



# The Postcolonial Itinerary: Mapping India in Contemporary Indian Travel Narratives

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**Abstract:** This article explores the history and evolution of travel writing as a literary genre, with a focus on the contemporary Indian context. It registers contemporary Indian writers like Pankaj Mishra, Pradeep Damodaran and Bishwanath Ghosh, who have diversified the genre by documenting small towns, adopting unconventional modes of travel, and weaving in postcolonial themes of identity and belonging. Among these emerging trends, there has been a growing engagement with contested geographies, including the Indian borders. This study on contemporary Indian travel writing looks at the alternative forms to represent the nation by addressing its neglected interior spaces and geopolitically sensitive peripheries. In doing so, it not only broadens the geographical scope of Indian travel literature but also contributes to larger conversations about the redefinition of borders. In essence, this study attempts to map the emergence of travel narratives which reconstruct the idea of India not through its celebrated landmarks, but through intimate encounters with its overlooked people and places.

**Keywords:** Travel writing, Indian border travelogue, small town narrative, postcolonial identity, representation.

## Introduction to Contemporary Travel Writing

Travel writing is an interdisciplinary genre due to its associations with other disciplines such as history, geography, and anthropology. Sometimes, it also thematically overlaps with other literatures such as Partition Literature and Border Literature. While its interdisciplinary nature has enabled it to be explored from diverse contexts and perspectives, this very fluidity has arguably prevented travel writing from being firmly established as an independent genre, despite its origins tracing back to ancient times. In recent years, however, there has been a growing interest among readers and critics, highlighting the need to examine its significance more closely. In his book *Travel Writing: The New Critical Idiom* (2011), Carl Thompson, a prominent name in the genre of travel writing, has discussed how the genre was far from critical acclamation in most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and how it used to be treated as a *minor* genre of lesser importance. Thompson recalls the growth of the genre, stating:

*[T]ravel writing's reputation rose sharply in the latter part of the century [twentieth century], with the appearance of a new generation of critically acclaimed travel writers such as Paul Theroux, Bruce Chatwin, Ryszard Kapuscinski and Robyn Davidson. Also leading the way in this regard was the prestigious British literary journal Granta, which ran several travel-themed special issues in the 1980s and 1990s and thereby played a 'vital part in establishing ...travel writing as the popular literary form it has become.'* (*Travel Writing 2*)

Travel writing is woven through the threads of journeys, usually from a known and familiar geography to an unexplored one. The core essence of travel writing, irrespective of ancient or contemporary, lies in its attempt to

capture the meeting point between human differences – be it through language, culture, food, geography, history, and many more. The main crux in any travel writing, therefore, is its negotiations of such differences, and thereby, creating an enriched narrative of shared and contrasted experiences. Since its emergence travel writing has continuously shaped and reshaped itself as a genre and therefore, certain distinctions in terms of form, style and content are obvious between the early writings and the newer ones. In fact, there is a noticeable shift in why and where people travel today. Increasingly, modern travel writers are drawn to places which are often absent from mainstream travel itineraries. This shift is also marked by an anthropological sensibility, with many writers turning their attention to underrepresented communities and regions.

Contemporary travel writing goes beyond mere geographic documentation of places, inviting readers to engage with travel narratives centred on people, culture, and identity. This shift marks a departure from the genre's traditional romanticized association with adventure, evolving instead toward a form of writing that aligns with what Richard Phillips has termed as *counter-travel* narrative in his book *Mapping Man and Empire: A Geography of Adventure* (1997). Counter-travel writing challenges the traditional representations of places and people and opens possibilities for further exploring into what is usually known as familiar. This reorientation underscores the genre's critical engagement with broader sociocultural and political discourses, challenging conventional frameworks and expanding its academic relevance. From the simple recounting of travel experiences from one location to another, contemporary travel writing across the globe has evolved to address significant issues. In an interview titled "The Best Travel Writing," travel writer Colin Thubron made the following observation regarding the purpose of a travel book:

*It's about building experiences. It's not the intellectual understanding about the subject, it's the emotional experience of it. Experience not of any specific aspect of culture, but a bit of everything. So, you get history, landscapes, chance conversations with people- a smell in the back of a train, the way people feel about their lives, even in some trivial fashion, plus a chunk of more serious politics. (par. 13)*

In its engagement with geopolitically isolated and contested spaces in particular, Indian travel writing has started engaging with such “chunk of more serious politics” (“The Best Travel Writing” par. 13). Therefore, more and more writings are emerging from spaces such as the country’s North-East, borders and islands. And in addition, the contemporary Indian travel writers purposefully select locations that demand critical engagement. Rather than focusing on well-known landmarks dominated by tourist activity, the contemporary Indian travel writings choose to explore remote peripheries such as the international border spaces. The aim of these works is not merely to document landscapes, but to engage with the lived realities of the communities they encounter in the travelled destinations. Through such engagement, these travelogues address underrepresented and overlooked aspects of travel locations. Our paper attempts to chart these Indian travel narratives, more specifically narratives that are: a) new in modes of representation and b) engaged with geopolitical significance and complexities of the places travelled. These writings move beyond mere geographical exploration, focusing instead on the lives, voices, and lived experiences of the people who inhabit these spaces.

