

The Japanese Model: Quest for National Identity in Two Colonial Bengali Women's Travel Writings

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Abstract: This article seeks to look at how Bengali women travellers during the early twentieth century looked at and idealized Japan as a model for Bengal/India under colonial British rule. As women they were most influenced by their Japanese counterparts and their role in society both in the domestic and the public space. The two travel writings by Hariprabha Takeda and Sarojnalini Dutt in comparative and complementary ways bring out the reasons why Bengal/India should not emulate the West but rather look at Japan as an Asian model to consolidate their national identity when resisting colonial rule.

Keywords: travel writing, women's writing, colonial Bengal, women's education, Japan, Asia

INTRODUCTION

Secular travel along with traditional *tirtha* (religious travel) became a part of Bengali cultural milieu since the latter half of the nineteenth century. Crossing the *Kalapani*¹ or the 'black waters', a Hindu religious prohibition was absolved in 1894. Travel for higher education, pursuit of career, trade and experience became common among the Bengali Hindu elite and Brahmos². Like the *grand tour*³ of

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¹ In 1894, the provincial conference of Bengal ultimately passed a resolution sanctioning sea voyage of Hindus taking into consideration, the changed political and economic scenario. The travellers before this period who crossed the blackwaters were severely ostracized in society and had to undergo the *suddhikaran* process (rites performed to do away with the sins committed by crossing the blackwaters) to get back to the acceptable social life in Bengal.

² Romesh Chandra Dutta (1848-1909) was one of the earliest travellers to England, His *Three Years in Europe*, 1868-71 was published in 1896, which also included an account of his second visit in 1886. Trailokyanath Mukherjee (1847-1919) visited Europe in 1886, his *Visit to Europe* was published in 1902. Besides the two early

the English to visit continental Europe, the commonly sought destination for the Bengali elite was Europe and England. Besides England and other places of Europe, travel within Asia was also not uncommon. The reason for the increase in importance of Asian countries such as China and Japan was because of Germany's rise in power over England and the opening up of the new horizons for exploration with the rapidly increasing pan-Asiatic sentiments and the idea of 'Greater India' (Sen 2010, 94). Bengalis in late nineteenth and early twentieth century frequented places like Myanmar, Singapore, China, Japan and other Asian countries. It is commonly known that Rabindranath Tagore was the first to travel to Japan from Bengal and a series of letters⁴ written during the visit were published in the Bengali journal *Sabuj Patra* (Mukhopadhyay 1937). A compilation of these letters was later published as *Japan Jatri* in 1919.

Hariprabha Mullick (Takeda), a Bengali woman married to Uemon Takeda, a Japanese migrant who had joined a soap factory in Dhaka, had travelled to Japan four years prior to Tagore in 1912. She published her travel account in 1915 as *Bangomahilar Japan Jatra (A Bengali Lady's Journey to Japan)* from *Sahitya Prakash*, Dhaka⁵. Though Takeda does not have an illustrious family legacy like the Tagore's, her writing is historically quite significant. She is the first Asian woman to publish a book on Japan. British writer Isabella Bird⁶

travellers, figures like Girish Chandra Basu, Brahmabandhav Upadhyay, Protap Chandra Mazoomdar, Shibnath Shastri also travelled to Europe and England between 1860 and 1900.

³ The Grand Tour as a means of education was never better understood inspite of rudimentary means of locomotion, than by the upper classes of Elizabethan England. Throughout the century young Englishmen of good family invariably completed their education in foreign travel and by attendance at a foreign university. The Renaissance spirit to know had formalized this process as a necessary means of completion of education. For Details see Mead, William Edward. *The Grand Tour in the Eighteenth Century*, Houghton and Mifflin Co., Boston and New York, 1914.

⁴ On his way to Japan and during his stay there, he wrote a number of letters to various people. The list includes names like Nepal Chandra Roy, Surendranath Thakur, Gaganendranath Thakur, Mira Devi, Pramatha Chowdhury, Dinendranath Thakur and Nagendranath Gangopadhyay.

⁵ It was reprinted in February, 1999 by Sahitya Prakash with an Introduction titled *Hariprabha Takeda r Japan* by Monzurul Haq and a concluding essay titled *Hariprabhar dakha Japan* by Kajuhiro Watanabe.

