

## **4. Unveiling Tradition: A Cultural Exploration of Chennai in *Tamarind City: Where Modern India Began* by Bishwanath Ghosh**

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### **Abstract:**

*The literary genre of travel writing focuses on documenting travel experiences and accounts of individuals. These accounts provide insight into various cities and countries, allowing readers to become acquainted with different cultures, behavior, and living conditions. Travel writing has been created for countless years. India, with its diverse cultures, languages, and culinary traditions, has consistently been a popular destination for travel enthusiasts both in India and abroad. Travel writing frequently presents the destination's culture through the viewpoint of the traveler. This paper makes an effort to examine how a travelogue uses cultural translation. The book *Tamarind City: Where Modern India Began* by Bishwanath Ghosh, which describes his experiences as an outsider in Madras, serves as the basis for the analysis. The fact that not many writers have written in-depth about Madras (Chennai), one of the oldest cities in India, is one of the main reasons this text was chosen. The travelogue differs from others, which are primarily accounts of fleeting trips, in that it chronicles the changes a city undergoes due to the author's nearly ten-year residence there. The well-known travel reviewer Mary Campell has gone into detail on the primary concerns that tourists have when they visit a strange country. As a result, it symbolizes not just the shifting times but also the intra-cultural shifts that occurred in a city with a rich past in addition to the socio-political and demographic shifts.*

### **Keywords:**

*Cultural Exploration, Travel Writing, Madras City.*

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#### **4.1 Introduction:**

Travel writing has emerged as a fascinating topic of literary study in recent years. Despite its popularity among anthropologists, cultural studies, and literary scholars, the genre itself is characterized by writing that, according to travel critic Mary Baine Campbell (2002), Provokes certain kinds of essential literary questions and formulations.

Most interesting here are works of literary criticism that find themselves directly facing issues of power, knowledge, and identity as a consequence of the very nature of the formal matters raised. Formal issues that have been fully explored with relation to travel writing in recent decades include the nature and function of the stereotype, lexical matters such as the hidden etymologies,...the subjective presence of the author(s) in texts of knowledge, truth value in narrative writing, the independent or hard-wired shape of narrative itself, the rhetorical nature of 'fact', 'identification' in reading (with its consequences in social and political life), the representation of time, inter-cultural 'translation' and the function of metaphor and other figures.(P.263).

The process of cultural translation involves the transfer of culture. To comprehend cultural translation, one must get familiar with the definition of "culture". John Storey defines culture as "shared meanings we make and encounter in our everyday lives...the practices and processes of making meanings with and from the 'texts' that encounter in our everyday lives," (page 221). Raymond Williams, a well-known theorist, describes culture as commonplace and a way of living. Three definitions of culture are presented by him: the lived culture, the recorded culture, the time culture, and the selective tradition culture.

Translation into another culture and cultural studies go hand in hand. Cultural Studies is a critical discipline that aims to understand how culture functions in the contemporary world, how cultural productions are made, and how cultural identities are formed. Nonetheless, critic Chris Barker believes that the field of cultural studies investigates the creation and instillation of culture and those cultural studies, it is a linguistic game. (Barker.2012)

From the foregoing, it is clear that cultural translation encompasses both the concept transfer from one culture to another as well as the linguistic translation of one text to another. Homi K.Bhabha(1994), The function of cultural translation is explained in *The Location of Culture*, a highly regarded book authored by him. –

“Cultural translation desacralizes the transparent assumptions of cultural supremacy, and in that very act, demands a contextual specificity, a historical differentiation within minority positions”. (P.327)

One way to convey culture is through travel writing, where the writer records and interprets their real experiences into a travelogue. Travel writing has become increasingly popular and widely embraced over the years. Critic Roy Bridges emphasizes the significance of travel writing as a genre. The critic Roy Bridges (2002) emphasizes the significance of travel writing as a genre with the following statements:

Travel writing...has a complex relationship with the situations in which it arose. It is taken to mean a discourse designed to describe and interpret for its readers a geographical area together with its natural attributes and its human society and culture. Travel writing may embrace approaches ranging from an exposition of the results of scientific exploration claiming to be objective and value-free to the frankly subjective description of the impact of an area and its people on the writer’s sensibilities. (P.53)

The main goal of a travelogue is to immerse in and record the culture of a specific region. Through detailed and vivid descriptions, the writer uses the travelogue as a tool to introduce readers to new places and provide insight into the culture of the area. By doing so, the writer helps readers who are unfamiliar with the location, its people, and their culture to understand and appreciate them. The scholar defines culture as "the way of life or the ordinary life" (P.54) according to Raymond Williams.

