

## A Study on Cultural Encounter in *chai chai* by Bishwanath Gosh

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### **Abstract:**

Bishwanath Gosh is an Indian Travel writer who has travelled to various remote places in India like Mughal Sarai, Itarsi, Jhansi, and Shoranur. As a travel writer, he encounters different cultures followed by the people of these cities. He records the cultural practices, food habits, beliefs, traditions and material culture in his work *Chai Chai*. This study is an attempt to explore how travel narrative helps to understand the culture of the people. He encounters different sections of the people in his travels and tries to give an identity to these people through his writings. He documents everything with a cultural relativistic attitude. He also points out that Indian Railways plays a vital role in binding these people culturally, socially and politically.

**Keywords:** cultural encounter, history, food habits, identity, language, material culture.

Travel writings can serve as a piece of evidence of cultural documentation. Most of the travel writings are written out of the personal experiences of the travel writer. He encounters different sections of the people observes their traditions, values, and beliefs and then documents them in their work. William H. Sherman points out this process of documentation in his work, *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* as follows,

“Documentation had always played an important role in travel, particularly in overseas ventures” (Sherman17).

Travel writer escapes from his land and explores different types of land thereby he gets an experience with the people of different lands. In this process, the travel writer encounters people's cultures and gets a first-hand experience of a new region. The culture which the travel writer encounters should be analysed as it contains many buried meanings. When the travel writer crosses his border to observe the culture of new people belonging to a different land. The culture of people who belong to a new land is represented by their behaviours, customs, mannerisms, traditions and beliefs. The writer recreates an identity for the people who belong to different cultures from his point of view.

Cultural Encounter is a term used to mention actions of different cultures being introduced to each other. Peter Burke in his work *What is Cultural History?* brings out the origin of the word cultural encounter. He comments, “The term ‘cultural encounters’ came into use to replace the ethnocentric word ‘discovery’, especially in the course of the commemoration in 1992 of the five hundredth anniversary of Columbu’s landfall” (121). To get a better understanding of this concept, one should have a clear knowledge of the term ‘culture’. The term culture is a complicated term used all over the world. Raymond Williams stated in 1953 that culture is everything about society. It can be also described as ideas and material objects passed on from one generation to another. In a society, culture provides guidelines for action and interaction. Culture evolves and changes over time. Everyone shares a culture with others and the creation of culture is ongoing and cumulative. Culture separates man from animals. Clifford Geertz argues in his *The Interpretations of Cultures* that

The concept of culture I espouse is essentially a semiotic one. Believing with Max Weber, that Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning. (4)

Culture creates certain structures that shape a set of meanings in which the people live. Culture is constructed. In short, it could be said as the representation of meanings. Cultural encounter is the interactions between people of different standards. It happens when people of different cultures, mindsets and social backgrounds meet with one another.

Bishwanath Ghosh's *Chai, Chai* discusses multi-cultures. In this novel, he travels to many places in India like Mughal Sarai, Jhansi, Itarsi, Guntakal, Arakkonam and Jolarpettai, and finally Soranur. India is a land of multiculturalism. These places are remote railway stations which unite India. Indian railways are like the circulatory system which plays an important role in modern India. It is a binding factor and influences culture. In these places, one could see the real essence of India. He has brought out the rich history of the people who belong to these places. He gives life to every moment he spends in these places.

Mughal Sarai is situated close to Bihar, on the eastern edge of Uttar Pradesh. At first, the writer goes to an old road in Mughal Sarai. It is an important road in Mughal Sarai and it is 500 years old Grand Trunk Road. It is said to be the lifeline of India and the highway to the heart of India. He encounters different sections of people in Mughal Sarai. A teacher whom he met during his travel to Mughal Sarai says that the place is full of crime. Then a police constable warns the writer that the place is full of thugs. Mughal Sarai is completely unsafe. He mentions,

