

Interview with Prof. John Varghese, Principal, St. Stephen's College, Delhi

Driving Student Exchange Programs for Japanese Students

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

Prof. John Varghese, principal of St. Stephen's College, Delhi, is responsible for the day-to-day academic and administrative aspects of the college. In an interview with Naoyuki Haraoka, editor-in-chief of *Japan SPOTLIGHT*, he talks about student exchange programs between India and Japan.

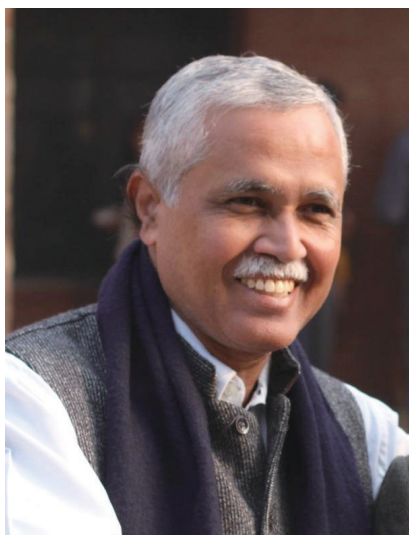
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History of Student Exchanges

JS: How do you assess student exchanges between India and Japan today? What do you think about the contribution made by St. Stephen's College to exchanges between the two countries? And could you tell us a bit about the history of student exchanges between India and Japan?

Varghese: I will answer these questions at two levels: the importance of exchange programs between India and Japan, and specifically about St. Stephen's College. The student exchange program between Soka University and St. Stephen's College has been one of happy progress. It has not only been good for the two institutions but also very good in terms of cooperation and building relations between India and Japan. Having been principal here for some time now, I have had the opportunity of seeing how these specific relations and exchanges between the two institutions have helped both institutions. At a larger level, they have helped the countries as well.

Since St. Stephen's College is one of the oldest colleges in North India, our relations with Japan go back to the 1960s and with Soka University the relationship is more than 30 years old. Our college has been able to share world-class knowledge in disciplines like English Literature, Economics, and History with visiting students from Soka. But it has not been a unidirectional exchange. Students from Japan have also brought in their culture and the value systems and have influenced Indian students at St. Stephen's College as well. So, I am very happy that it has worked both ways and that the young people of both the countries have benefitted. I'm particularly happy because, as we all know, the future of the world lies in the hands of our young



Prof. John Varghese

people and so this is a great significant benefit for our world.

The history of these successful exchanges brings two specific features into the foreground. One, it is possible for young people to achieve and complete whatever their seniors had started. Peace, for example. We know about the wonderful example of, or the personal example of, Dr. Daisaku Ikeda who was a strong proponent of peace. He stood up for peace by influencing the young people of Soka University and many other institutions. Now, when young Japanese students bring these ideas to India and share them with our young people at St. Stephen's College, it makes for a wonderful engagement. So, that way, these exchanges are able to take the larger goals that all our

seniors, leaders, and bureaucrats have been trying to achieve. Young people across the world understand in very realistic terms that goals across the world are the same: peace, a happy and war-free world, and good health for all. These goals are essential for people irrespective of the country they live in. Also, young people are very creative, and their knowledge of technology is much better than what seniors like you and I possess. Young people have a great ability to bring in their creativity and coupled with their knowledge of technology it is easier to achieve the sustainable development goals. So, particularly in our exchanges between India and Japan we have seen that, and it is a matter of great satisfaction. But as we all know, there is much more work to be done.

Sustainability of Global Environment

JS: Peace is a challenge in today's world. Another challenge is the sustainability of the global environment. What are your views on the global

environment as an issue to be discussed by students of the two countries?

Varghese: I think the sustainability of the global environment is a serious and high-priority goal. To give you an example, Delhi has been witnessing one of the highest levels of air pollution, and this is a matter of life and death for its inhabitants. Similarly, in many parts of the world, there are unseasonal rains and different kinds of pollution – all manmade disasters. The world belongs to our young people, and it is their world that we are threatening through our interference with the environment. Therefore, if we want our young people to be able to work comfortably and to bring development across the world, we should pave the way for them to work in an environment which is safe and good for them. So certainly that is a priority and we must encourage our young people to tell us, to point out to us some realities which seem to have escaped our attention.

Indian & Japanese Teachers

JS: Students exchange programs through language education are very important and productive in achieving long-term friendship among nations; for example, the JET program has contributed well to US-Japan friendship. In this regard, what do you think about inviting Indian English teachers to teach English in Japan or having more Japanese teachers to teach the Japanese language in India?

