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INDIAN MIGRANTS IN TOKYO

**A STUDY OF SOCIO-CULTURAL, RELIGIOUS,
AND WORKING WORLDS**

Megha Wadhwa



Indian Migrants in Tokyo

How does an extended stay in Japan influence Indian migrants' sense of their identity as they adapt to a country very different from their own?

The number of Indians in Japan is increasing. The links between Japan and India go back a long way in history, and the intricacy of their cultures is one of the many factors they have in common. Japanese culture and customs are among the most distinctive and complex in the world, and it is often difficult for foreigners to get used to them.

Wadhwa focuses on the Indian Diaspora in Tokyo, analysing their lives there by drawing on a wealth of interviews and extensive participant observation. She examines their lifestyles, fears, problems, relations and expectations as foreigners in Tokyo, and their efforts to create a 'home away from home' in Japan.

This book will be of great interest to anthropologists and sociologists concerned with the impact of migration on diaspora communities, especially those focused on Japan, India or both.

Megha Wadhwa is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Institute of Comparative Culture, Sophia University, Japan.

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Indian Migrants in Tokyo

A Study of Socio-Cultural, Religious,
and Working Worlds

Megha Wadhwa

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To my *Nani* (Grandmother),
whose favorite country was Japan
amongst many that she travelled.
Her travel stories were my inspiration,
and the journey still continues...

To my family and all the families I met during fieldwork.

To all kinds of migrants in the world
finding home, or
making home away from home.



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Preface

‘What’s *your* story?’, ‘Why did you come to Japan?’ and ‘What made you choose this topic for your research?’ These were the questions I was often asked during the course of my research. I rarely went into the details of my story during my fieldwork, but after contemplating these questions for almost a year, I decided to write the answers in my preface, to let my readers and others know where I’m coming from and what my inspiration for this topic was.

I grew up in New Delhi, and that was home for me until 2007, when I moved to Japan. After graduating from high school I joined a Japanese language school, where Professor Ashok Chawla and a couple of Japanese teachers were my mentors in terms of learning the language and about Japanese culture. Most of my friends and relatives were surprised that of all the popular languages to learn in India, such as German, French and Chinese, I chose to study Japanese, which at that time was amongst the least popular choices. My only inspiration for taking up the Japanese language was my grandmother, who after her world tour declared Japan to be her favorite country, and who told me stories about her visit to Japan that included delicious, expensive apples, extremely clean roads and kind Japanese people, amongst many other things.

At the time, my only aim was to learn the language and work for a Japanese company in India. By 2004, even before graduating from university, I had found myself a job in a Japanese company. I had absolutely no inclination to move to Japan or any other country, away from my family, because India was my home.

In 2007, due to a personal issue, I had to make the difficult decision to leave home for couple of years. My initial plan was to go to Australia for further studies, and I had almost done all the paperwork for admission to a university in Melbourne. But life had different plans and I ended up in Japan in June 2007 to study at a language school to further improve my Japanese skills.

I was 24 years old and this was my first time abroad, and my very first time away from my family, so I had mixed feelings of excitement and fear about the prospect. I had my own share of preconceptions about Japan, some of

which were confirmed while others were confounded. My first shock was my shared house – a four-storey building that had no elevator, so I had to carry my heavy luggage up the flights of stairs all on my own. My expectation had been very different; I had an image in my head that everything would be very high-tech in Japan.

I was a vegetarian for the first 24 years of my life, but Japan turned me into an omnivore, and I enjoyed eating all kinds of meat until I quit again in 2016. My first ice milk tea at an Indian festival in 2007, which to me was like a cold version of *chai*, was one of my very first Japanised Indian experiences. It wasn't a popular beverage (or maybe didn't even exist) at that time in India, at least not in New Delhi.

I built up a wealth of interesting experiences, laughs and lessons along the way on my journey from working in a convenience store to being a researcher today, and none of this was a part of any plans I had. My original intention was to go back to India in 2009 and work there, but I ended up becoming an English instructor in a language school. It was my love for teaching and learning more that led me to the graduate school at Sophia University in Tokyo.

