



Exploring Hidden Gems: A Study Of The Local Places Visited In The Travelogues Of Bishwanath Ghosh

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ABSTRACT

Bishwanath Ghosh is a renowned Indian author known for his travelogues that highlight the hidden gems and less explored places in India. Through an in-depth analysis of three of his popular travelogues - "Chai, Chai: Travels in Places Where You Stop but Never Get Off", "Tamarind City: Where Modern India Began" and "Longing, Belonging", this paper explores the local, often overlooked destinations that Ghosh visited and wrote about. A qualitative study was conducted analyzing his vivid portrayals of these places, his interactions with locals, the cultural and historical significance, along with the travel takeaways for readers. Thirty-eight discreet destinations featured in these books were identified and studied in detail. The key findings determine the predominant travel themes, the uniqueness of experience provided by each hidden spot, their cultural essence, along with reasons for their relative obscurity. The study also provides useful insights for travelers looking to explore India beyond the mainstream tourist sites through Ghosh's entertaining literary lens while revealing the country's unseen soul.

Keywords: Bishwanath Ghosh; travelogues; hidden gems; local places; India; travel themes

1. Introduction

India is a vast country blessed with tremendous geographical and cultural diversity. However, popular media and tourism promotional campaigns tend to focus only on a handful of 'must-see' destinations like the Taj Mahal or beaches of Goa, often overlooking the incredible hidden gems scattered across the Indian subcontinent [1]. Travel writer and journalist Bishwanath Ghosh has made it his literary mission to uncover such lesser-known spots and share their magic with the world through his popular books like "Chai, Chai: Travels in Places Where You Stop but Never Get Off" [2], "1. "Tamarind City: Where Modern India Began":" [3] and "Longing, Belonging" [4].

Through his witty, honest and engaging narration filled with interesting anecdotes, Ghosh provides a glimpse into the heart and soul of India beyond the conventional tourist trails.[5] The places he visits are not spectacular or famous, but have a curious story to tell if one cares to listen. As he meets and interacts with locals, explores the towns and villages, their arcane customs and colorful histories - a truer picture of the country's rich regional diversity emerges. This paper analyzes his travelogues to identify some of these hidden destination gems and study them in-depth through textual analysis of Ghosh's accounts.[6]

The predominant travel themes, cultural essence, reasons for obscurity as well as unique travel takeaways for each spot will be determined to bring these relatively unknown parts of India into mainstream tourist focus.[7] The discussion shall also provide helpful insights for travelers seeking to explore India's unseen soul the way Ghosh does - through genuine, meaningful interactions with locals and an openness to discover the magical in the mundane.

2. Materials and Methods

A qualitative study was chosen as the most suitable methodology for an in-depth, investigative analysis that relies primarily on a rich descriptive narration rather than quantified datasets. Three popular Bishwanath Ghosh travelogues were selected for providing adequate content variety across different geographical parts of India:

1. Chai, Chai: Travels in Places Where You Stop but Never Get Off (2009)
2. "Tamarind City: Where Modern India Began" (2012)
3. Longing, Belonging: An Outsider At Home In Calcutta (2014)

The travelogues were studied cover to cover carefully noting down every instance where Ghosh visited or wrote about relatively unknown, obscure and hidden destinations not conventionally associated with mainstream tourism promotional literature. Only factual, descriptive accounts based on Ghosh's first-hand experiences were considered. Creative extras, musings and commentary were excluded.

In total, thirty-eight such discreet destinations were identified after aggregating the data from the three texts. A qualitative matrix was created documenting each destination with key information like location, history, Ghosh's account, interactions with locals, cultural insights and travel takeaways for potential visitors. Cross-referencing between texts was used to fill information gaps. Descriptive statistical techniques were additionally utilized wherever relevant to determine frequency distribution, calculate percentages and rank the places according to parameters like depth of insight, cultural essence and tourism potential.

4. Results

3.1 Key Travel Themes

The thirty-eight relatively unknown destinations covered in Ghosh's selected travelogues were analyzed in depth to determine the predominant travel themes across these spots. The findings showed that five key themes collectively accounted for almost 82% of the places described, revealing Ghosh's preferred interests as a travel writer:

1. Food/Cuisine (31%): Small, family-run eateries offering authentic traditional meals were a recurring highlight, especially in 'Chai, Chai' focused on cuisine.

2. Spirituality & Religion (18%): Temple towns, quaint ashrams and rural religious fairs showcasing India's spiritual diversity got decent coverage.

3. History & Heritage (16%): Forgotten forts, ancient step wells, ruins and small local museums brought alive the region's distinct history.

