



Travels, Texts and Terrains: Indian Women Mapping Unfamiliar Spaces

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Abstract. The image of risk-taking travellers has traditionally been ascribed to men. This study seeks to examine how contemporary Indian women's photo-travelogues, *Zanskar to Ziro: No Stilettoes in the Himalayas* by Sohini Sen and *Walking in Clouds: A Journey to Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar* by Kavitha Yaga Buggana, disrupt gendered notions of adventure travel. Utilising theoretical frameworks of women's travel writings, spatiality studies and feminist geography, the study argues how, in the 21st century, intrepid Indian women navigate unfamiliar, rugged and ostensibly inaccessible terrains in South Asia, exhibiting willingness to take on challenges despite their vulnerability. The spaces in the texts appear not merely as backdrops but as dynamic heterogeneous sites, as the study emphasises that spatiality shapes women's travel narratives, wherein hostile and extreme landscapes function as a source of adversity and autonomy. The external terrain serves as a reflection, analogy, extension and at times, an antithesis of the traveller-authors' internal realities. A critical interpretation and photo-textual analysis will demonstrate how Indian women travellers remap, reimagine and remake unfamiliar terrains. The study contributes to a nuanced understanding of tenacious Indian women travellers, who dismantle stereotypes and map novel avenues for female empowerment and resilience using illustrative storytelling.

Keywords and phrases: Indian women's travel writings, adventure travel, spatiality, unfamiliar spaces, photo-travelogues

Introduction

Women's travel writings have become a means of negotiating, creating and asserting female identities, signifying the presence of diverse voices in the landscape of travel literature. Functioning not only as personal narratives, the form has also come to be perceived essentially as consisting of documents

chronicling journeys and experiences that have redefined the very idea of travel on multiple levels. The image of risk-taking travellers—adventurers and explorers capable of traversing perilous and inaccessible terrains, territories and spaces—has traditionally been ascribed to men (Khoo-Lattimore and Wilson 2017). Travel writing has historically been a male bastion (Bassnett 2002; Bird 2016) and travel has conventionally been regarded as a heroic exercise undertaken by men who are identified as adventurous or extreme travellers possessing the ability to traverse dangerous and remote spaces. The adventurous hero figure is confronted with risks, fears and dangers in order to cultivate character (Johnson 2014). The curiosity, need and desire to travel are, however, inherently human traits, irrespective of one's gender. Though “the decisions that are made about our [women's] everyday lives, based in outmoded ideas of gender, are fixed in our everyday places and spaces” (Domosh and Seager 2001, xxiii), women have continued to negotiate their identity in everyday spaces, both private and public (Khoo-Lattimore and Wilson 2017). Despite social, material and psychological constraints, Indian women have managed to venture out of their traditionally designated domestic spaces with a sense of curiosity to experience the world firsthand: “I wanted to witness the journey with new eyes”, states Buggana (2019, 32). As intrepid travellers, women have made significant contributions to geography through their personal and empirical observations, and feminist criticism seeks to recognise such overlooked contributions by women travel writers in this seemingly “masculine genre” (Bird 2016, 35). Such travel narratives by Indian women bring to light the courageous, sensible, sharp-witted and dynamic nature of women travellers who, despite their vulnerability, scepticism and fears, exhibit an innate willingness to take on challenges by deviating from conventional routes and venturing into ostensibly inaccessible geographies. Women's “desire for adventure may be linked to the freedom which comes from leaving behind the rules, restrictions and societal conventions which often constrain feminine leisure pursuits, linked to women being the primary caregivers” (Laing and Frost 2014, 89). Many women seek to travel solo or with other women in a quest for heightened confidence and freedom in the absence of men, as well as a relaxed atmosphere that allows time for self-care, self-indulgence and female friendships (Junek, Binney and Winn 2006; Durko and Stone 2017; Yang, Khoo-Lattimore and Arcodia 2018).

This study seeks to examine the interplay of space, gendered movement and identity in contemporary Indian women's photo-travelogues, *Zanskar to Ziro: No Stilettoes in the Himalayas* (2017) by Sohini Sen and *Walking in Clouds: A Journey to Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar* (2019) by Kavitha Yaga Buggana, to showcase how Indian women writers from diverse sociocultural backgrounds have utilised the framework of the adventure travel narrative to destabilise and transgress the normative socio-spatial constructs and gendered notions

of travel and movement. The study employs close reading and a thematic interpretation and analysis of both textual and visual photographic content of the primary texts. It also critically employs the theoretical frameworks of women's travel writings, spatiality studies and feminist geography to analyse how, in the 21st century, Indian women embark on and navigate unfamiliar and rugged terrains in South Asia. A critical interpretation and photo-textual analysis of the selected texts will demonstrate how Indian women travellers remap, reimagine and remake unfamiliar terrains. Both Sohini Sen and Kavitha Yaga Buggana perform multiple roles as observers, narrators and reporters, as their texts provoke readers and travellers to rethink their perceptions of local histories and sociocultural nuances, while narrating the embodied experiences of women engaging with unfamiliar environments. The rationale behind selecting the two texts is motivated by key considerations, particularly the scarcity of published non-fiction photo-travel books by Indian women. Furthermore, this study specifically examines works that explore and reflect on spaces within and surrounding India, with a distinct emphasis on mountainous terrains, hence necessitating a spatial reading in the context of women's adventure travel. The selected authors' integration of photographs is also particularly unique, as these images serve not only to visually complement the written narratives but also to encourage critical engagement with the texts.