The inspiration for choosing this topic was a result of attending a seminar by Professor Takefumi Terada during my Master's course. His work on the Filipino community within the Roman Catholic Church in Japan inspired me to research the Indian community in the country, and that initial spark was stoked by Professor Cyril Veliath, who himself has been a part of the Indian community for nearly five decades. I started getting involved in community events from the very beginning of my time in the country.

As years went by, I became well acquainted with some long-term Indian residents, and good friends with others, but I never had a conversation on a deeper level about their 'Indian identity' and what it meant to them. Some of my relatives and friends who were settled in the US, UK and Canada considered themselves or aimed to be citizens of those countries, and I wondered, was it the same for Indian migrants in Japan? The desire to know more about the Indian community in Japan from a deeper perspective led me to put on my researcher's gear and investigate further.

This research has helped me not only understand Japanese society better but also given me a better understanding of my Indian community and how they see Japan. The idea of 'home' is not just the place where we are born, but a place we keep re-creating – 'home' as a space for re-collecting the memories and experiences that we treasure. It is the 'home away from home' that keeps us going, by giving us an opportunity to reminisce about what we left behind, and this book is a reflection of the creation of that 'home' here by the members of the Indian community in Japan.

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I have been officially involved with this research for approximately seven years, but this subject is something that has sat latent within me since shortly after I arrived in Japan in 2007. My doctoral guide, Professor Takefumi Terada, and my sub-guide, Professor Cyril Veliath, have played an important role in sowing within my mind the seeds that brought this research to fruition. I thank them warmly for the encouragement they offered me in choosing this research topic, and the generous support they granted me thereafter. Their advice and innovative ideas have not only enhanced my academic skills but have also been a consistent source of inspiration. Also, my gratitude to Professor Veliath for supporting me in editing the early draft of this book.

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I really appreciate the support I have always received from the editors at *The Japan Times*. To begin with I would like to thank Ben Stubbings for giving me the opportunity to write about the Indian community in Japan. I would also like to thank him for having the patience and making time to read my book, offering his expert comments and editing it. At least for me, he has been the best editor I have ever known. I would further like to thank all the other members of *The Japan Times*, including Elliott Samuels, Shaun McKenna and Jordan Allen, for their kind support.

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1 Introduction

It was a long three-week trip to India and very hectic, mentally as well as physically. As I sat in the bus from Narita Airport to my home in Tokyo, I was at peace, in a meditative state – and that’s the way Japan makes me feel, at least on certain days.

It was 2015, and I had gone back to India for the first time in two years. A lot had changed, a lot was happening. There was a lot more traffic, pollution, trendy dining out and much more energy around.

What had not changed was the noise, inconvenience and impatience, the cluttered and haphazard systems. As a resident of India for 24 years, they formed a part of my life, and since I hadn’t experienced anything beyond that, for me it was the only existing truth. But now, after living in Japan for almost a decade, I had come to know another perspective, something that was beyond what I had imagined earlier. I had never envisioned somewhere as peaceful as Japan, a place where living was synonymous with convenience, and patience was like the way one breathes, and being organised at work (if not in your personal life) was the general rule. After more than a decade in Japan, my love for India hasn’t diminished, and neither do I look down upon my country for all its messiness. All that mess has its own beauty even today, the country has its own energy, an aura that would make you fall in love with it again and again, which would ensure your life is packed with challenges and action. However, there is also Japan, my second home and my second love. Japan, too, doesn’t fail to perform its magic.

As with every human being, each country has its good and bad aspects. My two countries have their own special features, and I have no intention of looking down upon either of them for what they are. Instead, I intend to bring out both their negative and positive facets through the narratives of my respondents, reflecting on the ways in which an encounter with a dissimilar culture affects and modifies one’s thoughts about one’s motherland, both positively and negatively. After our migrating experiences, it is the comforts and inconveniences we once took for granted that we miss or complain about. We often interrogate ourselves, wondering ‘Where is our home?’ Is it the *Matrabhoomi* (motherland)? Or is it the *Karambhoomi* (land where we work)? The answer would vary depending on circumstances, experiences

2 Introduction

and requirements. This book, while exploring the narratives of Indians living in Tokyo, will provide the answers in terms of how they feel toward India their *Matrabhoomi*, and their *Karambhoomi*, Japan.

