

## Mukul Dey and Japan

Sudipta Das\*

Assistant Professor, Department of Japanese (Nippon Bhavana), Bhasha-Bhavana, Visva-Bharati University, Bolpur, West Bengal, India

**\*Corresponding author**

*Sudipta Das*

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**Abstract:** The private exchanges that resulted into deep cultural bond in modern times between India and Japan in general, and Bengal and Japan in particular, were the outcome of the great historical meet between Tenshin Okakura and Rabindranath Tagore in the year 1902. In these private exchanges the great talented painter Mukul Chandra Dey (1895-1985) is one of the important personalities. However, neither in India nor in Japan much work has been carried out on him. This prompted me to take up research on Mukul Dey and his connections with Japan. This work is a preliminary finding on him.

**Keywords:** Bengal, Japan, Tagore, Okakura, Mukul Dey, Art.

### INTRODUCTION

The age-old relationship between India and Japan paved the path to a deep cultural bonding between the two countries in modern times that resulted from the historical meet between Rabindranath Tagore and Tenshin Okakura [1], the Art critic of Japan. Upon meeting Okakura, Tagore developed his interest on Japan. Tagore was highly appreciative of the Japanese Art treasures and their lifestyle and thus took all measures to nurture this relation in his dream institution at Santiniketan.

Tagore for the first time travelled to Japan in the year 1916. Subsequently, he visited Japan in 1917, 1924 (twice) and in 1929, a total of five visits to Japan. Mukul Dey, the young budding artist was only 21 years old when he accompanied Tagore during Tagore's maiden visit to Japan in the year 1916 and in 1917 on the way back from America to India. For Mukul Dey these two visits were the only opportunities for personal presence in Japan, though he repeatedly wished to visit to Japan during his lifetime.

### Journey to Japan

Mukul Dey was born in Dhaka [2]. His father was Kulchandra Dey and mother was Purna Dey. From 1911 to 1916, he studied at the Brahmacharyashra [3] established by Rabindranath Tagore. He learnt painting regularly from Abanindranath Tagore [4].

Mukul Dey used to go to Jorasanko, the residence of Tagore in Kolkata, to learn paintings from Abanindranath Tagore. During one such visit to Kolkata, there was an unexpected telegram in his name from Santiniketan. This telegram

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<sup>1</sup> Tenshin Okakura (1862-1913); was a great artist who contributed to the development of arts in Japan. The author of "The Ideal of the East" (1904).

<sup>2</sup> Dhaka is the Capital of Bangladesh.

<sup>3</sup> Tagore's Brahmacharyashram was constructed by Maharshi Debendranath Tagore and latterly developed by Rabindranath Tagore a form of a University (Visva-Bharati).

<sup>4</sup> 1951-1871; Nephew of Rabindranath Tagore as well was a famous Indian artist.

was from Rabindranath that said - "Come immediately, with luggage proceeding to Japan" [5]. It is indeed a matter of surprise that Rabindranath chose young Mukul Dey as his attendant for visiting Japan among many others. Mukul Dey became very happy and his father also was not disagreeing regarding his travel with Rabindranath; but his mother was anxious about her son's foreign travel. Rabindranath convinced Mukul Dey's parents that through this visit Mukul Dey would be acquiring knowledge about Japanese arts and fine arts. For sure Rabindranath will see to it that Mukul Dey returns to India with him [6].

An important event happened for Mukul Dey before his departure to Japan. That was the event of King Maharaja Bijaychand Mohatab of Burdwan's purchase of Mukul Dey's two paintings for eight hundred rupees. He narrated his feeling about this incident in the following manner, "This event may not be of much importance to others, but it left deep mark on my mind at that young age. This gave me a message of my becoming an artist" [7].

In this journey to Japan Mukul Dey was always with Rabindranath. There was huge gathering to welcome them in the port of Kobe on 23rd May 1916. At night they [8] were all invited by an Indian Businessman Morarji and spent the night at his residence [9]. They participated in the welcome ceremony organized by the Indians in Kobe and Osaka at Oriental Club and on that very day the Woman's College of Kobe welcomed them [10].

