

**Tales of Business Entrepreneurs and Professionals: Exploring
the Working Experiences of Indian Immigrants in Japan**

Megha Wadhwa

Post Doctoral Fellow,

Institute of Asian, African and Middle East Studies,

Sophia University, Japan

Abstract

Japan and India possess links dating a long way back in history, and the intricacies of their cultures comprise a factor among their numerous likenesses. Foreigners often find Japanese culture and customs distinctive, and getting acclimatized to them takes time, and Indians living in Japan too are no exception. This paper, based on an ethnographic research of (around 108) Indian migrants in Tokyo and its vicinity, aims to present their stories of migration reflecting on the old and new patterns of mobility. It focuses on the important questions of when, why, how and under what circumstances these men and women moved to Japan and further reflects on their aspirations of leaving or living in Japan and the reasons behind it.

Introduction

The first arrival of Indian merchants in Japan appears to have been in the early 1870s.¹ These Indian businessmen imported Japanese silk, for which they travelled to Yokohama and Kobe. These trade linkages gradually encouraged the migration of traders and businessmen to Japan. While the whole movement initially started from Yokohama, yet later a large number of migrants moved to

¹ (Chandru 1993; Chugani 2003; Dhar 2004; Prakash 2006; Kumar 2010)

² B.A. Prakash, p. 212 (Encyclopedia)

³ Hiroshi Shimizu, 2005.

⁴ Ibid, p.29

⁵ Ibid.

⁶, Prakash, p.212.

Kobe, as the city became prominent as a trading center for Asian countries.² It is believed that Yokohama was the main center of silk manufacture, and Kobe gained prominence in the field of cotton imports.³ The first direct trade-shipping route between Kobe and Bombay developed in 1893. Several Indian trading companies set up branches in Kobe to import raw cotton, indigo, skins, tins and ivory from India, and export silk goods and sundries to the same country.⁴ By 1901 there were twenty-six Indian residents in Kobe, most of who seem to have been involved in commerce, and within four years this number more than doubled to fifty-nine merchants.⁵ The movement of commercial migrants intensified during the last two decades of the 19th century, and trade between the two countries expanded following the opening of shipping routes to Calcutta in 1910 and Madras in 1936.⁶ Indians in Japan had founded their own social organizations by the beginning of the 20th century. The Indian students in Tokyo established the Hindustan Association in 1902, and in Kobe ‘the Oriental Young Men’s club’⁷ which later was renamed “India club”, was founded in 1904. The India-Japan club was also founded during the same period to foster India-Japan relations. In 1921, the Indian Merchants’ association was also founded in Yokohama, but in 1923 the Great Kanto Earthquake led to the death of about 36 Indians in Yokohama,⁸ and so thereafter many Indians moved from Yokohama to Kobe. The Indian social organizations in Kobe supported these Indians. Kobe became the main commercial as well as social center for the Indian businessmen, and it continued until the 1970s. In 1934, the Indo-Japanese Trade treaty came into effect, which imposed import regulations on general textiles and raised

² B.A. Prakash, p. 212 (Encyclopedia)

³ Hiroshi Shimizu, 2005.

⁴ Ibid, p.29

⁵ Ibid.

⁶, Prakash, p.212.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

imposed duties on regular merchandise. Despite these regulations the first half of the 20th century saw an increase in the number of commercial migrants and trading firms in Japan, and between 1923 and 1939 the number of trading firms increased from approximately 120 to 200.⁹

During the war period from 1939-45 there was a decline of trade and commercial correlations between India and Japan, and this also impacted the Indian firms in Japan very critically, as a result of which several businesses were shut down. Apart from that there were also many re-migrations to cities like Bangkok, Singapore and Rangoon, and this led to a decline in the number of Indians in Japan. The post-war years yet again revived the migration of Indians to Japan. There were now Indian businessmen involved in the pearl trade, and there were a number of others who opened garment shops and catered to the US military personnel and their families. From then on the number of Indians continued to increase.

