

The Elephant and The Samurai: Why Japan Can Trust India?



Author Aftab Seth

by **Dr. Rupakjyoti Borah**

(Kaveri Books, Delhi, 2017. 160 pp. Rs 450)

By **Aftab Seth**

Overview of India-Japan Relations

This slim volume provides a comprehensive overview of the developments in India's relations with Japan from early times almost 1,500 years ago to the present time. The author traces our relationship to Bodhisena, the Indian monk who arrived in Japan in 752 AD for the eye-opening ceremony of the Diabutsu in Todaiji in Nara. In modern times a Japanese consulate was established in Bombay in 1893 and the NYK line began a service from Kobe to Bombay. There was great interaction between scholars like Okakura Tenshin and Rabindranath Tagore, and later between Rash Behari Bose and Netaji Subhas Bose and the Japanese politicians of those times. Swami Vivekananda who visited Japan in 1893 wrote: "The world has never seen such a patriotic and artistic race as the Japanese, and one special feature about them is this, that while in Europe and elsewhere Art goes with dirt, Japanese Art is Art plus absolute cleanliness."

Indian merchants mainly from the province of Sindh in India settled in Yokohama and enjoyed good business. To promote Japanese business interests in British India and British interests in Japan, the Japan-India Association was set up in 1903. It will be recalled that the Anglo-Japanese treaty was signed in 1902; this was a real recognition by the world's largest empire that Japan had, as it were, "come of age" and was a country that could be admitted to the white man's table. The defeat of Russia by Japan in 1905 led to the influx of Indian nationalists into Japan, including men like Rash Behari Bose. He married a lady from the Nakamura family and set up the first Indian restaurant, called appropriately *Nakamura-ya*. Subhash Chandra Bose came to Japan in 1943 during World War II and gained the help of Japan to set up the Indian National Army, comprising Indian prisoners of war taken into custody by Japan, when its armies conquered British territories in South East Asia. After the war, the Indian judge Justice Radhabinod Pal at the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal was the only one to deliver a dissenting opinion declaring that Japanese wartime leaders were "not guilty". The author mentions the museum attached to Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine where portraits of these three men — Rash Behari Bose, Subhas Chandra Bose and Radhabinod Pal — adorn the walls. These men

are regarded as true friends of Japan.

India under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru refused to sign the Treaty of San Francisco as it did not uphold the dignity of Japan. Instead India signed a separate peace treaty with Japan at the end of the American occupation and waived all rights to receive war reparations from Japan. This act and the gift of a baby elephant to Ueno Zoo were symbols of India's feelings of friendship for Japan and influenced an entire generation of Japanese. But India's policy of non-alignment and Japan's security treaty with the United States kept the two countries apart during the Cold War years. India's nuclear test in 1974 was another reason for Japan's aloofness towards India. Yet bilateral ties took a dramatic turn for the better at the turn of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st century.

India's Relations with Other Nations Interwoven with Japan's

The special feature of this book is that the author interweaves India's relations with the US and ASEAN, as also Japan's relations with these countries, into the narrative on bilateral relations. This provides an important perspective since the dramatic improvement in India's relations with the US and with Japan have often followed a similar course. For example, the March 2000 visit to India of President Bill Clinton broke the ice which had set in after the May 1998 nuclear tests. Likewise Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori's historic visit to India in August 2000 five months after Clinton led to a breakthrough in India's relations with Japan. This was the beginning of the "Global Partnership" and the start of military and defense connections between the two countries.

In July 2005 Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reached an important agreement with President George W. Bush which led to enhanced military and strategic cooperation with the US, including the question of civil nuclear energy. Before the end of his term as president, in fact on Oct. 2, 2008, Bush oversaw the passage of the enabling legislation for nuclear cooperation through Congress. Singh visited Japan about a year after the US agreement and he and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, in December 2006, elevated the Global Partnership to a "Strategic Partnership". This saw the start of joint

naval exercises between India and Japan which were later joined by the US and ultimately by Singapore and Australia. Hesitations over the reactions of China to this enhanced military and naval cooperation led to a lull for a couple of years, but with the return of Abe to power in December 2012 the naval cooperation resumed and the Malabar exercises between the US, Japan and India have now become an annual feature.

It is significant that since India's independence in 1947, the USSR had been the biggest supplier of weapons to India. But over the last 10 or more years the US has become the biggest defense partner of India. From 2005 to 2015 India imported over \$10 billion worth of defense equipment from the US. Among the weapons imported are C-130 Super Hercules aircraft, P-81 long-range maritime patrol aircraft, C-17 Globemaster III giant strategic airlift aircraft, and other military hardware. Japan, Singapore and Australia also import similar equipment from the US. This increases the interoperability of Indian armed forces with these countries, which all have close military links with the US. For India and Japan this similarity of equipment makes it easier for our defense forces to work together at joint exercises and at Peace Keeping Operations. The presence of Abe as chief guest at the Republic Day military parade in January 2014 was the first time a Japanese leader had been witness to India's strengths in the field. Abe's visit had been preceded by that of the emperor and empress of Japan from Nov. 30 to Dec. 5, 2013. The symbolic significance of the imperial visit was not lost on observers of the developing relationship between India and Japan. In 2014 September Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Abe be further elevated the Strategic Partnership to a "Special" Strategic Partnership. Negotiations on a civil nuclear deal with Japan which had begun in 2012 finally ended with an agreement in November 2016 when Modi went to Japan for the annual meeting of the two prime ministers.

