Ancient Links to Modern Alliances: The Saga of India-Japan Relations

Arpan Nautiyal*, Prof. Asha Rana**

Abstract

India and Japan, two of the oldest civilizations in Asia, have shared deep cultural, religious, and intellectual connections for centuries. The Japanese term for India, "Tenjiku," reflects the deep-rooted awareness of India's significance in Japanese history. The cultural and religious exchanges between the two countries laid the foundation for a unique relationship, encompassing not only spiritual and intellectual dimensions but also political and economic interactions. In modern times, the historical ties between India and Japan have continued to influence their bilateral relations. The interactions between Indian intellectuals and Japanese scholars, the support provided by Japan during India's struggle for independence, and the post-war cooperation between the two countries have all contributed to the strengthening of this relationship.

This research paper explores the historical linkages between these two nations, with a focus on the spread of Buddhism, the impact of Japanese monks' travels to India, and the evolving nature of bilateral relations from ancient times to modern history. The study also highlights key events that shaped the political and cultural interactions between India and Japan, offering insights into how these interactions have influenced contemporary relations between the two countries.

Keyword: India-Japan relations, Buddhism, cultural exchange, historical linkages, Indo-Japanese cooperation, Meiji Restoration, Indian Independence League.

Introduction

India and Japan, two ancient civilizations, have shared a rich history marked by deep cultural, religious, and intellectual exchanges. Their relationship, rooted in centuries of historical, cultural, and civilizational ties, is one of the oldest bilateral connections in Asia. This connection has been largely influenced by the spread of Buddhism from India to Japan, which has served as a spiritual bridge between the two nations.

The historical linkages between India and Japan have been documented in various records, highlighting the influence of Indian culture on Japanese civilization. The Japanese term for India, "Tenjiku," reflects the deep-rooted awareness of India's significance in Japanese history. The cultural and religious exchanges between the two countries laid the foundation for a unique relationship that has evolved over time, encompassing not only spiritual and intellectual dimensions but also political and economic interactions.

The relationship between India and Japan holds a significant place in the broader context of Asian history. The shared cultural heritage, particularly through Buddhism, has had a profound impact on the development of Japanese culture and society. This historical connection has also influenced Japan's interactions with other Asian countries, shaping its role as a major power in the region.

In modern times, the historical ties between India and Japan have continued to influence their bilateral relations. The interactions between Indian intellectuals and Japanese scholars, the support provided by Japan during India's struggle for independence, and the post-war cooperation between the two countries have all contributed to the strengthening of this relationship.

This paper explores the historical linkages between India and Japan, tracing the evolution of their relationship from ancient times to the present. Through an analysis of key events and figures, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the cultural, religious, and political interactions that have shaped the India-Japan relationship over the centuries.

Buddhism: A Spiritual Bridge Between India and Japan

The Introduction of Buddhism to Japan

The introduction of Buddhism to Japan in the 6th century marked the beginning of a profound cultural exchange between India and Japan. Buddhism, which originated in India around the 5th century BCE, spread

* Research Scholar, Dept. of Pol. Science, Radhey Hari Govt. Post Graduate College, Kashipur, U. S. Nagar
** Dept. of Pol. Science, Sardar Bhagat Singh Govt Post Graduate College, Rudrapur, U. S. Nagar

across Asia through the efforts of missionaries, traders, and scholars. By the time Buddhism reached Japan, it had already established deep roots in China and Korea.

Buddhism has been the most evident and verifiable thread connecting these two lands. According to the renowned Japanese scholar of Veda and Buddhism, Hajime Nakamura, India had a significant impact on Japanese culture. In his book 'Gotama Buddha' he says, "Without Indian influence, Japanese culture would not be what it is today."[1]

The arrival of Buddhism in Japan is traditionally dated to 552 CE, when the Korean kingdom of Baekje sent a mission to Japan, presenting Buddhist texts and images as gifts to the Japanese emperor.[2] However, it was not until the Nara period (710-794 CE) that Buddhism truly began to flourish in Japan, influenced by the teachings and practices that had originated in India.

Buddhism's introduction to Japan also brought with it various aspects of Indian culture, including art, literature, and philosophy. The construction of temples, the creation of Buddhist sculptures, and the translation of scriptures into Japanese all contributed to the cultural transformation of Japan. Indian deities were incorporated into the Japanese pantheon, and Indian artistic styles influenced Japanese architecture and iconography.

