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Beyond the Tracks: Railway Stations as Sites of Inclusion and Social Fluidity in Biswanath Ghosh's Chai, Chai: Travels in Places Where You Stop But Never Get Off

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Abstract

This paper discusses Biswanath Ghosh's Chai, Chai as a travelogue that reveals India's often-overlooked railway towns, showing them as welcoming spaces where identities, social status, and class blend together in the flow of travel. While many stories about India focus on the metropolis, Ghosh highlights stations like Itarsi, Mughal Sarai, and Jhansi, which are usually seen as just places to pass through but are actually full of human stories about flexibility, survival, and togetherness. By applying Henri Lefebvre's ideas about space, this study looks at how railway stations act as lively and democratic spaces where social differences fade away in the constant movement of people. Victor Turner's concepts of "liminality" and "communitas" help understand how these spaces encourage cultural mixing and flexible identities. Judith Butler's idea of performativity as a dynamic process shaped by repeated performances in various contexts illustrates how vendors, laborers, and travelers play different roles, transforming these stations into ever-changing stages of life. More than just places to catch a train, railway stations teach us important lessons about social inclusion and diversity. People from various backgrounds interact daily, learning to coexist despite their differences. This study argues that Ghosh's depiction of railway towns challenges the strict structures of mainstream society, showing that diversity can thrive in motion. By observing these spaces, we can learn to embrace inclusion, adapt to our differences, and work towards a more harmonious future.

Keywords: Railway stations, marginal spaces, fluid identities, hybridity, performativity, social inclusion, pluralism.

Introduction

Travel literature is a genre of writing that recounts the experiences, observations, and reflections of individuals who journey to different places. It includes

a wide range of narratives, such as personal travelogues, essays, memoirs, and novels, bringing themes of exploration, adventure, culture, and self-discovery. Carl Thompson defines travel as "a movement through space," emphasizing that a journey can be vast and epic, spanning continents, or more localized, within familiar surroundings (Thompson 9). Travel writing is important in today's world. With the rapid growth of travel in the modern era of science and technology, this non-fiction genre captures society through the writer's observations. Travel narratives often describe adventures, explorations, and socio-political and cultural dimensions in a non-fictional format.

Travel narratives combine personal experiences with larger societal themes. They show how traveling enhances storytelling. Shruti Dabhi and K. K. Shastri write, "Travelling and storytelling go hand in hand. These fundamentals of human existence involve stages like seeing, feeling, understanding, believing, recepting and narrating it to others" (2). This connection between traveling and storytelling shows that each journey deepens our understanding of the world and helps us shape our identity as we share our experiences with others.

In Chai, Chai, Biswanath Ghosh moves beyond India's shining metropolises to explore the overlooked railway towns where movement shapes daily life. Here, people from diverse backgrounds—vendors, laborers, and travelers—converge, share experiences, and form human connections beyond caste, class, or status. These transient spaces create an organic multiculturalism that is flexible, inclusive, and deeply human. This paper argues that Ghosh's depiction of railway towns challenges the rigidity of settled communities in terms of class and ideology by presenting these spaces as microcosms of pluralism and social harmony. Using Henri Lefebvre's spatial theory, Victor Turner's concepts of "liminality" and "communitas," and Judith Butler's idea of performativity as a dynamic process shaped by repeated performances in various contexts, this study explores how these fleeting yet deeply rooted spaces reveal an alternative vision of progress that values human connection over structural divisions. By reimagining railway stations as places of inclusion and transformation, Chai, Chai invites us to embrace diversity, adapt to our differences, and work towards a more harmonious world.

Literature Review

The past readings of the mentioned travelogue cover diverse perspectives. In this regard, Siddhartha Dubey, in his article "Journeying through the Indian Railways in Around India in 80 Trains (2012) by Monisha Rajesh and Chai, Chai: Travels in Places where You Stop But Get Never Off (2009) by Bishwanath Ghosh," examines how train journeys create temporary spaces that challenge conventional

notions of tolerance and intolerance. He argues that "a provisional spatial arrangement of a train therefore questions the idea of tolerance and intolerance compared to that of permanent arrangement" (320). However, the critique gives scant attention to how open interactions on trains can impact larger social structures beyond just places like railway stations.

