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Beyond the Junction: Travelogue as a Voice of Regional Identity in Bishwanath Ghosh's *Chai Chai*

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Abstract

Travel writing has long been associated with journeys to celebrated destinations and the representation of unfamiliar landscapes. Bishwanath Ghosh's *Chai Chai: Travels in Places Where You Stop but Never Get Off* offers a different perspective by directing attention to railway junctions that are usually regarded as temporary halts rather than destinations. This paper argues that *Chai Chai* presents the travelogue as a literary voice of regional identity by transforming these overlooked spaces into sites of cultural meaning. Through close textual analysis, the study examines how Ghosh constructs regional identity by engaging with local history, everyday labour, community life, and personal encounters across railway towns. Instead of relying on spectacular landscapes or tourist attractions, the narrative derives its significance from ordinary places and the experiences of the people who inhabit them. By moving beyond the railway platform, Ghosh reveals the social, cultural, and historical dimensions of towns that often remain outside mainstream travel narratives. The travelogue also challenges destination-centred ideas of travel by suggesting that meaningful journeys emerge through attentive observation, conversation, and participation in local life. The study concludes that *Chai Chai* expands the possibilities of Indian travel writing by repositioning railway junctions as culturally significant landscapes and demonstrating that travel writing can preserve and articulate regional identities through the representation of everyday experience.

Keywords: Travel Writing, Regional Identity, Railway Junctions, Bishwanath Ghosh, *Chai Chai*, Indian Travelogue.

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Introduction

Travel has occupied a central place in literary expression for centuries, offering writers an opportunity to record landscapes, cultures, societies, and personal experiences. Early travel narratives were often written to document unfamiliar territories and introduce distant worlds to readers. Marco Polo's *The Travels of Marco Polo*, for example, records commercial routes and cultural observations across Asia, while Ibn Battuta's *The Travels of Ibn Battuta* combines geographical description with detailed accounts of the customs, institutions, and everyday lives of the communities he encountered. Likewise, Xuanzang's *The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* preserves invaluable descriptions of the political, religious, and cultural life of the Indian subcontinent during the seventh century. Although these works differ in purpose and historical context, they collectively demonstrate that travel writing has never been limited to describing movement alone. Instead, it has served as a literary medium through which places are interpreted, cultures are documented, and human experiences are preserved. Modern scholarship has expanded this understanding by approaching travel writing as a literary form that actively shapes cultural knowledge rather than merely recording geographical experiences. Carl Thompson (2011) argues that travel writing represents places through selective observation and interpretation, while Mary Louise Pratt (1992) describes travel narratives as spaces where cultures encounter one another through processes of observation, negotiation, and representation. These perspectives suggest that travel writing participates in the construction of cultural meanings by interpreting places through the traveller's experiences rather than simply presenting objective descriptions. Consequently, the literary value of travel writing lies not only in where the traveller goes but also in how places and people are represented through narrative.

The relationship between travel writing and place has received increasing scholarly attention within literary and cultural studies. Rather than treating place as a fixed geographical entity, contemporary theorists understand it as a cultural formation shaped by history, memory, social practices, and everyday human interactions. Yi-Fu Tuan (2001) observes that places acquire meaning through lived experience, while Edward Relph (1976) emphasizes that people's attachment to a place develops through continuous engagement with their surroundings rather than through geographical location alone. Similarly, Doreen Massey (2005) argues that places remain dynamic because they are continually produced through social relationships and historical processes. These perspectives provide a useful framework for understanding travel writing that moves beyond descriptions of scenery to examine how ordinary spaces become culturally meaningful. Within Indian English literature, travel writing has gradually shifted its attention from celebrated monuments, pilgrimage centres, and tourist destinations towards less visible locations that reveal the diversity of everyday life. Contemporary travel writers increasingly explore railway towns, marketplaces, neighbourhoods, and small settlements where regional cultures are expressed through routine social practices rather than extraordinary events. Such narratives encourage readers to reconsider places that usually remain outside mainstream cultural attention and to recognize the significance of ordinary experiences in shaping regional identities.

