

# Postcolonial Queer Dimension of Travel in the Goopi-Bagha Trilogy of Films

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## Abstract

European genre of travel writing is guided by an "ethnographic impulse" which constructed India as an exotic space. Neglecting the country's vast complex and liberal culture, the European travel narratives about India focused on certain negative aspects like ignorance, women subordination, casteism, and religious conflict to construct India as a primitive and exotic space, an excuse for colonialism. In contrast to these the British presented themselves as civilised, rational, masculine and enterprising. Resisting these definitive absolutes, postcolonial travel writers challenge the construction of India in terms of exotic barbarity. *Goopi-Bagha* trilogy (Satyajit Ray's *Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne (Adventures of Goopi and Bagha, 1969)*, *Hirak Rajar Deshe (The Kingdom of Diamond, 1980)* and his son Sandip Ray's *Goopi Bagha Phire Elo (The Return of Goopi and Bagha, 1992)*), though primarily children's fantasy films, uses the motif of travel to challenge the Orientalising gaze of the European travel narratives. The scholastic seriousness of the realistic genre is parodied in a carnivalesque spirit through the fantastic mode of children's films. The films not only question the 'ethnographic impulse' of constructing India as irrational and uncivilised but also dismiss the tropes of exoticism exposing India's complex and rich culture and focusing on its scenic beauty. While European travel narratives are the story of exploitation of nature, of discovery and conquest, in these films the two friends Goopi, Bagha travel only to enjoy and wonder at nature's unconquerable spirit. Presenting two lower caste effeminate men in the guise of travellers, the films unsettle the masculine aura of adventure, associated with this imperial genre. Travel provides them not only the opportunity to enjoy nature and express a concern for the marginalised, but also the scope to move beyond the carceral gaze of heteronormativity and enjoy their homoeroticism. Thus travel becomes the means to unsettle the heteronormative paradigm of knowledge and relation which was consolidated by the British colonisers in India through mediums like travel literature. Using the destabilising effect of postcolonial queer theory, this paper explores how the films not only resist the Oriental construction of India as an 'exotic other', but also how the motif of travel is used to contest the ideas of colonial modernity, of power and marginality.

**Keywords:** Travel, Exoticism, Postcolonial, Masculine, Queer

"Travel writing has been identified by many of its discerning critics as a mode of colonialist discourse that reinforce European norms" (Holland and Huggan, 2000, p. 47). As an excuse of colonialism or as they called it the "white man's burden" as well as to portray their cultural superiority over the racial others, the European travel writers has pictured their land of travel i.e. the colonised nation as uncivilised, barbaric, licentious and exotic. In her seminal book *Imperial Eyes* (2008), Mary Louise Pratt observes, "... empires create in the imperial center of power an obsessive need to present and re-present its peripheries and its others continually to itself. It becomes dependent on its others to know itself. Travel writing, among other institutions, is heavily organized in the service of that need" (p. 4). This "ethnographic impulse" (Rubies, 2002, p.

242) impelled post-Enlightenment British travel writers to view India through an Orientalising gaze. For example, William Henry Sleeman's *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official* (1844), John Forbes Watson and John William Kaye's *People of India*, published between 1868 and 1875, construct India as a fabulous exotic place, marked by ignorance and barbaric practices like sati and casteism. Though a change in attitude takes place with the passage of time, the late colonial texts like J. R. Ackerley's *Hindoo Holiday* (1932), George Orwell's *Burmese Days* (1934) and even some postcolonial texts like those by V. S. Naipaul retain the orientalisising impulse. The cult of exotic barbarity was reinforced through more popular medium like Hollywood adventure films, such as *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (1935) by Henry Hathaway or *Gunga Din* (1939) by George Stevens. But when this imperial genre of travel narrative is manoeuvred in a contrapuntal move by the postcolonial natives to represent themselves dismantling the Eurocentric view of the Orient, it becomes an "autoethnographic expression" (Pratt, 2008, p. 9) or what Holland and Huggan (2000) call "countertravel writing" (p. 50). Pratt (2008) explains: If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are texts the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations" (9).

