

Representation of Japanese Women of the Early Twentieth Century in Bangla Travelogues on Japan

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The rise of Japan as a modern Asian nation occupies an important position in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century history of Asia. In 1868, Japan ended her long isolation policy of two centuries; also, opened her ports to foreign powers of Europe and America. This historical event is known as the Meiji Restoration. It 'signalled the end of feudalism in Japan'¹ Within a few decades after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japan rose as an important power in Asia; Japanese industrialisation made significant progress and Japan underwent rapid internal transformation, which transformed the nation from a feudal state to a capitalist one.² It must be remembered that the Meiji Era that brought a renewal of contact with the rest of the world, also restored Japan's association with Bengal and other parts of the British Empire. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, many educated Indians have paid visits to the Land of the Rising Sun. Further, many of them have penned down their experiences in the form of diaries, memoirs, travelogues etc. Among those who visited Japan from Bengal in the late nineteenth century, Swami Vivekananda's name deserves mention. Vivekananda's interview published in English newspapers, and his letter written from Yokohama, praise the Japanese people for their industrious nature, patriotism, cleanliness and artistic sensibilities.³ Among the earliest writings on Japan in Bangla language, mention should be made of Madhusudhan Mukhopadhyay's *Japan*, a translation of Matthew C. Perry's book, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the Chinese Seas and Japan*. Perry is usually credited for having opened Japan to the western world, following the Kanagawa Treaty. Madhusudhan Mukhopadhyay's book seems to be the earliest attempt in introducing Japan to the Bengali reader. It is true that

other than Bengal, many other enterprising persons from different parts of colonial India visited Japan. Many of them have written memoirs, travelogues or essays on Japan. In the early twentieth century, we can name three people, who authored travelogues on Japan, prior to Tagore's first visit to Japan in 1916. They are Hariprobha Takeda, Manmatha Nath Ghosh and Suresh Chandra Bandyopadhyay. Manmatha Nath Ghosh went to Japan in 1906 to take industrial training. His exposure to the industrial world of Kobe and Tokyo in Japan, finds a vivid narration in his travelogue *Japan Probash*. It was published in 1910. Ghosh, also authored two other books on Japan, based on his travel experiences in Japan. They are entitled *Nabyo Japan* and *Supto Japan*. Both the books were published in the year 1922 (1322 BS). Sureshchandra Bandyopadhyay, another traveller, also visited Japan in 1906, and authored a book titled *Japan*. Sureshchandra Bandyopadhyay's travelogue, with its recounting of various issues, such as the social life of the Japanese people of that period, education and politics of Japan, which the travel writer witnessed during his time, is another primary source of studying this cross cultural reception on the part of Bengali visitors to Japan. Hariprobha Takeda, the first Bengali woman to visit Japan, left for Japan on 3rd November, 1912, accompanied by her husband Uemon Takeda. During her stay at the ancestral house of Takeda, located in the countryside of Japan, she got the opportunity to encounter rural Japanese society; and this experience has been brilliantly narrated in her travelogue entitled *Bongo Mahilar Japan Jatra*. As noted earlier, Bangla magazines of this period like *Prabasi*, *Bharati*, and *Bharatbarsa* have printed many travelogues and essays written on Japan, based on the writers' exposure to the Japanese society. This paper aims at delving deep into these travelogue to find how women, more particularly, gender politics in the Japanese society of the early twentieth century, has been represented by these writers. It must be remembered that the travel

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writers who visited Japan during this period, came of different background. They have tried to take an account of different aspects of the Japanese society, according to their value structures. Where they differ from each other, are equally interesting to note.

The Meiji period (1868-1912) and the following Taisho period (1912-1926) in Japan, witnessed industrial growth and capitalist development. However, this does not mean that a new superstructure came into existence. The travel writings will unravel that many practices and customs, belonging to a residual culture, were quite vivid even to the foreigner's eye. A testimony of this observation can be the existence of depressed classes, as viewed and described by visitors, during the early twentieth century. Modern Japan has eradicated this social evil. However, during the time Rash Behari Bose reached Japan, the problem of outcastes was still prevalent. Rash Behari Bose in his 'Notes from Japan,' published in the *Standard Bearer* (Vol II No.15), has touched upon this issue. For Bose, the problem of outcastes in Japan was a reminder of the existence of the same problem in India. Within this perspective of the remnants of a feudal system in Japan, it would be worthy to see how women in Japanese societies have been represented in the travel writings by Indians in the early twentieth century. This also, bears resemblance with the condition of women in India during that time, and even now.

