

# Japan Kaleidoscope

By Mohan GOPAL



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In this article, I am presenting to you several facets of Japan based upon my observations, experienced during 20 fascinating years in this country. This is a potpourri which I hope will assist you in enhancing your understanding of the enigma that Japan has often been.

It is difficult to give all sides of the picture in a two-page article. You will therefore forgive me for having chosen to take a slant towards the positive sides of life in Japan, of which I have penned but a few.

## Food & Fashion

*Water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink...* Had the Ancient Mariner been on the food floor of any Tokyo department store, he would have had a very different opinion. Counters and counters of countless varieties line up the food floors of shops in Japan, from the very daintiest of Western cuisine to every kind of delectable Japanese fare. All that is to be sold is perfectly packaged and displayed. A feast indeed for the eyes which, when partaken of, can assure you that the quality is hardly matched anywhere on earth.

This holds good for other consumer items. Clothes, cosmetics, electrical items, automobiles... just name it. Japan is a paradise for quality- and brand-conscious buyers. The top end of top-end brands are found in Japan, in shops not reserved just for an elite few, but where it is easy for the common man to walk in.

The four seasons are put to perfect business use, with merchandise and related promotion being adapted accordingly. Festive days from other cultures are constantly adopted to provide new authentic reasons for the consumer to buy. Thus, Valentine's Day, Easter, Halloween and Christmas are celebrated by shops with gusto in addition to spring, summer, autumn, winter, traditional Japanese festivals and days to honor mothers, fathers, girls, boys, couples, grandparents. The list is ever expanding. The Japanese annual calendar has a long string of holidays, several of which are clumped together to boost travel and spending.

## Language & Literacy

I started off in Japan strongly aware of my illiteracy at every step. Several years later, despite furthering my Japanese language capability, this awareness continued with the only difference being that I had got used to it. I have felt that Japanese is an easy language for

acquiring a basic survival level of conveying your wants. To go anything beyond that, to have a working knowledge which can be put to real use at work or even at play, takes ages and effort. The vocabulary is extensive with associated complexities in usage and nuance. It is this that makes translation from Japanese to other languages (or vice versa) a tricky exercise that often meets with disastrous results while using machine-based translators.

The Japanese language is almost completely used in all aspects of communication in Japan. The education system is based upon it and barring the few international schools that cater to mostly foreign or mixed clientele, Japanese is the base on which all subjects are taught at all levels of education from kindergarten to post-doctoral. Thus, all work at all levels of society essentially uses Japanese. One can understand from this that the language itself is highly advanced and flexible enough to allow new words to be coined and new concepts to be codified. Vocabulary of foreign origin is freely integrated and usually becomes Japanese to fit in with the syntax of the language.

English is taught as a subject across all schools in Japan from the elementary grades. It is mostly taught in Japanese and the focus is on reading. With some effort, most Japanese people will be able to read and understand English documents.

## Precision & Perfection

I am convinced that the Japanese are born with an alarm-clock. *Precision, thy name is Japan.* Punctuality is carried to rather extreme levels extending to even casual meetings between friends or family members. Even a minute's delay is accompanied by an apology. Construction work which can run into delays the world over will be in a state of perfect completion on the date that was announced a few years earlier.

Photo: The Research + Education Group



Delicious fruits

Photo: Amit Kanaskar



Bullet trains run

Photo: Amit Kanaskar



Scaled-down replicas

It is not surprising that some of the best precision work in the world is done in Japan, whether it is watches, robotics, animation, the creation of dolls and crafts or simply wrapping a gift or folding a piece of paper. Details are hacked out to the unthinkable minutest nitty-gritty. After the completion of a construction project, even a nail will not be found left asunder. Warehousing areas, truck depots and fish markets in many countries would be places fit for only the rough and tough. However, in Japan, these can vie in cleanliness, maintenance and orderliness with high-end fashionable locales of other lands. The seediest of entertainment areas in Japan are places safe and fairly decent enough for a granny to take an evening walk in.



Ancient temple 'Taiyouji' nestling in the Chichibu mountains

The Japanese love documentation. The written word has held its sway across the centuries covering everything from grandma's tales to user manuals. Explanations are precise and detailed with amazing graphic support. There are no surprises. Many a foreigner may feel at times like taking a breather in other lands and let *chance be given a chance*.

### Teaching & The Taught

Our children studied in Japanese kindergartens (*yochien*), a conscious decision which my wife and I took at the time and with subsequently no regrets. *Yochien* children are kept free of the toils and tribulations of learning to read and write and are instead treated to learning the basic etiquette of life like civility, cleanliness and neatness, timeliness, respecting each other's property and friendship in addition to simple crafts including paper folding, nutritious meals, exercise, rest, music and dance. The entire country works like an impeccably clean, superbly maintained clockwork machine and the traits needed for this are honed in from childhood.

Teachers (*sensei*) have traditionally been respected and though there are sometimes aberrations to this in recent years, the trend by-and-large holds. Students at all ages are likely to fondly remember their favorite teachers and continue to seek their advice right through life.

### Relationships & Responsibilities

All serious engagement in Japan, be it for personal purposes or business, is founded on a backbone of relationships. The longer the relationship, the better it is considered to be. Most attempts at breaking the ice – which is a formalized process in Japan – start with an explanation on the length and depth of a relationship. A relationship which has gone sour in one field of activity is unlikely to be forgotten and simply passed over for engaging in bonhomie in another field. For example, if someone disliked his former boss, the possibilities are that even small courtesies will not be exchanged if they happen to run into each other years later.

Relationships are grouped and compartmentalized, and there are systems and processes that clearly define the associated responsibilities. In the corporate world, Japanese organizations will follow a clear hierarchical reporting structure and are in general uncomfortable with a matrix concept. Ad-hoc or spontaneous decision-making is usually nonexistent at any level of organization. After a system or process is decided upon, it is diligently followed by all stakeholders.

### Religion & Spirituality

The standard response to the question "What is your religion?" in Japan is likely to be a slightly confused look, some shakes of the head and then either, "no religion" or "Buddhism," prompting a conclusion that Japan is filled with either atheists or Buddhists. The reality is far from the first and partially true with regards to the second. Most Japanese do believe in the existence of forces beyond the realm of human power called *Kamisama* (Gods). People visit Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines to pray for good fortune, especially at specific times of the year, notably the New Year. Funerals are conducted mostly as per Buddhist rites while births and some other milestones during one's life are as per Shinto practices. However, daily rituals are mostly either nonexistent or not practiced.

The Japanese daily life is based upon duties and responsibilities. The world-famous Japanese penchant for hard work and commitment is born out of these, an ultimate implementation of the path of Karma Yoga.

One of the world's great spiritual leaders, His Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, commented in 2009 during a visit to Tokyo that Japan is a deeply spiritual country. The mountainous land is filled with temples – many of them in deeply inaccessible spiritually uplifting locations and looking deeper – and one can see a strong influence of pluralistic Hinduism and Buddhism in temples across Japan. Spirituality exists deep and sound and goes well beyond the narrow confines of dogma or the exclusion of other beliefs.

### Conclusion

There has been a lot of talk that Japan's economy is done for and that the good times are over. While there has undoubtedly been cause for concern which requires the Japanese government, business and society to address matters early, things are not as bad as they are made out to be. To quote former Indian Ambassador to Japan Aftab Seth, an eminent Japan expert who aptly summed up his comment on Japan and her economy as, "there is only so much weight that an elephant can lose."

It is in the interest of the world to ensure that this elephant is healthy and happy.

**JS**

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