

THE INDIA-JAPAN RELATIONSHIP

By

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Honorable Mr. Raj Kumar Srivastava, Deputy Chief of Mission, Swamiji Medhasananda of the Vedantic Society of Japan, my many Friends from India and Japan, Ladies and Gentlemen, today happens to be the 155th anniversary of the birth of Swami Vivekananda, as well as the 125th anniversary of his visit to Japan. On this occasion I must confess I am deeply honored to be called upon to speak to you all on the topic of relations between India and Japan, and accordingly, I express my sincere gratitude to the organizers of this event for their kind invitation.

Now, to offer you all a brief self-introduction, I am currently a Visiting Fellow of the Institute of Asian, African, and Middle Eastern Studies at Sophia University, as well as Assistant Director and Visiting Professor at the Center for South Asian Studies at Gifu Women's University. My first visit to India was in 1977, at the time of the proclamation of the emergency by India's former Prime Minister, the late Mrs. Indira Gandhi, and her subsequent defeat in the elections. At that time, I happened to be a second-year university undergraduate. From 1981, for a period of three years, I studied as a foreign graduate student at Benares Hindu University, and obtained a Ph.D. in Sociology. As a researcher, the subject of my specialty concerns India's society and people. I spent approximately a year in a small farming village located in the eastern part of the State of Utter Pradesh, and conducted participatory observational research as field work. This research earned for me a doctorate, and my doctoral thesis was subsequently published in both Delhi and London. Since then around 40 years have elapsed, yet I continue to visit the village and maintain my links with the villagers, by pursuing my study under the overall theme of 'transformations that have occurred in the farming village and in the lives of the people.'

Well, the subject of today's talk concerns the relationship between India and Japan. This being the case, I shall hereafter briefly present before you all my analyses and proposals, with regard to the development of relations between our two nations.

[1]: Swami Vivekananda set foot in Japan 125 years ago. He arrived in Japan in 1893, namely the 26th year of the Meiji era. He spent some time in the South Indian city of Chennai (which at that time was referred to as Madras), and here he discussed the future of India and Hinduism with some young people. The youngsters who heard him were deeply impressed. They bade him participate as the representative of Hinduism in the World Parliament of Religions that was

slated to be held in the city of Chicago in America, and Swami Vivekananda too, complying with their request, decided to sail for America.

Swami Vivekananda at that time was 30 years of age. On May 31st he set sail from Mumbai (which at that time was called Bombay), and the ship on which he sailed, namely the Peninsula, eventually reached Nagasaki after docking at Singapore, Hongkong, and other ports. From Nagasaki, journeying by land he spent some time in Osaka, Kyoto, and Tokyo, before eventually heading for Yokohama, from where he set sail for America.

As regards the lectures and talks he delivered while in Japan, we have no detailed information. However, since the Tokaido Line was opened in July 1889, I am of the view that his initial glimpses of Japan were acquired through the windows of trains. From Yokohama he sailed aboard a ship named the ‘Empress of India,’ and around the middle of July he arrived into the port of Vancouver in Canada. His visit to Japan was brief and he journeyed mostly by road, and yet, during this short space of time, he succeeded in acquiring a profound insight into the unique facets of Japanese society.

For example, during an interview that he gave for a Chennai newspaper in February 1897, he declared:

1. Japanese have a great sense of loyalty and love for their nation, even to the extent of sacrificing everything for it.
2. Their Art is authentic.
3. The Buddhism they follow, namely the Mahayana school of Buddhism, differs from the Theravada Buddhism of Ceylon (the former name of Sri Lanka). It is a theistic and positive Buddhism, similar to Vedanta.
4. Japan seeks to absorb deeply the wisdom of the West, while at the same time sustaining its own spirituality.
5. Japanese eat optimal amounts of cooked rice and miso soup.
6. It would be better for young Indians to pursue their studies in Japan rather than in England.

As witnessed from the above statements Swami Vivekananda rated Japan highly, though sad to say his health eventually deteriorated to such an extent, that his second visit to Japan was not realized. I shall hereafter conduct a scrutiny of Japan’s society of that time, and study the links it bears to the society of today.

[2]: I shall henceforth diverge a little from the subject of Swami Vivekananda’s Japan visit, and speak instead about the relationship between India and Japan. When speaking of this relationship, invariably our thoughts turn to the fact of

India being the ‘Land of Buddhism,’ as the birthplace of Shakyamuni Buddha, or the ‘land that created curry rice,’ and so on and so forth.

Of course, since recent times India’s Information Technology (IT), its huge consumer market that is sustained by a substantial population, and even more, its reputation as a land of prodigies capable of the efficient use of 4-digit arithmetic and so on, have given rise to fresh images of the nation, so much so that India is now being considered even with reference to security issues.

