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# Examining the New Perspectives on the History of Indo-Japan Exchange: The Unexplored Resources in *Hindustani*

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**Abstract:** This study explores the intellectual and cultural exchanges between Japan and India in the early 20th century, with a particular focus on Urdu-language sources, which have largely been overlooked in previous research. The study examines the contributions of Indian intellectuals, educators, and independence activists who engaged with Japan, particularly those who spent time in the country. Figures such as K. S. Sabharwal, Muhammad Badarul Islam Fazli, and Muhammad Noorul Hasan Barlas played pivotal roles in fostering Indo-Japanese literary and cultural interactions, yet their contributions remain underexplored. It underscores the need for further archival research in both Japan and South Asia to uncover additional primary sources, including newspaper articles, unpublished translations, and personal correspondences.

## Introduction

Since the late 19th century, Japan was not only modernizing by modeling itself after the West but also emerging as a significant cultural reference for various Asian nations, including pre-independent India. Japan's emergence as a successful and powerful Asian nation became a source of inspiration for Indian intellectuals and nationalists, who viewed Japan's rapid progress as a potential blueprint for their own struggle against British colonial rule. Numerous Indian intellectuals and writers developed an interest in Japan, forming networks of literary and cultural exchange. Examining the perspectives on Japanese literature and culture from India—a country that maintained a distinct distance from Japan both politically and culturally—offers a unique comparative framework distinct from Eurocentric or East Asian approaches to modern Japanese studies.

In pre-modern times, Japan-India literary and cultural exchanges were limited, mostly mediated through China. Even after the Meiji Restoration, this pattern remained unchanged, with Britain replacing China as the primary intermediary. However, significant changes took place in the 20th century. Understanding early 20th-century Japan-India exchanges is facilitated by distinguishing between two groups based on their political status:

1. Regions of India under direct British colonial rule
2. Regions that retained autonomy from colonial rule

This distinction is significant because the nature of Japan-India interactions varied depending on the political context. In British-controlled regions, Indo-Japanese exchanges were often influenced by anti-colonial sentiments, with many Indian independence activists seeking refuge in Japan or drawing inspiration from Japan's modernization. In contrast, autonomous regions such as Mysore and Hyderabad engaged with Japan primarily through educational and cultural

exchanges as seen in the missions of M. Visvesvaraya and Sayyid Ross Masood, who studied Japan's education system.

From the first category, many figures involved in the independence movement sought refuge in Japan, deepening the relationship between the two countries through political asylum and cultural exchange. Among them, K. R. Sabharwal (1894–1981) played a pivotal role in bridging Japanese and Indian literature. He maintained friendships with notable prewar Japanese writers such as Tanizaki Jun'ichirō (1886–1965), Ibuse Masuji (1898–1993), and Satō Haruo (1892–1964), facilitating literary exchange between the two nations. I will try to further explore Sabharwal's contributions in the following chapter.

In the second category, the governments of Mysore and Hyderabad dispatched M. Visvesvaraya (1861–1962) and Sayyid Ross Masood (1889–1937), respectively, to Japan to study its educational system. Their findings were documented in *"Reconstructing India"* (1920) and *"Japan and its Educational System"* (1923), both of which recommended learning from Japan's education model. This illustrates the wide-ranging interest in Japan—from political to literary spheres—highlighting its unique significance in international literary reception and cultural history.

This article sheds light on the history of Indo-Japanese exchanges in the early 20th century, emphasizing the intellectual and cultural dialogues that formed between the two countries. It brings attention to Urdu-language resources, which have been largely overlooked in previous scholarship on Indo-Japanese relations. These materials—ranging from books, periodicals, and newspaper articles to translations and personal correspondences—offer invaluable insights into how Japan was perceived and discussed in South Asia. By incorporating these sources, this study aims to broaden the scope of Indo-Japanese historical research, offering a more multilingual and nuanced perspective on the intellectual and cultural networks that connected the two regions. It is expected that this article will provide a roadmap for future exploration of the history of Indo-Japan exchange.

## **1. Intellectual and Cultural Exchange: An Introduction to Untapped Resources in Urdu**

Several KAKEN-funded research projects have significantly advanced our understanding of Japan-India intellectual and cultural exchanges. For instance, the project titled "Research on Japan-India Educational Exchange in the Modern Era—Focusing on the Establishment of the Indian Women's University" (KAKEN Project/Area Number: 05610229) explored educational collaborations between Tokyo's Japan Women's University and the Indian Women's University (in Pune). This project references documents on the founder of Japan Women's University, Naruse Jinzō, his relationship with Rabindranath Tagore, and his connections with Masao Asō, V. Thakarsī, and D.K. Karwe.