Similarly, Meena Nandhini and Beneson Thilagar Christadoss, in their article "A Study on Cultural Encounter in Chai, Chai by Bishwanath Ghosh," note how Ghosh through his travelogue captures the cultural diversity of India by bringing various lesser-known railway towns such as Mughal Sarai, Jhansi, Itarsi, Guntakal, Arakkonam, Jolarpettai, and Shoranur into the limelight. They write, "Indian railways are like the circulatory system which plays an important role in modern India. It is a binding factor and influences culture" (3). According to these critics, Ghosh's travels show the true spirit of India by sharing the stories of people in small towns. He makes these places feel alive and important even though they are often ignored.

In the same way, Satarupa Mukhopadhyay, in her research report "Quenching the Thirst of Exploration: Revisiting the Genre of Travel Writing with Special Reference to Bishwanath Ghosh's Chai, Chai, Tamarind City, and Gazing at Neighbours," examines how Ghosh thoughtfully captures his impressions of the towns he visits and the people he meets along the way. His narrative style flows effortlessly, moving between serious historical insights and light comic moments. According to her, "the core success and the interesting part of his book lies in his mastery of enacting dialogue with the local persons and his co-travelers and dramatization of his experiences and the characters with whom he interacts" (7). This observation reveals Ghosh's strength as a storyteller who not only describes people and places but brings them vividly to life through engaging dialogue. She, however, pays little attention to an aspect that holds rich potential for exploring how railway platforms function as unique social landscapes, reflecting the diversity and mobility of India.

Anuradha Goyal's review of Chai, Chai by Bishwanath Ghosh highlights how the travelogue brings out the hidden stories of railway junctions and the lives around them. She notes Ghosh's growth as a writer, observing a deeper narrative style compared to his earlier work, Tamarind City. The review appreciates how he captures the quiet vibrancy of places beyond the train tracks. However, while Goyal acknowledges Ghosh's exploration, she does not delve into how these spaces reflect social fluidity and cultural performance, which are parts of India's pluralism and spirit of coexistence.

Building on the existing literature, it is clear that while previous readings emphasize cultural intersections and personal narratives, they often overlook the dynamic nature of social identities within railway contexts. My exploration of Ghosh's Chai, Chai aims to add how the fluidity of identities and social interactions at railway stations help establish a sense of belonging and community. By focusing on the performative aspects of travel and the transient yet impactful relationships formed in these spaces, this study seeks to deepen our understanding of inclusivity and pluralism in contemporary Indian society.

Railway Stations as Sites of Inclusion and Social Fluidity in Chai, Chai

In Chai, Chai: Travels in Places Where You Stop but Never Get Off, Bishwanath Ghosh explores railway junctions like Mughalsarai, Jhansi, Itarsi, Guntakal, and Jolarpettai, where people pause but rarely stay. These stations become melting pots of human interaction, where passengers from different walks of life engage in conversation with tea vendors, rickshaw pullers, hotel owners, and fleeting yet meaningful conversations. Unlike settled societies bound by rigid identities and ideologies, these liminal spaces promote inclusion, fluidity, and freedom. Here, barriers dissolve, and a shared humanity comes to the fore. Ghosh's travelogue beautifully captures this transient yet profound interconnectedness, revealing railway stations as sites of diversity and harmony.

The writer reflects on the journey through the train and the power of the chaiwallah. As he notes in his travelogue, "When you are travelling in a long-distance train like Tamil Nadu Express, it is often not possible to tell Tamil Nadu from Andhra Pradesh, or Andhra Pradesh from Maharashtra. You will have to rely on the chaiwallah to tell you your current location, in case you've missed the yellow signboard" (Ghosh i-ii). Ghosh shows how the chaiwallah is more than just a tea seller; he becomes a guide in the ever-moving train journey. As state borders blur, the chaiwallah quietly helps the travelers, offering them a sense of place in the ever-moving railway world.