Role of Buddhist Monks and Intellectuals

Buddhist monks played a crucial role in the transmission of Buddhist teachings from India to Japan. These monks, who traveled from India through China and Korea, were instrumental in spreading the knowledge of Buddhist philosophy, rituals, and scriptures. The most notable among these were Indian scholars like Bodhisena, who arrived in Japan in the 8th century.[3]

Bodhisena's journey to Japan exemplifies the deep cultural ties between India and Japan during this period. Invited by the Japanese emperor, Bodhisena became a key figure in the establishment of the Ritsu school of Buddhism in Japan. His influence extended beyond religious teachings; he also introduced aspects of Indian culture, such as Sanskrit, to Japan.

The role of Buddhist monks in facilitating intellectual exchanges between India and Japan cannot be overstated. These monks translated and disseminated Buddhist texts, conducted religious ceremonies, and served as spiritual advisors to Japanese rulers. Their contributions helped to shape the development of Japanese Buddhism, which in turn had a lasting impact on Japanese society and culture.

The Influence of Prince Shotoku

Prince Shotoku (574-622 CE), one of Japan's most revered historical figures, was instrumental in promoting Buddhism in Japan. Although he was not directly involved with India, his efforts to establish Buddhism as a state religion in Japan were profoundly influenced by Indian teachings.

Prince Shotoku is credited with founding several major Buddhist temples in Japan, including the famous Horyu-ji temple, which stands as a testament to the architectural and artistic influence of Indian Buddhism. He also commissioned the construction of numerous Buddhist statues and the transcription of Buddhist scriptures, further solidifying Buddhism's place in Japanese culture.[4]

Shotoku's Seventeen-Article Constitution, which incorporated Buddhist principles of peace, harmony, and ethical governance, reflects the deep impact of Indian philosophical thought on Japanese political and social structures. His admiration for Indian Buddhism and his efforts to integrate it into Japanese society laid the groundwork for the enduring spiritual connection between India and Japan.

Meiji Restoration and Japan's Re-engagement with India

Japan's Policy of Isolation

For nearly two centuries, Japan pursued a policy of isolation known as Sakoku, which severely limited foreign contact and trade. During this period, Japan's interactions with other countries, including India, were minimal. However, the Meiji Restoration in 1868 marked a significant turning point in Japan's history, leading to the reopening of the country to the outside world.

The Meiji Restoration was a period of rapid modernization and Westernization in Japan, as the country sought to strengthen itself against colonial powers. Japan's re-engagement with the global community

included renewed interest in Asia, particularly in India, which was then under British colonial rule. This re-engagement laid the foundation for new cultural and intellectual exchanges between Japan and India.

Japanese Buddhist Scholars' Travels to India

The reopening of Japan during the Meiji period allowed Japanese scholars and monks to travel to India, seeking to reconnect with the spiritual homeland of Buddhism. Among these scholars was Kakuzo Okakura, a prominent intellectual who traveled to India in the late 19th century.[5] Okakura's journeys to India were motivated by his desire to revive traditional Asian cultures in the face of Western imperialism.

Okakura's interactions with Indian leaders, such as Swami Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore, exemplified the renewed cultural ties between Japan and India. These interactions fostered a sense of pan-Asian solidarity and emphasized the shared cultural heritage of the two nations. Okakura's work in promoting the idea of "Asia as One" played a significant role in shaping Japan's cultural identity and its relationship with India.[6]

Japanese Buddhist scholars' travels to India also had a profound impact on the revival of Buddhist studies in Japan. These scholars brought back valuable manuscripts, relics, and knowledge that enriched Japanese Buddhism. Their efforts to reconnect with the Indian roots of Buddhism symbolized a broader cultural and intellectual reawakening in Japan, driven by the desire to preserve and celebrate Asian heritage.

Impact of Cultural and Religious Exchanges

The cultural and religious exchanges between Japan and India during the Meiji period had far-reaching effects on both countries. For Japan, these exchanges contributed to a deeper understanding of its own cultural heritage and strengthened its sense of identity as an Asian nation. For India, the support and interest from Japan provided a source of inspiration and solidarity in its struggle against British colonial rule.

The impact of these exchanges extended beyond the religious sphere, influencing art, literature, and intellectual thought in both countries. Japanese artists and writers drew inspiration from Indian culture, while Indian intellectuals admired Japan's rapid modernization and sought to emulate its success. This mutual admiration and exchange of ideas laid the groundwork for a strong and enduring partnership between India and Japan.

