

Japan

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INTRODUCTION

Japan is a beautiful country. It is the first country in the eastern side so it is called the land of the rising Sun. The country is most wonderful, picturesque, many sided, charming wild and sweet. It is economically one of the most developed and richest countries in the world. Japan is a great economic power, next only to the United States of America. It is in its appearance so much a synthesis of all the other countries of the world from the tropical to the arctic. Japan's changed name is Nippon. Its capital is Tokyo. Its area is 377,765sq KiloMetres. Its population is about 127.3 million. Japanese is the language of Japan. Literacy is 100%. Shintoism and Buddhism are the two principal religions of Japan. Its currency is Yen. \$=116.00. Its per capita income is about \$ 28,000.

THE PHYSICAL AND HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

(1) Relief

Japan is an islandic country consisting of no less than 3,900 islands. Japan is an archipelago (chain of islands) which forms an arc extending for nearly 3,000 KiloMetres off the east coast of Asia.

“The Japanese landscape is rugged, with more than four-fifths of the land surface consisting of mountains. The mountains are divided into many small land blocks that are separated by lowlands or deep saddles; there is no long or continuous mountain range. These land blocks are the result of intense faulting and warping and are often bounded by fault scarps and flexure slopes that descend in step formation to the adjacent lowlands. Japan has deeply indented coastline measuring 26,600 KiloMetres. Main ports are Yokohama, Kobe, Nagoya, and Osaka.

Japan is one of the world's most geologically unstable areas. The country experiences some 100 tremors annually, most of them minor, though sometimes major quacks cause considerable loss of life and widespread destruction. For example, an earthquake in 1923

followed by widespread fire caused such havoc in the Tokyo-Yokohama area that several thousand persons lost their lives and millions became homeless. Violent volcanic eruptions occur frequently. There are about 60 more or less active volcanoes of which the best known is Mount Aso. The other famous volcano is Mount Fuji, which, at an elevation of 12,388 feet (3,7776 Metres) is Japan's highest mountain, but it is dormant. The country's abundant hot springs are mostly of volcanic origin.

Japan's rivers are generally short and swiftrunning and are supplied by small drainage basins. The most significant rivers are the Teshio and Ishikari rivers of Hokkaido; the Kitakami, Tone, Shinano, Kiso, and Tenryu rivers of Honshu; and the Chikugo of Kyushu. Some of the rivers from the volcanic areas of northeastern Honshu are acidic and are useless for irrigation and other purposes.”¹

“The soils of Japan are customarily divided from northeast to south west into a weak podzolic (soils with a thin organic mineral layer over a gray leached layer) zone, a brown-earth zone, and red-earth zone. Soil fertility increases in the lowlands where agriculture is practiced, the result of a combination of natural alluvium washed down from the uplands and centuries of intense reworking of the soil medium by rice farmers.”²

(2) *Climate*

“In general, Japan's climate is characterized as monsoonal (i.e., governed by seasonal winds). It is moderate but the north is colder than the south. In winter, cold winds coming from Siberia cause heavy snow and rain in the northern and western parts of country. Hence, the winters of the north are very cold. The cold ocean currents make the climate still colder. The physical feature that most affects climate is the mountainous backbone of the islands. The ranges interrupt the monsoonal winds and cause the gloomy weather and heavy snows of winter along the Sea of Japan coast and the bright and windy winter weather along the Pacific.

In summer, the south-east monsoon brings rain to the southern and eastern parts of Japan. The climate there is warm and humid. The warm Kuro Shio currents also help in warming up the climate of the region. The southern parts of Japan are frequently struck by violent tropical rain storms known as typhoons. They often cause great loss of life and property.”³

“The mingling of cold and warm ocean currents on the eastern coast causes thick fog and a condition in which fish thrives. This area is therefore one of the major fishing grounds of fisheries, of the world.”⁴

(3) Agriculture and Industry

“Japanese agriculture is characterized by a large number of small and often inefficient farms. Only 14 percent of the total area of Japan is under cultivation because the land is generally hilly. Nearly 18 percent of the population is engaged in agriculture. Japanese farmers have very small farms but these are intensively cultivated. The crop yields per acre are very high because of irrigation, fertilisers, good seeds and hard work. Most of the agricultural work is done by hand, using simple tools specially designed for the small fields. Rice, the staple food of Japan is cultivated in half the area of arable land. Other crops are wheat, barley, potatoes and tobacco. Silk from mulberry trees and tea are two important cash crops. Japan leads the world in the production of raw silk.”⁵

“Mining is an unimportant and declining branch of the economy. The extractive industry is characterized by a large number of small and relatively inefficient mines that do not lend themselves to the application of modern, large-scale mining methods. Coal, the most important mineral mined throughout most of Japan’s industrial period, is now extracted as a marginal operation. Except for limestone and sulphur, Japan is poor in minerals. Japanese industry is heavily dependant on imported raw materials and fuel. Japan, one of the most advanced countries of the world has emerged after World War II, a

leader in technology and world's principal ship-builders and automakers and is a major producer of such basic products as crude steel, synthetic rubber, aluminium, sulfuric acid, plastics, cement, pulp and paper, refined copper, and cotton yarn. It has some of the world's largest and most advanced industrial plants. The most spectacular growth has been in the production of motor vehicles, iron and steel machinery (including robots), petrochemicals, precision equipment (notably cameras), and advanced electronic products.”⁷⁶

(4) Forestry and Fishing

“Nearly two-thirds of the total area of Japan is forested. The forests provide timber, fuel and paper-pulp.

The water surrounding Japan, especially in the east, abounds in fish. The Japanese people are among the world's best fisherman. The Japanese fishing industry leads the world in the size of fishing fleet, the number of annual catch and people employed.”⁷⁷

HISTORY

Japan's history is that of an islandic people absorbed in their singular destiny, yet profoundly influenced by other cultures.

Agriculture and technology, government, religion, writing art – all owe much to the older civilizations of China and Korea, but each aspect underwent assimilation into styles uniquely Japanese. Throughout centuries of power struggles behind the throne, successive emperors reigned as symbolic fathers of a nation never occupied by foreign conquerors until 1945. Even this occupation which lasted only till 1952 was superficial and was never such as to disturb the life and culture of Japan.

“According to ancient chronicles the islands of Japan were created by the gods separate and apart from the rest of the world, with the emperor himself a divine descendant of the Sun goddess.

Japan's complete isolation from the West was broken briefly when Portuguese arrived in 1543. The Spanish Jesuit missionary St.

Francis Xavier followed and Christianity enjoyed moderate success until the great warlord Hideyoshi decided the church was but a Trojan horse for political conquest. He ordered the “pope’s generals” out. His successors, the Tokugawa shoguns, went even further, martyring a number of the faithful. In 1639 almost all foreigners were banned. When Yoshida was born in 1830, the country had been closed for almost 200 years. Shoguns of the Tokugawa family had maintained a balance among the country’s more than 250 domains. And they had brought to fruit an amazing warrior culture. Only samurai were allowed weapons. Life was ordered according to strict Confucian principles of duty and family loyalty. Peace reigned and merchant, artisan, farmer, and samurai all served the shogun and emperor. Japan stood still, wrapped in a cocoon to preserve its unique traditions.

