well-decorated room for the first-class passengers, where they sat and dined. It was called ‘salon’. All the cabins were not of the same size, each containing two, four or more number of beds. The beds were arranged in tier system, and often, to reach the top most berth, the person had to almost wrestle with oneself. When I first entered the cabin, I did not think it would be possible to spend the night in that pigeonhole. Raising your hand, you could touch the roof and the beds were so narrow that I thought the Goddess of Sleep would never grace me there. Anyway, gradually I adjusted to everything. And if you think logically, you would realise that a better arrangement than this, was not possible in a ship. On those walls of the cabins which faced the sea, there were small windows like the air holes that we see in our country. Those are called ‘port-holes’. Apart from those there were a few more cabins that contained excellent arrangement for bathing and other facilities. At one end of the ship there were cabins for the first-class passengers as well as the officers and at the other end, there were cabins for the second-class passengers and seamen². In the central part of the ship was the machine room. In this machine room there was a huge engine that propelled this ship to move. It was very hot near the machine room and the roar of the engine combined with foul smell of its oil made it difficult for anyone to stand there for long. Just below our cabin there were two to three very big cases in

¹ The author uses the old Bengali measuring unit, haath, which I have converted to yards – 4 haath = 1 yard

² Like many other personal details, she refrains from mentioning in the text the class in which she travelled.

which the goods of the ship and the bigger trunks of the voyagers were kept¹. Beneath these cases was the base of the ship.

The person at the head of the ship is known as ‘captain’. He had four subordinates. These five people, in accordance to their order took charge of the ship. But the captain was the overall in-charge of the ship. There were six engineers to look after the entire machinery of the ship and a doctor on board to treat any person falling ill. Every Sunday a church was organized in which the doctor or the captain functioned as the priest. Under them were four other men called ‘quarter master’. They carried out the orders of the captain and his subordinates. Those who worked as servants in the ship were known as ‘stewards’. The chief steward was responsible for food. He decided what is to be cooked, how much in quantity etc and supervises everything like the mistress of the house. All the other stewards serve food, make the beds, wash utensils etc. There were sixteen stewards in all, and a ‘stewardess’ for all the women travellers. There were people for almost all types of jobs – three to four cooks, barbers, carpenters, blacksmiths etc. There were about six Africans² employed to work in the machine-rooms near the fire. They could bear extreme heat. In this ship there were around sixty sailors from Bombay engaged in chores such as cleaning the ship, unfurling the sail, anchoring the ship etc.³

Soon it was noon. The sun grew brighter and the sea sparkled under it. The waves rose and fell gracefully as if playing with the rays of the sun. The captain and a couple of his crew adjusted the time in keeping with the position of the sun. Today it was two o’ clock at the very time when it was quarter to two yesterday. As we moved along, time differed by a quarter of an

¹ She is perhaps referring to the ship’s hold where bigger luggage was stored.

² The author uses the term *kafri*, a term commonly used in the nineteenth century Bengal synonymous to ‘negro’.

³ Though almost all travel accounts written by Indian travellers travelling to England contained detailed descriptions of the travel through sea, most of them did not give such a vivid and technical description of the vessel and its crew.

hour. I thought of sitting on the deck and reading. But that was not possible; I felt drowsy, the swaying ship seemed to lull me into sleep. The sun was scorching on the deck but cool breeze lessened the heat. I held the book in my hand and sundry thoughts came to my mind – one by one I thought about India, my birthplace, Calcutta, friends and relations. All the people there were in exactly the same condition as they were when I had left them but in these four days I had travelled a great distance and had undergone so much of change in my food habits and things! Had my mother seen me now, she would cry thinking that I have become a Christian, my brothers and sisters would not rush towards me and dare to call me *didi*¹ loudly or hold my hands lest they become outcastes² too. Other relatives would tease me and call me *memsahib*. But there had been no change within me. I did not have the customary *ghomta*, a must for a Hindu wife. Also I had become so British in my eating habits and attire that no one would recognise me as a daughter of a Hindu. Yet I had the same love towards my mother, father, brother, sister and other kith and kin. Had I seen them then, I would have hugged them and talked to them. I still felt the same longing for India. Some Indians brought false allegations that the moment an Indian got into a ship, the person changed. I think they said so because they believed that difference in attire brings in a change in the nature as well.

Gradually, the sun lost its brightness. At the time of sunset the sky appeared red, it seemed as if the sea was on fire and the flames leapt up to the sky. I had seen sunsets many a times in India but none had seemed so fascinating. Now my surrounding was not just blue in hue. Looking at the reddish sky overhead, I thought we were near some land inhabited by people. I

¹ A form of addressing the elder sister in Bengali.

