

Cool Japan – Hot India

By Sanjeev Sinha



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The Japanese government is running a campaign to promote various aspects of Japan under the slogan “Cool Japan”. The contrast with “Hot India” comes naturally to my mind!

Climate

First, with regard to climate, Japan is definitely cooler on average than India. Unlike most major cities in India, most of Japan has its fair share of snow in the winter. Comparing Tokyo and Delhi, Tokyo is about 5 degrees cooler, with a lag of about two months, compared to Delhi. For example, when we have a temperature of 5 C at night in Delhi at the end of December, Tokyo may be 0 C at the end of February. When Delhi is 42 C in June, Tokyo may be 37 C at peak in August. It seems this two-month “delay” in the Japanese weather is also a symbolic representation of Japan, which takes its time in planning followed by swift execution. It's common to find Japanese industry planning in advance for seasonal change, with shops selling winter clothes or summer wear two months ahead of time and the hotels becoming booked well in advance for the beaches, autumn-leaf viewing or skiing, as the case may be. The “Cool Biz” concept of not wearing a tie in the summertime and saving electricity by cutting down on air-conditioning is itself pretty cool. But it's not just the climate of which we can say “Cool Japan — Hot India”.

History

Japan, being an island country, has deliberately long been disconnected from the rest of the world, except for a few controlled interactions, both in terms of culture and trade. This has led to a very homogenous culture with a long continuity of tradition. There are more than 400 companies in Japan, known as *shinise*, that have been in existence for more than 300 years, including the oldest in the world from 578 AD. This is almost like history being frozen in time! By contrast, India has been a hot and dynamic melting pot of various races, cultures and religions from around the world and at center stage in world history.

Homogeneity & Diversity

With such homogeneity and long continuity, there is a common thread of culture and conduct

across Japan. Although Japanese people tend to talk about the cultural differences between Tokyo and Osaka, these are hardly differences at all compared to those between the north and south of India. This homogeneity in Japan has been further intensified in recent decades as the same quality of technology and infrastructure has spread out across the country and the economic model in Japan has led to very low income disparity. As a result there are very few shades of lifestyle across Japan compared to most other countries in the world. India, on the other hand, is arguably the most diverse country in the world with its wide range of races, religions, lifestyles, geographies and income levels.

Reserved Japan versus Argumentative India

The cultural homogeneity of Japan means that a lot can be communicated between the Japanese just by mannerisms and a nod, without the explicit need for words. This, along with other cultural values, tends to make a Japanese person very modest or reserved, as a lot can be communicated and assumed by one's status or background, and by mannerisms rather than verbal explanations.

In India, on the other hand, given its diversity, one cannot assume that all people share the same values and thought processes, and hence there is a need to be very verbal and descriptive to get one's message across. The “argumentative Indian” is indeed rather hot!

Order & Dynamism

Japan is renowned for its culture of discipline and also for being the first developed country in Asia. It has instituted processes that have led to a very organized environment. A restaurant waiter takes an order on his centrally integrated wireless system; a railway station attendant feels in control as he monitors the already well-organized operations of the trains; and a company president who can effectively delegate to his long-time employees with well-defined roles and responsibilities is not bothered about day-to-day operations. Everything runs according to plan in a cool and relaxed manner. Having a large domestic economy has been very helpful in creating such a calm environment. Such order and organization is also very good for the environment, as evidenced by the low carbon emissions per unit of GDP production compared to most other developed countries in the world.

Photo: Author



Maneki Neko in Kanazawa

In India, the rapidly and dynamically evolving environment is much hotter by contrast. With new economic opportunities arising every day, people naturally tend to change jobs as well as their plans very quickly. One has to have a “hot” attitude to deal with such dynamism. Also the huge diversity, global presence and connectivity of the Indian community is a hot asset for the country.

Age & Youth

The ageing population of Japan has been a big talking point. But I remember the day of the Great East Japan Earthquake in March 2011 when my 70-year-old colleague very comfortably walked 40 kilometers back to his home: he leads a marathon walking club and prefers using the stairs to climb up to his 10th-floor office. Many people in Japan start a new career at the age of 60, with good experience, wealth and health, and in Okinawa there is an annual triathlon tournament only for people above 100 years of age. Now that is what I call cool!

India is truly very young. Compared to the median age in Japan of 45.4 years, India has a median age of 26.5. This young energy, now empowered through better education, mobile phones, the Internet and huge economic opportunities, is a hot asset for the country.

Systems & “Jugaad”

Another thing I find cool about Japan is the application of high technology in routine human life, such as bullet trains, high tech toilets, smart cities and a wide range of electronic money options, as well as the combining of modern technology and processes with cultural traditions, as can be seen in Japanese *anime* and super *onsen* (spa resorts). Bullet trains are an intricate combination of a huge manufacturing industry, large-scale infrastructure implementation and control systems, and a refined work culture. Despite the huge complexity and sensitivity of the system, Japan makes it look like a piece of cake with bullet trains running at intervals of 10 minutes or so, and without a single fatality in their history despite the earthquakes and typhoons.

India, on the other hand, is known for its “Jugaad” — a word used to denote the spirit of frugal innovation. An individual in India manages well in the absence of large-scale effective systems by individual creativity and innovation as part of daily life. This aptitude helps a lot in the new dynamic world of globalization where one needs both speed and creativity.

Organization & Entrepreneurship

In Japan large-scale systems and organizations pay attention to the finer details, with roles and responsibilities well defined and supply-chain mechanisms developed over many years. This is well manifested in the automobile industry, for example. This style is well suited to gradual improvements but leads to huge organizational inertia when a major and sudden change is needed, as is very often the case in the new and fast world of global competition.

In India, by contrast, the general mindset is well suited to handling

sudden changes creatively. This, combined with the new world of economic opportunities at home and abroad, has amplified the inherent spirit of entrepreneurship in India. More than a quarter of the CEOs of Silicon Valley are of Indian origin.

Cool & Hot Economy

Japan has been a leader in the world of technology for decades and is among the top countries in terms of per capita income. With the new global flows of information and people, the developing world — helped by Japan’s contributions of technology and capital — is fast catching up. With huge differences in labor costs, the ease of knowledge transfer and new global supply chains, a large part of the manufacturing industry, except for the most high tech, is inclining toward shifting out of Japan. After a long heated run, Japan’s economy has to cool down and wait as the rest of the world catches up.

India, on the other hand, is a hot economy, with a young and fast-growing consumer market. The need for infrastructure development in India is also huge and, unlike in the past, now with its greater international exposure India requires aggressive development of its infrastructure, and is attracting and allowing global companies to participate in its development. With their better education the young people of India are getting ready to supply the much-needed good quality human resources and in turn become the drivers of consumption in a vibrant self-fulfilling economic cycle.



Photo: Author
A display of lights at an Indian market at the festival of Diwali

Synergies

India can learn a lot from the development of Japan. As the consumption of energy in India grows along with industrialization, it is imperative for the global environment that India adopts at least some of the environment friendly technologies and practices of Japan. Also as the new economy in India creates new wealth, it will be important for India to achieve a low income disparity, a low crime rate and low unemployment like that of Japan.

By the same token, in its mature domestic market Japan needs the added spice of India. As Japan too faces global competition, the diverse resources of India could prove to be an ideal partner for the country. With such excellent complementarities, it’s poised to be a win-win partnership.

Time for lunch... Shall I go for some cool *sushi* or some hot curry today? **JS**

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