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Star Books Review

Of Bengal, Japan and a hundred years

Subrata Kumar Das relishes some facets of intellectual history

Bengal --- or today's Bangladesh --- has a long history of relations with Japan. In the last one hundred years there have been cultural, political, social and economic ties between the two countries. Many known and unknown different facets of the Bangla-Japan relationship have been presented in Probir Bikash Sarker's formidable book *Jana Ojana Japan*, recently published from Dhaka.

The writer of the book has been a devoted cultural activist in Japan vis-a-vis Bangladesh. For more than two decades, he has been residing there and has turned into a great lover of Japanese culture. His profound love has helped him to undertake worthy research in bringing out the details of the century-old relationship between these two nations in the Asian continent. The work under review, a commendable initiative, promises further volumes to follow. He has been working on a voluminous book on the Rabindranath-Japan relationship also.



Jana Ojana Japan (Volume One)
Probir Bikash Sarker
Manচিত্র Publishers, Dhaka

The articles in *Jana Ojana Japan* include 'Tenshin: The Forerunner of Japan-Bangla relationship', 'Recently Liberated Bangladesh in the Eyes of Ichinosei Taizo', 'Sheikh Mujib in the Eyes of Masaaki Tanaka', 'The Century Old Relationship of Japan-Bangla', 'Were the Indians the Ancestors of the Japanese?', 'The Greater Asia: The Burning Eyes: Toyama Mitsuru & Genyosha', 'Revolutionary Rashbihari Bose and the Independence of India', 'Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and Japan', 'Dr. Radhabinod Pal : The Envoy of Peace to Japan', 'A Feature of Japan-Asia Relationship', 'Shapla Neer: A Worthy Example', 'Agriculture: The Heart of the Japanese', 'Haiku King Matsuo Basho and One Toshiharu Aseko', 'More Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Asia', 'Noh: A Theatre of Masks', 'An Indian Film-Loving Japanese Lady', 'Burakumin or Dowra in Japan' and 'Isse Miyake: The God of Fashion & Beauty, 'Japan: A Different View'.

The book opens with an article on Okakura Tenshin, who played a vital role in developing Japan-Bangla relations at the very outset of the twentieth century. It is well known that Okakura's *The Book of Tea* (1906) served as an intellectual base for the unified 'One Asia' philosophy which was conclusively demonstrated in his book, *The Awakening of the West and The Ideas of the East*, both written in India. It may be noted here that Okakura first visited India in 1902, and in 1912 for the last time. He got associated with the leading personalities of the Bengali community, including Swami Vivekananda, Nandalal Bose, Rabindranath Tagore et. al at the time. The writer of the present book has also given authentic references regarding Okakura's romantic relationship with the Bangladeshi poet Priyamboda Bandopadhyaya (1871-1935). A graduate in 1892, Priyamboda emerged as one of the pioneer social workers of the then society. Her writings included a long story called 'Renuka' based on the geisha women of Japan.

The long article 'Japan-Bangla Shomporker Shotoborsho' can be treated as an introductory piece. The century-old relationship started with Okakura's visit to Kolkata and was enhanced by Rabindranath's visit to Japan. Though it may here be worth mentioning that during the latter's visit Okakura was no more alive. Then Rabindranath was welcomed warmly by Okakura Tenshin's son Kakuzo Okakura. The major events in this century were the five visits of Rabindranath to Japan (1916, 1917, 1924, 1929-twice). Japan's role in the liberation of the

colonial dependent countries of Asia, and as the abode of many Bengali revolutionists like Rashbihari Bose, Herembalal Gupta, Taraknath Das, Romanath Roy, involvement of Netaji Suhbash Chandra Bose (1897-1945) with Japan, etc., are the other major events to recall. The opening of the Japanese department at Shantiniketan in 1954 also drew much attention. Celebration of the birth centenary of Rabindranath in 1961 in Japan was also noteworthy. The publication of the Japanese translation of Works of Rabindranath in 1988 and establishment of Nippon Bhaban in Shantiniketan in 1994 are some other events worth mentioning in this regard. Probir Bikash Sarker presents all these historical features with necessary information.

An important essay in the book is on Rashbihari Bose and the independence of India. Rashbihari Bose, who left India in 1915, is treated as a pioneer revolutionary who sacrificed everything in life for the liberation of his motherland from the British. There is a long tale behind his departure from India for Japan. It is now well known that he was a suspect in the eyes of the British police. So he collected documents from Rabindranath himself as if he was a distant relative of the Tagore family and these documents helped him to flee India. The significance of the article lies in the wealth of information provided about Rashbihari Bose's personal life in Japan his family, the Japanese wife, his children, the challenges that he met there.

Another noted personality is Netaji Suhbash Chandra Bose, the international Indian political figure during the Second World War. It was Netaji who developed a very significant bilateral relationship with Japan. After his death in a plane crash, an accident not accepted as fact by many, his remains have been kept in Japan till date by his fellow fighters. The writer of Jana Ojana Japan has provided us with many exciting references to Netaji, his death, the fellow fighters et cetera. Anyone interested in Netaji related issues will find much food here to brood over.

What makes the work invaluable is the unavailable information Probir Bikash Sarker has collected from Japanese-language newspapers and books. Being a resident of Japan and being proficient in Japanese language have helped him collect such resources. The meetings and interviews of people related to the events of the book have added meat to the story.

The Hindi edition of Jana Ojana Japan, published from New Delhi, promises to lead to many more editions in many more languages.

For people interested in Japan and Japan-Bangla relations, Probir Bikash Sarker has done a great job. He deserves more than simple thanks. We believe future publications from him will draw the attention of a wider literati.

Subrata Kumar Das's web site is www.bangladeshinovels.com.