

# **THE INDIAN DIASPORA IN JAPAN: A TAPESTRY OF CULTURE AND COLLABORATION**

*“The formation of a diaspora could be articulated as the quintessential journey into becoming; a process marked by incessant regroupings, recreations, and reiteration. Together these stressed actions strive to open up new spaces of discursive and performative postcolonial consciousness.”*

~ Okwui Enwezor

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Indian diaspora, a vibrant and dynamic community spread across the globe, plays a crucial role in fostering cross-cultural understanding, economic growth, and cooperation. Japan, a country renowned for its technological prowess, rich history, and unique culture, has been home to a thriving Indian diaspora for many decades. This article explores the journey of the Indian community in Japan, highlighting their contributions, challenges, and the harmonious cultural amalgamation between the two nations. The migrants from India to Japan and their descendants make up the Indian population in Japan. There were 43,886 Indian nationals residing in Japan as of December 2022. Indians work mostly in Japan's information technology sector and other office positions that need the English language.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The presence of the Indian diaspora in Japan dates back to the late 19th century when a small group of Indian merchants and traders set foot on Japanese shores. However, in the early 20th century, the community began to grow significantly. Indian students started arriving in Japan to pursue higher education, primarily in fields like engineering and medicine. Among the notable early Indian residents was Dr. Dwarkanath Kotnis, a physician who arrived in Japan in the 1930s and became renowned for his selfless medical service during World War II.

Modern Indian settlers have been present in Japan for more than a century. A few Indian businessmen and their families, mostly Sindhis and Parsis, moved to Yokohama and Okinawa as early as 1872. Tata, a fledgling business, opened a branch in Kobe in 1891. According to

Japanese government figures from 1901, there were 30 British Indians residing in Japan. In 1905, the Hyogo Prefecture government reported 59 Indian residents, 59 of whom were men except for one. Indian traders from Yokohama moved to Kobe after the Great Kant earthquake of 1923 destroyed the city, and Kobe subsequently became the epicenter of the expansion of Japan's Indian population.

In Hyogo Prefecture, there were 632 Indians living there as of 1939, just before the outbreak of World War II. However, as a result of British sanctions against Japan and the cessation of transportation between Japan and their country of origin in 1941, many of these businesses closed their doors, and by 1942, there were only 114 remained. Three years after India's partition, their numbers had somewhat increased to 255. The Kobe region remained the center of the Indian population in Japan up until 1990. But after 1990, Tokyo's population started to rise significantly. Industrial trainees sent by Japanese automakers with Indian plants were among the migrants who arrived in the 1990s. Also arriving in Tokyo were IT workers and their families, who mostly settled in Setagaya and Minato wards

## **POST-INDEPENDENCE ERA**

The Indian diaspora in Japan post-independence witnessed significant growth and diversification, with the two nations forging stronger bilateral ties. The period after India gained independence in 1947 marked a new chapter in the relationship between the two countries, creating opportunities for Indians to migrate to Japan for various purposes, including education, employment, and business ventures.

**Educational Pursuits:** Following India's independence, many Indian students sought educational opportunities in Japan to acquire advanced knowledge and skills. The Japanese education system, known for its excellence in engineering, technology, and medicine, attracted a considerable number of Indian scholars. The Indian government also encouraged such exchanges through scholarships and educational programs, fostering a deeper understanding between the youth of both nations.

**Technological Collaboration:** Japan's rapid economic growth during the post-war period led to the emergence of cutting-edge industries. Indian professionals, particularly in the fields of engineering and information technology, found lucrative opportunities to contribute to Japan's

technological advancements. Many Indians worked for Japanese companies, contributing their expertise and skills to bolster Japan's economy.

**Cultural Exchanges:** The Indian diaspora in Japan played a pivotal role in promoting Indian culture and traditions within Japanese society. Various cultural organizations and community groups were established to organize events such as Diwali celebrations, Holi festivals, and Indian dance performances, providing the Japanese people with a glimpse into India's rich cultural heritage.

**Business and Trade:** As economic ties between India and Japan strengthened, Indian entrepreneurs began exploring business opportunities in Japan. Indian restaurants, grocery stores, and trading companies started to sprout, catering to both the Indian community and the Japanese population interested in Indian goods and cuisine. Additionally, the Indian diaspora facilitated trade relations between the two countries, enhancing the economic partnership.

**Research and Academia:** Indian scholars and researchers established collaborations with Japanese universities and research institutions, contributing to advancements in various scientific disciplines. Joint research projects, academic exchange programs, and knowledge-sharing initiatives further strengthened the academic ties between India and Japan.

