

Independence Day of India

Century of Indo-Japanese economic relationship

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In a show of pan-Asian solidarity, Sei Arai and Teiichi Sugita formed the Society for Asian Revival (Koh-A Kai) in 1880. Wary of seeing Japan drifting toward Westernization, they argued that even though Japan had modernized itself based on a Western model, it should remain an Asian power in accordance with where the nation lay geographically and historically. The society even envisaged a federation consisting of Annam (present-day Vietnam), Burma, India, Korea and Southeast Asian countries subjugated or threatened by Britain, France and Russia.



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News of the formation of a national organization by the Indian people (the Indian National Congress) and the launching of a campaign against the British lent support to their pro-Asian activities. Celebrating the news, "Nihonjin," a biweekly magazine founded in 1888 by Setsurei Miyake and Shigetaga Shiga, ran an article envisioning India as a "major new independent Asian country."

The renewed interest in India resulted in the establishment of Sanskrit, Buddhist and Indian philosophy courses and departments at Japanese universities. But in the absence of direct connections with Indian scholars and academic institutions, the Japanese not only had to rely on Western scholarship;

but also study in European academic centers under the guidance of European scholars. Direct contact between the people of India and Japan began only with the arrival of art historian Tenshin Okakura in Bengal in 1901.

Indian politics were in a state of turmoil at the time of Okakura's visit. A wave of despair and anger had engulfed the Indian people after their appeals for a representative government were turned down by the colonial masters. Expressing solidarity with the Indian people, Okakura wrote a book titled "The Awakening of Japan" (1904), in which he made a fervent appeal to Indian youth to unite and work for the revival of Asia.

A prominent statesman Shigenobu Okuma set up a study circle (*Indo Gakkai*) on the campus of Waseda University to promote Indian studies and stimulate interest in Indian affairs. Despite the constraints of an Anglo-Japanese alliance, Okuma openly sympathized with the Indian cause and in several of his speeches urged the British to grant self-governance to India.

The renewal of the Anglo-Japanese alliance in 1907 had added coverage of India, thus making Japan a guardian of British interests in India and East Asia. This infuriated Shumei Okawa, who graduated with a degree in Indian philosophy from Tokyo Imperial University's Department of Philosophy. After studying India's classical age, Okawa's inquisitive mind turned to contemporary India. The idealized image of India was shattered in 1913 when he read Henry Cotton's "New India." In 1916, Okawa wrote several articles exposing the exploitative nature of British rule and denounced the presence of Great Britain as a source of suffering in Asia. He railed

against the continuance of the Anglo-Japanese alliance, which he saw as a means of deterring the Japanese from fostering closer ties with India. Therefore, he pleaded with the Japanese government to cultivate friendly relations with the Indians and aid them in their struggle for freedom.

After the founding of the Indian National Congress in 1885, the struggle for independence gained momentum, and national leaders began seeking ways and means to cast off the yoke of British imperialism. Captivated by Japan's remarkable progress, several Indian representatives from divergent backgrounds visited Japan to uncover the secrets of its success. Among these early visitors were P.C. Moozomdar and Swami Vivekananda. Accompanying Vivekananda to Japan was Jamshetji Nusserwanji Tata, the head of the Tata business group. Tata was visiting Japan to meet Eiichi Shibusawa, the shipping magnate behind Nippon Yusen Kaisha (NYK) to explore the feasibility of establishing direct trade links with Japan. India's burgeoning textile and spinning industries had generated great interest among Japanese businessmen. In 1888, Tsuneki Sano had visited to India from Osaka with a team of engineers to learn about spinning technology. In 1892, 50 percent of raw cotton used by Japanese mills came from India but for transportation they had to depend on European vessels. Despite tough competition from European firms, which monopolized trade and commerce on the route, both Tata and Shibusawa succeeded in launching shipping services with their own ships to transport cotton goods. The Japanese government encouraged

