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Negotiating Identity through Travel: Japan through a Bengali Woman's Lens

Abstract

The paper seeks to analyze how Hariprabha Takeda, a Bengali woman, in the early twentieth century negotiated with the issues of identity, integration, and cultural assimilation in her narrative from the standpoint of an insider in a Japanese household. Through a close textual analysis of her travelogue Bongomohilar Japan Jatra (1915) and other memoirs (translated as The Journey of a Bengali Woman to Japan (1915) & Other Essays by Somdatta Mandal in 2019), the paper attempts to examine how she was influenced by the Japanese culture and blurred the strict demarcations of private and public spaces through interracial marriage. The paper argues that the notion of pan-Asian identity gained prominence due to the active interest of travelers in exploring and developing cultural and political links between colonial Bengal and Japan, which forms the background to Hariprabha's transnational connections. A critical investigation of her translated narrative opens up various embedded cultural, gender and class issues that she encapsulated as a colonized woman and, thus, helps in situating it in the larger sociocultural and political scenario.

Keywords: colonial Bengal, travel, gender, identity, space, translation, culture

1. Introduction

During colonial times, travel "emerged as an increasingly complex range of experiences: practices of crossing and interaction that troubled the localism of many common assumption about culture" (Clifford 3). Travel narratives record experiences and minute details through observations and present stories of men and women to a wider audience. The space that travel literature

encapsulates provide a fertile area for negotiating identities and uncovering multi-layered meanings which arise during the complex process of retelling events and chronicling experiences. The close study of such travelogues enlarges the scope of literary canon and the transnational elements contained within the narratives question the strictures of private/public boundaries (S. Chatterjee).

There have been a number of studies which focused on travel encounters from the colonizers' perspectives (e.g., Marriott; Nayar) as well as the response of the colonized people when they ventured into the land of the colonizer (e.g., Harder; B. Mukhopadhyay; Sen). These colonial exchanges gained momentum during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a number of travelers from Bengal were travelling in order to explore the uncharted territories. The interactions between the colonizer-colonized embodied center-periphery tensions and, therefore, problematized the dichotomous relationship that the increased mobility had facilitated. In contrast to these binary interactions, another emerging trend during this period was to explore other Asian countries. There is a distinct difference in the gendered nuances and representations in such accounts as the perceptions of the travelers, shaped by social, cultural, and political forces, varied in respect of other Asian countries as they were not considered the cultural Other.

Travel writing was considered predominantly a masculine project as men had unrestricted access to the public domain, implying that women travelers found it difficult to dismantle the masculine dominion (Blunt & Rose 1; Mills 29-50). The free access to public space that men had exclusively enjoyed until the nineteenth century was gradually contested by the emergence of female voices as they came out of zenana or andarmahal (private quarters) to question gender dichotomies, creating their own space in the process. Further, the women who recorded their travelling experiences had to negotiate with various forms of social limitations pertaining to the production as well as reception of their texts due to the marginalized position in society.

In the recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in travel narratives by women, due to the momentum received by the re-discovering of texts through translation. In relation to Bengali travel writing, Sen observes that accounts by women were fewer in comparison to men (23). Although lesser in number, recent research has unearthed a significant number of travel accounts

by women either in serialized journals or in the form of full-length narratives (Gooptu, Knowing Asia ; M. Mukhopadhyay).

The intersection of gender, mobility and class has been rather unexplored in the context of travel writing to East which this paper aims to address. Although there have been studies looking at women's travel narratives through varying theoretical perspectives, the issue of class has been overlooked because the women travelers were 'othered' primarily on the basis of gender and race during the early twentieth century.