Renowned film director Satyajit Ray's *Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne* (*Adventures of Goopi and Bagha*, 1969), *Hirak Rajar Deshe* (*The Kingdom of Diamond*, 1980) and his son Sandip Ray's *Goopi Bagha Phire Elo* (*The Return of Goopi and Bagha*, 1992) are replete with the "autoethnographic expression." Though the last film was directed by the son at the behest of his father, the story and the songs of the film were written by Satyajit Ray himself. Though the *Goopi-Bagha* trilogy doesn't essentially belong to the genre of travel writing, it certainly uses the motif of travel to unsettle the Eurocentric understanding of the genre and its close contiguity with knowledge and power. The films resist the othering practices of associating the Orient with irrationality, depravity, sensuality, infancy not through the celebration of rational masculinity in a realistic narrative of travel but through the carnivalesque mode of musical fantasy and travelling adventures of two effeminate infantile men. These are children's films in fantasy mode focusing on the series of adventure in different parts of India by two male protagonists Goopi, the singer and Bagha, the drummer. Hailing from a lower class and caste, they are banished from their respective native places by the royal authority owing to their violent musical feats. The punishment in turn becomes rewarding for them. Once out of the cocoon, their suppressed wanderlust is aroused. In their dream they meet the Ghost King who being pleased with them offers to bestow any three boons they wish. The first boon they seek is food and clothing, their basic need for existence. Immediately when the basic need is granted the second boon they can think of is no other than travelling and then they think of fulfilling their love for music. Immediately after being endowed with the magical power of singing, the very first song they sing is a kind of directorial invitation for the audience to look at the natural beauty of India: *Dekho re nayan mele jagater bahar* ("Behold the beauty of the nature"). Since the films were made in the wake of India's independence, they focused on the natural and the rural. Tabish Khair (2016) reminds, ". . . one has to appreciate the fact that in colonial and early nationalist writings about India, it was 'natural' and rural spaces that took prominence" (p. 391).

Being endowed with the magical power, though they could go anywhere without the toil of travel by just clapping hands of each with the other, they didn't do so except when necessity called on. Rather they liked to walk on in the midst of nature only to enjoy the scenic beauty without any intention of discovery or map the world, as the Western travellers often did. While the imperial design of travel involved systematic exploitation of nature or reinvention of India's topographical variety in exotic tropes by the British writers and artists, as Romita Ray mentions in

her book *Under the Banyan Tree: Relocating the Picturesque in British India* (2013), in Ray's narratives Goopi and Bagha enjoy nature's unconquerable spirit and express an awe and wonder at nature through their songs. This is of course not the false "anti-conquest" guise of the imperial traveller, which Pratt mentions, but the real innocent wanderlust which also falsify the colonial accusation of the Orient and its men being idyllic, pleasure-loving and unadventurous. Through the adventures of Goopi and Bagha, the directorial gaze traverses through different parts of the country and present a 'real' India. While the two friends enjoy the pastoral beauty, wander through the rivers, hills, jungles, seas or deserts they also visit the human world, sometimes to be happy with it sometimes disturbed. The films while appreciative of the scenic beauty and bounty of the rural India with its rivers and hills, desert and pasture, do not forget to focus on the inequalities, poverty, oppression and casteism present in the Indian society. But these are never conceived in terms of definitive exoticism, as stable and fixed in time and place or evidence of India's backwardness. In the first film when Goopi and Bagha reach the land of Shundi, they are enchanted by the beautiful rural landscape especially with its clear sky, rich paddy fields, coconut trees etc. The informer of Halla, the neighbouring state, informs its wicked minister that though Shundi lacks a strong army, people live there happily and peacefully. But the picture is different in Halla where the wicked minister conspires to usurp the throne and the people are poverty-stricken. Poverty is not natural to the land rather as the films expose it is artificially created by the evil power like the minister in Halla or the King in *Hirak Rajar Deshe*, who selfishly exploit the rich resources of the country. They are challenged and chastised as forms of neo-colonial authority in the newly independent nation. Through the contrasting pictures of Shundi and Halla, Ray attempts to portray a complex and diverse culture instead of presenting any magisterial monolithic account of the country.

Though practices like casteism, women subordination or religious conflict were of course present in the Indian society before the British arrived in India, but they were not as stable, strict and definitive as the colonial travel writers asserted them to be. On the contrary, it was the colonial rulers who along with some nationalist elites transformed India's liberal culture into a regimented one. Often than not the rigidity and backwardness of India was a construct of colonial modernity. Referring to the dichotomy of India's indigenous flexibility and the British travel writers' Orientalising fixity, Tabish Khair (2016) argues:

The point is not whether these were actual or not, common or uncommon, mainstream or not; the point is that these were among many features of a complex culture, yet they were highlighted as exotically definitive because of an Orientalizing colonial gaze which sought evidence of India's backwardness. (pp. 387-388)