Another project, "A Comparative Study of the Yellow Peril and Japan's Pan-Asianism" (KAKEN Project/Area Number: 16K02601), examines how Asianist discourse was negotiated and adapted in both Japan and the UK. One key finding of this study concerns a misunderstanding by Okakura Tenshin and Rabindranath Tagore during their stay in India. According to Nivedita's letters, they mistakenly

believed that Letters from Chinese (1901) by Lowe Dickinson was an actual letter from a Qing dynasty official—an error that was not uncommon at the time. Additionally, the project uncovered the activities of H.P. Shastri, an agent who played a crucial role in compiling “The Pan-Asianism Movement”, a report written by Petrie. Shastri, who was reportedly a professor at Waseda University, sent detailed reports to the British government regarding key figures such as Taraknath Das, Sabharwal, and others.

The project “Transnational Aspects of the Indian Independence Movement: The Pursuit of ‘Purna Swaraj’ and Japan” (KAKEN Project/Area Number:16K02998) explores historical materials related to the *Ghadar* Movement, British intelligence operations on Indian independence activists, INA (Indian National Army)-Japan cooperation and the relationships between Indian intellectuals, artists, and the Indian independence movement during the Taishō and early Shōwa periods. However, the specific materials uncovered by this project remain unclear.

Additionally, an ongoing project “History of the Indian Independence Movement and Its Relationship with Japan” (KAKEN Project Number:22KF0130) aims to uncover materials related to individuals’ involvement in the Indian independence movement and their relationship with Japan. One key figure in this study is Mukul Chandra Dey, whose artistic journey has been a major focus. Dey was fascinated by Japan’s rich artistic traditions, particularly Japanese woodblock prints and the technique of Japanese ink painting. Based on research output currently available in the public domain, this project seems to primarily rely on materials in Bangli and sources related to Dey’s connection to Rabindranath Tagore.

It is, however, essential to assess whether these studies have thoroughly examined the wealth of materials available in *Hindustani* (Hindi - Urdu). Given that many primary sources related to Indo-Japanese interactions are preserved in Urdu script, their inclusion is crucial for a comprehensive analysis. Therefore, a meticulous review of these projects is warranted to determine the extent to which Urdu materials have been utilized. Such an evaluation will ensure a holistic understanding of the intellectual and cultural exchanges between Japan and India, and open new avenues for further research.

Suzuki Takeshi, in his 1984 study 『ウルドゥー語で書かれた日本』 (Japan written in Urdu), introduced various Urdu-language books related to Japan. However, his research was limited to publications from before 1940. In the conclusion, Suzuki noted that while his study focused solely on pre-1940 monographs, a large number of articles on Japan had also been published in Urdu-language magazines and newspapers, and efforts were ongoing to collect these materials. However, a review of available research suggests that no further studies expanding on this work have been made publicly accessible.

Urdu, being one of the most widely used languages in India at the time, played a crucial role in shaping perceptions of Japan in the subcontinent. Suzuki highlighted these early publications and argued that they were part of a broader effort to introduce Japan to Indian readers through the lens of a rapidly modernizing, militarily strong nation. However, as Suzuki noted, these early writings focused

primarily on Japan's military prowess and industrial strength, leaving little room for nuanced discussions of Japan's social and cultural dynamics.

As mentioned in the "Introduction", from the early 1900s onward, many prominent Indian intellectuals began to show interest in Japan's modernization and cultural development. One of the key figures in this exchange was Mahbub-ul-'Alam (1863–1933), an influential journalist and intellectual from India, who became deeply interested in Japan's modernization. In 1890, he published a book titled *Japan aur Japani* ("Japan and the Japanese") in Urdu. This was one of the first books written in Urdu that focused on Japan. Alam's work reflected a growing awareness of Japan's achievements, and it encouraged readers to look to Japan as an example of how an Asian nation could successfully modernize while maintaining its cultural identity.

Alam's book was significant in that it demonstrated how Japan's experience in modernization and industrialization could serve as an inspiration for India's own development. This book marked the beginning of a series of Urdu-language writings that aimed to inform Indian readers about Japan's success and challenges. In 1903, another notable Urdu writer, Muhammad Ibrahim Azmi, published a 70-page article titled "Japan" in the Urdu weekly *Watan*, further elaborating on Japan's rise as an Asian power.

Another avenue of interactions was the recruitment of *Hindustani* language instructors from India for Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. Among these figures, Muhammad Badarul Islam Fazli and Muhammad Noorul Hasan Barlas played pivotal roles in shaping Japan's image in India. Fazli published *Haqiqat-e-Japan* ("The Reality of Japan") in Urdu in 1934, while Barlas wrote articles and translated Japanese folktales into Urdu. Examining these materials can provide valuable insights into the History of Indo-Japan Exchange.

## 2. The Scope of This Study for Future Research

To understand the significance of Urdu-language sources in Indo-Japanese exchanges, it is essential to consider the linguistic context of *Hindustani*, a widely spoken language in North India during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. *Hindustani* functioned as a lingua franca in administration, education, and literature, facilitating communication across different regions and communities. Over time, *Hindustani* evolved into two standardized forms based on script and vocabulary: Urdu, written in the Perso-Arabic script, incorporated a rich literary tradition influenced by Persian and Arabic.

Hindi, written in the Devanagari script, developed with an increasing emphasis on Sanskrit-based vocabulary.

