Contested Histories in Contemporary Travel Writing on India

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By

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Dedicated to Baba, Didi, and Ankur

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INTRODUCTION

Contested Histories is a study of contemporary travel writing as a contested field of political and historical articulations. It poses the question of the relevance of the travel form in a world that is both flagrantly unequal and extensively mapped. The book focuses on post-independence India. India's long civilisational history, its centrality in the British Imperial project, its postcolonial ambitions, its ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity, its unique status as the largest democracy in the world, and its recent rise as a formidable global power, make it a compelling area of study through the optic of travel.

Any study of travel writing has to contend with the immense conceptual scope of the idea of travel. Almost all surveys of travel writing indicate that travel writing is a mixed form constituted by a wide variety of genres and historical contexts. Though travel writing has a long history, academic consideration of the form is fairly recent. Since travel writing's status as 'literature' has always been ambiguous, it has not invited serious academic inquiry until very recently. It was not till the 1990s that travel writing emerged as an established area of interest in literature departments. The renewed academic interest in travel writing has been predominantly shaped by postcolonial and feminist theoretical frameworks, which critically examine the discursive strategies through which colonial and gendered identities are constructed and disseminated. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* (1992), Kate Teltscher's *India Inscribed* (1995), and Sara Mills's *Discourses of Difference* (1991) placed travel writing at the centre of their analysis and interpretation of colonialism. Since then, travel writing has incrementally gathered academic status and in recent times there has been a proliferation of scholarly research in this area.

Given the pivotal role travel writing has performed in the production of colonial hegemonies, its archival significance is evident in a large body of scholarly writing on colonialism across disciplines. My intention in this book is to extend this area of research and study the contemporary variant of the form. While there is a rich corpus of critical writing on colonial travel literature, studies on contemporary travel writing are relatively sparse. My work is inspired and influenced by the writings of Graham Huggan, Patrick Holland, Debbie Lisle, Barbara Korte, Tim Youngs, Peter Hulme, James

Clifford, and Ali Behdad, to name a few, who have constructed the critical apparatus for reading contemporary travel writing. One of the purposes of this study is to understand the role of the travel book in the contemporary context. Since mobility has become the defining condition of our time, the idea of travel permeates all aspects of contemporary life. The conceptual eclecticism and the generic variety of travel writing reflect an enormous range of philosophical, cultural, and political ideas and attitudes.

After the two Big Wars, travel narratives of heroic exploration, imperial ambitions, scientific discoveries, ethnographic documentation, and sentimental education begin to wane. In his book *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between the Wars*, Paul Fussell wrote the definitive obituary of the genre. He argued that the democratic 'crassness' of commercial tourism had displaced real travel. The Wars changed the old imperial world and produced new geographies of power. The world hegemonic ambitions of USA and USSR inaugurated the Cold War era, creating an ideologically contested bipolar world. The horrors of the World Wars, fascisms, the Holocaust, territorial and geopolitical shifts, mass displacement, and anti-colonial movements left the old powers depleted of resources. Since the beginning of modernity, travel writing has played a crucial role in producing, representing, and sustaining imperialist discourses. Edward Said's path-breaking book *Orientalism* is an examination of this relationship. The record of travels undertaken by merchants, scholars, explorers, administrators, ethnographers, novelists, missionaries, poets, and soldiers, written in various forms and frames, went into the making of imperial ideology and colonial governmentality.

Though travel writing's function in the colonial project cannot be emphasised enough, it is useful to remember that there were dissident voices within the tradition that questioned and critiqued the Empire. Priyamvada Gopal's epic work *Insurgent Empire* refers to a rich archive of historical materials to trace the effect of anticolonial resistance from outside Europe and America on British dissident discourse. Gopal studies numerous politically inclined travellers to the colonies, who learned from anticolonial movements they witnessed, "shifting their views, and even being radicalized in the process" (Gopal, 2019, 8).

As the sun began to set on the British Empire, travel writing began to change in tone and intent. Already in the early half of the 20th century, travel writing as a literary form began to replace its 19th century allegiance to objectivity. Almost all modernist luminaries[1] worked with the concept of travel as central to their aesthetics and politics. While literary travel writing became an established tradition, commercialization of tourism led to the production of a great variety of touristic literature, ranging from attractive

adverts selling faux authentic travel experiences to the remotest and most exotic destinations of the world, to conscious-raising ecological and history tours. Between this sublime and the profane, travel literature continues to be produced and consumed in great abundance. The commercial success *and* critical interventions of travel writing are equally relevant to the genre's continued significance.

The end of formal colonial rule did not erase or even alleviate the effects of colonisation as newly independent colonies continued to be at a historical and structural disadvantage to the Western world. Newly independent states like India inherited the administrative and political apparatuses of British India, and the inequities perpetuated by this. As the world became steadily unipolar since the late 80s, with the fall of Communism and expansion of American hegemony, postcolonial nations like India and China emerged as powerful neoliberal regimes. This meant that the inequities produced by colonialism were replicated and reproduced in postcolonial contexts. Massive accumulation of wealth by a few, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, the abrogation of socialist principles, and repressive state control of political dissidence became the defining features of the postcolonial nation. The lingering effects of long imperial rule continued and its structures of governance were deftly appropriated by the postcolonial state.

