



# Travel Writing as Witness: A Reading of Pankaj Mishra's *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana, Travels in Small Towns of India*.

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**Abstract:** Travel writing provides a rich terrain to study socio cultural realities of the places they depict. Postcolonial travel writings have received significant scholarly attention recently as they bring forth travel narratives that offer important insights into social and political concerns of contemporary world. This paper discusses the travelogue of one of the important postcolonial travel writers from India, Pankaj Mishra's *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana, Travels in Small Towns of India*. *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana* is a travel text written during the 1990s in the context of globalization entering India and documents the changes that were seen in small towns of India in the wake of globalization from a critical perspective. The paper argues that *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana* serves as an example to understand how travel narratives can act as a witness to the profound socio- cultural changes occurring in the society.

**Key words:** Travel Writing, globalization, economic liberalization, postcoloniality, socio cultural shifts, travel as witness.

## Introduction:

Travel writing has become a significant area of scholarly study in the past decades as it is reflective of some of the important social, political and cultural features of the times. Travelogues are also fascinating because it helps us see how journeys are used by individuals to make sense of the world around them. The eclectic quality of travel writing offers a rich terrain for readers and scholars to engage with some of the critical social and political debates of the times they are written and read. Travel taken up by writers from postcolonial contexts have offered important insights in understanding the contemporary world. Postcolonial travel writing is also seen as providing a counter narrative to the Euro centric world views and has offered what Justin Edwards calls as

‘revisionist, critical, subversive narratives, political positions and innovative forms of representation’ (02) from the non-European world. Postcolonial travel writings are of different forms and one of them is travel writing based on travel inside one’s own country to gain better understanding and perspective of the society and the changes it is undergoing. These travel texts become important as they depict issues that are ‘specific interest to postcoloniality’ (Holland 65). This category of travel writing also serve as a witness to some of the significant changes in the socio-cultural realities in the postcolonial society. Pankaj Mishra’s *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana, Travels in Small Towns of India* is one such travelogue that chronicles the changes that India saw during the 1990s with the liberalization of economy.

*Butter Chicken in Ludhiana, Travels in Small Towns of India* was published in 1995 and book narrates the experiences of travel to small towns of India in the context of new economic policy/globalization entering India. This was a momentous time as the economic changes opened market to foreign investments, private companies. This also meant shift towards market centered, consumption driven economy, the impact of which was felt at in the social and cultural spheres of people’s lives. The impact of globalization was very obvious in the larger cities but the changes in the smaller towns were comparatively obscure. The book primarily focuses on the social and cultural shifts that occurred in small towns during this time in curious and unsaid ways. Pankaj Mishra achieves this by documenting the external and internal changes that could be seen and felt in the people and places he visits. The book is a narration of experience of travel to 19 small towns located in different parts of India which is overall representative of the trends and patterns that were emerging during the time of globalization. Using wit, humor and satire, Pankaj Mishra’s lucid prose chronicles the conversations and observations he has during the journey to these 19 small towns. The travel narrative becomes to witness to the eventful change that India underwent. Hailing from a small town himself, Pankaj Mishra becomes an insider to the context he writes about, thus making the portrayal closer and authentic.

### External and Internal Shifts

Pankaj Mishra takes a close look at the both the external and internal changes occurring in small town India spurred by globalization in this book. The economic changes and larger shifts in the market propelled small towns leave their sleepy, laid-back and rather an apologetic semblance behind and take on ‘new aggressiveness’ and that ‘spoke of an untroubled confidence and growing ability of places like Muzffarnagar to deal with the larger world on its own terms’. (xvi) The travelogue in first-person narrative documents the profound changes that economic liberalization had begun to bring in the lives of people. With short chapters detailing each place the author visits, the book gives readers a glimpse into the people and event and becomes a witness to these shifts. Pankaj captures a large and diverse landscape from Shimla to Kanyakumari bringing the regional diversity to center stage. Huge dish antennas erected on the elegant ancient palaces of Jaipur, the loudspeakers that come alive in the morning at Mandi, incessant honking of vehicles, latest style loudspeakers playing Bon Jovi at Pushkar, diesel tempos, lorries, auto rickshaws and cars strangulating the spacious avenues of Udaipur, mounds of unclaimed garbage next to the flashy multistoried buildings all capture the ‘shabby modernity’(54) for the author. Describing his experience at Shimla, the author also talks about the chaos of new buildings juxtaposed to the elegant Gortin Castle and old church buildings built by the native builders using local craftsmen and materials which are harmonious with the landscape in unostentatious and simple in style highlighting the sustainable life that seem to be slipping away from the surroundings.

