

# "If possible, I too shall venture out into the world – that is my desire": Reading Rabindranath Tagore's *Chhinnapatrabali* as Travel Writing

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## Abstract

Hugo's description of a view from a moving train is one of many instances in travel writing which illustrates how the mode of travel (here, the railways) often plays a significant role in the creating of new landscapes within the text. The gaze of the traveller also plays a significant role in landscape production as does their relation to the land they are describing. This article seeks to examine the ways in which 'literary landscape(s)' produced by travel-writing are able to challenge the 'imperial eye' in the construction and representation of the colony, in this case, Bengal, with specific reference to Rabindranath Tagore's letters written to his niece Indira Devi. This article shall locate *Chhinnapatrabali* within the broader framework of British landscape paintings of India in order to examine how Tagore's text is formulating individual and cultural identities. It seeks to argue that the production of literary landscapes in the letters in *Chhinnapatrabali* must be seen within the larger colonial project of landscape production and be located within the efforts by the colonial subjects to explicitly and implicitly produce and reproduce landscapes of their own through travel narratives, where landscape becomes an interesting site/sight of Self and national identity.

**Keywords:** landscape, modernity, Tagore, letters, nation

"The flowers by the side of the road are no longer flowers but flecks, or rather streaks, of red or white; there are no longer any points, everything becomes a streak..." – Victor Hugo, 1837

## Introduction

The term landscape inevitably conjures up the image of a framed work of art – scenes of mountains, rivers, trees, and vast fields in which the human figure remains mostly absent. As a form of art, the landscape is peculiar, for it is both the subject and the form – that which is represented and the final production. This sense of duality is carried into the idea of a literal landscape – the kind of landscapes that literature is able to produce through words. Travel writing, by the very nature of its genre, is able to produce and represent a varied assortment of landscapes – from a fast-moving train, from a slow-moving boat, or the view while walking. Each mode of travel generates a different view of landscapes as they either speed past or slowly drift by.

In all these senses of the landscape, as a form and a process, as the object and the subject, the central concern that is common is the human relationship with nature. As Denis Cosgrove points out, "[...] landscape is an ideological concept which represents the way in which certain class of people have signified themselves and their world through their imagined relationship

with nature (1998, p. 15).” Thinking of landscape as an ideology becomes significant in the colonial context. Land becomes a fraught word. What is the relationship of the colonised to their land? How are questions of ownership mitigated within a colonial context? What kind of connotations does the term “land” carry within it, especially in a colonised nation? And finally, if the landscape is a construction or a production, then who produces and reproduces these landscapes?

This article seeks to answer these questions with reference to Rabindranath Tagore’s letters written to his niece Indira Devi, which were collected in the volume *Chhinnapatrabali* published two decades after the death of the poet. In its reading of Tagore’s letters of his journeys within India within the larger framework of British landscape art about India, it will focus on the production of literary landscapes and the construction of identities through such formulations within a colonised nation.

### Landscape and Power

Borrowing W. J. T. Mitchell’s theorisation, we can think of this ‘landscape’ not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed. Landscape, in this sense, becomes an instrument and perhaps, as Mitchell argues, even an agent of cultural power that is independent of human intentions. Landscape greets us as space, as environment, as something within which we can find or lose ourselves. It is a physical and multi-sensory medium in which cultural meanings and values are encoded. It is the process by which cultural and individual identities may form and emerge. (Mitchell, 1995, pp. 1–2)

As a mode of production and as the produced site/sight, the question of power, then, is intrinsically linked to both the process of producing the landscape and the final result. In case of Tagore’s *Chhinnapatrabali*, many of the letters, and the bulk of the letters referred to in this article in particular, were written while travelling through the Tagore estate. Here, Tagore’s relation to the land is that of the lord. But in a larger sense, the land – both literally and figuratively – that is the nation, is ruled over by another force.