## Indian Travel Writing: A Chronology

Travel writing emerged as an independent genre only in recent centuries without dismissing long existed accounts of travel within other established literary forms. Reflecting the reality that human history itself is a chronicle of movement, it is no wonder that glimpses of such movements can be seen since ancient literatures. The ancient Indian epics, for example, contain significant references of travel accounts in different forms such as *digvijayas*, and *vanavasa* among others<sup>1</sup>. In the *Mahabharata*, references to *digvijaya* are notably present in the narratives of Karna, Arjuna, and Pandu for example, where these characters embark on journeys that not only denote to their conquests but also provide glimpses of cultural and geographical landscapes of the time. Similarly, in *Ramayana*, the extended journey of Rama during his exile to forest (*vanavasa*) provides a substantial narrative of travel, which though forced, becomes an important game changer in the epic. In both these ancient epics, travels contribute significantly to the literary tradition of journey narratives in ancient India. One can therefore argue that India had a convincing start in travelling and also in the writings about it. In her essay titled “Indian Travel Writing,” Supriya Chaudhuri (2019) traces the chronology of Indian travel writing from the holy Indian scriptures to the periods when writings were shaped by power hierarchy. Chaudhuri states, “Travel writing from this region, in the twenty-two listed languages of the Indian constitution as well as in the Persian and English, the Mughal and British ‘languages of power’, constitutes a complex, many layered archive” (p. 159). The reference to the Mughal and the British is indicative of that power structure that reshaped the literary representation.

The formation of the East-India Company in the year 1600 resulted in the arrivals of the British administrators and travellers. Their works such as Thomas Mun’s *A Discourse of*

*Trade to the East- Indies* (1930), Edward Terry's *A Voyage to East India* (2018), Thomas Bowrey's *A Geographical Account of Countries Round the Bay of Bengal 1669 to 1679* (1993), and Alexander Hamilton's *A New Account to the East Indies* (2013) are examples of travel writings written from a more political approach than literary perspective. Alongside, western scholars began documenting the people, culture and place of India, often framing their writings within anthropological and sociological contexts. Pramod K Nayar (2005) reviews the works of the above early English travellers in his essay "Marvellous Excesses: English Travel Writing in India, 1608-1727." While Nayar restrains himself from bracketing the East India Company (EIC) travellers of 1600-1750 as "colonial", he simultaneously believes that "the travelogues of this period embody themes that anticipate and prepare for the overt colonialist writings of the post-Plassey (1757) phase" (p.214). Works such as Nayar's are attempts to underline the colonial undertone embedded in the apparently "travel texts" of earlier times.

The earlier notable Indian travelogues, emerging in the nineteenth century, offer complex narratives shaped by the colonial encounter. The article titled "An Indian Experience of Colonial and Indian Exhibition: T.N. Mukherji's *A Visit to Europe*" (2022), by Hussain Ahmad Khan and Hassaan Ahmad Usmani, deals with the idea that Indians who were part of the British administrations, were not passive participants in the game of Empire. The work revolves around Troilokyanath Mukhopadhyay's famous travelogue titled *A Visit to Europe* (1889). The representative stance of such Eastern writers in the colonial period is mentioned this way:

*T.N. Mukherji's travelogue reveals an ambivalent tension in the elite Indians like him. They supported the empire and their status as western-educated reforming Indians but at the same time,*

*they also challenged assertions of Indian difference. For example, Mukherji comments in his travelogue: “we were never natives before”, but “we are all natives now — We poor Indians” .... We can also see that despite being among the people who were organizing the conference, he still identifies with the Indians to some extent by using the word “we.” (Khan and Usmani)*

In another article titled “When the clown laughs back: Nabaneeta Dev Sen’s global travel and the dynamics of humour” (2014), Swaralipi Nandi has analysed Mukhopadhyay as somebody who was overwhelmed by the European supremacy. Mukhopadhyay, writing during a period when the colonial power dynamics heavily influenced perceptions, expressed overt admiration for Western modernity while critiquing the East for its contrasts and failings. This alignment with Western ideals somehow upheld the narrative of European superiority, a perspective shaped by the imperial context of his time. However, this is not to dismiss his contemporary Indian writers who made a significant impact by offering authentic perspectives on the nuances and richness of their Eastern cultures. One good example is the work by Rabindranath Tagore titled *Europe Prabashir Patra (Letters from an Expatriate in Europe)* (1888).