Varghese: I think that is a wonderful idea. And I think it is wonderful not only because the idea is good but also because it is good for the people who are going to implement the idea. I am referring to English teachers across the world, especially in India and Japan. Teachers in both countries are highly respected. They are considered a national treasure. Teachers help create the future.

A few years ago, we had a Japanese language teacher from Japan. She was then Ms. Ui Teramoto, but today she is Dr. Ui Teramoto. She came from Japan and stayed at St. Stephen's College for almost a year. She taught our students the Japanese language. I am so amazed at what she left behind. During her stay here, she influenced many minds and had a positive impact on many of her students, and on me and my colleagues. She taught well and brought with her certain qualities that were special to Japan: the gentleness in speech and behaviour, the paying attention to small details, and the excellent work ethic. All these have had a positive impact on all of us here at St. Stephen's College.

I was in Japan for a few days, and during my visit she was one of the people who supported me with the planning and execution of my work in Japan. So you see a teacher may come for only a few months or a year or maybe for a couple of years, but the impact lasts for a full life. It lasts for a long time especially when it is on students. It goes from one generation to the next. So I think the teacher exchange programs are a very good way to have a positive impact on each other's countries.

Humans are also great improvisers. So while the formal arrangement can specify that you will teach either the English language or the Japanese language, you can find more opportunities and avenues to influence each other positively. I also want to share the fact that in all our memoranda of understanding with institutions in Japan, we have a teacher exchange component, but from the college we have not really sent a teacher for a long period. We hope to rectify that, and I have been in conversation with the dean of international relations at the college, and he is very insistent that we must send a teacher for at least one semester to Japan to share not only language proficiency but also knowledge of other disciplines. So I am looking forward to seeing the time when we can have more of such teacher exchanges so that the institutions and countries benefit. It is not just about languages, but also social sciences like economics, history and the humanities. I would like to have more exchange programs in the fields of economics and information technology.

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam

JS: What do you think about encouraging student exchange programs for Japanese and Indian students studying social sciences or the humanities apart from subjects such as IT, science and mathematics?

Varghese: I would say the more the better. So faculties from the humanities should benefit from each other's knowledge and experience in their fields. We should also involve other disciplines – whether it is IT or social sciences. All of them have a serious contribution towards making a better world. Our prime minister, Narendra Modi, uses this wonderful phrase which is there in the Indian tradition. He talks about *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, which means the world is a family. In a family it is normal to exchange things, to ask for help, to support each other. So while there are many things that we learn from Japan – its culture, its technology, the discipline – we can also, whenever possible, offer help whether it

is in IT, the humanities, or social sciences. I think in every possible field we should collaborate and partner, supporting each other to grow because if we grow, then the world benefits.

Literature & Films

JS: What do you think about exchanges in literature and films? Should India and Japan have more cultural elements in common?

Varghese: Certainly, as you know, some Indian film stars are very popular in Japan; for example, Rajinikanth. He is very popular in Japan. In the same way, Amir Khan's film *Three Idiots* is very popular across the world. The Indian film industry has a significant impact on India's economy. So I think we should have a component of the Indian film industry and it should be both an academic and practical component where we look at the practical aspects of the Indian film industry and see how they can be brought in for other countries to follow. But we should also study the Indian film industry to see how it has an impact on the aging population, young population, and the economies of both our countries. So this is a wonderful area for study, and we should probably look at how it can be encouraged as a new upcoming field of study.

JS: That sounds good. I like old Indian films more than the new ones. I hope to see more old Indian films coming to Japan.

Varghese: Certainly, we can request the government of India through its Film Division to encourage the sharing of old Indian films as well. I have made a note of it and will share this point with the government.

Discussion & Symposium

JS: How do you think we could, from now on, expand the number of students exchange programs between the two countries – programs that reflect good economic and political relations? Do you think that organizing annual student panel discussions or symposiums on specific issues like the global environment would be a good idea?

Varghese: That is a wonderful suggestion. One of the best ways would be to invite leaders from our countries. We can invite the

minister of external affairs to come and interact with our young people, including Japanese students, so that leaders can share with young people their own ideas; and that is because, as we all know, these young people are the ones who will lead the world in the future. If ministers or people at the top in our countries come and answer the questions that our students may have, it will help continue the good work that our leaders are doing now. I think that is a wonderful idea. *Japan SPOTLIGHT* should take the lead in this area and organise one such event. At St. Stephen's College we would be more than happy to coordinate your efforts.

