The Attractions of Classical Japanese Literature for Indian Students

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Background

The classical works of Japanese literature are the most challenging areas for the foreign students and researchers from the countries having non-kanji script like those from Europe and America, Asia including India. Yet it has not deterred the scholars of these countries to take up the study and research of Japanese literature especially the classical works. Conversely speaking it means that the intrinsic beauty and appeal of the works of Japanese literature must have been tremendous to attract the researchers to such a challenging field. This paper attempts to investigate it further in the light of Indian students of Japanese Language and Literature.

Japanese classical works are full of the depictions of the four seasons, depictions of the subtle human emotions with simplicity and brevity through the expressions like mononokaware, wabi, sabi, okashi etc. as well as for drawing the imagery from nature and the landscape by employing the poetic devices like makura kotoba, kigo etc. These are the documents of the life and ways of the people of yore but also present deep insights in to the mind of aristocracy, warriors, ascetics and monks to hand-down universal human values, which are eternal. There could also be a number of other factors that captivate the human mind with lasting impressions. However broadly speaking, the history and culture is deeply embedded in to the Kiki works on one hand while the affairs of the human mind are predominately reflected in the fiction (monogatari), poetry, essays and the women’s diaries. Both of these elements converge in the world famous Genji monogatari appraised to be the first work of fiction in the world literature.

In case of the Indian readers, the former aspect could be a matter of sheer curiosity, to gain a deeper understanding of the culture completely far removed from their own. On the other hand it is the psychological analysis that may draw lasting interest of the readers due to the universal appeal of human nature and emotions like love/hate, meeting/parting, happiness/sorrow, compassion/anger, longing/detachment etc.

In case of the former one may rely on the English sources, translations and it could turn out to be the preparatory stage for stepping in to the second one.

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For example Rashōmon is one of the most commonly known Japanese words that became famous as the title of Akira Kurosawa’s movie. It’s story line is inspired by Konjaku monogatari (early 11th century), a voluminous collection of discourse narratives secular as well as religious, compiled in 31 volumes. Leaving aside the translations of some randomly selected stories, the English translation in part (Vol. 1 to 5) of Konjaku monogatari was available as late as 1986. As compared to it, the English translation of the famous novel of The Tale of Genji (Genji monogatari, early 11th century) was available as early as 1933. What I want to point out here is that despite the English as well as Hindi translations of Genji monogatari being available the work has not drawn much attention to motivate any character analysis or critical analysis of the work in India. This possibly could be due to the intricate plot of the Genji monogatari, which is so heavily embedded with the cultural elements almost alien to the Indian readers.

On the other hand in Rashōmon, apparently the portrayal of the various moods of the human character must have captivated audiences due to its universality so much so that the very name, Rashōmon that symbolizes Japan’s cultural capital of Kyoto, recedes to the back ground.

Literary Studies

Today hundreds of graduates are working as translators and interpreters in India and Japan and have made a significant contribution in the area of commerce and industry. At advanced level, there is a gradual shift in the focus to intensive reading and writing as well as appreciation of metaphors etc. understanding of socio-cultural paradigms, awareness about intercultural relations etc. in the form of Nihon jijō.

Similarly, the importance of a literary text is realized sooner or later by the teachers as well students. However there is little uniformity when it comes to the practical aspect of What, How and When to introduce depending on the typology of the language. In case of the ideographic languages like Chinese and Japanese, writing demands a rigorous and ongoing effort. With the advancement in technology for Japanese word processing and aids like electronic dictionaries etc. the situation is relatively better. Also the difficulties have been marginalized as in the recent years; the annotated collections of Japanese literature including the classical works are available for the benefit of the readers. In the last few years there has been a sharp rise in the students of Japanese in India and today it is estimated to be more than 20,000, as compared to a few thousands only a decade ago, yet those engaged in study of Japanese literature may be even less than 1 percent.

It is due to the difficulties entailed in the study of literary text, like to learn a large number of additional ideographs besides the basic 1945 characters of common use, and relearn the original expanded forms, the classical Japanese (bungo 文語) grammar, the inflection system, script (kanbun,
kyūkanazukai) etc. of the old Japanese as well as additional set of readings used for the official and place names etc.