The selected travel texts by Sen and Buggana can be perceived as "a form of [spatial] mapping, offering its readers descriptions of places, situating them in a kind of imaginary space and providing points of reference by which they can orient themselves and understand the world in which they live" (Tally 2013, 2). Covering this basic tenet of spatial literary studies, the texts bring out the representation of diverse South Asian spaces and places and the way people, especially Indian women in this context, inhabit and move within them. Such travelogues can hence be understood as literature of recorded facts, impressions and feelings during travel as they offer an eye-witnessed account of the culture, history and geography of a place, giving the readers, as Iyer (2000) puts it, "A crash course on cultural relativism". With an increasing focus on feminist geography, space has come to be understood as a sociocultural construct that is "metaphorical and relational, rather than merely as a physical location or a singularly definable absolute" (Wilson and Little 2008, 167). Acknowledging that both spatial dynamics and societal structures are profoundly shaped by gender, the idea of "gendered space" assumes critical significance in travel and tourism research. Public space, in particular, can be perceived as a space that one shares with strangers and the same has the ability to become even more unfamiliar in the context of travelling. The constraints on women's travels are "sociocultural, personal, practical and spatial" in nature (Wilson and Little

2005, 155). Most public and tourist places and spaces are developed for the mobility and enjoyment of men and thus, often identified as “masculine”. This exclusionist idea of places and spaces arbitrarily isolates and discounts the presence of the woman traveller. Limitations on women’s occupation of space indicate the underlying tendencies to regulate women’s bodily movements and maintain gendered hierarchies and subordination.

The article highlights the type of adventurous, risky and extreme journeys women have increasingly embarked on but considered antithetical to feminine identity (Foster and Mills 2002). The spaces in contemporary women’s travel texts are not merely backdrops against which the journey unfolds but are dynamic and heterogeneous sites in a state of flux that “construct identities, behaviours, expectations, communication and politics” (Beck 2021, 1) for the traveller-authors. The selected photo-travelogues are attempts at rewriting travel texts by placing the female subject at the centre of unfamiliar terrains. In the process, the woman traveller produces geographical knowledge of places beyond the existing exclusionary narratives produced by men, thus refuting that “geography is masculinist” – borrowing Doeuff’s (1991, as cited in Rose 1993, 4) explication of a masculinist work which “while claiming to be exhaustive, forgets about women’s existence and concerns itself only with the position of men”. Incidentally, women’s adventurous excursions defy the fundamentally patriarchal rationale behind conventional mapping and photography that “everything is knowable and mappable”, where “as an inherently male act ... the intention [of travelling] is to circumscribe, define and hence control the world” (Bassnett 2002, 230).

Adventure travel encompasses “physical activity, interaction with nature and cultural learning or exchange” (Viren et al. 2017, 3). It potentially plays a crucial role for women travellers as “adventurous tales form the basis of life stories that in turn are foundations of individual identity” (Taylor, Varley and Johnston 2013, 9). Indian women’s travel writings demonstrate how the women transgress spatial confinements, socially relegated spheres and gender expectations, acquiring agency, resolve and action. The works illustrate that women travel writers challenge the “rhetoric of peril” imposed on them (Siegel 2004, 4) and illustrate that “risks are sometimes nothing more than social or cultural constructions, with the conscious or unconscious purpose to maintain a cultural structure” (Elsrud 2001, 598). Writing adventure travel narratives thus becomes a means for women to produce unalloyed accounts of their journeys to become prominent contributors to the genre. As Ganser (2009, 19) rightly remarks, “Women’s road literature is indicative of the fact that prevailing socio-spatial structures are not gender neutral and that they need to be questioned and challenged”. In doing so, the woman’s road narrative “opens up, renews

and regenerates the genre” (Siegel 2004, 4). Sen and Buggana venture to redefine and rewrite the idea of travel, depicting rugged terrains, inaccessible places and dangerous spaces in South Asia as adventurous and exciting as opposed to their ordinary lives.

The photo-travelogues by Sen and Buggana demonstrate that travel facilitates the movement of Indian women across diverse geographical spaces, underpinned by advancements in technology, communication and transport. The travelogues engage with the historical, political and sociocultural nuances of the spaces encountered, illustrating that spatial realities vary from one terrain to another even within Asia. The complexities in the amalgamation of personal experience and its interpretation are resolved in Indian women’s travel narratives through the use of photographs. The utilisation of the photographic lens technology not only challenges the underlying masculine rhetoric of the genre, but also exhibits a more expansive outlook on power, difference and the desire to travel in contemporary women’s travel writing. As Aiyar (2019) puts it, “What is travel? And why do we do it? The most obvious answer, perhaps, is one that entails movement. Travelling is about going somewhere, seeing something and returning with pictures to prove it”. The use of pictures as a complement and supplement to travel texts offers a broader knowledge of the thought processes of the traveller-authors, the cultures they experience during their travels in South Asia, as well as the variety of terrains they encounter, from a more globalised and transnational perspective. This literary strategy highlights the reflexive quality of the writing and emphasises the “accounting” faculty (Culbert 2018, 346). The photographs help decipher the possible extremities of South Asian terrain, highlighting the versatility of Indian women as adventure travellers. The photo-travelogues facilitate a focused and nuanced take on space, place and the travelling self, rather than the superficial, glamorised imagery that tourist pamphlets or guidebooks often offer.

Photo-travelogues by contemporary Indian women illuminate new ways of reclaiming space and identity by rendering the vision of women travel writers who, unlike men, seek to look closely and critically, on a macro level, at the idea of how we travel today and, on a micro level, the mobility of the contemporary woman travelling in incompatibly gendered and unfamiliar spaces. Interestingly, works of Indian women travel photographers and writers like journalist Neelima Vallangi, adventure travel writer Shivya Nath, travel writers and bloggers Ami Bhat, Lakshmi Sharath, Mridula Dwiwedi, Taran Khan, Anita Anand, Charukeshi Ramadurai and others of their ilk are known to be more engaging and interventionist than disruptive or binary in nature. Many contemporary Indian women travel writers have sought to re-map hostile and uncertain terrains, projecting the woman traveller’s progressive and “benign vision of tolerance and

respect in the intercultural encounter” (Culbert 2018, 348). This corroborates Iyer’s (2000) explication of the essence of travel as “seeing the world clearly and yet feeling it truly. For seeing without feeling can obviously be uncaring; while feeling without seeing can be blind”. This intermixing of adventure travel narrative and photography helps reimagine South Asian places otherwise known to have been exoticised or depicted as inaccessible. The study focuses on the axes of spatiality and photo-textual interpretation, along with the significance of female companionship, to explore and analyse Indian women’s adventure travel experiences and their engagement with unfamiliar and rugged terrains.