² Casteism was strongly practised in 19th century India. Making a person outcaste was equivalent to ostracising him/her for failing in following the customs of his religion and it was commonly practiced. Krishnabhabini's modern outlook is reflected in her critical approach towards this prevalent custom.

felt as excited as that traveller who, lost in the darkness of night, sees the lights of a distant city. The sun moved farther from us gradually. I could see half of it and then it completely disappeared. The sky was still red. The sun had left its light behind. Even after the sunset, the hue the sun had left behind proclaimed its greatness just as fame betokens the great deeds of a saint even long after his death. Slowly darkness engulfed everything. Once again the sky was deep blue. Now the blue moonlit sky was studded with thousands of stars and the moon situated amidst them radiated its soothing light. If you observe the sea – you would see thousands of moons dancing upon the waves, swaying for a while before disappearing. Oh! What a sight! Sitting on the deck I kept watching the stars and wondered whether these were the same stars that I could see from India? I had come such a long way from India, could I get a glimpse of those same stars from here as well? But see, here are our well-known planets – Venus and Mars. And here are our familiar Big Dipper, Orion and other constellations shining brightly in the sky. I felt glad to see the known stellar bodies here. We used to sit together on the terrace of our house in Calcutta and watch them. The stars are here, still visible to me but where are the other people? Would I meet them ever again?

Next morning I woke up to find the sea as still as a pond. I opened the porthole to have a look. After watching for some time I felt bored. So as soon as the bell rang I changed quickly and went for breakfast. In the ship, a bell was rung before each meal. On finishing breakfast we once again went to the deck to watch the sea. But it were the same sky, same people, all were the same. Now life in the sea appeared dreary. If my husband¹ had not been with me during this period, I would have really had a tough time as apart from him I did not have anyone to talk to. There were other women on board, but we did not have much conversation with them. I have

¹ This is the most personal comment that we find throughout the book. Nowhere else she makes any direct reference regarding any of her family members.

heard that when the British go to India from England, they are polite towards the Indians and treat them as equals but when they are on their way back, they strike a different attitude. Their politeness disappears. Therefore I too did not talk to anyone.

Six days passed in this way. When I went to the deck on Friday morning, I saw something like smoke at a distance; gradually as we went nearer, it appeared like shore. I cannot describe my pleasure then. Only one who has spent six to seven days continuously in water can understand this happiness. There was a time when I longed to see the ocean, and now I was restless to see land. Gradually as the land approached, I became happier. Around ten o'clock in the morning we approached Aden. A siren informed us that we had reached the port. The sailors hurried to anchor the ship. The ship came to a halt.

Aden was quite close by. There were white and red houses in the lap of black and grey hills, behind which were the roads and beyond them, the sea again. It seemed that Aden had risen from the sea. Along the roadsides small but very strong dikes had been built to keep the waves at bay. Looking at this side I saw that a number of small boats had come near the ship and ladders had been let down from both its sides and many new people were climbing on board. Many of them had come to sell something or the other. Some people showed us large feathers, others were asking us to buy ornaments and at another point I saw a Persian sitting with many kinds of toys. Going to the edge of the ship I saw another new scene; about twenty-five to thirty small boys, each on a small dinghy were shouting 'oho, have a dive' and asking for money. If a coin was thrown in the water, they would immediately dive into the sea and effortlessly find it out. One of them said that if someone would throw the coin from the other side of the sea, he could swim from beneath the ship and find it. I threw a two *anna*¹ to test him and I saw that he dived and

¹ Old monetary system of India. 16 annas = 1 rupee. This system was followed before the beginning of decimal system.

picked it up. But I could not understand whether he went along the side of the ship or swam underneath it. Anyway, seeing their proficiency in swimming, it seemed to me that these boys were some kind of aquatic creatures¹. They did not seem to ever grow taller and all of them looked alike – very dark complexioned with thick growth of sand coloured hair. They seemed to be Africans. The people of this place spoke Arabic but since the British, French, and other races frequently came here, these people knew a smattering of all those languages including Hindustani². So they had a working knowledge of all these languages.

Everyone must be aware that Aden is under the British rule. It has such a great importance for the English because they have to cross this place while going to India. So they pamper Aden so much. Many people describe this place as the gateway to India. This is the reason for which the British have built a fort in this desert and have posted a troop of soldiers there. Since there is a very close contact between Aden and India, the British considers it as a part of the Bombay presidency. Almost all the ships on their way stop here for eight to ten hours to replenish their stock of coal. In the mean time, the passengers go to the shore for sight-seeing.