The research project

Historical links between Japan and India go back a long way, and one thing the countries have in common is the complexity in their cultures. Japanese culture and customs are probably among the most distinctive, unique and complex in the world, and it is often difficult for foreigners to adapt to them. Past research works on migration in Japan have also referred to the nation as a negative case of immigration.¹ For the Indians living in Japan, however, it is a country of opportunities as well as challenges. This book reflects on Indian migrants in Tokyo and analyses their life as Indians residing here. It addresses their lifestyles, fears, problems, relations and expectations as foreigners in Tokyo.

The first Indian merchants in Japan appear to have arrived in the early 1870s.² 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. Today, in the 21st century, Indian migration to Japan has undergone a major shift. While the number of migrants has been gradually increasing, there has also been an influx of professionals into the nation.

Something that has not changed is the effort the community members make to hold on to their 'Indian identity' as they strive to adjust to their new environment. By 'Indian identity' I mean their attachment to their past, to the place they call their 'homeland,' and their desire to do things like they did back in India, be that in their everyday lives or on certain special occasions such as festivals.

As Peter Van Der Veer writes, "Migration has ambiguities of its own, based on what we would call the dialects of 'belonging' and 'longing'." He further adds,

The theme of belonging opposes any shift from rootedness to uprootedness, establishment to marginality, and that of longing harps on the desire for change and movement, but relates this to the enigma of arrival, which brings a similar desire to return to what one has left.³

There is a longing and desire to re-create what they have left behind: something they can keep going back to and reminiscing about, their memories of a homeland to which they feel they still belong, a place they can call their home. Hence, they make efforts to re-create their own little India in Japan, an India they want their children to be familiar with and feel rooted to, just as they themselves feel about their homeland.

Going out into the field, I was seeking answers to these questions: Do long-term Indian residents of Japan still see themselves as Indians? If so,

what are the reasons for this and what efforts are they making to maintain that identity? The idea was to explore their diaspora identity, as in their desire to be strongly linked to India in some way or another. And what aspirations do they have about moving back to India? Do they face any hurdles in Japan? And if so, what prevents them from quitting their second home? And finally, has the India–Japan relationship been of assistance to the community in any way?

While this book may not be able to provide a resolute ‘answer’ to all the queries listed above, these questions evolved in the course of my fieldwork, thereby providing me with a better understanding of the community. This whole research process has enabled me to acquire a grasp of their notions of ‘home’ and ‘identity,’ and how they have developed a ‘love-hate’ relationship with Japan over the years, much the same as the one they have with India. At various points, I was surprised at the lengths they would go not only to maintain their connections to India but also to pass down these emotions and ideas to the next generation. These efforts will be broadly dealt with in the chapters focusing on education and religious activities.

While this study focuses on the lives of Indian migrants living in Tokyo, it will also briefly cover the transformation witnessed in the relationship between India and Japan over the course of these years. In subsequent chapters of the book, I intend to address the following issues: (i) details concerning the lives of Indians in Tokyo; (ii) the problems they face and their expectations as foreigners; (iii) their efforts towards maintaining their Indian identity as well as their reasons for doing so; (iv) aspects of their personality that have become ‘Japanized’; and (v) challenges and opportunities for Indians migrants with reference to work.

Over the past few years, the number of Indians in Japan has increased, but their numbers are not as high as in nations such as the UK, the USA, Singapore or Malaysia. The answers to the questions raised above have helped me bring out the peculiarities and differences that set the Indian community in Japan apart from those in other countries with a higher concentration of Indian residents.

My experiences over the course of both the fieldwork and this whole research project have served to demonstrate the significance and necessity of the notion of culture with reference to identity construction within diaspora communities. It is indeed the core issue, bringing the entire community together. The narrations and activities of these Indian migrants in Japan reflect their perceptions of culture and enable us to comprehend the reality of their lives in Japan, and, most important of all, it is a reflection on their adaptability within a nation that, regardless of the similarities it is also endowed with, is nevertheless vastly different from their own. The experiences narrated by my respondents also offer insights into the possible ways of contributing to these two societies – that is, to their homeland, India, and their second home, Japan.