They were invited to a tea ceremony by the owner of the newspaper, Osaka Asahi Shinbun. A detailed description of the Tea Ceremony had been recorded in 'Japanjatri', the Japan Travelogue by Rabindranath Tagore. Mukul Dey was present in that Tea Ceremony. We come to know about his experience of this Tea Ceremony through his book 'Amar Katha'. On the same day a reception in honor of Rabindranath was organized at the Osaka Asahi Shinbun Hall. Shokin Katsuta [11], another ex-resident of Brahmachray-ashrama was present with Jinnotsuke Sano [12] during this reception. Mukul Dey was extremely happy to know that both Katsuta and Sano were resident of the Brahmachrayashrama at Santiniketan.

While staying in Japan, Mukul Dey along with Rabindranath visited many places, like Nara [13], Kyoto [14] the ancient capitals of Japan. On the way to Tokyo, he was overwhelmed seeing the Mt. Fuji. The personalities like Taikan Yokoyama [15] and others were present at Tokyo railway station to welcome Rabindranath and his group. Some famous newspapers published articles on Mukul Dey. To name a few, Osaka Mainichi Shinbun (30th May 1916), Hoochi Shinbun (30th May 1916), Tokyo Mainichi Shinbun (30th May 1916), Tokyo Asahi Shinbun (30th May, 6th Jun, 7th Jun, 1916), Osaka Asahi Shinbun (29th May, 2nd Jun, 6th Jun, 9th Jun, 1916), Tokyo Nichinichi Shinbun (30th, 31st May, 1916) [16].

Mukul Dey stayed at the residence of Taikan Yokoyama. Amidst Yokoyama's hectic schedule, he encouraged Mukul Dey to draw and examined Mukul Dey's works with great interest. Taikan was indeed happy seeing Mukul Dey's works and believed that for sure Mukul Dey would be a great painter in the future.

On 28th July 1916 they came to a huge farm house of Tomitaro Hara of Yokohama. Tomitaro was a rich businessman in Japan. He was fond of literature and fine arts. He played a vital role as a patron of Japanese painters.

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<sup>5</sup>Dey, Mukul Chandra,( 1995)*Amar Katha* P.46

<sup>6</sup>Azuma, Kazuo (2004).*Japan wo Robindranath:Sotoborsher Binimoy* P.103

<sup>7</sup>Dey, Mukul Chandra,( 1995) *Amar Katha* P.46

<sup>8</sup>Except Mukul Dey Rabindranath Tagore accompanied with Andrews Charles Freer and William W. Pearson. Andrews Charles Freer was a freelance Christian worker joined in Tagore's ashram in 1914 and William W. Pearson came to India in 1907 and 1916 he went to Japan as a secretary of Tagore.

<sup>9</sup>Japanjatri p.66

<sup>10</sup>Azuma, Kazuo (2004). *Japan O Robindranath: Sotoborsher Binimoy* P.104

<sup>11</sup>1879-1963- was a painter who portrayed India, give art class to Santiniketan

<sup>12</sup>1882-1938- Was a Judo master came to Visva-Bharati University as a judo instructor in 1905.

<sup>13</sup>714-794

<sup>14</sup>794-1868

<sup>15</sup>1868-1958-A representative painter of Japan, who created the new style of Japanese painting.

<sup>16</sup>Azuma, Kazuo (2004).*Japan O Robindranath:Sotoborsher Binimoy* P.105

Especially he helped the painters of Nihon Bijutsuin [17] established by Tenshin Okakura. Tomitaro Hara was well-known to the cultural world as Sankei Hara. Mukul Dey enjoyed the pleasant views from the top of the building Sankei-en [18]. Rabindranath and his group stayed there till their departure to America. During this period they visited Karuizawa, Izura etc.

While staying in Hara san's house, Mukul Dey learnt the styles of paintings from painters of Japan who came to Hara san's place with deep interest. Mukul Dey showed his sketches and drawings to the Japanese painters. They all were pleased with Mukul Dey's talent and admired his intelligence. We find Rabindranath expressing his satisfaction about Mukul Dey in a letter to Rathindranath in the following manner, "...he drew one or two Japanese style paintings. Seeing these paintings, the experts here (Japan) have profusely praised him..." [19].

It should be mentioned here that the news regarding young painter that Mukul Dey would be a disciple of Taikan and would not return to India with Rabindranath had been published in the Tokyo Asahi Shinbun on 4th February 1916. This news was also published in the Osaka Asahi Shinbun. This shows that the artists made efforts to hold Mukul Dey back in Japan even after he came to Japan on their return from America. However, it did not turn into reality [20].