But I was nervous. I had heard only unflattering things about Mughal Sarai. An editor, who had never been there, told me the place was crime-ridden. A police constable, who had lived there, warned me that the place was infested with goondas. And now I was right there, at this vulnerable hour, completely at the mercy of a town that sat on the eastern edge of Uttar Pradesh, dangerously close to Bihar. (7)

Next, the writer tries to converse with a rickshaw puller, but he is not in the mood to engage with the writer. This event reveals that the people in Mughal Sarai, never initiated the conversation with other people and they do not come forward to speak. The Rickshaw puller never initiates the conversation and he never smiles at the writer until

he receives the amount he expected. They value money more than human beings. Burcu Zeybek in his article *An Analysis of Identities in the Context of Cultural Encounters* expresses, "Communication and culture influence each other mutually, and determine the cultural values of individuals constituting the society" (Zeybek 104). Through conversation and communication, one's culture is revealed.

The writer describes the appearance of the railway station as well as the people who travel in trains. He encounters different sects of people like Tamil, Bengali and Marwaris in his travel by train. He comes to know about their traditions and food culture while he is travelling on the train. Railway stations are the meeting places of different people. It paves the way to find different cultures. Bishwanath Gosh clearly states that food plays a vital role in knowing the culture of the people. He observes the eating habits and diets of Marwaris, Tamils and Bengalis. Marwaris used to pack puris, sabzi and pickles for their travel whereas Tamils used to carry idli and chutney powders with them. Then the author comments, "The Journeys are not just about the levelling, but also about getting acquainted with each other's cultures, especially food habits" (02). He strongly conveys that food reveals the cultural identity of the people.

He records the history of the place of Mughal Sarai. Sher Shah Suri, was a Bihar-born Afghan warrior who overthrew the Mughal emperor, Humayun in the 16th century. While the author is walking along the Grandtrunk road, he imagines how this place would have been in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. He states,

I tried imagining how the place must have looked when Sher Shah Suri-the Bihar-born Afghan warrior- administrator who had displaced Mughal emperor Humayun from his throne for fifteen long years-was laying it in the sixteenth century. The canvas for my imagination was as vast and empty as this place must have been then. (15)

History is an inevitable factor which influences culture. Kings and queens are the endorsers of culture. The article, *Difference between History and Culture* points out that "It is history that has to accommodate culture and the people that uphold culture" (Olivia). The writer could see the traces of Mughal architecture on the road he walks.

Then the writer discusses the dress and the culture of women in Mughal Sarai. On the way back to the writer's lodge, the writer buys a cheap t-shirt and a lungi. It is said that the Mughals of the day had a habit of dressing in this way. One can see so many beauty salons on the roads of Mughal Sarai. This shows that the people of Mughal Sarai have a culture of using beauty salons. The women of Mughal Sarai are more conscious about their beauty in turn, they are using more beauty salons. People have been immersed in this culture. The travel writer crosses his own culture and explores the foreign culture and its people. He then goes on to say that it is the largest railway station in Asia a place of major coal market and the birthplace of Lal Bahadur Shastri, the second Prime Minister of India. The writer narrates Mughal Sarai as follows,

“There was very little I knew about Mughal Sarai when I set out on the journey. I only had visions of visiting a crumbling caravanserai that must have throbbed with life during the Mughal era, catering to weary travellers passing by in carts drawn by horses, bullocks and camels” (17).

Babu is a native of Mughal Sarai. The writer asks if Mughal Sarai is affected by communal riots. He replies that Mughal Sarai is a peaceful state without communal riots. The writer describes as follows.

I asked him whether Mughal Sarai was affected by incidents that aimed to cause communal strife in Benares, such as the blast at the Sankat Mochan temple in early 2006. He answered with an emphatic ‘no’. ‘Benares mein curfew lag sakta hai, magar yahaan shaanti rehti hai--Benares might be under curfew, but here in Mughal Sarai there is always peace (21).