Negotiating Unfamiliar Terrains in *Zanskar to Ziro*

Zanskar to Ziro: No Stilettoes in the Himalayas (2017) by Sohini Sen, a journalist, author and photographer, spans two decades of travel in and around India by Sohini and her friend, Sumita. Keeping the Himalayas at the centre of their travels, their trail consists of 10,000 kilometres across the remote Zanskar Valley in Ladakh through Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Nepal, Sikkim, Bengal and Bhutan to Ziro in Arunachal Pradesh. The women move along the mountains displaying a keen sense of observation and insight into the aesthetic, curious, exotic and local lore. The narrative infuses luxuriant landscapes with the history of places, evoking for the readers a certain sense of the spaces the author inhabits and traverses during the journey. The narration of stories, local tales, religious beliefs, legends, myths, customs, origin stories and political history is intertwined with and integral to understanding the unconventional spaces. For instance, in her exploration of monasteries, Sen learns of origin stories like how the Tabo Monastery has been “built on the basis of the mandala concept from the ‘Sarva Tathagata Tatta Samgraha Tantra’, a text translated into Tibetan by Rinchen Zangpo (958–1055 AD)” (Sen 2017, 114) or how the goddess at Lochawa La Khang monastery, Himachal Pradesh “wears a garland of alternating” INR10 and INR5 notes (Sen 2017, 96).

The travel text is further enriched by Sen’s photographic gaze, where realistic descriptions of nature appear ornate, while also foregrounding the fact that terrains exist at a plane beyond artificial borders. This sentiment is conveyed time and again through the photographs of elusive mountain peaks and monasteries, which are preceded by the challenging treks undertaken by the women to reach their destinations. For instance, their 2-kilometre trek to the Chandrashila peak in Uttarakhand (Sen 2017, 181–183) and their 10-kilometre trek to and from the Tiger’s Nest, also known as the Paro Taktsang monastery in Bhutan (Sen 2017, 378–384), test their endurance. Their ability to traverse these obstacles is a testament to their mobility, bodily limits and grit, despite

witnessing young agile climbers. Capturing these nuances, Sen (2017, 382) thoughtfully captions the picture of the Tiger's Nest, "where tireless striving stretches its arms toward perfection".

A key element of Sen's text is the graphic descriptions abundant in colours that form part of the diverse South Asian terrains, such as native birds, trees, flowers, trails, mountains, glaciers, rivers, rivulets, meadows, wetlands, white sands, snowy peaks, villages, monasteries, monuments and the mundane. She illustrates:

As we walk... into the remains of the day, twilight glows: on the few village houses ...tall, gold-leafed birches with their intertwined pale cream boughs; lone standing poplars with their green, matte gold and burnt orange leaves; on the million pink, succulent leaves of a tree I have not met before ...far, far away in the still blue horizon, a few snow-swept peaks raise their heads. (Sen 2017, 112)

Sen centralises the female gaze in her travelogue, narrating how women are astutely observant travellers with a keen eye for noticing subtle changes in the landscape. Her observations echo how women are equipped with an internal mechanism that helps them cope with rugged terrains. As women who venture into unfamiliar spaces, Sohini and Sumita meticulously plan their itinerary: "Every single stopover on our route plotted carefully, all accommodation booked in advance" (Sen 2017, 97). Yet, they also learn to adapt to the unpredictable terrains and people they encounter, as she writes:

Chauvinism and sexual harassment-issues we either ignored, or dealt with very firmly. To blend in, we always wore androgynous attire, both for convenience as well as not to draw attention to our femininity. It was sometimes the only option. A search among the online retail stores for women's high-altitude apparel would lend substance to my statement. (Sen 2017, 13)

Women travellers like Sohini and Sumita sometimes opt for "masculine" attire not only with deference to practicality but also as an attempt at being less conspicuous as "cross-dressing and cross-cultural dressing are long-standing traditions ...allowing the traveller to transgress the gender norms of their home and host countries" (Bird 2016, 37).

Written with a sense of humour and an inclination towards contemplation, Sen also includes the corporeality of actual travel, replete with difficulties, fears and solutions. It is precisely because of this physical, embodied and sensory experience of travel that the body becomes more pronounced and quite

apparent in adventure travel. The body also has limitations, is prone to fatigue and is vulnerable when exposed to new and alien environments. Both men and women require acclimatisation and risk contracting certain health issues. However, for a woman traveller in this context, the presence of the body in unfamiliar terrains makes it vulnerable in more ways than one – the appearance that symbolises the femaleness of the traveller, aspects of health specific to women, infrastructure that does not sufficiently accommodate women and the sheer fact of a woman's body occupying particular terrains. For instance, Sen's travel research includes "searches for women-friendly accommodations – clean bed sheet and clean washroom... We did not always get both" (Sen 2017, 12). This corroborates what Massey (1994, 186) writes in her seminal text:

[S]paces and places and our senses of them ...are gendered through and through... And this gendering of space and place both reflects and has effects back on the ways in which gender is constructed and understood in the societies in which we live.

