

Travel, Identity, and Everyday India: Reading Arjit Harisinghani's *The Living Road* and Bishwanath Ghosh's *Chai, Chai*

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Abstract: This paper examines the relationship between travel, identity, and the representation of everyday life in Arjit Harisinghani's *The Living Road* and Bishwanath Ghosh's *Chai, Chai*. While Harisinghani's travelogue focuses on Bhutan and its cultural landscape, Ghosh's narrative explores the everyday rhythms of Indian life through journeys across railway networks and tea stalls. Despite their different geographical and thematic orientations, both texts foreground the role of travel in shaping identity and understanding the ordinary. The study argues that travel writing reveals identity as dynamic and relational, constructed through encounters with people, spaces, and everyday practices. Through comparative analysis, the paper highlights how both authors transform ordinary experiences into meaningful reflections on culture and selfhood.

Keywords: Travel Writing, Identity, Everyday Life, India, Arjit Harisinghani, Bishwanath Ghosh.

1. Introduction

Travel writing has undergone a noticeable shift from grand narratives of exploration toward more intimate accounts centred on everyday life and personal experience. Earlier travelogues often focused on distant, exotic locations and dramatic journeys, presenting travel as something extraordinary and removed from routine existence. In contrast, contemporary travel writing pays closer attention to the ordinary the small, everyday moments that reveal how people live, interact, and make meaning in their environments. This shift allows writers to explore identity in a more nuanced way, not as something fixed or predetermined, but as something shaped through movement, observation, and engagement with the world. The everyday becomes a meaningful space where cultural understanding and self-reflection unfold, turning seemingly simple experiences into sites of deeper insight.

This transformation is clearly reflected in *The Living Road* by Arjit Harisinghani and *Chai, Chai* by Bishwanath Ghosh, which represent two distinct yet complementary approaches to travel writing. Harisinghani's narrative offers an immersive journey through Bhutan, where the focus lies on cultural engagement, environmental awareness, and the sensory experience of travel. His writing emphasizes interaction with landscapes and communities, presenting travel as a reflective and transformative process. In contrast, Ghosh's work is grounded in the everyday life of India, using train journeys and roadside tea stalls as central spaces of observation. Through conversations and encounters in these ordinary settings, he captures the diversity and complexity of Indian society, demonstrating how meaningful insights can emerge from routine experiences.

By examining these two texts together, this paper explores how contemporary travel writing engages with themes of travel, identity, and everyday life. It argues that both narratives highlight the transformative potential of travel, not through dramatic or extraordinary events, but through everyday encounters and interactions. Identity, in these works, emerges as fluid and evolving, shaped by movement across spaces and engagement with different people and perspectives. Ultimately, these travelogues show that travel is not only about reaching new destinations but about developing new ways of seeing and understanding the world, where even the most ordinary moments contribute to the ongoing formation of selfhood.

2. Travel Writing and the Everyday

Contemporary travel writing has increasingly shifted its focus from the exotic and extraordinary to the textures of everyday life, challenging older assumptions that travel is valuable only when it reveals something rare or unfamiliar. Instead of seeking spectacle, many modern travel narratives turn their attention to routine experiences conversations, small rituals, and ordinary interactions that reveal how people actually live. This approach redefines the purpose of travel writing, suggesting that meaningful cultural understanding often emerges not from dramatic encounters but

from sustained attention to the everyday. By foregrounding ordinary moments, travel writers are able to explore identity, culture, and belonging in more grounded and nuanced ways, showing that the everyday is a rich and complex site of meaning rather than something insignificant.

This perspective is clearly illustrated in *Chai, Chai* by Bishwanath Ghosh, where the simple act of drinking tea becomes the central organizing principle of the narrative. Tea stalls across India function as spaces of social interaction, bringing together people from diverse backgrounds different regions, languages, and social classes. Through these encounters, Ghosh captures the rhythms of everyday Indian life, transforming ordinary settings into spaces of cultural insight. Conversations at these tea stalls reveal stories, opinions, and experiences that reflect the complexity of Indian society, demonstrating how the everyday can serve as a powerful lens for understanding broader social and cultural dynamics.

A similar attention to everyday experience can be seen in *The Living Road* by Arjit Harisinghani, where travel through Bhutan is shaped not only by movement across landscapes but also by interactions with local communities and engagement with daily routines. Harisinghani's narrative highlights small, lived moments observing customs, participating in everyday activities, and responding to the rhythms of life in different places which together create a deeper understanding of Bhutanese society. These seemingly ordinary experiences reveal the cultural values and social structures embedded within daily life. Taken together, both texts demonstrate that the everyday is far from mundane; it is a meaningful and dynamic space through which identity and culture can be understood in a more intimate and authentic way.