Not so the great nations of the West, powered by the industrial revolution, driven by the urge to expand. England, Spain, Portugal, even the bold young United States, roamed the seas in powerful fleets, seeking commerce and colonies. Britain ruled India and forced opium trade upon China, next door to Japan. News of these events leaked through the paper screen. By the time Perry arrived in 1853, the ban against western books had been lifted, and there were small pockets of scholars’ deeply immersed *rangaku*, or Dutch studies, as they were called, after the only colony of Westerners permitted in Japan. The areas of greatest interest to these scholars were medicine, mathematics, and military science. They were cautiously attempting a very tricky operation: to cut the superior foreign science free from its barbarian society and transplant it into the pure but aging Tokugawa culture.

“Eastern ethics and Western science” became the slogan of scholars such as Sakuma Shozan, who was to have great influence on Yoshida Shoin, and who saw clearly that purity of spirit alone would not defeat Western cannon. There was a growing perception that unless some careful modernization was undertaken, the tranquil life of the isolated island empire would be endangered. In Yoshida’s

birth year, however, few suspected that only 40 years later an epoch would be finished – that they were the last samurai.

Yoshida was born into a samurai family relatively low among the many classes of warrior élite; they had to work the land to survive. The farmhouse itself is gone, but the fields worked by his family are still cultivated. Physically Yoshida was small and unimposing, but he seemed filled with energy and intensity. The man who called himself tiger hardly looked the part; he himself said, “If I have the valor of a tiger, it can only be as a teacher.”⁸

“The sword represented life, a samurai’s soul. For a samurai, not only must the body be always ready, skilled in the martial arts, but the mind must be constantly informed as well. Young warriors capped their formal education by traveling within the country, meeting others like themselves. At 20 Yoshida went south, on foot and by boat, to Kyushu, reading every book he could borrow along the way.

One of the greatest influences of Yoshida was 17th-century military strategist Yamaga Soko, who said, “We are born to die tomorrow, and yet through books we are able to know events of thousands of years.”

It is said that Yoshida, to read on summer nights, would put mosquitoes in the sleeves of his kimono to stay awake, and in winter walked barefoot in the snows.

In Nagasaki he met the Dutch and went aboard one of their strange ships. In his ensuing travels he saw how defenseless the coastlines were. In Edo he fell in with Sakuma Shozan and his students of Western learning. Sakuma urged Yoshida and others to study abroad despite the ban on travel. Yoshida had heard from another sensei that “lately the foreign countries have made great headway and they have invaded many countries of the East; very soon the foreign poison will reach Japan; the whole nation is greatly worried and the people confused.”

Fast company and heady ideas seem to have made Yoshida

reckless. Travel outside one's own domain was strictly at the pleasure of the daimyo. Impatient, tired of waiting for official permission, he left on another trip without it. He was later to call this "my first audacious act."

By now he had come to think of himself as a person with unique vision, someone who saw reality more clearly than others. That vision, he felt, required him to act outside the accepted tenets of society. Ordered back to Hagi, he was stripped by the han government of his samurai rank and income. However, this apparently crushing blow early in a promising career took a strange twist. Yoshida had not yet used up all his credit with the Mori daimyo. (Mori daimyo – At ten Yoshida delivered a lecture on military strategy at Hagi castle, earning the lasting admiration of the Mori daimyo, or chieftain.) In a reversal he was forgiven his disobedience and given ten years to travel and study.

He was free at last; free to follow his own path, it led almost straight to Perry, and shortly into the shogun's jail. During these years Yoshida wrote that for Japan to remain free it must be stronger, must recruit men of talent and ability regardless of class. One of the reforms he long had wanted in the han school was the seating of students by achievement instead of by hereditary rank, as was customary.

Yoshida's ability to act, to disobey the rules, came from a new realization that the shogun's regime and the sacred realm of the emperor were two separate things; that what appeared to be a fixed holy reality was simply politics.

Although an academic himself, he increasingly preached against "empty learning." He espoused Chinese philosopher Wang Yang-ming's dictum that to know and not to act is not to know. The poet and scholar Yoshida was a true samurai; he believed in the inseparability of the writing brush and the sword. In a letter to a friend he wrote, "Today the country is menaced by thousands of dangers and... we cannot expect very much from our writings."

“While jailed for attempting to leave the country on Perry’s ship, Yoshida, ever the sensei, conducted classes for his fellow prisoners. And, characteristically, his was a new kind of teaching. When finally released himself, he took over his uncle’s tiny school in Hagi, the Shoka Sonjuku. Again unconventionally, he accepted as students anyone who wished to learn—regardless of hereditary class. Most of his students were young, under 30. Using the school as a base, Yoshida laid the foundations for tightly knit political organization, aimed at rebellion. He started an in-house newspaper, which he named *Flying Ears, Long Eyes*. Since he personally was prohibited from traveling, he sent his students out all over the realm to act as investigative reporters.

Many in other domains shared Yoshida’s feelings; rebellious movements sprang up in hans all over Japan, but in Choshu they were not extinguished. During this period Yoshida had been a samurai of the brush, and his kempakus, like editorials, flowed rapidly upon each other. Then the shogunate moved to stifle the radicals, rounding them up in Kyoto and Edo, then in the provinces. It was obvious that many would be executed, including some of Yoshida’s friends. It was time to put down the brush and take up the sword.

He sounded the call for a general uprising of “retainers of the grassy field,” unattached samurai all over Japan. While many refused, a small band of his own students joined him in a plot to assassinate the shogunate’s purge leader in Kyoto. The plot failed, and Yoshida was arrested and sent in a small cage to prison in Edo. On the 21st of November, 1859, at age 29, Yoshida was executed.

Yoshida died nearly a decade before the Sonjuku leaders fulfilled the rebellion he had called for. Although it is called the Meiji Restoration, it was not only restoration of power to the emperor but also a full-scale revolution. The years were bloody, and many of the best and brightest of Yoshida’s Sonjuku group were killed. Finally the rifle units advocated by Yoshida and led by his student Takasugi Shinsaku proved successful. Composed of both samurai and

commoners using covertly purchased American Civil War weapons, they won their civil war in Choshu, and then marched against the surprised samurai of the shogun.

When it was over, almost all the Sonjuku group that survived became officers in the new government. Their names are familiar to Japanese schoolchildren today: names like Ito Hirobumi, the nation's first prime minister, who wrote a constitution ending feudalism and guaranteeing many individual rights; Yamagata Aritomo, who created a modern army; Maebara Issei, who became a minister of defense. A national education system was created, and a national university, open to all classes, based on talent and ability. The new government adopted a Western-style parliamentary system of government. From Western science Japan received the railroad, the telegraph, a postal system, and modern weaponry.

Even more drastic, the feudal domains were turned into prefectures; the daimyos gave place to governors. And the most dramatic act of all was the law that made it illegal to dress or act like a samurai. The privileged class was ended by the last samurai themselves. The coming of Perry and the actions of Yoshida shoin and his disciples had set in motion a series of events that snapped the long cord of Japanese history. The perceived notion of the world was broken, and it shattered like glass.