"Moreover," one must remember "India is a nation that is several countries in one" (Mandal, 2010, p. 1). *Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne* refers to the class-and-caste experience prevalent in the rural society of Bengal, but they are never conceived as stable and definitive as is found in texts like *People of India* by Watson and Kaye. At the very beginning of the film, Goopi suffers the caste-and-class-based humiliation in the hands of the Brahmanical authority. In spite of belonging to the lower class and caste, Goopi has a penchant for classical music which is considered to be a high caste prerogative. For this he is mocked and humiliated by the Brahmin pundits who also contrive for his banishment from the village by the royal authority. Later on, he meets Bagha in a cane forest also suffering the same fate. Though the duo lacks the etiquette of civilisation, they are not conceived as barbaric or untouchable, endogamous or roguish as is generally supposed to be the essential characteristics of lower class-caste. Rather they enjoy the social mobility in an open system of social stratification in India. They are never perpetrated or executed for transgressing

the social norms. Endowed with the magical power of the Ghost King, Goopi and Bagha sing of values like equality, transgress the class-caste norms and ultimately become Kings. Social historians like Anjan Ghosh in his article “Cast(e)out in West Bengal”(2001) observes “Transgression of caste norms invites social sanctions but not violent retribution” (p. 508). The unsettling of the class-and-caste experience is graphically presented through the ghost-dance sequence where at the end of the concert the director places the common people at the top and the Brahmins at the bottom of the symbolic layers of the dancers. In *Hirak Rajar Deshe*, Goopi and Bagha not only overthrow the despotic King but also cause the celebration of liberty, equality and fraternity breaking all the class-and-caste barriers. The films can also be read as the rise of the proletariat in power challenging the national bourgeoisie who have become the neo-colonial authority after independence. Thus Ray neither exoticize class-caste phenomenon nor essentialise it as a monolithic, archetypal institution with a pan-Indian characteristic. He rather presents it as a regional customary practice or repressive apparatus of some elites which is often manipulated and transgressed.

The films also disrupt “the core colonial discourse” (Khair, 2016, p.389) of conceiving India as a country of two warring nations, namely Hindoo and Muslim. Ray had witnessed the Hindoo-Muslim riot due to the British conceived partition, but he was also aware of India’s liberal past when the Hindoos and the Muslims have lived together for ages. So his films *Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne* as well as *Hirak Rajar Deshe* bear the testimonies of communal harmony. In *Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne* Ray shows a picture of a fair in Shundi where many people have gathered. People wearing turban and caps, symbolising Hindoo and Muslim respectively are moving together and enjoying the fair. In the latter film we come across students of both the communities studying together in the *pathshala* run by a pundit named Udayan. Ray’s films foreground the mutual cohabitation of the two communities. Moving beyond any essentialising tendency the films expose the complex culture of a vast nation. However, the films unfortunately conform to the patriarchal ideologies of the time regarding women. In the nationalist discourse of India men were allowed to act in the outer world of materiality while women were given the responsibility of upholding indigenous spirituality restricting themselves within the boundaries of home. Since the films chiefly concentrated on the public sphere, women were consciously kept out of this. The miniscule representation of women is also very normative. Ray’s nationalist anxiety might have propelled him to construct the characters of women thus within the private sphere of domesticity.

However, the nationalist concern could not interpellate Ray into assuming a hypermasculine attitude of the colonisers which often influenced India’s nationalist agenda. Rather he celebrated India’s indigenous idea of androgyny in contrast to the colonial discourse of hypermasculinity. Critics like Smethurst (2016) observes “Explorers like Park and David Livingstone established the cult status of the explorer and helped spawn the masculinist genre of colonial adventure fiction” (p. 234). While the Eurocentric genre of travel writing consolidated the idea of masculine adventure, these films curtail the masculine aura of travel presenting two effeminate males on adventure enjoying their androgyny and challenging the masculine authorities without any colonising project of conquest, discovery or fact finding even after they become the Kings. Considering “. . . travel writers as retailers of mostly white, male, middleclass, heterosexual myths and prejudices . . .” (p. viii), Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan (2000) argue, “Travel has recently emerged as a crucial epistemological category for the displacement of normative values and homogenising, essentialist views” (ix). While travel narrative attempts to disrupt the heteronormative paradigm and challenge the cultural and social norms it becomes essentially queer. In his article “Travel Writing and Sexuality: Queering the Genre”, Churnjeet Mahn (2016) postulates:

Queering the travel writing canon is . . . critiquing moments when the genre works in culture to promote and enforce normative (hetero)sexuality; and it is a project especially concerned to recover and explore moments in which heteronormative structures and relationships are queried or undermined through travel or travel writing. (p. 47)

Satyajit Ray uses travel as a means to resist the colonial idea of hypermasculinity and heteronormativity imposed upon India, denigrating its indigenous culture of psychological bisexuality by the colonial master.