At twelve noon we took a boat to the shore. The sea-shore had miles of sand and there were a few shops owned by some Persian and British people, about two to three hotels, a post-office, etc. We took a car and entered the city. There was not much to see except a few tanks or ponds. Nobody knows who had built these tanks. It is said that many years ago, when this place was under the Arabs, these deep tanks had been dug to store rain water and save people from drought. Now, no one takes care of these any more. The land here is very barren and sandy; we

¹ Ramesh Chandra Dutt in his work, *Europe e Tin Batsar* or *Three years in Europe* gives a similar description of these boys in Aden, calling them 'sea-animals' or *jala jantu* (7)

² Hindustani as a language means the language of Hindustan, which was the commonly used name of India. But in common usage it generally meant Hindi.

could not see any green fields or trees anywhere. Here camels carry all types of loads; some horses and horse carts are also available. The houses in Aden are much similar to the ones that we have in Bengal, many among which are made of stone. In spite of the sea breeze, it was very hot there. Added to that was the scarcity of drinking water. Perhaps that is why no one wants to stay here. But many people have to somehow spend their lives here on account of their jobs. In Aden there are Arabians, Africans, Jews, Indians, British, French, and people from other races. Here population is scarce; apart from the soldiers, almost everyone is engaged in business. The various streams of commerce that flow through the four continents meet in Aden. The ships coming from India, China, Australia, Japan, South Africa, go via Aden to Europe or America.

On returning to the ship again at three in the afternoon, we found the ship to be extremely crowded and covered with coal-dust. They bring coal in boats from the shore, which is then loaded into the ship. This takes about three to four hours, and during this time, coal dust settles on all the things around turning them black. The doors and windows of the rooms are kept shut and it becomes difficult for people to remain in the ship. Within an hour or two the sailors cleaned up everything. When all the outsiders had left, the ship blew its siren signalling its time to leave. Look towards the port of Aden. You can see a number of ships sailing – red, black, blue, white - with their own flags fluttering in the air! All the ships belong to the Europeans, and most of them are owned by the British; there were no ships belonging either to the Indians or to any other Asian country. After two or three ships left, we also started moving. As darkness spread, we lost sight of Aden.

The next morning we woke up to see that we had reached the Red Sea. I had thought that the Red Sea would appear red. But like the Indian Ocean this one was also blue. Here in the

month of *ashwin* the weather was as hot as our *jesth*¹. Red sea is not very wide; it was particularly narrow for quite a stretch from the port of Aden. Here we did not feel as though we were in the middle of a sea. On the two sides we could see the shores of Arabia and Africa. Gusts of searing hot air were blowing from time to time from the deserts of these two places. The ocean here was quite dangerous; there were a number of hillocks under the surface of water. Therefore the ship had to be steered very carefully through these regions. I have heard that the Red Sea got this name because a number of people had lost their lives here. Today the captain was very busy. Instead of allowing his crews to steer the ship, he was doing it himself. He did not have the time to eat as well. The sun was very bright in the morning and the night sky was absolutely clear. The stars and planets were shining brightly and their lights fell on the water to illuminate the place. Actually, I had never seen such sky in India. Here I saw another new scene. When I was in India, I had heard of a fish that can fly; here I saw real flying fish. They could not fly continuously like birds, but from time to time, they flew for a few feet above the sea level, like ducks. They were white with a reddish tinge and glittered under the sunshine.

A few more days passed as I enjoyed these scenes. On Tuesday, around eight in the evening, I saw a light at a distance. Many people watched it using telescopes but none could make out its source. Some said that it was another ship; others thought it to be a light from the city of Suez. After about another half an hour when some more lights were visible, we realised that we were near the city of Suez. The ship stopped after some time. I had thought that we shall take a train from Suez to go to Alexandria, and from there we shall go to Brindisi by a ship. But it was not so. All the mails between India and England go through this route, but this time even the mail did not pass this way. The reason behind this was the war that was going on in Egypt.

¹ *Ashwin* and *Jesth* are names of the months in Bengali calendar, corresponding to the English months of September-October and May-June respectively.

Though the war had ended by then and that route had been reopened, none of the passengers were allowed to get down lest there be some trouble. Therefore we had to go through Suez Canal, covering the entire journey by water. Ships are not allowed in the canal at night, so we spent the night at the port. The city of Suez was about four miles away, but since it was already dark, nothing was visible. I kept looking at the lights as long as I could, thereafter, feeling tired, went off to sleep.

The next morning I woke up to see a number of small boats and many people on both sides of the ship. There were ships of many different colours and types in the port. I had never seen so many ships at one place. It was just a few days that the war was over. So a number of ships were still waiting there. There were two or three different flags unfurled at the top of each ship. The flags either showed the race of the owner of the ship or the company to which it belonged. I could see white coloured houses at a distance. And nearer to me, I saw people being very busy – getting up, climbing down, coming here, or going away – I felt like going and join them. Those ships, which were waiting in the canal at night, came out one by one and the ships which were in the port, started moving towards the canal. This went on till twelve noon. At one o'clock our ship left port to slowly enter the canal.