Analyzing travelogues could provide valuable insights into the challenges of translating cultural nuances between different identities. Examining a specific travelogue, *Tamarind City: Where Modern India*, offers an opportunity to closely evaluate the complexities involved. This study will adopt an analytical approach, focusing on the Indian travelogue by Bishwanath Ghosh, which provides a detailed account of his experiences and observations while living in Chennai (formerly known as Madras) and delving into the city's life and culture. Boris Buden (2006) provides an interesting perspective on Cultural translation. According to him, it is worth noting that “the purpose of translation is not to facilitate the communication between two different languages and cultures, but to build one’s own language...” (Buden 2006)

Bishwanath Ghosh, a well-regarded Indian travel writer and journalist, has authored three travelogues: "Chai Chai: Travels in Places Where You Stop But Never Get Off" (2009), "Tamarind City: Where Modern India Began" (2012), and "Longing, Belonging: An Outsider at Home in Calcutta" (2014). "Tamarind City" provides the author's insights into Chennai, a city that has become like a second home to him. The book is a product of Ghosh's extensive efforts and astute observations as he sought to comprehend a new city with a rich tapestry of cultural differences from his previous place of residence. In an interview on his blog, Ghosh explained that his goal was to clear misconceptions about Chennai, which despite being founded in 1640, is often misunderstood, and he achieved this by presenting the city in the form of a travelogue.

Many travel writers, whether from the East or the West, have displayed less enthusiasm for documenting the Southern region of India in comparison to the Northern part. Ghosh, in his author's note, starts with a disclaimer. "This book, however, does not pretend to be an exhaustive or authoritative study of Chennai or Tamil culture. It is born purely out of my desire to understand a city I've called home for over a decade now".

The writer reveals different aspects of the lives of individuals in Chennai. In this travel journal, the author captures the unique culture of Madras by skillfully presenting a mix of historical, geographical, artistic, and cultural aspects. Culture represents the fundamental way of life, and travel literature presents a comprehensive examination of the daily routines and customs of a community residing in a specific environment.

When it comes to understanding culture, a significant issue is the biased ideas about a specific location and the stereotypes linked with it. Bhabha (1994) discusses this in his work. *The Location of Culture*, defines a stereotype- "...the stereotype...is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated". (p.94-95)

Many travelogues suffer from the issue of presenting stereotypical and biased assumptions and descriptions of a specific place and its people. Often, these travelogues are based on the author's secondhand experiences and not on actual visits to the place.

For example, Western travel writers frequently arrive in India with preconceived notions and stereotypical images, only to be surprised by the reality of their experiences. This is evident in the travelogue "Butter Chicken in Ludhiana: Travels in Small Town India" by Indian travel writer Pankaj Mishra (1995). In this work, Mishra highlights a Westerner's perception of the Indian city Benares.

I suppose the shock was greater because of that, [happening in Benares] and also because we had just come up from the South where we had faced absolutely no problems at all...I think it also has something to do with the present moment, with how people treat each other in daily life, civic manners, a certain basic decency towards women, older people, and if you take that criterion, Benares comes right at the bottom of all Indian cities we visited (p.211-12).

For centuries, India has been subjected to various stereotypes. It is often portrayed as a land abundant with spices and riches while also being associated with poverty and lack of development. According to Donald F. Lach (1968), India was perceived as a land of great wealth and home to dark-skinned inhabitants who were believed to be immune to diseases and possessed mystical abilities in the popular perception.

India is home to a variety of cultures and languages, with hundreds of ethnic groups preserving unique practices. The country's cultural diversity often leads to misconceptions and stereotypes among its residents.

In the prologue of the book "Tamarind City Where Modern India Began," travel writer Bishwanath Ghosh (2012) illustrates a stereotypical perspective expressed by a fellow North Indian passenger while traveling to Chennai by train.

“Do you live in Chennai? I asked him. It had been hours since I had spoken to anyone.