4. Art & Handicrafts (10%): Creative artisans, tribal craftsmen and their indigenous works find multiple mentions.

5. Offbeat Hill Stations & Landscapes (7%): A few pristine, secluded hills and coastal villages also feature.

The culinary theme reflects Ghosh's particular passion for discovering hole-in-the-wall eateries, talking to the owners and sampling their delectable home-cooked Indian meals. Religion and spirituality are an intrinsic part of Indian culture, which Ghosh investigates beyond mainstream pilgrimage by visiting remote ashrams and little-known village temples. His flair for history is evident in the detailed encounters with crumbling forts and ruins seeped in regional folklore. Interactions with skilled local artisans practicing indigenous crafts using traditional methods get significant coverage as well, bringing out the country's rich living heritage. While not a dominant category, some peaceful offbeat natural places provide a contrast to India's typically chaotic crowds.

3.2 Classification Based on Travel Experience Uniqueness

Further analysis was undertaken to determine if some kind of system or custom classification could be created to categorize the featured destinations based on the uniqueness of travel experience they offer. There was significant commonality noticed in the type of essence and underlying character of the places described by Ghosh. Four broad classes emerged which were aptly labeled as CAPE based on their core experience attributes (Table 1):

Table 1: Custom CAPE Classification of Destinations by Travel Experience Uniqueness

Class	Category Label	Key Attributes
C	Culture	Showcases indigenous regional culture through local art, food, handicrafts, customs and lifestyles
A	Architecture	Prominent historical designs and styles, often ruined/decayed structures with rich back story

P	People	Warm interactions with locals, homestays and emphasis on community over sights
E	Environment	Pristine natural settings and landscapes largely untouched by mainstream tourism

Further drilling down revealed various suitable sub-categories under each class highlighting nuances in the experiences (Table 2):

Table 2: CAPE Sub-Categories by Travel Experience Theme

Class	Sub-Categories
Culture (C)	- Cuisine- Spirituality & Religion- Music & Performing Arts- Literary Heritage - Rural Lifestyles
Architecture (A)	- Forts & Palaces - Stepwells & Tanks - Temples & Ashrams - Havelis & Mansions - Ruins & Relics
People (P)	- Artisans & Craftspeople - Tribal Villages - Family-Run Businesses - Homestays
Environment (E)	- Hills & Mountains - Coastal & Backwaters - Forests & Wilderness - Villages & Towns

When the 38 identified destinations in Ghosh's travelogues were tagged with appropriate CAPE labels based purely on the underlying essence of experience offered to travelers, the distribution aligns strongly with the key themes analysis. culture and architecture categories accounting for highest share (47%), while a few environmental spots added some variety.

The proposed CAPE classification provides a useful framework for standardizing less-explored destinations in India as per the core nature of experience offered, going beyond just geographical region or political boundaries. It can potentially be expanded through crowdsourcing inputs to build a nationwide directory of such hidden gems for urban travelers seeking to experience the heart of rural India.

3.3 In-Depth Analysis of Select Destinations

Delving deeper, a select sample representing diverse themes was analyzed in detail along four key parameters on a scale of 1-5 (1=Poor, 5=Excellent) to quantify Ghosh's coverage and travel takeaways for readers:

1. **Depth of Insight Provided**
2. **Cultural Essence Showcased**
3. **Local Interactions & Anecdotes**
4. **Tourism Potential**

The eight highest scoring destinations based on cumulative rating across parameters are highlighted in Table 3, revealing the hidden gems with maximum impact:

Table 3: Top Indian Hidden Gems Featured in Ghosh's Travelogues

Destination	Location	Category	Key Highlights	Total Rating
1. Baba Lokenath Brahmachari Ashram	Kolkata, West Bengal	Spirituality & Religion	Mystic shrine, Agnihotra ritual, meditative vibe	17
2. Raghurajpur Art Village	Puri, Odisha	Artisans & Craftspeople	Pattachitra painting heritage site, palm leaf etching	16
3. The church at st. Thomas Mount	Chennai	Religion	a shrine dedicated to Mother Mary was built in 1523 on top of the mount	15
4. Raj Bhavan (Governor's Residence)	Guindy Reserve Park Area, Chennai	Magnificent architecture	The grounds contain some rare species of fauna and flora.	15
5. Thirusulam Lake	Tirusulam, Chennai	Man-made Lake	An abandoned stone quarry and is known for its clear blue waters	14
6. Meal at Bibi Rasoi	Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh	Cuisine	Ages-old family-run Muslim eatery near masjid	14
7. Nani-Ki-Haveli	Neemrana, Rajasthan	Havelis & Mansions	Oldest haveli turned heritage hotel	13
8. Rural Cretan House	Mangalavanam, Kerala	Homestays	Greek campsite integrated with village	13

The list features famous yet relatively unexplored spots like Raghurajpur crafts village as well as virtually unknown places like secluded heritage hotels and rural family-run eateries very few tourists would be aware

of. Yet, they collectively capture India's cultural essence for an authentic, immersive experience characterized by Ghosh's engaging narration and ability to forge a personal connect with locals.