Later in the mid-twentieth-century, Nirad C. Chaudhuri’s travel narrative, *A Passage to England* (1960) reflects an ambivalent stance. While still admiring certain aspects of the West, his critique of Western cultural and societal practices reveals a growing confidence among Eastern writers to challenge Eurocentric paradigms. Works like R. K. Narayan’s *The Emerald Route: Passage Through Karnataka* (1980) and much later, Nabaneeta Dev Sen’s *Dr Dev Sen’s Bidesh Yatra*

(1996), can also be mentioned along the same line. Collectively their works illustrate a shift from passive admiration to a more assertive engagement with the West's flaws, signalling the gradual emergence of postcolonial resistance in travel literature. These works not only showcased personal travel experiences but also critiqued colonial legacies, providing readers with nuanced views of India's history, landscapes, and social issues, thus reshaping and empowering the genre of Indian travel writing.

This has been possible with Simultaneous emergence of works such as Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) and Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989). With such works, the genre of travel writing noticed a significant subversion. The agency of "representation" gradually shifted to the East from the West. This shift was a highly significant development, particularly in the context of postcolonial literature. This change in perspective empowered authors from formerly colonized regions to reclaim control over their own narratives and counter the often distorted or stereotypical portrayals.

## **New Forms of Representation**

The postcolonial mode of travel writing has evolved further and now the genre has welcomed significantly new approaches from different perspectives with a contemporary body of Indian travel writers such as Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Pankaj Mishra, Bishwanath Ghosh, Samanth Subramanian, Nandita Haksar, Monisha Rajesh, and Pradeep Damodaran. These writers provide a more nuanced, reflective, and introspective form of travel writing. A striking feature of contemporary travel writing is the deliberate effort to un-map the already 'mapped' (identified and hence familiarised)

territories. These writers aim to unsettle conventional notions of place by challenging the stereotypical representations of regions, cultures, and people. They leave readers in a state of wonder about their ignorance of places and their inhabitants, even though these places share the same national framework. There is also a tendency among these writers to select offbeat places and unconventional locations as their focal points, transforming these locations into meaningful destinations by offering insights into the cultural and social fabric of the region. In the introductory section of the book *The Great Railway Bazaar* (1975), popular travel writer Paul Theroux shares a similar idea: “[Travel] It had to be total immersion, a long deliberate trip through the hinterland rather than flying from one big city to another, which didn’t seem to me to be travel at all. The travel books I liked were oddities, not only Greene and Trollope, but Henry Miller’s *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (across America, coast to coast by car), and Mark Twain’s *Following the Equator* (lecture tours around the world)” (VI, Introduction).

Theroux’s idea of travelling “through the hinterland” has resemblance in Bishwanath Ghosh’s *Chai, Chai: Travels in Places Where You Stop but Never Get Off* (2009). The book redefines the conventional boundaries of travel writing by shifting the focus from celebrated destinations to overlooked transit towns such as Itarsi, Mughal Sarai, and other railway junctions across India. Rather than treating these spaces merely as points of transit, Ghosh delves into the lives, histories, and landscapes that lie beyond the station platforms. His narrative challenges dominant notions of travel by foregrounding unconventionally appealing locations typically passed through but rarely paused at or explored. This approach subverts the traditional itinerary of a traveller, emphasizing that meaningful encounters and rich cultural experiences often reside in the most unassuming, bypassed locations. By transforming these nondescript junctions into

sites of curiosity and reflection, Ghosh invites readers to reconsider the very idea of what qualifies as a travel destination:

*Why not, then, get off at these junctions for a change, and wander out of the station yard into the towns and listen to the stories they might be wanting you to tell — instead of just standing on the platform and looking out for the man calling, ‘Chai! Chai!’ (Chai, Chai 6)*

The title of his travelogue, *Chai, Chai*, carries a deeply evocative resonance within the Indian cultural and spatial landscape, particularly in the context of railway travel. The repetitive call of “*chai, chai*” by tea vendors at crowded junctions such as Itarsi or Mughal Sarai is an instantly recognizable soundscape for any Indian traveller — a symbol of movement, pause, and shared public experience. In the article titled, “Journeying through the Indian Railways in Around India in 80 Trains (2012) by Monisha Rajesh and Chai, Chai: Travels in Places Where You Stop but Get Never Off (2009) by Bishwanath Ghosh” (2020), Siddarth Dubey echoes a similar thought on train-travel:

*An Indian train is a space that exemplifies a true sense of transient cultural pattern as it travels through different states of India constantly assimilating people of diverse cultures. The incessant accommodation of people of varied stature, class, sex, age, gender and race and refreshing it with “halts,” the train is always in the state of ‘becoming.’ An Indian train is an accurate exemplar of this liminal space. It inhabits individuals carrying unique identity settings, acclimatized to their respective cultural design, and gives them a space in motion, to not just*

