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*Journeys into Sacred India***

by **Arup K Chatterjee**

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I am circling around God, around the ancient tower, and I have been circling for a thousand years, and I still don't know if I am a falcon, or a storm, or a great song. (Rilke, 76)

"I realize unexpectedly that I have become a pilgrim without a God, a wanderer from city to city and from village to village seeking a place where the mind may find rest, but finding none" ... Travel, at this point, takes on a totally different dimension, resembling the age-old metaphor of the round of lives that we go through, travelling from birth to death. This is no longer the travel of a European adventurer visiting distant shores in search of conquest or wonder, but the travel of a soul from life to life, in search of everlasting peace or freedom from process. (Paranjape, 91)

And here comes the turning point in Paranjape's travels.

The subject in the excerpt is Paul Brunton's book *A Search in Secret India*, published in 1934. Brunton's travels in India follow a travelogy of lavishness. In the beginning of the book, according to Paranjape, Brunton attributes "higher powers of observation and logic" to the Western traveller. This prepares the ground for the dialectic between the Orientalist, who is Brunton, and the Oriental(s), especially Ramana Maharshi, which is soon to follow in Paranjape's analysis. However, another crucial matter is how Brunton's estimation of the Western traveller qualifies the latter as the rightful colonizer of the land. Colonialism, to begin with is not an oppressive force. It begins with the independence in economic and political subjectivities to travel and trade. This is also the birth of the technical. It is this technique that Brunton prides his nation with, that to reinforce and reinscribe he visits India.

Yet, quite the opposite is to be faced with. Braced with the complacency of Raj Brunton is forced to a realisation of his loss of *svaraj*. In his encounters with Ramana Maharshi that follow he undergoes *bhanganyaya*, “the deconstruction of the body itself”; he is drawn to the brink of a nervous breakdown. His pursuit of the picturesque or the spectacular weakens considerably as he begins to travel inwards. The sacred and the secular or the colonizer and the colonisable are no longer entities that lie outside of his body. They are no longer objects of his speculation. They are the constituents of his very spirit, as they always were. “Brunton is no longer a traveller; paradoxically he is no longer a pilgrim”. The traveller has been transformed into the spirit that impregnates objects as they are seen in the eyes of a traveller. This spirit is consciousness itself. One cannot be conscious of it. As soon as Brunton claims consciousness over it, and in turn his own sagehood, he loses the spirit. He becomes “boring” and “incomprehensible” in Paranjape’s terms; in effect he loses the very journey on the road to *svaraj*.

Paranjape’s next subject of inquiry is Roger Housden’s *Travels Through Sacred India*. It is sharply at odds with Brunton’s text. Housden’s travels do not trail the classic bildungsroman that the average European traveller in search of the picturesque populates. His India is the most secret insofar as it is the most open. It is susceptible to globalization and liberalization, both that bring in illusions of its progress and purdahs on its naked demographic, economic and as such spiritual disparities. Housden does not discover, establish, or revive spirituality. Neither is Indian spirituality presumed as an a priori space. Instead it is treated as a manifestation of the individual spirit. “The sacrality of the place is interior to the pilgrim, as well as being externally located at some physical place”. With regard to this Housden’s *Travels* problematize the metamorphosis of the concept of pilgrimage into one of tourism, in the Hinduism of this modernity. The spirit of such pilgrimages having now become a secularizing force merely adds to the utility of the site or the monument. Housden therefore celebrates not the promise of the unknown but the unknown in the ordinary. While the standard practice in any travel discourse is to specialize or glamourize the travel site Housden functions through a deglamourization of it, or by delineating the deglamourizing effects of modern touristic consciousness. However, he does not discriminate either

the pilgrim or himself from the tourist. No travel itinerary can be without mercenary suffixes.

Situated today in globalization, or an order of fragmenting nationalities, travel writing is on an untenable course. Such is the popular doubt, and consequently there has been a huge decline in theoretical and philosophical writings on travel and travel literature in the last ten years. The reason behind this is that the travelled is seen as calculable, and therefore exhaustible. That globalization is detrimental to travel literature is a surprising notion. Topology is finite while experience is not. While representations of racism, colonialism, imperialism or linguistic and cultural jingoism that emanate out of travel writings are symptoms of a temporal disturbance of identities, the moment of the travel experience is timeless. So, racism for the *other*, for instance is nothing but a trope to identify with what the ego recognizes as the privileged self. This however, follows in the deferral of the transcendental ego and the phenomenological intersubjectivity that is at the heart of a travelling consciousness. Tourism thus becomes not only “predatory” as Housden and Paranjape call it, but also cannibalistic because it feeds on the human essence that has been de-subjectivised and de-linked from the essence that the travelling self is a part of. In other words, the spirit of a non-dual human consciousness undergoes an endless series of dualistic differentiations and categorizations as othered from the self. So, the self rather occupied in differentiating itself from the *other* starts substituting the *other* with whatever it travels. Even the individual *other* becomes a constant signification of a persona or an identity of a class. Subsequently, from the traveller’s eyes cultures, communities and traditions get essentialized. And this is something that still happens, something that is as true of the foreign as the native traveller. “What matters – what will set apart a pilgrim from the ordinary traveller – is whether you are willing to make the tirtha, from this world of mundane reality to one in which the journey, the goal, and the pilgrim himself, are all expressions of the One Divine Whole”, where the finite and differentiating self is just a part of the infinite other, the *spiritus mundi*. “(T)he divine, rather than being somewhere above and beyond life, is... even in the squalor that seems to be its very antithesis.”