**Social and Cultural Integration:** While the Indian diaspora experienced success in Japan, they also encountered challenges related to language, cultural differences, and social integration. However, efforts by both communities to foster understanding and mutual respect have helped bridge these gaps and create a more inclusive environment for Indian expatriates.

**Diplomatic Contributions:** Some members of the Indian diaspora in Japan have also been active in diplomatic circles, strengthening bilateral relations between the two countries. Their understanding of both Indian and Japanese cultures has proved valuable in promoting cooperation and addressing issues of mutual interest.

## **CULTURAL ENRICHMENT**

The Indian diaspora in Japan has played a pivotal role in enriching the cultural landscape of the country, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of Indian traditions, art forms, and ways of life. Through various cultural activities, events, and initiatives, the Indian community has contributed to Japan's diverse cultural fabric, promoting cross-cultural exchanges and strengthening the bond between the two nations.

**Festivals and Celebrations:** Indian festivals are celebrated with great enthusiasm by the Indian diaspora in Japan. Diwali, the festival of lights, is one of the most prominent celebrations, where the Indian community comes together to illuminate their homes and share traditional sweets. Holi, the festival of colors, is another vibrant event that showcases the exuberance and joy of Indian culture. These festivals have gained popularity among the Japanese population, with many locals actively participating and learning about Indian customs.

**Dance and Music Performances:** Indian classical dance forms, such as Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Odissi, and traditional folk dances, have been presented on various stages across Japan. The grace, storytelling, and intricate movements of Indian dance have captivated Japanese audiences, leading to a growing interest in learning and practicing these art forms. Indian musicians and vocalists have also held concerts, introducing the melodious tunes of Indian classical and contemporary music to Japanese enthusiasts.

**Film Festivals:** Indian film festivals have become a platform for showcasing Indian cinema in Japan. These events screen a diverse range of Bollywood and regional Indian films, providing insights into India's cultural diversity and cinematic excellence. Japanese audiences have developed a fondness for Indian movies, and Bollywood films have even gained a cult following in certain circles.

**Yoga and Meditation:** The practice of yoga and meditation has gained popularity in Japan, largely due to the efforts of the Indian diaspora in promoting these ancient traditions. Yoga classes and meditation workshops are now widely available across the country, attracting both Japanese and expatriate practitioners seeking physical and mental well-being.

**Language and Cuisine:** The popularity of Indian cuisine in Japan has grown significantly, with Indian restaurants and eateries flourishing in major cities. The Indian diaspora has introduced Japanese locals to a wide array of flavors and dishes, including curry, naan, biryani,

and various regional specialties. Language schools and language exchange programs have also been established to teach Japanese residents about Hindi and other Indian languages.

**Art Exhibitions and Workshops:** Indian art, with its rich history and diverse forms, has been showcased in art exhibitions and workshops in Japan. Paintings, sculptures, and handicrafts from different regions of India have been displayed, offering a glimpse into India's artistic heritage and cultural expressions.

**Cultural Exchanges and Collaborations:** The Indian diaspora has actively collaborated with local Japanese cultural organizations, promoting cross-cultural understanding through joint events, workshops, and performances. These collaborations have resulted in a mutual exchange of ideas and traditions, enriching both societies.

## **ECONOMIC COLLABORATION**

The Indian people living in Japan have played a significant role in fostering economic collaborations between India and Japan. Through their diverse expertise, entrepreneurial endeavors, and business ventures, members of the Indian community in Japan have facilitated trade, investment, and technological partnerships between the two nations. Here are some ways in which the Indian diaspora has contributed to economic collaborations:

**Business Ventures:** Many members of the Indian diaspora in Japan have established successful businesses, ranging from restaurants and retail stores to IT startups and engineering consultancies. These ventures have not only created job opportunities for both Indians and locals but have also facilitated economic ties between the two countries. The Indian entrepreneurs act as bridges, connecting Japanese consumers and businesses with Indian goods, services, and technologies.

**IT and Technology:** The Indian diaspora has a significant presence in Japan's IT and technology sectors. Indian professionals, particularly in the field of information technology, have contributed to the development and growth of Japanese tech companies. Their expertise and knowledge have been instrumental in advancing Japan's technology-driven industries.

**Knowledge Exchange:** Indian professionals working in various industries in Japan bring with them a wealth of knowledge and experience. Through collaborations and knowledge-sharing

initiatives, they have contributed to the exchange of best practices, technological know-how, and industry insights between the two countries.