Travel accounts of Bengali women who ventured to Asian nations are relatively few and, therefore, they provide a unique glimpse into how Bengali women perceived Asian countries and thus shaped the notion of an Asian identity. This is a complex idea as it encompasses distinct cultures which cannot be defined homogeneously, therefore, travel narratives to other Asian countries provide newer perceptions of how identities were constructed. In this context, the paper employs textual analysis to explore Hariprabha Takeda's travel account Bongomohilar Japan Jatra (1915) and other memoirs (translated as The Journey of a Bengali Woman to Japan (1915) & Other Essays by Somdatta Mandal in 2019), with a view to uncovering the complex transnational experiences of a colonized Bengali woman during her travelling and her appropriation of pan-Asian identity. The present study also aims to bridge the gap in the existing scholarship on the middle-class experience of women travelers as well as examine how the private and public spheres entwined to shape her multi-layered relationship with another culture.

2. Theorizing Transnational Travel and Translation

While there has been a rich tradition of travel writing in many cultures, crossing the kalapani (black waters) was prohibited by the Hindu religious texts (Sengupta 74-76). However, the colonial period witnessed the evolving concept of travel where travel other than for religious purposes began gaining popularity. This created a contact zone (Pratt 8) which allowed transnational encounters, thereby leading to the formation of opinions and molding of identities through dynamic exchanges. The interaction of geographically, culturally, and historically distinct people resulted in multi-dimensional experiences of women travelers who navigated contact zones, and these experiences need to be analyzed through various perspectives to uncover the complexities of travel.

Over the last two decades, the interest in transnationalism has increased significantly due to its multidisciplinary approach (Vertovec 2). The increasing interest in transnational or cross-border relations focuses on exchanges, affiliations, and social formations across nations. While exploring cross-border cultural exchanges and sustained linkages in narratives, literary transnationalism becomes an important lens as it critically mediates the relationship between literature produced within a geographical context and the wider forces of globalized culture (Dirlik 209). This theoretical perspective will help in unravelling the greater implications of Hariprabha's travelogue as it situates her narrative in the broader framework of transnational connections. Further, transnationalism impacts the discourse of cultural specificity and differences, and this will enable a critical examination of differences and similarities, prompted by the transnational interactions that converged to shape Hariprabha's identity. The primary idea is to shift the unit of analysis from an individual to a multicultural system to get an overview of the cultural and social assimilation as well as comprehend the politics working at the intersections of gender, race, and class.

The complex process of identity formation that a traveler experiences is based on how the person defines the 'Self' through the construction of the 'Other'. The encounters that are enabled in the contact zone lead to various negotiations by the traveler, which shape identity. This space is often referred to as the 'thirdspace' (Bhabha, The Location 2; Soja). Such sites encourage newer interpretations wherein perspectives and identities are formed and re-formed. Women's travelogues additionally navigate the politics of gaze, gender, and class and embody a kind of gender power that destabilizes the strict boundaries of the public and private, the self and other.

The question of translation assumes importance in the context of Hariprabha at multiple levels. Further, Hulme and Youngs have pointed out that "translation studies has brought another dimension to travel, giving thought not only to translation between languages but also between cultures" (9). In this context, translation assumes various meanings as Hariprabha translates and interprets a foreign culture for her understanding as well as the readers'. The textual translation of her narrative is akin to the physical as well as metaphorical journey that she undertakes in the cross-cultural contact zone. As travel indicates physical journey, translation also embodies a journey from one point in temporal and spatial location to another with the aim to make the text available to a larger audience. Hariprabha's text shifts between spaces and places and, just like

the traveler, the translator also becomes a moving figure who continually shifts between languages and cultures. This idea becomes important while exploring the relationship between travel, translation, and mobility. Further, the concepts of hybridity and interstitial space (Bhabha, Foreword ix) can be applied in this regard as notions of identity and translation are interlaced and both occur in the in-between space. This space transcends spatial, cultural, and linguistic barriers and, therefore, the scope of travel narratives is expanded through translation. In addition to this, intertextuality between Hariprabha and other women travelers to Japan during this period is explored as it helps in uncovering similarities and differences regarding the preoccupations and experiences of travel.