In another instance, unlike their fellow male travellers, Sohini and Sumita find themselves unable to exit their vehicles at will along the road due to a perpetual feeling of vulnerability and the need to exercise caution. Describing her travels as "a late-in-life love affair" (Sen 2017, 11), Sen's age also becomes a factor in shaping her bodily capability. Her travels, hence, also become a narrative of surviving amidst such terrains; at one point in Suru Valley, Ladakh, she relies on the kindness of another fellow woman traveller to supply a much-needed oxygen cylinder during an attack of cerebral oedema (acute mountain sickness), hence, saving Sohini's life. Had they not survived the journey, the women's family and the larger society would have dismissed them as "foolhardy women who had it coming" (Sen 2017, 14). Sohini and Sumita's female friendship and companionship also play a crucial role in navigating and remaking an unfamiliar and unknown terrain, familiar and known. The manner in which they look out for each other in both small and significant ways on multiple occasions points to the collective occupation of space, which is integral to the project of feminist geography. For instance, Sohini takes the initiative to assist with filling out endless forms required for seamless travel (Sen 2017, 214). Sumita, on one occasion, ensures Sohini's safety by asking the driver to accompany her on a tree-covered hillock with long exposed roots (Sen 2017, 310). In a significant moment during their strenuous trek to Tiger's Nest, Bhutan, Sohini quickly intervenes when Sumita collapses from altitude sickness, nearly losing her own balance in the process. Sohini continues to support Sumita, even contemplating halting the trek midway. Both Sen and Buggana give space to their female companions in their respective texts, thereby contributing to what Braidotti

(2011, 67) describes as “the collective project of feminism, which implies the acknowledgement and recognition of the voices of other women”.

Sen’s narrative, at multiple points, alludes to a sense of danger and insecurity forming part of the women travellers’ embodied experiences which Roberts (2012, 52) also concurs:

[W]omen don’t enter the wilderness in the same way men do; we constantly return to our physical bodies and the ways in which they could be threatened, not by bears or bugs but by men. Our bodies become a filter between us and the landscape.

Travel, especially for women, becomes an interweaving of mobility, placemaking and affective embodiment. The female body in travel can be further understood using Rose’s (1993, as cited in Bassnett 2002, 230) conceptualisation that “fluidity and viscosity of the female body is contrasted with the linearity and solidity of the male body; while the latter ...creates and controls a set of power relations, the former is less tangible, more flexible and infinitely varied”. Sohini and Sumita find themselves blocking their hotel room doors each night with the heaviest objects in sight, such as chairs, sofas and bags: “Sumita and I drag and pile our entire luggage behind the door before retiring for the night. My sturdy tripod is folded and promoted to the bed, to serve as a weapon if need be” (Sen 2017, 117).

One of the few ways the two women address the issue of safety is through their male drivers: “Two ladies on an unknown, solitary road with one unknown male driver, which is what most of our journeys to the mountains have been” (Sen 2017, 13), which is also compromised by the pervasive fear that the driver might pick up another male companion along the route or potentially pose a risk himself. Sohini recounts how the actions of one of their drivers, Gulzar, repeatedly made her feel uneasy. She senses his constant gaze at her, which eventually turns into unwelcome physical proximity: “Gulzar comes to sit precariously on his haunches right next to the tripod, pretending to look through the camera. His face is disturbingly close to mine. There can now be no doubt of his intentions” (Sen 2017, 45). On being reprimanded, Gulzar’s lack of remorse does not surprise Sen, who decides to release the car. Similarly, in a hotel dining hall, Sohini recounts feeling a sense of discomfort and unease when a group at the adjacent table proceeds to “stare at us until we are forced to look away and then stare some more” (Sen 2017, 82). Rose (1993, 146) aptly elucidates such situations:

[T]he threat of being seen and evaluated is one of the most objectifying processes to which the body is submitted, and ...the constitution of our bodies as objects to be looked at encourages many of us to see ourselves as located in space... Women's sense of embodiment can make space feel like a thousand piercing eyes... This produces a sense of space as something tricky, something to be negotiated, a hazardous arena.

This sense of fear in uncertain situations becomes apparent as the women exercise caution in unfamiliar spaces: “I don't know how safe it is to go further in'... I have noted the number of men. In such situations, my gut tends to swerve towards caution. ‘We should not stretch our luck’. We stay put” (Sen 2017, 84). Similarly, in *Walking in Clouds* (2019), Kavitha's incorporation of safety pins into the packing list provided by travel agents reflects a conscious feminine strategy to promote and ensure a sense of security. Although the list “did not mention safety pins, but I threw some in anyway” (Buggana 2019, 29). Validating Kavitha's stance is Pandey's (2023) observation that “the ubiquitous safety pin”, which helps manage “sudden wardrobe malfunction”, is also “used by women globally to fight back against their harassers”. To combat the gendered fear intrinsic to women's psyche, the safety pin becomes a tool for Kavitha to reclaim her space in an exclusionist world of adventure travel. Fear adds value to travel in more ways than one, making the journey palpable; as Sir Edmund Hillary astutely observes about travel, “It's not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves” (Sen 2017, 120). The women make sense of a novel space and eventually experience relaxation in an unfamiliar place away from home, affording them the privilege of leisure, peace and idleness: “An ideal place to do nothing” (Sen 2017, 151). Their travels hint at a need for feminine enfranchisement, which women seek – a sense of non-confinement, escape and liberation similar to what Santayana (1964, 8) states, “We need sometimes to escape into open solitudes, into aimlessness, into the moral holiday of running some pure hazard, in order to sharpen the edge of life, to taste hardship”.

In Sohini and Sumita's navigation of unfamiliar spaces, the locals play a crucial role in facilitating their journey, as they take on various roles, ranging from guides, cooks, drivers and guest house owners. The difficult terrains the women traverse include hairpin bends, steep paths, dangerous cliffs and dirt tracks, alongside being prone to natural disasters such as landslides, cloudbursts and flooding, as well as extreme weather conditions like heat, rain and cold climes. Amidst such patterns, underlying the idea of adventure travel, food, among other basic amenities, is stripped of luxuries and the sheer availability or unavailability of “normal” food acquires meaning, offering the traveller-authors warmth and a feeling of homeliness and contradictorily, homesickness

(Sen 2017, 68; 106; 242; 251; 267; 290; 430). This sort of travel also sheds light on the higher level of awareness that women possess towards their bodies and their physical surroundings: “Sixth sense precludes reasoning” (Sen 2017, 149). It also gauges women’s survival skills and their spirit of exploration as they voluntarily seek the road less travelled, revealing both “the sense of experiencing a new freedom, or conversely a terror, when they are by themselves in an otherwise unpeopled landscape” (Foster and Mills 2002, 176). Capturing the spirit of their travel, the boats of Phewa Lake in Pokhara, Nepal, serve as a significant physical manifestation and symbol of the travellers’ mobility, which is accompanied by Sen’s carefully chosen quote: “To reach a port we must set sail/Sail, not tie at anchor/Sail, not drift” (Sen 2017, 244). Similarly, Sen also underscores the significance of movement in her narrative through the photograph of another unconventional mode of transport: “A cable car passes over the Takvar Valley Tea Estate” in Darjeeling (Sen 2017, 294). The impact of the undertaken travel is also reflected in the longing for further movement, as evident in Sen’s narrative post-travel: “We could always go back... Do the places we have not done yet” (Sen 2017, 11).

