

RECONSTRUCTION OF JAPAN: PRESCRIPTION TO TRANSCEND A DOWNSIZED JAPAN

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(full text)

My first tryst with Japan happened in 2002, when Japan co-hosted the FIFA World Cup Finals. Was the first World Cup hosted by the continent of Asia, looking like another attempt by a rich country that didn't really know anything about football, in attempting to make it more popular there? The world knew about the Nintendo, Sony, Sumitomo; it was fascinated by the brave Samurai; it knew about Karate and Sumo; it grimaced at the memories of Hiroshima, Pearl Harbor and the Korean War. But the tremendous passion of the Japanese for football took the world by surprise.

It is interesting to reflect why this was surprising to so many people. A partial answer lies in the kinds of popular images of Japan the world has been exposed to. During its coverage of the event, the venerable BBC produced a beautiful advertisement, which was screened during the opening credits of every match. This was a more romantic montage of images: beginning with a temple on a lake at sunrise, followed by close up eyes of the Buddha, a fluttering Japanese flag. A football is kicked which then guides us through lingering shot of a geisha, then a slow romantic shot of Mt Fuji. At this point there is a sudden change of pace, as though taking us to the modern era: a *Shinkansen* explodes into view, neon illuminated crowded streets, and then the football flashes up between the uprights of a great *torii* as though it were a goal.

Undoubtedly, the imagery was clichéd. We see a mix of traditional culture and hyper modernity, of the mysterious and technological. Japan has been represented as an enigmatic "other" that has somehow appropriated the modernity that is familiar to the western audience. There was

supposed to be an effect by seeing the Sumo wrestler and the *Shinkansen* in the same sequence.

But why?

Making sense of Japanese “modernity”:

It is Japan being a culturally different nation, simultaneously modern and technologically advanced that is the cause for intrigue: it has a rich history of “eastern” traditions and a “western” presence. As an interested observer, I have an extra reason to consider Japan, widely regarded as the only modern “non-western” nation in history. Indeed the history of this nation, since the end of its apparent international isolationism through *sakoku rei* (closed country policy) in the 19th century to the present day, is a document of the effects of its interaction with the western powers, and simultaneous exposure to the ideas and technologies of modernity.

The concept of “modern” has meant different things to different groups of Japanese people at different points of time. The people of Japan were not passive recipients of grand historical trends; it is not the case that modernity “happened” to Japan, but rather through industry, toil, bloodshed and creativity, Japan forged itself into its present state. But in the process, Japan encompassed the experiences of many different nations, while struggling to understand and keep in mind, its unique dimensions and historical reality. Because there was no culture-free standard of modernity against which to measure success, Japan tended to fall back on the legacy of the west as the prototype. While it started as a situation of retaining Japanese traditions whilst adopting “value-free” modern rationality, it eventually collapsed into abandoning Japanese values and traditions on the misnomer that only by becoming western could Japan become truly modern. This coupled with a sense of socio-cultural anxiety about the identity and place of Japan has made the process of negotiating life in the present world, a task fraught with difficulties, culminating in the present cataclysmic changes that Japan faces.

Be it the Economic downsizing and loss of place as the world's 2nd largest economy to China, or the Graying of the Japanese population along with declining birth rates posing a question on Japan's continuity, or be it the reality of Immigration, along with increasing pressure calling upon Japan to assume leadership in Climate protection and International share of power, Japan can find its answers by a bit of foresight and relying on its values of being Japanese.

Japan has to remember the unique core values that impart the innate "Japan-ness" to it. Japan has a distinct set of values that make its Japanese spirit, which it could have called upon for strength in these times of crisis, but which it has abandoned for another set of "non-Japanese" values: adopting the Anglo-Saxon model of capitalism at an increasing spree by ignoring the uniquely Japanese model is one such example. But Japan should understand that modern era needn't dispense with cultural traditions all together. Modern Japan must engage with its traditions in a transformed way.