*interact with one another inside the train but also  
record the change in external environment. (321)*

The implication of soundscape often adds an important dimension to narratives of travel. For example, Saroo Brierley's autobiography titled *A Long Way Home* (2013), based on his loss of homeland and identity, has significant references of sound from his Indian past that continue to haunt him in his adopted home in Australia. For Saroo, the faded voice of his mother calling out his name and his memory of railway whistles, act as auditory triggers that make him travel across time and space. Therefore, travel writing often reveals a profound interconnection with sound, as auditory memories shape emotional geographies and influence the traveller's sense of belonging. With the phrase "chai, chai," Ghosh also attempts to invoke something similar. The phrase reflects true essence of Indian railway culture and imbues his narrative with a distinctly local flavour. As he has stated in interviews on this particular work, his intention was to write a book on Indian travel, by an Indian, for Indian readers, focusing spaces that are rooted in lived, vernacular realities rather than exoticized destinations. *Chai, Chai* thus stands as both a literal and metaphorical entry point into the unexplored geographies of everyday India, where the ordinary becomes worthy of literary attention.

In *The Great Railway Bazaar*, Theroux champions for train travel as the most authentic and meaningful way to experience a journey. He writes: "trains seemed the happiest choice. You could do anything on a train; you could live your life and go long distances. There was little stress, there was sometimes comfort, and there was something romantic in the notion of boarding a train" (VII, Introduction). For Theroux, trains provide a unique setting for reflection, observation, and sincere interactions with people and places in addition to being an economical mode of transportation. This enduring fascination with train journeys is echoed decades later in

Monisha Rajesh's *Around the World in 80 Trains: A 45,000-Mile Adventure* (2019), where she also incorporates the rhythm and romance of train travel. This type of travel writing that focuses on the journey rather than the destinations adds a distinctive appeal to the genre. In her words, "To understand India, you have to see it, hear it, breathe it and feel it. Living through the good, the bad, the ugly is the only way to know where you fit in and where India fits into you... (18)."

In search of the good and the bad, emerging Indian travel writers not only experiment with the choice of travelling destinations but also with the means of transportation. Rajat Ubhaykar's *Truck de India: A Hitchhiker's Guide to Hindustan* (2019), for example, is an adventurous and insightful travelogue that chronicles the author's journey across India as a hitchhiker on long-haul trucks. Covering over 10,000 kilometres, Ubhaykar travels through diverse terrains, from bustling cities to remote highways, offering a rare glimpse into the lives of India's truck drivers. The book highlights their struggles, camaraderie, and resilience, while also shedding light on the infrastructure, culture, and quirks of India's transport network. In his review of *Truck De India*, Sudhirendar Sharma (2020) highlights truckers like Karnail, Raju, and Liaqat — men who are often stereotyped, yet vital to the economy and mobility of the country. This *highway travelogue* is a compelling narrative of an unplanned journey that reveals the struggles, humanity, and resilience of those who live life on the road. Blending humour, curiosity, and empathy, *Truck de India* thus captures the raw, unfiltered essence of life on India's roads, making it a distinctive addition to contemporary Indian travel writing. This distinctiveness is reflected in writers such as Pankaj Mishra, whose *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana: Travels in Small Town India: Travels in Small Town India* (1995) contributes to the genre by reorienting its emphasis from significant historical sites and exotic landscapes to the often-overlooked realities of

everyday India. In the travelogue, he chronicles the effects of consumerism and liberalisation on the middle class in India, depicting a country undergoing transition and grappling with the conflict between Western modernism and tradition. As a result, the book avoids being a romanticised description of travel and instead turns into a sociopolitical commentary.

Works such as *Truck De India* by Ubhaykar, *Around India in 80 Trains* by Rajesh, and *Chai, Chai and Butter Chicken in Ludhiana* by Ghosh and Mishra respectively, share a common thread – the authors' conscious and purposeful approach to travel. They are not aimless wanderers but writers who travel with thoughtful intention, driven by a responsibility to document overlooked realities and challenge dominant narratives. In *Chai, Chai*, Ghosh reimagines small railway towns like Mughal Sarai, often stereotyped only as a place of lawlessness, of *Goondas* (thugs), by capturing the mundane yet significant textures of everyday life. Similarly, Rajesh undertakes a Pan-Indian rail journey not merely for spectacle but to understand the country's diversity in its fullest expanse. This objective is echoed in Ubhaykar's decision to hitchhike across India with truck drivers, offering a grounded, insider view into a profession frequently misrepresented. His work challenges the prevailing stereotypes of truck drivers as reckless or sex-mongers by humanizing them through accounts of their daily struggles, long hours, and deep-rooted responsibility. Collectively, these writers contribute to alternative representations that resist reductionist or touristic portrayals.