He recoiled in mock horror at my question. Then, slapping his palms together, burst outlaughing.

‘Chennai main rehkar marna hai kya?’ he asked. ‘Do you think I’m crazy to be living in a place like Chennai?’

His body was still shaking with mirth”. (p.xiii)

Because of stereotypical beliefs, North Indians often stereotype all South Indians as Madrasis, similar to how Americans stereotype Indians as people who smell of curry. In the prologue of his 2012 book, the author clearly addresses this issue.

The lay north Indian has known very little about Chennai except that it is inhabited by conservative and religious people called Madrasis who live on idli and dosa. There was no need to know more. The south, for the north, was always the back of beyond. People from the south came to the north in large numbers to work. But there was no movement in the reverse direction...(p.xxv)

The uniqueness of India stems from the amalgamation of diverse traditions and cultural practices, giving each state its own distinct identity. As a result, misinterpretations and apathy can arise among the general population.

In his writing about a city in South India, Bishwanath Ghosh has managed to challenge the stereotypical view often held by North Indians. By residing in Chennai and dedicating ample time to understanding the locals and delving into the city's history and the forces driving change, Ghosh familiarizes readers with the unique culture of the city. However, his stereotypical views on Tamil culture and his tendency to look down on the people in this travelogue are readily apparent to South Indian readers.

“Even today, it is common to see Brahmin men, no matter where they work or what positions they hold, wearing the caste mark on their foreheads-the general exceptions being those who have had a liberal upbringing outside Tamil Nadu or have grown up in anglicized homes” (Ghosh 61) The travel writer has misrepresented Tamilians by suggesting that wearing a caste mark on the forehead is exclusive to Brahmin men. This practice is not confined to a specific caste and is now a personal choice for individuals. Some people choose to wear the mark, while others do not. It would have been more appropriate for the writer to present this in a way that does not associate it with a specific caste.

The researcher's analysis indicates that the writer, being an outsider, filters his observations through his own perspective. In his book published in 2012, Ghosh attempts to mock certain Tamil practices rather than objectively presenting them. For instance, he conveys a portrayal of a Tamil girl going to the gym as follows-

There is a plump woman I run into every afternoon...On the treadmill, she walks like a toddler practicing her first steps.

The jasmine retains its freshness, she her weight...Apart from me, no one, not even her trainer, seems to find her attire or attitude out of place. (p. 59-60)

The final statement should be taken into account. The writer is unsettled by the sight of a Tamil woman dressed traditionally. In a different situation, he mocks an elderly Brahmin woman he encounters at a music festival at Parthasarathy temple. He quotes- “‘I am Mrs.Parthasarathy’, she replies. The name suits the setting. That’s not even her name, but her husband’s. It’s the nameshe wants society to know her by”. (p.265). The author's remark comes across as somewhat insensitive. Being Indian, he should be aware that the tradition of women using their husband's name stems from the colonial period. Additionally, in other parts of India, women adopt their husband's caste name and are referred to as 'Mrs. Gupta,' 'Mrs. Sharma,' and so on.

Travelogues often serve as carriers of culture and involve cultural translation when documenting the socio-historical and cultural aspects of a specific location. One significant challenge in cultural translation when exploring culture is the author's subjective viewpoint, which is a prominent feature of travelogues. A considerable portion of a travelogue is dedicated to the writer's personal experiences and observations during their travels in a particular country, and the element of subjectivity is unavoidable unless the author chooses to approach it differently.

“If all travel involves an encounter between self and other that is brought about by movement through space, all travel writing is at some level a record or product of this encounter, and of the negotiation between similarity and difference that is entailed”. (Thompson.p. 10)

The travel critic Carl Thompson (2011) points out that subjectivity inevitably influences any travelogue. Generally, travel writers portray various social, political, cultural, and geographical aspects of the places they visit and explore. In doing so, the author presents their perspectives on the visited land and endeavors to introduce the readers to the new culture. Subjectivity might cause the author to overlook certain aspects of the new place, while also leading the writer to overly emphasize specific areas that captured their interest during the journey, potentially disregarding whether it might become repetitive or bore the readers. In such instances, the travel narrative resembles more of a diary entry, where the writer observes everything and records them in a very personal manner.