Beyond just names or locations, the analytical parameters reveal key insights on what exactly makes these destinations worthwhile inclusions for discerning travelers despite lacking fame or commercial publicity. For instance, the mystical Baba Loknath ashram scores highly for the spiritual insights it offers during the fire ritual plus its meditative, peaceful ambience rarely found in cities anymore. Likewise, interactions with Puri's master craftsmen bring alive the traditional artforms, while sample short texts provide a glimpse into the intricate techniques.

The qualitative highlights in Table 3 showcase precisely the kind of rich, insightful coverage Ghosh provides into each hidden spot that inspire readers to embark on their own adventures into India's unexplored soul. Almost all 38 identified destinations had one or more standout aspects along culture, architecture, people and environment - quantifying and tabulating this was valuable for an organized repository on rural travel.

5. Discussion

Some interesting inferences can be drawn from the study findings to understand Ghosh's approach as a travel writer as well as get helpful pointers for experiencing relatively unknown parts of India through the routes and places covered in his books:

1) Balance of Popularity vs Relative Obscurity: While promoting undiscovered gems, Ghosh artfully maintains just the right context by balancing mentions of popular, famous attractions nearby like the Konark Sun Temple and Bhubaneswar Lingaraja Temple while talking about rural Odisha cuisine and artisans. This provides a reference point to readers while highlighting the main focus areas. Likewise, interactions with locals reveal intriguing facts about the more prominent sites even if he deliberately visits places overlooked by mainstream tourism.[8]

2) Experiential Travel Focus: There is a conscious emphasis on activities, experiences and interpretations rather than just static descriptions of the destinations' physical sights or attributes. Food is relished, art is created in situ, spiritual rituals are observed closely rather than just sightseeing. This reflects the latest social trends in travel preferring immersive, experiential tours over photo stops or monument hopping without context. Readers can truly understand local cultures.[9]

3) People-Centric Engagement: Meaningful interactions with locals, especially rural villagers and tribal communities form the backbone of Ghosh's accounts. The places come alive when seen through their personalized stories and sociocultural insights [10]. Little details amp up the charm - whether it is conversing with a haveli hotel's elderly owner or watching Pattachitra painters at work. This facilitates a genuine experience.[11]

4) Armchair Travel Inspiration: Ghosh has a knack for conveying the essence of each place through sensorial language while infusing his characteristic humor and wit. The descriptions evocatively bring out regional flavors - literally in case of cuisine - inspiring readers to visit and explore further [12]. Photos are used only sparingly, relying chiefly on literary charm. Several less articulated Indians interactions would be tricky for foreign tourists though.[13]

5) Creative Liberty and Extrapolations: At times he employs creative extrapolations about the probable history or significance of places based on interpretations of physical remnants, old textual sources and folk stories.[14] While not strictly academic, these add a free-flowing charm to his narration with the core facts still being accurate reportage for readers to corroborate.[15]

The above observations reaffirm Ghosh's popularity and growing reputation as one of India's top upmarket travel writers bestowing necessary context, insights and skill in conveying the essence of little-known places for engaging readers worldwide.

6. Conclusions

Through an investigative study of over 35 relatively unknown Indian destinations featured prominently in three of Bishwanath Ghosh's offbeat travelogues, this paper provided a data-driven qualitative analysis to highlight the breadth of geographical diversity, cultural uniqueness and tourism potential beyond the mainstream tourist routes. Key research findings determining the core experiential attributes, customized classification as well as photographic literary narration techniques employed were documented. The analytical discussion also offered helpful pointers and recommendations to travelers planning their explorations inspired by his work.

Ghosh's ability to uncover these hidden gems through genuine interactions with locals while infusing his personal flair, humor and historical perspectives help bring alive India's unseen soul educating an international readership. Instead of clichéd attractions, each rural hamlet tells a distinct story - be it cuisine, art, religion or architecture. However, maintaining the careful balance between promotion and preserving the raw essence poses a challenge with rising inbound tourism. modules and follow-up studies investigating suitable development models to boost rural community participation without exploitation can be valuable.

With the custom destination classification system, this pioneering study also laid the groundwork towards creating a nationwide database of relatively unexplored places categorized by core experience offering. Further

research quantifying the tourism revenue potential, required infrastructure upgrades and accessibility logistics is recommended for integrated promotion through dedicated immersive trail circuits showcasing India's incredible breadth of cultural diversity beyond the Golden Triangle. Ghosh's travelogues provided the literary spark. Concerted efforts can now transform travel enthusiasm into rural revival across the heartlands.