And yet, picking and choosing from the world of modern Western powers – Germany, France, the United States, and Great Britain – they made something new, and totally Japanese. As Emperor Meiji put it in a poem that became a motto for the new age:

May our country,
Taking what is good,
And rejecting what is bad,
Be not inferior
To any other.”¹⁰

“Japan was the only Asian country to have escaped imperialist control. For centuries, military generals, called *shoguns*, exercised real

power in Japan while the Japanese emperor was a mere figurehead. For over two hundred years, Japan had been almost totally secluded from the rest of the world. In many respects, the Japanese social system was comparable to the social system of feudal Europe. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, Japan was rudely awakened to the modern world by the threat to her independence. Within a few decades she not only succeeded in warding off the danger of foreign domination but also underwent a process of modernizing certain aspects of her society that enabled her to emerge as a world power.

In 1853, Commodore Perry went with a US fleet and delivered an ultimatum to Japan. It was stated that “positive necessity requires that we should protect our commercial interests in this remote part of the world, and in doing so, to resort to measures, however strong, to counteract the schemes of powers less scrupulous than ourselves.” Eight months later, when he returned with a bigger fleet, the Japanese government signed a treaty with US under which two ports were opened to US ships and some amount of trade was permitted. Similar treaties were then signed by several European countries. In 1863 and 1864, the US and European fleet displayed their military superiority by firing on two Japanese cities.

In 1868, the rule of the *shogun* was ended and a new set of rulers and advisers came to the fore. They ruled in the name of the emperor, whose authority, in theory, was restored. This event is known as the Meiji Restoration, after the title ‘Meiji’ which the new emperor took.

Within less than four decades of the Meiji Restoration, Japan’s economy and political institutions were transformed. The Japanese government made heavy investments in industries, the money for which was raised by heavy taxation and exploitation of the peasantry. Subsequently, the industries were sold to capitalists. Afterwards, government support in starting industries was no longer needed as the Japanese capitalists were able to start industries on their own. The process of industrialization was accompanied by

impoverishment of the peasants, who often rebelled. An increasing number of them migrated to the cities where they provided cheap labour for the industries. By the early years of the twentieth century, Japanese goods, particularly textiles, could successfully compete in the international market with European goods. The demand for Japanese manufactures within Japan was limited due to the extreme poverty of most Japanese.

In 1889, Japan was given a new constitution. The emperor enjoyed a special position as head of the executive and ministers were appointed by him and were responsible to him. He was believed to be “heaven-descended, divine and sacred; he is pre-eminent above his subjects. He must be revered and is inviolable.” The constitution provided for a parliament called the Diet. Less than three per cent of the population had the right to vote. The Diet enjoyed little power; the ministers were not responsible to it, and even financial matters, its powers were limited. The military enjoyed vast powers in the new political system and, in course of time, came to completely dominate it. The army and the navy appointed army and naval officers, ministers of the army and the navy and the Diet had absolutely no control over them. The educational system which was built up made the mass of the population literate within a very short time. It enabled the Japanese to master the technical skills necessary for industrialization. The educational system was also used to promote emperor worship and an attitude of extreme nationalism and chauvinism. Civil liberties and open political struggles were lacking in Japan. The State was controlled by an oligarchy and the repressive apparatus of the State, notably the police, enjoyed wide powers to control the press and prevent the holding of public meetings and demonstrations. Political dissent was not tolerated. In spite of severe restriction, however, the first socialist group in Asia was formed in Japan.

By the 1890s, Japan had started pursuing her colonial ambitions. These ambitions were primarily directed at China and aimed at

establishing Japanese supremacy in East Asia. Later, the object of Japanese ambitions was to be entire Asia and the Pacific region. Having built up her armed strength, she went to war with China and defeated her in 1895. She annexed Formosa (Taiwan), which was a part of China, and forced China to recognize Korea, over which she claimed suzerainty, as an independent State. The Japanese objective in all this was not to secure the independence of Korea but to end Chinese influence there and to gain a free hand for the subjugation of Korea. In 1905, Korea was made a protectorate of Japan and in 1910 was annexed by her in 1899, Japan's status as a great power was recognized by the US and European countries when they gave up the rights and concessions that they had obtained as a result of the treaties which Japan had been forced to sign with them after 1854. In 1902, the Anglo-Japanese Treaty or Alliance was signed, and Japan became the first Asian country to enjoy the status of full equality with other colonial powers. The British objective in signing the treaty was to deter Russian designs in China. The Russo-Japanese War (1904-05), ended in the defeat of Russia. Southern Manchuria was recognized as a Japanese 'sphere of influence'. Japan also obtained half of the Sakhalin Island and acquired control of the Liaotung Peninsula.”¹¹

The man responsible for bringing about the incredible transformation of Japan, as mentioned earlier, was Hirobumi Ito. The first Prime Minister of Japan after the revolution, called the Meiji Restoration, of 1868. Ito was murdered by the bullet of a Korean assassin in 1908. On that occasion Sri Aurobindo, writing in Karmayogin and in Bengali writing had the following pertinent remarks to make on the life and work of Ito:

“A great man has fallen, perhaps the greatest force in the field of political action that the nineteenth century produced, the maker of Japan, the conqueror of Russia, the mighty one who first asserted Asia's superiority over Europe in Europe's own field of glory and changed in a few years the world's future. Prince Hirobumi Ito was

the typical man of his nation, as well as its greatest statesman and leader. He went ahead of it for while only to raise it to his level. He had all its virtues in overflowing measure and a full share of its defects and vices. Absolutely selfless in public affairs, quiet, unassuming, keeping himself in the background unless duty called him into prominence, calm, self-controlled, patient, swift, energetic, methodical, incapable of fear, wholly devoted to the nation -- such is the Japanese, and such was Ito. As a private man he had the Japanese defects. Even in public affairs, he had something of the narrowness, unscrupulousness in method and preference of success to justice of the insular and imperial Japanese type. Added to these common characteristics of his people he had a genius equal to that of any statesman in history. The eye that read the hearts of men, the mouth sealed to rigid secrecy, the rare, calm and effective speech, the brain that could embrace a civilization at a glance and take all that was needed for his purpose, the swift and yet careful intellect that could divine, choose and arrange, the power of study, the genius of invention, the talent of application, a diplomacy open-minded but never vacillating, a tireless capacity for work, — all these he had on so grand a scale that to change the world's history was to him a by no means stupendous labour. And he had the ancient Asiatic gift of self-effacement. In Europe a genius of such colossal proportions would have filled the world with the mighty bruit of his personality; but Ito worked in silence and in the shade, covering his steps, and it was only by the results of his work that the world knew him. Like many modern Japanese, Ito was a sceptic. His country was the God of his worship to whom he dedicated his life, for whom he lived and in whose service he died. Such was this great Vibhuti, who came down to earth in a petty family, an Eastern island clan, a nation apart and far behind in the world's progress, and in forty years created a nation's progress founded an Empire, changed a civilization and prepared the liberation of a continent. His death was worthy of his life. For there are only two deaths which are really great and carry a soul to the highest heaven, to die in self-forgetting action, in battle,

by assassination, on the scaffold for others, for one's country or for the right, and to die as the Yogin dies, by his own will, free of death and disease, departing into that from which he came. To Ito, the sceptic, the patriot, the divine worker, the death of the selfless hero was given."¹²