At present due to the improvements in internet accessibility, the problem of reference material has been solved to a large extent. Today the vast reservoir of Japanese literature classical, medieval, early-modern and modern is available on our desktops. In the words of Prof. Saroj K. Chaudhary a veteran in the field of Japanese Studies, “major emphasis on literature is the need of the hour since the M. Phil and Ph. D. students usually offer a topic from the area of literature. They face difficulties because of insufficient exposure to literature.” The studies and research in Japanese Culture and literature had been felt in order to complement the language studies but still most of the efforts are exhausted in memorizing the names and learning the characters that they are unable to appreciate. Even those students who spend one extra year in Japan as foreign students are still very far removed from appreciating a literary text. Due to this reason to introduce a reader of classical literature for the Indian students, the challenges could be far too many.

Does it mean that a student of Japanese Language and Literature can never aspire to work in the field of classical Japanese literature?

The importance of classical works in the quality advancement in the language acquisition is a well established fact that need not be reiterated again. Thus the onus lies on the educators to develop a sustained interest of the students and prepare them to take up the literary research and translation. Luckily the history of Japanese literature shows a coherent development, through which a correlation in the works of the classical age and modern period could be established. The glaring example of it is the women’s diaries of Heian period and the modern “I” novels. A recent work of “Memoirs of a Geisha” may appear to be a novel trend of autobiographical novel by a woman but its prototypes could be found in the Women’s diaries of Heian period. The reference to Kaminaga hime (Ukiyo doko) could be understood by a non-Japanese only by referring to the Kojiki (Chapter on Jimmu Tennō). The term Sesshō-Kampaku in the context of Toyotomi Hideyoshi could be properly understood only with some insights into the system of Regency called Sesshō Kanpaku during the Heian period.

Prof. T. Itō of NIJL, comments about the development of literary studies in countries like Taiwan, Korea, America, Canada that, one feature common to these countries is the presence of Japanese Language educational program. It seems that here the literary texts are used as the tools to impart the education of Japanese language for which some concise text that can impart some knowledge about the cultural scene could be focused upon…… Having acquired the basic knowledge of Japanese the next stage is to achieve the level to be able to read and appreciate a literary text. For this instead of depending on the research and development in Japan only, a broader outlook will come a long way to create a niche for Japanese literature in the world literature.

Presently the English translations of contemporary Japanese works like the novels of Murakami Haruki are widely popular all over the world. However in the last century the focus had been on the
classical works of Japanese rather than the contemporary ones with the result that most of the works are available in English translations or rendered into modern Japanese and have proved to be excellent reference material. Hereafter the research and study of Japanese is likely to grow in India and by making use of such reference material available in English and sharing the knowledge jointly throughout the globe, the younger students could be nurtured to undertake the literary research in the field of Japanese literature. This could be facilitated by exploring the aspects, especially of the classical Japanese literature that could have appeal for the Indian researchers due to the intercultural relations of the yore.

The Homogeneity of Japanese Classics

The Japanese classical works especially the prose works had been compiled on the behest of the rulers in a systematic way by the men of letters commissioned by the centre. Since the intellect and Sino-centric scholarship was the prime condition for success and advancement in one’s carrier at court, the aristocrats and some members of imperial family were also associated with the supervision and compilation work which ensured the consistency and authenticity of Japanese classics. Such eruditions add to the clarity of the works with lesser ambiguity. In poetry the consistent use of 5, 7, 5, 7 syllables is conspicuous whereas in prose the complex philosophical discourse and metaphysical contemplations don’t mar the beauty of the simple narrative style. There are clearer demarcations in the style and themes which developed along the lines of prose and poetry, representing the social milieu of each historical period as in the ancient age while the poetry was in the form of hymns and prayers whereas the prose told the creation myths and legends as well as attempts for nation building in the historical period. In Nara period we find a convergence in the prose and poetry as seen in Kiki works. Subsequently in the Heian period of peace and prosperity when the aristocracy was infested with the court romances at all levels in aristocracy during the Heian period, tales of bravery of Shōgun (Army General) and Warriors in Kamakura period, the fun and frolic of the merchant class in Edo period. All such factors make the Japanese classics more approachable and don’t add to the existing difficulties posed due to the complex script.

