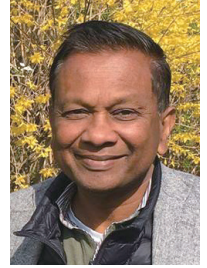


Jagmohan Chandrani – Father of Little India in Nishi Kasai



Author Mukesh Williams

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Jagmohan Chandrani has spent four decades building the Indian community and his own business in Nishi Kasai in Edogawa Ward, Tokyo. An ardent photographer, sharp shooter, tea connoisseur, cuisine expert, communitarian, restaurateur, businessman and social analyst, he manages his life pretty well in Japan. Chandrani turns 69 this year but his predominant passion for tea remains unabated. His tea company called Shanti, which means peace, continues to survive the pandemic emergency. His concern for others has endeared him to both Japanese and Indians alike.

Born in Calcutta in the early 1950s, Chandrani studied Economics at Delhi University in the 1970s and now lives in Tokyo. He combines with his pioneering spirit the evolutionary history of Sindhi migration before 1947 to India. Today his extended family is spread out in different cities of the world – Calcutta, Bombay, Jodhpur, Tokyo, Toronto, and London among others. Rooted in a religious ethnic ethos, Chandrani possesses the *métier* to combine different cultures and cosmopolites into a single psychological whole. He does not miss India, nor regrets coming to Japan. His deep understanding of Japanese culture coupled with his altruistic spirit has made him into the “Father of Little India”. He leads the Indian Community of Edogawa from Nishi Kasai located on the Tozai Line in Tokyo. In this area mostly software engineers live to whom he has been both guarantor and provider of board and lodging. Living in Japan for almost half a century he is “nearly a Japanese” in his attitude and ideas. His children are settled in the United Kingdom. His wife after whom the tea brand is name partners him in his business. A man of

many parts he can recite song lyrics from Bombay Talkies and quote Shakespeare and Dickens. The Indian expatriate community looks up to him for global business advice. They are grateful to him for getting help ranging from housing and food to linguistic interpretation and procedural direction.

Schooling in India & Knowledge of Japan

Japan was a mysterious and esoteric country for Indians in the 1970s. The art of bonsai, ikebana and the kimono looked abstruse to most Indians. Chandrani elaborates, “The colors woven on the Japanese kimono are invariably so many, yet they are neatly arranged as the areas covered by each column are rather small. The kimono looked unusual to me.” Indians also found the paper doors or *shoji* in wooden houses rather surprising. Young Chandrani had these two questions about Japanese houses: “How can you have a paper door? What safety would it give?”

Indian students from English-medium schools who did the Senior Cambridge exam in the 1960s were introduced to various cultures especially those of the UK and United States but their knowledge of Japan was limited to Fujiyama, geisha, *zaibatsu*, Minamata Disease and the Dodge Plan. For those from Calcutta there were other sources of information provided by fellow Bengalis who visited Japan such as Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Rash Behari Bose, Subhash Bose and Radha Binod Pal. Swami Vivekananda explained to Indians the Japanese love for their nation. He advised young Indian men to visit Japan to learn from it, but wondered if they would return to their home country after meeting beautiful and sweet Japanese girls.

Swami Vivekananda believed that unlike Indians, Japanese were not “subjugated” and because of it Japan became an exemplary country for India. Chandrani remembered that “in our school days it was a well-established idea that young people should go to Japan. In my mind Japan was a place to go to. I tried to learn more about Japan through American magazines like *Time* and *Life*. The story of Japan in *Life* was not a happy one. *Life* broke the news about Minamata Disease in the late 60s and early 70s. I was then in higher secondary in Don Bosco School and entering college. There was a photographer named Eugene Smith. He photographed the victims and published it. *Life* looked at the world, the world looked at life. Of course it was shocking. Seeing the human angle, how the family took care of people completely immobile and in tremendous pain was quite moving.”

Photo: Author



Jagmohan Chandrani at his office desk

Don Bosco High School, Calcutta

Chandrani studied Literature in English at the all-boys missionary-run Don Bosco School in Calcutta. He was a voracious reader of books in English. One day in English class he was secretly reading Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* when the class was on. "The teacher pulled my book from inside the desk and was surprised. He wanted to scold me but could not. Instead he made my literary habit somewhat exemplary as I was reading good literature." Chandrani was reading not only books in English but periodicals – "directly from magazines and got a drift of what was happening in the world." So he was not uncomfortable with people from other cultural backgrounds. As for Japan, not much information was available to him regarding "their culture and daily life".

Expo '70 in Japan

In 1970 an international exposition took place in Osaka called Expo '70. It was the first time the Expo had come to Asia. This was the time when it was not easy for Indians to procure a passport. But for this event the government of India allowed people to travel to Japan. "Even students from our school, my uncles and cousins went to Osaka. Since I had to appear for some exam my parents said I could not go. I felt extremely disappointed. At this time Japan was a world supplier of battery-operated toys. When my relatives returned from Japan they bought terylene clothes and saris for the ladies. I got a doll of Fuji Musume holding flowers and standing in a glass box. For children they got a battery-operated bus, Ferris wheel and merry-go-round. But I was unhappy that I could not go."