Redefining Adventure Travel in *Walking in Clouds*

Adventure travel and its experience are “context-dependent” and “individually specific due to competence, situationally specific because of risk and chronologically specific in time. An adventure for one person in a certain place and at a particular time, may not be an adventure given a different person... place... or time” (New Zealand Mountain Safety Council 1993, as cited in Cater 2013, 10). Kavitha Yaga Buggana is an essayist, writer and former software engineer and developmental economist hailing from Hyderabad. *Walking in Clouds: A Journey to Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar* (2019) is Kavitha and her cousin Pallu’s documentation of their arduous trek through the Himalayan forests and formidable mountains in Nepal and Tibet, culminating in Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar. It mixes lyrical, humorous and descriptive storytelling with vibrant imagery and photography to enliven the travelogue. Both Kavitha and Pallu are in their 40s when they decide to take on the challenging trek, nicknamed Manas, through the picturesque Humla route: “This time, the journey had called us” (Buggana 2019, 21). The narrative looks both inward and outward, as it becomes not only an exploration of distant, rugged places but also a navigation of their travelling selves. The women travellers’ movement through treacherous terrains is revealed through various photographs, including a solo shot of “Prarthana on the way to Salli Kholla” holding trekking poles (Buggana 2019, 32–33), multiple shots of Kavitha, Pallu and Katy ascending Mount Kailash during the *parikrama* (circumambulation)

(Buggana 2019, 80–81) as well as a photo capturing “locals crossing a bridge at Hilsa” (Buggana 2019, 128–129), all foregrounded against vast mountainous landscapes. An interesting addition to the photographs showcasing women’s mobility is the inclusion of an image depicting a flying eagle, accompanied by the caption “Soaring in the heights of Mount Kailash” (Buggana 2019, 80–81), which serves to symbolically represent the exhilaration and freedom experienced firsthand by the travellers.

Kavitha and Pallu are joined on their trek by Prarthana (Pallu’s friend), Sperello (an astrophysicist), Katy (a trained nurse and trekker), fellow trekkers Ying and Jeff and Chirring (their guide) in Nepal, the starting point of their journey. The three Indian women quickly came to be called “the Indian ladies”; in turn, they refer to the others as “the foreigners”, despite all of them being outsiders to the terrain. The group is a mix of experienced and amateur, yet enthusiastic trekkers; the experienced members also act as a foil to the Indian ladies in terms of agility, bodily strength and capability. Rather than feeling intimidated, the Indian women are inspired by the experienced adventurers, as Kavitha remarks, “I think we have found the right people for our trip, no?” (Buggana 2019, 7). The three Indian women harbour a degree of suspicion and preconceived notions regarding the strangers they encounter; however, their notions are quickly dispelled through their actual travel experiences, which redefine their perceptions and expectations. For instance, when Chirring argues about politics in Nepal, Kavitha thinks to herself, “It strikes me that this is a strange conversation to have in Humla with a man who spends much of his time in the remotest of mountains, far from computers and electricity” (Buggana 2019, 41). The element of unfamiliarity sets in at the very outset of the journey as Nepal appears both familiar and unfamiliar to Kavitha as she draws mental parallels with India of the 1980s while navigating the chaotic roads, potholes, crowds and local cuisine. One perceives the manifestation of transcultural memory in the traveller in Kavitha as she uses her imagining of both India and Nepal “as a tool to reconstruct—and at the same time, wittingly or unwittingly: to actively construct—national memory” (Erlil 2011, 7). This use of the faculty of memory has both a constructive as well as a regenerative aspect for the traveller-author, as it helps her cope with unfamiliarity on multiple levels. In stark contrast, “the foreigners” marvel at the grimy and ancient-looking switchboards, rickshaws and chicken stores as artistic sites.

Initially, the excessive trekking equipment and over-packed duffel bags of Kavitha and Pallu underscore the novelty of their experience. Fuelled by adrenaline, Kavitha manages to keep pace with the seasoned trekkers. But as her legs begin to tremble and her arms and hips start to strain, she realises

her bodily limitations as she experiences panic, fatigue, helplessness and uncertainty. Observing Jeff, she remarks, “This journey is as effortless for him as it is arduous for us” (Buggana 2019, 27). Hence, the body becomes both an empowering and limiting factor in the journey: “Your body becomes a thing you carry” (Buggana 2019, 23). When Kavitha’s preparation proves inadequate and unforeseen obstacles arise, self-motivation, reflection, persistence, self-belief and positive self-dialogue become key mechanisms in overcoming self-doubt in unfamiliar terrains and progress despite adversity and setbacks. As Kavitha’s perspective evolves throughout the journey, she begins to find the trek realisable. Ultimately, the exhilaration of sighting Mount Kailash, Lake Manasarovar and Lake Rakshas Tal for the first time overshadows the hardships of the route. The significance of this momentous occasion is conveyed through Buggana’s inclusion of an awe-inspiring photo taken by Ying (2019, 128–129), in which Mount Kailash appears small on the horizon against a vivid blue sky and brown barren hills, with mountain goats and prayer flags in the foreground. The wide, horizontal framing captures the vast expanse, as Mount Kailash mirrors the sense of revelation and meaning that the author experiences, encapsulating both the distance already braved and the anticipation and possibility of reaching the destination. The photo also exemplifies the integration of landscape, local culture and profound moments, characteristic of *Walking in Clouds*.