The Tenjiku Factor

Due to the intercultural relations between the two countries the presence of Indian thought and philosophy, concepts and terms, names and place names, ceremonies and beliefs, language and symbols are widely prevalent in the Japanese classics in the garb of Buddhism. During the Nara and Heian periods when Buddhism developed in Japan, it was treated like a state religion and became an integral part of the life of aristocracy. Leaving aside the religious aspect some of the rituals, be it conducting sermons like on Lotus Sutra (Hokke Hakkō), copying of the sutras or inviting monks to chant sutra, isolating oneself temporarily in a temple etc. were commonly practised among the aristocracy. For example a famous comment by Lady Sei Shōnagon about a monk invited to give sermons is mentioned
in her work *The Pillow Book* (*Makura no sōshi*, 1000AD). It reads,

> A preacher ought to be good looking. Only if, it is a pleasure to keep one’s eyes on him all the time that there is any chance of religious awakening. Otherwise one begins looking at something else and soon ones attention wanders from what he is preaching, in which case ugliness becomes an actual cause of sin. 

(Arthur Waley, tr., *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*, p. 114)

Also due to the influence of Buddhist literature on Japanese language and literature in the classical age, the Indian researchers may come across interesting findings. For example the names and objects of Buddhist origin transliterated using *kanbun* is one aspect and how a large number of these are adapted in Japanese vocabulary in transliterated form is another. Like *naraku*, *goma*, *garan*, *bosatsu*, *haramitsu*, *Shumisen*, *Maya*, *danna*, *Buddha*, *kyara*, etc., as well as Japanese terms like *rokudō*, *butszō*, *raigō*, *sambō*, *kyō* which could be understood by the Indian researchers without much effort as compared to their Chinese and European counterparts. Also the concepts related to philosophical thought and rituals are commonly transliterated or translated like *rinne*, *inga*, *mappō*, *shūji*, *hitari*, *shari*, *yokubō*, *mujōkan*, *arakan* etc.

Not only the terms, but the genre of discourse narratives called *setsuwa* which are partly religious partly secular, draw material from the Buddhist works as well. Particularly in some *setsuwa* collections there are direct inferences to India like in *Nihonryōiki*, *Sanbō e kotoba* etc., while in others the themes of Indian origin like *Hagoromo*, *Ubasuteyama*, *Ikkakusennin*, *Kumano no honji* etc are adapted. In folklore (*mukashibanashi*) there are motifs like *Nezumi no yomeiri*, *Saru no chušai*, *Doubutsu-kōman*, *Ningen mujō* etc.

In short due to the presence of the triad of Tenjiku, Shintan and Honchō most of the themes of *setsuwa* are classified under these three categories that make it possible to approach it in a systematic way. The works like *Jūshichijō Kenpō*, *Iroha uta* corroborate the fact that since the very inception of Buddhism in Japan, Tenjiku became an integral part of Japanese culture and literature. One wonders that in the absence of the cultural legacy of Tenjiku, what could have been the state of classical Japanese studies in India? Perhaps it might have limited to *waka* poetry only. In short, the convergence of two cultures has made it more stimulating.

**The Animal Motifs**

Theodore Benefy’s contention that most of the world’s animal fables originated from India, can said to be partially true in case of Japan. However, Benefy has based his claim on the work of Pancha-tantra (200BC) that has been widely translated in Arabic, Persian etc. However in case of Japan the claim could be made on the basis of the Buddhist works especially the stories of the past lives of Buddha or the Jataka tales (*Honshōtan*) whereby out of 548 tales found in the Pali Jataka collection,
more than one fourth are animal stories. A large number of these motifs have been widely adapted in Japanese *setsuwa* works and some of these have been completely Japanized. Leaving aside the issue of origin, to discover the similar themes in another culture could be very fulfilling and motivating experience for any student. It may not be an exaggeration to say that there could be no dearth of such discoveries in Japanese classical works for any Indian. In Japanese folklore also a number of animal motifs are found which indicate that in Japan the presence of animals despite its idiosyncrasies, is accepted as an extension of the human society. *Inaba no shirousagi, Urashimatarō, Momotarō, Kitsune-nyōbō, Sarumuko, Dōbutsu no kakekurabe/chie-kurabe, Usagi no magokoro* etc. could be some of the attractions, as it would interest some to learn the difference in the rabbit in the moon in India and in Japan and probe further about the significance of the rabbit in Japanese culture. An encouraging factor is that some of the animal motifs especially found in *otogizōshi* works have been beautifully illustrated in picture scrolls along with the story line. The illustrations not only arouse the interest of the learners but also help in overcoming the cultural barriers.