Business Family of the Chandranis

Three generations of Chandranis have been involved in the import-export business. Initially they began dealing in textiles and plastics from Japan to India. In the early 1970s Chandrani's paternal cousin was in the textile trade. His brother was in New York supplying the fashion industry dealing in textiles and fabrics. So his cousin would buy fabric from Osaka and send it to New York where it would be fabricated. In 1977 business in New York became quite intense, so Chandrani's cousin left Osaka for New York. A vacuum was created in Osaka. Chandrani states, "Since I was at a loose end and not married the finger landed on my head."

Japan in the Late 1970s

Coming to Japan in the late 1970s was not a great idea as both the local perception of India and the global business environment were not good. "Being young, inexperienced and new to the cultural and business environment of Japan added problems to setting up business." When Chandrani came to Japan in 1978 his work was to

handle trade enquires generated in India. So he was not so busy.

But he carried with him his student days' hobby of photography. Japan was a land of cameras and here he bought many expensive ones. "So I was in the center of Tokyo and at a loose end. When I was in college my father gave me money to buy a motorcycle but instead I bought an expensive camera with three lenses. Now in Japan I began to buy one camera after another. I began to do photography using film for slides. I began to have many things to do."

Trade Between India & Japan

This was a time of the Cold War between the US and Soviet Union. The Americans introduced the Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls (COCOM) policy, which did not allow any item of technology to be resold to the Soviets. Japan was also affected by it. India was deemed close to the Soviets. So India, as Chandrani said, "was under lock and key. We couldn't sell any technology-related equipment to India." Import of textiles from India was also a risky business. Some Indians were exporting Japanese watches but Chandrani did not take up this idea. He says, "I was young and felt exporting was not my game – *jawani ka josh*." He debated with the idea that he should import prawns, iron ore or textiles. But when he discussed with experienced Sindhi traders in Japan they dissuaded him, since he did not know the Japanese language and his Japanese would-be counterparts would not know English. How would he do sales? He asked himself "What should I import? Fashion changes in three or four months. Food gets spoilt quickly." He was at his wits' end. Then he hit upon an idea.

Entering the Tea Business

Chandrani came from Calcutta and had business connections in the tea trade. Internationally well-known companies were doing brisk business in Japan. He convinced himself, "This is the area I should enter." When his first tea consignment came from India he found a newly-built warehouse near Nishi Kasai. "So I came rushing down. My ship came and the tea boxes were brought by truck and kept in the warehouse. But my difficulties were not over." This was the decade of the 1980s. Thirty years had gone by and the Nehruvian era of romance with India was almost forgotten. The two elephants which were gifted by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to Ueno Zoo may have sired their offspring but the India-Japan bonding was weak. "The general impression of India in the 1980s was it was not a clean country and was difficult to do business with." A popular belief in Japan was that tea came from England not India. Many Japanese said, "I take English tea and not Indian." Hardly anyone knew that most of the English tea came from India. Chandrani confessed, "We had to do promotional activity for the tea we were selling. Drink this tea for 100 yen. If you don't like it, don't pay. Half an hour later

customers would come back for another cup.” After much effort he got a lucky break and entered a departmental and set up a tea store.

In the 1970s trade with India and Japan was quite limited. Japan was a closed market and the society was also not open. Imports of tea until 1972 were limited by a quota. Only a few companies, British brands mostly, were importing tea. In 1972 the restrictions were removed and tea could be freely imported. “Business in Indian cuisine, fabric textiles or prawns had their problems ranging from seasonality to lack of experience. We were trying to find something which had universal appeal. Tea seemed to be a good idea but most of the big companies were bagging and selling tea. I felt tea should be bought and brought directly from India. Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.” So Chandrani got tea directly from India to Japan in 1981. But he had big mountains to cross in front of him. Japanese buyers wanted to know will he be there tomorrow? He wondered if he could succeed in getting a Japanese clientele. Fortune smiled on him and he met the owner of a coffee house who not only served coffee but also tea. His coffee house served tea in pots. He gave Chandrani an 80-seater shop in Kawagoe to supply leaf tea, a blend of Assam and Nilgiri. Tea drinkers increased. “The coffee house owner had 240 shops of which he then gave us five shops. In six months with a new replacement of tea pots with tea bags made in Japan we could succeed. Then business increased.” There was a request to Chandrani from a Tokyo company which was buying black tea from his company to supply them with Japanese tea from Kyoto in tea bags. Two years later the Kyoto government presented Chandrani with a trophy for promoting Kyoto tea.

Changing Image of India

The image of India began to improve slowly from 1988 when Rajiv Gandhi organized the Festival of India in Japan. India was wooing Japan and trying to change its image of being a “hot and dirty” country to that of a lucrative market. It was during the 1980s that Suzuki entered India under the name Maruti Suzuki and Chandrani supported an OEM supplier to the company. When the Festival of India happened Chandrani was 30 years old, “a greenhorn” as he describes himself. In the Festival there was dance, drama and museum exhibits. “I decided to do a Mela which was held at the Ueno Park – sell *mitti ka khilona* (earthen toys), *dug-duggi* (small bamboo drums) and other similar goods.” The Children’s Day happened during this time and no entry fee was charged at Ueno Zoo. Thousands of people entered the Festival. “Indian handicrafts, goods, food were strange or *ajoba* for the Japanese. No fortunate wind blew our way. And after three or four days not much jelled.”

