



Japan-India Connections Through Ages

By Mukesh WILLIAMS



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The relationship between India and Japan runs deep. There are spiritual, economic, political and cultural affinities between the two countries that date back to the period of Buddhist expansionism from the sixth to eighth centuries. This connection gained a fillip in the 16th, 17th, 20th and 21st centuries through the activities of evangelists, scholars, traders, political rebels and IT professionals.

Modern Indian expatriate communities in Japan largely comprise Kobe and Yokohama traders and Tokyo IT professionals. Early settlers from Kobe see themselves as “self-made” and perhaps look down on late comers from Tokyo as “privileged.” Parsees, Punjabis, Gujaratis, Sindhis and Bengalis all make up the demographic mosaic of Indian entrepreneurship and success in Japan. However, reliable information on the age-old Japan-India connection has never been systematically studied because of either academic disinterest or the segmented nature of the interaction between the two countries.

Recently, this lacuna has been partly overcome by a new emphasis on oral history vis-à-vis government narratives. Though the Indians in Japan are ethnically and religiously diverse, they are nevertheless building “new bridges” of understanding through their activities. They have not only adapted to the singular uniqueness of Japan but also helped acquaint Japanese society with Indian business techniques, cuisine and education. Today the different Indian communities living in Japan total about 23,000 people. The Japanese media and the public at large have begun to respond positively to Indians. The stereotypical perception of India as “a poor country living on curry rice” has given way to “IT and 20 into 20.”

Buddhist Connection

The Buddhist monk Bodhisena came to Nara in August 736 at the invitation of Japanese Emperor Shomu. Bodhisena, or Bodai Senna as *Shoku Nihongi* – an imperially commissioned history book of ancient times – calls him, was a South Indian Brahmin and shared a mystical connection with Bodhisattva Manjusri. In search of the reincarnation of Manjusri, he went to China and was brought to the then Japanese capital Nara on a ship via Cambodia and Vietnam by the Japanese ambassador to China, Tajihino Hironari. When Bodhisena reached Nara, he was met by Buddhist monk Gyoki. The monk took him to the emperor, who asked him to teach Sanskrit and establish Kegon Buddhism (the Huayan school of Chinese Buddhism). Bodhisena stayed at the Daian-ji temple in Nara and conducted a consecration ceremony for the bronze Vairocana statue at Todai-ji. He died on February 26, 760, and was buried on the Ryoujusen Mountain as per his desire. Scholars such as Sir Charles Eliot have highlighted the entry of Buddhism into Japan as a direct outcome of the “intercourse with Hindus and other foreign Buddhists.” By the 12th and 13th centuries, Buddhism had already taken deep roots in Japan and was both transforming “old sects” and creating “new ones” (*Hinduism and Buddhism*, 1962, p. 14). It is believed that Japanese traditional court dance and music in some measure owe to the influence of

Bodhisena’s Indian heritage. But the strongest influence was on the *hiragana* syllabary, which may be traced back to the Sanskrit system introduced in Japan by Bodhisena.

Tokugawa Shogunate & Portuguese

This Indian relationship with Japan was further renewed in the 16th century through economic connections with the Portuguese colony in India. As copper and silver were discovered in Japan, Portuguese merchants began to trade in spices with China and India, paying with these metals mined during the Shogunate period ruled by the Tokugawa feudal government (*Chart*). Portuguese ships visiting Japan came from Goa, the headquarters of the Portuguese East India Company, and had on board Indian Christians referred to as lascar seamen. In Japan, the Portuguese were perceived as Indians and when they introduced Christianity into Japan, the religion was seen as a new Indian religion. It is believed that when Japanese Christians were persecuted by the Tokugawa government in 1596, many of them escaped to Goa on these ships. So, by the early 17th century, there was a small colony of Japanese traders in Goa. This colony was further joined by abducted Japanese girls from the stigmatized Japanese Christian and poor farming communities from the Amakusa Islands of Kumamoto Prefecture and other Christian families fearing persecution.

It was not just trade but also the transfer of knowledge that encouraged Japan-India relations. In the 12th century, Japanese scholars enrolled in the global Nalanda University to learn analytical and scientific methods based on Buddhism. In the 17th century, adventurer Tenjiku Tokubei (1612-1692) traveled to India and wrote an essay titled “*Tenjiku Tokai Monogatari*” or “*The Tale of Sea Travels to India*” that became extremely popular. His spiritual quest and high regard for Indian spirituality made Japanese call India *Tenjiku* or heavenly abode. The knowledge of Japan ran deep within the Indian imagination and the early modern-day expatriates who came to Japan were Indian Portuguese, some of whom, including Phiroze Hormasji Dastur of Navsari, are buried in the Foreigners Cemetery Yokohama.