The canal was so narrow that more than one ship could not pass. If the ship sailed fast, then soil from both the banks might slide and choke the canal itself: so the ship moved very slowly. At some intervals in the canal there were stops similar to railway stations. Near those stations, the canal was wider, so if two ships came together, at these places, one was made to stop while the other moved on. Gradually we left the city of Suez behind. Now, there were open spaces on either side of the canal, most of it being sandy desert. Only at long distances there were a few houses. Apart from these nothing else was visible. The ship was moving very slowly.

It had to halt for a number of times in between and stopped completely at night. So we had to spend two nights before covering much of a distance. Later we reached a lake. Since the canal merged with the lake here, this place was much wider, so the ship moved a bit faster here. At eleven o'clock in the morning we reached the city of Ismailia. The ship stopped. Here too a few boats came near the ship but since the ladder was not lowered from the ship, none of them could come on board. They started selling eggs, fish, fruits, from their boats itself. One gets delicious fruits here, here I tasted fresh pomegranate, such succulent grapes, apples and some other kinds of fruits that I had never seen before. My eyes had grown tired of watching water and fields only. Now, looking at the white coloured houses and green trees, I felt very happy. There is a royal palace in Islamia where the *khedive*¹ of Egypt comes and stays at times.

By now we had crossed almost half of the canal. We left Ismailia and proceeded further. Next day we crossed a number of ships on our way, and when I saw one of them going to Calcutta, my mind wavered. Had I been in that ship today, I would have been very happy, or if there be any Indian in this ship he must be so happy to be on his way back to his own country! The pain of yearning for one's own country can only be felt by those who are living abroad.

Suez Canal is about ninety miles long² and for about seventy miles, its width is about 54.5 yards and for the rest of 18 miles, it is only 32.5 yards wide. Digging of this canal had begun in the year 1860 and was completed in 1869. The idea of Suez Canal was first thought of by a famous French person, named Monsieur Ferdinand de Lesseps and now this fruit of his intelligence and efforts is being enjoyed by us. Around twenty-two crores of rupees has been

¹ This is a Persian term meaning the lord or ruler. This title was granted by the Ottoman Sultan to the hereditary *pasha* of Egypt in 1867.

² The units that she is using here are *krash* and *haath* which have been converted to miles and yards respectively. 1 *krash* = 2 miles (approx.) and 1 *haath* = 0.5 yards.

spent in its construction, apart from that there was the cost of the land and the *Khedive* of Egypt had forced many workers to work on it without any payment. Earlier, the route to India through the south of Africa was about 11000 miles, after the construction of this canal it has been reduced to only 7400 miles and this route has reduced the span of journey by thirty-six days as compared to the previous one. It is documented that in the year 1877, 1651 ships had crossed this canal among which 1291 belonged to the British. In that year, the revenue earned from this canal was around 16000000 rupees and this annual income has been only rising since then. All its work is done by a French company. Monsieur Lesseps is the leader of this; their main office is in Paris, the capital of France. All those ships which take this route have to pay to this company according to the quantity of their cargo.

On Friday evening, at seven o' clock our ship crossed the canal and reached the city of Port Said. We felt relieved. If the ship can move at a constant speed, the canal can be crossed in ten hours, but as it moved slowly, stopping in the middle for a number of times, it took us two and a half days. Port Said too was extremely crowded with ships, but since it was night, they were not properly visible, only their lights shone in the darkness. From a distance it seemed that a diamond necklace was floating on the sea. There were a number of shops on the sea-shore which looked charming in their bright lights. These shops kept attracting the passengers of the ship but as it was night, none ventured to the shore. I have heard that Port Said is a dangerous place, all the notorious people from various European countries gather here.

The ship in which we are sailing will reach England going along the south of Europe, but we and a few other passengers wanted to go to England through Europe via Italy and so we left this ship and boarded a different one. This new ship was a bit smaller than the previous one, but cleaner and taller. Apart from three or four of us there was no other Indian in it; the sailors were

all Italian and the captain and his crew were British. The ship sailed within half an hour. Now at last we were leaving Asia behind. This thought made me sad. Leaving Port Said means cutting off all relations with Asia. Till Port Said one doesn't feel very far from India because the people and their houses in Aden, Suez or Port Said keep on reminding one of India. But from here on, everything would be different and the farther you go, in all the places you would come across Europeans, and many new things.