Rabindranath didn't agree with the proposal that the Japanese offered him about Mukul Dey as he had promised Mukul Dey's parents to return with their son from Japan at the end of his Japan tour. Attraction to Okio san and encouragement from Okio san made Mukul Dey restless. This restlessness of young Mukul Dey annoyed Rabindranath. This might also have been one of the reasons for not allowing Mukul Dey to stay back in Japan. Mukul Dey enjoyed the rest of his stay in Japan [21]. In his words, "so long I was in Japan throughout myself and Taikan was under the care of Hara san. We enjoyed a lot of things; saw beautiful places and pleasant environments while our stay in Japan. We came in close contact with many wise persons and received respect everywhere in Japan. All these are beyond my description" [22].

Mukul Dey realized all the aspects of Japanese fine arts and was able to clarify the different characteristics of the Japanese arts. Tenshin Okakura established the Nihon Bijutsuin with his disciples. At the earlier period of the Meiji era the flow of modern westernization developed in Japan. Most of the traditional arts of Japan were being refused. Only some conservative artists protested against this westernization and sustained traditional way of arts of Japan. Tenshin Okakura, founder of Nihon Bijutsuin accepted the new flow of westernization and engaged in new creations. Mukul Dey realized this situation properly. He wrote in his 'Amar Katha' –

"Wherever I saw paintings of Taikan or Shimomura, I realized that they didn't copy the European art or nor did they sided with ancient Japanese arts. There were strong and courageous self expressions. This is the place where they occupied supremacy. There is no exaggeration but vastness. The life is more valuable than imagination to them" [23].

While Mukul Dey was in Japan, he was impressed with the exhibition held by Taikan, he went to various places with Taikan, learned techniques to fine parts of Japanese art, and drew some Japanese paintings. Tomitaro Hara also acknowledged his talent and thinking that he could be a leader in Japanese painting, offered to offer a scholarship of 10 years to him. Mukul Dey was very pleased, but Tagore did not accept this proposal. After Japan, he went to the United States and returned to Japan On February 4 in 1917.

Although it was a short period, he was taken care of by Tomitaro Hara and Taikan. He felt the differences from American and European paintings, and appreciated Japanese art. He says that Japanese paintings do not imitate Europe, but also move away from fantasies, depicting reality in life.

March 10, 1917 Mukul Dey came back to India with Tagore. At that time he had a close relation with Japanese painter Arai Kampo. At the request by Rabindranath, copy the pictures of Taikan and Shimomura, Arai Kampo came to

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<sup>17</sup> The non-governmental Japan Art institute focused on the teaching, and exhibition of (traditional) Japanese-style painting, established by Tenshin Okakura in 1898.

<sup>18</sup> Is a traditional Japanese-style garden in Yokohama, opened in 1906. Sankei-en was designed and built by Tomitaro Hara

<sup>19</sup> Azuma, Kazuo (2004). P.107

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.P.110

<sup>21</sup> Ibid p.110

<sup>22</sup> Ibid p.110

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.p.111

India in 1916, 16th December. Mukul Dey was introduced to Kampo while Arai Kampo started copying these pictures. His main aim to visit to India was to teach the way of Japanese painting in Santiniketan and Jorasanko.

### **Influence of Arai Kampo on Mukul Dey**

Arai Kampo was dispatched from the Japan Painting Association to replicate Ajanta murals. In addition, he was invited by Rabindranath as a professor of painting at Bichitra Art School [24] on December 17, 1916. Kampo stayed in India for a year and a half, and returned to Japan on May 11, 1918. While teaching Japanese painting at Santiniketan and Jorasanko, he learnt Indian original painting methods and arts such as those done in Buddhist temples and Hindu temples and caves.

Mukul Dey met at Hara San's place and became a good friend of Arai. In the 'Bharat-Bhraman Dinoponji' (Indian visit diary) written by Arai Kampo, Arai wrote, "Mukul Dey gave me Indian clothes as a souvenir, immediately I tried to wear it and everyone was very pleased" [25].