Bishwanath Ghosh's *Chai Chai: Travels in Places Where You Stop but Never Get Off* (2009) represents a distinctive contribution to this development in Indian travel writing. Instead of travelling to famous destinations, Ghosh deliberately chooses railway junctions that millions of passengers encounter only during brief halts. These stations exist prominently within India's railway network but rarely occupy a meaningful place in the traveller's imagination. Reflecting on this neglect, Ghosh writes:

> Yet, Itarsi is almost non-existent on the political map of India. You are unlikely to have come across someone who works in Itarsi. You are unlikely to have ever posted a letter

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> that bears an Itarsi address. Itarsi is only a railway station, where you get down and have tea and maybe something to eat, and then move on. But how does the town, where all cultures and traditions pass through every few minutes, look like outside the railway station? (Ghosh, 2009, p. 15).

This passage establishes the central premise of the travelogue by questioning the conventional perception of railway junctions as insignificant transit points. Instead of viewing these locations merely as temporary stops, Ghosh encourages readers to recognize them as inhabited places with their own histories, occupations, memories, and social relationships. The railway station functions not as the destination itself but as an entry point into a regional world that usually remains unnoticed by passing travellers. The narrative therefore shifts attention from movement to habitation, suggesting that meaningful travel begins when one chooses to step beyond the platform and engage with everyday life.

The travelogue develops this perspective further through the author's invitation to rethink the purpose of travel itself:

> Why not, for a change, travel to these places and listen to the stories they might be waiting to tell, instead of standing at the door of your coach and looking out for the man calling, 'Chai, chai!' (Ghosh, 2009, p. 15).

Rather than celebrating mobility or distant destinations, Ghosh associates travel with attentive observation, conversation, and sustained engagement with ordinary places. His narrative privileges local voices, routine occupations, historical memories, and everyday encounters, thereby presenting railway junctions as culturally significant spaces rather than anonymous points of transit. Through this narrative strategy, *Chai Chai* broadens the possibilities of Indian travel writing by demonstrating that regional identity is most clearly expressed in the ordinary rhythms of daily life.

Despite its distinctive contribution to contemporary Indian travel writing, *Chai Chai* has received limited critical attention in relation to regional identity and the literary representation of place. Existing scholarship has largely examined travel writing through the perspectives of mobility, tourism, postcolonial encounters, or autobiographical experience, while comparatively little attention has been given to the travelogue as a literary form that represents regional cultures through everyday social life. Similarly, discussions of regional identity in Indian literature have focused predominantly on fiction, autobiography, and historical narratives, leaving travel writing relatively underexplored. This study addresses that gap by examining how Ghosh transforms railway junctions into cultural spaces where history, labour, community, memory, and everyday experience collectively shape regional identity. This article argues that *Chai Chai* demonstrates how the travelogue functions as a literary voice of regional identity. Rather than locating regional identity within administrative boundaries or geographical descriptions, Ghosh constructs it through close engagement with ordinary places and the people who inhabit them. By foregrounding overlooked railway junctions, the travelogue challenges destination-centred models of travel and proposes an alternative literary understanding of place in which regional identity emerges through lived experience, cultural memory, and everyday human relationships. Using close textual analysis alongside scholarship on travel writing, place, and regional identity, this article examines how Ghosh reimagines India's railway junctions as meaningful cultural environments that deserve sustained literary attention.

1.Travelogue as a Literary Form: Place, Identity, and Cultural Representation

Travel writing occupies a distinctive position within literary studies because it combines personal experience with cultural interpretation. Unlike fiction, where places may be imagined, or historical writing, which seeks to reconstruct the past, the travelogue is grounded in the traveller's encounter with actual locations and people. Its literary value lies not simply in recording journeys but in interpreting the social and cultural realities that become visible through movement. Consequently, travel narratives create a space where observation, reflection, and storytelling intersect, allowing readers to engage with unfamiliar worlds through the traveller's perspective. The travelogue has undergone significant changes over time. Early travel narratives often focused on exploration, trade, pilgrimage, or political missions, producing detailed accounts of distant regions for readers who had little direct knowledge of them. Such works documented landscapes, customs, and institutions, preserving valuable historical and cultural information. In modern literary studies, however, travel writing is understood as a narrative that does more than describe geographical settings. Carl Thompson (2011) argues that travel narratives are shaped by the traveller's choices about what to observe, what to omit, and how to present experience. A journey therefore becomes a process of interpretation rather than a neutral record of events. This interpretative quality distinguishes the travelogue from other forms of non-fiction. Every description reflects the traveller's interaction with local people, cultural practices, and historical environments. Mary Louise Pratt (1992) explains that travel narratives emerge through encounters between different cultures, where observation is accompanied by negotiation, curiosity, and self-reflection. The traveller is not merely an observer standing outside the place being described; the narrative develops through conversations, shared experiences, and moments of cultural exchange. As a result, travel writing often reveals as much about the traveller's understanding as it does about the locality itself.