From Hariprobha Takeda's article, which is entitled '*Japane Santan Palon O Nari Sikha*,' and also from her travelogue, we get an interesting picture of the patriarchal society that she found to be existing at that time. Hariprobha Takeda left for Japan, accompanied by her husband Uemon Takeda, in 1912. While staying at Mr. Takeda's ancestral home in the countryside of Japan, she found the opportunity to see the condition of women in the rural areas of Japan. This has been narrated in her travelogue *Bongo Mahilar Japan Jatra*, and also in another essay, entitled *Japane Santan Palon ONari Sikha*. According to Hariprobha, the condition of the Japanese women at that time was far better when compared to that of Indian women. Universal education for every girl-child had been ensured, women could assist their husbands in their agricultural activities in rural areas.⁴

Yet, the writer has rightly pointed out that it would be wrong to suppose that gender discrimination and male domination had ceased to exist. Japanese women, Takeda points out, had to act according to her husband's decisions—

The Japanese wife remains submissive and silently endures all ill-treatment of her husband. In this country, husbands treat their wives like their servants. However, wives have to revere their husbands as their masters.⁵(Translation mine)

Takeda found that Japanese women were supposed to be respectful towards their in-laws, failing which husbands could desert them and remarry, as it was accepted in that society.⁶This hegemonic influence of this feudal society also determined men's attitude towards their counterpart—

Japanese men are rarely found to be indulging them, in paying attention to their wives. Husbands are rarely found to be showing respect towards their wives. Wives are supposed to attend the household duties. Also, they have to look after their children... Men are engaged in defending their country, and also in earning money. The mother has to bring up her child in a way that in future, he can also earn his living. In some cases, women are also engaged in different jobs.⁷(Translation mine)

The demands for Japanese women's rights were first voiced during the Meiji Era in Japan. Junko Kiguchi in her erudite paper entitled 'Japanese women's rights at the Meiji Era'⁸ has referred to eminent educators and intellectuals of the Meiji Era, like Yukichi Fukuzawa and Mori Arinori, who were pioneering voices in favour of the equality of sexes. For Kiguchi, this dawning of liberal ideas towards women was facilitated by the influence of western scholars, like John Stuart Mill. The Meiji Period also, witnessed the establishment of many girls' schools and a rapid spread of education among women in Japan. We have already referred to the writings of Takeda; other travel writings as essays on Japan, published during the first half of the twentieth century also tell us about this spread of women's education in Japan during this period. An arresting article that needs mention in this regard is 'Japaner Strisikha' by Brajosundhor Sanyal, published in the Bangla magazine *Prabasi* (Agrahon, 1315BS). According to the writer, Japan succeeded in the spread of primary education throughout the country. The data provided by the author, can show how far Japanese government was successful in ensuring primary education for children of both sexes, by the beginning of the twentieth century —

According to the official statistics, 3,876,495 boys and 3,590,391 girls, in all 7,466,886 students, are regularly attending primary schools of Japanese cities during the academic year 1901-1902.⁹ (Translation mine)

Other important measures to spread women's education in Japan during the same time, as mentioned by the author, include the setting up of higher school for women, establishment of women's university etc. Another interesting fact, that we come across in these writings, is the existence of different originations, solely governed and maintained by women —

There exists in Japan, organizations, which are solely run by women. The numbers of such organizations are twenty.¹⁰ (Translation mine)

