



Title	Hariprabha Takeda : A Trailblazing Woman in India-Japan Relations
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Citation	Proceedings of 5th International Seminar for the Promotion of International Exchange : Exploring After Corona Influx of International Students at Higher Education Institutions. 2024, p. 27-33
Version Type	VoR
URL	<a href="https://doi.org/10.18910/95396">https://doi.org/10.18910/95396</a>
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# Hariprabha Takeda: A Trailblazing Woman in India- Japan Relations

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**Abstract:** The dawn of India Japan's diplomatic relations began in 1952, when India signed a peace treaty with Japan after Japan got back its sovereignty. However, when it comes to people-to-people relationships it can be traced back to Bodhisena's tryst with Japan, dating back to 730 AD and it continued over the centuries. It gained momentum when Japan opened itself from Sakoku, many scholars and political luminaries established relationships between the two nations. Hariprabha Basu Mullick (1890-1972) played a very significant role not only during the early 20th century but also during World War II. The narratives went that Hariprabha fell in love with a Japanese man and thereafter got married to him. She was the first Indian woman to visit Japan. Thus, this paper explores the contributions of Hariprabha's work in Indian and Japanese relation, as her experience was personal and portrays the image of Japan among Indians. The paper also focuses on the lived experiences of Hariprabha, highlighting her interactions with Japanese culture and examining the accounts and legacies she had attributed through constant diary writings. These expressions, in turn, laid the groundwork for shaping Japan's perception as a nation in India.

## Introduction

The remnant of the Indo-Japan cultural relations can be traced to Bodhisena's tryst with Japan, dating back to 730 AD. However, cultural exchanges between India and Japan were significantly reduced in view of the *Sakoku* policy of Japan. It was resumed when Japan opened up through cultural exchanges with India. Thanks to the religious scholars and intellectuals from both the countries like Kitabatake Doryu, and Shaku Soen from Japan, Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, and Rash Behari Bose, and political other luminaries like Subhash Chandra Bose from India once again set a platform for the exchange of literature, language, and culture between India and Japan. Tagore visited Japan in 1916 and made a huge contribution through his written travelogues such as *Japan Jatri*, which fascinates many Indian audiences as it talked about atheism of Japan. Perhaps many scholars and intellectuals have visited Japan either with the purpose of studying Japanese culture or related to nationalist ambitions.

Besides, it is worth mentioning that there was one Bengali lady who visited Japan not as a scholar or intellectual but as a bride of a Japanese man. Her name is Hariprabha Basu Mullick, which later got changed to Hariprabha Takeda by marrying a Japanese man, Uemon Takeda. Her visit to Japan was unique, for she visited Japan not only to actualize the envisioned new land but also to find a new home. She visited Japan in 1912-1913 for a period of four months, and thereafter in between 1941-1948. During her stay in Japan, she noted down in her diary every minute detail of the things that she had experienced and encountered in Japan.

Indeed, her diary could have been written for the people of that era as it is a unique piece of work which portrays the details relating to the actual conditions of Japan during that time however it was overlooked by both the countries. Nonetheless, it has now remained as one of the earliest primary sources of information for the present generation to gain insight into Japanese history and its culture. It is also worth mentioning that her work may be considered based on participant and non-participant observation. Hence, her work has provided a sort of firsthand information which is a very remarkable link to the understanding of Japanese culture. Thus, become a prominent source of information and a foundation to understand Japan as a nation to India. Her major works include:

The *Bangamohilar Japan Jatra* (The Journey of a Bengali Woman to Japan) (1915), is believed to be one of the earliest works authored by a woman from the Indian subcontinent, particularly during a period when the Kalapani crossing taboo was still deeply ingrained in the Hindu society. In addition, *Juddho Jorjorito Japanese* (In war-ton Japan), a Japanese memoir was one of the longest works by Hariprabha which covered the period between 1941-1948, during the crucial period of Japan in the World War II era. This travelogue was not uncovered until the early twenty-first century till it appeared for the first time in the book, *The Journey of a Bengali Woman to Japan and Other Essays*, translated in English by Somdatta Mandal. Furthermore, *Child Rearing and Women's Education in Japan*, published in the popular Bengali Language Journal called *Bharatbarsha* (1949) This is the last work written by Hariprabha regarding childcare and women's education in Japan. Through this work one can get an overview about the condition of Japanese women and child rearing during 1949 in Japan.