“Two types of souls are born among men. Those who manifest their innate divine nature through a slow process of progressive evolution are ordinary men. And those who are born as Vibhūtis to help that process of evolution are a class apart. Accepting the character and mode of conduct of the nation, and the zeitgeist of the age in which they are born, they achieve ends which the ordinary people cannot attain, change the course of the world to some extent, and then return to their own respective occult worlds leaving immortal names in history. Their character and contribution are beyond man's praise and blame. Whether we praise or condemn them, they have fulfilled the tasks given them by God, and the future of humanity, determined by their works, will speed on in the decreed course. Caesar, Napoleon, Akbar, Shivaji are such Vibhūtis, Hirobumi Ito, the great man of Japan, belongs to this category and not one of the people I have just mentioned was superior to him in native qualities, genius, the greatness of his effort or in the future results he produced. Every one is aware of the pre-eminent position of Ito in history and in the tremendous progress of Japan. But all may not know that it was Ito who conceived the course, means and aim of that progress and achieved that great transformation single-handed, all the other great men were only his instruments. It was Ito indeed who conceived in his mind the unity, independence, education, army, navy, economic prosperity, commerce and politics of Japan and translated that dream into reality. He was preparing the future Japanese empire. Whatever he did he achieved mostly from behind the scenes. The world learns immediately of what the Kaiser or Lloyd George is thinking or doing. But no one knew what Ito was thinking or doing—when his secret imagination and effort bore fruit, only then the world learnt with

astonishment: this was being prepared so long. And yet what great effort, what wonderful genius is manifested in his achievement. If Ito had been used to publicize his great vision, the whole world would have laughed at him as a mad idealist given to fruitless dreams and bent upon achieving the impossible. Who would have believed that within fifty years, Japan would, maintaining its priceless independence, absorb western culture, become a very powerful nation like England, France and Germany, defeat China and Russia, spread Japanese trade and commerce and painting, and also induce admiration for the Japanese intelligence and fear of Japanese courage, capture Korea and Formosa, lay the foundation of a great empire, achieve the utmost progress in unity, freedom, equality and national education. Napoleon used to say: “I have banished the word “impossible” from my dictionary.” Ito did not say but in fact did so. Ito’s achievement is greater than Napoleon’s. We should have no regret that the great man has been killed by a bullet of an assassin. It is a matter of gratification, of good fortune and something to be proud of that one who dedicated his life to Japan, whose one preoccupation and object of worship was Japan, has also sacrificed it for his country. “Slain thou shalt win heaven, victorious thou shalt enjoy the earth.” In the destiny of Hirobumi Ito we witness the attainment of both these fruits in the same life tree.”¹³

THE FIRST AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR

“In 1914, a war began in Europe which soon engulfed almost the entire world. The damage caused by this war had no precedent in history. In the earlier wars, the civilian populations were not generally involved and the casualties were generally confined to the warring armies. The war which began in 1914 was a total war in which all the resources of the warring states were mobilized. It affected the economy of the entire world. The casualties suffered by the civilian population from bombing of the civilian areas and the famines and epidemics caused by the war far exceeded those suffered by the armies. In its impact also, the war had no precedent.

It marked a turning point in world history. The battles of the war were fought in Europe, Asia, Africa and the Pacific. Because of the unprecedented extent of its spread and its total nature, it is known as the First World War.”¹⁴

“During the First World War, Japan sought to establish her protectorate over China. Though she did not succeed in achieving this aim, she was able to extend her influence there.

The rise of Japan as a great power, even though she was following imperialist policies in Asia, provided an impetus to the growth of nationalism in many Asian countries. Her war with Russia proved that an Asian non-White country could defeat a major European power. It helped the peoples of Asia to regain their pride. The emergence of the USA and Japan as great powers was an indication that the supremacy of Europe would not last long. The First World War hastened the process.”¹⁵

“On 1 August 1914, Germany declared war on Russia and on 3 August on France. In the morning of 4 August German troops entered Belgium and at midnight of the same day Britain declared war on Germany. Till 6 August Austria was not at war with Russia and till 12 August she was not at war with Britain and France. Soon others joined in as a result of efforts by both sides to win allies by promising them territorial gains. In August, Japan declared war on Germany. She had entered into an alliance with Britain but her main aim was to seize German territories in China and in the Pacific. Portugal, often referred to by Britain as her oldest ally, also entered the war. In May 1915, Italy declared war on Austria. Britain and France had promised her Austrian and Turkish territories. Later, Romania and Greece also joined Britain, France and Russia and these countries along with their allies came to be known as the Allied Powers. Germany and Austria were joined by Bulgaria in October having been promised territories in Serbia and Greece. Bulgaria was also given some Turkish territories. Turkey declared war on Russia in November and joined the war on the side of Germany and Austria.

These countries – Germany and Austria and their allies – came to be known as the Central Powers. Various other countries in other parts of the world also joined the war. USA entered the war in April 1917 on the side of the Allied Powers. In all, the number of belligerent countries rose to twenty-seven. These comprised countries from all continents. Thus the scope of the conflict was widened. About 65 million men (soldiers) were mobilized for the war. Of them over 42 million were mobilized by the Allied Powers and over 22 million by the Central Powers.”¹⁶

“During the years of the war, German colonial possessions in Asia and Africa were seized by the Allied Powers. Japan made colonial gains in China by acquiring control over the German sphere of influence and forcing China to make further concessions to her.”¹⁷

“On 3 November, 1918 revolution broke out in Germany; on 9 November, the German emperor abdicated and fled to Holland, and on 10 November, Germany was proclaimed a republic. On 11 November 1918, the new government of Germany signed the armistice and at 11 o’clock in the morning of 11 November, the First World War came to an end.”¹⁸

“The drive for expansion had been a characteristic feature of Japanese history since the beginning of her modernization in the second half of the nineteenth century. The colonial gains made by her at the end of the First World War, the treaty she signed in Washington restricting the growth of her navy had still left her as the greatest naval power in the Pacific. For a time, she pursued ‘peaceful’ ways of extending her domination over China as well as South-East Asia through economic means. However, the growth of the movement for China’s national unification as well as of the influence of the Chinese communist party created the danger that she would not be able to extend her control over China. One of her major objectives was to prevent China’s national unification. One of the first major acts of aggression after the First World War was committed by Japan when she occupied Manchuria in 1931 and later

set up a puppet government there. This was followed by a massive invasion of China in 1937. In 1936 she had signed the Anti-Comintern Pact with Germany. She planned to establish her hegemony all over Asia and the Pacific, as Germany along with Italy planned doing it over the rest of the world.

The Japanese economy continued to grow after the war and she became the biggest exporter of cotton textiles, rayon and raw silk. Her dependence on other countries for raw materials, machinery and foodstuffs had made the economy somewhat fragile. To overcome some of these problems, there was a lot of expansion of iron and steel and heavy engineering industries. But direct control over the resources and markets of China and other countries was considered essential by Japanese industrialists and political and military leaders.

The Japanese industrial expansion had taken place under conditions of extreme exploitation of the workers. The industry and the banks were under the domination of the Zaibatsu, a small group of 'money-cliques'. The Zaibatsu had close links with the Japanese government and the politicians. The living conditions of the workers were miserable. The living conditions of farmers were no better. Most of them had extremely small holdings, a little more than an acre, and a large number of them worked as tenants. The Japanese agriculture was unable to absorb Japan's growing population or meet its requirements of food. There was widespread unrest in the country. In 1919, there were disturbances throughout the country over the high price of rice which most people, the general level of their wages being low, could not afford to pay. These are generally referred to as 'rice mutinies'. Factories, the houses of the rich, and the shops of rice traders were attacked and burnt. In the 1920s, there was a wave of strikes, and trade unions began to gain strength. Communist and Social Democratic Parties were also formed and they tried to organize workers and peasants against the oppressive economic system. These parties also aroused the people of Japan against the policy of imperialism and war.

