

# India-Japan Relations

By Aftab Seth

THERE was a meeting of minds 1500 years ago, a beating together of hearts, a spiritual union that occurred between India and Japan.

In the era of Shotoku Taishi (574-622), the sublime and compassionate message of the Buddha came to the shores of the stunningly beautiful Japanese archipelago. The Japanese people, the elites and the common men alike, embraced the teachings of the Buddha and internalised the essence of India's message of brotherhood, love and friendship. Japanese scholars over the centuries continued this intellectual discourse with India and several travelled to China and India for pilgrimage and the acquisition of knowledge. Notable among such scholars was Kobodaishi of Kagawa Prefecture whose birthplace in Zentsu-ji Temple is commemorated with a beautiful temple set amid a forest of camphor trees. Kobodaishi travelled to China in 804 and acquired precious Buddhist texts from India, which he brought back with him to Japan.

At the Buddhist University in Nalanda in Eastern India, scholars from the entire Buddhist world, in their thousands, gathered together to build a sense of "Asian consciousness" of which Japan was an integral part.

Techniques in textile design and manufacture such as *shibori*, or tie and dye, or calico-sarasa and the IKAT designs of Orissa marked another aspect of the cultural interflow between the two countries.

About 450 years ago, yet another dimension was added to the India-Japan story, by men like Saint Francis Xavier (1506-52). This Spanish missionary came to the west coast of India and established a centre in Goa. From there missionaries and traders travelled to Miyazaki and Kagoshima prefectures. Later Spanish, Dutch and English traders, from their bases in India and the East Indies, travelled to China and Japan. This traffic maintained a con-

stant flow of goods, people and ideas. Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542-1616) wanted to engage the Europeans in trade where the profit for them could be as high as 20-30%. Ieyasu, however, was persuaded to change his mind because of the European war, in which the Spanish Hapsburgs were fighting the Dutch, who sought their independence. In the event, the Dutch were the winners and the only Europeans permitted to trade with Japan, though they were confined to Dejima in Nagasaki Prefecture. Through the Dutch the exchange of goods between India and Japan continued, although the intellectual discourse was largely suspended.

This situation changed dramatically after the Meiji Restoration in 1868 and the opening up of Japan under new governance. While Japan's political orientation remained essentially western oriented, the important links with India were restored.

Tada Motokichi (1829-96) was sent to India by the Meiji Government to learn about black tea production. He travelled to tea gardens in Assam and Darjeeling and visited tea factories in Calcutta. On his return to Japan after a couple of years, he introduced black tea production in Shizuoka Prefecture, thus establishing a link which still exists today.

Sri Jamshed Tata, a leading industrialist of India en route to the United States, stopped in Japan and learned much from the rapid industrialisation that he witnessed at the end of the 19th century.

On the spiritual front Swami Vivekananda, the great disciple of Rama Krishna, who preached the message of tolerance and universal brotherhood, visited Japan. He went to all the major centres of Buddhist learning and was struck by the piety, cleanliness and patriotism of the Japanese. With the chief priest of Engaku-ji Temple in Kamakura, Vivekananda travelled to the

United States. In Chicago he and his Japanese friend shared the wisdom of the East with hundreds of intellectuals who had gathered to attend the 1st World Parliament of Religions in 1893.

Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel laureate poet, visited Japan three times in the early years of the 20th century. Shantiniketan and his Vishwabharati University became an important point of contact for Indo-Japanese intellectuals and artists. Okakura Tenshin, Yokoyama Taikan and Arai Kampo were amongst the prominent Japanese who brought back to Japan the art and spiritual heritage of India.

At the political level, the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05) had a profound impact on the Indian national movement. The Japanese victory over a major European empire split the Indian national Congress between those who wished to follow a constitutional path and those who wished to follow Japan and use military force to gain independence from the British.

It was to Japan again that a national leader, Rash Behari Bose, fled in the late 1920s and where he was given refuge. He married a Japanese woman, Nakamura Toshiko, and founded the first Indian restaurant in Japan in Shinjuku, Tokyo.

The relationship between India and Japan until 1939 saw many positive developments. Hundreds of Japanese businessmen lived in India, which was Japan's 3rd largest trade partner after the United States and China.

During World War II, Subhas Chandra Bose, a national leader, sought Japanese military help to build the Indian National Army (INA) composed of Indian prisoners of war, who had been captured by the Japanese army when the conquest of South East Asia was accomplished. Soldiers of the INA fought alongside their Japanese brothers in many battles. Thousands of them died and are buried together with the

Japanese in Imphal in Eastern India.