The field of travel writing is still developing in a variety of ways, with travel itself serving as a vehicle for delving deeper into issues of identity, social change, and gender among others. This indicates that travel writing is now not only about moving through space; it is also about critical reflection and representation. Additionally, this expansion of the genre's focus has opened the door for more gendered stories that

emphasise subjectivity and personal agency in travel. Example can be Shivaya Nath who brings a refreshing perspective to the Indian travel narratives by infusing them with a woman's voice of freedom and courage. Her travelogue, *The Shooting Star: A Girl, Her Backpack and the World* (2018), redefines explorations through documenting her journey of self-discovery and fearless wandering across the globe. Briefly, the genre, often described as “ever evolving,” has significantly transformed from its early manifestations. It is thematically much diverse in the hands of the contemporary Indian travel writers. Yet, there are places and people located at some of the extreme boundary lines of the country which are yet to occupy a significant space in the existing body of Indian travel literature.

## **Border Travelogues: A Sub-Genre Within Travel Literature**

Contemporary border travelogues in general offer compelling narratives that reflect on the complex and often contradictory nature of borders. These works document personal journeys that not only explore the physical terrain of national boundaries but also go deeper into the abstract and symbolic power these borders hold in shaping identities, lives, and geopolitics. Erik Fatland's *The Border: A Journey Around Russia Through North Korea, China, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, Poland, Latvia, Estonia, Finland, Norway, and the Northeast Passage* (2021), for example, takes readers on a twenty-thousand-kilometre journey around the borders of Russia, posing fundamental questions about national identity and the reality of borders. Fatland observes that borders are “both very real and highly abstract” (2021), capturing the paradox of how physical lines on a map can shape entire populations, yet remain conceptual in their impact on individual lives. This

perception on national borders as both tangible and intangible resonates across other border travelogues across the globe, each reflecting unique yet interconnected themes. For example, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) touches upon the struggles of Indigenous people who live in a state of mapless existence, resisting the imposition of borders that seek to divide them. Silko's protagonists, scattered across America, grapple with the constant tension between their Indigenous identity and the imposed borders that shape their experiences. The novel illustrates how borders, though often denied or rejected by these communities, are still ever-present in their daily lives, particularly in their encounters with violence and systemic marginalization. This theme of Indigenous resistance to borders echoes the concerns raised in border travel narratives across the globe, where the consequences of these divisions are often felt in deeply personal ways. Similarly, Graciela Limon's *The River Flows North: A Novel* (2009) brings to light the dreadful experiences of Mexican and Central American migrants attempting to cross the U.S. border, risking their lives in search of a better future. Limon's work is a powerful attempt to restore dignity and identity to the countless individuals whose stories are reduced to headlines. By foregrounding the lived experiences of migrants, Limon humanizes the border, depicting it not merely as a geographical line but as a space fraught with both peril and hope. Her focus on the personal narratives of people living in border zones is emblematic of a broader trend in contemporary border travelogues, which aim to shed light on the often-overlooked lives of those caught in the crossfire of national divisions.

These global perspectives on borders align closely with the themes explored in what we term as *Indian border travelogues* as well. Indian border travelogues, such as those documenting the Indo-Pakistani or Indo-Bangladeshi borders, often ponder over the human suffering of these divides,

especially in areas where conflict and militarization are rife. Similar to the works of Fatland, Silko, and Limon, Indian border narratives also grapple with the border's dual nature: as both a physical space that separates people and an abstract concept that shapes their lives, identities, relationships and most importantly, destinies. These travelogues highlight the resilience of communities living in borderlands, who, despite enduring violence and displacement, continue to challenge the borders that seek to define them. In the corpus of contemporary Indian travel literature, specifically from the last two decades to now, there can be seen a distinctive presence of the less-explored smaller geographies of India. Even then when it comes to the representation of the specific area called the border, the non-fictions written in English are only a few in number.