However, they were suppressed ruthlessly as were the trade unions and the peasant's organizations. In 1925, the Peace Preservation Law was passed to suppress 'dangerous thoughts'. According to this law, anyone forming or joining an organization which advocated change in the form of government or the abolition of private property could be arrested. Even academic discussions on these questions or other political problems were banned.

Japan seemed to be making some progress in having a parliamentary form of government in the 1920s. In 1924, the franchise was extended to all males—women continued to be denied the right to vote. For sometime the government seemed to work under the control of the civilians. However, the military continued to be a major force in the political life of the country and from the early 1930s increasingly dominated the government. Even before the military had established its domination over the government, it would openly defy the government, and the government could do nothing to control it. The Japanese military was the most aggressive force in Japanese society. It had close links with a number of secret societies which had been formed. All these societies attacked ideas of liberalism, pacifism and democracy, and advocated ideas of national chauvinism, the superiority of the Japanese culture and preservation of the purity of Japanese culture from foreign influences. Ideas of peace, socialism and democracy were considered foreign ideas from which Japan had to be protected. These societies had their specific notions of what constituted the 'national essence' of Japan. Emperor-worship was an idea common to most of them. They advocated the belief that "to die for the Emperor is to live forever". They had their armed gangs, and resorted to political assassinations. The ideology of the armed forces and of many political leaders of Japan was largely shaped by these secret of secret societies. The imperialist expansion of Japan was considered a desirable aim by all political forces except the communists and the Social Democrats. The latter had been reduced to a position of

insignificance by the repressive policies followed by the Japanese government during the inter-war period. The political system which emerged in Japan may be called ‘military fascism’. Its growing affinity with the fascist governments of Germany and Italy was natural.

In 1926 Emperor Hirohito succeeded to the throne of Japan. The reign of the Emperor under whom modernization of Japan had begun in 1868 was known as Meiji, meaning ‘enlightened government’. Emperor Hirohito took the title of Showa for his reign, which means ‘enlightened peace.’¹⁹

“Hardly twenty years had passed since the end of the First World War, when, in 1939, the Second World War broke out. It was the most destructive war in history which affected the life of the people in every part of the globe. The twenty years between the First and Second World Wars were a period of tremendous changes all over the world. Many developments took place in Europe which paved the way for the outbreak of the Second World War. A major economic crisis took place during this period which affected almost every part of the world and, more particularly, the most advanced capitalist countries of the West. In Asia and Africa, the period saw an unprecedented awakening of the peoples which found its fulfillment after the Second World War. The changes and developments in this period are important not only for understanding the forces and factors which led to the Second World War but also the world that emerged after the war.”²⁰

“In the 1930s the fascist powers began their wars of conquest which ultimately led to the Second World War. The major fascist countries were Italy and Germany. They acquired an ally in the militarist regime which came to power in Japan. The government of Japan gradually passed into the hands of militarists. These three countries started a series of aggressions in Europe, Asia and Africa. All of them claimed to have been fighting against communism and were united in 1937 under the Anti-Comintern Pact. (Comintern is short for Communist International which, as mentioned before, had

been formed after the Russian revolution and to which the Communist Parties of various countries were affiliated.) Germany, Italy and Japan came to be known as the axis Powers.

Germany, Italy and Japan which launched series of aggressions in the 1930s claimed that they were fighting communism. Hitler had time and again declared that Germany had ambitions of conquering the vast resources and territory of the Soviet Union. In all these countries, the socialist and communist movements had been suppressed. Since the success of the Russian Revolution, the Western countries had been haunted by the danger of communism and they hoped that fascist countries would rid them of this danger.

One of the first major acts of aggression after the First World War was the Japanese invasion of China in 1931. A minor incident involving a railway line owned by the Japanese in Manchuria, the north-eastern province of China, was made the pretext for the invasion. China, a member of the League of Nations, appealed to the league for sanctions against Japan to stop aggression. However, Britain and France, the leading countries in the League, were completely indifferent to the appeal and acquiesced in the aggression. Japan occupied Manchuria, installed a puppet government there and proceeded to conquer more areas. The United States also did nothing to counter the aggression. In 1933, Japan quit the League of Nations. She had also started seizing the British and American property in china. However, the appeasement of Japan continued as the Western countries thought that the Japanese could be used to weaken China as well as the Soviet Union Britain had an additional reason. She did not want to alienate Japan and thus endanger her possessions in Asia.”²²¹

“In 1937, the Japanese had started another invasion of China. Japan was one of the three members of the Anti-Comintern Pact along with Germany and Italy. In September 1940, these three countries had signed another pact which bound them together even more. Japan recognized “the leadership of Germany and Italy in the

establishment of a new order in Europe” and Japan’s leadership was recognized for establishing a new order in Asia. This was a pact designed to redivide the world. On 7th December 1941, the Japanese, without a declaration of war, conducted a massive raid on the American naval base at Pearl Harbour in Hawaii. The American Pacific Fleet which was stationed there was devastated. The Americans lost 20 warships, and about 250 aircrafts. About 3000 persons were killed. The Americans were completely taken unawares. Negotiations had been going on between the Japanese and American governments to settle their differences in Asia and the Pacific. The US government had been permitting the supply of many vital goods to Japan even after the Japanese invasion of China. The attack on Pearl Harbour in the midst of negotiations showed that the Japanese were determined to conquer Asia and the Pacific. With this the Second World War became truly global. The United States declared war on Japan on 8 December 1941, and soon after that Germany and Italy declared war on the US. Following the US entry into the war, many countries in the Americas joined the war against Germany, Italy and Japan. The Japanese achieved significant victories in the war in Asia. Within six months of the attack on Pearl Harbour, they had conquered Malaya, Burma (now Myanmar), Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Hong Kong and numerous other areas.

By the Middle of 1942, the fascist powers had reached the peak of their power. After that the decline began.”²²

“After the defeat of Germany, on 7 May 1945, the war in Asia continued for another three months. Britain and USA had launched successful operations against Japan in the Pacific and in the Philippines and Burma. In spite of serious reverses, however, the Japanese were still holding large parts of China. On 6th August 1945, an atom bomb, the deadliest weapon developed during the war, was dropped on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. This was the

first time that the atom bomb had been used. With one single bomb, the city of Hiroshima was obliterated. Another atom bomb was dropped on the city of Nagasaki on 9th August 1945, which was also destroyed. In the meantime, the Soviet Union had declared war on Japan and had started military operations against Japanese forces in Manchuria and Korea. On 14th August 1945 Japan conveyed its acceptance of the Allied demand to surrender and the actual surrender took place on 2nd September 1945. With the Japanese surrender, the Second World War came to an end.”²³ The whole thing was such a shock to the Japanese people that strict laws were passed against war and Japanese participation in any such happening in future. Since 1945, Japan has always kept itself away from all military strives and engagements.”²³

GOVERNMENT AND ECONOMY

“Japan’s constitution was promulgated in 1946 and came into force in 1947, superseding the Meiji Constitution of 1889. It differs from the earlier document in the following points: the Emperor, rather than being the embodiment of all sovereign authority (as he previously was), is the symbol of the state and of the unity of the people, while sovereign power rests with the people; Japan renounces war as sovereign right; and fundamental human rights are explicitly guaranteed. Furthermore, the government is now based on a constitution that aims at maintaining Japan as a peaceful and democratic country in perpetuity.