this Indo-Japanese venture by providing financial subsidies. The commencement of direct shipping not only stimulated bilateral trade with branches in Kobe and Yokohama, it also led to the establishment of Japanese consulates in Bombay in 1894 and in Calcutta in 1907. Even though Tata later withdrew from the joint venture with Japan, NYK continued its shipping services aside from raw cotton, also transporting commodities such as pig iron, teak, jute, gunny bags, fertilizers from India, and items such as glassware, matches, umbrella stretchers and handles from Japan. The base cargo carried from Bombay was raw cotton, and that from Calcutta was pig iron. Hence those routes were known for years as the Cotton Route and the Iron Route. Encouraged by the trading prospects, many of Japan's leading business conglomerates (*zaibatsu*), such as Mitsui and Nichimen, forged links with Indian partners and opened offices in Bombay and Calcutta.

Engineer-statesman Mokshagundam Visvesvaraya visited Japan in 1898 and was impressed by the Japanese people's receptivity to new ideas and the zeal for self-improvement. The educational decree in Japan, Visvesvaraya noted, was that henceforth "there shall be no community with an illiterate family, nor a family with an illiterate person," and praised the government for its efforts in promoting such reforms. He contrasted Japan's case with India, where educational institutions were restricted to only a small segment of the population. The aim of the British was primarily to train loyal servants of the Empire and only secondarily to enlighten the masses. Visvesvaraya discovered

in Japan a working model for India and was convinced that with education and planned economic development, India could similarly rise to Japan's level.

The Indian people's interest in Japan was further piqued after its victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. A small Asian country's ability to defeat a gigantic European power was hailed across the continent as it shattered the myth of the West's military invincibility. The event electrified Indians and other Asians, for it showed that any country, even outside the West, could rise to a higher status if it did what was necessary. Indian leaders such as Dadabhai Naoroji, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Lala Lajpat Rai and Bal Gangadhar Tilak exhorted their countrymen to learn lessons from Japan and to imbibe the virtues of patriotism and spirit of sacrifice. Despite his faith in the superiority of spiritual forces over material forces, Rabindranath Tagore found occasion to praise Japan and celebrated its victory with an evening bonfire amid cheers of "hanzai." Tagore composed three poems, one of them as follows:

*"Wearing saffron robes, the
Masters of religion (dharma)
Went to your country to teach.
Today we come to your door as disciples,
To learn the teachings of action (karma)."*

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, who was at that time in South Africa, attributed Japan's victory to the spirit of self-respect and self-reliance. Emphasizing the need to cultivate the spirit of self-respect, he said, "Having remained in bondage for a long time like parrots, we cannot understand what honor and freedom are." And to the 16-year-old Jawaharlal Nehru, then studying at Dover, the event struck "like a thunderbolt." Recalling the impact 40 years later, he wrote in his autobiography:

"Japanese victories stirred up my enthusiasm... I invested in a large number of books on Japan and tried to read some of them... Nationalistic ideas filled my mind. I mused of Indian freedom and Asiatic freedom from the thralldom of Europe...dreamt... I would fight for India."

Inspired by Japan's daring feat, Indian leaders intensified the demand for *Swaraj* (self-rule), and as the struggle entered the *Swadeshi* phase, attempts were made to displace British imports by increasing the indigenous production of such goods from British factories. Indian manufacturers saw Japan as a source of new equipment and machines for increasing the supply of home-made goods and displace the British competition. Funds were raised to send students to Japan to learn industrial arts and trades so that they could contribute to the production of simple goods like pencils, glass, watches, cardboard, cane boxes, and textiles. The popular mood was one of hope that Indian nationalism might eventually prevail over British imperialism if India were to follow the Japanese model and become self-reliant.

It has taken a hundred years for India's self-reliance to near its goal of becoming a developed nation. The India-Japan commercial partnership is rich with possibilities that will widely contribute to enduring prosperity in Asia and beyond. The Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Tokyo) has served the Indian economic agenda for nine decades. On behalf of all members of ICCJ, I convey our appreciation to all who have contributed to India's cause. I am grateful to the Japan News and its readers.

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17