Truly, the Meiji era, with its reformatory environment, contributed a great deal towards empowerment of women. Yet, this development process and change of ideas did not result in the upturning of the patriarchal society of Japan that had been in existence for centuries. Rather, the educational policies regarding girls' education, adopted during Meiji Period, were aimed at making 'Goodwife and wise mother.' Thus, home remained the prescribed position for women, even during this period. Viewed from this perspective, the last two lines quoted above from Takeda's essay, aptly describe the position of women during the time of her visit. Also, this representation of gender politics, we come across in several writings by Bengali travelers who visited Japan during the early twentieth century. Another traveller, Sureshchandra Bandyopadhyay, whose travelogue *Japan* we have referred to earlier, has recounted an experience, which suggests the hierarchical position enjoyed by men in Japanese society, during the early twentieth century—

Japanese wives are often seen to be following their husbands on the streets of Japan. While walking, men do not like to accompany their wives. They also even show resentment in carrying the luggage of their spouses...Nowadays, many Japanese men, who are highly educated, or have returned from foreign countries, are found to be accompanying their wives.¹¹ (Translation mine)

The Japanese word *Kanai*, meaning wife, consists of two characters. *Ka* denotes house and *Nai* denotes inside. This suggests the position of women, determined by the feudal society in Japan that perpetuated for centuries. Suresh Chandra Bandyopadhyay's account of Japanese women also shows that male domination was quite common in Japanese society when he visited. Not only common people, but kings and queens, also were obliged to accept this system of dual status, for both sexes—

The Japanese emperor and the empress are never seen to be sharing the same car. Far behind the car of the Japanese emperor, the empress rides in a covered car. The Japanese emperor is revered like a god; however, the empress seems to be nothing, other than an ordinary woman.¹²(Translation mine)

The author in the same book entitled *Japan*, has rightly pointed out that though Japan never came under colonial rule, women never enjoyed the same kind of freedom. Women, in Japanese society, during the time of his visit, were supposed to carry out the task of child rearing and were to obey the instructions of their domestic lord.

Male domination exists in Japanese society, as it exists elsewhere. Most of the Japanese men never accept that women can be attributed other responsibilities, other than, looking after their younger ones. Japanese women are supposed to obey the orders of their husbands. This patriarchal system has been continuing since earlier times.¹³(Translation mine)

We have also referred to Junko Kiguchi's paper *Japanese women's rights at the Meiji Era*, where she has argued that the Meiji period, with its many reforms to bring about social changes, also raised its voice for the establishment of the system of monogamy in Japan. In this context, Manmatha Nath Ghosh's description of Japanese society may be recalled. The writer found, that during the time he visited Japan, polygamy was commonly practiced in Japanese society. The writer has described the case of an aged woman, and how, after reaching her old age, she willfully allowed her husband to keep a mistress and returned to her own ancestral home. The woman has been referred to, in the travelogue, as *Obaasan* (The Japanese word for grandmother).

Once, I asked an *ObaSan* (grandmother) the reason, for which she returned to her paternal home from that of her in-laws. Responding to my enquiry, she replied, "Following my aging, I decided to abstain from my conjugal life. Hence, I gifted my husband a young and fair looking woman, to look after him. I quitted the place, and along with my son Taka, returned to my paternal house."¹⁴(Translation mine)

The author's observation in this context deserves attention—

Most of the Japanese men spend their leisurely moment with prostitutes and dancing girls(Geishas); either taking consent from their wives, or even in front of them. Visitors to Japan, are well aware of this fact.¹⁵(Translation mine)

In some other travel writings also, we come across similar descriptions of the condition of marginalised women of Japan, including those of barmaids, prostitutes and Geishas. According to an entry, published in the *britannica.com*, a geisha is a 'member of a professional class of women in Japan whose traditional occupation is to entertain men.' The geisha system, which emerged in the seventeenth century Japan, occupies an important place in Japanese culture. Geishas, with their beauty and graceful appearances, have also attracted western audience during the last two centuries. It is interesting to note how, during the post Meiji period, the system of Geisha also underwent considerable changes. Sureshchandra Bandyopadhyay, in his travelogue *Japan* has mentioned that in the year 1906, in Tokyo city, about 3,526 geishas used to reside and the Tokyo municipality of that time, used to receive 1,60,000 Yen as tax. Further, the travelogue also has depicted how a girl child, who came to a geishi-house, received rigorous trainings in dancing and playing traditional Japanese musical instruments, and also in nurturing the qualities, they needed in order to be a professional geisha.