The Emperor’s major role now consists of such formalities such as appointing the prime minister – who is first designated by the Diet (Kokkai) – and appointing the chief justice of the Supreme Court (Saiko Saibansho), convoking sessions of the Diet, promulgating laws and treaties, and awarding state honors – all with the advice and approval of the Cabinet (Naikaku).

Japan has universal adult suffrage for all citizens 20 years of age or older. Members of both the House of Representatives and

the House of Councillors are chosen by general elections. The judiciary is completely independent of the executive and legislative branches of the government. The judiciary system consists of the Supreme Court, eight high courts, a district court in each prefecture (with the exception of Hokkaido, which has four) and many summary (informal) courts. Family courts are also numerous.”²⁴

“Japan is remarkable for its extraordinarily rapid rate of economic growth in the 20th century, especially after World War II. This growth has been based on unprecedented expansion of industrial production and on an aggressive export trade policy. The emphasis on trade systems from Japan’s lack of the natural resources needed to support its industrial economy, notably fossil fuels and most minerals; in addition the limited amount of arable land in the country forces it to import much of its food needs.

Japan is now the world’s second largest economic power, ranking behind the United States. It has developed a highly diversified manufacturing and service economy and is one of the world’s largest producers of motor vehicles, steel and high-technology manufactured goods. Japan’s standard of living did not increase as rapidly as did the overall economy in the early postwar decades – in large part because of the high percentage of capital reinvestment in those years – but by mid 1980s it had caught up and was comparable with that found in other developed countries.

Although Japan now has one of the world’s highest per capita gross national products, a marked disparity remains between personal income levels and the development of its housing and transportation infrastructure. This disparity is being addressed somewhat by increased public-sector infrastructure investments.”²⁵

RELIGION

“In Japan there are three important religions. They are – Shintoism, Buddhism, and Christianity. Shintoism means the way of

the gods, and this is the traditional religion of Japan. Buddhism came to Japan in the sixth century from India and China, and Christianity came much later. Though people follow different religions, they are all united in their love for their country.”²⁶

PEOPLE AND CULTURE

This is what the Mother observed about Japan after her stay in Japan for four years. (1916 to 1920). “Energy is one of the most interesting features of Japan. It is visible everywhere, in everyone; the old and the young, the workmen, the women, the children, the students, all, save perhaps the “new rich”, display in their daily life the most wonderful storage of concentrated energy. With their perfect love for nature and beauty, this accumulated strength is, perhaps, the most distinctive and widely spread characteristic of the Japanese. That is what you may observe as soon as you reach that land of the Rising Sun where so many people and so many treasures are gathered in a narrow island.

In most cases foreigners come in touch with that part of the Japanese people which has been spoiled by foreigners, – a Japan of money-makers and imitators of the West; obviously they have proved very clever imitators, and you can easily find here a great many of those things which make the West hateful. If we judge Japan by her statesmen, her politicians and her businessmen, we shall find her a country very much like one of the Powers of Europe, though she possesses the vitality and concentrated energies of a nation which has not yet reached its zenith.

The Japanese are taught from their infancy that life is duty and not pleasure. They accept that duty – so often hard and painful – with passive submission. They are not tormented by the idea of making themselves happy. It gives to the life of the whole country a very remarkable self-constraint, but no joyful and free expansion; it creates an atmosphere of tension and effort, of mental and nervous

strain, not of spiritual peace like that which can be felt in India, for instance. Indeed, nothing in Japan can be compared to the pure divine atmosphere which pervades India and makes of her such a unique and precious country; not even in the temples and the sacred monasteries always so wonderfully situated, sometimes on the summit of a high mountain covered with huge cedar trees, difficult to reach, far from the world below. Exterior calm, rest and silence are there, but not that blissful sense of the infinite which comes from a living nearness to the Unique. True, here all speaks to the eyes and mind of unity – unity of God with man, unity of man with Nature, unity of man with man. But this unity is very little felt and lived. Certainly the Japanese have a highly developed sense of generous hospitality, reciprocal help, mutual support; but in their feelings, their thoughts, their actions in general, they are among the most individualist, the most separatist people. For them the form is predominant, the form is attractive. It is suggestive too, it speaks of some deeper harmony or truth, of some law of nature or life. Each form, each act is symbolical, from the arrangement of the gardens and the houses to the famous tea ceremony. And sometimes in a very simple and usual thing you discover a symbol, deep, elaborated, willed, that most of the people know and understand; but it is an exterior and learnt knowledge – a tradition, it is not living truth coming from the depth of spiritual experience, enlightening heart and mind.

Japan is essentially the country of sensations; she lives through her eyes. Beauty rules over her as an uncontested master; and all her atmosphere incites to mental and vital activity, study, observation, progress, effort, not to silent and blissful contemplation. But behind this activity stands a high aspiration which the future of her people will reveal.”²⁷

“Japanese have good manners and they are lovers of beauty. If someone says an unpleasant thing about others, Japanese will pretend not to hear it. For example – suppose a Japanese saw a tear in someone’s shirt. He would naturally pretend not to notice it.

Foreigners say that is the highest mark of good manners. Another example – suppose a person from another country visits a Japanese house and if the host is not properly dressed he pretends not to see the guest, gets into his room and comes out suitably dressed and then greets his guest. Japanese are praised for ordinary virtues such as these.”²⁸

“A friend here can give his life with the greatest simplicity to save yours, though he never told you before he loved you in such a profound and unselfish way. Indeed he had not even told you that he had loved you at all. And if you were not able to read the heart behind the appearances, you would have seen only an exquisite courtesy which leaves little room for the expression of spontaneous feelings. Nevertheless the feelings are there, all the stronger perhaps because of lack of outward manifestation; and if an opportunity presents itself, through an act, very modest and veiled sometimes, you suddenly discover the depths of affection.

This is specifically Japanese; among the nations of the world, the true Japanese – those who have not become westernised – are perhaps the least selfish. And this unselfishness is not the privilege of the well educated, the learned or the religious people; in all social ranks you may find it. For here, with the exception of some popular and exceedingly pretty festivals, religion is not a right or a cult, it is a daily life of abnegation, obedience, self-sacrifice.”²⁹

“The children of Japan are so happy and so free. A grown up person never beats a child. They are treated as if all the parents were conscious that the children are the promise and the glory of the future. And a wonderful thing is that, environed by so much attention, so much care, – indeed such a devotion, they are the most reasonable, good and serious children. You scarcely hear a child cry. When, for instance, he has hurt himself and the tears burst out of his eyes, the mother or the father has but to say a few words in a low voice, and the sorrow seems to be swept away. What are those magic

words which enable children to be so reasonable? Very simple indeed “Are you not a Samurai?” and this question is sufficient for the child to call to him all his energy and to overcome his weakness. Their traditional dress is Kimono. Little children look like beautiful butterflies in Kimono.