Sales of Japanese copper by Dutch East India Co., 1701-1724 (Total: 29,048,256 pounds)

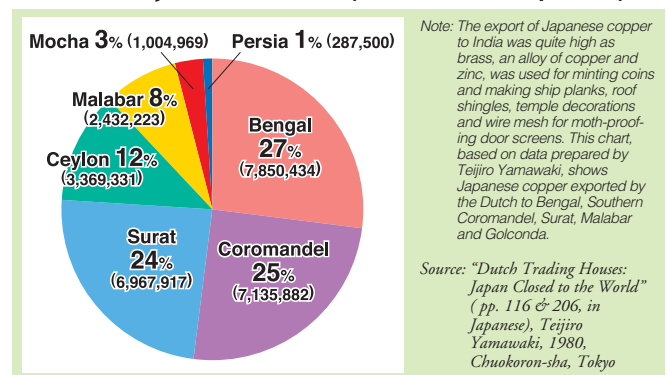


PHOTO 1 *Photo: Mukesh Williams from the Kaza family archives with permission*



Jaffa Abdul Kaza in later life dressed as a Japanese

PHOTO 2

Photo: Mukesh Williams



Yamashita Park memorial service with Chandru Advani and others on Sept. 1, 2010

PHOTO 3

Photo: Mukesh Williams



Memorial service for Netaji at Renkoji Temple by Revd. Kyozen Mochizuki on Aug. 18, 2010

Meiji Era & Trade

During the Meiji era (1868-1912), Japan began to modernize its trading sea routes. In 1893, the shipping company Nippon Yusen started the first run between Yokohama and Bombay, bringing in both Indian workers and traders to Japan. A Sunni Muslim teenager working on the ship's deck, named Jaffa Abdul Kaza (born 1868), came on one of the runs (Photo 1). Japan left a deep impression on the young boy. A few years later, he returned to Japan on the Empress Queen Victoria. He worked with the Kumazawa family and was called Kumazawa Impressu as he came on Empress Victoria. He married Koto Kumazawa and had seven children. After Kaza, many Sindhi and Punjabi traders came from then British colonies to seek their fortunes in Japan.

Many of the Indian merchants who became involved in silk trade in Yokohama flourished. But during the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, 28 Indians also lost their lives. A memorial fountain (Photo 2) was constructed at Yamashita Park where Chandru Advani together with the Yokohama municipal government organizes a memorial service every year (Photo 3). Most Japanese traders who do business with Indians feel that they are prompt in payment and have a vast network of business relations which are quite useful.

As the activities of the Indian trading community expanded, the Japan-India Association was established in 1903 to foster bilateral friendship. In 1939, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs recognized its work and accepted it as an authorized association. It played a significant role in providing support to members of the Indian independence movement and was outlawed for this very reason when the Allied Forces took over Japan. It resumed and expanded its activities to include culture under the leadership of then Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori.

Post-World War II Relationship

The warming of Japan-India relations continued after WWII when, in 1949, Jawaharlal Nehru donated two Indian elephants to the Ueno Zoo to help uplift the spirit of the nation. One of the elephants was called Indira, named after his daughter Indira Gandhi. Nehru was an ardent admirer of Japan from his youth. His admiration grew when Japan defeated Russia in a naval battle off Tsushima Island in 1905. Nehru felt that if an Asian nation like Japan could defeat a European power like Russia, then India had hope to defeat Britain.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was also an ardent admirer of the fine things in Japanese culture and at the same time a belligerent critic of the rising nationalism. In 1916 when he came to Japan at the invitation of his Japanese friend Yonejiro Noguchi (1875-1947), he was deeply impressed by the economic progress, scientific development and

the emotional restraint of Japanese *haiku* verse. When he visited the Sankeien Gardens in Yokohama, he was moved by its aesthetic simplicity and harmony. But at the same time he was deeply troubled by the rising militarism. He wrote passionate letters to his friend who by the 1930s had turned pro-nationalist. Though Tagore was hurt by Noguchi's support for Japanese expansionism in Asia, others like Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose (1897-1945) and Rash Behari Bose (1886-1945) endorsed his ideas.

The contributions of Rash Behari to the cause of India's freedom have been neglected for many reasons. First, he relinquished his Indian citizenship and became a Japanese national. Second, Netaji's elevation to heroism overshadowed his contributions. Third, Japan lost the war and its leaders were discredited by the War Tribunal that negated all the work they did for the Indian freedom struggle. Finally, most of the information on Rash Behari was hitherto irretrievable either through linguistic difficulties or extraneous factors.

The archival material on Rash Behari, in possession of his granddaughter Tetsuko Higuchi, sheds light on his personality, showing him as a tireless leader committed to the cause of Indian independence and a warm-hearted man taking care of all those around him. It is also possible to see his role in strengthening Japanese support for the Indian freedom struggle in the decades of the 1920s, 1930s and early 1940s through his wide-ranging contacts, which reached the very top. The significance of his contributions is not lost in Japan though they have hardly been recognized by Indian scholars. His friend Ayappanpillai Madhavan Nair (1905-1990) also suffered from the same neglect though he played a pivotal role in creating a social network in Japan for India's liberation through his Nair Restaurant in Ginza.

Conclusion

Japan-India connections are built on a wide range of breathless possibilities and endorsed by centuries of cultural similarities and trade relations. But at times these perceptions differ. Such differences may stem from economic and political causes or cultural and social biases. But in the long run, shared economic interests of both nations would override narrow parochialism or partisan concerns, leading to the sharing of knowledge and mutual transfer of technologies. The centuries-old connections would guide the two nations towards peace and security and in the long run contribute to the overall economic prosperity of both nations. **J.S**

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