Before delving into her significant literary works, let's first explore the details of her biography.

### **Brief Biography of Hariprabha Takeda (1890 - 1972)**

Hariprabha Mallick Takeda was born in Dhaka, in the then undivided province of Bengal. She was the daughter of Sasibhusan<sup>1</sup> and Nagendrabala Mallick. The couple had a total of eight children; out of them, two were adopted daughters and Hariprabha was the eldest. Her father was an educated, religious and politically liberal person. He was well settled as Sub-Inspector of police in a court at Dhaka. In 1883, he married Nagendrabala, who belonged to a priestly family. Sasibhusan,

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<sup>1</sup> During this time, the Brahmo Samaj movement had a great impact on society. Sashibhusan left his job and joined Nababidhan Brahmo Samaj. He dedicated his life to the salvation and recovery of destitute children and women who experienced social challenges, aligning with one of the primary causes upheld by the Brahmo Samaj during that era. As a result, in 1892, he established a facility within his own residence known as 'Balika Uddhar Ashram' (Dhaka Rescue Home for Girls). Subsequently, his spouse, Nagendrabala, gained recognition as a prominent social worker and held the title of 'sevika' within the ashram. However, due to space constraints, the ashram was relocated to a nearby village known as Khilgaon (Ramna, Dhaka) in 1903. With the shift of the place, the institution was renamed as 'Matri-Niketan' (Mother's Abode), where orphaned girls and widows received care and education.

having embraced Brahmo faith, had the conviction that two essential actions were required for the advancement of a nation. Firstly, he believed in fostering international awareness among the country's population and advocated cross-cultural marriages to promote this objective. Secondly, the establishment of industries for the country's development was the goal. In furtherance of this goal, he established the Bulbul Soap Factory in Dhaka, where he enlisted the services of two Japanese individuals, Oemon Takeda and his brother Toshana Takeda. Among these two brothers, Oemon Takeda later became his son-in-law who married Hari Prabha in 1907.

Perhaps it will not be wrong if one asserts that Hari Prabha's international marriage in the 1900s was possible because of his father's support and his liberal thinking. One of his major goals was to foster international awareness among the country's population, and he actively encouraged cross-cultural marriages to achieve this goal.

After marrying Oemon Takeda, Hari Prabha always wanted to visit her in-laws in Japan. As she wrote in her diary,

*"When I got married, no one thought that I would one day go to Japan. Nobody wanted that either. But I always nurtured a strong desire to go there."*  
(Mondal, 2019).

Her dream to meet her in-laws became a reality in 1912 when she visited Japan for the first time. The first journey to Japan commenced on October 30, 1912. This journey took four months to reach Japan. During her first trip, she not only admired Japan for its beautiful nature but also noticed the status of Japanese women in society. She wrote in her travelogue, there are no restrictions for women; they work together with men, move around; there is no restriction anywhere. This observation by a young Bengali lady holds unprecedented social significance. Another interesting fact is that her name in the title of the book is prefaced by 'Sri' and not 'Srimati' Hari Prabha Takeda. The former denotes a man, while the latter a woman. (The Journey of a Bengali Woman & Essays). Thus, gender-neutrality is seen in the work.

During Hari Prabha sojourn in Japan, she assiduously transcribed each minutia in her diary, not for the purpose of publication rather it was driven by to cherish the repository of personal experiences. After she returned from Japan, her sister and the Brahmo community leaders convinced her to publish in the journal or as a book for the edification of other Bengalis who were travelling to Japan and for those who were living there. Her work also helped a lot for the people to learn about Japan as a nation. The accomplishments as authors have gained wider recognition among Bengalis, Indians, and larger society across the globe.

### **Overview of Hari Prabha's First Sojourn to Japan in 1912**

Hari Prabha embarked on her initial voyage to Japan on October 30, 1912, starting in Dhaka. She along with her husband sailed from Narayangung on November 3, 1912, commencing their journey to Japan. They arrived at Moji, Japan's first port on December 13, 1912. During this journey, Hari Prabha diligently recorded every detail in her diary, chronicling her four-month stay. She had documented all the good and bad experiences of her voyage, leaving no detail unrecorded.