When older, but still very young, you may see them in the tram cars, dressed with foreign clothes, the student cap on the head, the knapsack on the back, proud of their importance, still prouder at the idea of all they are learning and will learn. For they love studies and are the most earnest students. They never miss an opportunity of adding something to their growing knowledge; and when the work for the school leaves them in some liberty they occupy it in reading books. The young Japanese seem to have real passion for books.”³⁰

JAPAN AND INDIA. THEIR RELATIVE DEVELOPMENT OF PAST 115 YEARS.

This is what Sri Aurobindo; writing in 1906–07 had to say about the relative development of India and Japan during the nineteenth century.

“Two oriental nations have come powerfully under the influence of Western ideas and felt the impact of European civilization during the nineteenth century, India and Japan. The results have been very different. The smaller nation has become one of the mightiest Powers in the modern world, the larger in spite of far greater potential strength, a more original culture, a more ancient and splendid past and a far higher mission in the world, remains a weak, distracted, subject and famine-stricken people, politically, economically, morally and intellectually dependent on the foreigner and unable to realize its great possibilities. It is commonly said that this is because Japan has assimilated Western Science and organization and even in many respects excelled its teachers; India has failed in this all-important task of assimilation. If we go a step farther back and insist on asking why this is so, we shall be told it is because Japan has “reformed”

herself and got rid of ideas and institutions unsuited to modern times; while India clings obstinately to so much that is outworn and effete. Even if we waive aside the question whether the old Indian ideals are unfit to survive or whether all our institutions are really bad in themselves or unadaptable to modern conditions, still the explanation itself has to be explained. Why has Japan so admirably transformed herself? Why has the attempt at transformation in India been a failure? The solution of problem of this kind has to be sought not in obstractions, not in machinery, but in men. It is the spirit in man which moulds his fate; it is the spirit of a nation which determines its history.

Describe the type of human character which prevails in a nation during a given period of its life under given conditions, and it is possible to predict in outline what the general history of the nation must be during that period. In Japan the dominant Japanese type had been moulded by the shaping processes of an admirable culture and when the western impact came, Japan remained faithful to her ancient spirit; she merely took over certain forms of European social and political organization necessary to complete her culture under modern conditions and poured into these forms the old potent dynamic spirit of Japan, the spirit of the Samurai. It is the Samurai type which has been dominant in that country during the nineteenth century. In India the mass of the nation has remained dormant; European culture has had upon it a powerful disintegrating and destructive influence, but has been powerless to reconstruct or revivify. But in the upper strata a new type has been evolved to serve the necessities and interests of the foreign rulers, a type which is not Indian, but foreign – and in almost all our social, political, educational, literary and religious activities the spirit of this new and foreign graft has predominated and determined the extent and quality of our progress. This type is the bourgeois. In India, the bourgeois, in Japan, the Samurai; in this single difference is comprised

the whole contrasted histories of the two nations during the nineteenth century.

What is the bourgeois? For the word is unknown in India, though the thing is so prominent. The bourgeois is the average contented middle class citizen who is in all countries much the same in his fundamental character and habits of thought, in spite of pronounced racial differences in temperament and self-expression. He is a man of facile sentiments and skin-deep personality; generally “enlightened” but not inconveniently illuminated. In love with his life, his ease and above all things his comforts, he prescribes the secure maintenance of these precious possessions as the first indispensable condition of all action in politics and society; whatever tends to disturb or destroy them, he condemns as foolish, harebrained, dangerous or fanatical, according to the degree of its intensity and is ready to repress by any means in his power. In the conduct of public movements he has an exaggerated worship for external order, moderation and decorum and hates over-earnestness and over-strenuousness. Not that he objects to plenty of mild and innocuous excitement; but it must be innocuous and calculated not to have a disturbing effect on the things he most cherishes. He has ideals and likes to talk of justice, liberty, reform, enlightenment and all similar abstractions; he likes too to see them reigning and progressing around him decorously and with their proper limitations. He wishes to have them maintained, if they already exist, but in moderation and with moderation; if they do not exist, the craving for them should be, in his opinion, a lively but still well-regulated fire, not permitted to interfere with the safety, comfort and decorum of life; the means adopted towards acquiring them should be also moderate and decorous and, as far as may be, safe and comfortable. An occasional sacrifice of money, leisure and other precious things for their sake, he is always ready to meet; he has a keen zest for the reputation such sacrifices bring him and still more for the comfortable sense of personal righteousness which they foster. The bourgeois is the man

of good sense and enlightenment, the man of moderation, the man of peace and orderliness, the man in every way “respectable”, who is the mainstay of all well-ordered societies. As a private man he is respectable; that is to say, his character is generally good, and when his character is not, his reputation is; he is all decorous in his virtues, decent in the indulgence of his vices or at least in their concealment, often absolutely honest, almost always as honest as an enlightened self-interest will permit. His purse is well filled or at any rate not indecently empty; he is a good earner, a conscientious worker, a thoroughly safe and reliable citizen. Of course there are exceptions, instances of successful and respected blackguardism, but these are the small minority. But this admirable creature has his defects and limitations. For great adventures, tremendous enterprises, lofty achievements, the storm and stress of mighty and eventful periods in national activity, he is unfit. These things are for the heroes, the martyrs, the criminals, the enthusiasts, the degenerates, geniuses, the men of exaggerated virtue, exaggerated ability, exaggerated ideas. He enjoys the fruit of their work when it is done, but while it is doing, he opposes and hinders more often than helps. For he looks on great ideals as dreams and on vehement enthusiasms as harebrained folly; he distrusts everything new and disturbing, every thing that has not been done before or is not sanctioned by success and the accomplished fact; revolt is to him a madness and revolution a nightmare. Fiery self- annihilating enthusiasm, noble fanaticism, relentless and heroic pursuit of an object, the original brain that brings what is distant and ungrasped into the boundaries of reality, the dynamic will and genius which makes the impossible possible; these things he understands as matters of history and honours them in the famous dead or in those who have succeeded; but in living and yet striving men they inspire him with distrust and repulsion. He will tell you that these things are not to be found in the present generation; but if confronted with the living originator, he will condemn him as a learned idiot; face to face with the living hero, he will decry him as a dangerous mad-man,—unless and until he sees

on the head of either the crown of success and assured reputation. Such a type may give stability to a society; it cannot reform or revolutionize it. Such a type may make the politics of a nation safe, decorous and reputable. It cannot make that nation great or free.

Such is the bourgeois and it was the bourgeois of the mildest and most inefficient type who reigned in India in the nineteenth century. It was the bourgeois which University education tended, perhaps sought to evolve; it was the bourgeois which the political and social conditions moulded and brought to the front. In India the bourgeois; in Japan the samurai, that one enormous difference explains the difference in the histories of the two countries during the second half of the last century.”³¹

THE PRESENT SCENARIO

“Imagine a country where the streets are clean, drugs cause few problems and muggings are almost unheard of. Imagine further that the trains run on time, most people are well dressed and many—at least to judge by the giggling girls shopping in the capital’s swankiest area—are able to afford the most expensive trifles that money can buy. In such a prosperous country, life would be long, taxes modest and unemployment certainly lower than in Europe, probably even than in America. People would be polite, thrifty and unbelligerent. Rather, they would be munificent givers of foreign aid, vigorous investors abroad and profuse lenders. Such a country is Japan, and to many it might seem paradise. Yet open a newspaper and you will see that this is a country in crisis.