The writer wants to know about Mughal Sarai and its culture. The writer then asks Ramesh about Mughal Sarai, “Was there any inn in that town dating back to Mughal times?” (26) He finds no such inn. He then adds that the Mughal emperors would have travelled in these places, it is easy to find objects for entertainment in this place. This incident reveals the Mughal culture. The author keeps on Inquiring about the history of Mughal Sarai from the residents of Mughal Sarai. From the person named Chote lal, he knows that once it was a small village but now it has grown beyond recognition. He comes to know the fact that Lal Bahadur Sastri, the then prime minister

of India and Deen Dayal Upadhyay, an ideologue of the Jana Sangh was born in Mughal Sarai.

The police officer warns him that it is a land of thugs, pickpockets and big criminals. The author encounters different sections of the people of Mughal Sarai and their culture. He investigates the history of Mughal Sarai from the natives of Mughal Sarai. Cultural history records the descriptions of past events which involve human beings through social, cultural and political manners. History has two dimensions according to Schorske,

The historian seeks to locate and interpret the artefact temporally in a field where two lines intersect. One line is vertical or diachronic, by which he establishes the relation of a text or system of thought to previous expressions in the same branch of cultural activity. The other is horizontal, or synchronic: by it he assesses the relation of the content of the intellectual object to what is appearing in other branches or aspects of a culture at the same time. (Chartier 420-425)

The relationship between culture and history is complex. On Many occasions, Cultural traits have been created based on history in the society. History is also one of the aspects which determines the culture of a particular society. Here, the travel writer travels to the remote part of India, Mughal Sarai. He encounters different people and comes to know about their culture. Through his inquiries, he has found that their culture was highly influenced by the Mughals who ruled the place in the sixteenth century. Travel paves the way to know various cultures and histories.

Language can be considered as a part and parcel of culture. The foundation of every culture has taken three forms, they are spoken language, written language and nonverbal language. Jurgen Habermas, in *Cultural Analysis*, says that Language provides a key to the analysis of culture. The writer should know the language of the place which they are going to visit. This makes them understand the culture of the region in a well-defined manner. Language allows one to communicate with one another whereas culture enables one how one should think and perceive what is happening around oneself. Both culture and language share human ideas, thoughts and perceptions. Culture is not static. Language signifies the changing nature of culture. With the help of language culture

evolves. Khaled Hosseini, an Afghan-born novelist reinforces the concept of language and culture in his novel, *And the Mountain Echoed* as follows, "If culture is a house, then language was the key to the front door, to all the rooms inside" (49).

When the writer visits the city of Jhansi, he talks to a woman to learn about the culture of Jhansi. He introduces himself in English. The author comments that speaking English fluently would work wonders in North Indian cities. If one speaks good English, he should have attended convent school. From this, one could see the culture of speaking in English in Jhansi. The woman also tries her best to converse in English with the writer. Those who can speak English fluently are seen by the community as valued, knowledgeable and cultured. Though she could not talk in fluent English, she managed to talk with him. Speaking in English has been related to efficiency and Knowledge. This kind of behaviour is popular in North India.

Then the writer asks his friend Vikas about Jhansi. But he rejects the question first and then says that it is just a small town. The writer's mind is on Jhansi. The writer then mentally plans an itinerary for the next two days. He finds at least Lakshmibai, the queen of Jhansi, has a fort on horseback with her adopted son Damodaran on her back. She died fighting with the British. She becomes a symbol of patriotism and courage. The writer says that almost every schoolgirl in Jhansi wants to be as brave as Queen Jhansi. From this, it is evident that Jhansi is named after a woman named Rani Lakshmibai. Not only that but also the writer finds the culture that existed then. It shows that the women who lived during earlier times were so courageous. He mentions,

At least there was the fort from where Laxmibai, the queen of Jhansi, had taken the plunge on horseback, with her adopted son Damodar strapped to her back. She had died fighting the British and become a symbol of patriotism and female valour. Until not very long ago, almost every schoolgirl aspired to be as brave as the Rani of Jhansi (62).