Japan needs to understand its **Kami** (spiritual essence in Shintoism)- the eternal values that Japan has nurtured and is the need of the hour; **Body**- the aggregation of various segments that work in coordination and make up Japan's vital organs, like Economy and Business, Population and Labour, Climate and International Relations etc; and its **Soul**- to caress the bleeding Japan and to infuse confidence in it to lead the new world order, post the present crisis.

As the author, I humbly invite you to understand the Spirit of Japan, with which it can transform its Body, and thus simultaneously perform a soul-introspection, so as to be the leader of the new world order that will inevitably emerge post crisis. This is an attempt to understand and rectify Japan's present in the light of essence from the past.

The Japanese spirit...:

"However, it is according to the dictates of time and fate that We have resolved to...enduring the unendurable and suffering what is unsufferable."

- The Great Emperor Hirohito in the *Gyokuon-hōsō*, August
15th, 1945

This is a statement etched in history, which best encapsulates the true grit and determination of what it means to be called Japanese. Japan fought tooth and nail and emerged victorious in a short span of time, taking the whole world by surprise. Japan's belief in *tennozan* (a divine victory) led thousands of Japanese civilians to fight the invaders during the Great Battle of Okinawa with sticks, rocks and bare fists, retreating into the mountains until the last breath and then killing themselves to prevent capture. The dedication of the civilians led the surprised invaders to commission an anthropologist to attempt to explain the devout nature of the Japanese. Thus Ruth Benedict's famous monograph *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946) was born.

Saigo Takamuri stood against the tide to show the Japanese people what it meant to be called Japanese, lest the onslaught of the so called "modernity" cause the people to forget themselves. This story serves to affirm the fundamental value of Japanese traditions even in the face of the onslaught of Westernization; Japan must inherently remain Japan in spirit. Thus *bushido* (the way of the Samurai) is the common thread that would present to Japan a sense of national identity and moral worth. Nitobe Inazo was not a great scholar, but he presented to Japan the holy grail of Japanese values. Later scholars would cite the rise of *Nihonjinron* (essays on Japanese uniqueness), which continues to this day, as a reaffirmation of this spirit.

Having such an exquisite history and legacy to bequeath, it is only a matter of time that Japanese and Japan will overcome this sudden onslaught of cataclysmic events that challenge its existence today.

Reforming the Body...:

Keeping the spirit in mind, we proceed to rectify the body of Japan: the Economy and Business, the Population and Labour, the Environmental sensitivity and the International role that it plays. Here we will evoke the Japanese values that would come at the aid of this reconstruction.

The Population:

Japan's population is aging faster than any other nation in the world. On one hand, its share of retirees is increasing with respect to the working population. On the other hand, the Total Fertility rate (the number of children a woman can have in her lifetime) is declining from the late 1970s and has accelerated now to being 1.6 compared to 2.1 that is necessary to maintain the population at the current levels. This *shoshika mondai* will force radical change if the nation is to avoid a fiscal crisis, or worse. These seemingly innocent demographic changes will force Japan to shrink its famously high savings rate, reverse its proud trade surplus and impact a more active, high-profile foreign policy. Ultimately, these changes will shift the balance of power in East Asia (Milton Ezrati, 1997).

Japan's elders have been saving a lot during their working years, and are now dis-saving the same (Ministry of Internal Communications, 2010). The alternative support for them is weakening (Nakashima and Jackson, 2008). The share of elders living with their children is continuously declining; Japan's traditional Confucian ethics of "Familial Unity and Familial Piety" come in for increasing attack from western individualistic values. As agriculture in Japan is becoming a rarity, and at the onslaught of globalization, elderly workers may find their skills becoming increasingly obsolete. So the argument of extending the retirement age of the elders from the present level of 65 may not actually be a solution (Oshio, 2008). Japan should restore its Confucian values of familial piety and support its elders, many of whom toiled hard during the

hard days of Japan, unlike their children who have only seen the bright side of it. This would then mean that we need more of the younger generation.

