

Mirroring the Self in the Light of the ‘Other’: Early 20th Century Travelogues on Japan

Pratyay Banerjee¹

Travel literature as a genre delineating the culture of ‘other’, provides us a scope for studying cross-cultural reception. Since late 19th century, many Indians have paid visits to the ‘Land of the Rising Sun’, some of them have penned down their experiences in the form of letters, diaries and travelogues. Among travel writings on Japan written during the first part of the last century, the first name that should crop up in our mind would be Tagore’s *Japan Jatri*. However there had been many others also; we can mention the names of three people who had authored travelogues on Japan prior to Tagore in the last century. They are Satish Chandra Bandyopadhyay, Manmothanath Ghosh and Hariprova Takeda and the travel writings written by them are *Japan, Japan Probash and Bongo Mohilar Japan Jatra* respectively.

The travel writer, notes Casey Blanton, ‘introducing us to the other’, dramatize an engagement between the self and the world. (1) (11) In the three travel writings mentioned above, also in other travelogues on Japan, one recurrent motif that we come across is how cultural exposure to another land acts as a tool to redefine and reassess our homeland and the socio-cultural phenomena which are an intrinsic part of our homeland. Wherever the traveller goes or whatever he views or experiences, the idea of ‘home’ is never oblivious in his mind. What we come across is testing and assessing one’s own culture, religion society, and political system in the light of new experiences that he gathers in a distant land. In this short paper the writer proposes to examine how Indian travellers, who had visited Japan in the early 20th century, had tried to depict Japanese life and culture with reference to their own position, i.e. an ideological position which he had derived from his past and which serves as a bedrock for the cross-cultural reception he underwent during travelling .

It must be noted that, thetravellers who reached Japan during this period were certainly not of homogeneous type, their tenure of stay as well as exposure to Japanese life and culture varied from each other. For instance, Manmathanath Ghosh, the author of the text ‘*Japan Probash*’ went to Japan and during his stay acquired industrial training. His voyage began on 1st April, 1906, in Japan he first arrived at Tokyo from where he went to Kobe and Osaka. There the writer

¹ Pratyay Banerjee is a PhD scholar in the Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University.

took industrial training in celluloid and in button making; Ghosh's text includes a prodigy of Japanese vocabulary, even common conversational Japanese expressions, which is a unique feature of the book. While working as an apprentice at a button-making factory in Kobe, he had to take part in the funeral of his employer's daughter. The poise with which the employer and his wife faced their daughter's death reminded him how Indians become restless and scream on the occasion of their loved one's demise. Ghosh's observation is worth remembering:

In our country whenever there is an incident of demise in the family, all the members start wailing loudly, some think that this helps in purging the intensity of bereavement; there might be truth in it, however, such customs should not be encouraged. (Ghosh49)

It is interesting to note that, in the above passage we get a constant reference of India that comes in the mind of the writer. The narrator's own past, his lived experiences in his homeland serves as a yardstick against which all experiences regarding the 'other' are to be judged.

This is also in particular in all the other three travelogues on Japan, as well as, in other writings containing ingredients of travel writings, though differing in form as letters written by Mukul De from Japan, or prose writings as M. Visvesvaraya's book, *Reconstructing India and others*. The diversity in form within the genre of travelogue is no less an attractive issue.

Japan, which remained cut off from the rest of the world, underwent rapid modernization in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Following the end of the Tokugawa Period in 1867 and the beginning of a new era, known as the Meiji Period, the new government took rapid reforms to bridge up the country's difference with the West. This included administrative reforms, educational reforms after the French and German education system, rapid armament in order to meet the challenge of western aggression and many others. A close study of travel accounts by Indian travellers in Japan can reveal certain aspects. Firstly we come across picture of the development of a society, which is systematic, disciplined and more like the West. In all the three travelogues mentioned above, we come across the depiction of a society in which the administration is extremely cooperative and is far removed from that of colonial India.

On every crossing of the city, notes Ghosh in his travelogue *Japan Probash*, there remains a traffic assistance booth, it is gifted with a map of the vicinity and an armed police officer remains

in charge of the station; it provides immense help to foreigners, the writer while recollecting how he had received assistance there made a remark, worth noting here –

It was impossible for me to think that a police officer would willingly leave his station in order to accompany me for half a mile. I felt that it would take time to materialize such an administration in Colonial India. (42)

This picture of a society that is disciplined, organised and developed like the West, we also get in other travelogues too. Suresh Chandra Bandhyopadhyay , another traveler reached Nagasaki on 1st January ,1906. The first thing that drew his attention on his maiden visit to Japan’s capital, Tokyo, is the complete absence of destitutes on streets . A passage from his travelogue entitled as, *Japan* may be referred to in this context-

One cannot spot beggars on the streets with tattered clothes and emaciated looks.....
Those who are able bodied work to ensure their living..... Japanese people consider begging to be humiliating and deplorable. (37)

A contrasting picture with which the writer had been used to in his motherland has led to regret that ‘Ours is the country of beggars’.

