



Interview with Yog Kapoor, President, Samrat Restaurant Chain

Indian Pioneer in Japan Forging Bilateral Links

Interviewer: Helen FUJIMOTO



SAMRAT
CHAIN OF INDIAN RESTAURANTS



What was your first encounter with Japan?

Kapoor: When I was a college student, I was not at all interested in business. I was fascinated by acting and movies and after I graduated I moved from Dehra Dun (India) to Bombay to get a job in the film industry.

I first visited Japan in 1965 as an assistant film director for a Indian film company. We were here for two months and I visited the office of the company quite often. The only person I could communicate with in English there was a young Japanese woman working in the art department. I visited that office three or four times a week, and by the end of two months I had fallen in love with her. I proposed and she accepted me, but I felt I could not marry her until I became a director. At the end of a year, I became a director and she flew to Bombay, and we got married.

My wife found life very hard. I was at the film company from early morning till late at night and to cope with the boredom, we found a job for her at the Japanese consulate office in Bombay. After a year, I felt she was still not happy and I really wanted her to be happy. I like adventure and challenge, so I decided to leave. I left my career, my



Yog Kapoor, president, Samrat restaurant chain

job and my country and we left for Japan.

We came to this country just as television was becoming popular and the movie industry was in trouble. My wife found a job immediately, but I spent six months looking everywhere for a job – our positions were reversed. Finally, I gave it up and made a big decision – to go into business. There was no way I could return to India, so I had to work out a way to live here in Japan with Japanese people.



What is the secret of your success in business here?

Kapoor: When I first came to Japan, things Indian were practically unknown. My father had a big business exporting handicrafts so I wrote to him about starting a business here. He sent many samples of handicrafts for us to select what would sell here. We

took the handicrafts to department stores which they like very much. My wife has a wonderful sensibility and a keen eye for what Japanese people like, and that was the key to our success. I didn't know anything about Indian business methods – I learned by actually doing business here in Tokyo, together with my wife.

In a few years, the competition really grew, so I decided to go into fashion. I started by importing cotton skirts and blouses – you know Jaipur prints? I showed them to the president of Seibu Department Store and he really liked them. I was living in Ikebukuro at that time, and Seibu was the biggest department store in Tokyo. They took our samples for a one-week bargain sale and completely sold out. After that, I was given a small space in the store, and then a larger space. That was in 1971 and designer Kenzo Takada was near me – he was not famous then, but he is a big name now. Seibu's *shacho* (president) is a very kind and humble man. He is really my mentor. We created a boom, and by the mid-1970s, Indian clothes and fashions were hugely popular.

Then, in 1979, I got the feeling that the garment business was going down and I came up with the idea of starting a restaurant. We looked around and settled on Shibuya. I've always liked Shibuya – at that time it was frequented by artists and designers and felt very dynamic. It is

Photo: Samrat



Inside view of Samrat restaurant in Shinjuku, Tokyo

Photos: Samrat



Flyers showing two restaurants in Tokyo's Roppongi and Shibuya in Samrat's earliest days (left) and a variety of ready-to-eat curries in retort pouches on sale in Samrat's burgeoning new business

different now, but I still like it. We found a new seven-story building, which was under construction, all floors taken except the sixth. There and then, my wife went to the nearest tobacco shop and used its red (public) phone to call the agent's number. We put in an offer and several days later, we had the space. When I opened my first restaurant there on Nov. 15, 1980, it really was the first Indian restaurant in Shibuya. Now, after 30 years, we have a chain of 14 Samrat restaurants in the major centers of Tokyo. And now again, I see things slowing down. People don't want to spend money in restaurants. So I feel it's time to start something new. I am moving into making a big range of ready-to-eat Indian curries to sell here. I think there is a big market for that.

going into manufacturing in India and entering the share market. India is a paradise for outside investment. It's a hungry market so Japanese business will have a lot of scope there.

Indians and Japanese have different values and working customs. What kinds of difficulties have you experienced in doing business here?

Kapoor: One big difference between India and Japan is that individual Japanese don't have authority to make decisions and always have to consult with their superiors. Indian businessmen come here with complete authority to make decisions, and they feel impatient that Japanese take so much time. This is a big difference in company style, and it has a big impact on business relationships.

How do you assess the Japanese market in terms of its potential?

Kapoor: Now business is very tough here – people are going for cheap things and the country is in depression. I am not optimistic for Japan. When I first came here, Japanese people were the hardest workers in the world, but now things are very different. Young Japanese do not know how to work and have lost “the hungry spirit” of their fathers. And the Japanese manufacturing industry has been exported overseas but it has left Japan in trouble.

Many Indian businessmen can only visit Japan for a few days or a week – this country is very expensive. They don't have the time to learn about Japan or get to know Japanese people, and they feel very frustrated by the amount of time it takes for the Japanese side to make decisions. It was only when I came to Japan that I entered the business world, and I did so with the help of my wife. Perhaps that is why I have never experienced this kind of frustration and difficulty.

What do you think about Tokyo as a multi-cultural city?

Kapoor: I loved this country from the beginning and I really love Tokyo. Everything new starts here in this city. Tokyo is the fastest to adopt anything new. I love Tokyo – anywhere I go in the world, I always miss Tokyo. Also, this is the only country in the world where I can walk around at midnight and feel very safe.

How do you think business relations between India and Japan can be improved?

Kapoor: Indians like Japan. Japan and India belong to the East and our cultures are similar in being very ancient. There is a very good future for Japanese business in India. Many Japanese companies are

Finally, what is your dream for your business?

Kapoor: I have lived in Japan since 1968 and I understand how things are done and why. After 43 years I have adjusted. It took me a lot of time and I worked very hard for that.

I have a dream not for my own business only but for this country where I have lived for about 43 years. Once again in my lifetime, I want to see Japan prosperous, glorious and staying one of the biggest economic powers in the world. Japan has lost this status to China and may be losing to India also in the future. Japan must bring a great change in this country and in its society, too.

Helen Fujimoto is associate professor, Japan College of Social Work.