The writer comes to know about Rani Lakshmi Bai and the people's notion about the valiant Queen Lakshmi Bai. He talks about the history of Jhansi. In 1857 Lakshmibai, revolted against the British. With her adopted son on her back, she jumped on a horse and escaped from the fort. In June 1857, she died in the battle near Gwalior. Her heroism



is revealed. Next, the writer mentions that her heroism and courageousness are celebrated in a long poem composed by local poet Subhadra Kumari Chauhan. It is also engraved on the board at the entrance with the site map of the fort. The poet mentions about Lakshmi bai as follows,

Loyalty was wavering at the same spot even in 1857, when Laxmibai, like many other native rulers, discovered that allegiance to the British no longer guaranteed her status as the queen of Jhansi. She revolted and, as the enemy forces zeroed in on the fort, escaped by jumping from the fort on a horse with her adopted son strapped to her back-only to die valiantly three months later, in June 1857, in a battle near Gwalior. (75)

She breaks the stereotypes that are prevalent in India. She has set an example of how women should be brave. Her legacy still gets life in Jhansi through stories. Her stories are an inspiration for many women. She becomes an iconic figure and many songs and stories are written about her bravery. The people of Jhansi follow her and adore her. Makhijani Eagly and Klonsky mention in their work *Gender and Evaluation of Leaders* that, “Men have higher status in most societies, they are more likely to be perceived as effective leaders” (3-22). She has set up a culture and influences many people not only in Jhansi but almost all over India. Men are leaders in many cultures but she changes the culture. Her Majesty is a powerful cultural influence on the people of Jhansi. The writer explores Jhansi and finds out Lakshmi Bai’s influence on the people.

The writer then through his friend, Bhagat comes to know about the psyche of the people of Jhansi. He says that in a place like Jhansi, people are not coveted too much and is happy with what they get. If someone earns fifteen thousand rupees a month, he is satisfied with it and they would tell it is enough. It reveals the attitudes of the people of Jhansi. Vikas, the writer’s friend complains about the people of Jhansi. He conveys that the streets in Jhansi are Unsafe and it is a place of murder and insecurity. Travel narrators could be considered as a source that documents culture through which new places are better understood through descriptions of the writer’s experience. Bishwanath Gosh, with a cultural relativistic attitude which means assessing a culture with an open mind and by its standards. Ruth Benedict, an anthropologist argues, “Each culture has



an internally consistent pattern of thought and action, which alone could be the basis for judging the merits and morality of the culture's practices" (Chap 3).

The famous hockey player Dyan Chand was born in Jhansi. Dyan Chand's mesmerizing performance at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, made Jhansi a notable place. Dayan Chand's bigger statue is situated in Jhansi amidst today's cricket-mad India. Though hockey is the national game of India, people give more importance to cricket. But in Jhansi, people treat all games as equal. There are many sports venues in Jhansi like Dayanchand Stadium, Railway Stadium and LVM Sports. Dayanchand's stadium is the best place to learn sports in Jhansi. Hockey, cricket, football, chess and many other games are played at Dayanand Stadium. The writer observes the people's love for Dayanand in his travels. They give more importance to sports, especially hockey. From this, it is evident that the people of Jhansi have more affinity for sports.

The writer notices some sign boards on the way to Madhya Pradesh. It states that only condoms can fight AIDS. The following are the lines on the notice board: "AIDS *ka virodh*, bus *ek nirodh*. Condom alone can fight AIDS" (80). The temple of Khajuraho has statues which depict erotic scenes. One of the guides says he could speak English fluently and then the writer can catch a few words from a distance I.e. brutality, homosexuality, evils, delusion and delusion. As the writer approaches the guide, the writer realizes that he is justifying the presence of erotic sculptures in the temples. The writer narrates that "'Lust converts to love, love converts to devotion, devotion converts to spirituality, and spirituality converts to super consciousness" (93). The culture of the society is recognized by its art and architecture. Both art and architecture reflect the social, political, and economic behaviours of the society. It has a profound impact on the concept of culture and it is meant to preserve or keep ancient values, beliefs and traditions.