To explore the changing role of women with respect to travel and identity, it is imperative to situate them in a wider context for analysis as the social and political changes need to be studied against the broader Pan-Asian background. This has been addressed in the next section which highlights the deep-rooted connections between Bengal and Japan and the ensuing cross-cultural relationships.

3. Pan-Asianism and Bengal-Japan Connections

According to Stolte and Fischer-Tiné, “Asianisms, that is, discourses and ideologies claiming that Asia can be defined and understood as a homogenous space with shared and clearly defined characteristics, have become the subject of increased scholarly attention over the last two decades” (65). Further, Saaler and Szpilman state that the “term ‘Asia’ came into common use in East Asia only in the mid-nineteenth century in response to the increasing diplomatic, military, and economic presence of the Western powers, and their territorial expansion in East Asia” (4). In the history of European-Asian encounters, the victory of the English in the Opium War (1839-1842) established their colonial intentions and expansionist policies in Asia, therefore, this juncture slowly brought the question of Asia and Asian solidarity into focus. It was considered by the intellectuals and political leaders as a viable argument to unite the Asian countries based on the transnational commonalities of race, culture, language, and so on.

The discovery of Asia through the accounts of explorers, geographers, and travelers as well as the unravelling of deep-rooted connections between Bengal and other Asian countries turned the

Bengali gaze toward them. This resulted in the publication of a number of travel accounts to countries such as Japan, Indonesia, Java, Burma, and China, in the popular literary journals of Bengal during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Lahiri ix). While the West was a popular destination for the people from colonial Bengal, Japan slowly gained prominence amongst the Bengali intelligentsia through essays published during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Gooptu, "Japan and Asian Destiny" 198). The turn of the twentieth century marked the period when Bengalis started travelling to Japan and this coincided with the time that Japan had opened its borders to the world. Das Gupta mentions:

Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905 [was greeted by Indians] as the victory of Asia over Europe, nationalists and revolutionaries alike looked to Japan as exemplar in their anti-imperialist struggle especially since Japan developed an identity of its own without imitating the West but by employing and adapting Western knowledge. ("Looking East" 124)

The interest in Japan gained impetus during the colonial rule when many Bengali intellectuals, leaders and others travelled and uncovered spiritual, material, religious, and cultural connections. These emerging deliberations offered multiple opinions which were published in the popular periodicals of the time such as Bharati (1877-1926), Prabashi (1901-1964), and so on. These musings on one hand tried to introspect and rediscover their own culture while at the same time tried to look beyond home to recognize the diversity. The idea of pan-Asianism represents an early example of transcontinental ideology, which spanned the continent and promoted political solidarity. It highlighted "a fundamental self-awareness of Asia as a cohesive body, be it geographically, linguistically, racially, or culturally determined" (Hotta 123). The ideology aimed to proclaim a shared consciousness based on self-awareness and recognition in the world which sought to shape the Asian identity in order to achieve equal status with the West. This strain of thought is evident in the travelogues to Japan by women as they highlighted the progressive aspects of Japan along with its rich culture.

Gooptu has extensively documented the writing of notable Bengali personalities and their multifaceted responses to the Japanese culture and people, ranging from their religious sentiments to demographic details. Further exploring the connections between India and Japan, Gooptu

stresses that “Japan evolved, changed, and interfaced with Asia as a whole and India in particular” (“Japan and Asian Destiny” 199). The voyages to Japan recorded the differences between the two nations while underlining the materialistic and spiritual connections that existed by stressing the ideals important to Asians during the early twentieth century. A few other travel narratives to countries other than Japan, such as Burma, written by Sarala Debi Chaudhurani in 1931 (serialized in Bharatvarsha in 1931-1932), elucidated the idea of Pan-Asianism that was gaining currency (Das Gupta, “Looking East” 123-25).