⁶ Isabella Bird (1831-1904) was an English travel writer. As a medicine for her ill-health, she was prescribed travel and therefore we have some very interesting tales from her. Her writings include, *The English woman in America* (1856), *Six Months in*

published her travel account of Japan in 1878 as *Unbeaten Tracks of Japan* and Takeda is not very far from her in this regard. Apart from Takeda, another Bengali woman who had travelled to Japan during almost the same time was Sarojnalini Dutt, wife of Gurusaday Dutt⁷, civil servant and founder of the *Bengal Bratachari Society*⁸. Sarojnalini went to Japan in 1920. Sarojnalini's travel account was published posthumously as *Japan e Banganari (A Bengali Lady in*

the Sandwich Islands (1875), *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* (1879), *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* (1880), *The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither* (1883), *Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan* (1891), and *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond: An Account of Journeys in China* (1899).

⁷ Gurusaday Dutt (1882-1941) was the son of the Ramakrishna Dutt Chaudhuri and Anandamayee Debi. His father was the *zamindar* of Birasri village of Sylhet. He stood 1st in the F.A. examination (prior to Graduate studies) from Presidency College, Calcutta in 1901 and was awarded the Scindia Gold Medal. He went on a Scholarship from the Sylhet Union to Emmanuel College, Cambridge, UK and then took the Indian Civil Service (ICS) examination. He is the first Indian to have stood first in the ICS examination. He also passed the Bar examination with a First Class, and was called to the Bar by the Honourable Society of Gray's Inn. In 1905, he returned to India and started work as an ICS officer. As he served in high administrative posts in various districts of Bengal, he was actively involved in various kinds of social work and activities, the foremost among them being the establishment of the 'Palli Sampad Raksha Samity' literally meaning association for protecting the local heritage in the year 1931, during his tenure as the District Magistrate of Birbhum. The Samity was converted to Bengal Bratachari Society in 1935.

⁸ Gurusaday Dutt was introduced to the fabulous heritage of his motherland by his wife Saroj Nalini Dutt. After the demise of Saroj Nalini Dutt, Gurusaday Dutt formed the Saroj Nalini Dutt Memorial Association in 1925. It was meant to uplift the condition of Bengali destitute widows and other poor women of Bengal and also to enlighten the womenfolk of Bengal towards the rich heritage. Gurusaday Dutt established the 'Palli Sampad Raksha Samity' literally meaning association for protecting the local heritage in the year 1931, during his tenure as the District Magistrate of Birbhum for collection, preservation and nourishment through the practices of rural folk art and craft of undivided Bengal. However, the Samity was converted to Bengal Bratachari Society in 1935. Gurusaday Dutt – introduced the word '*Bratachari*' (where the Bengali word - *Brata* meaning taking vows as the objective and '*chari*' - meaning the practice), a folk movement taken up by the youth at the same level of sincerity, honesty and zeal with which the womenfolk of Bengal practiced their religious rites i.e., *Bratas* for the betterment of the family members. Later, he incorporated this term in 1935, when he established the '*Bengal Bratachari Society*'. The aims & objectives of the 'Bengal Bratachari Society' is to popularise the spirit of National consciousness for becoming a good citizen by means of educative training of physical, mental and universal fraternity through the practice of the traditional folk songs and dances of Bengal.

Japan) in 1929. Prior to its publication as a book, it was serialized in a Bengali periodical *Bangalakkhi* between 1928 and 1929. These travellers played a crucial role in bringing the Japanese experience closer to Bengal. The Bengali ‘self’ always tried to complement and compare itself with the Japanese ‘other’. This article will attempt a comparative and complementary thematic analysis of the travel accounts by the two Bengali women who went to Japan over a gap of eight years. It will focus on the areas of women and their education along with themes of domesticity and social space.

