



The Land of the Rising Sun in the Eyes of P. C. Mozoomdar

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Abstract: A watershed moment in Japanese history occurred in 1868. After nearly 230 years of near-complete isolation, Japan reopened its doors to the rest of the world in 1868, the year of the Meiji Restoration. Other countries were eager to establish ties with the newly opened country, and India was no exception. Regarding the relations between Japan and undivided Bengal in pre-Independence India, the contributions and views of Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, Rasbehari Bose, and Hariprabha Takeda are frequently studied, and Swami Vivekananda is regarded to have been the first Bengali to visit Japan. However, ten years before Swami Vivekananda's visit, another Bengali religious preacher by the name of Protap Chunder Mozoomdar, or P. C. Mozoomdar visited Japan in 1883. In 1884, he released *Sketches of a Tour Round the World*, a record of his globe-trotting journey that included an account of his twelve-day stay in Japan. This article will examine P. C. Mozoomdar's text and examine his image of Japan as a praise-worthy yet turbulent land.

Key Words: Travel writing, Japan, Bengal, Meiji era, image.

A lot of people from Bengal travelled to Japan after Meiji Restoration in 1868 which ushered in the Meiji era with which Japan opened its doors to the 'world' after more than two hundred years of self-imposed isolation during the era in Japanese history which is known as the Edo Period (1603-1868). These travels happened in the early twentieth century with a few exceptions that dated back to the late nineteenth century. A number of eminent public figures from Bengal were among those who visited Japan, such as Narendranath Dutta, also known as Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, and Jagadishchandra Bose. Swami Vivekananda is usually accepted in the academia as the first person from Bengal to visit Japan in the nineteenth century. He stayed for a few days at Yokohama in 1893 on his way to Chicago to deliver his address for the Parliament of World Religions. While recounting his brief stay and impression of Japan in a letter, he had nothing but praises for the country. However, exactly ten years before Swami Vivekananda, another man from Bengal, named Protap Chandra Mozoomdar travelled to Japan and experienced the country directly. This paper will seek to demonstrate how he saw a country that has been newly revealed to the eyes of the world and also discuss why Japan became an important symbol to the Bengali readership in the very first few decades of the twentieth century.

Protap Chandra Mozoomdar or P. C. Mozoomdar (1840-1905) arrived in Japan on December 12, 1883 and stayed until December 21, which was a total of 10 days. P. C. Mozoomdar was a key-figure of the Brahmo Samaj¹, and toured to many countries all over the world to deliver the message of Brahmoism through lectures. He was a distant

¹ Led by Ram Mohun Roy and later pushed forward and bolstered as a religion by Debendranath Tagore of the illustrious Tagore family of Jorasanko, Brahmoism was a monotheistic faith that originally followed the doctrines of the Upanishad. This faith emerged as a reaction to the corruptions in Hindu practices in the nineteenth century. Brahmoism as a way of life and as a movement was contemporary to other crucial social reforms in Bengal such as the remarriage of widows through the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856, and the establishment of girls' schools all across Bengal.

relative of Keshub Chandra Sen and joined Brahmo Samaj in 1858 under the latter's influence. It was P. C. Mozoomdar's book *The Oriental Christ* (1883) which brought him fame and helped him enter a dialogue with the renowned Indologist Max Muller. He was also a participant in the famous Parliament of World Religions in 1893 where he represented the Brahmo school of thought. His wide-spread travels included a number of countries like England, Germany, Japan, China, Singapore as well as the United States of America and he was a globetrotter in his own right. His travel writing, comprising of the accounts of his travels to different countries was published in 1884 under the title of *Sketches of a Tour Round the World*, from the publishing house of S.K. Lahiri. The text consists of chapters that talk about his travels, the important figures he met (such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Max Muller), and the work he did while travelling. This work mostly consisted of his lectures that he delivered in England², Scotland, Ireland, the United States of America³, as well as in Tokyo of Japan. The topics of these lectures varied from religion in India, Indian races, Yoga, Bhakti, and Aryan monotheism to the history of Brahmoism in India, sin, salvation, and also opium traffic and British rule in India. One of the earliest if not *the* earliest first-hand accounts of Japan by a Bengali can be found in this text. Six chapters are dedicated for his sojourn in a Japan which was only fifteen years into the Meiji era (1868-1912) and was striving towards a stable foothold in the world-politics. At that time, even the Meiji Constitution or the Constitution of the Empire of Japan (established in 1889) had not yet taken shape. The six chapters are titled as

'Through the Pacific to Japan'

'Who are the Japanese'

'The Religion of Japan'

'Japan Modernised'

'Jeddo or Tokio'

and 'Japanese Wisdom'.