Historically, India and Japan have ties that stretch back more than a thousand years. However, the 21st century has thrown up new trends in the

4 *Introduction*

India–Japan relationship, which will hopefully go from strength to strength. The IT boom in India has played a critical role in transforming the image of India from a ‘curry rice poor country’ to the ‘country of gifted engineers,’ not just in Japan but in other parts of the world as well. As a result of this, today the India–Japan relationship is a two-way process, where it is not just India that needs Japan but also Japan that has a need for India. The recent stability in Indian politics appears to have further reinforced this relationship.

The number of Indians residing in Japan is not significantly high, which is perhaps one of the reasons why there has been limited research on this topic in the past. Hence, academically, this enquiry aims to build on the research works already in existence. Earlier published research works on Indian residents in Japan have proved to be sources of guidance for my own research, especially those by Munenori Sawa (2007, 2013), Takeshi Minamino (2007), Masako Azuma (2008), among other researchers who have also written concerning Indians in Japan and the India–Japan relationship. These writers have elucidated the lives of Indians living in Japan but what demarcates this research from earlier works is its extensive focus, not only on the lives of Indian migrants but also their fears, expectations and the drawbacks they face living in contemporary Japan, all of which are indeed vital aspects of this book. By saying this, however, I have no desire to either censure or fault either Japanese or Indians. Rather, I merely intend to reflect upon those features of the Indians that form a part of the culture and traditions they belong to – that is to say, their ‘homeland’ – and consider how these attributes enabled them to create a ‘home away from home’ in Japan.

However, in a practical sense, it is my hope that this research might serve to help the two communities acquire a deeper understanding of one another, and in turn contribute to strengthening the ‘special’⁴ India–Japan relationship.

Methodology

This research utilises a combination of two main methodologies – first, a qualitative interviewing method and, second, a secondary data analysis. Additionally, I also conducted participant observations at some of the various events organised by the Indian community in Tokyo from time to time. This research aims to explore the lives of the people, that is to say the life of Indians living in Tokyo, and hence the qualitative method was most appropriate for me.

Various discussions on migration that link the issues of culture, identity and nationality tend to come fused together with sentiments of appreciation, fear and expectation toward the destination country. The narratives of Indian migrants who have been long-time residents of Japan manifest numerous aspects of their allegiance to their home country, namely India. Such narratives comprise details linked to the lives of Indians in Tokyo, including the hurdles they confront and their expectations as foreigners.

In 2013, when I first decided to carry out research on the Indians in Tokyo, I approached those members of the community who were known to me, and the list of respondents has since increased further through references. I have conducted interviews with approximately 100 Indian migrants, of which 55% were men and 45% were women. I also attended various Indian community events, particularly after I began my research, and at those events I made new contacts and conducted interviews as well. Other than one-to-one interviews, there were also group discussions with women or couples conducted over coffee or lunch, and I personally initiated those get-togethers along with a few friends. I completed my doctoral research in 2017, yet my involvement with the community with reference both to my research and otherwise has nevertheless continued.

My initial questions were of a general nature in order to make the interview informal and the subject/interviewee more comfortable, but gradually the questions became more focused. In cases where there were time constraints, the interviews were limited to 40 minutes or an hour. In other cases, when the discussion had become very illuminating, despite the time constraints either a second meeting was scheduled or the interview time was extended by mutual consent, and in certain cases it even lasted for between two and three hours. The longest interview I recorded in a single sitting was around five hours.

After having obtained my PhD in 2017, some of the interviews I conducted were also recorded on video. I conducted open-ended interviews, and with the permission of the interviewee, I recorded them either on video or audio only. In the event that the respondents were uncomfortable with the idea of recording, I refrained from doing so, and in certain instances the respondents requested that I switch off the recording when it came to something personal or sensitive. Soon after each interview, especially following those that were either not recorded or were partially recorded, I carefully wrote down the answers and important points discussed during the interview with the help of the notes I had made.

However, the entire process was not always smooth sailing, and there were quite a few cases of contacts and references where the people concerned refused to meet me. A few others apologetically declined either because of their busy schedules or because they felt they had nothing to say. Some of the prominent Indians either failed to reply to my emails or refused to meet me because of their hectic schedules, yet there were other prominent individuals who, despite their busy schedules, sincerely sought to assist me. They openly shared their experiences, with complete trust and no hesitation whatsoever.

Respondent selection

The first criterion for selecting respondents was their number of years in Japan. People who had been in Japan for more than five years were