

## Women of Japan

Hariprabha Takeda Originally published in *Bharatbarsha*, (Phalgun, 1356) (1949)

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*Hariprabha Mullick (Takeda) (1890—1972) was born in Dhaka. She was probably the first Bengali lady to have married a Japanese man. Her husband, Uemon Takeda, had come to Dhaka as a migrant labour in a soap factory. The account of her visit to Japan, **Bangamohilar Japan Jatra** (A Bengali Lady's Journey to Japan) (1915) was the first account of a Bengali lady's visit to Japan, though it is common knowledge that Rabindranath Thakur (1861-1941) was the first to travel to Japan from Bengal in 1915. A series of letters published as **Japan Jatri** (Traveller to Japan) in 1919 was the first travel account of Japan by a Bengali. Hariprabha did not travel to Japan once; the Takedas made a second trip in 1924, and a third in 1941, on the eve of the Second World War. When Hariprabha reached Japan in 1941, Rashbehari Bose and Subhash Chandra Bose were present in Japan. She met them and at the request of Bose acted as a war correspondent on behalf of the Azad Hind Fauz.*

*Hariprabha's travelogue is her most significant piece of writing, where she gives an insider's account of being a member of a Japanese household. Hariprabha's sojourn to Japan was in quest of her sasurbari or in-law's family and the passion with which she pens the account bears testimony to this fact. An educated Brahmo, Hariprabha's selfimage was that of a dutiful Bengali wife and her heart pined to meet her in-laws' and find their blessings. The Takedas set sail for Japan six years after their marriage. Hariprabha, therefore, became an insider to the Japanese household by marriage. However, the comparative 'self' and 'other' in Bengali and Japanese cultures naturally emanated in her writings. This strain is reflected in the piece translated here from **Japan er Nari** published in *Bharatbarsha* in 1949, a Bengali periodical after her return from Japan.*

In most places in Japan the *ghatak*<sup>2</sup> act as match makers for fixing a marriage alliance. The marriage alliances consented to, by the boys and girls, are also established by the *ghatak* and the *ghatki*<sup>3</sup>. It is uncommon to find girls getting married before the age of twenty. There is no social restriction on girls and boys mixing freely, yet their dependence on their parents and the *ghatak* is common. When the marriage alliances are fixed, after the formal betrothal ceremony, the girl and boy can become intimate with each other. Before marriage the brides ties the maiden knot and enjoys meals with her relatives and indulge in merry making. Women of Japan do not sport long hair nowadays. The length of their hair is down to their neck; they perm their hair with the help of electric gadgets— they tie their hair imitating western fashion. For the wedding, the neck-length black hair is further dyed black. Then they use a wig to lengthen their hair and tie a big Japanese knot and decorate it with flowers and

pins and wind it with a wide piece of cloth, sometimes with lace. They paint their face white, lips red and cheeks pink, and apply kohl on their eyes looking like a picture on a *pata*<sup>4</sup>. This is how the brides are dressed for their weddings. The dark-coloured *kimono*<sup>5</sup> usually touch the ground and cover the feet. The wide lace decorated with gold and silver work is worn on the waist and tied into a huge knot at the back. The beautifully dressed bride accompanied by the *ghatak-ghatki* and the chief man amongst her people (in the wedding) walks with slow steps and downcast eyes, and following the instructions of the dresser, proceeds to the in-laws' house. When the bride arrives at her in-laws' place, the neighbours express their delight and distribute biscuits and oranges which the children eat with great enjoyment. After a short prayer to the household god, the bride is seated along with the groom on the best seat and enjoys *sake*<sup>6</sup> (Japanese wine) along with the relatives. The bride carries her clothes, furnitures and usables from her natal home. Whatever she brings from there is her own; no gifts are given to the son-in-law.

Girls from poor households help their parents with their own earnings in preparing for the marriage. They start earning as soon as they finish their education.

In the marital home the daughter-in-law has to obey her in-laws. If the daughter-in-law flouts the norms, rebuke and insults from the mother-in-law and sister-in-law are common in this country just as they are in ours. The husband does not hesitate to leave his wife if she is not liked by his parents. Divorce is common here. After divorce the wife is free to leave the marital home with all her belongings. Both men and women can remarry.

The eldest son of a family generally lives with his parents after marriage; in his absence, one of the other sons can step in and take on this role. He looks after the parents and carries out his duties towards his younger siblings. The other children, however, can live separately. The father helps with all the necessary means. The daughter after marriage lives in the marital home. Where a couple does not have a son, the son-in-law becomes the *de facto* son and house husband. The man in such a case does away with his own surname and uses that of his wife's.

In this country, the wife is expected to be dedicated to her husband. The wife has to tolerate any kind of torture meted out to her by her husband silently. She cannot say anything even if he is corrupt and immoral. Husbands look upon their wives as slaves here while the husband is treated like a lord. The chaste and dedicated wife always awaits a change in the character of the husband and remains ever devoted to him. Women always behave with humility towards their husbands and try to serve them. The women take care of the entire household- rearing children, purchasing and carrying back articles for household use etc. Men never help with such domestic chores. When the husband leaves home for work, the wife attends to him and helps him dress; she kneels down and wishes him, 'go and accomplish your work and come back'. When the children leave the house, they usually leave saying, 'we are going out.' The mother says in reply, 'go and come back safely.'