JS: Which do you think would be a greater impediment to the promotion of students exchange programs between the two countries – finances or human resources?

Varghese: As we know, whatever project we take up, there will be challenges and impediments. But if we have the determination and the will to get the goal achieved, we would be able to achieve it. So I agree with you that there will be financial impediments, logistical impediments, the difficulties of different time zones, and other kinds of impediments – these are all parts of the game, and we need to take it in our stride. Well, we should not regard human resources as an impediment. On the contrary, human resources are a great advantage. So although there will be differences in, let's say, the way I think and the way you think, our differences are not an impediment. I see that, on the contrary, our differences will help us to improve further. Therefore, impediments are not a problem. We should go ahead, collaborate and overcome the difficulties.

Indian & Japanese Entrepreneurs

JS: However, there seems to be a gap between the cultures of India and Japan. The Japanese are a bit conservative. Currently, they seem to hesitate to take risks. But Indians, in my view, are very good at taking risks. Perhaps that's why there are so many entrepreneurs in India. Japan does not have many entrepreneurs. So as far as deepening India-Japan relations is concerned, we can turn more towards Indian entrepreneurship. What do you think about exchanges between Indian and Japanese entrepreneurs in the future?

Varghese: I think it's already happening. India has the largest

ecosystem for entrepreneurship. The government supports entrepreneurs – both corporate and educational institutions. It encourages entrepreneurship; and while India may be taking the lead, other countries are not far behind. Recently, I was in Japan, and you will be glad to know some of our Japanese alumni are now thinking of putting together a small enterprise in Japan where they would use the English language skills that they have acquired while they studied at St. Stephen's College. They would use it for the benefit of Japanese companies – the hotel and other industries. As you can see, the exchange programs have had some impact on the entrepreneurship culture in Japan.

I am sure the exchange programs would help India and Japan exchange ideas and promote risk-taking, in a guarded manner, and help both countries, especially Japan. If this small group of our alumni can do it, why can't it happen in a big way when institutions in India and Japan exchange ideas and interact? I am quite positive about it.

Diversity in Japan & India

JS: In what ways do you think Japan would achieve better relations with India through students exchange programs, or in what ways would India improve its relations with Japan? We need to keep in mind that Japan needs to promote more diversity in its society.

Varghese: When I visited Japan recently, I went to a few cities, including Tokyo, Osaka, and Kobe – and there I saw a larger group of students and young people from other countries. Now that is a good sign. But I must say every country has unique qualities and features. India accepts other languages and cultures, and that has been one of its greatest strengths. But I must say that Japan should open a little bit more. If Japan starts looking at other cultures and languages, it will be good for the country. It would gain a lot.

JS: What do you think the Japanese and Indian governments should do to promote student exchanges?

Varghese: The governments of both countries should give every possible support to student-exchange programs. They should start thinking of long-term plans. They need to put in certain procedures as soon as possible. Why don't governments consider, for example, making student-exchange visas free of charge or at reduced fees. If that is done, it will encourage students to go to different countries.

The resulting mutual exchange will help benefit each country. When students go to other countries, they get to learn about different cultures; and they return to their home country with new ideas, with things that would help their home country to become qualitatively better. Governments should also offer institutions special privileges and awards and give them special grants based on their result-oriented student-exchange programs. Institutions should put forward their achievements in student exchanges to their respective governments. In return, the governments must give the institutions that show results special privileges and grants in recognition of the good work they have done. Governments should realise that it is the future that makes such demands.

Future Targets

JS: What is your plan for promoting student exchange programs and encouraging students to go for exchange programs at St. Stephen's College?

Varghese: As you already know, St. Stephen's College has been blessed to offer many good people not only to India but also to the world. If you look at institutions across the world, you will find that many of them are led by the good people who studied at St. Stephen's College. I want to see the good influence of the college increase by leaps and bounds. One of the ways of doing that is partnering with institutions not only in India but also across the world. I am confident that the long history of contributing good leaders to communities, to India, to world bodies will gain momentum. And you people are the key. St. Stephen's College must bring the excellence and service which it has practiced to every country of the world. That is my future target. I am sure it will happen, slowly. There is so much work to be done. All of us at the college need to contribute so that peace, happiness, and good health for everyone become a reality.

JS: Yes, I agree with you. Continuous effort, little by little, could be invaluable for achieving something big. We hope to be part of that effort. Of course, government initiatives are of paramount importance, but individual efforts or nongovernmental efforts should be considered as well.

JS

Written with the cooperation of Rajesh Williams, who is a professional editor and a writer with a background in instructional design, technical writing, technical editing, and teaching.