Another traveller, Manmatha Nath Ghosh, who authored a book entitled *Nabya Japan*, has likened them to the courtesans of India. It is evident from his writing that mostly girl children were sold by their parents to the geisha

quarters, where they received the training for joining this profession.¹⁶ Now, at the age of 15, by choice one starts acquiring the skills of becoming a geisha.¹⁷ Thus for many, the culture of geisha is different from prostitution. This has been expressed by Lauren Lockard in his fascinating essay *Geisha: Behind the Painted Smile*—

To be a geisha requires skill, patience and an undying devotion to continue better oneself until the end, and it is because of this they will always be on a level that a prostitute can never hope to achieve.¹⁸

That geishas were looked differently, even during the time Manmatha Nath Ghosh visited Japan, has also been mentioned in his writing—

In Japan, a teacher and his student, husband and wife, a father and his son, can be seen accompanying each other, to a Geisha house. Possibly, in no other country such universal acceptance of barmaids and dancing girls can be seen.¹⁹ (Translation mine)

An appealing article that needs to be mentioned with reference to this topic, is one titled '*Geishar Swadhitona*,' published in the Bangla magazine *Bharati* (Poush, 1329BS). The anonymous author has well described the changes which were brought in the system of the geisha, during the early twentieth century, by amending laws. This short essay, published in the year 1922, shows how this new law empowered a geisha to even leave her profession, if desired. The new law empowered the geishas. In the past a geisha had to sign an agreement with her master. According to this agreement, she was compelled to stick to her profession—

Mostly, girl children of poor families are sold to the Geisha quarters. They receive training in dance and in music, at the Geisha-quarter. Once they become proficient in such arts, they are employed by their buyers to cater the customers. A lion's share of their wages are taken away by their masters. A Geisha has to sign an agreement with her master and till now this agreement was the main cause of their enslavement. Very recently, with the enactment of a new law in Japan, Geishas have been empowered to do away with their past, and to lead a free and normal life.²⁰ (Translation mine)

From the travel writings on Japan by writers from Bengal, we also come across the narration of the condition of women living in red-light areas of Tokyo city. As mentioned earlier, in this case also, we find how representation differs from one writer to another. Manmatha Nath Ghosh found 'Yoshiwara,' the main red-light area of Tokyo city, to be considerably clean and according to him, the government had employed doctors to administer routine check-up of the prostitutes. However, he has admitted that girl-children, mostly of poor families, were sold by their parents to the owners of

the brothels. His overall impression of the place was not one of dislike —

The red-light area in Japan is quite clean and located beside broad streets. Even temples are located beside brothels. The quarters of the prostitutes are also attractive and spacious.²¹ (Translation mine)

It is surprising that the writer has talked about cleanliness, or about the government's effort to preserve sanitation in red-light areas. However, the plight of these women, residing there, finds no reference. Further, he mentions the co-existence of prostitution and religion, which can be traced in many other countries. The same red-light area of Tokyo city (Yoshiwara), which existed then, has been depicted by Suresh Chandra Bandyopadhyay in his travelogue *Japan*. However, we notice how different the representation can be of the same aspect—

Apart from Geishas, many other women are engaged in other undesirable professions (prostitution) in this city. The total numbers of such women in this city are 6379. Almost in all areas, there are brothels. However, 'Yoshiwara', which is located in the outskirts of the city, is famous as a red-light area. ... Often, fairs are organized in this location. Then the place becomes heavily crowded. Many Japanese gentlemen pay visit to this place, accompanied by their family members. On both sides of the road, these women are found to be waiting in spacious rooms, dressed in colourful attire. The rooms are heavily guarded with iron fencing. From the streets the prostitutes look like caged animals.²² (Translation mine)

The appalling sight of Japanese prostitutes being caged like animals, reminds us of a scene in *Yojimbo* (1961), by legendary Japanese director, Akira Kurosawa. There also, we see prostitutes being displayed like caged animals, by one of the lords of a small town, who, in the movie, used to run a brothel. Interestingly, the pleasure quarters in Yoshiwara, continued till prostitution was outlawed by the Anti-Prostitution Law, passed by the Diet of Japan in 1956. Today, a disguised form of prostitution, still continues in the area, using a variety of names, such as the 'soaplands.'²³ Considering the subject of representation of women of Japan by travel writers, one aspect can hardly be ignored, i.e., stereotyped presentation of Japanese women, which we sometimes encounter in the travelogues, as mentioned earlier. In literary texts, women have often been portrayed from the point of view of a patriarchal society. Needless to say, travelogues on Japan can also ascertain this fact.