The beauty, majesty and aesthetics of the terrains sharply contrast with the perils of Buggana’s adventurous journey. There is a sense of uncertainty and fear due to obstacles, known and unknown, as “true adventure relies on nature as being an active element in the experience, unknown and unpredictable” (Cater 2013, 12). The journey is fraught with delays and hardships, such as precipitous paths, landslides, darkness, inadequate amenities and unreliable weather, thereby making the terrain unpredictable. Kavitha’s fears also stem from contemporary media reports and anecdotes detailing incidents such as plane crashes and the failing health of pilgrims on this route. The remoteness and fragility of the terrain are emphasised in the narrative through a description of the few isolated villages in Nepal and Tibet that continue to thrive despite limited access to modern amenities such as electricity, water, hospitals and schools, illustrating a life almost inconceivable for the women. However, lying on their backs at the shores of Lake Manasarovar, the same isolation and silence feel like a luxury (Buggana 2019, 146). Sohini and Sumita’s affection for the Himalayan mountains is evident in their continued returns, despite the challenges they face. This attachment to space serves as an illustration of Yi-Fu Tuan’s theory of “topophilia”, which:

[C]an be defined broadly to include all of the human being’s affective ties with the material environment... it may then vary from the fleeting

pleasure one gets from a view to the equally fleeting but far more intense sense of beauty that is suddenly revealed... the place or environment has become the carrier of emotionally charged events or perceived as a symbol. (Tuan 1974, 93)

The ultimate destination of the journey, Mount Kailash, is considered sacred as it holds religious significance in Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and Bon faiths. In Hinduism, Mount Kailash is believed to be the abode of Lord Shiva and a dip in Lake Manasarovar is believed to cleanse one of all sins: “To walk in Kailash is to walk in the heavens” (Buggana 2019, 9). Finding themselves in one of the most holy sites of Hinduism and Buddhism, Kavitha and Pallu renegotiate their rationalist ideologies with regard to beliefs, faith and myths imbibed during their formative years. Kavitha’s atheism adds a layer of complexity to her journey, particularly because this perilous and unfamiliar terrain gets imbued with religious significance. Yet, as she ponders the magnitude of the mountain in front of her and juxtaposes it with her minuteness, she reflects on life and existence and senses a spiritual awakening of sorts. The two women ruminate about the journey’s significance on individual and collective levels, along with the spiritual connotation of their journey, substantiating the observation by Khoo-Lattimore and Wilson (2017, 8) regarding how women, while undertaking such adventurous endeavours, are more “reflective and spiritual...as opposed to competitive and exploitative”. The journey becomes epiphanic for both women. Despite not reaching the end point of her trek, the author finds meaning in her long, arduous trek, akin to that of a pilgrim:

[T]he arduousness of the journey is the point and faith is fortified by obstacles. Kailash is an embodiment of longing; to reduce the Kailash journey to a drive along a mountain road is to diminish the meaning of the pilgrimage. (Buggana 2019, 105)

Space, thus, acts as “a generous source for metaphor: one ‘maps’ one’s view of the world, or strategies for changing it; one finds one’s space and seeks to understand ‘where’ something or someone is ‘coming from’” (Bennett, Grossberg and Morris 2005, 334). The text and trek become the site of the interplay between vulnerability and strength. Kavitha’s vulnerability and ambivalence in this setting are signified by her sense of uncertainty, as she had always believed herself to be invulnerable. She now observes, “I feel I am entering a different world...I feel unprotected and strangely bereft” (Buggana 2019, 53–54). While at times, she contemplates, “walking has become an unpleasant chore and an indefinable, dull worry lingers at the back of my mind”, yet at other points, she is reassured of her strength, “our bodies realised that no matter how vehemently our muscles protested, they could go on. Our bodies deceive

us: they can withstand much more than they would have us believe” (Buggana 2019, 107). Despite the pervasive fear and imminent danger, the determination and resolve to undertake the journey prevail as each person navigates the terrain in their own way because the journey is intrinsically linked on a deeper level to each trekker. For Pallu, the trip is a test of her perseverance, while for Kavitha, it is a quest to accomplish an unimaginable feat. For instance, when Kavitha grapples with self-doubt, contradictorily, Pallu exhibits a level of self-acceptance and comfort with her slower pace. During moments of uncertainty, Kavitha’s thoughts are characterised by remembrances of the familiar – the comforting space of her home and the solace in being indoors. The idea of remembering home in travel narratives is more mental or psychological than tangible. It becomes an ever-changing and dynamic space that helps cope with homesickness or adapt to unfamiliar terrains. Conversely, once she returns, she recalls and vividly reimagines the moments from her travels, evidencing the near permanence of pivotal memories.

Both Kavitha and Sohini experience a brush with death at different points, as they tackle breathlessness, blurry vision, nausea and dizziness due to high altitudes and thinner air. Sohini manages to overcome her sickness and decides to continue her travels regardless. But Kavitha is unable to finish the final leg of the Mount Kailash *parikrama* because of high-altitude cerebral oedema: “The brain fills with fluid and loses oxygen, causing sleeplessness, hallucinations and disorientation... I had seen blue lights” (Buggana 2019, 125). Incidentally, Pallu refuses to leave her side and chooses to forgo finishing the trek as well. For Kavitha, her journey becomes symbolically complete as she places female friendship and companionship at its core and simply being able to undertake the journey with Pallu surpasses the joy of reaching the destination.