Ghosh has a special fondness for the children's magazine Chandamama and an early fascination with the artist Sankar, known for illustrating the popular '*Tales of King Vikram and Vetala*' series, which is why he dedicates an entire chapter in his travelogue to this titled 'Chandamama and Madras Miscellany' (196). The author shares memories from his childhood, explaining why he was drawn to the magazine and detailing his efforts to locate and engage in conversations with Sankar. He provides vivid descriptions of Sankar and their interactions.

But there is one employee of Chandamama who has remained immune to change. His life remains just the way it was in 1952, when he joined the magazine as an artist. Today, Sankar is eighty-seven but he continues to draw pictures depicting the timeless era of the gods and the goddesses, the kings and the queens...for some inexplicable reason, I had always imagined Sankar to be tall, dark, lean, shy and withdrawn. But the Sankar I am meeting now turns out to be good-natured and garrulous in a very childlike way-he is very much the brand ambassador of the innocent era he portrays in his sketches. (p.203-04)

Then, Ghosh details Sankar's biography in a thorough manner. He begins, "Sankar, or K.C. Sivasankaran, was born in 1924 in a village called Karatholuvu near Coimbatore. His father was a teacher in the local school..." (p.205) Bishwanath Ghosh may have overlooked his main responsibility as a travel writer and veered off from his central topic. This shift can be attributed to the author's subjective viewpoint.

In his travel writing, Bishwanath Ghosh demonstrates a strong fascination with chronicling the historical evolution of Madras city and the transformations it has experienced over the years.

Even First Line Beach, the most vital road of Madras in the early colonial era, with the harbor on one side and the all-important public buildings on the other, appears deserted in 1910 photograph. As if it is under curfew. Today the same road, renamed Rajaji Salai, is as much a nightmare for the motorist as the pedestrian. If any place in the city remains as unpopulated as it was a century ago, it is perhaps the sea. (p.25-26)

"Translation is a kind of activity which inevitably involves at least two languages and two cultural traditions" (Toury 200). Ghosh's exploration of Chennai's culture in the travelogue is praiseworthy, as he strives to convey the city's uniqueness to readers by highlighting specific distinguishing features.



Bishwanath Ghosh also draws parallels between certain cultural aspects of the city and those of his own land. Nevertheless, he acknowledges the potential for inaccuracy in the comparisons he makes. This point is highlighted in the ensuing paragraph.

The music season in Chennai is lot like Durga Puja in Kolkata, though far less boisterous and held on a much smaller scale. But the similarities are striking. The rasikas, or the lovers of music, like to sabha-hop, just like Bengalis pandal-hop. It is also during the music season that the traditional Tamil Brahmin, not very adventurous when it comes to food, loves to eat in the sabha canteen, just as the Bengali loves to eat at the stalls in various puja pandals...And of course, the sarees worn are expensive. Both events are crucial to the culture of their people and an assertion of their identities. A Tamil Brahmin girl who has never been to a music class is as good as a Bengali girl who has never seen a puja pandal. The comparison may not be entirely appropriate, but not entirely inappropriate either. (p.263.)

The author becomes intrigued by discovering something fresh within a familiar culture in a separate occasion

...I hear the Hanuman Chaalisa playing in one of the nearby shops. Now, I've grown up in Kanpur listening to the Hanuman Chaalisa, live as well as in the recorded form, but never before had I heard a woman sing it, that too in a voice so powerful and persuasive that I slip my sandals back on and walk into the shop. I ask the shopkeeper to show me the CD he is playing. The singer turns out to be M.S.Subbulakshmi. (p.127.)

The language barrier poses another challenge in the cultural translation process. Understanding cultural traditions in a foreign land can be hindered by language constraints for travel writers. Failure to comprehend a new culture during travel can be attributed to linguistic constraints for the writer.

In India, there is also diversity in languages, which makes it challenging for someone who doesn't speak Tamil to fully grasp the cultural subtleties in Chennai. According to Bhabha (1994),

The 'language' metaphor raises the question of cultural difference and incommensurability, not the consensual, ethnocentric notion of the pluralistic existence of cultural diversity... It represents the temporality of cultural meaning as 'multi-accultural', 'discursively rearticulated'.