The idea of *place* occupies a central position in this literary form. Humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (2001) distinguishes *space* from *place* by arguing that space acquires meaning through experience. A location becomes a place when it is associated with memory, emotion, and repeated human activity. Edward Relph (1976) similarly suggests that a sense of place develops through lived experience and everyday familiarity rather than through physical boundaries alone. These perspectives emphasise that places are not passive settings for human activity; they are shaped continuously by the relationships, practices, and memories of those who inhabit them. This understanding has important implications for the study of regional identity. Rather than viewing a region as a fixed geographical unit, contemporary scholars recognise it as a cultural formation produced through shared histories, social practices, language, occupations, and collective memory. Doreen Massey (2005) argues that places remain open and dynamic because they are constantly influenced by movement, interaction, and historical change. Regional identity, therefore, should not be understood as an inherited characteristic attached to a map but as a continuing cultural process sustained by everyday life. Literary narratives contribute to this process by preserving the stories, experiences, and local knowledge through which communities understand themselves.

Within this framework, travel writing becomes an important medium for cultural representation. It introduces readers to local worlds that frequently remain outside official histories or popular tourism. The value of the travelogue lies in its ability to connect personal observation with broader cultural questions, allowing ordinary people and familiar environments to become subjects of literary inquiry. Instead of treating local knowledge as secondary to national narratives, travel writing recognises that cultural diversity is often most visible in the routines, relationships, and traditions of everyday life. This conceptual framework provides an appropriate basis for reading Bishwanath Ghosh's *Chai Chai*. The travelogue does not seek to catalogue India's railway network or produce a chronological account of a journey.

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Rather, it investigates how places acquire meaning through the lives of the people who inhabit them. The towns that Ghosh visits become literary spaces where local memory, occupational practices, and community interactions reveal dimensions of regional life that remain invisible within destination-centred narratives. The following section examines how this narrative strategy reshapes the literary significance of railway junctions, presenting them not as anonymous points of transit but as culturally distinctive environments worthy of sustained attention.

2. Beyond the Platform: Reimagining Railway Junctions in *Chai Chai*

Unlike conventional travel narratives that privilege celebrated destinations, *Chai Chai* redirects the reader's attention towards railway junctions that are generally dismissed as temporary halts. Ghosh deliberately unsettles the assumption that the significance of travel lies in reaching a final destination. Instead, he begins his exploration where most journeys ordinarily pause, transforming railway junctions into narrative spaces that deserve independent cultural attention. The platform is not the culmination of travel but the threshold from which meaningful engagement with the locality begins.

The opening of the Mughal Sarai chapter immediately establishes this shift in perspective. Rather than presenting the town through historical facts or tourist descriptions, Ghosh records his first encounter with an unfamiliar and seemingly deserted landscape:

> At four in the chilly morning, the town of Mughal Sarai was fast asleep. Not a soul in sight. Only I was there, and the rickshaw puller who was taking me to a hotel that was supposed to be two kilometres away from the station... But I was nervous. I had heard only bad things about Mughal Sarai. (Ghosh, 2009, p. 7).

The passage positions the narrator as an uncertain traveller rather than an authoritative observer. His apprehension is shaped by preconceived opinions, yet the subsequent journey gradually dismantles these assumptions. Ghosh employs this narrative strategy to encourage readers to question inherited perceptions of railway towns. Instead of confirming stereotypes, the travelogue allows the locality to disclose its own character through direct experience.

