

## Review Article

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# A Bengali Bride in the Land of the Rising Sun: Review of Somdatta Mandal's *The Journey of a Bengali Woman in Japan and Other Essay*

Translation of Hariprabha Takeda's *Bangomohilar Japan Jatra o Ananya Rachana* (Kolkata: Jadavpur University Press, 2019). ISBN: 978-93-83660-47-6; Rs.350.00

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The marriage of Hariprabha Basu Mallick, a young Bengali woman with Oemon Takeda, a Japanese national in 1907, Bengal, was exotic enough to be the stuff of fiction especially by those Indians who write in English. Unfortunately, very little is known about this rather unusual alliance except that Oemon Takeda had travelled in search of a job and had landed one as the technical supervisor in the Bulbul Soap factory in Dhaka owned by Hariprabha's father Sashibhusan Basu Mallick, an entrepreneur who was a liberal Brahmo social reformer. Monzurul Huq, the editor of one of the Bengali editions of her memoir, has suggested that Takeda probably began going to the Brahmo Samaj to alleviate his boredom, to socialize. Apparently it is here that he is likely to have met Hariprabha and fell in love. These are all felicitous speculations and it is a pity that Hariprabha, who wrote about her travel to Japan, remained silent about their courtship (if any). Yet, the blossoming of romance between a Japanese man and a Bengali woman had a precedent: Okakura Tensin, a sophisticated Japanese art- cultural impresario and Priyamvada Devi, a very well known Bengali poet, who were contemporaries of Oemon and Hariprabha.

Huq believes that it was Sashibhusan's wife Nagendrabala, who played an active role in social work, was instrumental in getting her husband agree to the marriage of their eldest daughter to his Japanese employee. Their trust in Takeda as a good prospective son-in-law was not betrayed as Oemon started his own manufacturing business and also took part in his father – in-law's philanthropic ventures. Though there may have been a social risqué element in marrying one's daughter to a Japanese immigrant but it was also true that the middle-class Bengali had begun to regard Japan in high esteem. The immediate historical context for this may have been the recent victory of Japan over Russia (1904-1905). There were articles in some of the major journals, most of which suggested that this was a sign of Asia's victory of Europe, no mean feat.

Hariprabha and Oemon may have been lost to posterity had it not been for the singular event of the young Bengali woman's decision to write of her travel to Japan which she undertook with her husband. There was, in Hariprabha's case, no obligation to patrilocate—the custom of women leaving their natal family to be with the family of which they became part through the marriage; her decision to visit her *sasurbari* or the home of her in-laws who lived in the small

town of Kochino in the Nagoya prefecture was an act of choice, fuelled no doubt by curiosity that was natural to a young woman in her condition.

In Bengal the most obvious reason for travel was *tirtha* or pilgrimages to holy places which the typical middle-class Bengali families undertook. Travelling beyond the boundaries of one's homeland could be for many reasons. Young men travelled to gain expertise in fields like medicine and law or in search of livelihood; for others, from more privileged leisured class, it could be for the sheer pleasure, a phenomenon which would gain currency later as tourism. In the late nineteenth century Bengali women like Jnanadanandini Devi, and Krishnabhabini Das travelled after their marriage to be with their husbands whose professional pursuits had made them move to England. Hariprabha's marriage took her to the Far East. Since they were based in Dhaka the first lap of the journey involved travelling by train to Narayangunj and from there by a steamer to Calcutta.

Hariprabha boarded a ship with her husband Oemon in 1912 and it made her the first Bengali woman to journey to the land of the rising sun. She decided to write about her four month long experience of sojourn in various cities of Japan. *Bangomahilar Japan Jatra* was published in Dhaka in 1915 by her sister Santiprabha Mallick. This was a year before Rabindranath Tagore's famous trip to Japan where he travelled extensively and lectured on the menace of nationalism. The Takeda couple returned to Japan in 1924 and again in 1941 during which time they stayed for seven years. It was during this period that she wrote an account, drawing upon her experience, titled *Juddha Jarjarita Japan* (Japan ravaged by war), a time when she was associated with Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's Azad Hind Fauj (Indian National Army), listened to Bose's lecture and also met him. Hariprabha was a keen observer of social life in Japan, especially those concerning women's roles, marriage, domesticity and child-rearing. This is evident in the essays titled '*Japane Santan Palon o Narisiksha*' ('Child Rearing and Women's Education in Japan') and '*Japaner Nari*' ('Women of Japan') which were published in the prestigious journal *Bangadarshan*. A collection of these writings titled *Bangomohilar Japan Jatra o Onannyo Rachana* (2009) was edited by Manjushree Sinha and provides the source of this English translation by Somdatta Mandal.

Mandal is an indefatigable translator into English of Bengali travel writings and has been engaged in this work for almost a decade. The list of her translations include Durgabati Ghosh's travelogue, *The Westward Traveller* (2010), *Wanderlust: The Travels of the Tagore Family* (2014); Krishnabhabini Das's *A Bengali Lady in England* (2015), Rabindranath Tagore's *Gleanings of the Road* (2018) and Chitrita Devi's *Crossing Many Seas* (2018). *The Journey of a Bengali Woman to Japan and other Essays* (2019) is her latest addition to this body of translations.