Richard M. Jaffe notes that the visits "influenced the shifting Japanese understanding of their form of Buddhism and its relationship to the broader Asian tradition." After their journeys, they wrote about their experiences in travelogues and essays, which helped boost awareness of various varieties of Asian Buddhism and "marked the start of growing Buddhist cooperation within the region."[7]

India-Japan Relations in Modern Times

Intellectual and Cultural Interactions

The early 20th century witnessed a revival of intellectual and cultural interactions between India and Japan, driven by a shared sense of Asian identity and solidarity against Western colonialism. This period was marked by the exchange of ideas between Indian and Japanese intellectuals, artists, and nationalists, who sought to forge a common cultural and political front.

One of the most notable figures in this intellectual exchange was the Indian poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore's visits to Japan in 1916 and 1924 were pivotal in strengthening the cultural ties between the two nations. His admiration for Japanese art, culture, and philosophy was well-documented in his lectures and writings. Tagore saw Japan as a model for the rest of Asia, combining modernity with a deep respect for tradition.

Tagore's interactions with Japanese intellectuals, such as Okakura Kakuzo and Tenshin Naito, fostered a mutual respect and understanding between Indian and Japanese thinkers. This intellectual camaraderie also influenced Indian nationalist leaders, who admired Japan's success in resisting Western dominance and saw it as an example for India's own struggle for independence.[8]

Japanese art and aesthetics also had a significant influence on Indian culture during this period. The adoption of Japanese styles in Indian art, particularly in the Bengal School of Art, symbolized a broader cultural exchange. This exchange was not just one-sided; Indian spiritual and philosophical ideas also resonated with Japanese thinkers and contributed to the intellectual landscape of Japan.

Japanese Influence on Indian Nationalism

Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) was a turning point in global history, as it marked the first time an Asian power had defeated a European empire. This victory had a profound impact on Indian nationalists, who saw Japan as a beacon of hope in their fight against British colonial rule. Japan's success demonstrated that an Asian nation could modernize and achieve military prowess without succumbing to Western imperialism.[9]

Indian nationalists were inspired by Japan's achievements and began to look towards Japan for support in their own struggle for independence. Leaders such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, and Subhas Chandra Bose openly expressed their admiration for Japan and sought to learn from its experiences. Japan's emergence as a powerful and independent nation provided Indian nationalists with both moral support and a strategic model for resistance against colonial powers.

The influence of Japan on Indian nationalism was further exemplified by the Indian Independence League, an organization founded in Japan in the 1920s by Rash Behari Bose, an Indian revolutionary who had fled to Japan to escape British persecution. The league worked to garner Japanese support for the Indian independence movement and played a crucial role in forging military and political ties between Indian nationalists and Japan.

The Role of Indian Revolutionaries in Japan

Japan became a sanctuary for Indian revolutionaries during the early 20th century. Many Indian nationalists who were persecuted by the British authorities sought refuge in Japan, where they found a supportive environment for their cause. The presence of these revolutionaries in Japan further strengthened the ties between the two nations and laid the groundwork for future cooperation.[10]

Rash Behari Bose was one of the most prominent Indian revolutionaries to find refuge in Japan. After escaping British surveillance, he settled in Japan in 1915, where he married into a Japanese family and became deeply integrated into Japanese society. Bose's efforts to mobilize Japanese support for the Indian independence movement were instrumental in forming the Indian Independence League and later the Indian National Army (INA).

The Japanese government, recognizing the strategic importance of supporting Indian nationalists, provided assistance to these revolutionaries. This support was driven by Japan's broader geopolitical interests in Asia, as it sought to weaken British influence in the region. The collaboration between Indian revolutionaries and Japan during this period set the stage for the more significant alliance that would emerge during World War II.

World War II and the Indian Independence Movement

Japan's Support for Indian Independence

World War II marked a critical juncture in India-Japan relations, as Japan emerged as a key ally of Indian nationalists in their struggle against British colonial rule. The Japanese government, motivated by its imperial ambitions in Asia, extended support to the Indian independence movement, recognizing the strategic advantage of weakening British control in the region.

Japan's involvement in the Indian independence movement was most prominently manifested in its support for the Indian National Army (INA), a military force composed of Indian prisoners of war and expatriates.[11] The INA, led by Subhas Chandra Bose, sought to overthrow British rule in India with Japanese assistance. Bose, who had previously been involved in revolutionary activities in India, fled to Japan in 1943 after escaping house arrest in British India.

In Japan, Bose was given the honorary title of "Netaji" and received significant support from the Japanese government, which provided training, weapons, and logistical assistance to the INA. The formation of the INA was a landmark moment in the history of India-Japan relations, symbolizing the solidarity between the two nations in their shared struggle against British imperialism.

