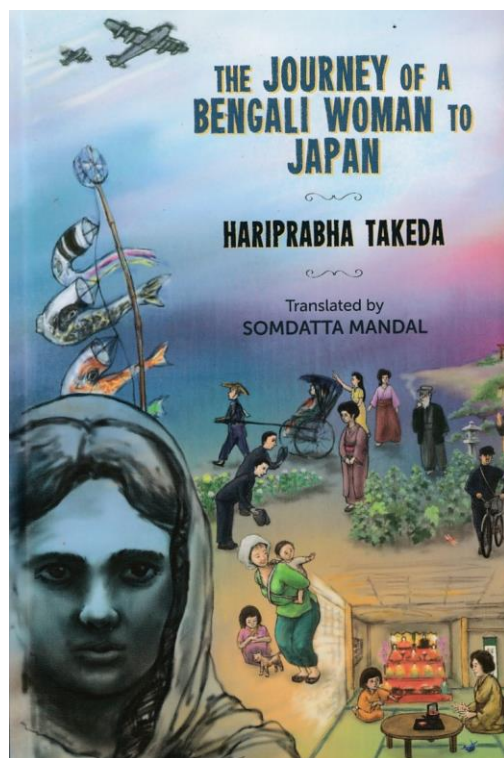


**Hariprabha Takeda, *The Journey of a Bengali Woman to Japan and Other Essays*. Trans. Somdatta Mandal. Kolkata: Jadavpur University Press, 2019. 260 pp. ISBN 978-9383660-47-6.**



Hariprabha Basu Mullick, a Brahmo girl from a liberal and enlightened family in East Bengal, married to a Japanese gentleman named Oemon Takeda crossed the “black sea” to visit the land of her husband. Her travel-narrative, *Bangamahilar Japan Jatra* (1915) predates Rabindranath Tagore’s *Japan Jatri* (1919), and she was the first Indian woman to write about another Asian nation. Her passionate desire to undertake a strenuous sea-voyage to reach Japan and see the land of her husband was natural and unusual at the same time. On the one hand, it reflects a traditional Bengali-Indian woman’s wish to make herself familiar to her in-laws; and on the other, her decision to cross the sea – in the first decade of the twentieth century – with her “foreign” husband, involves much courage and of course, a progressive outlook. However, her accounts of travelling in Japan, first in 1913 and later during World War II, have so far received very little attention. The reason, perhaps, was her simple, episodic and personalised style of describing things, very different from what we generally call a “critical” and

“reflective” prose. This may be somewhat true of her first travel-account, but her subsequent visit to Japan during World War II, her close association with Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and the INA, and her service as the Bengali newsreader of the Radio Station in Tokyo, at the request of Rashbehari Bose, bear much significance in the history of India-Japan connection in the early decades of the twentieth century, against the backdrop of a larger Asiatic, anti-British consciousness. On the whole, her experience in Japan deserves to be read as significant for the understanding of a postcolonial standpoint of “Reverse Orientalism.”

The Bengali writings of Hariprabha Takeda – all about Japan – have been collected and translated into English by Somdatta Mandal, and published in the form of a book titled *The Journey of a Bengali Woman to Japan and Other Essays*. The first narrative, translated from *Bangamabilar Japan Jatra*, has been thoughtfully documented with notes provided at the end of the book, reflecting a commendable editorial endeavour on the translator’s part. Hariprabha Takeda wrote her first narrative in the form of a personal diary, never giving a thought to publish it. The Bengali original, when brought to publication, still retained that diary-format. While translating, Mandal maintains the format, but provides a kind of well-arranged reading experience to the Anglophone reading public. Takeda’s observations on Japanese food-habit, clothing, religion, customs, transport, and above all, her cordial relationship with her in-laws, with whom she could communicate only through the “language of the heart” – all these have come alive through the translation. It is clear that Japan still remained a “foreign land” to her, yet she was sensible enough to recognise the emotional bonding she formed with her in-laws there – “Getting such a simple a caring mother-in-law in a foreign land who gave love and care like my own mother I wished to stay on with her. But how is that possible?” (113).

“In War-torn Japan,” translated from Takeda’s hand-written journal, documenting the traumatic years, 1941-48, constitutes the second narrative included in this volume. Besides her personal experiences, the narrative gives a faithful pen-picture of how the war struck Japan with air-raids, scarcity of food and poverty in general. Her experience of meeting the great nationalist leaders like Rashbehari Bose and Netaji, and working for them, shows how the personal can merge with the historical, the national and the international phenomena. The accounts of Netaji’s indomitable spirit (“Even if Japan is defeated, we shall fight for India’s independence till the end” [142]), his caring concern for his comrades, his zeal to ensure their safety before any danger and his tremendous faith that India would be independent, deserve special mention. The translation is able to give a sense of immediacy and intimacy, making the picture of war-tormented Japan all the more realistic, convincing and moving. It also shows that while commenting on the role of the Japanese king after the Hiroshima-Nagasaki

calamity, Hariprabha comes out of her otherwise “personalised” experience and participate in a critique of political discourse.

The third chapter of the book, containing the translation of an essay by Hariprabha Takeda on “Child Rearing and Women’s Education in Japan,” shows her engagement with a more “public” way of communication. Here she writes as a self-conscious author, addressing her intended audience, especially her own countrywomen, through the pages of a reputed Bengali journal like *Bharatbarsha*. Assuming the role of an enlightened informant, she writes, “Living in the fertile green land of my country where the granary is always full, my sisters will be able to compare themselves with the women of this hilly, rocky, small and very poor country. I will be happy if they feel inspired to further self-development” (157). Notable is her approach towards the formation of an intercultural “sisterhood” between the women of India and Japan, thereby nurturing the notion of a greater Asian culture, as opposed to the cultural imperialism perpetrated by the West. The change of tone from the first narrative to the third essay, from the “personal” to the “public” has been captured well by the translator. Hariprabha praises the Japanese women’s active role in their society, though she is critical of the post-war tendencies among the women of Japan to imitate the Western culture – American ways and tastes in particular (168).

Somdatta Mandal’s collection and translation of these writings, along with an informative introduction and annotations, can indeed be called an achievement in the field of postcolonial Asian Studies and Women’s travel-writings. Appendices included in this book provide further informative details: the memoirs of Hariprabha’s nephew Surojit Dasgupta and his wife Manju Dasgupta, selections from other Bengali writings and edited volumes on Hariprabha Takeda, by Swapan Prasanna Roy and Manjushree Sinha, an account of her family’s charitable service in Dhaka and a short article on the documentary film called *Japani Bodhu*, by the Bangladeshi filmmaker Tanvir Mokammel. A “Foreward” by Michael H. Fisher, Robert S. Danforth Professor of History, Oberlin College, USA and an insightful write-up by Kazuhiro Watanabe, Chief of the Bengali Department of Radio Japan, have added to the critical worth of this volume. The volume also contains some rare photographs, digitally restored. It deserves to be read as an important cultural text on the life and experiences of a lesser-known, simple yet extra-ordinary Bengali woman.

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