3. Identity as a Product of Travel

Travel plays a central role in shaping identity in both narratives, highlighting how movement across spaces leads to new forms of self-awareness and understanding. As travellers encounter unfamiliar environments, people, and ways of life, they are prompted to question their assumptions and reconsider their sense of self. Travel becomes a reflective process, where identity is not simply expressed but actively redefined through experience. Instead of remaining stable, identity shifts in response to new perspectives, creating a more fluid and dynamic sense of self. In this way, travel writing captures identity as something that emerges through engagement with the world rather than something fixed or predetermined.

In *The Living Road*, Arjit Harisinghani presents identity as something that develops through immersion in a foreign cultural environment. His experiences in Bhutan lead to moments of reflection, where he becomes more aware of his own cultural background and positionality. Through interaction with local communities, observation of everyday practices, and adaptation to new surroundings, identity is continuously negotiated. The traveller's sense of self is shaped by these encounters, revealing how cultural understanding is formed through participation and openness. The journey thus becomes not only an exploration of place but also an exploration of the self.

In contrast, *Chai, Chai* by Bishwanath Ghosh constructs identity through encounters within the familiar yet diverse landscape of India. Ghosh's journey across the country brings him into contact with a wide range of social, cultural, and linguistic contexts, particularly through conversations at tea stalls. These interactions reveal the multiplicity of Indian identity, showing how it is shaped by regional differences and everyday experiences. Even within one's own country, identity is not uniform but layered and complex. Both texts ultimately demonstrate that identity is not static but constantly evolving, shaped by movement, interaction, and the ongoing process of engaging with different perspectives.

4. Representation of Everyday India in *Chai, Chai*

Chai, Chai by Bishwanath Ghosh offers a distinctive perspective on India by turning attention toward its everyday spaces rather than its monumental or exotic aspects. The railway network and roadside tea stalls become central to the narrative, functioning as microcosms of Indian society where diverse lives intersect. These spaces are constantly in motion trains arriving and departing, people gathering briefly and moving on yet they also create moments of pause and interaction. In this setting, the ordinary becomes significant, as the traveller encounters a cross-section of society that reflects the diversity and dynamism of the nation. By focusing on such familiar and accessible spaces, Ghosh redefines travel as an exploration of the everyday rather than a search for the extraordinary.

Ghosh's narrative is shaped by a keen observational style that captures the voices, stories, and experiences of ordinary people. Through conversations at tea stalls and encounters during train journeys, he brings forward a wide range of perspectives, allowing readers to engage with the complexities of social life in India. These interactions reveal

underlying issues of class, language, migration, and regional identity, showing how everyday spaces are deeply embedded in broader social structures. Rather than presenting a singular or unified image of India, the narrative highlights its diversity, offering a layered and multifaceted portrayal that reflects the lived realities of its people.

The emphasis on everyday interactions also underscores the interconnectedness of Indian society, where seemingly small moments carry deeper cultural significance. A brief exchange over a cup of tea or a casual conversation during a journey becomes a window into larger social patterns and relationships. Through these moments, Ghosh reveals how individual experiences are linked to broader cultural and social dynamics, demonstrating that the ordinary is rich with meaning. His travelogue ultimately shows that understanding a society does not require grand events or distant locations; it can emerge from attentive engagement with everyday life, where culture, identity, and human connection are constantly being shaped and expressed.

5. Cultural Encounter in *The Living Road*

In contrast, *The Living Road* by Arijit Harisinghani centres on cross-cultural encounter as a defining feature of the travel experience. Harisinghani's journey through Bhutan brings him into contact with a culture that is at once distinct from and culturally connected to India, creating a space for both recognition and difference. This duality allows the narrative to explore the subtleties of cultural interaction, where familiar elements coexist with new and unfamiliar practices. Rather than treating Bhutan as an exotic "other," the text approaches it as a living culture to be understood through engagement and observation. The journey thus becomes an opportunity to navigate the complexities of cultural proximity and distance, shaping the traveller's perspective in meaningful ways.

A key aspect of this narrative is its emphasis on respect, curiosity, and openness, which together form an ethical approach to travel writing. Harisinghani avoids imposing external judgments or preconceived frameworks, instead allowing cultural practices to be understood within their own context. His observations are guided by a willingness to learn, where meaning emerges through interaction rather than assumption. This approach reflects a broader shift in contemporary travel writing toward sensitivity and responsibility in representing other cultures. By focusing on everyday practices, rituals, and social interactions, the narrative highlights the importance of seeing culture as lived experience rather than as a set of abstracts or generalized ideas.