When we woke up the next day, we saw that we were sailing on the Mediterranean Sea. Here too, like in the Indian Ocean we could see only blue water all around and blue sky over our heads. On Monday we moved ahead looking at the small hills in islands near Greece. There was no end to the sea; we felt very restless spending a few days in the sea, just think how much those people had suffered who had to spend one and a half years, or nine months, or six months or three months, during their passage between England and India. Tuesday early morning we reached about four miles from Brindisi, a town in the south-east of Italy. But what a luck! In spite of Brindisi being so near, we could not get down the ship. The Italians did not allow us to visit that place lest cholera enters Europe, particularly Italy, from Egypt. Such an arrangement is called 'quarantine'. And this rule is very strictly followed, such that when cholera breaks out in India or Egypt, they detain the ship for ten, fifteen or even twenty-five days and do not let it keep any kind of contact with the shore.

Brindisi was just ahead. At quite a distance white coloured houses can be seen and nearby, the masts of the ships were visible. One or two Italian ships crossed us to go to the port, but we were sitting like prisoners, unable to move about. At seven o' clock in the morning a doctor and two superintendents from the Italian government came to check all of us to see if we were suffering from cholera or any other diseases. All the people on board had to go to them.

None of us were suffering from any disease; still no one was allowed to get down the ship till we had passed three days near the port, or in areas near Italy. They only took letters packed in gunny sacks, and those too very carefully. Everyone felt irritated at this unnecessary wastage of time, but we were helpless. Not keeping the ship in the port for three days, the captain started moving northwards, towards Venice. Now we were in the Adriatic Sea. We sailed along the eastern coast of Italy.

On Wednesday when we saw a number of fishing boats, we realised that we were near some human habitation. Slowly Venice was visible to us from a distance, here again the ship came to halt. Everyone was eager to go to Venice, but as it was not yet three days since we left Brindisi, we were not allowed to get down. Everyone started abusing the Italian government; it was not a foreign dominated country such as India that the British could do whatever they felt like. This was a free country; here no other country can establish its stronghold. In this way we spent another day here. On Thursday morning we sailed again. We kept moving towards Venice through a canal. There were small islands on the two sides, green trees at intervals, various types of houses of white and red colours and then again water. Almost around eight at night we reached Venice. We heard that next morning once again a doctor, now from Venice, would come to check up the passengers; irritated, I went to my cabin.

Next morning at six, a doctor of the Italian government came from the shore and there was a check up for all the people on board. None in the ship was found ailing. As it was three days in the sea since our departure from Brindisi, we felt very happy as now we would be free to leave the ship. The ship anchored near the shore. Many small boats came by the side of our ship. These boats are called Gondola here. They look similar to the dinghy of our country. We prepared ourselves to get down the ship, in the mean time a few persons came from the Italian

excise department and started checking the luggage of the passengers. While travelling in a foreign country one has to pay a duty for a number of things, the duty on tobacco is particularly high. If one possesses it in a quantity more than his personal requirement and keeps it hidden without paying the tax, then if caught, the person might be fined or punished in some other way. After all these checking were over, on 18th October, at eight-thirty in the morning we took a gondola to Venice.

4. From Venice to London

First we took a gondola to the railway station of Venice. Contrary to our expectations, there was no respite from the sea even here as we once again came across it. The sea appeared endless. Charting our way through a number of canals, we reached the station. Reaching there, we found that no one knew English but all spoke Italian and a few could speak French. Thankfully my husband knew French, so we could somehow manage. We learnt that our train would depart at eleven o' clock in the night. We took another boat from the station and once again, crossing a number of canals of various sizes, we reached a hotel. There we had something to eat and then went out on a tour of the city. This was my first step on any European land. I cannot express my curiosity and the happiness that filled my heart while touring through Italy.

Venice is situated in the northeastern corner of Italy. It is an interesting city; one cannot find another place similar to it. It consists of a group of islands. At a glance it seems that a number of houses are floating on the ocean. Just as other cities have roads, here there are canals. If you want to go from one place to another, you can find a number of boats at your doorstep; you

can hire one and travel. There are rows of houses along both the sides of the canals and at intervals, there are bridges overhead. There is silence, as there is no noise from vehicles of any types. While in other cities the rich own cars or horses, here they own gondolas and boatmen. I did not see any horse or vehicle in this city. One can also walk around in this city along the bridges, but there are high bridges after every five minutes and one has to climb a number of stairs. So it is quite inconvenient to travel like this. I have heard that in the olden times, there was an Italian king who was a great lover of ocean. He wished to build a house over the sea. He is the creator of this city on sea.

Beside our hotel was the Saint Mark Square, which looked like a paved courtyard. Along the four sides of the square were fine shops of a variety of things. All of these were so beautifully decorated that it was difficult to take eyes off them. We went to an ordinary garden and found it crowded with people, mostly women; all the people - the poor or rich, women and men - were strolling or sitting and talking among themselves. Looking at them I was reminded of my sisters in India who were leading a confined life and felt very sad; they could not even think of such happiness. 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*¹. But unfortunately, we could not talk to them as we could not speak Italian. I had read that the Italian women were not very well educated, but they did not appear stupid. There was a mark of culture and freedom visible upon their visage.

