

THREE EARLIEST GUJARATI TRAVEL ACCOUNTS ON ENGLAND; CHANGING INDIAN PERCEPTIONS OF EUROPE

Mihir Mori, Assistant Professor,

Department of English, Veer Narmad South Gujarat University, Surat. Gujarat. India.

Abstract : The present paper aims at studying early Gujarati Travel narratives on England and how they constitute the changing perception of the subject from the colonized country about the masters. It is imperative to find the appreciation for the master's land but at the same time there is inherent critique of the land the traveler belongs to and the land visited. The subject positions of three travelers are interrogated with reference to gender, class and representation.

Keywords : Travel, Travel Writing, gender, Gujarati, Nineteenth Century

Travel writing in Gujarati emerged to prominence during the second half of the nineteenth century. These earliest travelogues provide fascinating insights in understanding the changing Indian perceptions of Europe in general and England in particular. The first Gujarati travel account on England appeared in 1861 and during the span of next forty one years there are as many as eight travel accounts on England, either exclusively on England or about the visit to England along with other countries. The Gujarati travel writers of this time, irrespective of their social status, profession, gender and age found it impossible to look at England with the excitement of a foreigner visiting a new country. They are totally bound in their historical location, where they are conscious of and fully occupied with their status as representatives of a subject nation. This new genre of narrative was undoubtedly influenced by the western model of travel writing and exposure to English education. Surprisingly, a few essays and articles were written almost during the same time in Gujarati in support of going abroad by the leading reformers of the time as crossing the sea was prohibited on religion grounds by a section of society.

The first ever recorded travel account on England appears in Gujarati in 1861 by a Parsee writer, Dosabhai Faramji Karaka titled *Great Britain khatene Musafari* (Travel to Great Britain). Which is followed by *England ni Musafari nu Varnan* (An Account of Travels to England) by Mahipatram Nilkanth in 1864 and *England man Pravas* (Travels to England) by Karsandas Mulji in 1866. After that appeared one or two lesser known accounts by Khan Bahadur Shekh Yusufali and Faramji Dinshaji Pitit on England and Europe. The first travel account in Gujarati by a woman traveler appeared in 1902 by Nandkunvarba called *Gomandla Parikram* (A Voyage across the World). For the present endeavor, I have restricted myself to three travel accounts i.e. *England ni Musafari nu Varnan*, *England man Pravas* and *Gomandla Parikram* to interrogate how they contribute in changing Indian perceptions of Europe.

Mahipatram Nilkanth visited England in 1860 with a purpose. He was sent to England by the then British government to have the first hand experience of the English education system, so that after coming back he can be instrumental in setting up teacher training colleges for natives. Amid all opposition from his own community for crossing black waters, his wife supported him morally and the government and few well-wishers financially. He stayed in England for almost a year and observed and experienced the English life very closely. However, he faced terrible humiliation and wrath of his community after coming back. To such an extent that he was almost forced to repent for his deed publicly. In the preface to the first edition he makes it clear that the aim of his visit to England was not personal gain but it was for the benefit of country. He opines that voyage to England is not at all difficult as hundreds of man, women and children visit this country every month. He opposed the rigid attitude of his community of forbidding the foreign travel and shows readiness to suffer their wrath for larger good. In the year 1864, he came up with a very systematically planned travel account, *England ni Musafari nu Varnan*. The travelogue is divided

into ten chapters and every chapter is further subdivided. The reading turns out to be a fine comparative cultural study of India as well as England. Being a colonial subject he is completely appreciative of English royalty, traits and life as well as educational system, factories, civic bodies, palaces, castles and list is endless. He is at times ambivalent in his response. He wishes that the best traits of English people should be followed by his own people and then and then only any kind of reform is possible. This visit to England proves an opportunity to learn and reform his society and in doing so he doesn't leave any chance to rebuke his own people. But at the same time he also points out, though in brief, the drawbacks of the English society.

England-mān Pravās, by Karsandas Mulji is one of the earliest travelogues in any Indian language and one especially in Gujarati. It was published in the year 1866, after three years of the author's visit to that country. Karsandas Mulji was a person with multifaceted personality. He was one of the foremost reformers of the 19th century India. In a very short life span of thirty nine years his writing astounded and debunked contemporary morally bankrupt society. A history was created when he won the most talked about Maharaj Libel Case of his time. His victory in this case was not one of his personal, but that of new emerging social setup. Karsandas Mulji in all his born days fought against religious hypocrisy. And for that he penned his writing like a razor edge.