Equally significant is Ghosh's decision to leave the railway premises almost immediately after his arrival. The narrative does not linger on train schedules, station architecture, or the mechanics of travel. Its attention shifts towards streets, neighbourhoods, markets, and conversations with residents. This movement beyond the platform symbolically marks the transition from mobility to observation. The railway station functions as an entry point, but the surrounding town becomes the true subject of the narrative. By relocating the focus in this manner, Ghosh redefines what constitutes a meaningful travel experience. After the uneasy arrival at Mughal Sarai, Ghosh gradually discovers that the town cannot be understood through first impressions alone. His movement away from the station marks an important shift in the narrative. Rather than remaining within the familiar space of the railway platform, he enters markets, small businesses, neighbourhoods, and public spaces where the rhythms of everyday life become visible. This transition from the station to the town reflects a significant narrative strategy: the railway junction functions only as the point of entry, while the surrounding locality becomes the real subject of the journey. The travelogue therefore encourages readers to move beyond the hurried perspective of the passing traveller and to experience the cultural complexity that lies outside the railway premises.

Ghosh's interactions with local residents further reinforce this transformation. Conversations with shopkeepers, journalists, teachers, and ordinary townspeople reveal

multiple perspectives on Mughal Sarai, replacing preconceived notions with lived experiences. These encounters demonstrate that a railway junction possesses its own social and cultural identity that cannot be reduced to its function within the railway network. Instead of presenting a single, authoritative account of the town, Ghosh allows different voices to coexist, creating a layered representation of regional life. The travelogue consequently shifts from documenting movement to interpreting place, where observation is enriched through dialogue and participation. The narrative also unfolds at a measured pace that contrasts sharply with the speed usually associated with rail travel. Ghosh spends time listening, revisiting places, and reflecting upon seemingly ordinary experiences that most passengers overlook. This deliberate slowing of the journey enables the travelogue to recover the cultural texture of railway towns, demonstrating that places commonly regarded as temporary halts possess histories, relationships, and identities of their own. In *Chai Chai*, the railway junction is therefore reimagined as a lived cultural landscape rather than an anonymous point of transit, expanding the possibilities of the Indian travelogue as a literary form.

3. Everyday Lives and the Making of Regional Identity

3.1 History: Local Memory as Regional Consciousness

History in *Chai Chai* is not presented as a chronological account of political events but as a living presence embedded in everyday spaces. Ghosh is less interested in reconstructing the past through archival evidence than in understanding how local communities continue to remember it. As he travels across railway towns, historical narratives emerge through conversations, memorials, neighbourhoods, and personal recollections, suggesting that regional identity is sustained through collective memory rather than official documentation. Mughal Sarai exemplifies this narrative method. Although the town is nationally recognised as one of India's busiest railway junctions, Ghosh discovers that its local identity extends beyond its railway significance. Residents frequently associate the town with Lal Bahadur Shastri, whose birthplace remains an enduring symbol of simplicity and public service. Rather than describing the memorial as a tourist destination, Ghosh presents it as a site where local history continues to shape civic consciousness. The emphasis falls not on the monument itself but on the values and memories attached to it. Through this approach, history becomes an active element of everyday life instead of a distant record of completed events.

The travelogue also draws attention to the unresolved death of Deen Dayal Upadhyaya near Mughal Sarai. Instead of offering a definitive historical explanation, Ghosh records the differing interpretations expressed by local residents. Their conversations reveal that historical events continue to generate debate long after they occur. By incorporating multiple voices, the narrative avoids presenting history as fixed or uncontested. Local memory emerges as dynamic, reflecting the varied ways in which communities understand their own past.

A comparable pattern appears in Jhansi, where the memory of Rani Lakshmibai continues to define the cultural landscape. Her presence is not confined to museums or history textbooks; it survives in public monuments, educational institutions, street names, and popular narratives. Ghosh's observations suggest that the queen's legacy remains part of the town's everyday identity, linking contemporary life with a shared historical inheritance. The travelogue therefore demonstrates that regional consciousness develops through the continuous interaction between place and memory. By foregrounding local recollections rather than official historical narratives, *Chai Chai* broadens the scope of travel writing. History is represented not as an external subject to be studied but as a lived experience that shapes the identity of ordinary communities. Ghosh's narrative suggests that understanding a region requires attention to the memories preserved by its inhabitants, for these memories provide continuity between the past and the present and contribute significantly to the cultural distinctiveness of each railway town.

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3.2 Labour: Work, Occupation, and the Cultural Fabric of Railway Towns

While history provides railway towns with a sense of continuity, labour gives them their everyday rhythm. In *Chai Chai*, Ghosh repeatedly shifts his attention from railway infrastructure to the people whose occupations sustain these settlements. Porters, tea vendors, rickshaw pullers, shopkeepers, mechanics, and railway employees are not treated as incidental figures in the background; they become the primary means through which the travelogue interprets regional life. By foregrounding ordinary work, Ghosh demonstrates that the identity of a place is shaped as much by its workforce as by its geography or history.