Entering Suzuki Business

Chandrani points out that the Indian government continued to woo Japanese businesses. It provided Suzuki with land and machinery

and asked it to “come and teach us”. At this time Germany, France, the US and Japan were the major countries manufacturing automobiles. So India came to Japan. Within this context Chandrani did consultancy in technology transfer to a Suzuki parts supplier. Suzuki was looking for parts suppliers through joint ventures in the manufacture and supply of car seats, doors, axles, brake fluid and coolant. Chandrani supported an OEM supplier of coolant and brake fluids to Maruti. “Being an OEM supplier was a major thing in the industry. The risk in coolant supply was less.” Working with a Japanese company who were suppliers of spare parts to Suzuki in Japan made it easy to tie up in India.

Y2K Bug & the Entry of Indian Engineers into Japan

Years passed and in 2000 the Y2K bug hit Japan. The bug turned the last two digits in a computer to 00 reverting it back by 100 years. Japan wanted engineers to rectify the problem. The US had already began employing Indian engineers. “When the Japanese came to know this, they were surprised,” said Chandrani. The Japanese prime minister, Yoshiro Mori, changed the immigration rules and allowed visas for Indian engineers. Japanese TV and magazines carried a “super good” image of India. A Japanese taxi driver once told Chandrani, “Indo, IT people, so strong in mathematics. They have a good brain.”

Board & Lodging & Support for Indian IT Professionals

Once the Indian IT engineers came they needed accommodation in Tokyo where they could cook their food. Their daily allowance was handsome, but as many of them were vegetarians, Japanese

Photo: Author



Spice Magic Calcutta Restaurant

restaurants got exasperated by what they wanted from them. They had to survive only on bread, butter and fruits. Hundreds of Indians came to work and live in central Tokyo. It was at this time Chandrani came into the picture. About 5,000 flats had been built in Nishi Kasai. “Four Indian families in Nishi Kasai – Hotani, Verma, Bhatt and Chandrani – got involved to help. Bhatt and Verma were in the travel not restaurant business. Hotani was a retired diplomat. So we would run into each other. In the month of August, we made a group of eight to support people coming from India. Suddenly Indians started coming who were looking for a place to live. Our group convinced local Japanese landlords to rent houses to Indians. These Indians also needed to eat Indian and vegetarian food.” Chandrani hired two Indian cooks who made simple Indian food – *subzi-roti-chawal* or vegetable curry, flat bread and rice. Food was provided on the basis of pre-paid coupons. Some engineers came for a short duration. Chandrani hired a building and converted it into a guest house for 20 persons. The customers paid 3,000 yen per day all inclusive. The guest house became totally full. From these humble beginnings Spice Magic Calcutta emerged which branched out into North Indian and South Indian cuisine in Nishi Kasai.

Nishi Kasai Community of Indians

Indians are family-oriented and enjoy themselves with family and friends. In Japan they often feel lonely when they cannot find a community. As the Nishi Kasai Indian community grew it needed a school, grocery shop and festival celebration like a Diwali Mela. For this purpose a *komin kaikan* (a public hall) was rented.

The acceptance of Indians in Japanese society was rather complex. Chandrani tells us: “There was admiration for their hard work and at their success. They were accepted but not by all.” After 1998 the number of Indians increased to 4,000. In Japan a new



Chandrani with family and friends



Chandrani speaking at the Diwali Festival in Nishi Kasai

image of foreigners emerged. So basically a perceptive change of the image of Indians came through information technology. There was a new respect for Indians. “Japan is unique and wants to preserve its uniqueness. I could do business with them. But after a day’s work you still have to learn a lot.” Looking at the future, Indians and Japanese need to assimilate with each other. Festivals like Diwali Festa in Nishi Kasai, Diwali in Yamashita Park, Yokohama and Namaste India that now occurs annually in Yoyogi Park have created a visible presence of Indians. “The Japanese share many things with the Indians – the way they give respect to elders, go to temples to pray and offer something there, and organize festivals.”

Connecting Business Initiative with World Events

Chandrani is conscious of political events, international policies, global trends, national stereotypes and efforts of Indian and Japanese leaders in opening business opportunities for expatriates and trading companies. He is able to connect his own business resources with popular cultural perceptions, business trends and the political directions of the last half century. His story tells us that in order to succeed we must balance our own inventiveness with an awareness of global trends. Another thing we learn from his life is that pursuing a hobby and maintaining an altruistic commitment to others can keep us happy and help us to innovate. Finally, he has a sense of humor and a twinkle in his eyes. His iconic beard has stood the test of time. He carries real experience from the university of hard knocks.

JS

Professor Mukesh Williams is advisor to the South Asia Research Center at Soka University, visiting faculty at Keio University, consultant/news analyst for the BBC World Service, St. Stephen’s College Alumni representative and Academic Exchange Programs coordinator in Japan.