In her study of contemporary travel writing, Debbie Lisle says, –

> When I argue that a particular travel writer employs a colonial vision, I certainly mean to foreground the tropes of power, control and exclusion at work in the text. But I also mean to reveal the anxieties, insecurities and difficulties that arise when simple logics of dominance/subordination are reproduced in a context of late twentieth-century globalisation… it reveals anachronistic forms of authority but also questions, disrupts and interrogates the foundations upon which that authority is grounded (Lisle, 2006, 4).

Patrick Holland asserts that not all travel writers share a uniform set of privileges and neither can one reduce the whole genre to a homogeneous category of imperialist discourse (Huggan and Holland, 1998, 14). Contemporary travel writing includes a vast and ever-expanding body of writing that encompasses "expansionist ambitions of modern tourism" and intervenes and challenges received ideas of cultural difference (14). The conservative continuance and radical departures within travel writing evoke critical questions about contemporary politics and histories.

At its radical best, travel writing questions established hierarchies of race, class, caste, gender, cultural and political hegemonies, and provides a political vocabulary and record of resistance. On the other hand, the

resilience of Eurocentrism and travel writing's reliance on commerce perpetuate old orthodoxies and newer forms of elitism. In this context, the contemporary relevance of the travel genre, both its ubiquity and impending expiration, has to be reimagined. The question of relevance is variously addressed by travel writers and scholars. The very concept of travel has acquired theoretical elasticity and cultural density with the explosion of mobility and the expansion of global capitalism. Conversely, mass tourism has obliterated the epical significance of travel. Further still, the inequities and violence produced by capitalist greed and neo-imperialism have resulted in climate crises, military expansionism, rise of authoritarian regimes. These factors have produced an unprecedented number of refugees and displaced people globally. While borders melt away for some, for others, their home itself becomes inaccessible. Modern-day military occupations have rendered people homeless in their own land. How are experiences of dislocation, war, and vulnerability addressed or obviated in contemporary travel narratives? How do we read the autonomy and privilege of travellers against the coerced mobility of migrants and refugees? How do the specific circumstances of mobility evoke contending representations of home and elsewhere?

It is within these contested and intersecting fields that I examine contemporary travel writing. This book is meant to pose new research questions and not necessarily offer firm conclusions.

One of the most challenging tasks in any study of travel writing is to define the object of one's study. Some suggest that any work that raises the issue of travel, irrespective of its genre, can be read as travel writing. Others insist on a factual, first-person prose account as the main principle in categorizing a work as a travel narrative. As Peter Hulme argues:

> There was a moment – call it the postmodern moment if you like – when Buford's ambiguity between fact and fiction seemed "wonderful", at least to some people. Less so, these days, I think, at least in part because of the powerful assaults on fact made by David Irving and other holocaust deniers. David Stoll's recent charges against Rigoberta Menchú's memoir have created even more controversy, although that case raises cross-cultural issues about the nature of testimony and witness which are much less easily settled[2]. The point is that this dividing line between fiction and non-fiction – however difficult to negotiate – does still matter to us, perhaps even more than it used to" (Hulme 2002, 37).

In my work, I have chosen to align myself with the latter, though, as stated earlier, some of the most radical travel works in recent times[3] blur the distinctions between fact and fiction, real and metaphoric, subjective and objective perceptions[4]. I am interested in factual accounts because of the

ethical claims that such narratives make about cultures, peoples, and histories. It is this ethical dimension that I have tried to explore in my book, both in terms of the politics of the writer and their practice of the travel form.

Contemporary India in Travel Writing

India has a special place in the Western imaginary. The colonial dimension of this fascination is now well recorded, but scholarly interest in contemporary India is relatively less extensive. The book reads contemporary travel writing on India from three discrete subject/narrative positions. The first is to understand how colonial histories produced a new kind of traveller. Within travel writing, the figure of the migrant begins to challenge earlier assumptions of cultural authority and demonstrates a complicated relationship with postcolonial societies. I examine V.S. Naipaul's Indian journeys in this context. The second position is represented by William Dalrymple, who travels in search of redemptive histories, challenging ideologies of civilisational conflict. And the third is the South Asian traveller, an ethically driven critical insider, who interrogates the dominant claims and colonial legacies of the postcolonial nation-state. These three positions are representative of three distinct tendencies in contemporary travel writing and evoke very different and contesting discourses on India. Two chapters of the book are dedicated to the writings of V.S. Naipaul and William Dalrymple, and the last chapter focuses on writings by South Asians on India's conflict zones.

The selected writings cover more than 60 years of post-independent India. These works engage with the most pressing political, social, cultural, and ideological developments and struggles in the life of the Indian nation from widely divergent perspectives and contested historical orientations. As India enters its 76th year after Independence, it is instructive to understand its past and present through multiple perspectives and locations. Travel writing's intimacy with political reportage, memoir, history-writing, ethnography, and the novel makes the record and experience of the contemporary both immediate and reflective. As a record of experiences, which is mediated through the personal politics and historical location of the writer, travel writing enables a close reading of attitudes, structures of feeling, and critiques of Indian politics and society.