The nation in the past had implored to the Japanese women for *umeo fuyaseyo* (give birth and multiply). But the women of today will not have babies for the nation, or if somebody asked them to (Ashino Yuriko, 2008). The government subsidy will do good if enhanced from the current 5000 Yen per child. The Japanese labour market imposes a steep “opportunity cost” for the mothers who have children. With little help at home and an ever-demanding employee, they need better facilities like child care and flexible work hours. The men need to ideally shoulder the responsibilities of parenting, but even the Japanese male is facing a similar set of challenges.

“*Oyaji*” means the typical Japanese guy, the soul of the nation who works hard and is the breadwinner for the family. “*Oyaji*” had traditionally been a positive concept, but now the term is becoming less so. This is because, the Japanese male is under great stress. He is still supposed to be the main breadwinner, but often feels trapped in his job, where his employer still demands very long hours, making it difficult, if not impossible, for him to support his wife in household and child-rearing chores. Economics is a factor as well: for those men making under \$40,000 year, over 75 percent are unmarried. More ominously, the suicide rate for men is twice as high as for women in Japan. The conclusion is inescapable that for young men in Japan, the burden of marriage is growing, and therefore they are resisting the institution altogether.

Japan needs to make itself ready for reforms, particularly in two settings:

Firstly, there is the incredible cost of simply being pregnant in Japan (i.e. the economic factor mentioned earlier). Regular examinations during pregnancy are not covered by health insurance. It costs about 4.4 million Yen to raise a child till the age of 6 years (Chapelle, 2004).

Secondly there is the attitude of lawmakers to children and their health that brings into question the desire to see more people in Japan. In particular here I am referring to issues of safety. The

dangers associated with shaking babies has only recently (2001) been added to parent-child books in Japan. Child abuse has only recently been 'discovered' in Japan (Goodman, 2002a).

Thus Japan should formulate its Social Security and Insurance policies, as well as its laws for the betterment of the future of Japan.

The Labor:

Japan fears that there will be a decline in labor force due to decline in population (Yamada, 2010). Pressures to reform and restructure the Japanese economy are often taken to be synonymous with the dismantling of the very institutions that were viewed as the pillars of Japan's postwar economic success (Ono, 2002). These include the concept of "lifetime employment" and "seniority based wages".

About 1/3rd of Japanese workers are the *kitan sheishan* (casual labourers) and are paid less than the *sheishan* (Japanese workers). Among the former are a significant proportion of immigrants, who may be *nikkeijins* (descendant Japanese) and have lesser pay, inspite of having greater fertility rates (UCSD, 2002). They are mostly made to do the "3K Jobs" : *kiken*. (dangerous), *kitsui* (tough) or *kitanai* (dirty).

These people provide a vital link in the nation's labour chain, one which can no longer be replaced by native workers. In spite of their importance, these same people are, however, forced to exist in a precarious legal limbo, denied basic rights and social security.

If Japanese women are opting (or resigned) to have fewer children, then the next obvious option is to try to maintain the population through opening the nation's doors to greater immigration. Furthermore, the situation Japan faces is perhaps more urgent than one that can be fixed by

encouraging people to have more babies. Goto (2001), for example, argues that it is already too late to try to increase fertility levels to offset the burden on the working population. To be sure, Japan is presently struggling to emerge from its recession with unemployment at a post-War record high. Given this situation, talk about requiring more labourers may seem misplaced. Tsuda (2001) has argued, Japan's immigrant labour population has become a stable feature of industry which is relatively unaffected by economic recessions and declines in production. What is more, greater immigration could in fact help increase demand and innovation in the Japanese economy as well as lead to a larger number of children.

Japan manifestly needs an immigration policy which allows immigrants to come to Japan to work, live and stay if they so desire. It does not yet seem to have the will to implement one, however. Changing peoples' perceptions is perhaps the hardest task facing those who would promote internationalisation in Japan. It remains a daunting and lengthy task, too. When respondents were asked in a recent survey whether Japan should accept immigrants (as a part of its international responsibilities) 17 percent replied yes, while 53 percent said only if all other alternatives have been exhausted (Asahi Simbun, 2008).