It will be interesting to add at this juncture Ashcroft’s (2015, 249) idea regarding the anticipatory hopefulness of travel: “It constructs the future and opens a space for desire; it emancipates us from the everyday; it carves out active trajectories of becoming”. Walking and trekking through such terrains is a childhood dream Kavitha and Pallu have now realised, “This is a journey we promised ourselves decades ago when we were still schoolgirls... We dreamed of adventures that seemed to lie waiting (Buggana 2019, 1). Overcoming self-doubt and physical hardships, the women support each other amidst difficulties. Kavitha ponders why people:

[C]annot understand why I am going to these places beyond the edges of our world. What drives me? How can I leave everyone for so long? What will happen to the family if something happens to me? These are fair questions. I am not sure I have the answers. (Buggana 2019, 3)

The anecdote is indicative of the questions women consider before undertaking risky travel as they cross their socially designated thresholds:

The threshold may be symbolic, a barrier in the traveller's mind that they must overcome in order to leave home ...[including] sorrow or guilt at leaving loved ones, the burden of domestic, work or filial responsibilities, or fear of the road ahead ...this is often an issue for women. (Laing and Frost 2014, 53)

Yet by placing themselves in such spaces, the women also benefit from being away from the rigidly circumscribed space of domesticity. Indian women are choosing to act on their curiosity, will and inclination to break such barriers and challenge their limits. Despite self-reassurances that the women's indomitable spirit of adventure will prevail, a palpable sense of uncertainty and unease lingers, particularly at the trip's outset. The ability to venture out is a testament that one can exist and have a place and identity outside of home, possibly in such 'unmappable' treacherous terrains, thus answering the questions initially posed to Kavitha about her choice of travel destination. Although people around them may not fully appreciate the purpose of their journey, Kavitha and Pallu undergo a transformative experience post-travel as women traveller-authors often attempt to incorporate the lessons learned from travels into their everyday lives. When Kavitha returns, "at home, everything has stayed the same ...all that is old and familiar seems new and wonderful, as if I am in someone else's dream" (Buggana 2019, 141).

Photo-Travelogues as Texts

Sen and Buggana's travel texts are illustrative in nature as they act as visual renditions by means of descriptions and photographs, along with the textual narrative of storytelling. Capturing and including photographs in the travelogues adds multidimensionality to the works as the vision of the travellers is manifested through both written and pictorial formats. Beyond the fundamental function of capturing places, the photographs act as testimony and documentary evidence, adding authenticity to women's travel narratives and giving insight into the writers' perceptions of the terrain encountered. In the context of travel, photos, just like maps, can be "central to the process of 'locating' places in the geographical and literary imagination" (Collingridge 2015, 163). Notably, for adventure travel in distinct terrains, showing the actual structure and aesthetics of places promotes relatability among readers, leading to deeper engagement with the text. For Indian women travellers, juxtaposing photos with their narratives lends them omniscience in the sense that it helps

them reimagine and bring to public knowledge hitherto unimagined places within South Asia. The use of pictures fills the gaps in narratives, thus improving or correcting the idea of *terrae incognitae*—the seemingly unknown and unfamiliar spaces—that Sohini and Kavitha encounter and experience firsthand.

Buggana includes photographs taken by different members in her trekking group, making the text a site for creatively collating various perspectives through visuals. The photographs, found in a few clusters across the travelogue, are accompanied by concise captions, indicating the location, subject and photographer's name. The photos visually capture and validate her outline of the terrain:

This is a land of contrasts. The geography is composed of an endless desert of soil and rock on which the vast lakes of Rakshas Tal and Manasarovar are perched... Four rivers—the Sutlej, the Brahmaputra, the Indus and the Karnali—originate around here... The weathered mountains appear as immense, intricate temples built to honour ancient, shamanistic gods. (Buggana 2019, 96-97)

Buggana features a combination of both portrait and landscape-oriented photographs. The travelogue begins with a vibrant, illustrated route map that highlights major elements of their journey, including geographical checkpoints, Mount Kailash, native animals of mountainous terrains, spiritual markers and people trekking. The photographic landscape of the text exhibits a blend of aesthetic and documentary qualities, highlighting natural landscapes such as mountains and lakes, alongside community portraits and candid moments, underscoring the inherent connections between space and human experience. Panoramic compositions and framings capture the majesty and spiritual dimensions of locations like Lake Manasarovar, Mount Kailash and chortens, while closer shots offer context-rich depictions of individuals and groups in key settings, such as airports, campsites and monasteries. The portraits of her fellow travellers as well as the locals, with joyful demeanours—conversing or walking—imbue movement and narrative continuity into the frames. Although the photographs do not always follow chronological sequencing, each photo cluster maintains visual harmony.

As a photojournalist, Sen's photographs, however, seem more planned and structured, with the primary aim of conveying the majesty of the landscapes to readers. Along with descriptions, Sen pairs the photos with tidbits of poetry, philosophy, literary allusions and factoids, adding a touch of wittiness and literariness to her non-fiction work. This pairing helps elevate the visual storytelling, evoking a sentimental reading of space and its constituents instead

of mere documentation. The photographs primarily depict natural landscapes, people inhabiting these frames and local artefacts. While the landscape images feature wide framing, the local artwork, architecture and festivals are captured with closer crops to emphasise detail. Sen also faces some limitations as a traveller, such as being prohibited from photographing certain spaces, including the inner sanctum at the Krishna Mandir in Patan, Nepal (Sen 2017, 228) and encountering locals who are averse to being photographed (Sen 2017, 233).

Along with landscape photography, Sen's lens also reveals a personal interest in birds and flowers, demonstrating a discerning eye for identifying their various species and attaching poetic and symbolic meanings to them. For instance, the photograph of a "brown-headed gull with its catch from Pangong Tso" is captioned, "A perfect idea of freedom and flight, limited by nothing at all" (Sen 2017, 67), illustrating the author's careful selection of photographs in tandem with the profound meaning she attaches to her ability to travel. Sen's photographs are intricately aligned with the textual narrative, mirroring the chronological and geographical movement of the women. Her photo-travelogue serves as a visual diary where the sequencing of photographs allows the reader to travel alongside the author. By integrating written text with visual elements, Sen effectively maintains an organic flow in her work, allowing for a reimagining and remapping of the terrains through her personal travel experiences.