Within the context of the British painting scenes from India, this question of power becomes explicit. Jeffrey Auerbach, pointing to the element of the ‘picturesque’ in British paintings of the colonies from the second half of the eighteenth century argues that this ‘literary and visual aesthetic’ acted as an agent of homogenization (2004, p. 47). British landscape painting during this time did not focus on the notion of *difference*, but rather, on the notion of *sameness*. That is, it did not seek to represent the colonies as being radically different from each other, or, even from the English landscape. Compare, for instance, the scenes of the artist William Hodges’s landscapes from Otaheite and India. There are more similarities in the use of colours, in the representation of water bodies and trees, than there are differences. Tillotson has argued, ‘The application of the English aesthetic to Indian scene served [rather] to restrain than to reveal their exotic nature’ (2000, p. 55). This was done to aid in the said process of homogenisation. African, Indian, and Australian landscapes look quite similar to one another. This created an image of the sameness of the British Empire. Further, argues Auerbach, the picturesque took as its starting point the idea that nature was imperfect, something that then needed to be organised and ordered into a frame. Or, in the case of literary landscapes produced in travel writing – a page. (2004, p. 48).

## Ways of Seeing

The young man said—

"If I rightly understand the Shasters, one can save one's soul just as well by remaining at home as by visiting places of pilgrimage."

"Then why did you come?" asked the old man.

The young man replied— "I told you before that I wished very much to see the ocean, and it is simply on that account that I have come." Then, in a lower tone, he muttered, "Ah! What have I seen! I shall never forget it even in subsequent states of existence!" (Chattopadhyay, 1866, trans. H. A. D. Phillips, 1)

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's second Bengali novel *Kapalkundala* was published in 1866. Set two hundred and fifty years before that period, when Portuguese ships and other pirates struck fear in the hearts of travellers, the opening scene narrates the tale of a group of passengers on a boat which has lost its way in a storm. Here, the reader encounters the male protagonist of the novel –Nabakumar – literally, the 'new', 'young man', the speaker of the extract quoted above. He is on a boat with other passengers returning from Gangasagar, a popular pilgrimage spot, and when the scene opens, the reader finds him in conversation with an old man. This old man, and the rest of Nabakumar's co-passengers are pilgrims. On that boat, the only exception is Nabakumar. But if he has not come on a pilgrimage, then why is Nabakumar on that boat? Nabakumar himself answers this question. He says that he has come to see and comments on what he has beheld, 'Ah! What have I seen! I shall never forget it even in subsequent states of existence (1)! We shall take from him, the idea of sight/site.

In 1885, Rabindranath Tagore wrote a very short piece entitled 'Swadesh' in *Alochona*. 'A friend of mine,' he begins, 'travelled to beautiful places like Kashmir, Darjeeling etc, and upon his return, proclaimed that nothing he had seen could match up to Bengal' (150Year Commemoration Edition 123) Many would laugh at such a statement, Tagore says, but he finds no justification for such laughter. Comparing Bengal to the mother, Tagore eulogises the grains that fill its lap, the beauty that flows from every corner, the tenderness and affection it exudes. 'Someone who has lived in Bengal all their life but not been able to see this beauty is someone who has actually never seen Bengal, except in the form of a map!' (p. 123)

Within the space of one small paragraph, Tagore uses the concept of seeing numerous times. The first act of seeing is that of his friend who has travelled to various beautiful places. This friend has "seen" two things – one, the places he has visited – this seeing is literal; and two, the friend has seen that these places pale in comparison to Bengal – this seeing is used as a stand-in for "reaching a conclusion." The next reference to seeing occurs in the context of the people who say that there is nothing to "see" in Bengal because it is a plain land which lacks diversity. Tagore twists the sentence around a little bit in his refutation. He says, sounding quite outraged, '*Bangladesh dekhite bhalo noy!*' which would literally translate to – 'Bangladesh is not good-looking (123)! He also makes a critical difference between types of seeing when he says that someone may live in Bengal but only see it in the form of a map and never see the true face of Bengal. Several kinds of seeing and several forms of the word appear in almost every sentence of this short paragraph. And he mentions maps.