**Education and Research:** Indian researchers and scholars in Japan have been actively involved in academic collaborations and joint research projects. Their contributions to scientific advancements, technological innovations, and academic excellence have strengthened the research ties between India and Japan.

**Trade Facilitation:** The Indian diaspora, with their cultural understanding of both countries, has been instrumental in facilitating trade between India and Japan. They act as intermediaries, helping to bridge the gap and overcome cultural and language barriers, thereby fostering a smoother trade relationship.

**Investment and Finance:** Some members of the Indian diaspora in Japan have also played a role in facilitating investment and financial collaborations between the two countries. They serve as conduits for foreign direct investment (FDI) and assist in identifying investment opportunities in India for Japanese businesses and vice versa.

**Cultural Exchange and Tourism:** The Indian diaspora has contributed to promoting tourism between the two countries. By organizing cultural events, showcasing Indian traditions, and inviting Japanese tourists to experience India's cultural richness, they have encouraged people-to-people interactions, which, in turn, contribute to economic growth in both countries tourism sectors.

## **FUTURE PROSPECTS**

The future prospects of the Indian government and the Japanese government regarding the Indian diaspora hold immense potential for strengthening bilateral ties, fostering cultural exchange, and promoting economic collaborations. Both governments recognize the importance of the Indian diaspora in Japan and have been actively engaging with the community to create a conducive environment for their growth and success. Here are some key areas of focus and potential future developments:

**Cultural Exchange and People-to-People Ties:** Both governments are likely to continue promoting cultural exchange programs, festivals, and events that showcase Indian traditions and culture in Japan. Similarly, initiatives to introduce Japanese culture and language to the

Indian diaspora in Japan may be enhanced. This exchange will foster mutual understanding and build stronger people-to-people ties between the two nations.

**Educational and Research Collaborations:** The Indian and Japanese governments are expected to strengthen educational and research collaborations to facilitate knowledge exchange and academic partnerships. Scholarships, research grants, and joint academic programs will likely be promoted to encourage Indian students and researchers to pursue higher education and contribute to Japan's academic landscape.

**Skill Development and Employment:** The Indian government, in collaboration with the Japanese government and industries, may focus on skill development initiatives to equip the Indian diaspora in Japan with the necessary expertise and language skills. This would enhance their employability in various sectors and contribute to Japan's workforce needs.

**Diplomatic Engagement:** The Indian and Japanese governments may engage with the Indian diaspora in Japan to tap into their expertise and experiences in various fields, including technology, science, business, and academia. The diaspora can act as a valuable resource in strengthening the strategic partnership between India and Japan.

**Consular Support and Services:** Both governments will continue to provide consular support and services to the Indian diaspora in Japan. This includes assistance with legal matters, consular outreach programs, and efforts to ensure the welfare and well-being of the Indian community in Japan.

**Community Outreach and Representation:** The Indian government is likely to establish platforms for the Indian diaspora in Japan to express their concerns, interests, and suggestions. This will facilitate greater representation and engagement of the Indian community in matters concerning their welfare and development.

## **EDUCATION AND RESEARCH**

The Indian diaspora in Japan has made notable contributions to the fields of education and research, playing a crucial role in advancing knowledge, fostering academic collaborations, and strengthening the ties between the two countries. Members of the Indian community have actively engaged in various educational pursuits and research endeavors, contributing to Japan's academic excellence and scientific progress. Here are some aspects of the education and research involvement of the Indian diaspora in Japan:

**Higher Education:** Many Indian students have pursued higher education in Japan, attracted by the country's prestigious universities and research institutions. Fields such as engineering, computer science, medicine, economics, and social sciences have been popular choices among Indian students. These students contribute to the diversity of the academic community in Japan, enriching the exchange of ideas and perspectives.

**Academic Research:** Indian scholars and researchers have made significant contributions to various academic disciplines in Japan. Their research publications and contributions to journals and conferences have advanced scientific knowledge and brought recognition to the institutions they are affiliated with. Their expertise spans a wide range of fields, including engineering, physics, mathematics, biology, and humanities.

**Collaborative Research Projects:** The Indian diaspora in Japan has facilitated collaborations between Indian and Japanese research institutions. Joint research projects in areas of mutual interest have flourished, leading to advancements in cutting-edge technologies, medicine, environmental sciences, and more. These collaborations benefit both countries and strengthen the bilateral partnership.

**Research Fellowships and Grants:** Indian researchers and scholars have availed of research fellowships and grants provided by Japanese organizations and institutions. These opportunities support their academic pursuits, enable them to conduct innovative research and enhance their professional development.