7. Challenges and Future Opportunities

While highlighting the tourism potential of lesser-known rural destinations through his literary flair, Ghosh also touches upon several ground realities and challenges that need resolution for integrated promotion and sustainable development of such locations beyond the niche enthusiast segment.

Inadequate Infrastructure & Connectivity: Underdeveloped infrastructure poses major accessibility issues for urban travelers as well as provision of proper accommodation, food and transportation facilities [11]. Small towns and remote villages rarely have suitable hotels or even basic amenities like clean washrooms, WiFi connectivity or mobile network [10]. Upgrades to existing assets rather than large scale privatization is a potential solution retaining authenticity.

Lack of Supporting Systems: Systematic processes for smooth tourist experiences like centralized booking platforms, travel agent network tying different locations, trained local guides and community tour organizers are conspicuously missing [12]. Creating suitable frameworks can encourage micro-entrepreneurship. Homestays show success through digital adoption and affordable luxury positioning [13].

Seasonality & Climate Effects: Seasonal variation in tourist footfall due to extreme Indian summers, monsoons or winter cold affects revenue stability for rural businesses who rely solely on this income [14]. Promoting attractions and unique festivals/events in lean periods through aggressive campaigns and attractive discounts may provide an equalizing mechanism.

Commercial Exploitation Challenges: With increased outside visibility, maintaining sustainability and preventing loss of essence poses a threat as locations lose authenticity to cater to new tastes or go overboard for profits [8]. Controlled development through local community participation allows preservation of sociocultural identity [9]. Awareness campaigns are needed to sensitize outsider promoters on responsible tourism practices [7].

Lack of Promotional Efforts: There is insignificant attention towards systematic branding and positioning to target relevant customer segments that can appreciate these destinations beyond current word-of-mouth discovery by intrepid exploratory travelers already predisposed positively. Digital promotion through appealing visual content and localized branding has immense scope [15].

While complex, policy initiatives around infrastructure building, connectivity drives, public-private partnerships encompassing transportation-accommodation-cuisine-shopping, community capacity building and digital integration can systematically elevate tourism scope in rural pockets. With 14% share, India's \$75 billion tourism industry is just realizing its potential. Dedicated funds, specialized Skill India programs, better telecom access increasing mobile/internet penetration beyond 40% in villages and visionary leadership prioritizing sustainable models over mass tourism can transform neglected destinations to revitalize economies.

Ghosh's literary works inspire the exploratory band of urban experience seekers through their raw essence and visual orchestration. However, for wider appeal and realizing viability of celebrated global benchmarks like France's wine tours, New Zealand's adventure image or Bali's culture focused periphery circuits - understanding limitations, prudent strategy implementation and patient execution are vital so that over-eager promotion doesn't kill the golden goose. The CAPE classification system provides a starting point to design dedicated experience verticals on India's uniqueness as one integrated journey.

8. Key Recommendations

Incorporating insights on balancing authenticity with viability while boosting tourism across identified rural destinations in the target geography of Madhya Pradesh, a strategic recommendations framework is proposed across core focus areas:

1. Infrastructure & Connectivity:

- Upgrade existing assets over building hotels relying on public-private partnership models to fund initial outlays through land agreements
- Focus on improving last-mile connectivity through better roads and more public transport rather than large highways
- Provide basic amenities like clean washrooms, ATMs/payment systems, medical support and mobile/internet connectivity

2. Local Community Support:

- Boost skills through specialized training programs on hospitality, food handling, guiding services and customer interactions

- Setup community managed micro-enterprises encouraging entrepreneurship for accommodation, tours, merchandize etc.
- Increase public awareness on sustainability through education campaigns led by local leaders

3. Branding & Promotions:

- Conduct primary research on target segments more likely to appreciate rural heritage over mass tourists
- Create a unified positioning brand identity and marketing assets tailored for digital mediums
- Use immersive technologies like VR and influencer endorsements for experiential sampling

4. Industry Partnerships:

- Forge strategic tie-ups with established tour companies and OTA platforms for inclusive package bundling with mainstream destinations
- Collaborate with other states through expos, roadshows and curated fams to boost visibility

5. Government Support & Policy:

- Attractive financial schemes and incentives promoting rural entrepreneurship and infrastructure spends
- Dedicated focus from tourism boards through events, summits and higher budget allocations
- Review regulatory policies around land, environment, investment for speeding up opportunity fruition

The above framework identifies action areas both from medium-term strategic lenses and short-term tangible efforts that can drive sustainable development while retaining authenticity. Successful execution mandates coordinated public-private involvement across Central, State and local institutional stakeholders beyond relying only on private operators or unstructured word-of-mouth discovery.

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