India's independence came on the heels of the Partition, and the spectre of that violent fracture continues to haunt subcontinental politics. From the debris of colonial impoverishment and the spirit of anti-colonial struggle, the newly independent nation was founded on the principles of democracy,

equality, secularism, and socialism. The immediate experience of colonisation made the issues of social justice central to the political imagination of India. Despite this imaginative leap, older class, caste, gender, and regional hierarchies were not seriously disturbed. Internationally, Indian independence and its early decades coincided with the end of global British colonial hegemony and the beginning of the Cold War. The Indian constitutional framework was based on socialist principles, but India's early foreign policy maintained political neutrality. As India went into the next decades of its independence, wars with Pakistan and China, the Kashmir conflict, insurgencies in the Northeastern states, peasant revolts, unalleviated caste inequality, Dalit and women's social justice movements challenged the idealistic narrative of India's experiments with democracy. The state response to insurgent movements, political dissidence, and social justice movements imitated the colonial state's repressive tactics. Additionally, the unreckoned trauma of the Partition, the corruption in the electoral processes, the continued upper-caste and elite influence on institutions and social power, and the gradual dissipation and ineffective implementation of welfare policies created the conditions for massive disaffection.

As the world became unipolar with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the USSR, India embarked on its journey towards economic liberalisation in the early 1990s. This was preceded by the Mandal Commission protest which was the upper-caste pushback against demands for social equality and affirmative action. This was followed by the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992. The adoption of neoliberal policies and the growing corporatisation of institutions coincided with the rise of Hindu supremacist forces and communalisation of Indian politics.

Hindu majoritarian politics in India has produced its own versions of the nation to legitimise its claims. The dominant and evolving political discourses on nationalism are concomitantly reliant on an inventive selection of an imagined past. History becomes the embattled territory on which the Hindu nation superimposes its teleology and builds its imagination of the future. The selected writings in the book respond to the aforementioned developments in post-independence India.

In mainstream English travel writing, several post-war travellers adopted an ironic and self-deprecating tone, as dominant conventions that conferred a heroic or culturally superior status to the traveller, accrued from its imperial history, could no longer be adopted without irony. In the 1970s and 80s, the welfare-oriented policies of post-war Britain were replaced by austerity measures, neoliberal policies, repression of labour agitations, anti-immigrant and openly racist sentiments. These years witnessed a nostalgic return to the glory days of the British Raj, a sense of self-crisis precipitated

by Britain's loss of economic power on the global stage. Interestingly, this was also the period of the resurgence of travel writing.[5] Alongside this development, post-war, postcolonial Britain saw the rise of Black and Diaspora literatures that investigated Britain's dark colonial past. Racism and immigrant experiences emerged as dominant themes. It is within this context that postcolonial travel writing begins to emerge as a distinctive form.

V.S. Naipaul started his writing career in the 1950s. Over the next 50 years, he travelled to India, the Caribbean, Africa, Latin America, and the Islamic nations, the whole width of the postcolonial world, and produced a large body of travel literature. In the book, I examine Naipaul's contested identity as a postcolonial travel writer. At the centre of Naipaul's writing is the construction of a narrative voice at odds with the deprecating self-irony of the English traveller, a migrant figure who is haunted and moulded by the dark history of colonialism. Naipaul's complex history as a descendant of an Indian indentured family in the British Caribbean became the chief determinant that mediated his view of the postcolonial world. Naipaul's India journeys brought a critical perspective to the reading of India's post-independent history. Naipaul's engagement with India was a life-long project, and he wrote about it extensively in both fictional and non-fictional forms.

William Dalrymple first arrived in India in the early 1990s and, over the last 30 years, has made Delhi his home. Of Scottish descent, Dalrymple acknowledges his intellectual debt to Robert Byron in his first travel book, *In Xanadu*. The convention of adulatory recognition of one's predecessors is a characteristic feature of contemporary travel writing. By the early years of the 1990s, Raj nostalgia in Anglophone travel writing begins to fade. Anti-racist movements from the 1970s onwards produced a new body of Black and Diaspora writing that forced a reckoning of British Imperial history. Simultaneously, the following decades saw the collapse of the Communist bloc, the first Iraq war, and the expansion of the American military-industrial complex in the Middle East. In the period after 9/11, Western foreign policy discourses spurred fresh myths about the "Clash of Civilizations".[6] This initiated a new era of Western military interventions in the Middle East and West Asia, legitimised by Islamophobic sentiments and discourses.

Dalrymple's interest in 18th and 19th century British Imperialism and its relationship with Muslim rule informs his interest in contemporary India. Dalrymple's travel writing and narrative histories can be read as a response to the rise of Islamophobia in the West. Contemporary global politics, in a sense, is a re-visiting of colonial attitudes of the 18th and 19th centuries, where Islamic societies are projected as barbaric, inept at self-rule, with an

innate potential for insane violence. Dalrymple's travels are mediated through a critical reading of colonial history. As a corrective to imperialist historiography, he excavates from the archive histories that challenge imperial attitudes and contemporary Islamophobic discourses.

It is interesting to read Naipaul and Dalrymple together because, as the book will demonstrate, their versions of Indian history and their reading of the Indian contemporary reflect contesting outlooks. Also, within the travel genre, they occupy vastly different narrative positions. Reading the two writers together enables an illuminating understanding of colonial mentalities and a spectrum of perspectives on Indian and global politics.