The Indian National Army (INA)

The INA was formed with the explicit goal of liberating India from British rule. Composed of Indian soldiers who had been captured by the Japanese during the fall of Singapore, as well as Indian expatriates living in Southeast Asia, the INA represented a diverse coalition united by a common cause. Under Bose's leadership,

the INA sought to wage a military campaign against the British forces in India, with the support of the Japanese Imperial Army.

The INA's military campaign, though ultimately unsuccessful, had a significant impact on the Indian independence movement. The actions of the INA, and the support it received from Japan, helped to galvanize Indian public opinion against British rule. The INA's efforts also exposed the vulnerabilities of the British Empire in Asia, contributing to the eventual withdrawal of British forces from the region after the war.

The collaboration between the INA and Japan during World War II is a key chapter in the history of India-Japan relations. It exemplifies the deep ties between the two nations, forged in the crucible of anti-colonial struggle and wartime cooperation. The legacy of the INA continues to be remembered in both India and Japan as a symbol of the shared aspirations for independence and self-determination.

Indo-Japanese Cooperation During the War

The cooperation between India and Japan during World War II was not limited to military support. The two nations also engaged in diplomatic and economic collaboration, with Japan providing material assistance to the Indian independence movement. This cooperation was driven by Japan's broader strategy of promoting anti-colonial movements in Asia as a means of expanding its influence in the region.

Japan's support for the Indian independence movement extended to providing refuge and resources to Indian leaders and revolutionaries. The Japanese government facilitated the establishment of Indian independence organizations in Southeast Asia, where they could operate free from British interference. Japan's alliance with the Indian nationalists was also part of its broader efforts to create a "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere," an imperial concept that sought to unite Asian nations under Japanese leadership.[12]

The end of World War II marked a turning point in India-Japan relations. With Japan's defeat and the subsequent occupation by Allied forces, the geopolitical landscape of Asia was radically transformed. However, the wartime collaboration between India and Japan had lasting effects, influencing the post-war relationship between the two countries and laying the groundwork for future cooperation.

Post-War Relations and the Path to Modern Partnership

The Shift in Diplomatic Relations

Following the end of World War II, India and Japan faced the challenge of rebuilding their nations in the aftermath of the conflict. Japan, devastated by the war and under Allied occupation, underwent a period of reconstruction and demilitarization. India, on the other hand, achieved independence from British rule in 1947 and began the process of establishing itself as a sovereign nation.

The post-war period saw a shift in diplomatic relations between India and Japan, as both nations sought to redefine their roles in the new global order. Despite the challenges posed by the war, the historical ties between the two countries provided a foundation for renewed cooperation. In 1952, India became one of the first nations to sign a peace treaty with Japan, formally ending the state of war between the two countries.

The Treaty of Peace with Japan, signed in San Francisco, marked the beginning of a new chapter in India-Japan relations. The treaty restored Japan's sovereignty and laid the groundwork for the resumption of diplomatic and economic ties between the two nations. India's early recognition of Japan's post-war sovereignty reflected the goodwill and mutual respect that had characterized their relationship throughout history.[13]

Economic and Strategic Cooperation

In the decades following the war, India and Japan gradually developed a strong economic partnership. Japan's post-war economic miracle and India's quest for industrialization and development created opportunities for collaboration in trade, investment, and technology transfer. Japanese companies played a significant role in India's economic development, particularly in sectors such as automobiles, electronics, and infrastructure.

The 1980s marked a turning point in India-Japan economic relations, with the establishment of the Japan-India Business Cooperation Committee and the signing of several bilateral agreements. Japan became one of the largest sources of foreign direct investment (FDI) in India, contributing to the growth of key industries and the modernization of India's infrastructure.[14] The economic partnership between the two

countries was further strengthened by the signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2011.

In addition to economic cooperation, India and Japan also developed a strategic partnership, driven by shared concerns over regional security and the rise of China. The two countries have engaged in regular diplomatic dialogues, joint military exercises, and collaborations in defense technology. The strategic partnership has been bolstered by initiatives such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which includes the United States and Australia.

Cultural Exchanges and Contemporary Ties

Cultural exchanges between India and Japan have continued to flourish in the post-war era, reflecting the deep historical ties between the two nations. These exchanges have been facilitated by various initiatives, including student exchange programs, cultural festivals, and academic collaborations. The promotion of tourism between the two countries has also contributed to greater mutual understanding and appreciation of each other's cultures.