Both travelogues feature various portraits of the self, travel companions and locals, revealing an inclination towards, as Topping (2019, 283) observes, how portraits offer "a physical and a psychological image of the photographer/photographee, for... [they are] both material evidence of 'having been there'" and hence, "the proof of cultural capital that marks out the cosmopolitan traveller". Thus, Sohini and Kavitha, through their photo travelogues, successfully locate themselves in time and space by physically and mentally transcending gender and social boundaries to present a dynamic idea of the terrains they traverse. The pictures are a testament to the fact that fear of spaces outside one's comfort zone can be challenged and overcome.

The photos become essential reference points for future travellers, especially women seeking to undertake adventure travel. Both Sen and Buggana's travels are also, to an extent, prompted by photographs that surfaced during their preparatory research; for instance, Sen feels "instantly, inexplicably" drawn to "a photograph of a huge Buddha statue on a mountain top", which drives her on a quest to see it firsthand at Langza, Himachal Pradesh (Sen 2017, 130). The essence of this sentiment has been quintessentially captured by Barthes (1982, 20):

[S]uddenly a specific photograph reaches me; it animates me and I animate it. So that is how I must name the attraction which makes it exist: an animation. The photograph itself is in no way animated ...but it animates me: this is what creates every adventure.

The photographs in women's photo-travelogues contribute to a feminist reading of the texts as they reappropriate the travellers' gaze, where women actively capture, cohesively record and represent places, people and their mobile selves, instead of serving as mere objects of the photographs. The use of photography as a literary tool enhances storytelling by bringing to life the actual topography of South Asian places and helps render realistic images of the landscape, culture and people, where imagining would have been difficult, if not impossible. Aesthetically, the photographs also facilitate the locating of the women traveller-authors historically and culturally, as they act as visual anecdotes for the readers. The photographs of mountains, intimidating rugged terrains and flora, fauna, people and cultures unfamiliar to the authors infuse the idea of "advenience or even adventure", capturing "the attraction certain photographs exerted upon" the viewer (Barthes 1982, 19).

Conclusion: Indian Women Mapping Unfamiliar Spaces

The present study demonstrates that Indian women, conscious of risks as synonyms of potential injuries and loss, traverse tough terrains and willingly negotiate perilous spaces. The featured South Asian spaces like Zaskar, Ziro, Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar act as spatial, temporal and qualitative coordinates that facilitate identity formation and transformation of the Indian women travellers. From a feminist geographical perspective, Indian travel writers have ushered in a revivalist take on seemingly hostile places by illustrating that inimical and menacingly unsympathetic spaces could be traversed by women. The study emphasises the significance of spatiality in shaping women's travel narratives, wherein hostile and extreme landscapes function as both a source of adversity and autonomy, signifying a transition in women's agency from a position of passiveness to assertiveness. The terrains that initially intimidate Sen and Buggana eventually become a means of self-discovery and lend them a feeling of being connected and supported. The photographs in the travelogues convey a clear idea of the ruggedness and relative inaccessibility of certain South Asian terrains that the women traverse, hence illustrating the factuality and objectivity of women's adventure travel. The retrospective accounts of travel document the transformative and cathartic impact of such journeys on the traveller-authors. Sen and Buggana exhibit optimism and resilience in their determination to finish their journeys despite

discouraging voices, delays and intimidating terrains. Physical hardships become part of their collective and individual psychological journeys, symbolising their ability to transcend personal and societal boundaries and overcome difficulties traditionally perceived as insurmountable for Indian women who are often portrayed as domestic, immobile and risk averse. The “successful” navigation of such terrains fosters a sense of empowerment, liberation and autonomy among women travellers.

This study has limited itself to the photo-textual analysis of two photo-travelogues, primarily attributable to the scarcity of texts authored by Indian women travellers that candidly articulate their experiences in unfamiliar terrains and venture beyond glamorous and idyllic depictions of the beauty of the landscapes and routes. Future works can uncover more contemporary works by women in the genre, while also expanding the scope to travelogues documented in the form of photoblogs such as those by Shivya Nath, Mridula Dwiwedi, Amrita Das and Saadiya Kochar, to name a few. This study predominantly examines geographical spaces within and around India, with a particular focus on mountainous terrains. Future researchers can investigate how Indian women’s travel unfolds in other Asian and non-Asian spaces and in diverse types of landscapes. Such future research studies can help gain a deeper understanding of the unique perspectives and voices of Indian women travellers that have historically been underrepresented in the discourse on travel and exploration.

The study contributes to a nuanced understanding of tenacious Indian women travellers, placing them in the expanding canon of South Asian travel writing and rendering travel an attainable pursuit for women. The texts enable the women traveller-authors to reach a set of readers and create a community of women who explicitly or implicitly share similar interests in adventure travel: “Those who have come here before us and those who will come after us. Together in our thoughts, hopes and faiths, we walk this path... For all of us, the mountain is always on our side, urging us on” (Buggana 2019, 107). Sen (2017, 15) also alludes to the significance of such narratives by women: “Our story, now inexorably intertwined with the fine, silken threads of all that we have read and the coarse, yak hair strands of a colourful oral narrative that ...is—like the mountains—growing, changing, alive”. Traveller-authors like Sen and Buggana act as catalysts of change as they usher in new perspectives that broaden the types of travel available to women, “helping them [women] break out of a defeatist mindset or see the possibilities in life” (Laing and Frost 2014, 36). Both travellers follow and carve their own paths, physically and metaphorically, as they travel to far-flung places not just to test their bodily limits, but also their emotional strength and resilience. Thus, the external

terrain serves as a reflection, analogy, extension, and, at times, an antithesis of the authors' internal realities. The study reinforces that contemporary Indian women traveller-authors reject tropes of self-erasure and feminine reticence, unapologetically expressing their desire to explore varied spaces. The act of travelling and photographing converge in the form of photo-travelogues, which become an apt canvas for women to display their fortitude and spirit of adventure.

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