Goopi and Bagha though are not openly gay, but one cannot overlook the homoerotic bond between the two friends. Their initial wish for heterosexual marriage with the princess is caused due to their upbringing in a heteronormative society. Since they belonged to very low class-and-caste in the society they could never afford to think of marrying a princess. It was more a childish fancy for them than any well-wrought-out plan. However being endowed with the Ghost King's magical power, they consider it seriously and intently pursue for that. Ultimately they succeed when they are married to the two princesses of Shundi and Halla as rewards for their success in stopping the war between these two kingdoms. Though the first film ends with the consummation of their heterosexual desire, the sequel begins with their feeling of frustration with heteronormativity. The two friends who were so eager to marry the princesses are least concerned about their wives after marriage. The second film opens with two friends in a room without their wives, expressing their boredom with their domestic life and desiring to get rid of that bondage. Travel can provide them with a sense of adventure as well as a space to enjoy each other's company beyond the heteronormative gaze. Though their children are mere babies as they inform through their song, their paternal responsibility do not hinder them from the thought of travelling elsewhere leaving their wives and children behind. Neither the wives ever appear in the next two films to express their wish regarding this nor are the two friends concerned to take their wives with them in their travels, though it was possible for them. When they express their wish for travel to their father-in-law, the King of Shundi, and the latter asks whom they wish to have as companion, the two friends answer they themselves would accompany each other and don't want anyone else. They seek relief from domestic life and to be together by themselves. They are the alter ego of each other, as they sing *Goopi Bagha mora manikjor/ Moder moto juti khuje pabenako aar / Mora jai kori ta kori jote* (Goopi Bagha we are the soul mates / One cannot find a pair like us / we do everything together). Inseparable intimacy of the two friends are also exposed through a mise-en-scène when the eye of the camera gazes at the two lotuses juxtaposed or two *dhutura* flowers nipped together. Comparing the intimacy of the friends with natural attributes also helps to bring home the naturalness of this kind of homoerotic relation which was an age-old indigenous practise but considered "against the law of nature" by the colonial masters. Ruth Vanita and Salim Kidwai (2008) observe, "Indian society too entered a transitional phase as older indigenous discourses of same-sex love and romantic friendship came into dialogue with the new Western legal and medical discourses of homosexuality as an abnormality or illness" (p. 222). In the name of modernity, the colonial masters along with some national elites created a homophobic atmosphere, escape from which was possible through travel. Thus travel helps the two friends to live a more open life beyond the carceral gaze of heteronormative patriarchy.

It is not only wanderlust, but also a kind of freedom, a coming out of the closet which goad them on for travel. Had it been mere desire for travel, they could easily travel anywhere they like along with the royal entourage. They neglect any kind of itineraries even after the visible concern of their father-in-law and desire to travel only in company of each other. Neither the conjugal love nor the parental affection and responsibility not even the royal power, pleasure and

kingly duty can restrain them. Though the two friends stay together in the same palace, yet they are not so happy. They are happy only when they travel together beyond the heteronormative gaze of the family, since travel provides them the opportunity to enjoy the company of each other more freely. S. G. Rousseau contends travel as “a means of coping with homosexual desire, rather than indulging or satisfying it” (qtd. in Woods, 2016, p. 318). Goopi and Bagha are never seen to be engaged in any kind of overt indulgence of homoerotic desire, rather travel for them acts as coming out of the closet. Once out for travel Goopi and Bagha sing, “*Aajke moder boroi sukher din / Aaj gharer bandhan chhere mora hoyechhi swadhin*”(We are so happy today / becoming free of the domestic bondage), and after some days’ of travel when Goopi asks Bagha whether he wishes to return home now, the latter replies, “*ekbar jokhon peyechhi chhara tokhon kiser tara?*” (Once we have become free, what is the hurry?). The two friends converse, if any domestic or kingly duty calls home upon them while out for travel they would go back and attend it but only to come back for travel.