Why Have India & Japan Become Closer Post-Cold War?

The author outlines the reasons why Japan and India have become closer in the post-Cold War period. First among these is the strategic convergence in the geopolitical environment of the present time. India has expressed interest in a range of Japanese defense products. Also India's "Act East" policy converges with Japan's

interest in connecting India via the land bridge of the northeastern states of India with Myanmar and Southeast Asia.

Secondly, there have been difficulties with China trade such as the abrupt suspension of exports of rare earths to Japan in 2012, impacting the electronics industry in Japan. This led Japan to seek alternative sources such as India. Japan is consequently heavily involved in building India's infrastructure. Japan's shrinking population and India's rising demographic graph makes collaboration natural.

Thirdly, countries such as Australia, with which Japan has close strategic and economic ties, have improved relations with India. Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbot was Modi's first foreign guest in 2014. With the largest uranium deposits in the world, Australia is a key country for civilian nuclear energy programs in both India and Japan.

Fourthly, both Japan and India have territorial issues with China. The assertiveness of China, including sending ships and planes into the territorial waters of Japan and troops across the land borders with India, prompts Japan and India to seek balancing ties with other countries similarly affected by Chinese aggression, such as Vietnam. China's attempts to use Pakistan to counterbalance India have led to difficult situations for India. The economic corridor linking Kashgar in China with the Arabian Sea at Gwadar, a port which has been built by China on the Pakistani coast, has significance for both India and Japan as it directly affects the security interests of both countries.

Fifthly, the personal equations between leaders have helped. Abe had a close relationship with Singh, who was given Japan's highest decoration for his contribution to the growth of our ties. Abe has also continued to enjoy a close relationship with Modi.

Sixthly, there is bipartisan support in India and Japan for increased friendship. Mori of the LDP and the BJP leader and former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee established new equations between India and Japan at the beginning of this century. Singh and Modi have continued on the same path, while likewise the prime ministers of the now opposition Democratic Party of Japan — Yukio Hatoyama, Naoto Kan and Yoshihiko Noda — did not make any significant changes in the degree of closeness with India. All three DPJ premiers essentially followed the policies of their LDP predecessors Mori, Junichiro Koizumi, Abe, Yasuo Fukuda and Taro Aso.

Seventh is the fact that both countries collaborate closely in multilateral forums such as the G20, East Asia Summit and other fora. And eighth, at present only 2% of India's energy is generated by nuclear power. India is woefully short of power and this has a direct impact on levels of growth. Hydroelectric dams are environmentally hazardous, as they displace millions of people and cause changes in levels of seismic activity. This is one of the reasons for the emphasis that India and Japan have put on expanding cooperation in the field of nuclear energy.

The author does not shy away from referring to divergences in our approaches. One of the differences mentioned is the degree to which Japan and India wish to be close to the US. While Japan has a security treaty with the US, India has been wary of being excessively close. India has apprehensions based on past history of losing "strategic autonomy" and believes that the interests of both countries are better served by "being friends rather than allies". This explains India's reluctance to join the US-led "Proliferation Security Initiative" and the reluctance with which India agreed to US demands to cut oil imports from Iran during the years when strict economic sanctions had been imposed on Iran by the US and other Western countries.

Another divergence of opinion is within India, with one group believing firmly in strengthening ties with Japan in order to balance the preponderance of China, while another set of opinion leaders believe that excessive closeness to Japan may antagonize China, with which India has important economic links. Another problem perceived by Japanese business is the red tape in India which slows down the decision-making process. In September 2014 the two sides agreed to set up a special group to speed up the clearance of Japanese projects in India.

The author outlines all these developments in lucid prose which is easy to understand. On the economic front he mentions that since 2003 India has been the largest recipient of Japanese ODA. Also, over the last 15 years, over \$20 billion in Japanese FDI has been invested in India. Abe pledged in September 2014 to make investments in India's infrastructure of the order of \$35 billion over the five-year period beginning in 2014. The flagship projects undertaken by Japan are the Shinkansen line between Bombay and Ahmedabad, the Madras and Bangalore metro systems and the Bangalore-Madras industrial corridors. The Delhi-Mumbai Industrial

Corridor first mooted in April 2005, during Koizumi's visit, was finally signed by Abe and Singh in August 2007 in Delhi. A huge territory as large as Honshu has been reserved for Japanese investment.