¹ What the author wants to stress at is that she felt a kind of kinship with the Italian women she saw at the park. This bond which she feels here is important from the point of view of the postcolonial studies – a woman of a colonial country harbouring a sense of sisterhood with women of a European nation.

This feeling is also a contrast to her attitude towards the English women who were her fellow passengers in the ship.

As the day ended we returned to our hotel and had dinner. Then, after a short nap we went to the station at ten o' clock in the night and boarded the train for London. I felt happy thinking that our journey would end in another few days. Somehow the night passed. Next morning as we travelled we watched the northern part of Italy. It seemed to me that though Venice appeared richer than any of our cities, Italy was a poor country. It reminded me of India.

Even now one can find certain traces which prove that the Italians and Indians have a lot in common. Even now the poor women here use scarves instead of hats, similar to our *ghomta*¹ and many of them wore *ghaghra*² and shirt, like those worn by the women of north-western India. The civilizations of the ancient Hindus and Italians belonged to the same period, both the races were idol worshippers, and there were many similarities between their customs and costumes. From those days Italians have changed a great deal; customs, traditions, religion, attire, everything has completely changed. Italy went through a dire phase after the fall of the Roman Empire. They did not just lose their name and esteem but also their freedom and were engaged in fighting among themselves. After a number of years when they gradually became aware of their faults and their degenerated condition, they finally solve their differences and regained their freedom with the help of famous patriots like Mazzini³, Garibaldi⁴ and others. But

¹ See note on *ghomta* in chapter 1.

² A kind of long skirt with lots of flair and usually of bright colours and design.

³ Giuseppe *Mazzini* (born June 22, 1805, Genoa; died March 10, 1872, Pisa, Italy) Italian patriot and a major figure in the making of modern Italy.

⁴ Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807 –1882) was an Italian general and politician. He is considered, with Camillo_Cavour, Victor Emmanuel II and Giuseppe_Mazzini, as one of Italy's "fathers of the fatherland". He had personally commanded and fought in many military campaigns that led eventually to the formation of a unified Italy.

what has happened to our India? One of our Indian poets, in an answer to this has truly said - 'India keeps on just sleeping'.

Around eight in the morning we reached Milan and changed the train to go towards Switzerland. A short while after leaving Milan we reached the mountainous region. Oh! Such wonderful beauty of nature! I was impressed by the sight of the mountain ranges in Jabalpur on our way from Calcutta to Bombay, but the inimitable and inexpressible natural beauty that I saw here was beyond my imagination, beyond my dreams.

On either side of us were the high mountains standing with their heads held up to the sky. In between there were fountains from which water gurgled out, disturbing the serenity of this tranquil and quiet place and at some distance this water took the form of a rapidly flowing small brook. At other places this water accumulated in more quantity to form a pond. Not very far from this place were the vast valleys, dark due to their cover of green grass and trees. At some places cows, horses and other such animals could be seen while at other places there were a few houses. Everything looked doubly bright and beautiful under the sun. There was complete silence except the sound made by the train moving at a great speed. Wow! So much of difference in nature! At every moment there was something new to see. The train was moving through the plateau region of this mountain. After a while we started descending again. As the train descended at a great speed, it seemed to me that the entire world was rushing downwards from a sky-high mountain. Those, which looked like leaves from a distance, appeared to be trees on approaching and those which looked like small brooks, later turned out to be broad rivers. There were mountains after mountains and the more we proceeded, we could see more and more amazing scenes. Nature gradually became more sombre. In front of us I could see another huge mountain. I thought that

now the train would stop, but eventually, it entered the mountain and passed through it. Like this we went through a number of tunnels at a great speed.

We reached a valley in the northern corner of Italy. Here we came across another new scene. Suddenly nature became quite serene. We had left the mountains behind. A few of them were ahead of us but they were too far to be clearly visible. The place was covered with different kinds of trees, climbers, etc. and not far from it was a beautiful and vast lake. Around the lake were a few white coloured houses. Men and women were happily strolling along its sides, small girls and boys were playing and ducks and other water creatures were happily swimming. It was already the season of *sharat*¹, but in this country where winter predominates, the flora had not yet lost brightness. Swaying lightly in the gentle breeze, the flowers appeared to be entertaining nature². A bit farther one or two farmers were working. The terrible winter had not set in yet to make the earth barren. There were some clouds in the sky and their shadow on the clean and quivering water of the lake added to its beauty. This was the beginning of the month of *Kartik*³, but the sun was less scorching; though it was afternoon, a cool and soothing breeze was blowing. I felt drowsy reflecting upon nature's exquisite beauty. For a while I fell asleep.