In the final section, the book studies a third kind of travel writer - the South Asian writer. Writers like Amitav Ghosh and Sudeep Chakravarti point to a new tendency in travel writing where the emphasis is on a more ethical and interventionist reading of the contemporary. The conventional binaries in travel writing – home/ elsewhere, insider/outsider, are redefined in their works. Travel writing in India has an inexhaustible archive. From pilgrimage narratives to travel poems, scholarly excursions to mendicant treatises, political travel to caste and gender-transgressive journeys, this field comprises a dense record of subcontinental history from the ancient to present times. Spanning across India's diverse cultural and linguistic literatures, writing on travel has been staggeringly extensive and creative. Supriya Chaudhari, Shobana Bhattacharya, and Pramod K Nayar[7], to name a few, have contributed richly to this field. My modest focus in this study is post-independent travel writing in English that examines the postcolonial Indian state - its legacies and failures.

South Asian travel writers like Sudeep Chakravarti and Amitav Ghosh study the postcolonial state and its many contestations. Questioning the dominant idea of India as a singular political and civilisational entity, writers like Chakravarti travel to those parts of India that are at war with the state. The very idea of India becomes a contested category when one reads the history of insurgent movements in the post-independence period. These writers travel to non-tourist-friendly places which are sites of intense political crisis and turmoil in India and South Asia. By reading colonial archives in conjunction with his travels, Ghosh evokes an older world of pre-colonial global affiliations that was disrupted by modern colonialism. His writing focuses on how postcolonial states have enthusiastically appropriated the extractivist policies introduced by global capitalist colonialism. Resource extraction, climate crisis, violence on indigenous populations, military occupations, corporatization of developmental projects, and ineffective social justice programmes have led to a crisis of democracy. It is this history and its violent manifestations that writers like

Sudeep Chakravarti and Ghosh record in their travel works. Their narrative position is neither that of a migrant/ diasporic intellectual nor that of an impassioned Anglophone visitor. They derive their narrative authority from a position of embedded belonging as critical insiders.

Pitching their writing against the ideologically suspect accounts of conflict zones in the popular media, they insist on a more critical understanding of politics in these regions. They present a reparative approach through their analyses, inviting policy changes. Recording documentary evidence with subjective inflections, personal experience with sociological understanding, personal journeys with cultural ethnographies, and autobiographical ruminations with historical analyses, these writers use the travel form, with its eclectic textual possibilities, to articulate a complex politics of the contemporary.

Appeals to history are crucial in democratically contested and socially diverse places such as India. In their writing, the travelled terrain is approached through an evocation of historical cosmologies, archival material, and personal experiences. I have chosen Naipaul and Dalrymple's travel writing on India to see how their historical orientations mediate their vision of contemporary India and their particular practice of the travel form.

My choice of authors is contextualised within the larger field of contemporary travel writing. In the first chapter, I provide a general survey of the field classifying the most significant trends in travel writing today. Travel writing in contemporary times has to contend with the explosion of mobility, global tourism, and the broadening spectrum of the very idea of travel. In this context, the value and relevance of the travel book need to be re-defined and re-evaluated. In my survey, I study how contemporary travel writing negotiates with the changing conditions of travel and writing and why history becomes an important trope and theme in this negotiation. I argue that recent developments in the discipline of History make space for a diversity of perspectives on the past. The shaking of disciplinary foundations in History has opened up new possibilities for travel writing for imaginative reinterpretations of the past and its relationship with the present.

In the second chapter, I argue that writers like Naipaul introduced a new sensibility in Anglophone travel writing where the perspective shifted from the privileged Western traveller to those who were forced to 'travel'. In this chapter, I study how, in his Indian narratives, this new sensibility is constructed. It is through historical contextualisation that this sensibility can be best understood and interrogated.

Naipaul's India narratives record both the historical trajectory of independent India and his role as a traveller and writer. Naipaul's "neurotic"

response to India was triggered by his complex personal history as a descendant of indentured labour in Trinidad. His narratives accommodate his feelings of disgust and attraction towards India, alongside his prescience in predicting emergent trends in Indian political and social worlds. The enthusiastic reception of Naipaul in the West and the strident criticism he receives from postcolonial readers for the cosy intimacy his views share with Western imperialist discourses, make Naipaul an immensely controversial writer. Naipaul's significance as a travel writer comes precisely from these contestations.

William Dalrymple's writing on India - both his travel works and narrative histories - is impelled by the need to understand the contemporary in its relationship with the past. Reacting against the now popular sentiment in the West that relies on a neat binarism between civilisations that determine Western politics and policy, Dalrymple's explorations of history enable a redemptive reading of culture encounters. India's long civilisational history, its experience of colonialism, and the recent ascension of Hindu majoritarian politics provide a fertile space to explore histories of cross-cultural contest and filiation. Dalrymple's early travel books were in the tradition of 20th Century travel writing, and he does not veer far from its narrative conventions and tone. Though he came to India as a young traveller, over time, he chose to 'belong' here, making Delhi his home. His development as a travel writer moves from a self-deprecating, entertaining adventurer to an impassioned crusader of cultural syncretism, an archivist of marginalised histories of cultural affinities. Like many contemporary travel writers, Dalrymple is acutely aware that travel writing as a genre has to reinvent itself in a globalised, postcolonial world. Unlike most travellers, Dalrymple immerses himself in a place. He builds relationships, creates a social world, and engages with the history of India intimately. In this chapter, I do a close reading of Dalrymple's *City of Djinns*, *The Age of Kali*, *Nine Lives*, and *White Mughals*, with references to his other travel works and narrative histories.

