

LITTLE TOKYO IN CHENNAI

Shalini Umachandran | TNN

Just about 800 of their 127 million subjects call Chennai home — but Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko of Japan, on their first trip to India after they were crowned in 1990, would find a vibrant community that has established its presence in several spheres.

The Japanese have been putting down their tatami mats in Chennai since the late 1960s but it's only in the last five years that the population has more than quadrupled, driven by jobs in the 360 Japanese manufacturing and automobile companies here. Japanese groups have invested more than ₹8,000 crore in the state, and the community's cultural engagement has deepened too.

"Business links between Tamil Nadu and Japan have been strengthening from the early 2000s and cultural understanding has improved," says Masanori Nakano, Consul General, Consulate-General of Japan in Chennai. Though Delhi, Mumbai and Banga-

lore have a larger population of Japanese expats, Chennai's rate of growth has probably been faster. The Japanese School Educational Trust's expansion can probably hold a mirror to the community's growth. When it was started in 1975 in Royapettah, it had a handful of students. Until 2008, the language school had just 20 students, which doubled to 40 in 2011. "This year, we have 72 students between the ages of seven and 15," says its managing trustee Shigeo Irie, who is also vice-president at Mitsubishi. "We moved into the campus of the American International School in 2003."

The challenge is to help them transition into life in Chennai, and that's where organisations like Japanese Association come in. "We celebrate festivals and organise events all year but our main purpose is to be their safety net," says Irie, who is also vice-chairman of the association. The consulate organises

film festivals, Ikebana, design exhibitions and more.

Some have assimilated so well they no longer consider themselves expats. "I have my own life so I don't meet other Japanese people," says Akira Hatayama, who teaches language and bonsai rearing at cultural centre ABK-AOTS Dosokai, and has been living here for 12 years. "I like the weather. I eat Tamil meals and find the shops selling Japanese food too expensive. It's for expats," he says.

Known to be intensely private and disciplined, the Japanese adjust quickly to Chennai; they find people here friendly and accommodating, although they do struggle to make peace with the chaotic traffic. Yoga teacher Shanthala T Medappa, who has had Japanese students since 2010, says there is much to learn from them. "They are punctual and respectful, never aggressive. If there a decision to be taken, they consult one another. They don't do just what's best for them but put the needs of others first," she says.

The admiration is mutual, says M R Ranganathan, founder-chairman of ABK-AOTS Dosokai. "They find us hard-working like them," he says. "With the factories in Sriperumbudur, Oragadam and Sri City, and the upcoming Japanese township near Mamallapuram, the Japanese community in Chennai is set to grow."

BUSINESS OF LIFE

SHARED HISTORY, CULTURE, BUSINESS AND LANGUAGE ARE JUST SOME OF THE FACTORS THAT LINK TAMIL NADU AND JAPAN



360
business
establishments in
Tamil Nadu



800
Japanese
living in
Tamil Nadu

4,000 Indians take Japanese language proficiency tests every year in Chennai

Late 1960s | First Japanese factory set up with Indian partner; Japanese consulate in Chennai established; Japanese population is about 30

1974 | ABK-AOTS Dosokai, oldest Japanese cultural organisation, set up

1975 | Japanese Class of Madras (now Japanese School Education Trust of Chennai) set up in Royapettah to teach Japanese children

1998 | Mitsubishi enters India with plant at Oragadam

2003 | Japanese School Education Trust of Chennai moves into American International School campus to accommodate more students

\$18b
Value of business
between Japan
and India

2005 | Nissan sets up plant at Oragadam

From 2006 | More businesses come in; half a dozen Japanese restaurants, stores set up; most companies are in the automobile and engineering space; other major players include commercial vehicle manufacturer Komatsu and trading company Mitsui

2013 | OneHub integrated township for Japanese businesses being set up; 200-acre industrial park in Sriperumbudur for Indian and Japanese companies planned

DRIVING AHEAD: The Nissan facility makes Sunny and Micra



Business bonds improve bilateral ties

Aparna Ramalingam | TNN

India and Japan have always had strong business ties. And now, with bilateral trade increasing, Tamil Nadu has the second highest concentration of Japanese establishments in the country at 360.