Ever since Europeans set sail to "discover" new worlds, travel was set within an early-imperialist framework. The Rest of the World that lay outside Europe needed to be discovered,

mapped, categorised, documented, ordered, and organised. With an encyclopaedic bent of mind, the Europeans embarked upon this project of knowledge accumulation, production, and dissemination. Captain Cook's journals from his first voyage contained several illustrations, including a modern chart of the South Pacific Ocean tracing the route of Cook's ship from 1769–1770, a chart of the island of Otaheite prepared by James Cook, chart of the Society Isles (1769), and a chart of New Zealand (explored in 1769 and 1770).

Tagore's dismissive approach to knowing a place through maps, then, immediately makes connections to the imperialist project of charting and cartography, and Tagore seems to suggest, in this small paragraph, that one of the ways of getting to "see" the land, both literally and metaphorically, is through travelling, and certainly not through the study of maps.

### **Fragmented Letters, Fragmented Images**

The term '*chhinnapatrabali*' did not exist in the Bengali language until it was used as the title to Tagore's collected letters to his niece Indira Devi. The collection was published almost two decades after the death of the poet and does not appear in any standard list of travelogues written by Tagore. In a letter written from Bolpur in October, 1894, Tagore writes,

Yesterday I lay on the bed and wrote a short poem and read a travelogue on Tibet. I love reading travelogues in solitude in secluded places such as this. [...] One of the advantages of a travelogue is that it has a sense of pace, but is not restricted by conventions of plot... (p. 249)

Although disparate letters, when bound together in a single volume, they provide a sense of continuity, a sense of moving forward, that, like the well-worn metaphor of the journey, does not end when it reaches its destination. Perhaps the fact that the epistle itself, in its physical form, has to make a journey of its own, that it lends itself so beautifully to travel writing, and in this case, endows *Chhinnapatrabali* with the quality and form of a travelogue. Even though we do not read the responses to the letters, the mention of Indira Devi's address, the destination of the letter itself, adds to the sense of movement and journey.

Some of these letters appeared in the 1910 work edited by Tagore titled *Chhinnapatra*. In this work, the first eight letters were written to his friend Shrishchandra Majumder, and the rest to Indira Devi. These letters appeared as a companion to *Gitanjali*, which was published in the same year. In 1920, Rabindranath himself translated the letters into a volume called *Glimpses of Bengal*. Doing away completely with the allusion to 'letters' that the Bengali title contained, Tagore instead introduces two completely different elements into the English title – seeing and what is being seen. He writes in the Introduction to *Glimpses of Bengal*:

Since these letters synchronise with a considerable part of my published writings, I thought their parallel course would broaden my readers' understanding of my poems as a track is widened by retreading the same ground. Such was my justification for publishing them in a book for my countrymen. Hoping that the descriptions of village scenes in Bengal contained in these letters would also be of interest to English readers, the translation of a selection of that selection has been entrusted to one who, among all those whom I know, was best fitted to carry it out. (1921, pp. vi–vii)

As Rosinka Chaudhuri (2014) has also pointed out in her Introduction to the translation of *Chhinnapatrabali*, the word ‘glimpses’ in the title itself is an allusion to the act of seeing. The word is used, I would argue, both as a noun and a verb, and in both instances, refers indirectly to a new way of seeing made possible by a faster mode of transport – the railways. The development of the railways across India resulted in an increase in non-pilgrimage travels, and the proliferation of travel writing. The railways itself found a place in the literary and cultural imagination of the Bengali, as is exemplified by its representation in fiction, and the number of tracts that were published about railway travel since its emergence and development.