The “*Bangamohilar Japan Jatra*,” was an extensive work that Hariprabha kept during her first trip to Japan, as it provides an engrossing glimpse into her experiences. It helps us to understand her journey when she left her loving family and the forward-thinking Brahmo society in Dhaka to travel with her spouse into a world that was largely unknown to them. Furthermore, through this journal, we gain insights into various aspects of Japanese culture, such as their food culture, clothing style, the harsh winter, the unreserved practice of public bathing where men and women bathe together, the manners in which they sit together at homes irrespective of genders and the tradition of consuming *sake*<sup>2</sup> with formal meals. Thus, one not only learns and visualizes Japan through the lens of Hariprabha’s account but also can understand the position of women in Japanese society. She had not only talked about the beautiful culture of Japan but also put forth the reality of women’s conditions in her diary.

It is important to note that she didn’t initially write her work with the intention of publication. As mentioned earlier, it was her sister and the Brahmo Samaj family who persuaded her to share it with a wider audience. This further underscores the conclusion that her work was genuine and written without any predetermined agenda.

#### **Overview of Hariprabha’s Second Sojourn to Japan in 1924**

It is believed that Hariprabha had visited Japan for the second time around 1924. However, there is no data or diary found yet regarding the same. Probably, Hariprabha has not maintained a diary for her second travelogue or might not have published it. It is still unclear. Therefore, it is not possible to give any information regarding her second visit.

#### **Overview of Hariprabha’s Third Sojourn to Japan (1941-1948)**

Hariprabha’s tour to Japan during World War II was one of the longest. Along with her personal experiences, Hariprabha mentioned that she was both an observer of, and a participant during that time. During her stay, she encountered and supported several Indian nationalist leaders, including Subhash Chandra Bose and Rash Behari Bose, as they were working with the Azad Hind Fauz *Indian National Army*. Hariprabha herself served as a regular newsreader on the radio, broadcasting in Bengali from war-torn Japan to her homeland. Therefore, it will not be wrong to call her the unsung heroine of India.

In the *Juddho Jorjorito Japane’s* account, she noted the hardships of food rationing and the growing destruction of Japan’s economy, cities, and society by American bombing. The third way she expressed her travel experience was in the form of an essay, published in the Journal *Bharatbarsha* (1949). Hariprabha desired to write for Bengali women without revealing her identity. She in fact shared her

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<sup>2</sup> Sake also referred to as Japanese rice wine, is an alcoholic beverage of Japanese origin made by fermenting rice.

experiences to give these women information and lessons about Japanese culture and society. She focused on how they could learn from Japan's strengths while avoiding its weaknesses. The work highlighted that Japanese society did a great job involving women in the workforce, even as supervisors over men, making Japanese women a symbol of Eastern culture in the modern age.

### **Hari Prabha's Account on Socio-cultural Aspects of Japan**

Being married to a Japanese person, she must have had some socio-cultural background, regarding the lifestyle in Japan, the social structure and family system. And all those perceptions about Japan became a reality when she travelled to her in-laws' home in Japan. In her diary along with the details of journey and places she visited in Japan, she also not only mentioned Japanese culture but at times compared those cultures with Indian culture. It could be asserted that the inclusion of comments in her diary suggests that she wrote solely for personal recollection, with no intention of publishing her thoughts.

Her very first encounter with Japanese culture began when she stayed in a hotel after they reached Japan and during her whole journey. She mentioned in her diary that;

*"The maid in the hotel works very efficiently.....Their hospitality is very charming. They bow their heads as soon as you enter". (Mondal, 2019)*

She described her train journey to her in-laws' house. It also mentioned the cleanliness and well-being of passengers towards each other and compared it with her motherland situation "It is not like ours" (Takeda 72). She observed the attitude and behaviour of Japanese people towards other passengers, following every small rule and how they act accordingly which is not common in Indian context.