THE CONTEXT OF THE TRAVEL AND WRITINGS

Hariprabha was born to the philanthropic couple Sasibhushan Mullick and Nagendrabala in 1894 in erstwhile Dhaka district of undivided Bengal. Both her parents ran the Dhaka Rescue Home which provided shelter to the destitutes. However, not much is known about the circumstances which led to the marriage of Hariprabha with a foreign national. Hariprabha’s sojourn to Japan was in search of her *sasurbari* or in-law’s place. Though she was a Brahmo and literate according to the standards of her time, her own self-image was that of a dutiful Bengali wife. Her heart pined to see her in-laws’ and acquire their blessings. What was significant about her was the desire to document⁹ what she witnessed in a foreign household, an essentially modern desire, when seen through effects and tools of printing press and women’s education in Bengal.

Dutt’s *Japan-e-Banganari (A Bengali Lady in Japan)* (1929) gives an account of her visit to Japan in 1920 with her husband Gurusaday Dutt. The travelogue written in the form of journal entries with dates traces the journey from the sailing of her ship from the port of Calcutta on 17 April, 1920 and ends with the return journey when the ship nears Hong Kong harbour on 1 August, 1920. Although Dutt travelled to Japan as a companion to her husband, her writing minutely observed and documented the nuances of Japanese life and culture across various social and cultural spaces. It includes her observations on the economic constitution of Japan, technological advancement, national

⁹ There has been a lot of speculation regarding why Hariprabha wanted to document her experiences of visit to Japan. Muntasir Mamun in his article on Hariprabha published in the journal *Aitihāsik* states that it was probably to acquire funds for Dhaka Uddhar Ashram (Rescue Home) of which Hariprabha’s natal-family was the founder. The proceeds of the sale would go to the Uddhar Ashram which was a shelter for destitute women.

consciousness, discipline and importantly enough for her own cause—progress in women’s education— all of which were exemplary of a ‘modern’ Japan to her. Dutt had upheld Japan as the Asian alternative and model that should be followed by India. Receiving no formal education, Dutt was tutored at her own residence in Bandel, in the district of Hooghly. Reminiscences of her life written by her husband, Gurusaday Dutt in *A Woman of India: Being the Life of Sarojnalini Dutt*¹⁰ portrays her as deeply patriotic and devoted to the cause of the country. Dutt founded the Women’s Institute Movement in India and was the first to set up a network of *Mahila Samity* or women’s organizations since 1913. She was conferred the MBE by King George V for her versatile contributions and social welfare works. She had accompanied her husband in his transferable jobs. *Japan-e-Banganari* was the result of her visit to Japan with her husband. All through the narrative, she emphasized on Japanese nationalism and their national character, discipline, women and their education. These can be found as *leitmotif* in her narrative. Her travelogue is not simply a record of her daily activities but her engaging comparative mind makes *Japan-e-Banganari* an important example of women’s writing from Bengal at the moment of growing nationalist charge in the Indian subcontinent.

BHADRAMAHILA(S) FREE FROM FETTERS

The colonial period in Bengal saw many changes, both rapid and slow in its social conditions. The ‘woman question’ was central to early nationalism in Bengal in the nineteenth century following from social-reform movements in the region. However, with the discursive shaping of the *bhadramahila* in Bengal in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the social roles of women were split into the binary as Chatterjee (1993) has shown by the *ghar/bahir*, (home/world) distinction. The ‘world’ as the external, domain of the material and confrontational politics and negotiations with the colonial state should not affect the inner domain of the home which represented the ‘inner spiritual self, one’s true identity’ (Ibid, 120) harboured in the body and the mind of the woman indoors. As an ideal help for her husband, the Bengali woman was supposed to be a carrier of the national tradition. She was modeled on as Borthwick observes, “An attempt to synthesize the virtues of the new and the old, based on traditional Hindu womanly qualities mixed with modern features derived from the Victorian image

¹⁰ The first Indian edition of this book was made available in 1998.

of the 'perfect lady'. The ideal Victorian lady embodied many of the characteristic virtues of a Hindu wife, combining moral goodness with a basic education and social presence." (Borthwick 1984, 56) Formal education was one of the primary ways in which women were reformed. Education became logically associated with abolition of issues such as *purdah*. The 'new woman' (*nabina*) produced were suited to meet the demands of the changing times. The *bhadralok* increasingly moved out from the world of trade and commerce to pursue *chakri* (salaried jobs) or in pursuit of independent professional careers. The changing economic base of the Bengali upper castes resulting in the consolidation of urbanized professional elite in the late nineteenth century created new social conditions for a redefinition of the role of women.

