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Narrating the 'Hippie': Bengali Perceptions of the Trail

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Design Radicals: Bay Area Counter Culture

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Abstract

With this paper, I will attempt to shift the focus of the Counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s from the Global North and examine how it affected cultural norms and perceptions in the Global South. My presentation will look at the 'Hippie Trail', a colloquial way to refer to a travel route taken by many European and North-American youths to the East at the height of the counterculture movement. The East served as an allegory of varying meanings but travelers often came by land from a European center like London and Amsterdam to anywhere relatively east, often ending in South and Southeast Asia. In this presentation, I try to understand the perceptions of the trail in the Bengali cultural milieu through the literary representation in Satyajit Ray's detective Novel, *Gangtok-e-Gondogol*.

Introduction

This paper will attempt to shift the focus of the Counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s from the Global North and examine how it affected cultural norms and perceptions in the Global South. Counterculture can be defined as a large-scale culture movement of the Global North based on dissent with various centers such as the Haight Ashbury in San Francisco¹ and many more peripheries. The hippie culture stems from the western counterculture which involves the sense of the 'one world' and desire to find alternatives to the heavily capitalized society in post-WWII Global North. This paper is going to look at the 'Hippie Trail,' a colloquial way to refer to a travel route taken by many European and North-American youth to the *East* at the height of the counterculture movement. The East, therefore, served as an allegory, and could mean a variety of things. However travelers often came by land from a European center like London and Amsterdam to anywhere relatively east, often ending in South and Southeast Asia. In this paper, I am comprehending the perceptions of the trail within the Bengali cultural milieu through the literary appearance in Satyajit Ray's detective novel, *Gangtok-e-Gondogol*. The novel is set in Sikkim which remained a popular destination with hippies and fit into the perceptions of Oriental East in the counterculture movement.

What is the Hippie Trail and How Does My Work Contribute to it?

Sharif Gemie and Brian Ireland remain one of the few historians who have extensively studied The Hippie Trail. In their book, *The Hippie Trail: A History*, the trail is defined as not a physical route, but a traveling attitude which often stems from discontentment with western

¹ This is seen as a major center for the Counterculture movement as it came to slowly develop as living spaces for people seeking alternatives to city life, a hub for psychedelic experimentation and also a space to protest.

post-war capitalism.² Gemie and Ireland also discuss in the chapter 'Representing the Trail' the various forms of repapers of the trail that exist today. Their work, which focuses on the perspective from Global North, points to the problem that not many pieces of fiction, in both literature or cinema, exist from the 1970s in the global North. My attempt, therefore, is to contribute to this gap through the literary studies perspective and think about *how the Hippie Trail is represented in Bengal and how the Hippies are remembered*.

What Is the Question?

In the chapter, 'The Hippie as a Tourist,' Gemie and Ireland discuss the dichotomy of whether the trailers were travelers or tourists, and if there is a fundamental difference between those two tags. They argue that the trailers moved between the two, where at some points they just traveled as tourists, and at other points, there was a larger internal journey that was sought out. They point out though that most hippie trailers "took it for granted that they were not tourists."³ In the limited discourse about the motivations of the trailers, the shift between tourist and 'finding one-self' is not well demarcated. They move between the two in this journey. The question, then, is how did they interact with their hosts and more importantly, with other local tourists? Gemie and Ireland point to larger historical questions of the unrest in Afghanistan and the rise of Islamic fundamentalists in Iran.⁴ They draw on the work of historians Bruce Chtawin, Patrick Matham, and Rory Maclean to discuss how their behavior in Central and West Asia earned little respect amongst the local communities, who seem to feel like this was an invasion of their culture leading to the rise of fundamentalism. The material conditions are more telling with the opium production in Afghanistan gaining a large impetus from the trailers. In contrast,

² Sharif Gemie and Brian Ireland, *The Hippie Trail: A History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 4.

³ Ibid, 103.

⁴ Ibid, 212-213.

the hippies remain a minor historical detail in India. Therefore, what would an everyday encounter look like in India? How is the Hippie remembered by a fellow tourist in the Himalayas?

Gangtok-e-Gondogol: A Brief Summary⁵

Gangtok-e-Gondogol is an early novel in the world-renowned filmmaker Satyajit Ray's popular detective series, *Feluda*.⁶ Published in 1970, the novel begins with the detective Pradosh Chandra Mitra—or Feluda⁷—and his cousin Tapeshe Ranjan Mitra traveling to Gangtok on a holiday. There they are encountered by a 'hippie', Helmut Unger, as they try to solve the murder case of Shivkumar Shelvankar. In Gangtok they meet several other Bhadrakol characters, and Unger serves as an important link to solving the crime.

The Traveler Meets the Tourist

Ray had made a documentary on the Royal Family of Sikkim in 1971 as well, one that was commissioned by the Chogyal King of Sikkim, and it remained one of the most controversial pieces of his long filmmaking career.