The concept of freedom had different connotation for the reformers of that age. After hundreds of years of Muslim oppression, the British were seen as the saviour from that relentless tyranny and provider of good governance. But because of those dark ages the evils of caste system, superstitions, custom of suttee, child marriage, etc. had fraught the 19th century society to an irremediable extent. Like other reformers of that age, freedom for Karsandas Mulji was in breaking the fetters of rigid caste system and other social evils so as to lead the country to all possible developments. The model before him for such development was of the English. With such consciousness and purpose, it was only too possible that he could not refrain himself from lavishing the British. In many respects the society of 19th century Hindustan was quite different from what one sees today. By this travelogue he wanted to present to his countrymen that model. His sole purpose behind writing this travelogue was to educate the natives and put before them whatever was best in England. As in his own words, "On my return from England, it occurred to me that I could not do a better service of my countrymen than by lying before them, in this volume, the various thoughts which suggested themselves to my mind during my visit to that country." One reading might give an impression that throughout the travelogue he is advocating the British, which is not entirely the case indeed. As the reformers of that age borne different concepts of freedom, it was not freedom from external hegemony but freedom from internal infirmity of senescent mind and from monolithic and senseless rules and regulation of the caste system.

England-mān Pravās is a larger compendium with over hundred illustrations and plates. This is a well structured work. The text has twelve chapters and each chapter is divided into twelve heads. Its popularity can be imagined from the fact that five hundred forty four copies were booked ahead of its publication. Its second reprint came out in the following year of its publication and the next year it got translated in Marathi. As it was in practice among the writers of that age, the front page and the preface were given in English by the author himself. The purpose was to draw attention of the English readers of that time. This travelogue begins with a detailed discussion on the advantages of traveling for cultural, political and economic reasons. In a manner that is both defensive and defiant. At the same time this travelogue is consciously bilingual, and replete with references, numbers and illustrations. Karsandas Mulji travelled to English shores with a purpose. He visited England to observe various types of business and trades in Britain. But he could not stay there for more than eight months due to his heart problem. Thus, this travelogue is an outcome of his visit to different country sides, cities, museums, parks, galleries, manufactories of England and Scotland.

The text is significant at many levels. First, written in the 19th century, it has unique historical significance in the history of Gujarati prose writing. This apart, the text is important from the literary perspective, as during that time the practice of writing in Gujarati language itself was in its amorphous form. More so, the text provides an important source material to pry into the form of Gujarati language that was used to constitute formal writing such as this. It goes without saying that this travelogue serves as an important source of colonial historiography as to how a colonial subject perceived his masters and compared his

country with the developed one. One more reason to extend this argument is that the author undertook his commissioned peregrination when a thought of crossing the sea posed threat of desecrating ethical codes of society and religion. Such an audacity could well augur ostracism from one's caste. The decision to travel was one in a long series of efforts at breaking the community's unregeneracy to change. As Mahipatran and Karsandas quote the Governor B. Frere's views on travelling, Frere perceived the new trend of travelling as a mark of "the dawn of a new era of civilization" and an "awakening intellect" in India. Karsandas Mulji not only travelled to England against all odds, but like his contemporary Mahipatram, he never showed his willingness to re-enter that caste system, which had cast him away. This travelogue is a constant comparison between two societies, cultures and traditions. The author very categorically criticizes the wrong notions, beliefs and customs of the 19th century Indian society. But at the same time he would never let go a single chance of disapproving the British treatment meted to its colonial subjects. His dissension comes to the fore in his description of Lodging House and in another instance when he comes across the world renowned diamond Kohinoor in one of the palaces of England where he candidly takes his stand against the English people. His reformatory thoughts bear relevance even in the present context, especially when he talks about the need of one language that is devnagari in his time, so as to unite the country. And in the ninth chapter he expresses his dilemma that how would those read this text who do not know Gujarati.