Rather than relying on official economic data, Ghosh uncovers the social structure of railway towns through conversations with workers. Their experiences reveal patterns of dependence that connect the railway with the surrounding agrarian economy. During his visit to Itarsi, a local shopkeeper explains how the town's commercial life revolves around both railway employees and farmers:

> Amandeep said of the three hundred or so regular customers who bought from his shop on credit, fifty per cent were railway employees. The remaining fifty per cent comprised farmers. Salaried customers cleared their accounts every month. Farmers, on the other hand, paid him twice a year, often in the form of wheat and soya bean... (Ghosh, 2009, p. 122-123).

The passage reveals that employment in Itarsi cannot be understood through isolated professions. Railway service, agriculture, and small-scale trade operate as interconnected systems that sustain the town's economy. By documenting an ordinary business transaction, Ghosh uncovers the economic relationships that remain invisible to passengers who simply change trains and continue their journeys. The travelogue therefore interprets labour as a shared social practice rather than an individual occupation.

Ghosh also pays close attention to the dignity of work. His narrative does not romanticise manual labour, nor does it reduce workers to anonymous service providers. Instead, he presents them as knowledgeable participants whose experiences deepen his understanding of each locality. Their observations frequently challenge conventional perceptions of railway towns by revealing aspects of everyday life that escape official descriptions. In this respect, labour functions not merely as a source of livelihood but as a repository of local knowledge. This emphasis on ordinary occupations broadens the scope of Indian travel writing. Instead of celebrating spectacular landscapes or monumental architecture, *Chai Chai* locates cultural significance in the routines that sustain everyday existence. The economic life of a railway town becomes an essential expression of its regional character, demonstrating that work is not simply an activity performed within a place but a force that continually shapes its social identity.

3.3 Community: Human Encounters and the Experience of Belonging

A defining characteristic of *Chai Chai* is its emphasis on human relationships as the foundation of regional identity. Ghosh's understanding of a place develops through conversations rather than observation alone. Instead of relying on monuments, museums, or official records to interpret a locality, he allows residents to narrate their own experiences. Their voices gradually transform unfamiliar railway towns into recognisable social spaces, demonstrating that a region is ultimately understood through the people who inhabit it. The travelogue is structured around a series of informal encounters. Shopkeepers, journalists, teachers, railway employees, students, and long-time residents become Ghosh's guides, not because they possess

institutional authority but because they represent the lived realities of their communities. These conversations often begin casually and evolve into reflections on local customs, family histories, occupations, and changing social conditions. Such interactions shift the travel narrative from external description to cultural dialogue, allowing regional identity to emerge through shared experiences rather than detached observation.

A recurring feature of these encounters is the generosity extended to the traveller. Throughout his journey, Ghosh receives directions, hospitality, and companionship from people who have no prior acquaintance with him. These gestures are presented without sentimentality; instead, they reveal everyday practices of trust and mutual respect that continue to shape community life. Hospitality thus becomes more than an act of kindness- it reflects a social ethic through which local identity is expressed and sustained. Equally significant is Ghosh's willingness to listen. Rather than imposing predetermined conclusions, he permits local voices to influence the direction of his narrative. This narrative humility distinguishes *Chai Chai* from travel accounts that privilege the traveller's authority over the experiences of residents. The resulting narrative becomes collaborative, where the meaning of a place is constructed through dialogue between traveller and community. In this process, regional identity appears as a collective expression rather than an individual interpretation.

The travelogue also demonstrates that railway towns are far more than transit points populated by anonymous passengers. Behind the movement of trains exists a stable network of families, neighbourhoods, friendships, and institutions that sustain everyday life. By entering these social worlds, Ghosh reveals dimensions of the locality that remain inaccessible to those who merely pass through. The railway junction, therefore, is not portrayed as a place of impermanence but as a community where relationships create continuity despite the constant movement associated with rail travel. Through these human encounters, *Chai Chai* broadens the scope of contemporary Indian travel writing. The narrative suggests that the cultural significance of a region cannot be understood solely through its landscapes or historical landmarks. It is equally embedded in the conversations, acts of hospitality, and everyday relationships that shape the lives of its residents. By foregrounding these interactions, Ghosh demonstrates that regional identity is experienced not only through place but also through the communities that give those places their enduring social character.