Ghosh's travelogue highlights the liberal and humanizing nature of railway stations, where rigid social structures give way to inclusivity and shared experiences. The writer observes that "India can have no better symbol for national integration than railways. The railway reservation form doesn't ask you anything beyond your name, age, gender, and address" (Ghosh ii). This statement emphasizes the railway's role as a great equalizer, where identity markers such as caste, class, creed, and custom, often central in settled societies, lose significance. The train compartment becomes a place where people from different backgrounds connect, united by the journey. Here, interactions are shaped by shared needs, making rail-

way spaces symbols of inclusion, movement, and harmony.

Ghosh's travelogue not only unfolds railway stations as spaces of inclusion but also as sites of cultural exchange, where food becomes a language of connection. Train journeys offer a glimpse into India's rich diversity, as passengers share meals, traditions, and stories, turning compartments into microcosms of the nation. As he observes:

The journeys are not just about levelling, but also about getting acquainted with each other's cultures, especially food habits. Marwaris, when they travel as a large family, carry a stock of food that would last them the journey… Tamil families usually carry their stocks as well: idlis and an oily paste of what they call the chutney powder… The story here is that the railways is not just a means of transport, but the circulatory system of India. No railways, no India. (Ghosh ii-iii)

Ghosh shows that train journeys promote cultural exchange, where food acts as a bridge between different groups. Sharing meals helps create a sense of community among passengers. This interaction highlights how railways connect people, transcending geographical and social barriers.

Building on this idea of connection, the shared experience of train travel can be seen as a liminal space where social hierarchies momentarily dissolve, allowing for new forms of interaction. Victor Turner, in his most celebrated book The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure (1969), introduces the critical concepts of "liminality" and "communitas." For him, "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (359), while communitas is a "modality of social relationship from an 'area of common living'" (360). To put it simply, liminality is a temporary "in-between" state where people step outside their usual roles, norms, or identities. In this phase, social structures become less rigid, paving the way for new possibilities and interactions, whereas communitas is the strong sense of unity and equality that emerges in liminal spaces. It happens when people share experiences that break down social barriers, creating deep and spontaneous connections.

Ghosh's depiction of train journeys reflects Turner's concepts of "liminality" and "communitas." For example, in a railway station, travelers from different backgrounds momentarily come together, free from their usual societal statuses, and experience both liminality and communitas. Passengers temporarily leave their daily lives and social roles behind. In this transitional space, sharing meals promotes a sense of communitas. This shared experience turns train compartments into vibrant microcosms of India, bringing the power of cultural exchange and

community during the journey to the fore.

Henri Lefebvre, in his book The Production of Space, explores how space plays an important role in shaping human experiences. He introduces the concept of the spatial triad: Spatial practice (Perceived space), Representations of space (Conceived Space), and Representational spaces (Lived Space). According to him, spatial practice "embodies a close association, within perceived space, between daily reality (daily routine) and urban reality (the routes and networks which link up the places set aside for work, 'private' life and leisure)" (38), whereas representations of space is "conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers, as of a certain type of artist with a scientific bent—all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived" (38). Spaces of representation, in the same way, are "space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users'… more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs" (39). To put it more pointedly, perceived space is the physical and social environment of daily life, such as roads, workplaces, and homes, as they are physically structured and used. Conceived space is the structured and planned space defined by experts and institutions. Lived space is personal and symbolic, shaped by culture and imagination. It is where imagination, resistance, and alternative uses of space emerge, challenging the conceived space.

In Chai, Chai, Biswanath Ghosh's projection of the train stations in India and surrounding towns embodies Lefebvre's spatial triad. Representations of Space (Conceived Space) includes the railway infrastructure, including the stations, tracks, and urban planning around them that represent the dominant concept of space imposed by authorities. Spatial Practices (Perceived Space) include the daily movement of passengers, chai vendors, and workers at the stations. They function as temporary meeting points where people engage in rituals like drinking tea and conversing while waiting for their next train. Spaces of Representation (Lived Space), in the same way, include the act of sharing tea, exchanging stories, and forming momentary yet profound human connections, which redefine the spaces beyond their utilitarian purpose, making them part of personal and collective memories. Ghosh's descriptions of life around the stations, where "tea vendors, porters, and pilgrims coexisted in their daily rituals" (22), show how these spaces are produced through everyday social interactions.