Karsandas like his contemporaries saw the English continent with utmost bewilderment. His journey does not remain an individualistic or even a private gesture, but acquires a larger, collective significance. Thus, this travelogue was not meant to be mere a piece of travel writing but a much larger utilitarian purpose was bestowed on it. The reading itself reveals that it cannot be solely put into the category of travel writing, as it is not a mere description of few places but a larger cause of reformation in itself.

Nandkunwarba, a Queen of erstwhile small kingdom in Gujarat, India visited Europe and other countries for more than four times in the later-half of nineteenth century. She was one the earliest Gujarati woman prose writers. As she herself makes it clear in the introduction of her travelogue that the purpose of her travels to Europe was to get rid of prolong illness from which she was suffering. It was the advice of her doctors that inspired her to take these travels with her husband. She not only visited England but other Europeans countries as well and also Japan, Korea, China, Russia, America and the list is endless. The unabridged edition of her travels runs into almost 700 pages. She has provided a great number of details of European life ranging from agriculture, education, customs, museums, and libraries to reading habits, cleanliness, hygiene. Surprisingly she could get rid of her illness during this voyage. To keep herself busy during her travels she kept on jotting down details about the places she visited. As revealed by herself in the introduction, she wanted to provide details regarding Europe for the benefit of other travelers, which inspired her to write this book. This shows that the discipline of travel writing in Gujarati language was in a formative stage. Nandkunwarba was the first Gujarati women travel writer who traveled so extensively across continents in the nineteenth century. Her account gives an impression that she was very well exposed in the matters of cultures, languages, societies, geography, history etc. of the world outside. Her knowledge of English language and literature seems very sound from the kind of references she has mentioned in the text. She visited Oxford and Cambridge universities and very fondly remembers her meeting with Max Muller, Sir Monier Williams and Sir William Hunter. She is highly ambivalent throughout her travelogue; appreciative as well as critical of the land she visited, which is found in many of the nineteenth century Gujarati travelers. Like any other Gujarati nineteenth century traveler, she keeps on comparing nations, society, people, customs, traditions, conducts etc. Notwithstanding, she is not critical about the presence of British in India. One of the reasons could be she herself belongs to a kingly state and so doesn't feel like commenting on such crucial issue. On the contrary, she does not find anything wrong in India being ruled by a superior nation like England. Moreover, on her visit to Scotland she was awarded the honor of C.I. by the Queen Victoria herself. She was equally influenced and affected by the colonialism like her contemporaries, Karsandas Mulji and Mahipatram Nilkanth and so considered nothing wrong in appreciating the then British rule in India. But at the same time she is reminded of the great heritage of her own country and feels that Hindustan should awake from a long sleep.

The sheer diversity of these earliest Gujarati travelogues resists simple categorization. The search for self expression and the reformulation for identity are common elements in the travel writing of nineteenth century. There is no way that women travel writing can be differentiated from that of male writers, though a few exceptions could be the difference in emphasis or in selection of material etc. The act seeing or the 'gaze' in all these travel account makes the inquiry more fascinating. It is equally important to note that not all the writings by these travelers were intended from the outset for publication. Surprisingly, England was not at all an unfamiliar world to the educated Indians in general and travelers to England in particular. They had before them quite elaborate knowledge of English life, history, politics and culture which was made accessible to them through the well designed English education system. And so these travelogues incorporated quite naturally and inevitably the discourse of imperialism and nationalism. However, that is the reason how they differ in their style of narrative from traditional travel accounts. In such given context, they no longer remain an act of apolitical and innocent exploration of unknown. Rather it becomes an act of introspection and leads to contemplation.

References

- Ghose, Indira. *Women Travelers in Colonial India: The Power of the Female Gaze*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Foucault, Michel. 'Prison Talk', in C. Gordon ed., *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interview and Other Writings 1972-1977* Michael Foucault. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980.
- Fussell, Paul. *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between the Wars*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.
- Mulji Karsandas (1866). *England maan Pravaas*. Gandhinagar: Gujarat Sahitya Academy, 2001.
- Nilkanth, Mahipatram R. *England ni Musafiri nun Varnan*. 1864. Gandhinagar: Gujarat Sahitya Academy, sixth ed., 1998.
- Nandkunwarba. 1902 *Gomandal Parikram*. (Reprint) Gandhinagar: Gujarat Sahitya Akedemi.
- Suleri, Sara. *The Rhetoric of English India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.