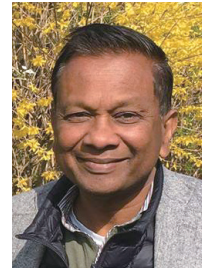


# Hariprabha Takeda's Diary – an Indian Woman's Observations of Taisho & Meiji Japan

By Mukesh Williams



Author Mukesh Williams

The diary of Hariprabha Basu Mallik (1890-1972) called *Bangomohilar Japan Jatra* or *A Bengali Woman's Journey to Japan*, published by her sister Kumari Santiprabha Mallik in November 1915 in Dacca, portrays Japanese family and social life during the Taisho and early Meiji eras. In 1907, Hariprabha married a Japanese entrepreneur Uemon Takeda in Dacca, and convinced him to visit his home in Shimamiya, Kochino, Aichi Prefecture after nine years of absence. Uemon's parents had given up on their son thinking that he had died in British India. So when he returned to Japan in November 1912 with his "fair-complexioned" foreign wife they were delighted. It was great news for the community; the local newspaper published their marriage and arrival thus: "Mr. Takeda has married the daughter of a certain gentleman in India and after several years has returned to his own country. Happiness is expressed through his eyes..."

The small village community was relieved that Uemon was happy with his wife. A hundred years ago the Japanese had seen few foreigners and few foreigners had seen Japan. A few Bengali women had travelled to Europe with their rich husbands but Japan remained a mystery to most. Professor Swapan Prasanna Roy believes that Hariprabha's travel to Japan was both a "reckless adventure", an incitement of Brahmo Samaj's "women's emancipation" culture. Hariprabha and her family were Brahmo Samajist. The Brahmo Samaj was a reformist movement within Hinduism and advocated equality of caste, creed and religion. The movement was responsible to a large extent in creating modern India. When Hariprabha's diary

was published it created great "excitement among the women of Calcutta" who saw her experience as an opening of new horizons. In 1915 the Indian revolutionary, Rash Behari Bose, fled to Japan. It was only four years after Hariprabha's visit that Rabindranath Tagore visited Japan for the first time in 1916.

### A New Face in Japan's Rural Community

In Japan Hariprabha was a strange new face in her husband's village community. Many people came to see her foreignness. Though she could not understand or speak the Japanese language and had to take the help of her husband to interpret everything, her in-laws, delighted to see their son return after nearly a decade, treated his wife with great love and care. Her mother-in-law who was 60-plus did not allow Hariprabha to wash clothes, cook food or do any household chores. In order to keep her busy, Hariprabha was asked to repair kimonos and take care of local children for short durations. The village society was extra nice to her, wanting to meet her and listen to her stories. The magic of the mysterious foreigner added to her attraction.

Hariprabha stayed in Japan for four months with her husband experiencing family life at close quarters. Her simplemindedness and purity of intention created a perceptive prose in her diary. By the time she started her journey back to India on April 12, 1913 she had captured the essence of Japanese middle-class life. She returned to Dacca on May 8, 1913 after 25 days of travel. In these four months she basked in the "love and attention of everyone", jotting down her experiences. She would return to Japan two more times.

### Brahmo Samaj Heritage

Hariprabha never intended to write for publication but as a Brahmo Samajist felt it was her duty to write about her life. Also the egalitarian ethos that Brahmo Samaj promoted made it easy for her to describe a foreign society with alacrity. Somdatta Mandal feels that "Brahmo Samaj encouraged such cross-cultural encounters so early in the twentieth century." Her parents denounced caste and campaigned for the downtrodden by running an orphanage called "Matri Niketan" in their own home in Dacca. When Hariprabha proposed to her youngest sister Santiprabha the idea of marrying Toshani, the younger brother

Photo: Somdatta Mandal



হরিপ্রভা ও ওয়েমেন তাকেনা

Hariprabha Takeda

Photo: Somdatta Mandal



ওয়েমেন তাকেনা

Uemon Takeda

of Uemon, she rejected it. But Hariprabha imbibed the ideas of Brahmo Samaj quite sincerely. She followed their example even when it caused her great misery. Towards the end of her life she, along with her husband Uemon, went and settled down with her sister Ashrubala Dasgupta who was a doctor in Jalpaiguri in North Bengal. Due to acute depression and ill-health, Uemon soon passed away. Hariprabha went on living there till her sister's death in 1970 after which she came down to Calcutta to spend the last couple of years with her nephew and his wife. In Jalpaiguri she had adopted a teenage girl who split her skull and ran away with all her belongings. On the verge of death, she was restored to health by her sister. In her Japan experiences she mentions a Brahmo prayer meeting called Brahmo Upasana at the residence of an expatriate Indian.