Today in the twenty first century Indian migration to Japan has seen a major shift. It has not only gradually increased but has also experienced an influx of professionals to Japan. In the year 2000, the 'India-Japan Global Partnership in the 21st century' contract was signed between Japan and India – one of the remedies for Japan to overcome its shortage of IT engineers. The increase in the number of Indian IT's in Japan, or other countries like the USA, also was the outcome of the growth of the IT industry in India. This growth largely resulted from labor markets and migrants beyond national borders, and the Indian IT engineers who lived in the USA, later launched firms in India (Sawa: 2013). It would not be wrong to say that even though IT did create a new focus and branding for Indian migrants, yet all the migrating professionals were

⁹ Ibid.

not necessarily IT engineers. This paper reflecting on the case studies of the old and new diasporas, would not only tell their story of migration to Japan but would also be used as a tool to reflect on the changing trends and their outcomes. It would mainly be reflected under two main categories – those working as business entrepreneurs and those working as professionals.

Case I – Chandru Advani – The longest living Indian in Japan

A Hindu born in Sindh, in undivided India and a member of Sindhi community, Mr. Advani moved to Japan in 1953. He was only 29 years old at that time. The journey took 45 days on a British ship that docked in one of the Tokyo's vicinity, Yokohama. He started working as a General Manager in an Indian Trading company. In 1958, after he had his first child he was asked to leave the company, as the boss was hesitant to support his family expenses. With the support of Japanese and a few Indian friends he finally started his own company in 1959 and there was no looking back for him after that. He presently lives with his daughter and his son is settled in Singapore. His wife passed away in 2015 and her last rituals were all conducted in Yokahama with the help of local authorities.

Case II – Mr. Kapur – A long stayer with a Japanese Spouse

He was in his mid-twenties and was employed in a factory in the outskirts of New Delhi. Someone informed him about a scholarship program for Japan. For better career prospects he decided to apply for it and got selected. He applied for the scholarship and finally came to Japan by sea and it took him 21 days. He came to Tokyo in 1969. He studied Japanese and found himself a part-time job in a factory. During this stay a Japanese offered him a job in India where he was

planning to open a factory in Bihar. Mr. Kapur agreed and worked there for almost four years and decided to move back to Japan. Even though he enjoyed and shared a good relationship with the Japanese counterparts in India but had a hard time dealing with the Indian employees. He found himself a job in Sapporo (north of Japan) with a travel agency. Finally in 1983, he started his own production house and has been a proprietor since then. He is married to a Japanese and has two sons.

Understanding the old patterns of mobility

In the case of Mr. Advani and Mr. Kapur the main factors behind migration were lack of opportunities in their own country. The migration in their case was more of a need for them. There are several other long stayers who had similar stories and even today similar scenarios exist. There are people who had and still move to Japan and are employed in the companies owned by some family members, acquaintances, relatives and so on. And some others move to Japan on scholarships and find themselves a job in India or Japan.

The most interesting and striking similarity amongst this group of Indian Diaspora in Japan was their desire to keep their Indian Citizenship. Mr. Advani said, "I love India and I am Indian first, and I would want die as an Indian. But I also love Japan. I am a Hamakko (Child of Yokohama) as much as I am an Indojin (Indian)". Also, Mr. Kapur said something similar, "I am 200% Indian but I love Japan very much. I cannot go back to India to work but I would love to go back and retire there."

The majority showed no interest in giving up their Indian passports even after decades of living in Japan. They make several efforts to stay connected with their roots by celebrating most of the festivals and conducting other religious

activities together and individually. On the other hand they prefer to keep Japan as their base for business while involving India and other countries in their business as well. The main reason for this was the ease and trust they experience in Japan.

Case III – Mr. Vishwas – The Professional world

Mr. Vishwas, an Engineer of 40 years, completed his 20 years in 2016. He came to Japan and studied in a Japanese university. While doing so he also attained intermediate Japanese language skills and later found himself a job in a big Japanese multinational company. He has been with this company for almost ten years now and seems to have well adapted to his working atmosphere and credits his Japanese language skills and the supportive co-workers for it.