As mentioned earlier, the author highlights the common interests of India and Japan in developing closer relations with ASEAN in general, and with Myanmar and Vietnam in particular. Both Abe and Modi have visited ASEAN countries, and India and Japan have agreed to develop together the northeastern states of India in order to improve connectivity with Myanmar and onwards through Thailand to Vietnam. The fact the Chinese had also offered to develop these areas but that India preferred Japan is symbolic of the high level of trust that exists between our two countries. Similarly the development of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands with Japanese help has great strategic significance, since the southernmost Andaman island is a mere 90 kilometres from Aceh in Sumatra; the importance of these islands therefore, for both India and Japan, for protection of shipping in the Malacca Straits, is obvious. Similarly Japan and India have agreed to jointly develop Chabahar port in Iran, to provide an alternate access to the sea for land-locked Afghanistan, which is otherwise dependent on Pakistan for access to the sea.

The Strait of Hormuz, not far from the port of Chabahar, is vital for the oil imports from the Middle East of Japan and India. Further, because of the Chinese presence at the port of Gwadar, on the coast of Pakistan, which is near the strait, Japanese and Indian cooperation in the development of Chabahar is of great significance for the defense of both countries.

Concrete Suggestions for Future India-Japan Relations

The author also provides a set of concrete suggestions in the last chapter of the book for the relationship between India and Japan to be raised to further heights in the strategic and economic spheres and indeed in the area of people-to-people contacts. Among the suggestions is for both countries to pursue the US-2 amphibious aircraft negotiations. India should also try to acquire the Soryu class submarines from Japan; it will be recalled that Australia had expressed an interest in buying these submarines from Japan but subsequently changed its plans. The Soryu is the largest non-nuclear submarine with the capacity to go to greater depths than

other submarines of that class. It is essential for the Indian Navy to acquire these excellent vessels.

The fact that the first country Modi chose to visit outside the immediate neighborhood of India was Japan is an indication of the priority that India attaches to its relations with Japan. The clear majorities that both prime ministers enjoy in their respective legislatures enable both governments to pursue energetically the strengthening of relations. In the November 2016 joint statement issued during Modi's visit to Japan, the threat faced by Japan from the North Korean missile and nuclear programs was clearly mentioned. Similarly, the problems faced by India on account of the support given by Pakistan to terrorist activities directed against India was also mentioned in the joint statement. This is an indication of the increasing levels of trust between both countries since they do not shy away from highlighting their respective security problems which lie at the core of their strategic concerns.

The author recommends a vigorous pursuit by both countries of a nuclear agreement. In India there is awareness of the strong anti-nuclear sentiment in Japan and the courage with which Abe has pushed this deal through the Diet. India's critical shortage of energy makes it incumbent on the government to pursue all possible alternative sources of energy. The author also envisages an increase in trade which fell from \$18 billion in 2012 to \$14 billion in 2014. The Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement signed by both countries in February 2011 should be expanded to include a wider range of goods and services. A target of \$30 billion in bilateral trade by 2030 should be set up.

Japan should also encourage the long-term stay of caregivers from India, in view of Japan's aging population. Indian nurses have proven their worth in many parts of the world and would doubtless be of great value to the elderly Japanese, of whom there is now an increasing number. The Indian diaspora in Japan should be used to increase awareness about India. The strong roles played by Indians in the US, the United Kingdom and in other European countries in the process of strengthening bilateral relations between India and those countries needs to be emulated by the Indians living in Japan. Visas on arrival for Japanese in India is a step in the right direction, and the author recommends a similar easing of visa restrictions on Indians visiting Japan.

Africa is another area where the two countries could collaborate.

The Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) has been functioning since the time of Koizumi in 2001. Japan has a base in Djibouti to help contain piracy and has sent peacekeepers to South Sudan. India has been involved in Africa for many years and took a leading role in the independence movements of many African countries. In the joint statement issued at the end of the summit meeting between Modi and Abe in November 2016, Africa was mentioned as an area where the two countries could collaborate. China has already made huge investments in Africa in order to gain access to the natural resources of that continent. It is essential for Japan and India to move together to counterbalance the Chinese presence in Africa. There is also a recommendation that India and Japan sign a "specific maritime cooperation treaty" and work with countries like Australia, Vietnam, Indonesia and the US to form an "Indo-Pacific Maritime Concert".

The author makes a valuable point that Bollywood, as Bombay's film center is called, should make more films in Japan, as that would attract more Indians to go for tourism to Japan. He cites the case of an Indian film shot in Spain which led to a dramatic rise in Indian tourist visitors to Spain. In this context, the proposed shooting in Japan of a new film titled "Love in Tokyo" by a well-known Indian director Imtiaz Ali is a step in the right direction.

The author is fully qualified to write a book of this type since he has had several important teaching and research assignments in various countries. Apart from working at universities in India, he has done work at Cambridge in the UK, at the Japan Institute of International Affairs in Tokyo, at the Australian National University in Canberra, and at the Japan Forum for Strategic Studies in Tokyo. At present he is working at the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore. **JS**

Aftab Seth is Indian ambassador to Japan, and has served in nine other countries around the world. Educated at St. Stephen's College and as a Rhodes Scholar at Christ Church, Oxford, he has also been both a student and professor at Keio University, and is a leader of several educational and cultural organizations in Japan. In recognition of his outstanding contributions to bilateral relations for more than half a century, he received Japan's highest decoration, *The Grand Cordon of the Order of the Rising Sun*, from the emperor in November 2015.