### A Keen Observer

Many Indian bureaucrats and businessmen have written about Japanese family life, economic dealings and food shortage during the war years. But Hariprabha's diary carries picture-book observations of Japanese homes, gardens, hospitality, food, city architecture, village life, child rearing, girl's education, cooking, daily living, women's hairstyles, kimonos, newspaper reading habits, bathing, washing hair, makeup and curiosity about foreigners. The early entries are short and carry snippets of daily events. But towards the end the discussion becomes more complex and lengthy, covering many aspects of Japanese life such as winter clothing, fire safety, kimono, footwear, rice preparation, respect for work, part time jobs, position of women and marriage rituals.

Hariprabha keenly observed the social life of Japan especially the woman's position – health care, domestic work, marriage and child rearing. The Bengali journal *Bangadarshan* brought out two articles by her. The first one was called *Japane Santan Palon o Narisiksha or Child Rearing and Women's Education in Japan* and the second *Japaner Nari or Women in Japan*. Both bring out the themes of women's position in Japan. Later Manjushree Sinha compiled these writings under the title *Bangomohilar Japan Jatra o Onannyo Rachana* (2009).

### Her Diary

Hariprabha's diary of 66 pages packs a lot of detail about her feelings about her river and sea voyages. She has a literary and religious bent of mind as she evokes metaphors of the sea and divinity through her descriptions and religious songs. Her journey takes her through Rangoon, Penang, Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai to Port Moji in Kitakyushu. She heaves a sigh of relief having arrived in Japan. From here she travels to Kobe and is fascinated by the exquisite wooden architecture of the hotel where she stays. When they reached the Kobe Customs House to get entry permission she notices the streets eroded by the rain: "The roads in this country are not good. They do not have pavements. The people

of the country wear a kind of shoe called 'bugari' which helps them to walk in rain and snow." She notices the houses are made of wood and inside them "everything was spick and span." She is fascinated by a girl's school which trains its students to become "dignified citizens" through the study of the sciences, "physical training, cookery, laundry work, gardening, knitting, music and English". She is impressed by the way the geisha ties the kimono and the coiffure with pins and flowers. She points out that women put their "neck on a wooden block" while they sleep in order to keep their hair-do intact for days. Hariprabha is impressed by Japanese women who work alongside men: "There are no restrictions for women, they work together with men, move around; there is no restriction anywhere." They wake up early and do all the household chores. The marriage custom of drinking sake, dressing in expensive silk and going to the in-laws house in a rickshaw are something to observe. She also notices that the Japanese mother is the center of the family.

Hariprabha has an eye for detail. She observes the different traditions from sitting on tatami with legs tucked behind to the delicacy of the tea ceremony and the careful arrangement of the food at her in-laws house. She also notices the initial wariness of her in-laws and later generosity as they become familiar with her personality. She does not forget to mention the *obento* box containing steamed rice and vegetables for 4 to 8 annas. Her diary is more of an emotional autobiography free from egoistic evaluation of social norms. Her observation of rural life in Shimamiya and city life in Nagoya, Ise, Osaka, Tokyo, Kyoto and Nikko during her visit to her in-laws or *sasurbari* 100 years ago are quite revealing. She was extremely fortunate to travel to Japan in the aftermath of the euphoric victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5. Through her diary entries we come to see a slow-moving Japan getting modernized but still carrying the legacy of the past in its manners, transport and architecture. Usually she avoids referring to the political life of Japan as she did not want any problem with the status quo. However, occasionally a few details about politics do creep in.

As Hariprabha writes about Tokyo, Kyoto, Nikko and Osaka, the reader can experience the ambience of these cities as they were a century ago. She notices "deep mud" on the roads with "horse carriages" passing by at long intervals. She is impressed by the trams and trains of Tokyo but does not find the metropolis as "attractive and gorgeous" as reputed to be. She is quite impressed by the park in central Tokyo close to the Emperor's palace with its well-planned lake, fountains and flowering plants. Hariprabha finds Kyoto as a city of "pilgrimage" shaped by its temples with wide verandahs for meditation and aesthetic pleasure. Osaka lives up to its reputation as a commercial center with its "factories and business".