Finally, I read Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*, *Dancing in Cambodia and at Large in Burma*, with reference to his other non-fictional works, Sudeep Chakravarti's *Red Sun*, and *Highway 39*. This chapter has a section on Alice Albinia's *Empires of the Indus*, which traces the route of the river Indus through Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tibet, and India. As Albinia journeys through these troubled lands, she links older historical readings with her travel experiences. I cluster Albinia's writing with Ghosh because both writers share an interest in history, ecology, and river stories. Here, I identify a new trend in travel writing which is driven by ethical imperatives. The South Asian travellers I read write as critical insiders. The precondition

for travel for Sudeep Chakravarti and Amitav Ghosh arises from a critical awareness of the challenges within the postcolonial state. In this context, democracy and nationalism are fraught subjects that produce ideological deceptions, legitimise repressive control of dissidence, and have led to further marginalisation of vulnerable groups. In Chakravarti's writings, for instance, India is not a uniform political entity. The borders of the nation-state, political and social disaffection, insurgent resistance, ethno-nationalist movements, and armed struggle have created geographies of crisis. It is to these "other Indias" that these writers travel to. These writers interrogate the insider/outsider, home/elsewhere, travel/belonging categories that have been so central to travel writing.

CHAPTER 1

CONTEMPORARY TRAVEL WRITING: SURVEYING THE TERRITORY

A resurgence of interest in travel writing in recent times, both within and outside academia, indicates the emergence of a new set of practices, perspectives, and sensibilities in the field, particular to the contemporary context. The term travel itself has gathered theoretical density in the present context that has forced a reconsideration of the practice, relevance, and critical evaluation of travel writing.

In this chapter, I have attempted to isolate some of the salient features of contemporary travel writing. I emphasise the relationship between history and travel writing as one the most interesting pathways through which contemporary travel writing negotiates with the multivalent concepts of travel in the world today. This engagement with history, I assert, becomes particularly relevant when writing about politically charged societies.

The homogenising impact of global capitalism and the rise of identitarian politics, easy dissemination of information, and stricter laws of censorship, mass mobility and greater policing of borders have made travel a complicated activity. The sustained interest of the Western audience in the postcolonial margins is driven by a complex of fear, curiosity, economic considerations, and exotic enchantments. The dissolution of old imperial structures, the polarisation of the world on ideological grounds and military capacities, the growing economic gap between the wealthy and the underprivileged, the rise of populist and authoritarian regimes, and the challenges of climate crisis produced by capitalist extractivism, have manufactured new forms of exploitation, resistance, complicity, and violence. As a form, because travel writing largely relies on an embedded observer, it can and often is an archive of the present. The vantage and narrative frame of a travel account, the sensibility and the selection, the expositions and the elisions, the intimate and the discursive, I argue, produce a particular kind of historical narrativization in travel writing that can be seen as both an adjunct and challenge to academic histories. The experientially based truth claims of a travel work are mediated through its

prejudices and questions. A writer's affective response to places and people, combined with research, references, and immersive personal experience, can transform a travel narrative into an archive of small histories, and offer a useful historiographical lens. A travel encounter often produces anxiety and recalcitrance, and exposes the vulnerabilities of the traveller. The travel work then becomes not only an analytical narration of observed facts but an account of how the world is experienced by the traveller who embodies cultural, racial, class, and gender histories and practices. History in a travel account is relational and a dialogue between the travel writer and the world he/she travels in. It is this dialectical aspect, inherent in the travel form, which can enable a unique kind of historical understanding.

Travel and History

There has been a foment in the world of academic history in the last few decades. A great number of philosophers and practitioners of history are interrogating the model and claim to objectivity that has framed most traditional historical writing. In the introduction to *Manifestoes of History,* the editors Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow write: "…the coming-to-the-end-of modernity included the problematising of all its 'historical' constitutive parts; history's empirical/epistemological rug has thus been pulled from under its feet; 'history' per se now wobbles" (Jenkins, Morgan, and Munslow, 2007, 5).

In the same collection, Dipesh Chakrabarty argues in favour of including what one calls 'experience' in history writing and says that most traditional historians continue to be sceptical about the "evidence of experience." Till now, he claims, the capacity to assume a certain distance from the past has been central to the idea of "historical objectivity" (Chakrabarty, 2007, 81). Problematising the categories of experience and objectivity in relation to history writing, Chakrabarty puts forward both sides of the argument. Those who still hold on to the idea of historical objectivity, less keen on relying on 'experience', argue that "… the time-consuming process of marshalling evidence and "proof" is part of the logic persuasion" (86). And those who recognise the role of memory and experience in historical telling, speak to the horizon of the now, which Chakravarty thinks is closer to the postcolonial mood. Chakrabarty argues that for democratisation of history both these horizons need to be kept in perspective from whence will emerge a new way of historical writing (86).

The Rankean paradigm in history writing was challenged by historians who opened the field to include multiple actors. Historians like E.P. Thompson, Christopher Hill, and John Saville theorised and wrote histories

that shifted the focus from elite lives to the study of common people: the labouring and peasant class. E.P. Thompson, in his essay "History from Below", published in 1966, created the theoretical apparatus for a new form of historiography that undertook the task of studying common people and those in the margins of society.