Satyajit Ray's *Gangtok-e Gondogol* makes a very intersectional perspective here. Many of these sought-out destinations of the Hippie Trail were also local holiday destinations where the 'local' non-white tourists would go. Gangtok is one such place, as it provides a hill station that is not very far from Calcutta but is an alternative to the traditional Bengali hill station of

⁵ Satyajit Ray, "Gangtok-e Gondogol," in *Feluda Samagrya*, vol. 1 (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2009).

⁶ Satyajit Ray is an Oscar-winning filmmaker known primarily in the realist movement of world cinema. He was also a major writer, especially of children's literature. Feluda's detective series is widely liked across Bengali audiences from many generations.

⁷ It is a nickname for the protagonist, common in Bengali literature.

Darjeeling.⁸ Therefore hippie 'travel' intersects with local travel; there are more conventional forms of tourists in these destinations who are in no way associated with the counterculture movement. Traveling to a new place within India for a trip is a recurring theme in the Feluda series, during which the central characters usually meet 'typical' but non-local characteristics from that place. This includes an evil Marwari businessman in Banaras, a smuggler-cum-film producer in Bombay, and an Armenian businessman in Hong Kong. It is interesting to think that Helmut's motif in the story is also to establish the surroundings and make them more real and believable. One attempts to think that Ray, who is extensively familiar with Sikkim⁹, might have felt that a story of travel in Sikkim would not be possible without a 'hippie' character. The story itself has no Sikkim locals in major roles and is a story largely of Bengali Bhadroloks. Does a 'hippie' then fit into the Bhadrlok popular imagination, as a fellow traveler in their summer vacation? Does this then break down the tourist/traveler binary? I argue that binary is broken in a way that tourists and travelers can both coexist and that the hippie is an essential part of the himalayan ecosystem in this period in the Bhadrlok Perception. However, the novel clearly reiterates the difference between Unger and Feluda and Topshe as travelers and that remains constant through the novel.

The Prodigal Return

The story does come with a twist, where it is revealed that Helmut Unger is actually Virendra Shelvankar, the long-lost son of the victim of the murder case within the novel, and his first German wife, Helga.¹⁰ This prompts a reversal of the 'oriental' gaze that Gemie and Ireland

⁸ Topshe, the teenage narrator of the stories, also points out that they are going to Gangtok because they seek this alternative.

⁹ Ray had made a documentary on the Royal Family of Sikkim in 1971 as well, one that was commissioned by the Chogyal King of Sikkim, and it remained one of the most controversial pieces of his long filmmaking career.

¹⁰ Ray, "Gangtoke Gondogol," 163.

describe as one that is supposed to be prevalent; as it is revealed that Helmut actually traveled from India to Europe in dire circumstances, doing every form of menial job possible to rebel against his father.¹¹ It is not clear if he traveled as a hippie, but he later states that he joined a group of hippies to come back to India. Though Helmut's relationship with the 'hippie' culture is unclear from this point on, it is interesting to think whether his travels in the reverse direction were considered to be on the hippie trail. Was Helmut a 'trailer' while going to Europe?¹² Or was he only a Hippie coming back? Does his particular appearance, especially his blue eyes (which we later learn are lenses), make him a Hippie? Or do his travels make him that? It is also important to note why Ray gives Helmut this backstory, and what it can tell us about the perceptions of the trail in Bengali imagination. Helmut is a possible suspect until this point, even being thought of as dangerous by Topshe right until the point that he reveals his identity (Topshe's internal monologue points to his fear of drug addict 'hippies'). Yet after this point, there is more warmth and he becomes a dear friend of Feluda. What is Ray then trying to achieve with this backstory of a prodigal return? What does a 'hippie' who is also Indian mean for how hippies are remembered.¹³

I believe that the implications here are complex as my complicating the idea of the hippie-Ray problematizes whether all hippies are friendly, decent people to be trusted, or is just Helmut aka Virendra Selvankar. As this is a children's novel, this is the first time readers might encounter the hippie. I believe that there is no clear black and white: we the readers don't get a distinction between Helmut as Virender and Helmut the photographer hippie. Placing it in the larger conversation about the hippie trail, Helmut adds another layer to the discourse of the

¹¹Gemie and Ireland, *The Hippie Trail*, 214.

¹² He most likely traveled in the late 1950s or the early 1960s.

¹³ Helmut Unger is the first 'hippie' I encountered ever, in literature, films or travelog.

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internal journey reflected by Gemie and Ireland. He is a tourist but also one seeking a larger internal journey which in turn transcends him to a local.

It is through these aspects that one can observe how Gangtok-e Gondogol and the character of Helmut Unger add a new dimension to repapers of the Hippie Trail, especially in popular culture in South Asia, and add to the sustained legacy of hippies in South Asia. The novel is successful in demystifying the hippie and as a children's novel opens up avenues for the hippie culture's perception in South Asia.

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