Nonetheless however, present-day Indian society and its people are issues that are almost wholly unknown to the average Japanese. This perhaps is due to the fact that in 21st century India, poverty and economic growth are intermingled, and this in turn has given rise to an excessively complex form of society. It is possible too that the nation’s robust religious faith, which exceeds the vision of the average Japanese, or the fact of a society wherein a multiplicity of religions co-exist, are matters that the Japanese people find hard to fathom.

India is a country that has never ceased to intrigue sizeable numbers of the world’s residents, and people from nations all over the globe have visited India. They have resonated with the figures that pervade the nation’s vast history, they have experienced feelings of wonder at the nation’s religious etiquette that has been conveyed from the past, or, in an ambience of profound emotion, they have felt themselves drawn into the nation’s all-encompassing space-time.

On the assumption that Buddhism, which originated in India, entered Japan in the 6th century, the Japanese people referred to India as ‘Tenjiku,’ and it was looked upon as a nation that one yearned for.

Also, the South Indian Buddhist monk Bodhisena arrived in Japan from ‘Tenjiku’ in the 8th century after journeying through China, and he performed the eye-opening ceremony for the giant bronze statue of Buddha Mahavairocana in the Tōdaiji Temple, located in the city of Nara. In the Kamakura Period, the senior monk Myōe Shonin, who also went by the name Kōben, and who restored the Kōzanji Temple (located in Umegahata Toganōchō in Kyoto), was keen on visiting Tenjiku. He has left us an unaffected record of his travels, despite the fact that his journey to Tenjiku was not realized.

This yearning that people had for Tenjiku, the birthplace of Buddhism, was fostered by hymns that extolled it as the most ideal place on earth. Furthermore, it underscored the fact these three nations, namely Tenjiku, China, (which had created an outstanding culture), and Japan, were specially linked to one another, and hence this longing for Tenjiku even pervaded the ranks of the common man.

Among the Japanese, India for lengthy periods continued to be viewed as a far-away land of human yearning, possessing links that led to the sacred sites of Buddhism. Needless to say, in accordance with this belief, since the people of India too lived in areas that were sacred to Buddhism, they too were offered the type of treatment one would grant to sacred Buddhist objects. One might also add that the Japanese of those days did not restrict this way of thinking to people who lived only in their own times, but rather, included people of other times as well.

What is clear to us is that as regards Tenjiku or India, from the remote past to modern times, the thoughts of the Japanese were focused not so much upon the hardships that pervaded the society and livelihood of the Indians. Rather, they were focused more upon this feeling of yearning for India, something that was far removed from the reality that pervaded the place.

In the middle of the 19th century, during the Meiji Restoration that followed the re-opening of Japan to the world, many young Japanese sailed to Europe, and in the course of their voyage some stopped by in India. This was not merely due to their interest in India as a land sacred to Buddhism. Rather, for them who were sailing to Europe with high expectations of acquiring knowledge from the West, India projected an image that was quaint and curious. That is to say, for academics and young intellectuals of Japan, a nation that had just begun to embark upon the path to modernism, India appeared to be a nation writhing under the torment of colonialism, a pitiful nation mired in poverty and gasping under oppression. It was thus that Tenjiku, which for long had served as an object of yearning for vast numbers of Japanese, now came to be viewed as a victim of Western colonialism, a nation undergoing the agonies of penury and destitution.

In fact, after the Meiji Restoration there arose a change in Japan's outlook, as conveyed by the words, "we should not become like India." Additionally, such changes also gave rise to the reaction that Japan should endure as a nation of Asia, that was strong enough to resist the Western colonial powers. It was precisely at that time that Swami Vivekananda chose to visit to Japan, and his visit turned out into becoming an event of critical value for both nations.

Sad to say though, ideas of nationalism began to be emphasized in Japanese society, and in due course the hand of invasion began to be stretched out towards Asia, including towards India, the land of yearning.

In the early 20th century, Nobel Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, visited Japan on five separate occasions. He introduced Indian culture to the scholarly elite of Japan and commenced a fresh cultural exchange between Japan and India, an exchange that was not limited to Buddhism.

Aside from providing a spiritual boost to the independence movement and defying the colossal British Empire, Mahatma Gandhi was an individual who was accepted by the Japanese people with feelings of profound awe. In Japan, a nation that was nursing designs of launching a counter-offensive against Western control and thereby becoming a spokesperson for Asia, Gandhi became a new target of esteem, and his role as an Asian who would defy the West, was highlighted.

In actual fact Gandhi's notions of non-violence and civil disobedience were promptly translated and conveyed to the Japanese, but on gauging the issue, we may perhaps say that the people associated with the society and press of those days, were unable to acquire a suitable grasp of what those notions implied. That is to say, while promoting the liberation of the Asian People from the hegemony of the West, Japan to the very end, set its sight upon attaining in an expedient manner, both the freedom of the Asian People, and the overthrow of Western Imperialism. It is also clear that once this Western control was toppled, the plan was for Japan itself to occupy their place.