**Knowledge Exchange:** The Indian diaspora in Japan serves as a conduit for the exchange of knowledge and ideas between Indian and Japanese academic communities. Through academic conferences, seminars, and workshops, they foster an environment of intellectual exchange, promoting cross-cultural learning and cooperation.



**Alumni Associations:** Indian alumni associations in Japan play a significant role in fostering networks and connections among Indian students who have studied in Japan. These associations organize events, mentorship programs, and knowledge-sharing sessions, creating a strong support system for both current and former Indian students.

**Language Teaching and Cultural Programs:** Some members of the Indian diaspora in Japan have also been involved in teaching Indian languages, such as Hindi and Sanskrit, to interested Japanese learners. These language classes contribute to cultural exchange and a better understanding of Indian heritage.

## **CHALLENGES AND INTEGRATION**

The Indian diaspora in Japan, like any other expatriate community, faces various challenges and integration issues as they settle in a new country with a different culture, language, and societal norms. While Japan is a technologically advanced and welcoming country, the following are some of the common challenges experienced by the Indian diaspora:

**Language Barrier:** One of the most significant challenges faced by the Indian diaspora in Japan is the language barrier. Japanese is the primary language spoken in the country, and many Indians may find it challenging to communicate effectively in the beginning. Learning Japanese takes time and effort, and without proficiency in the language, everyday tasks and social interactions can become daunting.

**Cultural Differences:** Japanese culture is distinct from Indian culture, and the vast cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings and difficulties in adapting to societal norms. From greetings and social etiquette to workplace practices, the Indian diaspora may encounter cultural norms that differ significantly from what they are accustomed to.

**Work Culture:** The work culture in Japan places a strong emphasis on hierarchy, respect for authority, and collective responsibility. Indian professionals may find it challenging to navigate these cultural nuances, especially if they come from a culture that encourages individualism and more informal work interactions.

**Social Integration:** Establishing social connections and friendships with local Japanese people can be challenging due to cultural barriers and language differences. The close-knit nature of Japanese communities may make it difficult for foreigners, including the Indian diaspora, to break into established social circles.

**Discrimination and Stereotyping:** Like in any country with a significant expatriate community, members of the Indian diaspora in Japan may occasionally face discrimination or stereotyping based on their ethnicity or nationality. These challenges can manifest in the workplace, housing, or even in daily interactions.

**Housing and Accommodation:** Finding suitable housing and accommodation can be challenging for the Indian diaspora, especially in urban areas with high demand and limited availability. Language barriers and unfamiliarity with the housing market may pose additional hurdles.

**Educational and Healthcare Concerns:** For Indian families with children, navigating the Japanese educational system can be a complex process. Additionally, understanding the healthcare system and accessing medical services in a foreign country can be daunting.

**Maintaining Cultural Identity:** While adapting to the host country's culture is essential, maintaining one's cultural identity and connection with India can be equally important for many members of the Indian diaspora. Striking a balance between assimilation and cultural preservation can be challenging.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Indian diaspora in Japan represents a story of resilience, cultural enrichment, and collaboration. Over the years, the community has grown and flourished, making significant contributions to Japan's economic and cultural landscape. By promoting cultural understanding and acting as a bridge between India and Japan, the Indian diaspora continues to strengthen the bonds between these two great nations and pave the way for a brighter and more interconnected future.

The Indian diaspora in Japan has played a significant role in building bridges between India and Japan, contributing to their fruitful and harmonious relationship in the post-independence era. Through educational pursuits, technological contributions, cultural exchanges, business

ventures, and academic collaborations, the Indian community in Japan has demonstrated resilience and determination in strengthening India-Japan relations. The diaspora's efforts in promoting cultural understanding through festivals, dance performances, music concerts, cinema, language, and cuisine have enriched Japan's cultural landscape and nurtured a sense of harmony and friendship between the two nations. Additionally, their contributions to economic collaborations, knowledge exchange, and research endeavors have bolstered both countries' economic prosperity and academic progress. While facing integration challenges, the Indian diaspora continues to grow, with support from community networks, cultural organizations, and the welcoming nature of the Japanese people, fostering a harmonious coexistence. The future prospects for the Indian government and the Japanese government with respect to the Indian diaspora are promising, with a focus on nurturing cultural ties, encouraging collaborations, and providing support to harness the diaspora's potential. As the world becomes more interconnected, the Indian diaspora in Japan is poised to play an increasingly significant role in shaping the future of both nations, acting as a bridge that fosters mutual understanding, collaboration, and friendship.

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