Case IV – Mr. Jain

Mr. Jain, 33 years old Recruiter (as of 2016), completed his 13 years in Japan. He also came to Japan to study in a University. He had only basic Japanese language skills and was employed in the same company as Mr. Vishwas. He was told that they need English speaking employees and the Japanese skills did not matter much. But after he joined the company things turned out to be different. All the meetings and documents were mostly in Japanese and it became very challenging for him. Even though his co-workers were supportive but he was expected to further improve his Japanese on job. It seemed almost impossible and he quit his job after two years and found himself a job in an English speaking recruiting company. In the long run he felt that his career progress in Japan due to his language limitation was limited and decided to move to Singapore. Beginning of 2017 he started working in a company in Singapore and at the career front he seems to be more settled and satisfied.

Conceptualizing The New Trends of Mobility – The Professional World

There are people like Mr. Vishwas who adapt to their working environment and enjoy working in Japanese companies. The long working hours or the language barrier are not the things that trouble them. Then there are those like Mr. Jain who prefer working in an international atmosphere and are also lucky to find such jobs. They enjoy mingling with people from other international communities and enjoy the non-conventional atmosphere at their workplaces.

In the recent years Japan is looking for an antidote for its ageing population. Several companies tend to go to India and do the head hunting. Also, some Indian IT companies in Japan recruit many people from India. Most of these people come with only basic language skills and eventually the language barrier and other work challenges either make them leave Japan or find themselves jobs elsewhere within or outside Japan. One of the respondents commented on the online forum,

“I hope these engineers from reputed colleges won't just have to create multicolored excel files. Only a comment for IT related jobs in Japan, as that is where I work. Even though everyone's experience is different, most of us realize that the expectations & scope of work for IT engineers in Japan is very different than in India and other western countries. Whether these 'expectations and scope of work' is good or bad, is an individual call. But I hope that these youngsters will do their homework and not just accept the offer because the Japanese

companies who make it look like the best deal ever lures them into it.”

Later during an interview, a respondent mentioned about the similar situation and how these circumstances resulted in many of his co-workers going back to India or other destinations in less than a period of one year of hiring. Long working hours, low salary, not much growth and overall working atmosphere are mainly the reasons for many deciding to quit their jobs.

Married Women at Work

Majority of the Indian women move to Japan as a ‘trailing spouse’. And they are only 30% of the whole Indian population in Japan. There are single women who move to Japan either for better career prospects or to study. But only a few of them end up being long stayers, the rest either move back to India or migrate to other countries. As Yeoh and Khoo mention, “women, in particular have usually been relegated to the role of “trailing spouses,” and are generally invisible in the migration process.” This also refers to the majority of the married Indian women in Japan, where men who move for opportunities tend to overshadow them. In this part, focusing on the married Indian women, I shall seek to probe their lives in Tokyo, as they cope with the diversity of situations and create opportunities for themselves while confronting challenges.

Most of my female respondents who moved to Japan after marriage are well educated. Most of them have acquired higher education, and attained bachelor’s degree. There were some with Master’s degree and Ph.D holders as well. Majority had acquired their education from reputed Universities in India. Some were also doing jobs in India, which they had to quit after moving to Japan.

For those who wanted to work, finding a job in Japan was very challenging due to lack of language skills. As a result, many of them ended up being English teachers or teachers in other subjects, mostly at the Indian schools in Japan. There are others who are able to find themselves full time jobs which they eventually quit after they have a kid or because of long and tiring working hours. There are also those who start small-scale business, mainly catering like Indians sweets, cakes and so on. Some also start home-based parlors and offer inexpensive parlor services (compared to local parlors) using Indian products. Their main targets are the members of the Indian community.

Despite the challenges these women find ways to not only survive but also thrive in their new environments. While most find Japan convenient yet they miss the earlier comforts they had known, and while they appreciate the nation's peaceful ambiance it also makes them feel lonely. To overcome such isolation they put in utmost efforts to keep busy in some way or other, either by working or fulfilling roles as homemakers. They discover ways to become self-dependent and earn some income, so as to contribute in their household, to their children's education, or in some cases, even to secretly support their parents back home.