Suddenly I woke up. I saw that we had reached a very dark and mountainous region. On both sides, there were two huge and barren mountains; however high I might look up, I could not see the tip of its peak. Never in my life had I seen such tough and horrible looking mountains. There was no trace of greenery. Large chunks of stones were falling on the plateaus and I was

¹ *Sharat* is the Bengali name for a season that comes after the rains and precedes autumn. In the winter countries like England, France, Italy, it is not present, and therefore it does not have a counterpart in English. This shows how geographical difference becomes one of the factors of limits of translatability.

² The author here indulges in a poetic and Sankritised form of the language. She often used such a language in course of her description of nature, particularly for scenes that touched her by their beauty. But such differentiation of diction is not possible in English.

³ A month from the Bengali calendar which falls in the months of October-November.

scared that very soon they would crush our bones. There were some caves in these mountains gaping at us, but even the sun's rays could never reach here. At places there were high waterfalls making loud noise as they fell from high mountains with a great force. Along with that there were echoes of the noise coming from various vehicles. These noises assaulted our ears. What a disturbance in nature that in such a secluded place there should be so much of a noise! Looking nearer I saw that we were moving across a very narrow bridge. Far beneath us was the plain land. Looking downwards I felt nervous.

Gradually we reached a higher region. We started feeling cold. Since we did not have any warm clothing we wrapped around ourselves whatever we had and sat with the windows of our carriage shut. But the awe and delight with which we watched the picturesque beauty of nature made us forget everything else. By then we had reached the foothills of the Alps. All the earlier views of nature appeared trivial in its comparison. Bounty of nature and its grandeur left us speechless and we kept staring upwards. We saw continuous ranges of peaks overlapping each other. The foothills were covered with various strange plants, but as one ascended the hill, these plants became scarce. Further higher up, nothing green was visible. One could see only naked brown stones. High peaks were totally covered with ice, and when the sun's rays fell on them, they gleamed brightly; from a distance it looked as if the king of the mountain sat wearing his crown of diamonds. It was the first time that we saw snow; I cannot justly express how astonished and delighted I was by such a view. Here and there were the fountains and the water of those streams winding down the surface of the mountain through an intricate route, resembled a white plait or at times they were obstructed by some rocks and sprayed water in all directions. When the sunbeams fell on these water particles, they reflected beautiful colours of a rainbow.

Elsewhere there were large stretches of desert like areas along the mountain slopes. There were certain areas that seemed completely inaccessible by any kind of living organisms.

Watching such amazing and overwhelming beauty of nature, we moved ahead contemplating the inconceivable power of our Creator and His unparalleled creation. These miraculous scenes were actually proofs of His greatness and power. In this way we reached very near to the peak of Saint Gotthard in the Alps range. Just before us, there stood a very high, huge and an awe-inspiring mountain. Its grave look asked us to stay away from it, lest our proximity debases it. I thought that here was mankind's defeat by nature; he would not be able to cross this insurmountable mountain. But thanks to man's knowledge and intellect; with the help of science and technology, he had succeeded in building tunnels through this impenetrable Alps. We went through these tunnels and crossing Italy, reached Switzerland.

The station was just beside the tunnel. We came to know that the train would stop there for half an hour. We got down the train and after our meals we took a walk and looked around that place. Just ahead was the huge mountain, the tunnel below looking no more than a small hole. We had come through the mid of this terrible mountain; I wondered whether there was anything impossible for man? I kept pondering upon the tunnel. On one of its side is a small town of Italy, named Airolo, while on the other side is Göschenen, a Swiss village. The length of the tunnel is almost ten miles and it is only twenty-two and half feet¹ wide, only two vehicles can move alongside at a time. It took us forty-five minutes to cross it. Once inside, we could not see anything, as it was completely dark. Apart from the sound of the train, nothing else could be heard. Italy and Switzerland, both the sides began the construction of this tunnel in the year 1872 and it was completed by 1881. Initially, the expense for the construction of this tunnel was

¹ The author used the unit *haath*, which approximates to one and a half feet.

estimated to be about nine crore rupees, but at the end of the construction, it turned out to be fifteen crores. There is another similar tunnel through the Alps joining Italy and France. It is called Mont Cenis tunnel. It is smaller than Saint Gotthard tunnel but it required more ingenuity and technical skills. Musing on the knowledge and intelligence of the European engineers, we boarded the train again at four o' clock in the afternoon.

Now we were moving through the hilly regions of Switzerland. All around us there were mountain ranges, similar to those which we had crossed earlier; the train proceeded, sometimes over the mountains, sometimes through them or at other times along their sides. Looking back, the high peak of Saint Gotthard was not visible anymore. The rail track was serpentine, if at once we were atop a mountain, the next moment we reached its foot. I could not help thanking the European science when I thought of the amount of skill and effort that had gone into building a railway through such impassable and rugged terrain. Also, we could move so fast as a result of this motor driven vehicle. In the morning we were in Italy while by evening we reached Switzerland. Then we heard people speaking in a particular language and now we heard them speaking in another completely different one. We progressed further watching the scenery of Switzerland.