The year 1868 has been regarded by historians as a landmark in the history of modern Japan. It was in this year that Japan underwent a drastic change that ended the Shogunate regime that had been continuing for the previous two centuries and the emperor took the control of the state. The new era named after the emperor is known as the Meiji period and this historical event known as the Meiji restoration also restored Japan’s relation with the rest of the world as Japan had been cut off from all contact with Europe and other parts of the globe since the Edo period (17th century). The beneficiaries of this historical incident were that it led to the establishment of a highly centralised government; feudalism in Japan came to an end and rapid administrative and social changes took place to ensure capitalistic development and this transformation of a society from a feudal to a capitalistic one within a period of on about fifty years. For instance, the new government ordered all feudal lords to hand over their landed properties to the emperor. Thus, a kind of a restructuring of Japanese society had been done in the 1870s.

However, it would be wrong to suppose that the shift of the society from a complete feudal state to a capitalist one had been secured. On the other hand, the travelogues gives us an interesting picture of a society in transition; a society that had been feudal and patriarchal is trying to get along with borrowed world views from the West ; this juxtaposition of the opposed elements are at time jarring and discordant . The fact is that, the perpetuation of a residual culture was quite visible before the foreigner even. This we note if we try to focus on the condition of women in Japanese societies, as portrayed by the travel writers and it bears resemblance with the condition of women in India during that time and even now.

Hariprova Tekedaleft for Japan accompanied by her husband Women Takedain 1912. While staying at Mr. Takeda's ancestral home in the countryside she got the opportunity to see the condition of women in the rural areas of Japan, so very expressed in her travelogue '*Bongo Mahilar Japan Jatra* and also in another essay entitled as, *Japane Santan Palon ONari Sikha*.

According to Hariprova, the condition of Japanese women was far better if compared to that of Indian women, at that time. Universal education for every girl –child had been ensured, women could assist their husbands in their agricultural activities in rural areas. Yet the writer has rightly pointed out that it would be wrong to suppose that gender discrimination and male domination had ceased to exist. Japanese women, Takeda points out, has to act according to his husband's decisions-

Even if the husband is immoral and corrupt , the Japanese wife silently bears with the humiliation and never protests. Husbands, in this country consider wives to be slaves yet, their wives treat them as their masters .(60)

An equally vivid depiction of gender discrepancy in Japanese society of the early 20th century, we find in Suresh ChandraBandyopadhyay's travelogue-Japan . Their also the writer's memory of his own motherland constitutes the backbone of his narrative .

Japan had never been under foreign rule, notes the writer, yet, men and women in Japan, as viewed by the writer, hardly enjoyed equal status in society . This gender discrepancy prevailed among allclasses.InSuresh Chandra Bandyopadhyay's travelogue,'Japan', we come across a description of the convoy of Japanese emperor and empress which may be referred to in this context-

The Japanese emperor and empress never board the same car. Far behind the convoy of the emperor the empress travels by a covered car. (104)

We have been discussing the commonalities among the travelogues in depicting Japan and with reference to the Indian scenario that existed then. The difference that exists in portraying Japanese customs by these travel writers is no less interesting. The travellers coming from India, that was then a part of the British Empire have tried to depict Japanese customs, rituals, festivals, lifestyle, that they witnessed in Japan according to their 'structure of feeling', where they differ needs mentioning. To hammer home this point it would be worth noticing how Japanese communal bathing system has been portrayed by the travellers. *Sentou* or Japanese Public Bath is a cultural practice that has survived through ages, according to an entry in the website, Japan-101.com, the origin of Japanese *Sentou* could be traced to the Buddhist temples in India, around 8th century AD, it was introduced in the Nara prefecture in Japan. At the end of the Edo period (1603-1867), the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1867) took initiative to prohibit the practice of mixed bathing. The compulsion came from outside, when Commodore Perry visited Japan in 1853 and 1854 he questioned the morality of this practice of mixed bathing. Subsequently, separate bathing houses for both the sexes were created at the end of Tokugawa period. It is interesting to note that in some travelogues as in Monmoth Nath Ghosh's *Japan Pobash*, *Sentou* has been described according to European standard. Monmoth Nath Ghosh's depiction of this practice is caustic and shows influence of western hegemony:

The Japanese bathing system which has survived till now should be criticized. (66)

In contrast to this Tagore's appreciation of Japanese culture turns out to be much taller in stature. This is evident if we note the depiction of the same custom in *Japan Jatri*—

In Japan the custom of communal bathing exists where men and women dip in the same bathing house in front of each other. That this custom is free from any stigma can be proved easily. Even close relatives do not find any inhibition in having a bath publicly. Nowadays this custom is gradually becoming extinct due to impure influences from outside. However, in rural areas this practice is still in vogue. (80)

The obvious question that needs asking is what accounts for the lack of preparedness to assess other culture in the preceding text and the presence of it in Tagore's *Japan Jatri*.

As early noted, this we should once again attribute to their different value structures, which had accounted for difference in perception of a same cultural practice. It must be noted that the travellers who visited Japan during this period were not of a homogeneous type. The memory of their homeland always played a pertinent role in generating certain responses in a foreign land; also travellers coming of different backgrounds have generated different reactions towards Japanese life and culture.

Note

1. All quotations included in this article have been translated from Bengali by the writer.

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