Concluding Remarks

This paper reflecting on the various trends of the migration of Indians to Japan, aims to focus on the changing times. It further aims to reflect on the challenges these migrants face that does not make Japan a very popular destination for Indians. The Indian immigrants, who are able to understand, adapt, and adjust to their new circumstances, have no reservations about continuing to live in Japan, while simultaneously maintaining their links and identity with India. However, those who cannot do so, gradually seek ways to

either move back to India, or migrate to a new location. I have often felt that it might help to view Japan as a wealthy husband who is keen of providing his wife with all her heart's desires, and who yet at the same time makes great demands on her, urging her to be patient and understanding, and to accept his manifold expressions of love. Sad to say however such patience is rare and not many would care to wait too long — particularly in view of the fact that there are plenty of easier options in the world beyond.¹⁰

Note – This paper is a small part of my dissertation where I have reflected on the ‘Diaspora Identity’ of the Indian migrants in Japan. It focuses on their life as migrants and focuses on the following points –

1. Details concerning the lives of Indians in Tokyo
2. The problems they face and their expectations as foreigners
3. The efforts they make, if any, to maintain their Indian identity, and reasons for clinging on to their Indian identity
4. The aspects of their personality that have ‘Japanized’
5. Challenges and opportunities for Indians migrants at work

It gives a detailed account of all the points mentioned above and also focuses of their religious activities, which make an important part of the life as migrants in Japan in order to keep connected to each other and most importantly to their roots in India. It also focuses on the problem women face as a ‘trailing spouse’ and the issues in regard to education of the children. The respondents in this paper and in my dissertation were selected based on their number of years in Japan. My official respondents have lived in Japan for minimum five years. I did interview those who have lived less than five years but they were not added in

¹⁰ http://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2015/06/17/voices/indians-japan-love-story-beset-challenges/#.V17FvldZ_dk (Accessed June 1, 2016).

my official list of respondents. This research is mainly based in Tokyo and its vicinity. Additionally I also interviewed around 17 people in Kobe.

Bibliography

- Agnew, Vijay. 2011. Identity Construction in the Diaspora, *Diversities in the Indian Diaspora: Nature, Implications, Responses*, ed. N.Jayaram, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Azuma, Masako. 2008. "Indians in Tokyo and its Vicinity". In *Rising India and Indian Communities in East Asia*, edited by K.Kesavapany, A.Mani and P. Ramasamy. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. (Kindle Version).
- Brah, Avatar. 1996. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge.
- Chandru, G. A. 1993. "The History of Indians in Japan." Pp. 322-325 in *Global Indian Diaspora: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, edited by Jagat K. Motwani, Mahin Gosine and Jyoti-Barot Motwani. New York: Global Organization of People of Indian Origin.
- Choudhary, Sabrani Roy. 2009. "Japan's Foreign Direct Investment Experiences in India: Lessons Learnt from Firm Level Surveys", *ICRIER Working Paper No.243*.
- Chugani, Anita G. 2003. *Indians in Japan: A Case Study of the Sindhis in Kobe*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International
- D'Costa, Anthony. 2013. "Positioning Indian emigration to Japan: the case of the IT industry", *Migration and Development*, 2:1, 16-36.