Contemporary travel writing, too, I suggest, has to walk the tightrope between these two tendencies: the expectation of 'objectivity' and the evidence of 'experience'. Travel writing, with its eclectic and promiscuous genealogy, has had to contend with these questions all along. Attempts to define travel writing constantly run up against its inherent heterogeneity both in form and content. The corpus encompasses a diverse array of genres, from epics to poetry to diaries, letters, surveys, tour guides, scientific writing, and reportage to literary accounts, which engage with issues of objectivity, experience, style, truth, reception, and authority, addressed in countless configurations**.** Additionally, travel writing does not only offer a *mode* of writing history but is also the *archive,* the *source* of history.

This is not to suggest that travel writing is thus superior to academic histories. Freedom from academic protocols does not mean that travel writing is free of historical moorings. History, by definition, is a narrative about the past. Despite the contest among historians and historiographers about the plurality of the historical discourse, the fact remains that history's object of study is primarily the past. What constitutes the past might be debatable, and the ways of framing, narrating, and writing about it might also be open-ended, but history's concern with the past is never seriously questioned. Travel writing, on the other hand, (especially those works that make history their constitutive interest) accesses the past primarily and vociferously from the present. It is the contemporary that directs the travel writer's interest towards the past, and thus the present reverberates strongly in most claims made about the past. Travel writers frequently archive the contemporary, imbuing it with historical significance. In the process of journeying, the travel writer encounters the contemporary in an embodied manner, wherein the interpretation of the past and present is shaped not solely by historical material but also by the materiality of the writer as an embodied subject. This embodied engagement fundamentally determines their construction of the past.

Current interest in oral histories, the search for new archives of public and private memories, and the role of mediation (subjective experiences, discursive traditions, and epistemological frameworks) in history-writing have led investigations of the recent past to living subjects and interlocutors. As a research practice, oral history has permeable boundaries and inter-disciplinary affiliations. The procedures of verification in oral history, its

reliance on memory and subjectivity, make 'evidence' visibly vulnerable to interpretation. Despite the apparent fluidity of its practice, scholars and students engaged in and committed to oral history have attempted to structure the discipline as a distinctive field.[1]

There are evident similarities between the procedures of the travel writer and that of the oral historian. Do these overlaps suggest that travel writing can be read as a necessary and creative adjunct to historical interpretations?

These questions are related to the larger question of the significance, relevance, and continuation of travel writing in the contemporary context. The demand for and pressures on contemporary travel writing come from a different set of expectations compared to academic history which has a set audience and positioned firmly within an established institutional space. Travel writing, on the other hand, addresses a motley reading public; it has to contend with a spectrum of creative meanings associated with the notion of travel, heterogeneous traditions of representations, and above all, has to justify its relevance in an age so dominated by the visual and digital media that represent travel in easy, alluring, and immediate ways.

In the subsequent sections, I shall discuss some of the significant tendencies that inflect contemporary travel writing. This contextualising is important to understand the role of the travel book today. I shall also discuss why the preoccupation with history in travel writing on places like India has such appeal and significance.

Writing India

The length of Western involvement with the Indian subcontinent and the extensive documentation of the encounter makes the burden of the past particularly heavy for the travel writer and the researcher. The conventions of representing India seem already fixed, the genre well-worn, and the land over-described. The old motifs of journey, home, departure, and destination have lost much of their relevance in the context of mass mobility and displacement. These pressures force a departure from older polemics and models of framing and writing about travel.

In the age of mass communication, the travel book, it is said, has been rendered obsolete by the jet engine, television, and the Internet. Besides, in an era of specialisation, the travel writer is shorn of the dignity of heroic exploration or of returning with new empirical knowledge. Wherein, then, lies the value of the travel book now?

In recent times, travel writers have become increasingly aware that they are describing fragmented, hybridised cultures. India's long civilisational

history and the multi-cultural and multi-religious fabric of Indian life is a fecund space to explore the hybrid nature of the contemporary world. The scope of my study includes analysing if contemporary travellers create a new idiom of cultural representation or they continue to replicate old political/colonial and cultural imaginaries. How do writers like Naipaul and Dalrymple constitute their narrative authority and interpreting selves? How are the enunciative positions chosen? How are their histories angled?

The history of colonialism forms an inevitable backdrop to most English travel works on India; the shared colonial relation inevitably presses its context upon the traveller and his/her relationship with India. The problem of history becomes particularly crucial for the postcolonial travel writer as he/she cannot but be aware of the central role travel writing has played in the formation of colonial ideology and governmentality. Contemporary travel writers navigate the colonial legacy of the genre through varied approaches, including self-deprecating humour, uncritical acceptance, or as a contested tradition. The connection with history is not only determined by the historical burden the genre places upon the travel writer, but also because in contemporary times appeals to history frame most debates on national and local identities, power and resistances, wars and reconciliations.

In Naipaul's and Dalrymple's writing, India is accessed primarily through history: colonial history, personal history, and immediate history. This engagement with history allows both writers to negotiate issues of subjectivity, modernity, cultural interactions, colonialism, and contemporary politics. The question then is – why is the travel genre chosen as a space for history writing? And what is the nature of such histories?