Through these encounters, the traveller develops a deeper awareness of both cultural difference and underlying similarities, leading to a more reflective and nuanced understanding of identity. The process of engaging with another culture prompts self-reflection, where the traveller becomes more conscious of his own cultural position and assumptions. This interaction between self and other contributes to the formation of a more complex sense of identity, one that is shaped by dialogue, comparison, and adaptation. In this way, *The Living Road* demonstrates that cross-cultural travel is not only about understanding others but also about rethinking one's own place within a broader cultural landscape.

6. Narrative Style and Perspective

The narrative styles of *Chai, Chai* by Bishwanath Ghosh and *The Living Road* by Arijit Harisinghani clearly reflect their thematic concerns and approaches to travel writing. Ghosh's style is grounded in observation and dialogue, capturing the immediacy of everyday interactions across India. His focus on conversations at tea stalls and encounters during train journeys allows the narrative to unfold through voices and lived experiences. The use of humour, anecdote, and informal exchanges adds both depth and accessibility, making the text engaging while also offering insight into social and cultural realities. His writing brings out the richness of ordinary life, demonstrating how simple interactions can reveal complex layers of identity and society.

In contrast, Harisinghani's style is more reflective and immersive, shaped by sensory engagement and personal introspection. His narrative emphasizes the textures, sounds, and rhythms of travel, allowing readers to experience the journey through a heightened awareness of place and environment. While still descriptive, his writing moves inward, focusing on how encounters shape perception and understanding. Despite these stylistic differences, both authors employ a first-person perspective that foregrounds subjectivity and interpretation. This shared narrative stance reinforces the idea that travel writing is inherently shaped by individual experience, where meaning emerges through the traveller's perspective. In both texts, the first-person voice acts as a bridge between the reader and the world being represented, highlighting that travel narratives are not neutral accounts but personal and interpretive engagements with place and culture.

7. Convergence of Themes

Although *The Living Road* by Arjit Harisinghani and *Chai, Chai* by Bishwanath Ghosh differ in setting, tone, and narrative approach, they converge in their exploration of travel, identity, and everyday life. Harisinghani's journey through Bhutan focuses on cross-cultural engagement, while Ghosh's travels across India are rooted in familiar yet diverse spaces. Despite this difference, both texts challenge the conventional idea that travel must involve distant or exotic destinations to be meaningful. Instead, they show that travel can also be an inward and reflective process, emerging from attentive engagement with surroundings whether foreign or familiar. In doing so, they broaden the scope of travel writing, demonstrating that discovery is not limited to geography but extends to perception and understanding.

Both narratives place strong emphasis on observation, interaction, and reflection as essential tools for making sense of the world. Through everyday encounters conversations at tea stalls, interactions with local communities, or moments of quiet observation the writers construct a deeper understanding of culture and identity. These experiences reveal that identity is not shaped only through extraordinary events but also through ordinary, repeated interactions that gradually influence perception and self-awareness. The act of paying attention to detail, listening to different voices, and reflecting on experience becomes central to the process of understanding both self and society.

This convergence highlights the versatility of travel writing as a literary genre, capable of capturing both diversity and unity within human experience. While the settings and methods may differ, both texts reveal common patterns of connection, curiosity, and reflection that transcend specific locations. Travel writing, in this sense, becomes a bridge between different worlds, offering insights into how individuals relate to one another across cultural and geographical boundaries. By bringing together the extraordinary and the everyday, these narratives demonstrate that travel is ultimately about engaging with life in its many forms, revealing both the uniqueness and shared aspects of human experience.

8. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *The Living Road* by Arjit Harisinghani and *Chai, Chai* by Bishwanath Ghosh offer valuable insights into the relationship between travel, identity, and everyday life, showing how different narrative approaches can lead to equally meaningful interpretations of experience. Through their distinct styles, both authors highlight the transformative potential of travel not as a dramatic departure from routine, but as a process of attentive engagement with people, places, and everyday practices. The analysis makes it clear that identity is not fixed or stable but continually shaped through movement, interaction, and reflection, emerging as a fluid and evolving construct. At the same time, the everyday is revealed as a rich and meaningful space of cultural exploration, where seemingly ordinary moments carry deeper social and cultural significance. Ultimately, these travelogues redefine travel as more than physical movement across space; they present it as a thoughtful and reflective engagement with the world, where both the extraordinary and the ordinary contribute to a deeper understanding of contemporary travel writing and human experience.

8. References

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