In reality however, Japan, which was proactively endorsing the subjugation of Asia, went on to invade British India, modern India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar (Burma). As regards relations between India and Japan at that time, there is little indication of adverse history. However, that was merely due to the fact that it was an issue that was never raised, as it was considered bad for both nations. Even so however, it is undeniably a portion of history that we should never forget.

In the aftermath of the Second World War India gained independence from Great Britain in 1947, and thereafter, all its policies towards Japan, which was now an occupied country exhausted by defeat, exerted a forceful impression upon the Japanese public. Certain initiatives taken by India, as for example at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, the insistence of Dr. Radha Binod Pal of India that the trial should be declared invalid on the basis of the principle of legality, India's refusal to participate in the San Francisco Peace Conference of 1951 as a sign of protest against the continued presence of foreign troops (the US army) in Japan, the separate peace treaty signed between India and Japan, and other similar moves, all led to a brightening of the prospects of Independent India.

It is obvious that for India, which after gaining independence had promptly acquired the awareness of its being a great nation, all such policies were purely a reaction against the Western powers. Such efforts of India, regardless of whether they stemmed from the colonial India of 1945 or the newly emerging India of 1947, evoked fresh reactions of goodwill among the Japanese, and the exultant welcome Prime minister Nehru received on his first visit to Japan in 1957, was emblematic of this. In Japan, sentiments of intimacy towards the great Indian nation were reinforced, feelings of yearning began to develop towards this new

India, and one might even go so far as to say that regarding Indo-Japan relations, the suitable keyword was “yearning.”

After 1950, India chose to adopt a pro-soviet stance, and this subsequently led to a distancing of itself from Japan. In actual fact though, until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, relations between India and Japan were lethargic, and economic links remained torpid. The allure the Japanese had for India continued unabated, but now, more than Buddhist worship, they tended to view India as a place where people could travel freely, and where mutual accord was concerned, there seemed to be a dearth.

I personally would describe the relationship between India and Japan as a “mutual misjudgment of goodwill.” There is no preconceived malice or ill will on either side, and each has a good impression of the other. For example, in Japan, whenever we recall India, the images that arise within our minds are linked to the growth of IT (Information Technology), people skilled in mathematics, delicious Indian curry, and so on, while in the case of India, whenever Indians recall Japan, they promptly visualize images of a society bouncing back from the ravages of the atomic bomb, brand name products of cutting-edge technology, and so on. Problems arise because people have a tendency to rely on these images alone, and not on the reality from which such images originate. The authentic state of society, the livelihood of the people, and other related issues are often ignored and not conveyed to the other party, and this inevitably results in the failure of mutual cooperation, and an inability on our part to find solutions to our problems. More than looking for praise or adulation, what we are called upon to do is to struggle towards the attainment of the type of mutual relationship, that will counteract and offset such drawbacks and hurdles.

India is a huge nation, with a population increasing to massive proportions. It possesses a large consumer market, a thriving economy, and a youthful society of an average age of 27 years, which seems all set to expand even more. Japan on the other hand is an aging society, with a diminishing number of young people. Since its population is slated to decline in the years to come, the maintenance of its current industries and economic structures, the management of its society and so on, are issues that are likely to prove arduous in the coming decades. In view of this, it is essential these two nations reach out their hands to each other in a spirit of earnestness and discharge their roles as world leaders, especially with regard to the betterment of public welfare and protection of the environment.

[3]: In conclusion, I wish to say that it is vital for both Japan and India to acquire an adequate perception of one another’s societies, peoples, and ideologies. The spirit of ‘yearning’ alone will no longer serve to sustain bonds between them. The

two need to learn from each other, exchange views, clarify issues on which they agree and differ, and assist one another for the benefit of both.

Recently there has been much debate concerning the relationship between India and Japan in connection with certain International Political Issues, namely, the relationship with China. Frankly I feel a bit uneasy about this.

What we need right now is for the people of India and Japan to learn from each other how to live as human beings, for this is what is demanded of us. Hence, for us who are members of Japan's society, to learn from a reputed sage of the stature of Swami Vivekananda, is an issue of supreme significance. In addition, I desire that the Indian people persist in their efforts to acquire an insight into the culture of Japan, and I desire also that they look upon these efforts as a means to reflect upon and get to know better, their own culture as well.

The spirit of 'yearning' is a requisite whose cogency endures to this very day, yet it needs to be converted into a form that is applicable to the present age. In other words, it needs to be accompanied by a clear insight into what it implies, and an attitude of mutual respect for one another.

In closing, I wish to express my sincere thankfulness to all of you for your cooperation, and I affirm once again my desire to work for the betterment of ties between our two nations. Thank you very much.