After the war, India made several important gestures of friendship towards Japan. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru refused to sign the San Francisco Treaty, which offended “the dignity of Japan.” Instead India signed separate peace treaties in April 1952 and waived all rights to reparations.

Nehru further encouraged Indian iron ore exporters to supply all Japanese requirements in order to rebuild Japan’s steel industry. Iron ore from Australia and other sources was not readily available to Japan. Deeply moved by the misery of Japanese citizens in the wake of the war, Nehru presented a baby elephant to Ueno Zoo in Tokyo in October 1949 as all the animals had either been poisoned or had starved to death during the war. The elephant named after his daughter Indira, who later also became Prime Minister, brought much cheer to the children of Japan and to their parents.

The Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal had an Indian judge, Radha Binod Pal, whose dissenting judgement holding the wartime leaders “not guilty,” did much to restore the sense of self-esteem and dignity of the Japanese people. Based on his understanding of International Law, Pal’s judgement was published in 1952 after the end of the occupation and lifting of censorship. It reinforced the impression that just as Gandhi wanted a “fair and non-violent” victory against the British, Pal wanted a “fair and non-violent” judgement of Japan and its leaders.

Indo-Japanese relations in the 1950s were marked by Japan’s decision in 1958 that India would be the first country to receive Japanese official development assistance (ODA).

A breakthrough in the relationship occurred in August 2000 when Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro made a historic official visit to India. The establishment of a “Global Partnership in the 21st Century” was strengthened by the subsequent visit to Japan in December 2001 of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and in April 2005 of Prime Minister

Koizumi Junichiro to India. In 2005 alone, almost 20 exchanges of cabinet rank ministers have taken place between India and Japan. A major decision has been taken to boost trade, investment and cooperation in science and technology.

At the United Nations (UN), India and Japan are together trying to ensure permanent membership of the UN Security Council (UNSC) for both countries. The G-4 draft resolution of July 6, 2005, which generated very wide support in the general membership at the General Assembly 59th Session, was resubmitted by Brazil, Germany and India on January 5, 2006. It is widely recognised that no other model for the reform and expansion of the UNSC has met with a similarly high level of endorsement. A comprehensive reform of the UNSC will bring it in line with contemporary realities and strengthen the UN as a whole. The objective of re-tableting the G-4 resolution is to instil positive dynamics into the process of UNSC reform, which had been emphasized in the outcome document of the World Summit held in September 2005. Brazil, Germany and India will continue the cooperative framework of the G-4 with Japan.

India and Japan share a common desire to see a multipolar world. We desire multilateral diplomacy, which seeks to enhance the prosperity, stability and security of Asia, and the sea lanes through which our commerce passes. We also wish to strengthen the global mechanisms for ensuring peace in the world at large.

India and Japan are equally committed to the concept of sustainable development which protects the environment of this planet, our common home. This is in keeping with Hindu and Buddhist traditions, and the inclusive ethos of Indian civilization.

Looking at the future, Japan’s relations with India are poised to move forward with a speed and intensity that has not been witnessed so far. The number of business organizations showing an interest in India continues to increase.

Japanese investment in India’s equity markets topped almost \$4 billion in 2005. At a recent sale of debt bonds in Japan, the Export-Import Bank of India was able to garner ¥23 billion. These are all signs of the increasing confidence with which Japanese business interests view India. But Japan needs to quicken the pace of its movement into India. It has to make up, in a sense, for lost time. South Korea and China have expanded trade and investment with India in the last decade at a rate which is several times larger than that of the Indo-Japanese figures.

The decision of the two Prime Ministers to expand the teaching of Japanese at Indian Institutes of Technology and at select high schools, with as many as 30,000 young Indians learning Japanese every year, will have a profound impact on the future of our relations. With India’s demographic advantage being sustained for the next three decades, India will continue to be a young country, with large numbers of skilled young workers being added to the workforce every year. Japan, on the other hand, has a declining birthrate and will therefore be able to make use of these bright young Japanese-speaking Indians, who will be available for work in Japan or with Japanese enterprises in India.

At the political level, and in matters relating to strategic issues, it is worth underlining that both our countries share many vital perceptions. In matters concerning the war on terrorism, the safety of sea lanes, the preservation and reinforcement of multilateral organizations and multilateral diplomacy, on the security and stability of Asia and on global problems like HIV/AIDS, bird flu and SARS, India and Japan have worked together in the past and will continue to cooperate in the future. Our ancient friendship will reach new heights in the decades and centuries to come. **JS**

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