Takeda and Dutt were the *nabina*. One a Brahmo married to a foreigner (Japanese national) and another from a Brahmo household married into another progressive Vaishnav household. Both of them as befitting companions to their husbands, travelled with them. As companionate travel started gaining currency among the Bengalis during the early twentieth century, these two women represent the earliest travellers to a foreign land from Bengal. In most of the travel accounts by Bengali women the first recorded reaction of undertaking a journey outside home is that of unbounded joy. First, it signified being free from the strict boundaries of the *antahpur* or the inner quarters of the household and second, a release from the stricter regimes of the household. In Takeda, this joy is first expressed when she writes, "We walked across the bazaar for the first time like *mems*, to purchase articles" (Takeda 1999 [1915], 24) This sentence expresses the reaction of a simple householder about the new found freedom during the course of her visit to a foreign land. However, for Takeda, visiting Japan was visiting her in-laws abode and the intense desire to see them is expressed at the beginning of her narrative.

For Dutt, journey to Japan was one of her many journeys accompanying her husband. She was actively involved in a public life. The pattern of social reform which began in the middle decades of the nineteenth century changed slowly in the late nineteenth century with the establishments of rudimentary women's associations in India, dealing with women's issues. *Sakhi Samity* was set up by Swarnakumari Devi in Calcutta in 1882 followed by *Bharat Stri Mahamandal* in 1910 in Allahabad by Swarnakumari Devi's daughter, Saraladevi Chaudhurani. Both these organizations had female

education as a major agenda. Later, 1913 onwards, Saroj Nalini Dutt setup a network of *Mahila Samitis* or women's organizations. Dutt herself had taken up the cause of women's education and women's economic independence to a great extent. The notes which she took on her visit to Japan and later to the United Kingdom were used by her after she returned to India. She was influenced by the women's organizations of the United Kingdom and modeled her *Mahila Samitis* on them.

COMPARING INDIAN AND JAPANESE WOMEN, DOMESTICITY AND SOCIAL HABITS

Takeda describes people and places, she captures with eloquence, the minute details of a Japanese household, the domestic life. On social aspects, her description of Japan is quite lively and elaborate. Japanese homes, their decoration, food habits, culinary art, social behavior, Japanese kimono, hair styles of women, all such details were given much attention by Takeda. She had seen and experienced it as a part of the Japanese domestic which makes her document a lived reality. In Takeda's writing we find obvious portrayals of Japanese women and get accustomed to their way of work and life. This comparison between domestic habits of women of Bengal and Japan reveals that women as a part of the society contributed to its upliftment through devoting time and energy in educating children and spending time with them, while for Bengali women most of the time was spent in domestic chores, the time for which could easily be curtailed.

Dutt also writes in detail on the domestic characteristics of women, their habits of dressing, hair-styles, marriage and education. Dutt's first interaction with Japanese women was while attending a concert in Kobe. She also highlighted with great importance the Japanese national character of being the caring affectionate woman fulfilling their duty as the 'wise mother'. Dutt was inspired by the cultural ethos of nationalism from the like of Gandhi and Tagore. (Majumdar 2002) Due to her interest and involvement in many *mahila samiti* one of the first things that caught her attention was the discipline and restraint followed by Japanese women. As mothers they imparted perfect training to their children. This was one of the ways in which Japanese mothers fulfilled their responsibility towards building a strong national character among the young breed.

Another major observation made on marriage by both Dutt and Takeda would be worth mentioning here. Since marriage was the most

important part of a woman's life in Bengal during this period, there were obvious comparisons between the two countries. Both the authors critically observed the practice of child-marriage, a rampant social evil in India, which had caused unparalleled harm to the progress of Indian women and India as a nation. Takeda wrote an elaborate article on the marriage practices in Japan published in *Bharatbarsha* much later.¹¹