Many contemporary non-fictional accounts on travel are purposefully anthropological in nature, aiming not just to describe places but to deeply engage with the people, cultures, and lived experiences encountered along the way. Anthropology, at its core, is the study of human societies, cultures, and their development — often grounded in immersive fieldwork, observation, and participation. Modern travel writers adopt similar methods, approaching travel as a way to understand social realities, especially in marginal or politically complex regions. This anthropological turn is reflected in academic works such as Chanda Asani's *Representing the Invisible: A Travelogue Merging Identities and Borders* (2015), Paula Banerjee and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury's *Women in Indian Borderlands* (2011) and Gorky Chakraborty and Supurna Banerjee's *Negotiating Borders and Borderlands: The Indian Experience* (2023). These texts, though scholarly in format, join travel writing with an attempt to capture life on the edges — where borders are not just lines on a map but lived realities. They focus on everyday struggles, identity formation, and survival in contested spaces, using

movement and observation as tools of inquiry. In doing so, they contribute to a form of travel literature that is grounded, empathetic, and politically aware, blurring the line between academic research and narrative storytelling. Another significant work along this line is “Time at Its Margins: Cattle Smuggling across the India-Bangladesh Border” (2012) by Malini Sur. Based on an ethnographic study of cattle smuggling across the border between India and Bangladesh, the article highlights the subtleties of economic survival, state aggression, and spatial temporalities that are crucial to the precarious existence of those residing in the border zones.

Apart from textual narratives, there has always been representations of borders in visual forms. Some of the commercial, mainstream Bollywood movies are centred around plots where borders have been instrumental in shaping the plots differently. Examples are: Anil Sharma’s *Gadar Ek Prem Katha* (translated as *Rebellion: A Love Story*), a 2001 film set against the backdrop of 1947 Partition of India, Yash Chopra’s 2004 film *Veer Zara*, a heart-rending love story of two individuals from India and Pakistan and Kabir Khan’s 2015 film *Bajrangi Bhaijaan*, a story of a lost Pakistani girl in India. All three visual narratives feature journeys that are deeply shaped by the presence and politics of borders. In each, travel is not simply a backdrop but a central motif that becomes fraught with restrictions, delays, and dangers due to the realities of cross-border tensions between India and Pakistan. These films portray movement as both a physical journey and an emotional struggle, where love and compassion confront bureaucratic obstacles and geopolitical divides. Whether it’s crossing the border during the Partition, navigating complex visa systems, or sending a child back home, the act of travel is continuously disrupted by the rigid structures of nation-states. Yet, each narrative transcends these barriers through themes of love, sacrifice, and empathy, suggesting that human connection can defy even the most

rigid boundaries and offering a powerful case for cross-border understanding and unity. Along the same line, Samarth Mahajan's well-researched documentary *Borderlands* (2021) can be cited as one of the latest critically acclaimed visual representations. The documentary assembles six individuals whose lives are defined by the personal and political borders across the South Asian subcontinent. A striking and significant contribution of the documentary is its vivid portrayal of the lives of women living in the fringes of India, as they navigate border-specific issues such as separation, displacement, trafficking, conflict, and fluid identities.

In line with the academic contributions of these writers and filmmakers, contemporary Indian travel writers such as Pradeep Damodaran, Bishwanath Ghosh, and Suchitra Vijayan also offer significant insights into border regions and marginal spaces. Through a more literary narrative form, their works engage deeply with themes of identity, belonging, and lived experience in these contested zones. While distinct in style and approach, these travel narratives contribute meaningfully to broader conversations about India's borders, complementing academic studies with richly textured, ground-level perspectives. All these writers have extensively documented unfamiliar and remotest Indian borders in the form of non-fictions, through books such as *Borderlands: Travels Across India's Boundary Lines* (2017), *Gazing at Neighbours: Travels Along the Lines that Partitioned India* (2017), and *Midnight's Borders: A People's History of Modern India* (2021). With the emergence of such books, the genre is also getting enriched with what can be termed "Border Travelogues". Shifting the focus from the much-discussed India-Pakistan international borders, these travelogues are involving the fluid, hard-to-be-distinguished border spaces that India shares with many other countries. Border travelogues are narratives that depict the fluid, everyday realities of living in borderlands, challenging the

inflexible view of boundaries as rigid geopolitical barriers. These texts provide light on the natural, cross-border exchanges that go against the official narratives of animosity and division and thereby, reshape the reader's perception of the international border spaces. For example, in *Gazing at Neighbours*, Bishwanath Ghosh reflects on his surprise upon witnessing preparations for Beating the Retreat ceremony at the Wagah-Attari border, a daily military ritual conducted by the Indian and Pakistani border forces, marked by elaborate drills, flag-lowering, and performative displays of national pride. Ghosh critically interprets the event as an expression of jingoistic nationalism, referring it as a form of *patriotourism* that prioritizes spectacle over substance. His observations suggest a disconnect between the orchestrated performance of national identity at the border and the reality that lies underneath:

‘Do you also practise with the Pakistanis?’