Hari Prabha keenly observed the Japanese society she encountered in her travelogue, offering a perspective(s) shaped by multicultural insights. The manner of Japanese people is mentioned many times in her diary, she admired the respect they give to each other and even others' work. She did observe that there was dignity of labour where she had mentioned saying, "These people do not feel humiliated to do any kind of mean work for their own benefits" starting with this line she states a story she read in a magazine. One day an Indian student saw his Japanese friend with a rickshaw and wanted to talk regarding the same, but his friend says that he is a driver now and went to search passengers. This manner to respect everyone's work is rare in India especially during that time. In addition, she also included the child-rearing practices and the pivotal issue of women's education within the third section of her book.

*Children are not taught with the aid of books. They are kept engaged with paper cutting, drawing, clay modelling, etc., and are given basic ethical training through stories. (Mondal, 2019)*

Along with the education of women she also highlighted the working culture of women in Japan. It is very common in Japan and you can easily find women working in various places like markets, shops, stations and post offices. In many places women can be seen working with their husband in the agriculture fields.

*Along with chemistry, botany, geology, and other areas of higher learning, the curriculum includes general physical training, cookery, laundry work, cleaning, gardening, knitting, music, art, ethics and English. (Mondal, 2019)*

Similarly, in the context of Saroj Nalini Dutts's travelogue "Japane Banganari" (1927) who also travelled to Japan with her husband and son in 1927, it is worth noting that the illuminates numerous instances of Japanese women that actively engaged in the public sphere.

*Most of the women do the general work here, so the selling of the tickets in the museum, storing the sticks, selling catalogues outside, all were done by them... These girls manage the work, without speaking a word of English. (Gupta 2020)*

Besides this she also spelled out the religious practices, food culture and attire of Japanese people. The new year celebration and the customs performed on that day are mentioned briefly. Flying kites is specifically noted. She highlighted the food habits of Japanese culture such as eating habits, where they do not have the dining table culture, using hands is prohibited in Japanese culture, thus Hariprabha discussed her difficulties in acclimatizing Japanese food in the initial days. She cooked for herself as almost all Japanese food is bland. However, Indian food is mostly fried and has many spices. Drinking sake during meals is also a common thing in Japan. Attires of Japanese people were also very strange for her as it was totally different from her own and she found almost similar attires for both men and women in Japan. She explained about the Japanese dress (Kimono) and Haori<sup>3</sup> but it was not made known whether she had worn the same or not. These are a few peculiar cultures and customs of Japan which she experienced during her visit and noted down in her diary.

## Conclusion

The journey of Hariprabha Takeda was completely personal and it gives a very clear image about Japan and its culture. This is believed to be the first written document by any Indian woman about Japan. However, it was retrieved after a long time and gained the interest of Indian and Japanese people. Even if this work reaches late to the scholars, one cannot deny that somehow it had connections with Indian society. As mentioned in her biography, marrying out of the country was not a common practice during that time. Despite facing resistance and criticism from her community, she persevered in her journey over the period. During an era when Japan remained unfamiliar to Bengalis, she not only married within that culture but also explored the country, documenting her experiences in writing. Unfortunately, as her accounts were in the form of a personal diary, they remained relatively unknown among readers and scholars until they were eventually published.

This shows that even if her diary was not so popular in the country it received recognition by a lot of people and those people had the image of Japan through her

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<sup>3</sup> Usually worn during winter over Kimono.

diary. Whether she got recognition from the scholar, intellectuals or not, she was the one who laid the foundation of Japan among larger society. Before her visit to Jamshedji Tata, M. Vishweshwaraiah and Swami Vivekanad also talked about the Japanese company, education system and Japanese thoughts respectively but not in the written form and all were for well-educated and intellectuals.

A documentary titled “*Japani Bodhu*” (The Japanese wife) was made by Tanvir Morkamel in 2012 as a tribute for her contribution. Monzurul Huq, a journalist also mentioned in his article as “Both Oemon and Hariprabha Takeda have been lost from our memory. We do not find them mentioned anywhere now. But as pioneers in establishing a link between these two countries, the contribution of this couple should be remembered naturally by all cultured people.” The contribution of Hariprabha Takeda in India-Japan relations is prominent among others scholars, politicians and intellectuals and needs more focus.

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