Both women travellers narrate the roles women take up in public life in Japan besides being the complying domestic. Women worked in markets, shops, stations, post-offices, places of entertainment and in supervisory roles. Dutt appreciates their quality of diligence and labour in women that reflected a strong national character. Attires, hair styles, ways of dressing and social habits of Japanese women attracted the attention of both the travellers. Tagore (1974) too mentioned that Japanese women were a "delight to the mind and the eye". He was greatly attracted by their beauty, aesthetic sense and work efficiency. Takeda observed that women took great care of their hair and it was difficult to find women with such long, black and lustrous hair anywhere else. Dutt observed that it was amazing to see the various hair styles of Japanese women. Both the travellers discuss in great details, the costume of Japanese men and women and its similarities and dissimilarities. Dutt was greatly overwhelmed by Japanese cleanliness. As a woman from Bengal, *suchi/asuchi* (qualities roughly corresponding to cleanliness and purity) occupied her mind. These for her were not only domestic habits read in manuals for tutoring the *bhadramahila* but also emblematic of the national character.

EDUCATION AND PROGRESS OF THE JAPANESE

Both the travellers were greatly attracted by the education system and they posited Japan as an ideal to be followed by India. Takeda's very practical observations were based on her visit to a girl's school where the system of education would help one lead a better life in a household and also be an ideal human being. In the schools girls had advanced subjects such as chemistry, botany, geology, common physiology and also cookery, washer man's work, cleaning houses, gardening, stitching, music, art work, drawing, moral science. She

¹¹ An article titled "Japaner Nari" was originally published in *Bharatbarsha*, Phalgun, 1356 (1949). A translation of "Japaner Nari" by Hariprabha Takeda in the Comparative Literature Association of India Web Journal, *Sahitya*, Vol. 2 (online): <http://www.clai.in/13madhurima-translation.pdf> was done by Madhurima Mukhopadhyay.

admired the fact that children were not taught via rote-learning as in Bengal but they received hands-on training on every possible subject. She further observes that it is because of this system of learning that there were hardly any illiterate men and women in Japan. The Government ensured education for all above 8 years.

Dutt noted her experience of the Japanese primary and middle schools for girls, visited women's organizations and compared it to that of Bengal. She lamented how the Indians lagged behind due to the social attitudes and problems of being colonized. Her writings mark the obvious differences in the condition of women between the two countries, education being an important aspect of their social constitution. Japan was chosen as a model for India for many reasons. In the early twentieth century, the concept of nation in India was based not merely on territorial extent of its sovereignty. Cultural nationalistic sentiments and expression encompassed that India's 'ancient history' and 'golden past', had been the birthplace of the Indus Valley and Vedic civilisations, as well as given birth to four major world religions namely Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Indian nationalists envisioned India stretching along these lines across the subcontinent. Rabindranath Tagore in his essay *Nationalism in Japan* (1917) wrote,

...those days when the whole of Eastern Asia from Burma to Japan was united with India in the closest tie of friendship, the only natural tie which can exist between nations. (Das 1996, 439)

Japan became the preferred Asian example largely because of its modern outlook. Tagore shared such admiration for Japan for demonstrating the ability of an Asian nation to rival the West in industrial development and economic progress.

Like other socio-cultural areas of indigenous intervention, Dutt envisioned India as a 'modern' nation at the beginning of twentieth century. However, she never suggested a complete eschewing of tradition and heritage. Rather like her contemporary time, she imagines India as a colonial modern nation. Dutt speaks about women's education and enhancing women's role in society for the uplift of the nation. She explains that Japan had progressed mainly because women there had progressed in the same pace as men. However, education didn't change the traditional modes of the Japanese society. Japanese women had a different history from that of women in contemporary Bengal. Changes in monarchies beset the Japanese 'modern' path with

changes in social policies to which women were subjected. The Meiji restoration¹² in the year 1868 marked the escalating pace of Japan towards modernization. Importantly, in 1872, the implementation of the universal compulsory education for men and women and conscription altered the gender roles during Meiji period. Prior to this period, the Christian missionaries were instrumental in establishing High school for girls. (Kimi 1995, 99) Conscription militarized men and universal education provided alternatives to agricultural work for young girls who could develop their intellectual skills. The schools imparted curricula where moral values were inculcated. Culturally approved qualities such as diligence, filial piety, love for country, reverence and obedience to the emperor were encouraged and were expected to be followed. 'Good Wife, Wise Mother' (*ryōsai kenbo*) was the motto of moulding the new Japanese woman.