This is evident, when we find that Manmatha Nath Ghosh in his book *Nabyo Japan* ponders over the subject of chastity of women. The author begins the topic entitled '*Satityer Mulyo*' (The value of chastity), by referring to Japanese words like *misao*, which denotes womanly

virtues. Interestingly, according to the writer, there is no Japanese equivalent for chastity, as the Japanese word *misao*, is a less specific coinage, denoting womanly qualities. His concluding observation is in accordance with this derivation—

However, it would be wrong to suppose that chastity of women is highly esteemed in Japanese society. During the settlement of a marriage, the bride's appearance is given more importance than her chastity. An attractive woman, even if she possesses an unrepentant character, finds no difficulty to marry a man of noble birth.²⁴ (Translation mine)

Ironically, in the same book, and just a few pages after, the author has praised Japanese women for not aspiring to attain equal status and opting to play second fiddle in social life. For the author, this acceptance of the social order, on the part of Japanese women, should be taken as a mark of their feminine qualities. And the author explicitly expresses his preference for controlled freedom for women, which would not pose a threat to the patriarchal order of the society—

In this context, it must be remembered that despite the empowerment of Japanese women, women never aspire to enjoy equal status with men. Like women of other parts of Asia, Japanese women are also found to be following their husbands in every respect. Japanese women show feminine dispositions. They are soft and shy in nature. Those who oppose freedom of women must meet Japanese women of our time. Then they will understand that women, having gained freedom, will never lose their intrinsic feminine traits.²⁵ (Translation mine)

With reference to the above-mentioned passages from Manmatha Nath Ghosh's book *Nabyo Japan*, and also remembering his advocacy for a controlled freedom for women, it would not be irrelevant to recall the history of social reforms in colonial Bengal and its impact upon different cross sections of Bengali communities, as evaluated by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, in his essay entitled 'Caste, Widow Remarriage and the Reform of Popular Culture in Colonial Bengal.' Bandyopadhyay, in his article, has rightly pointed out that 'though the Act of 1856 legalised widow remarriage,' yet, it could hardly make it acceptable at that time. Vidyasagar had to rely mainly on social consent. Thus, it was the hegemony of the patriarchal society that posed to be the stumbling block. This impeded Vidyasagar's endeavor to see many widow remarriages during his time.²⁶ Needless to say, this patriarchal society continued to exercise a strong influence also, during the first decades of the twentieth century. The travel writer's unconscious submission to the hegemony of patriarchy, also, his preference for stereotyped representation of Japanese women, may be viewed in the light of the general notion about women's rights, which had been popular at that time.

The other kind of stereotyping, which we come across in the travelogues on Japan, is accepting a dress (Kimono) for women, as a construct of their cultural identity. The post-Meiji Era, which showed a tendency of westernization, brought a change in the dress of Japanese men. Many opted for western attire (*Yofuku*) instead of Kimono. However, women in general, retained their preference for Kimono to other western clothing. This we have already mentioned in the previous subchapter. Tagore and other writers have praised Japanese women, for retaining their native custom of putting on Kimono. We notice Tagore's rhetorical admiration for Japanese women wearing Kimono—

Nevertheless on the face of the cities of Japan there is no sign of Japan. She has even taken leave of her individuality of dress! That is Japan has taken off her home dress and put on her office dress...It is for this reason that what attracts the eye most strongly on the streets of the cities of Japan, are the women of Japan. I feel that they, at least represent the home of Japan—they do not belong to the office.²⁷