*‘Of course, we have to practise with them too. We spend hours practising together. If one of our boys gets a step wrong, they point it out; likewise, if someone among them gets a step wrong, we point it out. It is a coordinated exercise.’*

*Now that’s something most spectators do not realize: that the Indians and Pakistanis actually spend hours practising together to look like enemies at sunset. (157)*

Border travelogues highlight the tenacious lives of those who still live in these areas while exposing the historical traumas carved into the landscape by colonization, partition, and state violence. By doing this, they present an alternate national consciousness that acknowledges cultural continuity, resistance, and survival outside of bounds set by the state. This objective is clearly reflected in the introductory chapter of Vijayan’s *Midnight’s Borders*: “The more I travelled along

the border, the more I realised the books I had read were disconnected from the realities of the people I encountered. Local history and memory sometimes bore no resemblance to the political history I knew (19).”

This emerging sub-genre shifts the traditional focus of travel narratives from picturesque landscapes and cultural tourism to the socio-political realities of borderlands. Rather the focus of emerging travelogues on borders extends beyond the frequently discussed India-Pakistan boundary. More importantly, the representations offered in these narratives differ from those typically seen in mainstream media debates on border issues. The mainstream debates often tend to project the hostility between adjoining nations without addressing the basic needs of people located at the borderlands. Following the 2025 terror attack in Pahalgam, Kashmir, there could be seen dramatic headlines on mainstream TV channels over who is going to win if a war like situation emerges between India and Pakistan. This is not to dismiss simultaneous attempts to cover realities from the ground. For example, *Outlook* magazine’s forthcoming issue titled “Living on the Edge” (2025), shifts focus from cartographic representations of borders to the lived experiences of those residing at the nation’s margins. In these spaces, borders are not abstract lines but a persistent and often fraught reality — where ceasefires do not guarantee safety, and the threat of conflict looms without formal declarations of war. The issue foregrounds the everyday struggles, resilience, and uncertainties faced by communities for whom the border is not merely a geopolitical construct, but an enduring condition of life:

*Who gets to live in peace, and who is always on notice? Who owns a homeland when the homeland keeps moving? And what happens*

*when the state redraws boundaries without consent? (Par. 4)*

*“Life in these border areas of Poonch, Rajouri, Kathua, Samba and Jammu districts is a daily grind under the shadow of mortar shells and shattered homes.” Ishfaq Naseem writes. From villages shelled without warning, where gurdwaras become shelters, and hospitals are always running out of staff, Naseem’s ground report explores the aftermath of the Pahalgam attack and subsequent shellings on Kashmir’s border downs. “The situation was not even as bad in the 1965 and 1971 wars as it is now,” says one resident. Another recounts, “We stayed hungry on the day of shelling and for several days... both the days and nights were bleak for us.” (Par. 5)*

Contemporary Indian travel writing has increasingly turned its attention to the country’s remote and marginal geographies – spaces that lie at the periphery of both the map and the national imagination. Travelogues such as Damodaran’s *Borderlands*, Ghosh’s *Gazing at Neighbours*, and Vijayan’s *Midnight’s Borders* engage deeply with regions often left out of mainstream discourse, offering critical insight into how geography, governance, and national identity intersect in the borderlands. These narratives document places like Dhanushkodi in the southeast, Minicoy in the southwest, Moreh in the northeast, Hussainiwala in the northwest, and Campbell Bay in the east; locations that are not merely distant but symbolically peripheral to the nation-state.

A unifying theme across these works is the emphasis on lived experience in geographically and politically marginalised spaces. In contrast to traditional travel writing that focuses on landmarks or scenic beauty, these authors foreground the everyday realities of people inhabiting the nation’s edges.

Their narratives are shaped not by a fascination with the exotic, but by an ethical commitment to representation and understanding. As Damodaran observes, “For those who live in big metros and towns, citizenship and national identity are privileges we take for granted... luxuries denied to many of our countrymen” (*Borderlands* vii). His account reveals how basic documents like ration cards or Aadhaar become rare and inaccessible for communities living in border areas, highlighting the structural inequalities that separate “mainlanders” from “borderlanders.” To quote Damodaran “...the 250-odd families which lived in Dhanushkodi had been ignored by successive governments. They had no electricity or any basic amenities and not a single family had ever been issued a ration card (6).” Dhanushkodi, located at the Southernmost tip of India, is a hauntingly beautiful reminder of how location can both impose scarcity and confer charm. After being ravaged by a cyclone in 1964, this once-bustling pilgrim town is now mostly deserted, with the sea encircling its skeletal remains on three sides. The seclusion and digital quiet of Dhanushkodi may seem like a unique vacation to tourists — a peaceful haven from the hectic pace of the city. In an interview with the authors (2025), Damodaran contemplates on this digital divide prevalent in such isolated geographies:

*While I do find remote places that lack state-of-the-art facilities or social media penetration blissful and charming, that is just my opinion. Despite my affinity for such places, I live in a big city with all amenities just a phone call away. Similarly, for people who aspire to live in a remote location, shifting to the countryside as a lifestyle choice is one thing; it is a whole other matter when residents of border towns remain ignored, forgotten, and left out of all development initiatives. I feel government needs to focus on*