The narrative constructs the changing nature of the identity of the small cities like Mandi, the external changes seem to give rise to a certain kind of aesthetics and ways of living. International (mainly American) brands, Arrow shirts, Woodland shoes, Park Avenue trousers or Nikes seen everywhere. From music to food and TV channels, American pop culture has found its place in small towns. The author says that what one encounters in these new markets is also ‘a new kind of business men increasingly that you met in your travels: people created by the recent liberalization of economy by the wholesale marketing in India’, people are increasingly exhibiting unabashed self-love, frantic hankering for fame, wealth and status...’ (54)

Pankaj Mishra through the conversations and descriptions of people and places, hints at the overpowering consumer culture and the slow erosion of moral compass that are revealed in many parts of the narrative that the book depicts. The young politician he meets at Mandi is a telling example of this. This young leader wants to build a tourist resort at Mandi and to make sure it is teeming with tourist resorts. He quickly adds to say that people of Mandi are too naïve and lack initiative, and stresses on the need to make Mandi like Manali, which was no more backward, poor and jungle but geared towards tourism. Despite his small-town background, he was a typical of the new kind of businessmen who is aspiring to become a politician. ‘In the past businessmen sponsored politicians ...now there was nothing stopping businessmen become politicians’ (86). These reflect the changing aspirations of people in small towns. The nature of public spaces also seems to be changing, the author talks about the sweet shops as example in Northern India which once served as a place offering a social space that were inclusive, democratic and diverse compared to any other place. It would be a place where people for all castes and class gathered together and a single Hindi newspaper would be passed around and entire morning would go by discussing contemporary event or topic. These sweet shops now, author observes have been up marketed and sport glass door, Formica counters and molded plastic chairs and *halwai* relegated to some invisible space in the backroom. The author tries to depict how the character of the place is completely lost in its attempt to make it slick and modern.

### Emerging Culture of Consumption and Ostentation

Pankaj Mishra captures what may seem as small, rather scattered and inconsequential details about mundane aspects of lives of people in the travelogue, but through such detailing paints the picture of transformation seen in the wake of globalization. The liberalization of Indian economy in the early 1990s unleashed fresh possibilities and impulses everywhere. New brand names and clothes and gadgets became the source of identity of many young business executives and these changes in places and people reflected the newly emergent class with aggressive individualism. The travel narrative becomes a witness to the changes in externalities of small-town life that reflected a shift in the sensibilities too. Ostentatious architecture, lewd music, strident politics were seen in conspicuous ways according to the author. The privileged middle class and business class proclaimed personal independence and self-sufficiency that were only based on imitation of duplication of popular and market culture. The author voices concern over the untroubled confidence of the new provincial middle class who appropriated the brand names and geared towards creating a new pan Indian culture, a culture based on consumption and ostentation. The sudden plentitude of money did not accompany any kind of civic responsibility as small town on one hand seemed to be developing ostentatious buildings and brands but horrific civic conditions continued to prevail. He becomes the witness to the influences of globalization and the tensions it spurred with the local culture and identities. These transformations seem to affect notions and ideas about progress in the society. The new identities stemming out of this context created were hybrid, and the old identities

became decentered and therefore ambivalent and contextual. The travelogue illustrates how these changes in the identity of small towns occurred all over the country, bringing new contradictory pulls in the society.

## Conclusion

Pankaj Mishra's travelogue *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana, Travels in Small Towns of India* captures the changes that small towns and cities of India saw in the wake of globalization powerfully. With use of satire, with and humor travelogue critically engages with people and places and chronicles the ways local identities of provincial India encountered the new changes. Through its critical tone, the travelogue expresses its concerns over the gradual loss of aesthetics, emerging dominance of consumerism, gradual erosion of local culture with mindless duplication and imitation of American/Western popular culture and the ways in which it impacts the subjectivities of people. The travel writing becomes a witness to the profound shifts that society underwent with the new market and consumption driven economy.

## References

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## Note

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