- _____ 2015. *International Mobility, Global Capitalism, and Changing Structures of Accumulation: Transforming the Japan-India IT Relationship*. New York: Routledge.
- Dhar, Mimi Banerjee. 2004. "Indians in Japan: History and Dimensions of Relations." Pp. 115-125 in *Indian Diaspora in Asian and Pacific Regions: Culture, People, Interactions*, edited by Lipi Ghosh and Ramkrishna Chatterjee. Jaipur: Rawat Publications.
- Jayaram, N (ed.). 2004. *The Indian Diaspora: Dynamics of Migration*. CA: Sage Publications.
- Jayaram, N. 2012. *Diversities in the Indian Diaspora: Nature, Implications, Responses*. India: Oxford University Press.
- Jayaram, N. 2011. "Heterogeneous Diaspora and Asymmetrical Orientations: India, Indians and the Indian Diaspora". In *Diversities in the Indian Diaspora: Nature, Implications, Responses*. India: Oxford University Press. 227-248.
- Kesavapany, K, A.Mani and P. Ramasamy. 2008. *Rising India and Indian Communities in East Asia*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. Kindle Version.
- Kumar, Mamta Sachan. 2010. *Trade of the Times: Reconceiving 'Diaspora' with the Sindhi Merchants in Japan*, M.A Thesis, National University of Singapore.
- Mani, A, and P. Ramaswamy. 2008. *Rising India and Indian Communities in East Asia*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Mathur, Arpita, 2012. "India-Japan Relations: Drivers, Trends and Prospects", *RSIS Monograph No. 23*. Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.
- Minamino, Takeshi and Munenori Sawa. 2005. "在日インド人社会の変遷--定住地神戸を事例として (Changes in Indian Society in Japan- Focused on the case of Kobe) 『兵庫地理』 50: 4-15. (In Japanese).

- Mishra, Vijay. 2007. *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*. New York: Routledge.
- Nakano, Ayuko, 2004. "An Afternoon with Chandru Advani", *Chakra Magazine*. 2004: Yokohama Mumbai Friendship Committee, 6-11.
- Nanda, Prakash, *Rediscovering Asia: The Evolution of India's Look East Policy*, New Delhi: Lancer Publishers and Distributors, 2003.
- Prakash, B. A. 2006. "Japan." Pp. 212-213 in *The Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora*, edited by Brij V. Lal, Peter Reeves and Rajesh Rai. Singapore: Editions Didier Millet; in association with National University of Singapore.
- Rai, Rajesh. 2009. *The South Asian Diaspora: Transnational Networks and Changing Identities*. New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Rai, Rajesh. 2014. *Indians in Singapore 1819-1945: Diaspora in the Colonial Port City*. India: Oxford University Press.
- Rayaprol, Aparna. 2011. "Understanding Gender Diversities in the Indian Diaspora", in *Diversities in the Indian Diaspora: Nature, Implications, Responses*, ed. N. Jayaram. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Reeves, P. and R. Rai. 2006. 'The Indian Context', in B.V. Lal, P. Reeves and R. Rai (eds) *The Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora*, Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, pp. 18-31.
- Sawa, Munenori, and Takeshi Minamino. 2007. "Emerging of An Indian Community in Tokyo: A Case Study of Nishikasai", In *The Indian Geographical Journal* 82 (1):7-26.
- Sawa, Munenori. 2013. "Spatial Reorganization of the Indian Community Crossing Border: A Case Study of the Global City Tokyo". In *Japanese Journal of Human Geography* 65(6). 508-526.

- Shimizu, Hiroshi. 2005. "The Indian Merchants of Kobe and Japan's Trade Expansion into Southeast Asia Before the Asia-Pacific War". *Japan Forum* 17(1) 25-48.
- Sinha, Vineeta. 2006. "Religious Traditions in the Diaspora", pp. 94-101, *The Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora*, edited by Brij V. Lal, Peter Reeves and Rajesh Rai. Singapore: Editions Didier Millet; in association with National University of Singapore.
- Van der Veer, P.T. 1994. *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- _____ (ed.). 1995. *The Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora*, University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Wadhwa, Megha. 2015. "Indians in Japan: A Love Story Beset with Challenges". *The Japan Times*, June 17.
- _____ 2017. "Opportunities and Challenges in a Foreign Land: A Study of Indian Resident Community in Tokyo and its Vicinity", Occasional Papers, Institute of Asian Cultures, Sophia University.
- Yamada, Takio. 2008. "Japan-India Relations: A Time for sea Change?" eds. K.Kesavapany, A.Mani, P. Ramasamy, *Rising India and Indian Communities in East Asia*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. (Kindle Version).
- Yeoh, Brenda S.A; Louisa-May Khoo. 1998. "Home, Work and Community: Skilled International Migration and Expatriate Women in Singapore", *International Migration*, 36 (2), 159-84.