While most of the chapters in the book are based on his personal experiences regarding communities and individuals, all the topics regarding Japan that are covered in his six chapters are more fact-oriented and introductory rather than relying heavily on his personal perception. He begins the chapter titled 'Through the Pacific to Japan' by describing the distance between San Francisco and Japan, which is 5200 miles. Even when he catches only a glimpse of Dai Nippon, he already feels that he is nearing his long lost home as he nears "the sacred continent of Asia" (Mozoomdar, 160). He describes disembarking the ship in the bitter cold weather of December. After that his description of jinrickshaws, to the discussion of the Japanese as a race, their religion, the 'modernisation' of Japan with its contact with the 'west' are intermingled in an approach that is both information-based as well consisting of his own observations. For example, he states in the chapter titled 'The Religion of Japan' that the Japanese have developed an inclination for beef which is consumed by the Europeans, but also points out that he himself had not seen a single butcher's shop while wandering in Yokohama or Tokyo. The chapter 'Japanese Wisdom' is a very interesting chapter where P. C. Mozoomdar lists several Japanese proverbs. Here, he refers to the English source text that he had used to inform his readers about Japan by saying "The Wisdom of Japan is concentrated in fine proverbs which Mr. Griffiths has translated"

² Particularly in London and Manchester

³ In places like Boston, Washington, Brooklyn, San Fransisco, and Oakland

(Mozoomdar, 191). This Mr. Griffiths who he refers to is William Elliot Griffis (1843-1928) an American educationalist who was invited to Japan in 1870 by Matsudaira Yoshinaga, a daimyo of Fukui domain to 'modernise' the Japanese schools in the Echizen province. Griffis wrote a number of texts on Japan and his text named *The Mikado's Empire* (1876) is what Mozoomdar uses to substantiate his own experiences and introduce Japan to his own target-audience in Bengal. Even the description of the Jinrickshaw and the facts associated with it is borrowed from this book and Mozoomdar clarifies it with a direct quotation from *The Mikado's Empire*, "It is a baby carriage on adult wheels" (Griffis, 334), about Jinrickshaw. It was a common thing to use an English text as a source text for information on Japan even for those who knew the language of Japan and had spent a few years there. Sureshchandra Bandyopadhyay who had stayed in Japan for four years from 1906-10 acknowledges in his memoir-cum-travel writing that he had sourced a considerable amount of his information from Arthur Lloyd's *Everyday Japan* (1909). Mozoomdar also writes about how Buddhism entered Japan and the tentative harmony between Buddhism and Shintoism in a number of different eras. Later, Christianity also entered and affected the lives of people. In the chapter titled 'Japan Modernised' he discusses Commodore Matthew Perry's expedition in 1853 and 1854, while also giving a brief history of the Shogunate and the system of Daimyos. Interestingly, he also refers to the Namamugi incident⁴ of 1862. As mentioned before, P. C. Mozoomdar's book is one of the earliest texts written by a Bengali that describes Japan which is why reading the later texts on Japan from Bengal show us how the trajectory of portraying the country changed with time.

Later texts, such as Sureshchandra Bandyopadhyay's *Japan* (1910) does not mention a lot of pre-Meiji era history that are mentioned in P. C. Mozoomdar's book. While Mozoomdar calls Japan the "Eldorado of Asia" he is yet doubtful about following the ideal of Japan, saying "...it is difficult to believe that the progress of the country will be as steady and as effectual as to make it a foremost example to Asiatic nations" (Mozoomdar, 182). On the other hand, the writings of Sureshchandra Bandyopadhyay depict Japan's rapid rise through 'Westernisation' and nationalism as an example of the progressive Asian country that India should also aspire towards.

Owing to the colonial education system, the availability and translation of texts from the English literary tradition for Bengali readers indicated a dialogue between two literary systems based on two separate languages and cultures. Bengal had a readership for several travel books and articles on Japan that were written in both Bengali and English, and these texts presented the idea of Japan in a certain way to appeal to the readers' preconceived notions about the country. The 'discourse' was to understand what led to Japan's 'development' in a rapid pace after the start of the Meiji era (1868-1912) and to what extent was it replicable in the scenario of Bengal. By the end of the first decade of twentieth century Bengal was shaping the imagination of Japan to fit the moulds of their own aspirations in a number of aspects such as women's education, patriotism and entrepreneurship and was viewing Japan as an Asian country that was leading by example.. In different English and Bengali writings, there was an emphasis on 'knowing' Japan during the Meiji Era and the Taisho Era (1912-26). By explaining the cause of Japan's 'exceptional progress' during the Meiji Era, the Bengali tourists claimed to unveil the ideal of Meiji Japan. Japan was already a known place to the Bengali

⁴ The Namamugi Incident (1862) is used to describe an incident in Japan when a British merchant named Charles Lennox Richardson was killed by the retinue of Shimazu Hisamitsu. This killing heightened the already fraught tensions between the Europeans in Japan and the Japanese authorities. It ultimately led to the bombing of Kagoshima in 1863.

readership by the early twentieth century and articles on different Japanese aspects were prolific in Bengali periodicals like *Prabasi*⁵. The articles ranged from vivid discussions about Japanese hair-tying techniques and Japanese games for children to ponderings upon the direct influence of Hinduism on Japan. A 1914 essay titled ‘Japani Chhelemeyer Khela o Khelna,’ in *Prabasi* describes how to play a few games, and lists another 37 indigenous games. However, even these articles uphold certain concepts, such as the notion that traditional Japanese games were intended to be played for fun and exercise, but games from Europe were thought to encourage aggression. The article's unnamed author suggests that like Japan, India should also gather and record information about the games that can be found India. The tone of comparison between Japan and the ‘West’ and Japan and India is strong here while Japanese games are looked upon favourably. Therefore, reading these texts side by side with *Sketches of a Tour Round the World* by P. C. Mozoomdar shows us how the 'reception' of Japan in the Bengali psyche was steadily changing throughout the years according to the readerly expectations where Japan slowly transformed from a barely-known land to an inspiring country.

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⁵ Starting from 1901, *Prabasi* was one of the leading Bengali periodicals of twentieth century. Initially it ran under the editorship of Ramananda Chatterjee.