Through art and architecture, the values have been transferred to the next generation. Parhizgar in his work *Journal of Life Story* mentions that, "Architecture is scientific-artistic activities to create space and organize it: crystallization of the culture of a community over time; and clear mirror of the society in different periods (11). Every community and ethnic group differ from one another in accordance with their art and

architecture. It serves as an identity for a group of people who lived in this world centuries before. It documents their values, attitudes and beliefs. Engraving sculptures in the temple is one of the beautiful arts which expresses the feelings of man from early times. Khajuraho temples stand as a monument for Indian heritage. It represents or portrays scenes from day to day life. It narrates the daily life of devadasis. This temple constitutes the representation of the arts and architecture of our country during the tenth century. Usha Rai writes about the sculptures as, "The spine according to the tantric theories current in the Chandela period, was linkened to the serpent of energy, kundalini, stretching from the base of the sacrum to the crown of the head, supporting the six stages of spiritual evolution" (Chaudhri).

Next, the writer visits the place called Itarsi which is situated in Madhya Pradesh. It is the connecting place for Chennai and Mumbai and Mumbai to Calcutta. The writer observes that the people of Itarsi had a habit of listening to music at the roadside shops. The writer comes to know from the people who used to have conversations in the tea shops. The new mobile phone the stranger bought for his son has up to 250 songs in stores. The people of Itarsi are lagging far behind in understanding the storage capacity of mobile phones. The writer concluded that the two strangers agreed that technology does great things in their lives. As a traveller, he documents the routine, beliefs, customs and states of mind of the people of Itarsi.

The writer notices the material culture of the place Itarsi. Material culture includes tools, utensils, machines, monuments etc., Non material culture destroys the people who create it whereas material culture exists even after the end of the people. Henry Glassie in his work *Material Culture* comments that, "Material culture records human intrusion in the environment, we live in material culture, depend upon it, take it for granted, and realize through it our grandest aspirations" (1). Human beings intrude on the environment in which they live and make productive things. Technological development is a part of a culture. A culture's growth is determined by its technology. Here in Itarsi, the writer points out that they are lagging in their knowledge of science and technology.

The writer visits the park in Itarsi. He finds that two Malayalees are sitting at the table next to him and also two Marathi-speaking men at the table behind him. However,

the table in front of him is occupied by a group of Punjabis. They are gathered in the park to celebrate the evening. Irrespective of the cultural differences, people gather in the park to celebrate their leisurely evening after tiresome work. A park is a place where people gather without any petty discrimination. This serves as an opportunity for a travel writer to observe various cultures in one place.

The writer inquired about Itarsi the person named Ramesh. He replies that it is a place of low-cost living. He then points out that long-distance trains are stopped at Itarsi. It thrives mainly on the passenger movement. For decades, Itarsi and Mughal Sarai have served as refreshment rooms for trains, and passenger engines. Gosh describes the city as the cities are increasingly connected by new high-speed trains. The author makes a statement about Itarsi as follows: "what the backwaters mean to Kerala, the railway station mean to itarsi" (122).

The wheat and soybeans which are available in the south came from Itarsi. Itarsi is one of the largest railway junctions in Madhya Pradesh. Itarsi falls under the West Central Railway Zone and is headquartered in Jabalpur. Itarsi is the busiest railway station in the Bhopal district. As a travel writer, the author represents the picture of Itarsi to the readers. He is a man who belongs to a different culture. He encounters the people of Itarsi with his own culture and observes their culture. He points out the people of Itarsi with their beliefs, daily routine, technology and the importance of railway stations in Itarsi. Itarsi's culture is influenced by railways. The people of Itarsi solely depend on railways for their livelihood.