### Translations from Bengali to English

There is a mixture of formal and colloquial styles in her diary which shows that since the manuscript was not intended for publication, revisions were not made to standardize it. Somdatta



Mandal has brought out the mixing of styles cleverly in her translation from Bengali into English, called *The Journey of a Bengali Woman in Japan* (2019). Her edition is exceptional in the sense that it includes two other essays of Hariprabha – *In War-Torn Japan* and *Child Rearing and Women's Education in Japan*. The edition also carries seven appendices that contain rare essays, reminiscences, articles and details of a documentary film *Japani Bodhu* (2012) in one text. Reading Mandal's English translation of the diary together with rich secondary sources makes both the worlds of Taisho Japan and British India come alive like a series of picture sketches. Mandal came across Hariprabha during her work on "colonial women's travel narratives". Monzurul Haq had brought "the text to light" through its publication in 1999. He had managed to retrieve the manuscript from the rare book section of the India Office Library in London. Mandal met Prof. Roy of Delhi University who published a second edition in 2007 and "inspired" her to translate the text. Then Mandal found a third edition published in Bengali in 2009 by Manjushree Sinha. "So as you go to the later editions more and more information about her is added." Inspired by the Takeda story, the Bangladeshi film director Tanvir Mokammel made a documentary called *The Japanese Wife* in 2012. In 2014 Mandal completed translating the book. But publishers delayed, and the book changed hands. It was finally published by Jadavpur University Press in 2019.

Over the decades a new interest has emerged in women's writing and travelogues. This has brought Bengali scholars from Monzurul Haq and Prof. Roy to Manjushree Sinha and Somdatta Mandal to build upon the scholarship of previous editors. Each subsequent Bengali edition of Hariprabha's diary has not only included Hariprabha's original script but added to it details of her life through interviews with Takeda's surviving nephew and his wife. Mandal accumulated all the essential relevant materials from the three Bengali editions of the text (1999, 2007, and 2009) and translated this important diary into English for the first time for the benefit of a larger worldwide readership. In smoothness of style and accuracy she brings to the Takeda translation decades of experience as a professor of English at Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan, and her ability as a native Bengali scholar.



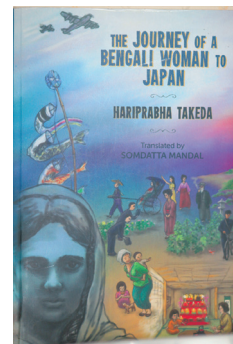
Bengali edition of the book, 1999



*The Japanese Wife* (Tanvir Mokammel) DVD



Translator Somdatta Mandal



*The Journey of a Bengali Woman to Japan*, translated by Somdatta Mandal, 2019

## Their Meeting & Marriage

Hariprabha met Uemon in Dacca. She was 22 and he was 37. Uemon like many other young men had travelled to British India in "search of a living". He travelled to Bengal and found a job in the Bulbul soap factory in Dacca as a technical overseer. The company was owned by Hariprabha's father Sashibhushan Basu Mallick. Translator Monzurul Haq suggests that as a Japanese immigrant to India Uemon must have felt bored not being able to meet people. The desire to socialize must have forced him to attend Brahmo Samaj meetings. It is at one of these meetings that Uemon met Hariprabha and courted her. Hariprabha's mother Nagendrabala realized Uemon's entrepreneurial character and persuaded her husband to allow their eldest daughter marry Uemon. Nagendrabala's assessment of Uemon's character proved correct as he started his own manufacturing company and helped his in-laws in the philanthropic work they were engaged in. He was joined by his brother Toshani. But for nine years Uemon did not communicate with his parents. In the essay "The Japan that Hariprabha Saw" Kazuhiro Watanabe has the answer. In the year 1912 when Hariprabha came with her husband to Japan, the Emperor Mutsuhito died ending the long Meiji Era. Watanabe conjectures that perhaps Uemon was arranging money for a trip back to his country. But more than that Watanabe believes the "death of the emperor made Takeda-san feel that a phase of Japanese society had come to an end." Now that Uemon was a "successful" businessman and married to a Bengali lady, he wanted to see the "new Japan" and show his "new self" to his relatives. This is possibly a good explanation.

Hariprabha was an attractive girl when she got married. Both her behavior and her looks attracted her in-laws and those she met in Japan. After their return from Japan, having no such family to call her own, she and her husband came to live with her sister Ashrubala in Jalpaiguri. Her nephew's wife Manju Dasgupta met her in 1963 when she was 73 years old and a widow. Hariprabha was still a charming person with lots of practical advice. Manju found that though Hariprabha's hair had turned silver due to old age, she still possessed those "exquisite" eyes and a "very sharp gaze". On one of

her visits to Japan she also had a “golden tooth” fixed which “sparkled” when she smiled.