"Trade volume between India and Japan is on the rise. Japanese companies also have a presence in Sri City, an integrated township on the Andhra Pradesh border," says Hidehiro Ishiura, director general, Jetro (Japan External Trade Organisation). At present, bilateral trade between the two countries is over \$18 billion.

The automobile sector, followed by engineering, has been attracting many Japanese companies to Tamil Nadu. "The Japanese perception of India remains unchanged. There is a huge domestic automobile market in the two-wheeler, bike and moped segment and Japanese companies are looking to ride that boom," Ishiura said.

From Nissan to Mitsui, some big Japanese companies have a presence here.

Once the Chennai-Bangalore industrial corridor comes into existence, it is bound to attract further investments. "The blueprint of the corridor will be completed by the end of this fiscal year," says Ishiura.

Recently, food products seasoning company Ajinomoto, Hitachi Automotive Systems, and fragrances company Takasago

MORE FIRMS ENTER TN

signed up to establish factories in the upcoming OneHub, a \$700 million integrated industrial township near Mamallapuram.

Developed by Ascendas, Mizuho Bank, JGC Corporation and Ireo, OneHub, spread over 1,450 acres will be a township complete with industrial, business and residential facilities alongside lifestyle amenities to facilitate the growth of Japanese and international business. Hitachi is looking to

build a state-of-the-art production facility, while Ajinomoto is looking to set up a new office and packaging facility. Takasago is planning a manufacturing and research and development facility, which is expected to be the headquarters for Takasago's R&D, manufacturing and sales operations in South Asia.

OneHub is expected to house automotive, food and beverage and consumer goods industries, and support 1.4 lakh people.

Doing business in India doesn't come without its challenges. "Power cuts, shortage of water, port congestion and bad roads are some of the problems," says Ishiura.



HOME & AWAY: Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko will be here for two days; (above) the Japanese community in Chennai try to assimilate easily

Traditional ties to be focus of royal visit

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

All eyes are on the skies today, not just in anticipation of the arrival of the emperor and empress of Japan, but in hope that the weather is clement. Nothing should rain on their parade through Chennai, not least a downpour.

The royal entourage will touch down around 2pm today and head for Taj Coromandel where they will be given the hotel's version of the 101 gun salute before the imperial couple is shown up to the presidential suite. They'll have just enough time to have an invigorating cup of tea before they'll be escorted to Kalakshetra Foundation around 4pm, where the emperor and his wife, both patrons of the arts, will be treated to an evening of classical performances.

At the dance academy, they will be received near Rukmini Arangam, a performance

space, and be taken on a tour of the Kalakshetra campus, following which they will witness a veena and a dance class in progress. They will then return to Rukmini Arangam where they will watch sequences of a dance recital from the celebrated Ramayana pro-

duction scripted by Rukmini Devi Arundale, dancer and founder of Kalakshetra. They will also be treated to a Hindolam thillana (the traditional dance that closes a performance). Before they depart from the academy, the emperor and empress will meet the chairman of Kalakshetra, Gopalakrishna Gandhi, director Priyadarshini Govind and deputy director Karunakara Menon. They return to the hotel from there.

On their second and final day in the city, the nature-loving emperor and empress will tour Guindy National Park, where several indigenous botanical species like neem, tamarind and wood apple will be pointed out to them. The couple is also slated to spend time with a group of school children at the park, to whom they will address such topics as the environment and climate.

Having worked up an appetite, the royal couple will go on to take lunch with the Governor and his wife at Raj Bhavan, and from there head to The Spastics Society of Tamil Nadu where they will be shown around the facility and introduced to some of the methods of instruction and vocational skills development practiced there.

The imperial itinerary in Chennai may stand apart from the ones of other heads of state by its absence of trade meetings and social shindigs, but as Masanori Nakano, Consul-General of Japan pointed out, the emperor is on a goodwill visit whose chief objective is to deepen ties of friendship and tradition with India.