The distinction that Japan had during those times was that it had not bowed to the European powers and the patriotic spirit of the Japanese people was glorified. It was seen as a modern nation due to its military prowess, economic advances, and excessive pride in their abilities as well as cultural past. It symbolized development without Western intervention and this meteoric rise of Japan in terms of development was inspiring to the Indian intellectuals. For Bengalis, the pan-Asian ideas attracted individuals who looked for “triumphant nationalism to heal the trauma of colonization” (Gooptu, “Japan and Asian Destiny” 199). The nationalism of the Japanese people had initially been applauded by thinkers like Rabindranath Tagore as it was looked at as a way to reverse the ordeal of colonization, though Tagore later moved on to the idea of internationalism owing to the aggressive policies of Japan toward other Asian nations.

There exist a few accounts of Bengali women who travelled to Japan during this period, and therefore these accounts provide a very interesting perspective on Japanese life. Hariprabha Takeda’s account, written in the form of a diary, resembles a memoir that captures the complex interactions between Hariprabha and her Japanese in-laws. This record stands apart from the others as it is a Bengali woman’s attempt to integrate herself into a Japanese family while blurring the outsider-insider demarcations. However, this ambivalence continues throughout her account as she records her observations about the culture, customs, education and women, which will be analyzed later. Other records of women during this time include Saroj Nalini Dutt’s Japane Banganari (1928), Abala Bose’s accounts from 1916, which were serialized in Mukul, and Shanta Devi’s narratives which were serialized in Prabasi from 1937-1939. The following section will closely analyze Hariprabha’s transnational engagements with the Japanese culture and people

while situating them against the sociopolitical changes. It will also refer to other women travelers of contemporary times, which will situate her experiences in an intertextual context.

4. Navigating Travel and Identity

The restoration of the Meiji dynasty in 1868 led to many changes in the political and social structure of Japan. The following decades witnessed the emergence of Japan as a nation striving toward modernization and international recognition. In this context, Hariprabha's account assumes historic importance as it is one of the earliest accounts which mention an interracial marriage to a Japanese man in Bengal, marking a juncture when Japanese people started migrating. Her travel account to Japan in the beginning of the twentieth century lays stress on her gender identity along with her regional identity, which is reflected in the reference to bangamahila (Bengali woman) in the title of the travelogue. This was a common way of referring to oneself while penning travelogues and the construction of her identity as a Bengali woman is pronounced in the very title of the narrative as it is through this textualization that her identity is molded. Therefore, it is imperative to analyze her experiences against this background in order to unravel the implications of her observations.

Hariprabha Basu Mullick hailed from a liberal Brahmo[1] family from present-day Bangladesh and was married to a Japanese gentleman named Oemon Takeda, who worked at the soap factory established by her father, Sashibhusan Mallick. To situate Hariprabha's marriage and her travel endeavors, it is necessary to understand her Brahmo upbringing. Brahmo Samaj was "a congregation or an order, rather than a sect or community" which sought to strengthen the "doctrine of universal brotherhood … ideals of love and service" (Banerjee 22). They promoted the notions of charity, benevolence, virtue and morality and, therefore, the idea of social reform through women's education and upliftment of their position in society was an important issue. This liberal approach shaped the outlook of Hariprabha, who was a literate woman, and it explains her interracial marriage to Oemon Takeda during those times.

Hariprabha's marriage was different from the traditional marriages of the time as she did not have to move into the house of the husband, generally referred to as the sasurbari. Due to the unconventionality of her marriage, her trip to Japan had romantic inclinations for her as she

undertook the journey to discover the marital home. The first account is a detailed chronicle of her journey which started on October 30, 1912 and the trials and tribulations while navigating through Hong Kong, Singapore, and Shanghai before reaching Kobe in Japan. Travelling abroad was a rare occurrence during that time and she expresses her excitement by mentioning:

> *When I got married, no one thought that I would one day go to Japan... But I always nurtured a strong desire to go there. That desire would remain a dream. After my marriage I longed to get the blessings of my in-laws … There arose a desire in my heart to see them and their country, and by God's grace it was going to be fulfilled. (Takeda 47)*

Although Hariprabha belonged to a progressive family and appeared to be an emancipated woman, yet the traditional notions of marital home and domesticity were important to her as she fashioned herself as a dutiful wife (Mukhopadhyay, "Writing Home" 309). The idea of home, which typically signifies stability, is problematized in her situation as she has embarked on a quest to find her true home in a distant land. The transnational and transcultural connections enabled by matrimony underscore the unconventionality of the narrative, which is representative of the relation that Bengal shared with Japan.

The idea of Pan-Asianism, as discussed earlier, shows how the Bengali intelligentsia was inspired by Japanese ideals and sought to present them to readers back home. Hariprabha's matrimonial union with Oemon Takeda symbolically unifies two cultures which greatly impacted each other due to their shared history. Interestingly, her account predates Tagore's Japan Jatri (1919) and is one of the first narratives by a Bengali woman expressing her experiences in another Asian nation. Hariprabha Takeda's account stands apart also due to the narrator's position as a member of the Japanese family by virtue of her marriage. The uniqueness that this position lends her offers a rare glimpse into a Japanese household of the early twentieth century from an insider's perspective while maintaining her Bengali cultural identity. This is unlike the records of other women travelers such as Abala Basu, Shanta Devi and Saroj Nalini Dutt, who were travelers to Japan casting a discerning gaze on a different culture in order to scrutinize an aspect of Asia which was untouched by the colonial rule.

A close reading of the text reveals the class consciousness, and it raises the issue of the intersection of class and gender thereby providing a greater understanding of the complexities embedded in the travel account. At the beginning of the narrative, Hariprabha mentions that Takeda bought tickets for their onward journey for one hundred and ninety rupees and an extra amount of forty-one rupees for food. The ship they had chosen was a cargo ship, which was cheaper, and they got a room which was "about ten and a half feet long, six feet wide, and seven and a half feet in height" (52). The focus on the physical details of the journey is not surprising due to the difficulties involved while travelling, especially for women who had just started venturing out. Moreover, it was this space that "functioned as the boundary separating the homeland from the foreign destination" (Das Gupta, "Looking East" 119). Hariprabha was aware of their financial and physical limitations, which she elucidated in her account, yet her determination helped her in moving forward:

> *Very little money, some physical weakness, oncoming winter, objections from relatives – many people scared us. But in spite of all these impediments, and by the will of the almighty who undid such difficulties, everything was ready. (47)*

It can be deduced that the couple did not travel with much affluence, denoting that they belonged to the upcoming "middle-class." This also highlights that Hariprabha's journey was not a leisurely activity undertaken by her. Usually, women writers started documenting the details of their journey from the preparations at home as this generation of women were the first in their respective families to undertake travel. The social norms which restricted the mobility of women belonging to "respectable" families are evident when Hariprabha visits the market in Calcutta before embarking on her journey. This is a novel experience for her as Bengali women during those times were not used to going to public spaces unaccompanied, and therefore, she remarks: "For the first time, I walked into the bazaar like a memsahib" (50). This draws a stark comparison and highlights the contrast between the white-skinned memsahib and the colonized Bengali woman, who at the time had not yet ventured out of the seclusion of the antahpur (private space). Venturing out for the first time, the experience of travel plays an enabling role in shaping her identity as she is beyond the strictures of society and allegorically journeying to uncover herself.

The first journey to Japan undertaken by Hariprabha meandered through places like Rangoon, Penang, Singapore, Hong Kong and, finally, reached Japan. Hariprabha expressed herself: "I am very happy today because I have reached Japan … I was very happy to see Japan." (67-68) The sense of fulfilment that she experiences while stepping on the Japanese land hints at the primary motivation to undertake this intracontinental journey, which was the intense desire to see the motherland of her husband and the acceptance of her husband's culture. However, in the process, she never forgoes her own cultural identity, therefore, assimilating both distinctive cultures. The yearning to undertake this journey seems unusual for her in times when the instances of voluntary travel by women were limited.