In his travelogue, Ghosh brings railway stations to life as vibrant stages where performances occur. The porters, chai sellers, and travelers all engage in daily performances of identity that reinforce cultural norms while also negotiating them

in a transient space. Judith Butler's theory of performativity illustrates that identity is not a static attribute but a dynamic process shaped by repeated performances in various contexts. In her book Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, she asserts that "the performance of identity is not merely a reflection of a pre-existing identity; rather, it is a practice that brings identity into being" (151). At Mughal Sarai, for instance, Ghosh notes, “The vendors shouted out their wares in the local dialect, but switched effortlessly to Hindi or English when a more affluent traveler approached” (39). This fluidity of identity reflects Butler’s idea that identities are performative, shifting according to the audience and context.

At the railway station, Ghosh sees people freely enjoying drinks, something society in India often disapproves of. He describes the Indian bar as a place where rules fade, conversations start easily, and strangers connect, even if just for a moment:

A typical Indian bar, the one that is attached to a booze shop, is mainly meant to facilitate clandestine drinking. When society looks down upon drinking and the family considers it taboo, such bars are only place where you can drink in peace, without burning a hole in your pocket and away from the view of your neighbours. (19)

The railway stations create spaces of inclusion and social fluidity. In Chai, Chai, Ghosh shows that bars attached to liquor shops offer a rare space where social norms loosen. Here, people from different backgrounds can drink freely, away from societal judgment. Unlike rigid social settings, the railway station allows individuals to step outside fixed roles, interact with strangers, and experience a brief sense of freedom. The writer further notes the sense of freedom and enjoyment associated with consuming street food near railway stations, which is often restricted within the structured framework of Indian family and society. His observation brings out how these transient spaces allow individuals to momentarily step outside social norms and indulge in simple pleasures that may not be encouraged in more regulated family settings:

There are people like me who indulge in street food not only because they like it but also, somewhere in their subconscious, to take revenge on the parents and elders who had kept them away from it during childhood by scaring them with words ‘germs’, ‘bacteria’, ‘jaundice’, ‘typhoid’, ‘cholera’ and so on. (86)

The railway stations provide a space where people can enjoy street food, something often restricted at home due to health concerns. Ghosh highlights that eating street food at these stations allows individuals to break free from the rules of family and society, giving them a sense of freedom and pleasure.

The description of the Jhansi railway station and its surrounding towns is characterized by a performative quality that reflects the continuous social interactions in this space. Ghosh notes the presence of "cheap hotels, restaurants, paan shops, phone booths, and dilapidated houses," creating a vibrant yet chaotic environment. He observes that people appear to "have been living for centuries watching the railway station metamorphose from a British-era piece of architecture to a shelter of chaos where everybody has an equal claim to the property—From the poor and the homeless to the beggar and the thief and the tout and the pimp" (47). This projection makes the railway station a microcosm of society, where social hierarchies blur, and a sense of communal belonging emerges amidst the chaos.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Biswanath Ghosh's Chai, Chai provides a new view of India's railway stations as lively places of inclusion and social fluidity. By focusing on towns like Itarsi, Mughal Sarai, and Jhansi, Ghosh shows that these stations are not just transit points but vibrant spaces filled with stories of diverse people coming together. The constant movement and interactions at these stations promote cultural exchange and flexible identities. Through this train travelogue, Ghosh challenges traditional views of social structure, showing that diversity can thrive in dynamic environments. The idea of a shining India often emphasizes settled societies that are divided by social hierarchies. However, we can learn valuable lessons from the lives of people in railway stations. These spaces teach us about the importance of diversity, inclusion, and cultural exchange. Understanding and appreciating these railway towns is essential for building a harmonious and culturally rich India. This is the core message of Ghosh's Chai, Chai.

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