Arai Kampo had to stay at Ajanta for some days to copy the frescos. During Kampo's stay in Ajanta in July 1917, Mukul Dey visited Ajanta to heal the sorrow of losing his father. They unexpectedly met each other at Ajanta. Arai Kampo wrote about this meeting with Mukul Dey in the following manner, "... screaming Arai san, Arai san, and suddenly one person jumped in front of me, the person was Mukul Dey." During this visit to Ajanta Mukul Dey experienced the beauty of nature, flowers, and waterfall at Ajanta which opened up a new door of art to him. He lived with Arai san at Ajanta and helped him in his endeavour as much as possible. In Ajanta's first cave, he was touched by the method of Arai san when copying the 'temptation of Buddha' [26]. Mukul Dey was moved by Arai san's hardworking spirit day and night. Influenced by Arai Kampo, Mukul Dey too decided to copy Ajanta's fresco murals. After a few days, Mukul Dey left Ajanta and Arai Kampo also returned to Japan.

In 1919, mentally and economically prepared, Mukul Dey headed again to Ajanta and spent there about a year and a half alone, engaged in productive work; at times working throughout the night to copy the pictures. He crawled around the cave in the darkness of the night, and endures pains in reproducing the murals.

His stay in Ajanta was described by him as, "The merry and wonderful time in my life" [27]. He mentioned that, "I really felt like crying at the time of departing Ajanta. I adored Ajanta through lot of sufferings" [28].

'My Pilgrimages to Ajanta and Bagh' [29], which was based on his experiences in Ajanta, was highly praised.

On a recommendation from Pearson, Mukul Dey acquired knowledge of Art in the United Kingdom from 1920 to 1927, and got an opportunity to hold an exhibition of his works at Victoria and Albert Museum. After returning to India in 1928, he was appointed the Principal of the Government College of Art and was active there until 1943. Since then he contacted the Japanese who visited India and kept in touch with them. Some Japanese occasionally stayed at his house. Frequently at the art school, they held exhibitions of their paintings and became a bridge between the two countries in the field of Art.

A true love towards Japan of Mukul Dey has been expressed in reminiscence of Bina Dey, wife of Mukul Dey. "Mukul Dey respected Japanese fine arts in the true sense. Both of them attended the Christmas festival organized by Nippon club, Kolkata. They had always kept in touch with Japanese Embassy. Mukul Dey himself organized Sukiyaki party in his own residence and invited Japanese. He used to have Japanese meal with chopsticks. He also always worked with two hands. Most probably, he practiced well when he was in Japan. He had a great attraction to Japanese cuisine, even intended to have sea fish and algae. He also learnt some Japanese music. He knew many Japanese fables for children. 'Tanuki' is a special animal in Japan. It is a very famous animal with a huge belly. The Japanese children listen to stories of this animal eagerly. He liked very much to tell the story of Tanuki to children. Often Mukul De told his daughter Bukuma this story of Tanuki. He even drew pictures of 'Tanuki' [30].

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<sup>24</sup> The art school founded by Rabindranath Tagore in 1915. It is situated in Jorasanko.

<sup>25</sup> Kampo Arai (Translated By Kazuo Azuma)(1993), p.35.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.p.77

<sup>27</sup> Dey, Mukul Chandra,( 1995)*Amar Katha* P.88

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.p.90

<sup>29</sup> Published in 1925

<sup>30</sup> Azuma, Kazuo (2004). p.107

The pioneer of Indian art, Mukul Dey's grandsons Satyashri and Siboshri established 'Mukul Dey Archives' at 'Chitrolekha' [31] in 2002 and a website have also been opened in 2003 [32]. 1989 After the demise of Mukul Dey, compilation of his various pictures, newspaper articles, letters began. 'Japan theke jorasanko' (from Japan to Jorasanko) has also been published in 2005. And in September 2015 the book was reprinted. Also digitization of precious documents of Mukul Dey is in progress [33].

#### **CONCLUSION**

It can be concluded by saying that Mukul Dey, no doubt, was a great contributor in the field of Japanese and Indian culture and paintings. He went to Japan much earlier with Rabindranath Tagore which was quite unthinkable at that time. Only at the age of 21, he got this opportunity. He collected lots of things from Japan and all the Japanese cordially accepted him. He silently contributed in a large scale. Though not a specialist in paintings, I sincerely intend to continue my work further on the Japan lover Mukul Dey and his connections with Japan that helped establish the Bengal and Japan cultural exchange at the beginning of the 20th century.

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<sup>31</sup> The name of the house of Mukul Dey, situated in Santiniketan.

<sup>32</sup> Anandabazar

<sup>33</sup> [http://www.chitrolekha.org/\(07.07.2015\)](http://www.chitrolekha.org/(07.07.2015))