In *Jibansmriti*, Tagore’s memoirs, in the section where Tagore writes about the first time he travelled with his father, he mentions Satyaprasad Gangopadhyay’s warnings prior to the journey, quoted here because of Tagore’s inimitable description, but also as a rare example of what a child felt when boarding a railway carriage for the first time:

Satya had told us that unless one was very adroit, getting onto a railway carriage was a dangerous affair — one tiny slip could result in a horrible accident. Then, when the train begins to move, one has to employ all the energy one has to be able to sit tight. Otherwise, a violent jerk can throw a man off to who knows where. Upon reaching the station, there were butterflies in my stomach. But boarding the carriage was so easy that I thought the worst was yet to come. But then the carriage began to move without a hitch, and the completely lack of danger even disappointed me a little. (p. 440)

The railways introduced a new way of seeing, which in turn, created a new landscape, in which, as Victor Hugo writes in a letter dated 22 August 1837, “The flowers by the side of the road are no longer flowers but flecks, or rather streaks, of red or white; there are no longer any points, everything becomes a streak...” (qtd. in Schivelbusch p. 55)

Compare this to the landscape Tagore is describing in the letter dated June, 1889:

Near Khirki station, I saw our sugarcane fields, rows of trees, the tennis court, and the house covered with glass windows. I felt an ache in my heart. It’s so strange! When I lived here, I felt no special affection for the house. It didn’t make me sad to leave it and go to Solapur with all of you. But now, having caught a glimpse of it from the window of a fast-moving train, having seen it standing all alone with its empty fields and empty rooms, my heart raced to it with lightning speed ... The moment I saw the house, there something struck my heart – there was a thump from the left to the right – the train sped past – the sugarcane fields disappeared – that was it, all had ended. ... But the engine thinks not of such things. It doggedly follows its iron path, it has no time to think about who is travelling, where to, and how. (14)

The language in this section of the letter is fast-paced – short, almost staccato sentences separated by dashes create this sense of pace, this sense of trying to pack in as much as possible within the page, because the page too is bound by margins. In this passage, Rabindranath uses metaphors of pace as well – ‘lightning speed’, the Bengali onomatopoeia ‘*hoosh*’ signifying the sound of something cutting through the wind very fast, for example.

The first letter of *Chhinnapatrabali*, written from Darjeeling in 1887, describes the journey from Siliguri to the hill town where Sarala is describes as being in a state of constant rapture by the sights she beholds and urges her Robi *mama* [maternal uncle] to see as well:

What else could I do but look at everything she wanted to show me – sometimes a tree, sometimes clouds, sometimes a blunt-nosed mountain girl, so many such things which pass by because the carriage moves on, and Sarala rues the fact that Robi mama did not get to see, but Robi mama is not in the least saddened by this. (p. 10)

Here the images that the young Robi mama is not as interested in as Sarala, are each a single fragment, evanescent in quality – a tree, a cloud, a girl.

In a letter written from Boyalia in November, 1892, Tagore imagines that the receiver of the letter is at that moment on a train and he imagines what the scene outside her window could be like if they were travelling on the Jabbalpur line. This description also uses short sentences that aid in the creation of singular, fragmented images within a single sentence, which, however, combine to create a whole:

The scene around there must be brightened by the fresh sunlight, through which distant, blue hills are beginning to be faintly visible....Cultivated fields are scarcely to be seen, except where the primitive tribesmen have done a little ploughing with their buffaloes; on each side of the railway-cutting, there are the heaped-up black rocks—the boulder-marked footprints of dried-up streams—and the fidgety, black wagtails, perched along the telegraph wires. A wild, seamed, and scarred nature lies there in the sun, as though tamed at the touch of some soft, bright, cherubic hand. (p. 111)

Many of the letters are written while still on the way to the destination, which also adds in making this work seem more like a travelogue than a simple collection of letters. The author is in a state of motion as he is writing the letter. In a letter written in 1891 from somewhere near Sajadpur, Tagore writes:

Still on the road. I have been floating since dawn till about seven or eight in the evening. Pace has a kind of attraction – the shore on either side is moving past the eye, that is what I've been looking at all day, I cannot move my eyes... (34)