Consequently, it seems that contemporary Japanese society is caught between the contradictory forces of ethnocentrism and internationalization (Sugimoto, 2003). On the one hand there are those calling for a freer immigration policy, with equal rights for all residents in Japan. On the other hand, there are those opposed, who fear that any greater influx of workers will threaten the imagined purity of the Japanese culture. But that is not true in the context of history.

Japan was between 1880 and 1930, an amazingly cosmopolitan country. Unlike Britain, France or the Netherlands that wouldn't grant citizenship of their own countries to Africans, Indonesians and Indians, Japan accepted Okinawan, Taiwanese and Koreans as full Japanese citizens, and the

National Diet had Korean and Chinese born politicians voted to represent electoral districts in Tokyo. Thus cultural assimilation is in the blood of Japanese. It is only that the anti-immigration rhetoric is leaving them unaware of this significant point in their own history.

Immigration is inevitable.

Business and Economy:

Japanese model of capitalism is inherently different from the Anglo-Saxon model in the sense that there is “humanization of capital”, thus taking it forward under a “better system of national coexistence” framework. The prominent Japanese economic critic, Uchihashi Katsuto, analyses the present juncture in the history of capitalism as one in which what he describes as 'pastoral capitalism' (the Japanese way) in which effort and discipline, skill and care, are rewarded and a sense of social solidarity nurtured, is being overwhelmed by Anglo-Saxon 'wild capitalism' in which reward and effort become de-linked and the speculative spirit is dominant.

Japan's associations with “marketization and financialization” have led to the present crisis in the economy. Human resources were dropped at the drop of the share price. The mindless and reckless behavior on the lines of short-sighted Anglo-Saxon model was a huge cost that some of the Japanese companies had to pay. It is time to embrace the true Japanese values and its innate model of capitalism once again.

Japan must now open its eyes, and realize that the economy will function well only when “fairness” becomes an instinctive policy; thus when committed people work in cooperative relationships based

on mutual respect rather than competitive, adversarial patterns subject to the market scrutiny of capricious shareholders.

Environmentalism and Climate:

Japanese environmentalism differed from the Western movement in that it sought to safeguard the environment in order protect man rather than save the environment for its own intrinsic value. In other words, “historically, environmental problems have been defined as conditions that rend the fabric of society, not the web of nature.”

As an island nation with few natural resources, Japan can't afford to be profligate. That means it has something to teach other nations. The country is one of the most energy-efficient industrial countries in the world, and some of Japan's leading companies, such as Toyota and Sharp, are known for technologies that foster greener lifestyles. A conservation mind-set is ingrained into Japanese people from birth, and is apparent in little ways throughout society. The public restrooms have no soap, no dispenser full of paper towels--sometimes no toilet paper. In their purses, *yamato nadeshiko* (women who are, among other things, mindful and prepared) make a point to carry packets of tissue paper with them into the stall, and handkerchiefs to dry their hands. What other country would install devices to mimic the sound of a toilet flushing to discourage the waste of water by modest Japanese anxious to cover the sound of their micturition with multiple flushes?

The attitude of the public and the efforts of the government are slowly changing Japan. Partly, that is because of the concept of *mottainai*, which literally means "what a waste" and is manifest in an almost reflexive desire to conserve and reuse. Centuries before there was an environmental movement, the Japanese embraced origami, an art form--originally from China--based on the

notion of creation without cutting. Fashion designer Issey Miyake adapted the concept 30 years ago in apparel made with a single piece of cloth, cut so that no pieces wind up in the garbage.

Mottainai is not an economical concept; it's a mentality (Hiroyuki Torigoe, a sociology professor at Waseda University in Tokyo as quoted in Time, 2006). Japan needs to foster this to play a prominent role in the new world order.

Politics and International Relations:

Japan's present crisis can be significantly attributed to the over-dependence on the American economy.