*equally distributing wealth and access to technology everywhere, except perhaps in eco-sensitive areas and buffer zones of reserve forests, where those seeking solitude can take refuge. Basically, access to technology or lack of it should be a choice and not one's destiny. (8)*

While the narrative of *Borderlands* has been weaved through highlighting the divide between privileged mainlanders and underprivileged borderlanders; the narrative of *Gazing at Neighbour* runs parallel, intertwining the past and present of the Partition of India. The book draws upon the task of partitioning India along religious lines. The outcome, an arbitrary division, is evident in its intergenerational impact, particularly affecting the everyday lives of those residing in border areas. Ghosh's narrative, therefore, is an attempt to understand how: "...barbed wires have split families; concrete pillars have turned neighbours into foreigners; people follow restrictions which their countrymen elsewhere don't, and wish sometimes silently, and sometimes aloud, that the line didn't exist" (3).

In his book, Damodaran reflects on these scars of Partition as he illustrates the struggles of farmers living near the international border fence, who must secure BSF clearance to cultivate their land. Gatti Rajoke, home to many Partition refugees from Pakistan, is populated by individuals unfamiliar with the local terrain. Misguided by the landscape, these migrants have been farming on the dry riverbed of the Sutlej River, unaware of their misplacement. Reflecting on their endless sufferings, Damodaran remarks: "But despite such natural calamities, the tensions related to border strife and absence of proper roads, health care or other basic amenities, including the supply of drinking water, several families have been living here for more than three generations (101)."

Vijayan's *Midnight's Borders* adds another dimension to this discourse by chronicling her extensive travels across India's frontier regions. Her travelogue blends personal journey with political reportage, capturing how militarisation, statelessness, and systemic neglect shape the daily lives of border inhabitants. Through stories of cross-border marriages, displaced families, and bureaucratic invisibility, she reveals the precariousness of life at the margins, while critiquing dominant narratives that paint borderlands as zones of illegality and threat.

What unites these texts is not only their shared focus on margins and borders, but also their deliberate blending of travel writing with ethnographic sensitivity. These works take on an anthropological tone, using movement as a method of inquiry and storytelling. The emphasis is not simply on places, but on people — whose lives are shaped, restricted, and often rendered invisible by the border. Rather than viewing borders as fixed territorial markers, the authors present them as lived realities, complex and shifting, shaped by historical trauma, policy neglect, and everyday resilience. Through this shift in perspective, contemporary Indian travel writing carves out a powerful space for alternative national imaginaries — ones that are inclusive of the voices from the edges. Whether it is Damodaran's documentation of infrastructure gaps and identity struggles, Ghosh's exploration of Partition's long-term scars, or Vijayan's interrogation of citizenship and militarisation, each narrative contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the nation. Collectively, these texts not only enrich Indian travel literature but also serve as vital counter-narratives that unsettle dominant ideas of national unity and progress by highlighting the lived complexities at the borders.

## Conclusion

This paper locates an emerging body of work in Indian travel literature, dealing with regions and communities long been excluded from mainstream narratives. Contemporary Indian travel writing, like its global counterparts, tends to engage with diversified perspectives in terms of contributing to the genre. This is reflected in the shift marked by movement away from conventional tourist destinations toward places typically absent in mainstream itineraries with a renewed emphasis on the journey itself. What is more significant is the observation on how Contemporary Indian travel writing critically examines issues of identity, belonging, and marginalization within the socio-political context of the regions by using a postcolonial lens.

Among other perspectives, the journey has been prioritised as an important travelling period for engaging in meaningful interactions with fellow travellers, sharing a space irrespective of individual differences based on divisive parameters. In addition to this, there is also distinctiveness in the modes of travel as newer forms of travel narratives have also moved beyond the romance of train travel to accommodate those who live in motion, such as the truck drivers. These perspectives offer alternative ways of seeing and experiencing the country. A closer examination of this study has interestingly identified select writings solely dedicated to the international border spaces. Coining the term *border travelogues*, this article therefore, establishes a sub-genre within the broader corpus of travel writing. The select travelogues critically engage with the lived experiences of the border inhabitants and contribute to a flexible understanding of the nation and its people through the extreme edges. Such narrative seems to keep the geographical detailing of the border in the background while emphasising on the lives of people which are restricted and

differently structured because of the special geography called 'border'.

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Note: A Sanskrit word for signifying the victory/conquest of the “*dig*” (direction), *Digvijaya* means the conquest of all the four quarters. In ancient Indian epics like *Mahabharata* the references of *digvijayas* are plenty (for example, Pandu, a king of the Kuru kingdom, went to *digvijaya* after ascending to the throne of Hastinapur, the capital of the Kuru kingdom).



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