The ground here seemed quite fertile because the fountain gave rise to many streams and lakes on its either sides. This country experiences severe cold – winter lasts for almost eight months a year. Snowfall had started by the beginning of this month of *Kartick*. Yet, there was a variety of flora here in its valley region. At places there were big trees whose branches covered with green leaves swayed gently in the evening breeze – it was a very pleasing scene. Here most of the houses were built of stone and some were made of wood. They had slanting roofs and big chimneys atop each of these. When I looked at these white coloured houses from the train, I felt

like leaving the train and running up to them. In spite of the winter, it must be a delight to live in these mountainous countries. Ah! What a sacred place! It seems that in such blessed places sin cannot exist. People lead a sacred life here as the sages do.

Slowly the day came to an end. We left the mountainous terrain to enter the plains. I felt that from heaven we had descended on earth. With the setting of the sun it was evening. At about nine o' clock in the night we reached Basel, a city situated on the river Rhine, in the north-west of Switzerland. Here again we changed our train and it moved at full speed. Everything was dark outside, nothing was visible. We only knew that we were crossing Germany through its south-west region. I felt quite tired and went off to sleep after some time. When I woke up in the middle of the night, I saw that the train had stopped at a station and people were moving about here and there. After sometime an official came to check whether we had anything with us for which we needed to pay a tax. We realised that we had left a country to enter another one. Till now we were hearing the harsh German language and now we could hear the sweet soft French. We had entered France. Next morning we went through the north-west province of France. Land here was extremely fertile; on both sides we could see lush green fields laden with crops. Since we were crossing the plains now, the amazing sights that nature held for us for the past few days were no longer to be seen. Finally, at one in the afternoon we reached Calais, a city in the north-west province of France.

This city is a famous port situated just beside the ocean. Sitting at home one can see the vast expanse of the ocean just ahead; watching the traffic of ships and the variety of things being exported or imported gives one a feeling that these people are very industrious. The entire city is enclosed by wall. I have heard that Paris and many other important cities of France are surrounded by walls, just as we find in Delhi, Jaipur and other cities in the north-western part of

our country. Calais appears to be a city of ships. All around us there were hundreds of people working in the ships – building or repairing them. All these give an idea of how rich and powerful these French are.

The French appear quite clever and social on interaction. They are famous for their intelligence and technological skills, therefore I need not write much about these people. Many of the French men are quite handsome, and the women are humble and shy. They do not belong to the *babu*¹ 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. They do not neglect their children for the sake of their own pleasure. 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 French love the outward pomp and show a lot. The churches and other public places are beautifully built, their architectural skills being amazing.

The French are not selfish; the poor, the rich, the middle class, all categories of people sit together to chat and gossip. They are so social that they will interact and converse friendly with even a stranger. 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

¹¹ In nineteenth century Bengal, *babus* were the foppish upper class men known for their lavish and idle life style. They were at the butt of ridicule by the nineteenth century intelligentsia and find a place in many social and literary works of that period.

drought. The houses in the French cities are made of stones and bricks which reminded me of the houses in Kashi¹ in India. The houses are six to seven floors tall but the floors are low. I have heard that winters in France are more severe than British winters and the summers are often as hot as in India.

After taking our meals at Calais, we boarded a ship at around three in the afternoon. Crossing the Strait of Dover we reached Dover, a city in the south east corner of England, at five in the evening. The strait was quite narrow, since England and France were quite close to it on its either bank, much water could not flow freely, and then there are violent storms coming from the Atlantic Ocean and the Bay of Biscay. Therefore there are huge and continuous waves in this strait. Here almost everyone suffered from sea-sickness and threw up. But surprisingly, since the time we started from Bombay and till we reached England I did not suffer from it even for a day.

On reaching Dover we saw that there was motor vehicle just on the beach, so without any delay we boarded it and started towards London. As I travelled, a new feeling came over me - I, a Bengali lady who had always remained under veil, was in England today! I was in that distant country of England about which I had read and heard so much with such great interest.

On twentieth of October at half past eight in the night we reached London. We got down at the Charring Cross station. On getting down we saw that the station was as bright as day, all around there were electric lights shining brightly like the sun. Since it was a Sunday, it was not possible to go anywhere else, so we went to quite a big hotel near the station itself. Travelling for twenty four days through water and land had left us extremely tired. Today, after a long span of time we took complete rest, free from all tension, and in a house which did not move.

¹ Also known as Benaras, it is one of the most important religious cities of the Hindus in the northern part of India.