Next, the writer moves to a place called Guntakal, Andhra Pradesh. Muslims make up 40 per cent of the population and they do not have any communal problem. They comment that they live as brothers. Muslims and people of other religions practice brotherhood with a sense of belonging which influences their culture. Here in Guntakal, there are more Muslims but they never indulge in any communal violence. The writer records the nature of the people of Guntakal.

Many problems or conflicts arise between two communities, religions, caste and race since people forget that they are all human beings bound by the concept of love. Those who indulge in riots and clashes lack understanding. The more one understands

other cultures or religions the more one can study other's cultures or religions. They start to show tolerance towards other communities and religions. The problem arises when he starts to think ethnocentrically which means believing that their culture is correct and judging other cultures is incorrect. Religion is a part of culture, the people of Guntakal maintain religious harmony with each other. They recognize each other's religion and start to respect each other.

Jyotsna Roshini says "Indian religions shaped Indian cultures" (Roshini). India is an example of unity in diversity. It is a symbol of multiculturalism and pluralism in every aspect. Communal clashes or conflicts are a threat to the nation's integrity. Guntakal serves as an example of multiculturalism where people live harmoniously with each other. Religious harmony or communal harmony is an ethic of coexistence rooted in peace. Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, in his *The Age of Peace*, mentions, "The time has come for all mankind to live on earth in harmony as a single family. Living in harmony is no longer simply an ethical principle rather it is a way of life" (41). The writer notices the harmonious nature of the people of Guntakal and documents it in his novel *Chai Chai*.

Then, the writer visits Arakkonam and Jolarpettai. Jolarpettai, is the junction between Chennai and Bangalore and the main junction of all the trains going to Karnataka, Kerala and South Tamil Nadu. Then the writer mentions the train stations. The writer portrays the Railway station as one which will take people straight to the hustle and bustle of the city. The junction of Jolarpet is a major factor in the growth of the city. Finally, the writer moves to a place called Soranur. Shoranur railway station would have been inaccessible to most Indians, if one came to Kerala from Delhi or Bombay, he or she had to spend a few minutes in Shoranur. But even within Kerala, it is primarily known as the railway junction. It is on the banks of the Bharathapuzha, in Kerala which is similar to the Ganges. Then he said that almost every Malayalam poet has written a poem praising the river. The writer states "considering that one in every six Malayalis sees a poet when he looks into the mirror every morning, the number of words written in celebration of the Bharathapuzha would far outnumber those written in tribute to the Ganga" (191).

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About seventy-five years ago, there were more than 3,000 railway employees in this town. Small businesses flourished in the town and Shoranur became famous for its cutting tools and agricultural implements. But now everything lost its prominence. The writer records the foods, habits and routines of the people of Shoranur. Railways play an important role in designing the lives of the people who are living in the connecting stations. Business Standard says, "Indian rail has not just connected, but influenced culture" (Business Standard). The Railways connect the country historically, economically and socially.

Bishwanath Ghosh travels to all the remote railway stations like Mughal Sarai, Guntakal, Itarsi, Shoranur, and Jhansi. He narrates the culture of the people who are residing in these places. The various cultures of the different sections of people have been recorded by the author in his novel *Chai, Chai*. Travel narration is a deliberate attempt made by the writer or the traveller to narrate the social, political, economic and culture-related problems to the readers. It is a mode for the encounter of different sections of people. Cultural encounters occur when two different cultural identities interact with each other.

This study is an attempt to know how a travel narrative helps to understand the culture of the people of Mughal Sarai, Itarsi, Soranpur and Jolarpet and how the author as a travel narrator observes these cultures from the perspective of his own culture. Gosh narrates or documents other cultures with a cultural relativistic attitude. He does not criticize, evaluate or judge anyone's culture throughout the novel. He understands that each culture is entitled to its own beliefs and values. As a travel writer, he carefully builds an identity for the people as well as for the places he encountered. Cultural encounter is a vast area of study which cannot be restricted within the literature. It can be analysed socially, anthropologically and politically.

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