How can a person's preference for a dress be taken as his belonging to a particular culture? In this context, I would like to refer to an argument, raised by Olfa Goldstein-Gidoni, in her article entitled 'Kimono and the Construction of Gendered and Cultural Identities.' The Meiji era, argues Goldstein, with its aim of transforming Japan into a modern nation state, emphasized the role of women as mother and wives, as beneficiary for the nation. Thus, home remained the demarcated space for Japanese women; the writer refers to the popular slogan of the Meiji period—'good wife wise mother,' which specified their functional role in society. According to Goldstein, the preference for Kimono to western attire on the part of Japanese women was not one of spontaneity. Rather, it was constructed as a symbol of distinction between the sexes, and was related to the image of Japaneseness. The author is correct to conclude that the 'Kimono-clad Japanese woman became a symbol in modern Japan.'²⁸ This acceptance of Kimono as a mark of feminist, and also, as the cultural identity of Japan, took place during the Meiji Period, in which the state had an important role to play. The writer has also referred to the role of Kimono experts and entrepreneurs, who, according to him, played no less a part in popularizing Kimono as a symbol of traditional Japanese women. It must also be mentioned that in our times, Japanese women wear Kimono only on certain ceremonies. Viewed from this historical perspective, Tagore and other writers' praise for Japanese women, for their preference for their native attire, seem to be stereotyped representation, lacking the true picture of the situation, which prevailed during the time they visited Japan.

Notes

1. Amit Bhattacharya, *Transformation of Japan Transformation of Japan 1600-1945*. (Kolkata: Setu Prakashani, 2009), 116.
2. Ibid., 109-115.
3. Swami Vivekananda 'Conversations and Dialogues' in *Complete Works*. 4thed. Vol. 5. (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1936) 244-322.
4. Takeda, *Bongo Mahilar Japan Jatra O Onnana Rachona*. (Kolkata: D. M. Library, 2009), 45.
5. Ibid., 60.
6. Ibid., 47.
7. Takeda, 'Japaner Nari'. Rpt. in *Bongo Mahilar Japan Jatra O Onnana Rachona*. (Kolkata: D. M. Library, 2009), 61.
8. Kiguchi, Junko. 'Japanese women's rights at the Miji, *www.soka.ac.jp*. (accessed, 12 December, 2012)
9. BrajosundorSanyal, 'Japane Stri Sikha,' *PrabasiAgrahan*, (1315BS, 1908):436.
10. Sanyal, 'Japane Stri Sikha,' 439.
11. Bandyopadhyay, *Japan*, 104.
12. Ibid. 104.
13. Ibid., 82.
14. Ghosh, Manmatha Nath. *Japan Probash*. (Dhaka: Dibya Prokash, 2012), 61.
15. Ibid., 61.
16. Ghosh, Manmatha Nath *Nabyo Japan*. (Kolkata: Sri Devaki Press, 1322(1915)). <http://dSPACE.wbpublibnet.gov.in:8080/jspui/>. (accessed 17 July, 2012). 110
17. Lauren Lockard, *Geisha: Behind the Painted Smile*, <http://www.scribd.com>, (accessed on April 27, 2013). 30.
18. Ibid., 31.
19. Ghosh, *Nabyo Japan*, 109.
20. 'Geishar Swadhinota,' *Bharati Poush*, (1329 BS, 1922): 875.
21. Ghosh, *Nabyo, Japan*, 11.
22. Bandyopadhyay, *Japan*, 63.
23. See, Wikipedia.org/Prostitution in Japan, also, Wikipedia.org/Yoshiwara
24. Ghosh, *Nabyo Japan*, 54.
25. Ibid., 55.
26. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'Caste, Widow Remarriage and the Reform of Popular culture in Colonial Bengal, ' *Women and Social Reform in Modern India: A Reader*, ed. Sumit Sarkar & Tanika Sarkar, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana U Press, 2008), 145-146
27. Sastri, Shakuntala Rao. Trans. *A Visit to Japan by Rabindranath Tagore*. (New York: East West Institute, 1961), 68.
28. Olfra Goldstein-Gidoni, <http://people.socsci.tau.ac.il>, 2001: (accessed on July 17, 2013), 16.