In *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that the universalising tendencies of 'Europe' influence any interaction between the West and non-European societies. Chakrabarty asserts that the attempt to capture elements that resist translatability across divergent cultural frameworks —thus envisioning the world as fundamentally heterogeneous — remains constrained within the epistemological frameworks of academic historiography. The travel genre, however, freed from the methodological strictures of disciplinary history, may offer a more compelling articulation of the ontological validity of alternative cultural and political practices. Within the travel genre, the dynamics of cultural encounter function as a foundational axis. Travel narratives are fundamentally shaped by encounters between travellers and their subjects, interactions frequently characterised by asymmetrical power relations. Such dynamics underscore and expose embedded class, gender, racial, and cultural biases, as well as implicit discursive prejudices, which

become more pronounced within the framework of the travel account. The modalities of interpretations that give authority to or are suppressed in a historical text become exposed in a travel work. This can be consciously stated or left implicit.

Steve Clarke argues that the concept of reference in travel writing needs to be sharply defined and perhaps be understood contextually:

> Conflicting evidence cannot be readily ascribed to unreliable narration: divergence between travel testimonies is no proof of falsifiability because social rationality may be deduced according to radically divergent protocol … Travel reference has to do with world coherence: the book projects a world. And it is the ethics of inhabiting that alternative domain that are primarily at stake (Clarke, 1999, 2).

There is a certain kind of history that most travel works piece together - a kind that sometimes compels historians, political analysts, anthropologists, and sociologists to draw on it as a resource. I am interested in reading this history and the manner of its telling.

The position of the traveller within a tradition of travel, along with his/her larger socio-political and cultural location, inform the nature of his/her travel. I study English travel writing as a discursive and ideological construct, a site where identities are not only represented but actively negotiated and redefined. Naipaul's work engages with this tradition while simultaneously subverting it through his diasporic perspective, situating himself both within the established framework of the genre and on its margins. He articulates a dual positionality—anchored in the canon yet claiming the vantage of the diasporic periphery. I argue that the travel form is a site where identities are constantly constructed and reworked. Naipaul appeals to this tradition but also disavows it by asserting his diasporic identity.

Dalrymple, on the other hand, is more self-conscious of the tradition within which he writes, acutely aware of the contested history of colonial travel writing. There is also a greater reliance on archival material that is constantly juxtaposed with the writer's immediate experiences. The extensively theorised Indo-Anglican encounter takes on a fresh dimension in Dalrymple's travel narratives. Here, the genre functions as a "contact zone," a discursive space where this protracted intercultural engagement unravels an alternative historical perspective. Dalrymple's works thus reframe the Indo-Anglican encounter, illustrating the travel genre as a dynamic site where overlapping histories and identities are renegotiated and recontextualized.

It may be argued that this historical preoccupation, characteristic of contemporary travel writing on India, is rooted in a deeply entrenched colonial tradition. A rigorous examination of colonial accounts reveals that English narratives on India were exercises in historical and ethnographical documentation. Motivated by political ambitions and commercial rivalries among European states, travel narratives were intentional sites for the articulation of competing imperialist discourses. Such narratives were consciously crafted to legitimise and project specific ideological and territorial claims, thereby establishing a historiographical foundation that continues to inform and shape the contours of contemporary travel writing on India. So, what is so radical about contemporary engagement with history in the travel form? If anything, it can be said that it is one of the most conventional approaches to the genre.

The answer to this question can be two-fold. I contend that the expectations from and of the form have changed. Travel-histories are no longer read merely as sources or archives of information about other cultures; their significance now resides in foregrounding history itself as the critical lens through which particular cultures are interpreted and understood. The preoccupation with history in travel writing has to be read within the larger field of contemporary travel writing, its dominant and recessive tendencies. In the following sections, I offer a brief overview of the field and highlight what I consider its most significant features.

Contemporary Travel Writing and its Modernist Predecessors

Mary Louis Pratt has argued that travel writing in the 18th and 19th centuries produced "the rest of the world" for the Europeans (Pratt, 1992, 5). The role of travel writing in the construction of cultural representations of the "Other" and the consequent fuelling of the imperial project makes the politics of the genre more than merely textual. The much debated yet established connection between the consolidation of imperial policies and travel writing makes it evident that travel in the past has been more than just a literary enterprise. But in the travel writing of the late 19th century and beyond, it appears that "the rest of the world" for Europeans begins to lose the lustre of distinctive "otherness".

The experience of exile and associated notions of cultural crossings occupy a prominent position in the modernist moment. Any account of travel writing of this period shows that a large number of fiction writers were writing travel works. Many authors lived much of their lives as expatriates or exiles of choice. Modernist texts register a new consciousness of

cultural heterogeneity where cross-cultural strains are the rule rather than the exception in both travel and other forms of literature. The engagement with cultural heterogeneity during this period, perhaps, accounts for the emergence of travel writing as a more literary genre. There was now a move from detailed, empirical prose to a more impressionistic style with interest focused as much on the traveller's consciousness as on the journey. It is within this generic history that I locate Naipaul's and Dalrymple's travel work.

The focus on writing in the experience of travel becomes significant in 20th century travel writing. The act of writing itself emerges as one of the most powerful defining characteristics of modernism, and travel carries much of the metaphoric weight in the making of a writer and his world. The importance of the writer as the documenter of the travelled terrain became the key factor in travel writing in the 20th century. Paul Fussell asserts that the First World War affected the attitudes of a generation of writers, and it changed the world map forever. There were no borders and restrictions, passports and identity cards. All these changes and rearrangements constituted a new 'modernist sensibility'. And this sensibility reflected that – "All implied an awareness of reality as disjointed, dissociated, and fractured". This created an aesthetic of the exiled writer, perennially in search of new artistic and spiritual habitations, discarding the deadening effects of familiar rituals, language, and prejudice. However, Fussell also suggests that tourism causes the destruction of 'real' travel writing and the end of good writing (Fussell, 1980, 36).