Another issue I would like to bring up is both an opportunity and a threat to "Brand Japan", and also an issue that is being debated heavily – both in Japan and abroad. I am referring to Japanese foreign policy, and in particular, its strained relations to its Asian neighbors like China and Korea.

As an export-oriented economy, Japan is totally dependant on the outside world for its continued success and prosperity. As explained earlier, over time, Japan has supplied the world with cost-efficient, innovative, and reliable products. Japan has managed to build a strong brand, and a pool of goodwill among consumers. This is one of the supporting pillars of the Japanese economy.

Japan needs to define an autonomous role for itself, not defined in terms of the west. This can be done by strengthening the cultural and social ties with East Asia and supporting the development of multilateral institutions in the region. In the pre-war era, Japan had hosted the concept of the *kyoeiken* (co-prosperity sphere). The idea of the "return of Asia" has become powerful in the public discourse, and they signify modern Japan's ongoing attempts to overcome "modernity" as defined by the west, thus transcending the "Westernization" and promoting the "home coming" of Japanese values. It should have new allies so as to consolidate its position effectively in the post-crisis world. The case of India-Japan relations is also a highly lucrative one which can be

effectively explored, so as to result in a new “Triangle in the Post-Crisis world”, where Japan-India-China will be a strong partnership.

Japan needs to look to rising powers with the view that in the 21st century, the national security and economic growth of one country need not come at the expense of another. In an interconnected world, power does not need to be a zero-sum game, and nations need not fear the success of another. “Cultivating spheres of cooperation -- not competing spheres of influence -- will lead to progress in the Asia Pacific (Barack Obama, Suntory Hall, Tokyo, 2010).”

Soul- Searching...:

The present crisis has revealed a Japan, wracked by anxieties and insecurities about its identity and place in the world. People are disillusioned; public surveys show low levels of happiness and satisfaction. Public confidence in the government has been affected, and the “Revolving Door” policy of the Prime Minister ship is only a reflection of the same. The intelligentsia is contesting hard the apparent “Japan passing” and that has gained momentum with China’s supposed take over as the world’s 2nd largest economy.

But what is immediately necessary to restore the spirit of fighting in the Japanese and to inculcate hope in their hearts once again, is to first perform an intense self-introspection and drive away the devils that plague it.

Japanese society has been ossified by a “catch-up” mentality, as noted by the commission set up to determine “Japan’s Goals in the 21st Century” in 2000. It seems to have lost its sense of purpose after having overtaken the so-called west.

The report calls for not only enhanced cultural confidence, it is also critical of Japan’s post-war tendencies. Against the background of the *Nihonjinron*, the Japanese society has become oblivious

of the fact that it's ideal actually egalitarianism and not homogeneity: people of Japan must be equal, but not at the price of sacrificing originality, innovation and individual talent.

Murakami Haruki in his work *Andāguraundo* (Underground, 1995) says:

“The reality is that beneath the main system of Japanese society there exists no sub-system, no safety net, to catch those who slip through the cracks. There is a basic gap in our society, a kind of black-hole.”

The necessary safety-net can be built by a unique sense of Japanese leadership in the post-crisis world, with the infusion of confidence and mutual identity among the Japanese, so as to take on that role of world leader which has been kept in waiting for a long time for it.

And to Conclude...:

Thus by rejuvenating its Body with the help of its unique Spirit, and giving that much-needed caress to the Soul, Japan can transcend the present crisis smoothly. Nonetheless, there will remain critics who will see all of Japan's efforts at regional confidence building as little confidence tricks. Wherever they will see Japan, they will see the covert insinuation of a new kind of Japanese hegemony in the form of Nissan cars, Nintendo games and Sony Playstations. But critics can rest for some time.

Japan has been representing itself as the home of artistic innovation and pop-culture phenomena, manga and video games, along with food, fashion and architecture, as amongst its contributions to the world. It should make greater sense of it being a modern society that is continuously negotiating for its share of identity and role in a world of global capitalism.

All this will reach a logical crescendo when Japan will define a Vision for itself that attracts others to it.

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