Paranjape’s comparative analysis of Brunton and Housden is just preceded by a chapter that describes the general politics of travel writing. In

Rushdie's words "Adventuring is ... by and large a movement that originates in the rich parts of the planet and heads for the poor". Looking retrospectively at this chapter neutralizes the perils of such a thesis. To say that largely the only travellers have been people with wealth or patronage is historically true. However, it is an aggressive thesis that delegitimizes the phenomenological development of the anonymous pedestrian. So, the thesis is true only insofar as it has crushed those travels that did not undertake passages across oceans, rivers, continents or constituencies. In the modern imagination travel is undoubtedly a matter of prosthetic movement over distances traceable on a small scale map. It does not account for daily travels to and from the school or the workplace. Paranjape metes out justice to those pedestrians by hierarchizing the humilities contained in travel. He privileges the pilgrims and "other humble travellers". And it is clear to us, now in hindsight, that not merely the destination of a sacred place makes the traveller a pilgrim – it is the spirit whose toils and spiritual development do so. The pilgrim is never pre-qualified as one. Yet, far from privileging religious processions to holy shrines, Paranjape deconstructs the very idea of the presumed certainty of this holy site. There cannot be any certainty principle behind spiritual fulfilment; sacrality is not an object of discovery to be found on a treasure hunt or at a given location. Its attainment lies purely in its elusiveness. The point where *svaraj* seems to be complete is the point when the toil for it comes to an end. So the spiritual is in travelling and every travel is spiritual.

Paranjape centres his book by these three chapters which are, exceptionally, not based on his personal spiritual or physical journeys. In the rest we find the writer himself travelling. The centre acts as a zone of his consciousness of history and literature. It is a fulcrum that governs his own circlings around a God, that is at once sacred and profane. And at the core of it comes the turning point that was also the beginning: the horrific anxiety of "Who am I?" Brunton is shown temporarily resigned or reconciled or content with the charisma of the Maharshi. He is saved from self-destruction, and is revived. But Paranjape does not resolve, redeem, or explain Brunton completely, even when he counterpoises him against Housden. The reason could be Paranjape's own psychological identification with Brunton that he uncannily reveals towards the end in his Epilogue, in the form of a partial disclosure that his student makes to him about his own book of poems which

is itself titled *Partial Disclosure*. This book, we are told, comprises three sections. The student reports that in the third section although there is a shift from the “physical to the metaphysical” and the “carnal to the spiritual” this dynamic spirituality does not “erase the unresolved tensions of the more ordinary kind (of love)”. So while Brunton has been a traveller Paranjape has been the lover. While *Acts of Faith* definitely makes a “forward movement” post-Brunton it inevitably makes a “backward” one too by eventually uniting the higher and the lower quests of the spirit, in the traveller and the lover. As Paranjape himself says, “the republic of the spirit’ is a democracy, not a dictatorship”. There is no hierarchy here among the low and the high. So, just as it is noble for Paranjape to live and die as though love mattered, it is noble for the traveller to live and die as though the travel mattered more than the arrival. Like ideal love is the renunciation of control over the object of love, so is travel at its spiritual best when control over its object of travel is renounced. Both clinging on to life and the site of travel with gaze, superstition and a temporal eros, are instead moments of thanatos. They secularise life and travel. They hasten death of the body and the shrine.

Travel literature on India has both seen a boom and a philosophical decline recently. In that context Paranjape’s *Journeys to Sacred India* is a refreshing oddity. The community of spirits is not entirely welcoming, if not a catalyst of xenophobia, for those interested in secular forms of travel. To them the book does not glorify the sacred at the cost of the secular. It does not even differentiate between the two. In this regard it is a modern Indian pioneer to trace the spiritual cartography of the nation within dynamic system of love and faith. Objects, spaces and faces reappear in our journeys, not as the same anymore, but as new personae, for, we ourselves have grown in the process of our circling journeys.

Round and round we go; what determines whether it is a sacred journey or not is the quality of our intention (Paranjape, 98).

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