Travel also helped some of the Englishmen like E. M. Forster to make an attempt to find sexual satisfaction when he was away as a colonial officer in India from his native homophobic culture. Being a marginalised man in his own culture, Forster attempts to connect with other marginalised categories like the non-white. His serious concern is exposed in *A Passage to India* (1924) through the main woman protagonist Adela who is determined to empathise with and understand the people and culture of British India as she travels through different parts of India. But the novel ends in the failure of building any friendship between the two male characters Fielding and Aziz as the latter is allegedly accused of making a rape attempt on Adela. Referring to Forster’s desire of finding “sexual satisfaction”, Holland and Huggan (2000) comment “The fictional Fielding-Aziz relationship draws upon Forster’s loyal but frustrated and unconsummated friendship with the Indian Muslim Syed Masood” (p. 136). The unconsummated homoerotic bond between the Englishman and the Indian Muslim symbolically exposes the cultural barrier between the West and the East. In spite of his assumed anti-racist guise Forster’s portrayal of India, its people and culture, especially Hindu-Muslim polarisation are coloured by his racial prejudices. Satyajit Ray strongly wished for a reinterpretation of the novel through a film since he felt “Forster overdid the mysteriousness of India . . . This is because India’s seen from English point of view” (Robinson, 2004, p. 286). But Ray’s dream could not find reality, since Forster strongly rejected the proposal.

However, Ray’s postcolonial anxiety regarding the colonial construction of India through travel, finds a cathartic release through the *Goopy-Bagha* trilogy. Besides querying the heteronormative understanding of relationship and travel, the films also question anything normative and challenge the asymmetrical power relation. David Halperin (1997) defines queer as “Whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence” (p. 62). Hence a concern for the marginal, the invisible, the oppressed is evident in queer politics. While Enlightenment rationality and later social Darwinism gave sanction to the ideas of “might is right” that found expression through colonialism and European travel writing, these films express concern for the marginalised, the natural and the peripheral. One of the important aspects of Goopi-Bagha’s travel is its anti-authoritarian spirit. They respect nature and express sympathy for the poor challenging the authority figure. In *Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne*, they dismiss the plan of the wicked minister of Halla for war and provide food to the hungry soldiers; in *Hirak Rajar Deshe* they punish the autocratic King and help the poor with wealth (diamonds) and in *Goopi Bagha Phire Elo* they help the little children and their helpless parents to rescue their sons from the cruel

*Acharjeemoshai* Brahmananda. Thus their travel helps to revive those silent voices which are pressurised to conform to the norms. Holland and Huggan (2000) argue:

Travel writing can arguably be seen, then, as having transgressive potential: in allowing the writer to flout conventions that exist within his/her own society, it subjects those conventions – those often rigid codes of behavior – to close critical scrutiny. (p. 4)

Positing two apparently uncultured, uneducated lower caste men in the guise of travellers, Ray also unsettles the tradition of the English gentleman traveller who is adventurous, heroic and scholarly, studying nature and other culture. Eulogising this quality of the British travel writers between the wars Paul Fussel contends, “As travelers and travel-writers, the English are special” (qtd. in Holland and Huggan, 2000 p. 27). The idiosyncratic individualism of the British traveller is parodied through the camping theatricality of Goopi and Bagha. The effeminate heroes are like comic foils to the masculine adventurer. “The androgyne is certainly one of the great images of Camp sensibility” (Sontag, 1966, p. 193). In “Notes on Camp”, Susan Sontag (1966) explains Camp as “a certain mode of aestheticism” which is “anti-serious”, “apolitical”, “exaggerated”, “androgynous” “epicene” and at the same time disruptive. In the movies, the aesthetics of camp is built not only through the effeminate nature of the adventurer duo but also through the anti-serious style of the movies which are cast in the fantastic mode for the pleasure of the children. The scholastic seriousness of the realistic genre of travel narrative is parodied through the musical fantasies with a camping sensibility. “One is drawn to camp when one realizes that “sincerity” is not enough” (Sontag, 1966, p.199). The fantastic elements, the comical extravaganza as well as the polyphonic music help Ray put a postcolonial queer resistance as well as explore the fluidity of the genre in a carnivalesque spirit. One cannot be sure, however, whether the director could express his voice of dissent against any kind of hegemonic authority, whether the imperial genre or the native authority, had the films not been cast in children’s fantasy. In spite of the fact one cannot ignore the postcolonial anxiety underlying the apparent fantasy. Ben Nyce(1988) contends, “The film is equally pleasing to adults and children, functioning as it does as both serious commentary and pure fantasy” (p. 113). The subversive potential of the postcolonial queer dimension of travel in the *Goopi-Bagha* trilogy is explored in this possible simultaneity through a camping sensibility.

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