The Geographical Aspect

The development of Buddhism in Japan introduced the presence of India and its customs and beliefs. Some of these become an integral part of Japanese culture without the knowledge of the people (Indians) of its land of origin. An important aspect of worship associated with Buddhism is the custom of going on pilgrimage. Since the time the Kokubunji was ordered, the temples were built all over Japan in every province. Also the construction of temples and installation of Buddhist icons became an expressions of faith by those men in power like emperor Shōmu, Fujiwara no Michinaga etc. In due course of time, there developed certain pilgrimage routes of various regions like Kōya-san, *Sanjūsankannon-jūrei* in western Japan, *Nijūnisha* of Shinto veneration etc. A study of these shall not only enhance the geographical awareness about the various parts of Japan but also introduce the beliefs, folklore, customs prevalent in each part. It could be a good exercise to take up a work like *Makura no sōshi* (The Pillow Book) for literary and cultural appreciation. A comparative study of such sites of pilgrimage and the beliefs and practices associated with each could be useful in understanding the peculiarities of Japanese customs as compared to others. Such type of comparative study could be extended to festivals and annual events, to gain deeper insights in to the ways and life of people.

The Universal Appeal of Japanese Classics

A key feature of Japanese Literature is its imagery woven through the elements of nature and the portrayal of the ways of human mind. While the best poetry is considered to be the one that stems directly from the human heart without any ostentations, it is the *mono no aware*, pathos of the things that evoke the sentiments and feelings, represented through the nature with the touch of universal appeal. The songs of spring autumn, summer/winter may evoke almost the similar sentiments as found
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throughout the waka poetry anthologies starting with Kokin wakashū. Even the poems of Man'yōshū are simple and naïve, singing the sentiments of love for the motherland, parental affection, longing for close ones, praises for sake, the misery of poor farmers, sentiments of the Frontier guard (Azuma uta) posted in remote areas away from the family songs revering the emperor etc.

Since the native Japanese beliefs based on Shinto are solely animistic based on the worship of the elements of nature like sun, fire, rain etc. with emphasis on ancestor worship, there are a lot of commonalities with India another agrarian country, pertaining to the objects of veneration.

Translations
Translation is one of the powerful mediums of not only introducing the culture and literature of another country to the readers but it could also provide an opportunity for the translator to enhance his linguistic capability to understand the nuances of the language. The task of translation in humanities could be more challenging as it demands a complete comprehension of the text and context rather than its surface meaning only. So in the process of translation one builds up a fair deal of understanding of the culture of the source language vis-à-vis the one in target language.

Due to the remarkable interest of the western scholars in Japanese classics, most of the works have been translated in English and several other European languages. In spite of this a large part it is still un-translated as the western experts ought to have a different perspective as compared to the Indians. Among the Indian students of Japanese the most popular author is Akutagawa Ryūnosuke as his short stories like Kumo no ito, Hana, Majutsu, Jigokuhen are widely read and translated in Indian languages. The works like Biruma no tategoto, Tottochan, Senbazuru, Hakai are widely translated in Indian languages. These and the popularity of Miyazawa Kenji’s works may throw some light on the Indian perspective. Some of the classical works are un-translated, for example, Ukiyo doko by Shikitei Sanba which would have a stronger appeal for the people where the road side barber shops are commonly found all over the country.

Art and Literature
A unique feature of classical Japanese Literature is that it is not far removed from the lives of people. The game of karuta is still enjoyed around New Year in the Japanese households reciting the best verse of the master poets. The poetry meets called uta awase which was a kind of social event for aristocracy in ancient times are still a part of the New Year celebrations. Similarly the paper strips that tell the fortune called omikuji, which one draws on a visit to a shrine or temple always have some famous poem on nature or ways of life, inscribed on it.

In Japan the deification of literary personalities is prevalent, the most famous example of which is the scholar Sugawara no Michizane, worshipped as the God of Learning. Also the close proximity and unique depiction of literary themes in Japanese art is conspicuous. Especially the classical forms
of art and paintings draw heavily from the literary themes. The calligraphy itself is regarded as a highly appraised art form. The paintings called byōbu-e depict the scenes from the famous works, *Genji monogatari* on the panels of sliding doors and folding screens. Likewise *emakimono* are the scroll painting in which the complete story is illustrated sequentially. A whole range of themes are depicted on scrolls like *Taketori monogatari*, *Genji monogatari*, *Ise monogatari* as well as associated themes like *Shigisan engi emaki*, *Ban dainagon ekotoba* and various other works of *otogizōshi*. It is of immense benefit to the young experts to brush up their knowledge about art & culture of Japan and develop interest in classical themes. This unique genre has added yet another dimension to the Japanese classical literature.

**REFERENCES**

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