

India-Japan: Building New Bridges

By Vickram Bahl

MY fascination with Japan began as a student in England during the early 1980's when the Japanese management style was talked about a great deal and Japanese investments were making small waves while entering the United Kingdom. However, I realized at that time even though I felt I knew Japan, like most Indians did, the truth was that I did not know enough. The fact that we had this comfortable feeling about Japan, almost to the point of taking Japan for granted as an old friend, was rooted in

our history. The world was moving ahead in a different direction but very few were noticing the change.

Most Indians of my generation who opted for a foreign education went either to the United Kingdom or the United States. In fact, Britain was the old favourite from my parent's generation. These English-speaking areas had a great advantage attracting young people from India and making them friends for life. Let us not forget that once you spend your formative years in a foreign country, you imbibe the culture through osmosis.

On the other hand, the East was largely ignored by Indians for education, primarily due to the linguistic barrier. Thus, speaking generally, the last two generations of Indians had a good understanding of the West but there was very little interaction among the young of the East. This is what is loosely

referred to as the Westernization of society that has been taking place at a rather rapid rate. However, this was not always the case but is only a recent phenomenon of the last century.

In fact, it was the exchange of people and ideas – more specifically, culture and philosophy – that brought India and Japan closer over the centuries preceding this period of Westernization.

Still Not Enough Understanding between the Two Countries

Even today, if we look closer, we find that India and Japan, the two great Eastern cultures, have many traits and values in common. Though Westernized, the people of both countries still retain their Eastern values. It is my opinion that a major factor that binds Japanese and Indians together is our Eastern thinking; many of which could be contributed to Hinduism, Shintoism and Buddhism.

I do not mean this in the strict context of religion – in this current context, religion may not be relevant as a bond – but the effect it has had on the values, thought processes and culture of our people is a bond that exists even today. What is surprising is that not many people are aware of the magnitude of the influence that we have had on each other.

The Japanese Ambassador to India, Enoki Yasukuni, talked on the subject of the cultural and historical bond that linked India and Japan at a reception.

Very few of us knew that the Indian legendary story, the Mahabharata, has been transformed into the Narukami of Kabuki theatre and the Ikkaku-sennin of Noh. Also, the Kyoto Gion festival that has lasted for

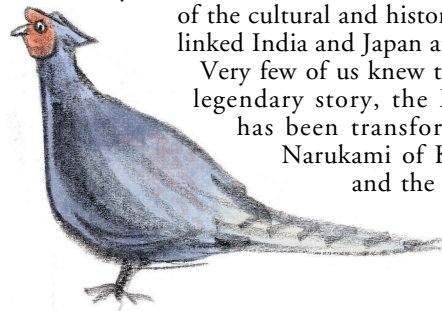


Illustration: Inagaki Taketaka

10 centuries has its roots in India. It is very similar to the Rath Yatra of Jagannath temple in Puri, India. Another interesting fact is that the *Biwa*, a Japanese traditional musical instrument, originated from the *Veena*, the Indian Goddess Saraswati's favourite instrument.

However, the facts of today are that despite the good historical relations – barring the one instance of cooling of relations during India's nuclear tests; which are behind us now – we are still not having people-to-people contact at the level that we once had.

In my opinion, this is what needs to be remedied.

In order to increase interaction between Indians and Japanese, a regular flow of information is a must. India has about 120 TV channels beaming in and has one of the largest television audiences in the world. If Japan wants Indians to understand the Japanese way of life, a good mix of television programmes for the Indian audience would be the best vehicle. In fact, some other countries, such as South Korea, have already started providing Indian television channels with special soap operas that showcase their culture. Special news and documentaries are also favoured routes. BBC, CNN, CNBC and many other international news, current affairs and business channels already have special content on and for India. Japan has yet to take advantage of these routes and the visibility of Japanese TV is extremely limited.

Surprisingly, even the Japanese people based in India, including leading CEO's of Japanese companies, are shy to talk on television, thus reducing the chances of people knowing more about Japan and its people. In my experience getting a Japanese guest for my TV show is the most difficult of all nationalities. This is a missed opportunity for Japanese business and culture.

Food is also a great bridge between the Indians and Japanese. Even though Japanese food is gaining popularity among the upper middle class

and rich Indians, it is still extremely low in visibility and very expensive in India. Sushi boxes are sold at Marks and Spencer stores in the United Kingdom along with the sandwiches. If it can happen there, why can it not happen in India? This is a missed opportunity for the Indians.

At this stage, let me put the picture in balance by mentioning that in recent times much is being done at various levels to put the Indo-Japanese relationship in a very special category of true friendship.

The Japanese in India, who have generally been a closed club in the past, are making the effort to interact even more. Nakajima Etsuji, who is the President of the Japanese Club – an exclusive private group of Japanese people based in India – recently invited me to interact with the members at one of their regular meetings. The effort made by the Japanese to engage with us showed a genuine feeling of warmth towards India. It is this sort of interaction at a people-to-people level that is yielding tangible results.

Just to give an example of how even a small piece of information or gesture can carry a big message, let me go back to Ambassador Enoki's speech on Indian and Japanese historical ties. He mentions the erection of a statue of Bodhisena – the first recorded Indian visitor to Japan in 736 AD, at the invitation of Emperor Shomu – in 2002, nearly 13 centuries later at Todai-ji Temple. This showed the relevance that the Japanese accorded to their historical ties especially with India, and put our history in today's context.

The Indian Year in Japan, the Japanese Year in India in 2007

Thankfully, there is even more happening. Both governments have recognised the need to nurture this old friendship. The result is that India and Japan are having the Indian year in Japan and the Japanese year in India, respectively, in 2007.

On the business front, too, Japan is

doing well with India. Total trade between Japan and India was around \$5 billion in 2004-05 and Japan is among India's top five trading partners. Japan has also emerged as India's 4th largest foreign direct investment (FDI) contributor for the period of 1991-2004. But what is most interesting is the recognition at the India-Japan Business Summit 2006 that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are the key to the Indo-Japan business relationship of the future. The announcement of the opening of a Japan External Trade Organisation (JETRO) office in Bangalore and the Japan Support Centre in Delhi to assist SMEs setting up business link with India was a much needed step. The big companies have the financial strength to explore and experiment. It is the SMEs that need information and assistance in contact building and specialised business development services.

Currently there are 330 Japanese companies operating in India, of which 100 have moved in during the last two years. Estimates are that this number will go up sharply with the assistance being given to SMEs. It is also estimated that Japanese investment in India is expected to grow around \$2 billion over 2006-07.

Apart from wealth creation, which is today's prime goal for all democratic societies, I hope that the Indians and Japanese can build a stronger friendship based on what I call our Eastern thinking. This Eastern thinking is a way of life; it is difficult to qualify and quantify, but it is tangible and understood by the philosophical people of India and Japan.

The Eastern friendship is probably best described in the words of Epicurus "It is not so much our friends' help that helps us as the confident knowledge that they will help us." **JS**

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