In contrast to the majority of other travelogues written during this period, there is no cultural conflict but rather a voluntary internalization of the new culture in her account. Hariprabha displays her awareness of the customs of Japan as she explicates that she "knelt down and then squatted with my legs behind me" (74) and "bowing their heads three to four times for every question and answer" (75). Her only regret during her first visit was that she did not know the Japanese language and had to pay "obeisance to them in silence" (75). The mutual respect and admiration that Hariprabha and the people she encountered in Japan had for the cultural legacy of both countries is evident when she writes:

> *Hearing of our arrival, many people came to see us and hear about India. They wanted to know about the food, dress, customs, manners and religion of our country, and about my relatives. Takeda-san gave them a brief history of Lord Buddha, about other great Indian personalities, about the Indian practice of sati and told them many other stories. (Takeda 76)*

Her hybrid identity, formed through the assimilation of cultures and shaped by the experiences at home and in Japan, hints at the in-between space that she inhabits. She is able to go beyond the constraints of cultural identity through a metaphorical dissolution of the geographical boundary which enables transnational transactions. In case of Hariprabha, the journey was not an instance of dislocation but rather a way to find her home and herself in the process. Hariprabha's subjective location in the zone of cultural exchange involves a clash of different cultures, but it results in reconciliation. Her viewpoint reflects that she is acknowledging and embracing the hybrid identity

through her position and navigating through the process of converging the apparently dissimilar culture.

The focus of Hariprabha's gaze is domestic life during her first visit as she comments on the status of women, their attire and hairstyles, customs of the Japanese people, their houses, eating habits, and so on, but her understanding of Japanese culture is different from that of the women travelers who experience a new culture only from the point of view of an "outsider." However, there is no constructing binarism as the women travelers to the West did while highlighting the Orient-Occident demarcation. This is due to the fact that Hariprabha is not viewing the new culture in terms of contradiction but as an extension of her identity. This has also been the approach of other women who went to Japan and praised the system of education and the status that women enjoyed. For instance, Saroj Nalini Dutt observed:

> *One is overwhelmed by their courteousness. So many ladies came and stood near me, but my being a foreigner or wearing alien clothes did not attract any untoward comments or unhealthy curiosity. In women of our country, this is a bad habit. I witnessed several assets in the Japanese today that should be emulated by us. (qtd. in Gupta 228)*

Gradually Hariprabha's perception evolves as she visits Japan for the second time and mentions the political scenarios, the effects of the Second World War, her meeting with leaders like Netaji and Rashbehari Bose as well as her involvement as a broadcaster in Bengali during the Indian freedom struggle. The second memoir has entries from the years 1941-1947, which covered a significant period when Japan was embroiled in the Second World War. The Japanese government recalled Japanese nationals from all over the world, and the couple reached Kobe on November 22, 1941 and stayed for seven years. As a dutiful wife, she accompanied her husband when he wanted to return to his country. This account is starkly opposite to the first one, which mostly consists of happy reminiscences of her journey. She states:

> *I first went to Japan as a bride in the year 1912, five years after my marriage. There I got all the love and care of my in-laws and was very happy surrounded by lots of relatives... All my memories have been washed away in flood. I just fiddle with a few sorrowful incidents that I remember. The present Japan only reminds me of my pleasant recollections once in a while. (Takeda 116-17)*

The account gains historical importance as she records the devastations of the war. The zealous woman endured such turbulent times while taking care of her ill husband. Her memoirs provide an indication of her nationalist tendencies (Das Gupta, "Marriage and Migration" 257) as the patriotic desire to do something for her country prompted her to take up the job of a reader of Bengali news broadcast from Tokyo Radio on behalf of the Azad Hind Fauj led by Netaji. She wrote:

> *The railway lines were being gradually destroyed and the factory that produced records was also damaged. There were several raids each night … There was an air-raid siren one day while I was in the radio office. I took refuge in the underground shelter, because upstairs we would have to run around in the dense smoke. Under such conditions, we were forced to resign our jobs and go back to our village. (Takeda 146-47)*

The significant shift in focus of the second narrative is the mention of the political scenario. The experiences she narrates during the second phase of her life in Japan palpably reveal that she would wear a helmet to protect herself in case of air raids, carry all her important possessions with her in a secret pocket in the petticoat, and travel in the middle of the night to reach the temporary radio station. Historically, this account is of utmost importance as it records a very important phase of India's struggle for independence and also the deep-rooted socio-historical connections between Bengal and Japan, as she mentions the people she met and alliances that were forged. The next section analyzes her observations and comparisons regarding social reforms and the position of women in Japan and unravels various changes happening in the socio-political scenario.

5. Transnational Encounters, Position of Women, and Social Reforms

Gooptu traces one of the earliest accounts by a Bengali man, "Rise of Japan" (1906) by Tarakhnath Mukherjee in Navyabharat, which had a comparative section on Bengali and Japanese women. He remarked that the nature of married Japanese women was "bound to raise warmth and admiration for the woman in the Bengali heart" (Gooptu, Knowing Asia 55) as they worked hard the whole day to keep their home beautiful and look after the welfare of their husband and in-laws. This revealed a lack of understanding of various women-centric issues and their position in society.

This patriarchal disposition is in contrast with the writings by women who focused on their selves, on women's role and position in society, and criticized the existing conditions by pointing out the progressive outlook that they personally witnessed in Japan. The system of education, syllabus, professional and vocational education given to women, and so on, has been a topic that women travelers to Europe as well as Asian countries deliberated upon as they believed that it is through education that the condition of women can be uplifted.

Hariprabha astutely documents the society that she observed in Japan through a multicultural lens in her travelogue and, apart from that, the third section of the book contains two essays penned by her. They specifically focus on the ways of child rearing and the issue of women's education. From the beginning of her sojourn, she noted the importance that the Japanese women gave to the idea of family and traditions along with education. She conveyed her interpretation of the institution of marriage, religious practices, and various habits as she perceived them. This reflects her awareness of the condition of women at home and the comparative way in which she juxtaposes it with the Japanese ways reveals her critical mindset aimed at reformation. She marveled at the system of education for women in Japan, as she commented on the comprehensive curriculum for the young girls:

> *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. (Takeda 83)*

In a similar strain, Abala Bose in the article published in Bamabodhini Patrika and titled "Women's Education in Japan and Our Duty" (1915) draws upon the Japanese experience of women's education to state that it was not always beneficial to formulate the syllabus based on the Western model. Further, she adds that when "Japan modernised itself, there was a slavish imitation of western modernity. But to prevent this from becoming widespread, a Japanese style of education for women was proposed" (qtd. in Gooptu, Knowing Asia 61). The travelers actively engaged with the culture and society to provide insights and scope for improvement at home. This diverse and all-encompassing curriculum interested Hariprabha as movements related to women's education were gaining momentum in Bengal during this time though still facing resistance due to

superstitions attached to educated women. Further, she acknowledged the effectiveness of teaching techniques adopted in Japan, thereby presenting the readers with a newer perspective on the system from a female point of view. This presented a new standpoint amidst the debates surrounding the Woman Question in Bengal (P. Chatterjee). Some of the progressive families of Bengal, especially the Brahmo families, were attempting to bring about changes through education in the status of women, and Hariprabha's Brahmo upbringing played a crucial role in her positive outlook toward the progressive educational system. She recognized education as an important tool for the liberation of women resulting in their elevated status in the household. Her keen interest in these issues is echoed as she remarks:

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 … Outside, the children were engaged in gardening. I saw the girls of higher classes discussing chemistry and experimenting with different kinds of glass pipes. All of them were trained in manners – to be respectful towards elders, to bow to their parents every morning, and so on. (Takeda 84)

Further, there is a constant critical juxtaposition of the Bengali traditions and Japanese culture when she evaluates what she has observed. This is evident when she says that women "do not consider cooking and eating to be their only work, as women do in our country" (Takeda 104). She was impressed by the autonomy and active participation of the Japanese women in different spheres of life. Here, she stresses the difference in their social position as Bengali women are still restricted to andarmahal or zenana, a secluded private space, while on the other hand she sees the women of Japan actively engaging in outdoor activities. This stark contrast is highlighted as she observes:

In many places, women work with their husbands in the agricultural fields. Women work everywhere – in the markets, shops, stations, and post offices. In places of recreation where there are a lot of people, women act as supervisors … They are not restricted indoors but they work together with men, move around freely and do not have any restrictions or reservations. (Takeda 100)

In this context, Saroj Nalini Dutts's travelogue Japane Banganari (1928) is also replete with instances of Japanese women in the public domain:

> *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. (qtd. in Gupta 228)*

Mother occupied a very important position in the Japanese household as she imparted education to the child before the age of eight, which was aimed at making children self-disciplined and responsible citizens. This was one of the reasons why women's education was encouraged in Japan. While noticing the progressive aspect of the Japanese culture, Hariprabha is also critical of certain aspects as she mentions:

> *In this country, the wife has to be subservient to her husband. She suffers silently all the tortures inflicted upon her by a corrupt and debauched husband and abides by all his dictates. Here, husbands treat their wives as servants, but the wife respects her husband as a superior being. (Takeda 171)*

Certain social practices and the relationship between a husband and wife that Hariprabha describes provide a glimpse into the patriarchal predispositions of the society in which the status of the wife was considered inferior in rank, much like in the Bengali society of the time. Although Japanese society displays a progressive outlook, she disapproves of the patriarchal undertones of the social system. The idea of divorce exists as she explains that a husband and wife can separate and are free to marry again although the wife will go on "trying her luck with patience" (Takeda 173). Therefore, she successfully captures the contradictions inherent in the prevalent social norms and gender dynamics. Hariprabha efficaciously presents to the Bengali readers a comprehensive picture of contemporary Japanese society, stressing the aspects in which she feels Japan ahead in terms of development, and also criticizing the patriarchal practices that she has observed during her expeditions.

6. Conclusion

Hariprabha's travelogue is an important text as it is written from a multicultural perspective of a Bengali woman. The transnational spirit encapsulated in the account deserves attention as it explores the cultural interaction and assimilation of two distinct cultures in the figure of Hariprabha Takeda. Although unusual and progressive for her times, she undertakes travel across seas, but her self-image is that of a dutiful wife. She writes from the standpoint of a person who is involved with the Other culture through matrimony and blurs the distinction between cultures. The appreciation and internalization of the Japanese culture makes her receptive to the nuances of the foreign culture, thereby enabling the construction of an identity which transcends the strict boundaries of nation and culture. Along with the description of the physical journey, contemporary issues such as the condition of women, education, and social reforms find articulation through her keen observations. She stresses the modern and advanced approach of the Japanese people and presents the positive attributes to the readers in a factual manner while highlighting the regressive practices too. This paper has offered insights into the ideas of Pan-Asianism, which gained momentum during the early twentieth century, and added a new dimension to it by exploring the personal account of a woman traveler and how it embodied the transnational spirit. Further explorations of narratives by women travelers to various other Asian nations could expand the scope of research in gender and cultural studies from the transnational perspective.

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[1] Follower of Brahmoism, a reformist and monotheistic movement which was an offshoot of Bengal Renaissance.