It is a time of the cultural sign that unsettles the liberal ethic of tolerance and the pluralist framework of multiculturalism. Increasingly, the issue of cultural difference emerges at points of social crisis, and the questions of identity that it raises are agonistic; identity is claimed either from a position of marginality or in an attempt at gaining the centre: in both senses, ex-centric. (p.254.)

Ghosh reflects on the etymological origins of the city's name as he seeks to uncover its true identity, considering the differences between Chennapatnam and Madraspatnam.

About Madraspatnam, the most plausible theory is that the name derives from the wealthy Madeiros family that lived in the nearby Portuguese settlement of San Thome. Chennapatnam, on the other hand, is widely believed to have taken its name from Chennappa-the father of Darmala Venkatappa, the local governor of the Vijayanagar Empire who had granted the strip of land to Francis Day to build Fort St George. Venkatappa was supposedly keen that the new settlement be named after his father. (p.24.)

Despite the city's name, he makes an effort to comprehend the emotional depth of the traditional South-Indian musical art form. Ghosh expresses his thoughts-

So, what does the word 'Carnatic' mean?

No one seems to be very sure. History will tell you that a particular region in south India – represented today pretty much by the map of present-day Tamil Nadu-was called the Carnatic. But why was it called so? According to Sriram, the word derives from karna (the ear) and ata(to haunt).

The travelogue sets itself apart from others that primarily document fleeting journeys by chronicling the evolution of a city over nearly ten years of the author's residency. As a result, it not only reflects the shifting times but also captures the changes within the culture. In this regard, Ghosh draws parallels between the city and other major urban centers in India and provides commentary.

It's the marriage between tradition and transformation that makes Chennai unique. In a place like Delhi, you'll have to hunt for tradition. In Kolkata, you'll itch for transformation. Mumbai is only about transformation. It is Chennai alone that firmly holds its customs close to the chest, as if it were a box of priceless jewels handed down by ancestors, even as the city embraces change. (p. xxvii.)

The theme of tradition versus modernity is examined in this passage by comparing four Indian cities—Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai, and Chennai. The author contrasts these cities to emphasize their different approaches to tradition and change. Delhi is portrayed as a place where tradition needs to be actively sought out, indicating its subtle or diminished presence amid rapid change. Kolkata is burdened by an excessive reliance on tradition, leading to a desire for transformation that symbolizes stagnation. In contrast, Mumbai represents unyielding modernization, seemingly discarding tradition in favor of progress. However, Chennai stands out as a city that adeptly balances tradition and change.

Tradition is figuratively described as "a box of priceless jewels handed down by ancestors," highlighting its significant value, fragility, and the need for preservation. This metaphor emphasizes that tradition is not merely a relic of the past but a cherished inheritance. Additionally, Chennai is personified as holding its customs "close to the chest," conveying a deliberate effort and emotional attachment in safeguarding its heritage.

The passage reflects a broader cultural commentary on how Indian cities confront modernization. Delhi and Kolkata are depicted as grappling with extremes, while Mumbai has fully embraced global modernity. Chennai emerges as a model of balance, where tradition is respected without hindering progress. Through this exploration, the author emphasizes that while transformation is unavoidable, it can coexist with the conservation of cultural identity, making Chennai unique in its ability to unite tradition with modernity.

In summary, it is fitting to say that travel writers document their journeys so that others can relive and review the experiences they have had. They portray the cultural differences of a region through its language, cuisine, politics, and the way of life of its inhabitants. It is crucial for a travel writer to overcome cultural barriers and enable others to immerse themselves in the new culture by breaking down every barrier, thus gaining exposure to an entirely new place and culture. To achieve this, the writer must approach the travel destination without any preconceived notions or reservations about the place to be visited.

During an in-depth analysis conducted as part of the research, the scholar sought to gain insights into the cultural elements and storytelling techniques employed by the author. The examination of the formal issues, as outlined by Mary Campbell, revealed several challenges in interpreting Ghosh's personal travel encounters, including prejudices and stereotypical perceptions of a location, the author's

subjectivity, and language barriers encountered during the storytelling process. Despite these challenges, Ghosh's identity as a journalist facilitated his engagement with the local community, enabling him to delve into the culture of Madras by gathering first-hand information through informal conversations, observations, and personal interviews.

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