Here, it is not the eye that is moving over the landscape, but the landscape that is the agent of action. It is the landscape that moves and is turned into a moving image. Tagore himself has used the metaphor of a photograph to explain his descriptions of the places he visits in his letters to his beloved Bob (Tagore's nickname for Indira Devi). In the letter dated 14 February, 1893, Tagore writes:

Some people have minds like the wet plate of a photograph. The image that it records has to be immediately printed, or else it is damaged. My mind is like that. Whenever I see a picture, I think, I must write about this in a letter [to Bob]. Then, new layers add themselves to this original print, and without me finding out, that first picture slowly fades away. I have come to Puri from Cuttack and there is so much to describe about this journey... (p. 124)

In other letters, Tagore alludes to painting and pictures when he describes the landscape. In a letter from Shilaidaha dated August, 1892, he writes:

Sometimes, when we see a picture, we think, "Oh wouldn't it be great to be able to live there" – this exact wish is fulfilled here. I feel like I am living inside a bright painting, the harshness of the real world cannot penetrate it. (p. 110)

Or, in a letter written on his way to Kolkata by boat, he writes while his boat is on the Ichhamoti, "...the fishermen are catching fish, the women are washing clothes, the boys are splashing about in the water, the cows are grazing, herons are sitting in paddy fields submerged in water, and everything looks like a picture." (p. 204)

In a letter from Kolkata, written in April, 1895, he expresses the desire to travel, the desire to heed the call of the road:

I feel like travelling to a foreign land. A picturesque land – with mountains and streams and moss-covered rocks, with cows grazing in the distant slope of the mountains and the sky a gentle and deep blue, and birds and insects and the water mingling together to create a strange, soft sound that ripples over the mind... (pp.302–303)

Sound (and silence) is one of the prominent features of the landscapes in these letters, making this landscape multi-sensory. The letter dated February, 1894, written from Patisar, provides us with a suitable illustration:

The sky is every now and then overcast and again clears up. Sudden little puffs of wind make the boat lazily creak and groan in all its seams. Thus the day wears on.

It is now past one o'clock. Steeped in this countryside noonday, with its different sounds—the quacking of ducks, the swirl of passing boats, bathers splashing the clothes they wash, the distant shouts from drovers taking cattle across the ford... (p. 174)

Contrasting the movement and the rapid succession of images in the landscape evoked by some of the letters, others display a vast, static landscape –seen from the moored houseboat, at different times of the day, incorporating light and darkness within its canvas. Let us take, for instance, this letter from Shilaidaha:

Our house-boat is moored to a sandbank on the farther side of the river. A vast expanse of sand stretches away out of sight on every side, with here and there a streak, as of water, running across, though sometimes what gleams like water is only sand.

[...] Looking towards the East, there is endless blue above, endless white beneath. Sky empty, earth empty too—the emptiness below hard and barren, that overhead arched and ethereal—one could hardly find elsewhere such a picture of stark desolation.

But on turning to the West, there is water, the current-less bend of the river, fringed with its high bank, up to which spread the village groves with cottages peeping through—all like an enchanting dream in the evening light. I say "the evening light," because in the evening we wander out, and so that aspect is impressed on my mind. (pp. 4–5)

Rosinka Chaudhuri writes that in the letters, the 'seeing eye' is never far from 'the inner eye of reflection and introspection.' (2014, Introduction) But alongside this inward journey is also a movement towards the construction of a national identity, where a leap is made from Bengal to India. In nature lies the freedom that is still a distant dream for the nation itself. In a letter from Shahzadpur in 1891, he writes:

I sat wondering: Why is there always this deep shade of melancholy over the fields, arid river banks, the sky and the sunshine of our country? And I came to the conclusion that it is because with us Nature is obviously the more important thing. The sky is free, the fields limitless; and the sun merges them into one blazing whole. (p. 48)

On his way to Goalondo, Tagore writes, in 1892:

Pictures in an endless variety, of sand-banks, fields and their crops, and villages, glide into view on either hand—of clouds floating in the sky, of colours blossoming when day meets night. [...] If I had not heard fairy tales and read the *Arabian Nights* and *Robinson Crusoe* in childhood, I am sure views of distant banks, or the farther side of wide fields, would not have stirred me so—the whole world, in fact, would have had for me a different appeal. What a maze of fancy and fact becomes tangled up within the mind of man! The different strands—petty and great—of story and event and picture, how they get knotted together! (pp. 95–96)

In the Bengali original, Tagore uses the term ‘heterogenous’ to signify this mesh, a word that is a direct challenge to the imperialist project of homogenisation. In a letter from Balia, he writes, ‘India has two aspects—in one she is a householder, in the other a wandering ascetic. The former refuses to budge from the home corner, the latter has no home at all. I find both these within me’ (p. 119).

This leap from the particular to the general, from the Self to the Nation, and thereby, the implicit project of producing and reproducing, constructing and reconstructing a heterogenous national identity, a discourse of *difference* as opposed to *sameness* and a celebration of that difference, to recognise that difference in the everyday – in a blade of grass or the warm summer breeze, in the way that light begins to fade at dusk, or how it dances on the water in the blazing afternoon, in fragmented images as well as sweeping panoramas, is echoed in the letter he writes from Shilaidaha dated 10 August, 1894. Tagore writes that when he sets foot on the planks of the boat, he can feel the different motions beneath the wood – shaking, swinging, swelling, and crashing – and he compares these several motions to the pulse of the country. He writes, “It is as if I am feeling the pulse of the entire nation.” (p. 215)

## Conclusion

The letters this article has discussed could be divided into two broad categories based on the landscapes they produce, which is also intrinsically linked to the mode of travel. The first kind would be the ones written about a railway journey – here the landscapes are fragmented, the sentences brief, as if in a hurry to reach their end. The second kind is the vast landscapes – mostly written during his visit to the family’s estates in eastern Bengal. He writes these letters from the boat, moving slowly down the river, or from a moored boat, with a panoramic view of his surroundings.

This article has mostly dealt with the letters written during this visit. If in his 1885 piece he only expresses his indignation at the thought of Bengal not being beautiful, his letters to his niece illustrate that beauty through the landscapes they produce. Supriya Chaudhuri has pointed out in her recent essay “Imagined Worlds: The Prose Fiction of Rabindranath Tagore,” (2020) that the letters of this period also carry within them a “literary resonance” (p. 134) and that “all the writings of this phase of his life – lyric and narrative poetry, short stories, and letters – mark the inception of a new register of feeling, especially a vastly expanded sense of physical space and the unboundedness of earth and sky.” (134)

During his visit, between 1890 and 1891, Rabindranth Tagore wrote fifty-nine short stories. If some of the literary landscapes in his letters appear to make the human figure invisible, figures



that have either produced it or is intrinsically a part of it, his short stories are populated by people he encountered during his visit and are born out of his experiences and observations. In the letters, as the viewer, Tagore is always outside the landscape, and his eyes and words mediate our reception of nature in its most “natural” state, undisturbed by human hands, but paradoxically, in its literary form, mediated by those very mechanisms. Through these mechanisms, however, his production and representation of the landscape in a nation under imperial rule becomes, on the one hand, a search for his own identity and relation to nature, but on the other, it becomes a quest for a national identity in which the vastness around him, the free spirit of nature, the rhythm of the water dancing under the planks of the boat, become a part of his construction of a unique Indian identity. As Supriya Chaudhuri puts it:

Rabindranath’s stories and letters from this period produce, for Bengal and perhaps for Indian modernity, a poetics of landscape that imbued a familiar vocabulary with enormous resources of affect, produced new ways of seeing, and inspired new modes of visual representation. (2020, p. 134)

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Quoted in Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986, p.55.

<sup>ii</sup> Translations from the original Bengali are my own unless specified.

<sup>iii</sup> The page numbers are from the Bengali original in case of *Chhinnapatrabali*, *Jibansmriti*, and ‘Swadesh’.

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