

Centuries-old Spiritual Connections between India & Japan

A Personal Perspective by a Long-term Resident of Japan & Singer of Japanese Folk Songs

By Rabinder Malik



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History of India-Japan Relations

In Japan the old name for ancient India was *Tenjiku* – the birthplace of Buddhism. The cultural and spiritual connections between Japan and India began in the 6th century when Buddha's message of compassion reached the shores of Japan via China. Over the centuries Japanese scholars have had an intellectual discourse with India through visits and pilgrimages to both India and China for the acquisition of knowledge. The spiritual connection between the two countries can also be deduced from the fact that Japanese mythology and folklore has several gods and goddesses of Indian origin. Three of the seven gods of good fortune are from the Hindu-Buddhist pantheon of India: 1) Daikokuten (Mahakala in Sanskrit), god of wealth; 2) Benzaiten (Sarasvati in Sanskrit), goddess of music and beauty, and 3) Bishamonten (Vaisravana in Sanskrit), god of dignity.

After the Meiji Restoration in 1868 and the opening up of Japan, cultural links between the two countries were renewed through contacts and friendship between Japanese and Indian scholars. Swami Vivekananda, a religious leader and prophet of his age in India, who preached a message of tolerance and universal brotherhood, visited Japan in 1893. He was greatly impressed by the cleanliness, piety and patriotism of the Japanese people, and spent a considerable amount of time in Japan visiting many centers of Buddhism. He came into close contact with the chief priest of Engaku-ji temple in Kamakura and travelled with him to the United States, where both attended the first World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893 and shared the wisdom of the East with other intellectuals and religious leaders.

In the early years of the 20th century, Japan was visited by another famous Indian, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, the first person in Asia to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. The Japanese people and culture made a great impression on Gurudev Tagore and he made three visits in all to Japan, during which he came into contact with several prominent Japanese scholars and developed a special relationship with Okakura Tenshin. Gurudev Tagore's Shantiniketan school and Visva-Bharati University in India became important points of contact for Indo-Japanese intellectuals and artists. Recently, the 150th anniversary of the birth of Gurudev Tagore was also celebrated in Japan, demonstrating the admiration and respect Japanese people have for him.

It is worth noting that the Japan-India Association has been in

operation in Japan for more than 100 years, and the first Japanese Consulate in India was set up in 1896 in Mumbai (then called Bombay). The first Indian traders came to Yokohama in the 1870s and later survived several disasters and calamities including two World Wars and the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, and trade between Japan and India continued to flourish. The city of Yokohama has enjoyed a long history of friendly relations with India and has helped promote people-to-people connections that are important not only for trade but also for strengthening cultural contacts between the peoples of the two countries. Also, fortunately in the case of India, there is no historical baggage such as characterizes Japan's relationships with its more immediate neighbors that suffered under Japanese occupation during the war.

In the modern history of India-Japan relations, the 1950s are regarded as the golden period. In 1949 the Japanese people were moved by the gesture of Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in presenting a baby elephant, named after his own daughter "Indira", to Ueno Zoo, and in 1952 the two countries signed a bilateral treaty of peace and friendship. More importantly, the Japanese crown prince and princess (the current emperor and empress) made a memorable goodwill visit to India in 1960.

Photo: author



Indian Prime Minister Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi feeding the elephant "Indira" at Ueno Zoo in 1957

Interaction with Japanese People

Thirty-six years ago, I came to Japan as a United Nations official on assignment with the United Nations University (UNU) soon after it was established in Tokyo, with strong support from the Japanese government. While my work was of international character, since I was living in Tokyo, it gave me an excellent opportunity to establish contacts with Japanese people, both officially and socially, including government officials, academic circles, business and several social and cultural organizations in Japan. Following retirement from UNU, I stayed on in Japan and was able to make more acquaintances and

friends through teaching at Japanese universities and other voluntary activities.

The city of Urayasu has become an important part of my life in Japan. I have lived here for the last 31 years and consider Urayasu to be my *furusato* (hometown). I have been involved in several community activities and was able to play a special role in promoting intercultural exchange and understanding among Japanese and foreign residents of the city, for which I was honored by the mayor. Urayasu used to be a small fishermen's town not so long ago but with land reclamation, opening of new metro lines and the Disney resort, it has grown into a truly international city.