The establishment of institutions such as the Japan-India Institute of Manufacturing (JIM) and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) has further strengthened cultural ties. These institutions promote language learning, cultural studies, and vocational training, fostering closer connections between the peoples of India and Japan. The increasing popularity of Japanese culture in India, including anime, manga, and cuisine, reflects the growing cultural affinity between the two nations.

The contemporary relationship between India and Japan is characterized by a strong sense of mutual respect and shared values.[15] Both nations are committed to promoting peace, stability, and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region, and their partnership continues to evolve in response to changing global dynamics. The historical ties that bind India and Japan serve as a foundation for a vibrant and dynamic relationship in the 21st century.

Partnership in the 21st Century

The transformation of India-Japan relations in the 21st century can be traced back to Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori's visit to India in August 2000. His visit was crucial, as it marked the first significant step toward reshaping the bilateral relationship after the post-Pokharan uncertainty.[16] Mori presented a vision for a "global partnership" between India and Japan, urging both countries to move beyond narrow bilateral issues and collaborate on global challenges such as nuclear disarmament, UN reform, counterterrorism, and energy cooperation. Mori's foresight in broadening the scope of bilateral relations was aligned with Japan's evolving geopolitical context after the Cold War, particularly in response to China's rise and the diminishing influence of the U.S. in Asian security matters.

The 1990s were a time of confusion for Japan, especially regarding its reliance on the U.S.-Japan alliance. President Bill Clinton's strategic engagement with China led to unease in Tokyo, as Japan questioned its security dependence on the United States. The 1997-1998 Asian Financial Crisis further deepened Japan's concerns. Japan's proposal for an Asian Monetary Fund was blocked by the U.S., signaling that Japan's role in the region was not as pivotal as it had hoped. It was within this evolving geopolitical framework that Mori sought to deepen ties with India, a nation seen as a stable and influential partner in Asia's growing multipolarity.

Mori's visit catalyzed a new era of security cooperation. In 2001, Japan and India initiated the first bilateral Comprehensive Security Dialogue, marking a shift in the nature of the relationship. Following this, military cooperation expanded, with Japan's participation in India's International Fleet Review and increased reciprocal visits between the two nations' military leaders. Prime Ministers Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Junichiro Koizumi welcomed this strategic cooperation, emphasizing the importance of security dialogues and consultations on counterterrorism.

This momentum continued through successive governments. In January 2003, Japan's Foreign Minister, Yoriko Kawaguchi, highlighted the significance of India-Japan defense cooperation. The strategic dialogue between the two nations intensified with George Fernandes' meeting with Shigeru Ishiba, Japan's Defense Agency Director, demonstrating Japan's growing interest in India as a strategic partner.

The bilateral relationship received a further boost with the landmark visit of Prime Minister Junichiro

Koizumi to India. Koizumi's visit institutionalized annual summits between the two leaders and expanded the bilateral agenda across three key levels—political, economic, and regional cooperation. The joint statement signed during this visit highlighted the shared commitment of India and Japan to regional peace and security, and cooperation on global issues such as UN reform and nuclear disarmament. This engagement laid the groundwork for the strategic partnership that continues to shape India-Japan relations today.[17]

The second summit, held in Tokyo in 2006 between Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Japan's newly elected Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, marked a deepening of this strategic partnership. Abe's vision for a "broader Asia" included India as a key player in regional peace and stability. His proposal for quadrilateral cooperation involving Japan, India, the U.S., and Australia, although controversial and resisted by China, was a testament to Japan's belief in the importance of India in ensuring a balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region.[18]

The strategic partnership forged in the early 2000s continues to be a cornerstone of India-Japan relations in the 21st century, reflecting shared political, economic, and security interests in an evolving global landscape.

Conclusion

The historical relationship between India and Japan is a testament to the enduring bonds of cultural, spiritual, and intellectual exchange that have shaped the destinies of both nations. From the introduction of Buddhism to Japan in ancient times to the modern strategic partnership, the ties between India and Japan have been characterized by mutual respect, shared values, and a common commitment to peace and prosperity.

Throughout history, India and Japan have influenced each other in profound ways, whether through the transmission of religious and philosophical ideas, the exchange of art and culture, or the collaboration in political and military endeavors. The experiences of the past have laid a strong foundation for the present-day partnership between the two nations, which continues to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world.

As India and Japan navigate the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century, their historical relationship serves as a guiding light, reminding them of the strength and resilience that comes from unity and cooperation. The future of India-Japan relations is bright, with the potential for even deeper collaboration in areas such as technology, innovation, security, and culture. Together, India and Japan can continue to build a peaceful and prosperous Asia, drawing on the wisdom and experiences of their shared history.

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