## Reasons for Her Visit to Japan

The reasons for Hariprabha's visit to Japan were many. She was curious to meet her in-laws and receive their blessings. The idea of *sangsar* or that a married woman's real home was with her in-laws was not a practice followed by Hariprabha. Being a Brahmo Samajist she had strong faith in the power of the divine to shape her destiny. Perhaps she wanted to pay obeisance to the gods of her in-laws who were Jodo-shu Buddhist. She also had a “secret dream” to visit Japan from the time of her marriage. We may not know what this special dream was. Marrying outside the caste and nationality a century ago was a “great challenge” to the “conservative decadent society of Bengal” observes Prof. Roy. Hariprabha's sisters did not share her ideas of an international marriage. Mandal explains that during the colonial period the “Bengali middle class traveled for pilgrimage, education or marriage relocation. Women like Jnanadanandini Devi, and Krishnabhabini travelled with their husbands to the United Kingdom. But travel to Japan was relatively unknown for women.”

## Two More Visits to Japan

The Takedas revisited Japan two more times, once in 1924 and then again in 1941. Her trip in 1924 was short but dates are not mentioned. The third trip in 1941 was the longest. Hostilities between the United States and Japan were increasing. As part of the repatriation drive organized by the Japanese government, the couple left Bombay on Nov. 2 in a Japanese ship with 1,200 Japanese nationals and reached Kobe on Nov. 21. Hariprabha chronicles both the wars and the bombing of Pearl Harbor and cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. She saw food shortages during the war and lived a life of penury as her husband fell sick. For some time, on the advice of Rash Behari Bose and with the direct encouragement from Subhas Chandra Bose, she worked as a radio announcer of the secret broadcast service of the Azad Hind Fauj or the Indian National Army. Also some of her Indian friends like Rash Behari Bose, Justice Radhabinod Pal and others helped her with her daily needs and perhaps gave her money to buy her passage back to Bengal. She returned with her sick husband on board the British ship *Eastern Saga* from Yokohama in 1948. A flood in 1968 spoilt all her possessions. So she came to Calcutta after her sister's death in 1970 and spent the last two and a half years of her life with her nephew

Photo: Somdatta Mandal



হরিপ্রভা (বলপাইকুড়িতে) বোন অশ্রুবলা (ভলপাইকুড়িতে)  
Hariprabha (left) with second sister Ashrubala Dasgupta

Photo: Somdatta Mandal



সেতাজির বঙ্গদেশে আসলে শান্তি পরিষদে হরিপ্রভা  
Hariprabha and Subhash Chandra Bose

Surojit Dasgupta and his wife Manju. Her husband became deeply depressed by Japan's defeat in World War II. “So basically she went with her husband in 1941 and returned in 1948. He was very sick and died soon after their return. No memorial. He suffered from acute depression as he could not accept the defeat of Japan. He would repeatedly regret about it aloud.” During her third stay she wrote about the war and its impact on Japan in *Japan Ravaged by the War* or *Juddha Jarjarita Japan*. She got connected to both the Boses who were in Japan – Subhas Chandra and Rash Behari. In *War-Torn Japan* she tells us that on a late December morning she had gone to Ogikubo to visit a Mr. Sahay. An air raid began in the afternoon and she returned with the help of a teenage chaperon to her home at 10 o'clock at night. Hariprabha describes the houses “burnt to ashes” and everywhere there was “water, mud, ashes, and electric wires”. She felt “terrified” witnessing the devastation. According to Mandal, “her first trip was romantic but the second was patriotic.”

## An Inspirational Wife

A dutiful wife, war reporter, event chronicler and social reformer, Hariprabha's travel diary and other writings continue to inspire the Bengali middle class in India. About seven and a half years of her Japanese experience feeds into the Asian sense of pride created by Okakura Tenshin and corroborated by Tagore. Tagore's own writings on Japan in *Japan Jatri* were a “poet's vision of that country” believes Watanabe, while Hariprabha delves deep within the heart of the common people. Hariprabha's diary brings alive the process of modernization Japan was going through during the Taisho and Meiji eras and the freedom struggle India was engaged in. Her diary is an important addition to the female travelogue literature of the early 20th century.

JS

Professor Mukesh Williams is advisor to the South Asia Research Center at Soka University, visiting faculty at Keio University, consultant/news analyst for the BBC World Service, St. Stephen's College Alumni representative and Academic Exchange Programs coordinator in Japan.