Bernard Schweizer, in his book *Radicals on the Road: Politics of English Travel Writing in the 1930s*, finds the 1930s an interesting decade as this was the period when a substantial number of well-known travel writers were also political radicals. Writers like George Orwell, Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, Robert Byron, and Rebecca West were restless travellers and took up strong ideological positions that represented the whole spectrum of the ideology of the time. "Waugh was a declared conservative, Orwell a dedicated socialist, Greene wavered between bourgeois instincts and his liberal sympathies and West maintained strong feminist and liberationist convictions" (Schweizer, 2001, 5).

Schweizer argues that the travellers in the 1930s pioneered a new tradition by employing travel writing self-consciously as a platform for voicing radical political ideas. Simultaneously, they abandoned the documentary, pseudoscientific, journalistic method that had dominated the writing of travel books in the past and opted, instead, for a more imaginative, introspective, essayist, and argumentative kind of travel book that aspired to be recognised as a form of literature. And from a commercial

point of view, these experiments were hugely successful (Schweizer, 2001, 3-7).

Schweizer controverts Paul Fussell's assertions that politics and travel are antagonistic and instead argues that they were in fact inseparable, *especially* during the period of instability and crisis of the 1930s. The dominant historical factors that caused the 1930s to be such a turbulent period were the polarisation of political ideology, the Great Depression, the growing threat of another war, and the decolonisation of Britain's colonies. One of the most important features of 1930s travel writings is how these travellers tried to shore up their ideological beliefs by appealing to binary distinctions - the most important binary being the distinction between the political Left and Right. In travel works, Schweizer argues, these two attitudes were reflected in paradoxical references to utopia and dystopia.

> Travellers of the 1930s did not realize the extent to which their journeys were predicated upon the specific advantages they enjoyed as envoys from the imperial metropolis. Once the empire went into decline, the very same travellers who had taken the privileges for granted sounded the alarm (Schweizer, 2001, 13).

In 1947, Waugh argued that there was no room for tourists in a world of displaced people. In the post-World War II context, "displaced person" had a restrictive meaning, referring to prisoners of fascist regimes, victims of forced labour, and postcolonial migrants, whose movements were determined by global developments beyond their control.

In the same measure, decolonisation started massive movements of people from the colonies to the metropolis but hindered the flow the other way to the margins of the empire. The restriction on the privilege to travel during and after the War began to show in the travel writing of the time. The writing expressed the anxiety of a generation who had lost their bearings in the new political world. Most of the travellers of the 1930s stopped writing travel books after the War, thereby making room for a new generation of post-war writers whose itineraries were more eclectic and whose books were no longer attuned to particular political beliefs (Schweizer, 2001, 13).

The history of the world underwent a radical transformation following the two World Wars, most notably marked by the decline of British imperial dominance. This shift was accompanied by the rise of American hegemony, the steady expansion of global capitalism, and independence of countries once under British rule. The increasing number of displaced and politically disenfranchised people further altered the landscape of travel. These factors collectively redefined the context in which people moved and interacted across borders. Additionally, the widespread dominance of the tourism

industry had some fundamental effects on the perception and writing of travel.

Declaring the end of travel writing, Paul Fussell in his study of British travel writing between the Wars, says: "Because travel is hardly possible anymore, an inquiry into the nature of travel and travel writing will resemble a threnody" (Fussell, 1980, 37). The predictions of the demise of the travel genre have been premature. Waugh, in the early part of the 20th century, had mourned the death of the form in the context of mass displacement produced by the devastations of the two World Wars. In 1946, Waugh, declaring the death of the travel form, said:

> My own travelling days are over, and I do not expect to see many travel books in the future… There is no room for tourists in a world of 'displaced persons. Never again, I suppose, shall we land on foreign soil with a letter of credit and passport…and feel the world wide open for us (Waugh, 1946, 4).

In his seminal work *Abroad*, Paul Fussell attributes the rise of global tourism as a key factor in closing the curtain on "true travel". Contrary to expectations, the travel book has continued to flourish, and for the very same reasons that both Waugh and Fussell thought would obstruct its continuance.

Contemporary Travel Writing and Tourism

Since the advent of mass tourism in the 19th century, there has been a distinct shift in the nature and perception of travel and the travelled terrain. The world has changed in dramatic and complex ways in the last few decades, and one of the most significant indices of this change is the phenomenon of mobility. The consequent remapping of the world, both territorially and imaginatively, has altered the way we dwell and travel today. Paul Fussell, writing about the travel book, says: "{a} travel book, at its purest, is addressed to those who do not plan to follow, but who require the exotic anomalies, wonders, and the scandals of the literary form romance, which their place and time cannot entirely supply" (Fussell, 1980, 203). Fussell's scepticism about the survival of travel writing in the 20th century is based on the 'alarming' expansion of tourism that had left no territory inaccessible, no space unmarked for the travel writer to explore or imaginatively construct.

Contemporary travel writing cannot be read without understanding the role tourism plays in organising cultural expectations, cultural encounters, economic hierarchies, and representation. Chris Rojek and John Urry, in