Both the travellers, Dutt and Takeda, travelled to Japan during the Taisho period¹³. During that time there fermented in Japan a school of thought which was democratic and liberal. There was also an appearance during this time of many women's organizations that upheld causes of women which included socialism, political rights, abolition of prostitution, as well as development of new schools of educational thought. In India, English was introduced in the curriculum as a means to further colonial rule and cultural supremacy. Following from the Wood's Despatch¹⁴ of 1854 on education, the British in India

¹² The Meiji Restoration also known as the *Meiji Ishin, Revolution, Reform or Renewal*, was a chain of events that restored imperial rule to Japan in 1868. The period extends from 1868 to 1912. The Restoration led to enormous changes in Japan's political and social structure, and spanned both the late Edo period (often called Late Tokugawa shogunate) and the beginning of the Meiji period.

¹³ The Taisho period followed the Meiji period, extending from 1912 to 1926. It represented a continuation of Japan's rise in the international scene and liberalism at home, known as the Taisho democracy in Japan; it is usually distinguished from the preceding chaotic Meiji period and the following militarism-driven first part of the Showa period.

¹⁴ Wood's Despatch on education in 1854 laid the foundation on which the educational system had developed in colonial India. As the President of the Board of Control, Wood in 1854 sent a despatch to Lord Dalhousie, the then Governor-General of India. It was recommended therein that: 1. An education department was to be set in every province. 2. Universities on the model of the London university be established in big cities such as Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. 3. At least one government school be opened in every district. 4. Affiliated private schools should be given grant in aid. 5. The Indian natives should be given training in their mother tongue also. In accordance with Wood's Despatch, Education Departments were

evolved educational schemes that set out to create a middle class serving as an agent of the imperialist economy and administration and envisaged that through it a social change would be initiated. In the context of Japan, both the travellers have generally opined that the Japanese have strengthened their education and language to fight foreign forces and therefore their language became a source of their national consolidation.

Dutt narrates in every detail what she saw regarding girl's schools in Japan. She punctuates her experiences in Japan with the illustrations from Bengal as she was associated with the causes for women in the region. Both the travellers thought it a great disadvantage that rote-learning was the only method of imparting education in India. Practical ways of education had greater advantages and made the process of acquiring knowledge more enjoyable and easy. She constantly pleaded to the parents in Bengal, for educating their boy and girl alike.

CONCLUSION

The thematic study of certain aspects of the two travelogues show how these travel narratives serve the purpose of being books of information and helpful guides to the fellow countrymen. It served the purpose of narrating aspects of the Japanese experience crucial for India, fighting colonial rule and re-casting its identity as a nation. Women, their education and their cultural roles became the critical areas of intervention, debates and analysis. In the genre of travelogue 'self' and 'other' comparisons naturally, almost unconsciously emanates in the writer. The process of travel writing necessarily heightens the writer's own understanding of self; when continually faced with the other. Korte (2010, 110) mentions, "women travel not only as representatives of their gender, but also as members of their particular society and culture." Takeda was eager to inform women of her country about the country of her in-laws and in the process bring to the forefront some of the aspects of Japanese life which would be perfect examples for India. Being a woman herself, what could be more striking for her than the condition of her contemporaries in Japan? So, she very meticulously pens down her experiences. Dutt's major agenda was to take lessons from the Japanese model of women's education on which she would typecast her *mahila samiti*. Her belief was that these *samitis* would help women assemble together and invest time in some 'good work'.

established in every province, and universities were opened at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras (1857), Punjab (1882) and Allahabad (1887).

These women's associations were training grounds for women allowing them access to education and to work collectively for the upliftment of their own sex. She was critical about her contemporary Bengali women's way of life and emphasized on improvement. The only way she saw was through education. However as mentioned before, though education was a major agenda, it was never by shunning the traditional roles of women as emphasized by the associations too. So this was a model for the colonial modern subject, trying to emulate modernity in rebuilding the Indian nation. Both the writers highlighted the ideal in Japan which India could follow in its contestations with the colonial state towards becoming an independent nation.

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