4. Beyond the Junction: Travelogue as a Voice of Regional Identity

Marcel Proust famously observes, "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes" ((Proust & Scott-Moncrieff, 2016)). Although Proust's reflection emerges from a broader philosophical meditation on perception, it provides an illuminating point of entry into Bishwanath Ghosh's *Chai Chai*. Ghosh's travelogue does not celebrate unexplored territories or distant landscapes; instead, it invites readers to reconsider places that have long remained within public sight yet outside literary attention. Railway junctions, familiar to millions of passengers as temporary halts, become meaningful destinations because the traveller learns to perceive them differently. The significance of the journey, therefore, lies not in discovering unknown places but in discovering overlooked realities within places that appear ordinary.

This altered mode of perception defines the narrative structure of *Chai Chai*. Ghosh consistently shifts his attention away from railway platforms once he arrives at a junction. Instead of recording train schedules or architectural details, he enters neighbourhoods, tea stalls, markets, schools, and residential colonies where the social life of the town unfolds. These movements beyond the station are not incidental episodes; they constitute the central purpose of the journey. The travelogue thus challenges the assumption that the value of travel depends upon reaching celebrated destinations. Rather, it demonstrates that careful observation can

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reveal cultural richness in places that conventional tourism overlooks. Ghosh's narrative perspective further distinguishes *Chai Chai* from destination-centred travel writing. He does not present himself as an expert who interprets places through historical facts alone. His understanding develops gradually through conversations with railway employees, vendors, journalists, teachers, shopkeepers, and long-time residents. These encounters transform the traveller from an observer into a participant, allowing the locality to define itself through the experiences of its inhabitants. The narrative consequently avoids imposing a singular interpretation upon the region. Instead, regional identity emerges through multiple voices that collectively reveal the complexity of everyday life.

Another significant aspect of the travelogue is its rejection of conventional hierarchies of place. Literary attention is generally reserved for locations associated with political power, architectural grandeur, or tourist appeal. Ghosh deliberately reverses this hierarchy by focusing on railway junctions that are remembered primarily because trains stop there. His narrative demonstrates that cultural significance cannot be measured by national visibility alone. Every junction possesses a distinct historical background, occupational structure, linguistic environment, and social memory that contribute to its individual character. The railway map, therefore, becomes not merely a network of transport but a map of regional cultures waiting to be explored. This perspective also broadens the possibilities of the Indian travelogue as a literary form. Rather than presenting travel as a sequence of destinations, Ghosh constructs it as an ongoing process of listening, observing, and interpreting. History, labour, and community become interconnected dimensions through which regional identity is experienced. The travelogue does not isolate these elements; instead, it reveals how they coexist within the everyday life of each railway town. By recording these lived realities, Ghosh preserves forms of cultural knowledge that rarely appear in official histories or tourist narratives.

Proust's reflection ultimately acquires renewed significance through *Chai Chai*. The travelogue reminds readers that discovery is not always dependent upon geographical distance or unfamiliar landscapes. Sometimes it requires only a willingness to look beyond habitual ways of seeing. Ghosh transforms railway junctions from anonymous transit points into vibrant cultural landscapes, demonstrating that the most meaningful journeys often begin with a change in perception rather than a change in destination. In doing so, he establishes the travelogue as a literary voice capable of recovering the regional diversity embedded within the everyday geography of India.

Results and Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that *Chai Chai* departs from the conventional framework of travel writing by relocating its narrative focus from destinations to railway junctions that have remained largely absent from literary discourse. Rather than functioning as transitional spaces, these junctions emerge as culturally significant localities where regional identity is expressed through everyday experiences. Ghosh's travelogue therefore extends the scope of Indian travel writing by showing that places commonly regarded as ordinary possess complex social, historical, and cultural dimensions worthy of sustained literary attention.