During the prewar period, Urdu was a widely used literary and intellectual medium in South Asia. Many scholars, writers, and educators writing about Japan used Urdu-script sources, including newspapers, literary works, and academic writings. Understanding how Japan was depicted in Urdu-language materials is therefore crucial for reconstructing a multilingual and comprehensive narrative of Japan-India intellectual interactions.

The study of Japan-India cultural and intellectual exchanges has largely been shaped by English and some by Bengali-language sources, leaving a crucial gap in our understanding of how Japan was perceived within Urdu-speaking communities. This is very significant to uncover and analyze overlooked Urdu language sources, particularly those produced by Indian intellectuals, educators, traders, and political exiles in Japan before World War II.

A significant number of Urdu-speaking scholars and activists played key roles in shaping Indo-Japanese relations in the early 20th century. Notably, Muhammad Badarul Islam Fazli and Muhammad Noorul Hasan Barlas, both educators at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, left behind important literary records of their experiences in Japan.

Another crucial source of information is the Indian independence activists who sought asylum in Japan. While some of the previously mentioned KAKEN projects have examined certain figures among these political exiles, many individuals remain unexplored. Among them, K. S. Sabharwal stands out as an important yet under-researched figure. Sabharwal also taught *Hindustani* at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies as a visiting lecturer. His contributions to shaping Indo-Japanese intellectual and cultural exchanges were significant, particularly in bridging Hindi-Urdu literature and Japanese literary circles.

One of Sabharwal's significant contributions was his translation of a short story by Munshi Premchand (1880–1936), titled “*Majinahr*”, which was published in *Kaizō*<sup>4</sup>. This translation marked one of the earliest introductions of Indian literature to Japanese readers. Sabharwal's translation efforts extended beyond mere literary interest, serving as a means to introduce Japanese audiences to Indian social issues and cultural contexts. However, research on Sabharwal and Premchand remains extremely limited, and the significance of *Kaizō*'s publication, as well as its reception in Japanese society, has yet to be thoroughly examined.

While it is well known that Sabharwal translated Premchand's works into Japanese, newly discovered materials during the writer's research at Premchand's Archives in India, indicate that Premchand himself was interested in Japan, regularly reading *The Japan Times* and exchanging letters with Sabharwal. In one such letter, Premchand suggested that an Indian writer should contribute to *The Japan Times* to foster amicable bilateral relations. While it remains unclear how Sabharwal responded, any influence of Japanese literature on Premchand would necessitate a major revision of our understanding of Hindi literary history.

In Japan, studies on Premchand have been conducted by scholars such as Doi Hisaya and Takahashi Akira, who have explored his literary characteristics and significance in Indian literature. However, their work rarely delves into Sabharwal's connection with Premchand and his translation activities. Furthermore, research from the perspective of Japan-India literary exchange remains underdeveloped.

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<sup>4</sup> *Kaizō*, Vol. 12, No. 4, April 1930

There is another mysterious side of Sabharwal, which has not yet gained much attention from the past scholars. He was expelled from Japan with an allegation of spy activities. This side of Sabharwal need through research taking account of both Japanese and foreign resources.

Despite Sabharwal's role as both a translator and educator at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, as well the allegation of spy activities, his influence remains largely absent from mainstream discussions on Indo-Japanese relations. Investigating his writings, Urdu-language sources, and his networks in Japan will provide valuable insights into the intellectual dimensions of Indo-Japanese exchanges beyond political narratives.

## **Conclusion**

This study has sought to reassess Indo-Japanese intellectual and cultural exchanges in the early 20th century by foregrounding Urdu-language sources, which have remained largely overlooked in previous studies. While much of the existing research on Japan-India relations has focused on English and Bengali-language materials, this article highlights the importance of Urdu-script writings—including books, periodicals, and personal correspondences—that provide valuable insights into how Japan was perceived and discussed in South Asia.

Through an examination of Indian intellectuals, translators, and educators, including figures such as K. S. Sabharwal, Muhammad Badarul Islam Fazli, and Muhammad Noorul Hasan Barlas, this study has demonstrated that Urdu played a significant role in shaping Indo-Japanese literary and cultural interactions. The translation of Japanese texts into Urdu, as well as the direct experiences of Indian scholars who resided in Japan, contributed to a distinct intellectual network that extended beyond political narratives.

However, many aspects of Indo-Japanese exchanges remain underexplored. The alleged espionage activities of Sabharwal, the reception of his translations, and the broader influence of Urdu writings on Indo-Japanese discourse warrant further investigation. Additionally, archival research in both Japan and South Asia is needed to uncover new materials—particularly in Urdu-language periodicals and manuscripts—that could reshape our understanding of early 20th-century Indo-Japanese relations.

By integrating Urdu-language sources into Indo-Japanese studies, this research aims to broaden the historiographical framework and encourage a more multilingual and nuanced approach to the study of cultural exchanges. Future scholarship in this field should continue to explore new linguistic and archival dimensions, ensuring that the intellectual contributions of Urdu-speaking scholars and writers are fully recognized in the history of Indo-Japanese relations.

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