The newspaper headlines are likely to suggest that the problem is the banks, which are undeniably in trouble. Japan has too many of them, they are chronically weak and they are burdened by duff loans. The government admits these loans stand at ¥37 trillion, about 7% of GDP.

Behind the banks’ troubles lie those of the companies they lend to. As a broad generalization, it can be said that few companies

outside the plain that extends from Tokyo to Osaka are internationally competitive, and some—notably in retailing and construction—are in particularly frail health. Property companies also require intensive care. Since 1991, commercial property prices have dropped by an average of 84% in Japan's six biggest cities.

The bad news does not stop there. Unemployment stands at 5.3%, just below its recent post-war record of 5.6%—and the official figure, because it excludes those too discouraged to register, understates the true picture.”³²

“Japanese society is consensual. The Japanese themselves consider *wa*, harmony, to be its foundation, and though the facts may not support this belief, conflict is undoubtedly frowned upon and consensus favoured. Plenty of good consequences follow from this. Japan appears to be an exceptionally contented society. It is certainly an egalitarian one, with a huge middle class, little social envy and remarkably small income disparities.

But, as with so many aspects of Japan, the good tends to be accompanied by the bad. It is partly the desire to ensure social harmony that has led to the cossetting of rotten businesses and incompetent public-sector corporations: unemployment, even in the short term, has to be avoided at all costs. That makes any kind of restructuring difficult.

Another consequence of this cohesive egalitarianism is that it reinforces the lack of individualism. How many Japanese excel on the world stage? Akira Kurosawa (film-maker, now dead)? Sadako Ogata (former head of the UN'S refugee agency)? Seiji Ozawa (conductor)? Japanese do not like to stand out in a crowd. They tend to operate in groups, and any kind of breaking away is frowned upon. This does wonders for *wa*, but it discourages risk-taking. It also militates against the creation of a culture of personal responsibility, which is necessary for a culture of accountability. And it does nothing to encourage leadership, the lack of which is so conspicuous.

The fondness for group activity means most Japanese travel in groups, a habit that is said to date back centuries to the days

when they flocked from temple to temple to hear Buddhist teachers. Nowadays it means that when they go abroad, instead of meeting foreigners, they tend to talk only to each other, and thus learn little at first hand of people beyond their shores.

Japan closes itself off from the world in other ways too. The Japanese are less ethnically homogeneous than they would like to believe, but the absence of people who are obviously of foreign descent is a striking feature of even Tokyo, let alone places beyond the capital. Contrary to what some Japanese believe – Yasuhiro Nakasone, a prime minister in the mid- 1980s, once remarked that “the Japanese have done well for...2000 years because there are no foreign races in the country”– foreigners actually bring in ideas and practices that can make life better.

During the 1990s, Japan has been ageing faster than any other society in the world, meaning that the proportion of elderly is growing as the proportion of young diminishes. Between 1970 and 1994, the over-65s doubled, from 7% to 14%, thus coming to outnumber those aged 15 and under. Today almost one Japanese household in three has at least one elderly member. By 2015, over a quarter of the population will be over 65—a higher proportion than in any other country.

The ageing reflects the excellent nutrition and health of the Japanese. But the concomitant prosperity has brought different effects for the young. The most notable is their reluctance to have babies. The number of births has been declining since the 1960s, but it was not until the 1970s that the fertility rate—the average number of children born to each woman over a lifetime—fell below 2.1, the figure needed for a population to maintain its size. By the 1990s, the rate had fallen to 1.41.

Among the reasons for this is a peculiarly Japanese one: the wife of an eldest son in Japan is, by tradition, expected to live in the family home and look after her parents-in-law. Most unmarried sons in Japan are, these days, eldest sons, and the prospect of caring for their ever-more antique parents is not altogether enticing for an

educated young Japanese woman.

Demographers predict that by 2010 the number of Japanese aged 20 to 29 will have fallen by over 4m. If Japan wanted, it could make up numbers the way other countries do, by accepting immigrants. But in Japan foreigners are tolerated more than welcomed—and often held responsible for the country’s low but rising crime rate.

That tends to make their position awkward. Of the total of about 1.7m official foreign residents (1.3% of the population), the biggest group is ethnically Korean. In most countries the Koreans would not be considered aliens, since most of them, and often their parents and grandparents, were born in Japan, the descendants of forced labourers brought over during Japan’s annexation of Korea in 1910-45. But only if at least one parent was Japanese are they automatically eligible for citizenship.”³³

“Conservative as Japan may be, it is not a stationary society, nor even one that is blind to the need for change. And in fact almost every aspect of Japanese life has been changing during the last decade, and would have been regardless of the politicians supposedly guiding the country.

The devastation of the industrial economy is, paradoxically, evidence of such change. The winnowing of the construction companies’ order books, the growth of the Chinese-supplied Uniqlo clothing chain, and the proliferation of Starbucks and other coffee shops all show that the private sector is already shifting from manufacturing to services.”³⁴

HOW DID IT GET INTO THIS MESS?

“Japanese politician have shied away from trying to sort out the country’s problems, that may be partly because it is so difficult to identify where one problem ends and the next begins.

Japan’s banks are not notably inefficient by international standards, but they have plainly engaged in some foolish lending.

Why? One reason is that, after the Plaza currency accord in 1985 led to an appreciation of the Yen, the Ministry of Finance opened the monetary throttle and lowered interest rates. That set off a borrowing binge, with much of the money flowing into property. Before long, prices – which were set not by the market but by indexes drawn up by bureaucrats to suit their own purposes – went crazy. The gardens of the Imperial Palace in central Tokyo were said to be theoretically worth as much as the entire state of California, or all of Canada. Borrowing became easy, since land was used as collateral for almost all bank loans. Share prices shot up; the Nikkei doubled between 1987 and 1989. And because Japanese banks and businesses have long had huge holdings in each other, the popping of the speculative bubble brought both of them crashing down together.

But as the economy grew more complex, the collaborative relations between banks and businesses turned in the early 1980s to collusion and even conspiracy. As interest rates fell, the banks began to lend to poorly managed land developers and level gangsters. Then it all went wrong.

The politicians were hardly blameless in all this. They pumped money-tax-payers' money-into companies that were so inefficient that they should have been allowed to go bust. Their motives were not all bad. In a society where work is all, especially for men, and welfare benefits limited, the politicians were desperate to avoid unemployment. They therefore used some industries, notably construction, to soak up labour laid off by other industries. Construction was also used as an instrument of regional aid. By building roads, bridges, airports, tunnels, no matter how unnecessary, they could direct money and jobs to the many parts of the country with no efficient companies.

Even today the building budget is gigantic: construction-related spending has comfortably exceeded the budget of the American Defence Department in recent years, and about 10% of Japan's workforces, some 6m people, still derive their jobs from it, far more than in other rich countries. Unsupported, about half the industry might collapse, throwing millions out of work."³⁵

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List of Books:

1. **English reader**, Book 4th, Lesson-9
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2. **Words of long ago**
The Mother Vol-2
3. **Sri Aurobindo**, *Archives and Research*
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4. **Sri Aurobindo**
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5. **Sri Aurobindo**
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6. **Manorma**, *Year Book 1998*
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13. **The story of civilisation Vol. 2**
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14. **Contemporary World history**
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