The study further establishes that regional identity in *Chai Chai* is constructed through interconnected layers of lived experience rather than through geographical description alone. Historical memory links communities with their past, labour reveals the economic structures that sustain local life, and everyday interactions create a sense of belonging among residents. These elements do not appear as isolated themes; instead, they operate together to produce a nuanced representation of regional consciousness. Ghosh's emphasis on conversations and observation allows these dimensions to emerge naturally from the narrative without reducing

them to documentary information. From a literary perspective, the travelogue employs a narrative voice that privileges participation over detached observation. Instead of assuming the role of an authoritative commentator, Ghosh positions himself as a traveller who learns through dialogue with local inhabitants. This narrative stance enhances the authenticity of the travelogue by allowing regional experiences to be articulated through the perspectives of the people who inhabit these railway towns. Consequently, the text moves beyond descriptive travel writing and develops into a reflective exploration of cultural identity grounded in lived realities.

The findings also support recent scholarship that views travel writing as a medium for representing overlooked places and marginalised experiences (Pratt, 1992; Thompson, 2011). However, *Chai Chai* contributes a distinctive Indian perspective by demonstrating that railway junctions- typically perceived as spaces of transit- can become meaningful literary landscapes. Ghosh's narrative challenges the assumption that travel narratives require spectacular destinations to produce significant cultural insights. Instead, the travelogue reveals that attentive engagement with ordinary places can generate equally compelling representations of India's regional diversity. This study therefore argues that *Chai Chai* should be recognised not merely as a record of travel but as an important contribution to contemporary Indian travel writing. By foregrounding local histories, everyday occupations, and community relationships, Ghosh reimagines the travelogue as a literary form capable of preserving regional voices that often remain peripheral within national narratives. His work demonstrates that meaningful travel begins not with the search for famous places but with the willingness to understand the cultural life of places where most travellers choose not to stop.

Conclusion

Robert Louis Stevenson (1996) remarks, *"To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive."* Although expressed in the nineteenth century, this observation continues to define one of the enduring philosophies of travel writing. Stevenson suggests that the value of a journey lies not merely in reaching a destination but in the experiences, reflections, and encounters that unfold along the way. Bishwanath Ghosh's *Chai Chai* embodies this philosophy with remarkable sensitivity. Instead of celebrating India's renowned tourist destinations, Ghosh deliberately turns his attention to railway junctions- places where passengers usually pause only long enough to board another train. By choosing these overlooked localities as the centre of his narrative, he redefines the purpose of travel and demonstrates that meaningful journeys often begin where conventional travel narratives come to an end.

The present study has argued that *Chai Chai* functions as a literary voice of regional identity by transforming railway junctions into culturally significant landscapes. Ghosh moves beyond the conventional representation of these towns as anonymous transit points and reveals them as repositories of local history, everyday labour, and community life. Through conversations with residents, careful observation of ordinary spaces, and an openness to unfamiliar experiences, he reconstructs the cultural personality of each locality. The travelogue thereby challenges destination-oriented models of travel writing and proposes an alternative mode of travel founded on attentive engagement rather than rapid movement. The analysis further demonstrates that regional identity in *Chai Chai* is neither static nor geographically predetermined. Instead, it is continuously produced through the interaction of historical memory, occupational practices, social relationships, and lived experience. Ghosh does not impose an external interpretation upon the places he visits; rather, he allows local voices to shape the narrative. This dialogic method gives authenticity to the travelogue and enables readers to encounter regional India through the perspectives of the people who inhabit these railway towns. Consequently, the text contributes to contemporary Indian travel writing by foregrounding places that have remained largely absent from mainstream literary and cultural

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discourse.

Beyond its literary significance, *Chai Chai* invites readers to reconsider the ethics of travel itself. In an age increasingly dominated by speed, itineraries, and destination-based tourism, Ghosh advocates a slower and more attentive form of travel that values conversation over consumption and understanding over observation. His journeys suggest that cultural knowledge emerges not from famous landmarks alone but from the ordinary lives of people whose stories are often overlooked. The railway junction, therefore, becomes more than a physical location; it evolves into a symbolic space where diverse histories, occupations, and communities converge to articulate the richness of regional India. Stevenson's reflection ultimately acquires renewed significance in the context of Ghosh's travelogue. *Chai Chai* demonstrates that the essence of travel lies not in the act of arrival but in the willingness to pause, listen, and engage with places that others merely pass through. By recovering the cultural depth of India's railway junctions, Bishwanath Ghosh expands the possibilities of the travelogue as a literary form and establishes it as a powerful medium through which regional identities are observed, preserved, and meaningfully represented.

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