When the husband and the wife travel together with their children, the younger child is carried on the shoulder of the mother; she holds the hands of the elder child and carries a

small bundle or baggage. The husband boards a tram with his office bag and occupies a seat while the wife remains standing- this is a common scene in Japan. The men folk do not hesitate to do this. Men here do not vacate their seats for women except when it comes to the elderly, or to sick women and women carrying exceptionally heavy loads.

A public show of private affection or expressing one's love for one's wife or showing respect in any form is not a characteristic of men of this country. The wife is the mistress of the household and a companion who helps her husband in his work. The entire responsibility of maintaining the household lies on the wife. The responsibility of educating the children also rests on her. The men are engaged in protecting the country. It is the foremost duty of the mother to train the child in such a manner so that he or she can become an able citizen - guarding the country and engaging in earning an income. The mother will not only train the child in these aspects but would also earn a living if required.

A husband dedicated to his wife cannot display his private affection in public. It is considered an insult. The wife usually does not mind the harsh behaviour of the husband as she is accustomed to the practices of the country. A quarrel between a husband and a wife may lead to their separation and both can remarry. An intelligent wife, however, takes in her stride every insult and carries on her joust with fortune. Japanese women are introverts and tolerant. They do not express their sorrow and pain easily - they carry on sporting a melancholy smile. They smile when they are happy or sad, during troubled times or even when they are angry. They conceal their many sorrows with a smile.

Men of this country usually have *mekafe*, a mistress and do not think it to be a bad habit. The *geisha* dancers of this country are highly educated and cultured. The intelligent rich people do not come to them for personal enjoyment only, they spend time also to solve complex questions and borrow ideas from them. On festive occasions, the *geisha*<sup>1</sup> entertain people with their song and dance presentations. The *mekafe geisha* attract men's attention with seductive looks. The wife must endure the husband following those moves with pitiable downcast eyes and a melancholy smile. The *mekafe geisha* can marry and get back to mainstream social life; there are no restrictions here.

The patriotism of Japanese people is very well known- they think that dedicating their life for their country is a glorious deed. They train their children accordingly. The sons are trained to become martyrs for their country and the daughters are trained to be befitting wives and mothers. This is their aim and this is how their system is constituted. When the men journey towards martyrdom; the mothers, sisters and wives do not get anxious or shed tears. The old mother says that the son of the soil is going to work for the country- her role was only to rear him. The wife asks the husband to go to work, taking it as her duty to look after her husband's children and maintain her husband's prestige.

Buddhism is popular in Japan. In villages, the huge Buddhist *theras* have educated Buddhist monks conducting the prayers. They live next to these temples. The villagers gather in the huge, clean, beautiful temple courtyards to offer prayers. Every house has Buddha as the

household god. Everyone here offers him prayers with great dedication.

In Japan the spirits of the brave martyrs are worshipped. This worship is done for the welfare of the country. The place of worship of these brave spirits is called *Omiya*. In every village, in every city, on the seashore, by the river, in forests and hilly areas, below waterfalls and streams and in open courtyards are these *Omiyas*. The formless gods are worshipped here by the Japanese people for the welfare of the nation and their relatives. It is the duty of the women of the village to clean and maintain these places of worship.

### Notes

1. Madhurima Mukhopadhyay is Project Fellow at the School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University.
2. In Japan a *nakodo* serves the role of a go-between families in the *miai* process which is the Japanese traditional custom in which individuals who have reached the marriageable age are introduced to each other to consider the possibility of marriage. They are similar to the *ghatak* of Bengal and Hariprabha mentions this presence of an intermediary in marriage to be similar in Bengal and Japan. Traditionally the *nakodo* is a family member or friend who is in touch with the community and who knows many eligible candidates that might match the inquiring candidate's needs. The practice of *miai* (match-making) emerged in 16th century Japan among the Samurai class to form and protect strong military alliances among warlords to ensure mutual support. Later, during the Tokugawa Period (1603-1868) the practice of *miai* spread to other urban classes trying to emulate Samurai customs. After the Pacific War, the trend was to abandon this restrictive arranged-marriage system, in favor of more Western ideals of love marriages. In colonial Bengal, with the rise of the *bhadralok*, the *ghatak* cult slowly lost its popularity. Initially the *ghataks* functioned within the community as the main agent for establishing marriage alliances. Their main function was selection of appropriate matches as they functioned as genealogists, who determined caste ranks and catalogued the position of people and families within the caste hierarchy. It was upto them to maintain caste 'purity'. Larger formal institutions replaced free agents in marriage negotiations and this suited the changing nature of Calcutta as it grew in size and in social composition.
3. The female counterpart of a *ghatak* is referred to as *ghatki* in Bangla.
4. A painting on cloth or canvas.
5. *Kimono* is a traditional Japanese garment worn by men, women and children. The word literally means *ki* (wear) *mono* (thing) 'a thing to wear'.
6. *Sake* is a rice-based alcoholic beverage of Japanese origin. It is sometimes spelled *sake* to show the pronunciation more clearly. This beverage is called 'sake' in English, but in Japanese, sake or o-sake refers to alcoholic drinks in general. The Japanese term for this specific beverage is *Nihonshu* meaning 'Japanese alcohol'.
7. *Geisha* are traditional Japanese entertainers whose skill includes performing various

Japanese arts such as classical music, dance and games. The word literally means *gei* (art) and *sha* (person or doer).