I enjoy living in Japan, especially in Urayasu, and appreciate the quietness, cleanliness and kindness of the Japanese people and the egalitarian society. It is remarkable that Japan has made rapid progress in attaining high levels of development and growth and creating a modern society without losing its cultural roots. When Japan faced the triple tragedy of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear plant disaster on March 11, 2011, the world shared in its sorrow but also admired the fortitude, discipline and resilience of the Japanese people, and prayed for a reenergized Japan.

Cultural Links through Folk Music

Interestingly, my long stay in Japan gave me an unusual opportunity to pursue my hobby of singing. When I was young, I used to sing Indian folk songs called *ghazals*. When I first heard Japanese *enka* songs, I was attracted because I found the melodies to be very similar to those of the Indian *ghazals* that I used to sing. I started taking lessons in *enka*, and since I won many prizes in singing competitions my teacher encouraged me to become an *enka* singer in Japan. I became a member of a trio named OYAJIGUMI and we put out a CD in 2001. These days I also sing Japanese *min'yo*, a more traditional type of folk music in Japan.

The amazing part of this story is that when I began to understand the meaning of the words of *enka*, I found that not only the melodies were similar but the words and message they conveyed were also similar to those of Indian songs. *Enka* is a form of popular ballad music and is generally referred to as an expression of *Nihonjin no kokoro* (heart and soul of Japanese). *Enka* songs are normally sad as they relate to failed romance and longing for home and can be recognized from titles which dwell upon drinking or sorrow. Indian *ghazals* have exactly the same image. Also, *enka* singers employ a style of vibrato known as *kobushi* (vibrato-like vocal ornamentation), which *ghazals* also have.

Enka songs gave me a better understanding of Japanese culture and I could perceive some similarities with Indian culture and traditions. I felt that these similarities were the remnants of the centuries-old spiritual and cultural connections between the two cultures. Let me give an example. My favorite *enka* is “*Oyako Zaka*” about the feelings of a father at the time of the wedding of his daughter. In India we have a song called “*Chalri Sajni*” with exactly the same theme and similar words. For Japanese audiences, I normally sing both songs to explain the similarities. In the case of

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CD jacket of “enka” songs by “Oyaji Gumi” (Big Buddy Trio) – Jun Ebihara, Yoshikazu Kinomura and Rabinder Malik

Indians, when I sang “*Oyako Zaka*” in Japanese at my daughter’s wedding, explaining that the words were similar to the Indian song “*Chalri Sajni*”, the Indian guests seemed to have understood the feeling and enjoyed it.

Not only through songs but also during my day-to-day interaction with family and friends in Japan I have noticed that we tend to share the same values. What I have observed at weddings, festivals and other social occasions in Japan is that while the styles and decorations are different there are certain basic similarities in the traditions and customs of India and Japan.

New Era of India-Japan Relations

Having said all this, however, I should add that there are many differences between Japanese and Indians. Sanjeev Sinha of Sun and Sands Advisers has written extensively on the subject of differences in business styles, decision-making and other attributes of Indians and Japanese, and has rightly argued for more exchange of people and information with a view to promoting business development between the two countries. I also believe that there is much scope to expand exchanges in cultural fields such as art, films, music, fashion as well as tourism.

In recent years, India-Japan relations have undergone a significant and qualitative shift. Japan has continued to provide consistent support to India in terms of ODA for a number of projects in the key area of infrastructure development, which is badly needed in India — Delhi Metro being a shining example of this cooperation. The remarkable success of the Indian economy, especially in information technology, and the fast-growing market and reservoir of talent in India has changed Japanese perceptions of the country. Moreover, there are socio-economic complementarities between India and Japan that can contribute to the promotion of comprehensive bilateral relations. The establishment of the Strategic and Global Partnership between India and Japan in 1996 has started a new era of relations between the two countries. **JS**

Rabinder Malik has had a long career with the United Nations, including at the UN University in Tokyo, and with the WHO and UNDP in India and Indonesia. He is a visiting lecturer at Keio University, representative of TERI in Japan, and member/adviser of several social, cultural and education organizations. He also sings *enka* and *min'yo* and often performs at musical events.