The title essay of the volume is a sixty six page account of Hariprabha's journey and sojourn in Japan. Expectedly, it begins with a vivid description of the sea voyage, with accounts of Takeda's sickness and her attempts to fight off anxiety by singing devotional songs. The route to Japan is via Rangoon, Penang, Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai. Arriving at Moji the final port of call creates a sense of relief for Hariprabha. They travel to Kobe, put up in a hotel where she encounters wooden architecture for the first time. Her eye for details is evident from the beginning but it is marvelous that she even notes the price of a bento box (one which has steamed rice and vegetables with pickles) as something between 4 to 8 annas, for the benefit of her Bengali readers. There is a detailed description of the home of her in-laws, the tradition of squatting with the legs tucked behind on the mat, the tea ceremony and the food which is served. Initially cautious, her Japanese family gradually warmed up to her presence and treated her with generosity.

The couple travelled to Tokyo, Kyoto, Nikko and Osaka. Japan as it was a hundred years ago comes alive for the contemporary reader through Hariprabha's eyes. Perhaps the most interesting and amusing is her account of Tokyo, one of the major metropolis's of the world as a "city[ that ] does not look that attractive or gorgeous"( p 82) ; she notices that rarity of "horse carriages" and the "deep mud" on the roads but speaks well of trams and trains. She admires the "koen" or park in the central part of Tokyo, close to the Emperor Mikado's palace with its fountains, lake, small hillocks and flowering plants ( p.87). Kyoto, the erstwhile capital is "a place of pilgrimage" because of its many temples with beautiful architecture ( she notes the wide verandas on all sides, which provide a vantage for sitting quietly and listening to bird-call) and sculptures. (p89) Osaka, she astutely observes is a "place for factories and business"(p91) a characteristic that has outlived the many changes in Japan.

Given her social and religious background it is not surprising that she mentions a Brahma Upasana (prayer meeting) which was held in the home of an expatriate Indian. A longish passage is devoted to the description of a girl's school (p 83) where lessons are aimed at creating a "dignified citizen"(p 83). The curriculum she notes includes, along with the sciences, "physical training, cookery, laundry work, gardening, knitting, music and English." Evidently, the education of young girls is to fashion the perfect feminine. This does not appear surprising and one wonders what relation these schools may have had with the Japanese tradition of training of the Geisha or accomplished women who entertained men. Hariprabha's 'female gaze' scrutinizes the special sartorial habit of wearing the Kimono and the women's elaborate coiffure of their knee-length hair which is tied up beautifully with artificial flowers and pins; she notes that women "put their neck on a low wooden block" instead of pillows so that the hair-do remains intact for days( p 98). Hariprabha is full of admiration for the hardworking Japanese women who wake up very early to do household chores but whose lives are not "restricted indoors"-- they work alongside men in several professions ( p.100). She notes the customs of marriage in which the bride, dressed in expensive silk attire and ornaments travels to the in-laws house in a rickshaw. It appears that there is no religious ceremony for the nuptials but drinking of 'sake' (rice-wine) and community dinner which is considered a solemnizing of the marriage. She observes and comments about the roles of women and mothers as the stable centre of families.

Somdatta Mandal's translation of Hariprabha's travelogues, which serve also as her memoirs, are indispensable to the researcher working in the field of history (Bengali colonial modernity), ethnography, women's writing and culture studies. There are two issues which are worth commenting on regarding its status as translation. The first concerns the translator's very literal approach to her original/ source language use. This is not to be confused with the vexed issue of fidelity versus fluency. The translator, who is aware of the politics of power involved while translating from Bengali into English, will nevertheless have to be responsible to the usages in the target language. Mandal seems to have overlooked this issue in her desire to 'reproduce' faithfully certain usages in Bengali original. These result in occasional strange/awkward phrases. To give just one instance:"I started quietly to chant the mother's name" (p.62) in the context of Hariprabha's anxious response to the ship swaying dangerously, would perhaps puzzle the reader who is not familiar with the Bengali 'ma yer naam jop kora'. This refers to the practice by devout Hindus who chant the name of the goddess Kali or Durga to save them from an impending doom. A gloss, in such a case would have been useful. Yet, the translator pays meticulous attention to providing an aid to the reader who is unlikely to be familiar with the historical context. Thus there is a Foreword by Michael H. Fisher, an Introduction and most importantly seven Appendices by Monzurul Huq, Kazuhiro Watanabe, Swapan Prasanna Roy, Manjushree Sinha, Surojit and Manju Dasgupta and an account about Tanvir Mokammal's documentary *Japani*

*Bodhu* (The Japanese Wife, 2012) and *The Mother's Home at Dhaka* by Gautam Neogi. Together they provide a wide range of historical, critical assessments of Hariprabha's journey, as well as reminiscences by relatives. Without these the translation would have floated in a vacuum and sunk without a trace. Fortunately, with these valuable references and aid to reading it is of immense value to a wide range of readers.