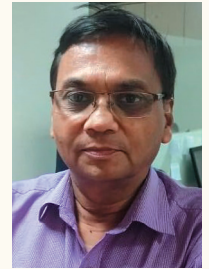


Culture

Coffee Cultures of Japan & India



Author Rajesh Williams

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Coffee arrived in Japan and India at almost the same time. The Dutch residing in Nagasaki in the 17th century brought, imported, and drank coffee, and the Portuguese traders then followed suit during the same period. It was in the later part of the 1800s that the first coffee shop was opened in Japan. In the 1930s, Tadao Ueshima founded the coffee industry. Coffee was brought to India by Baba Budan, a 17th-century Sufi saint from Karnataka. According to popular Indian lore, Baba Budan discovered coffee on a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1670. Eager to grow coffee himself at home, he smuggled seven coffee beans out of the Yemeni port of Mocha. He hid the beans in his beard. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why in the Indian home, coffee consumption is greater in south India than in north India.

Coffee Consumption

Coffee was not well received in Japan at first. The locals remarked that it tasted “burnt”. So, for quite some time, only the Dutch traders drank coffee. But by and by coffee made its way into the drinking habits of the Japanese people. The Japanese coffee culture started to boom at the turn of the 20th century. However, this boom was short-lived. It came back at the start of the 1960s, and with its return came instant coffee, which soon turned out to be a popular beverage in Japan. In India, filter coffee became a commercial success in the 1940s. Indian filter coffee is a sweet milky coffee made from dark roasted coffee beans (around 70%) and chicory (around 30%). It continues to be quite popular especially in the southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu.

Indian Coffee House

India Coffee House, which was later renamed as Indian Coffee House, played a pivotal role in fostering coffee culture in India. During the 1940s there were around 50 coffee houses across British India. Today, Indian Coffee House, which is a restaurant chain run by worker co-operative societies, has over 400 coffee houses in the country.

Until the 1970s, the center of attention in Indian coffee houses

was not simply the coffee but a certain experience that went along with drinking it. The coffee house tradition, which goes back centuries in English cultural life, flourished in Indian intellectual, artistic, business, and political circles. Conversation, whether for intellectual exploration or business purposes, was the desired “product” at the coffee house. In the 1970s, the coffee house in Allahabad, for example, served coffee as a product and offered an experience – a place for people to connect. According to Dr Satish C. Aikant, former head of the Department of English at H.N.B. Garhwal University, “the Indian Coffee House in Allahabad became a hub of various cultural and intellectual activities. It attracted writers, poets, artists, and thinkers who would engage in debates, discussions, and creative collaborations. Over time, it became a focal point for the city’s literary and artistic community. Prominent literary figures, political leaders, and artists were known to frequent the Indian Coffee House in Allahabad, making it a melting pot of ideas and ideologies.” (“Coffee, Culture and Allahabad”, *Garhwal Post*, Aug. 25, 2023). Many people visited the Indian Coffee House to have south Indian dishes such as masala dosa, idli, vada, and utappam as well, and conversations at the coffee house were associated with masculinity. Women seldom went there.

Trendy Indian Coffee Shops

In the 1980s, the coffee house began to lose its appeal; and in today’s Indian cities, the coffee house has been completely overshadowed by trendy coffee shops – especially the ones in big malls. Young adults are now flocking to such coffee-bar chains as Starbucks, Costa Coffee, and Brewberry’s Café, places where men and women can be seen conversing together. As coffee and tea vending machines have become an important part of the Indian corporate work culture, not many workers feel like having a cup of coffee at the local coffee house after work. To attract more customers, some of the old-school coffee houses have replaced their colonial decor with ambient lighting and a variety of ornate cutlery; but they no longer serve their original purpose.

Japanese Coffee Culture

Strange as it may seem, the coffee house tradition did not become part of Japanese cultural life in the way it did in India. Japan is known for its *kissaten*, cafés, and coffee shops. *Kissaten* is a “tea drinking shop” but it refers exclusively to Japan’s independent coffee shops. Coffee appeared in *kissaten* during the 1960s, ushering in experimentation in coffee and the art of hand crafting.

Traditional *kissaten* continue to be among the most popular types of coffee shops in Japan. They are famous for their high-quality coffee, relaxed ambience, and vintage decor. *Kissaten* baristas are known for their attentive brewing techniques. They give a lot of attention to detail: in order to give a cup of coffee a nuanced flavor that highlights the subtle flavors of the beans, the coffee grounds are carefully measured and the water temperature is meticulously controlled for the perfect extraction process.

Nowadays, *kissaten* also serves breakfast, luncheon, light meals, and sandwiches. As in the past, so in the present, they also serve as gathering places for writers and intellectuals. If you want to smell the distinctive aroma of fresh coffee or the smoke from a gentleman’s cigar, or listen to jazz music, visit a traditional *kissaten*. There are some *kissaten* in Japan that date back almost 100 years.

Japanese Cafés & Coffee Shops

The café in Japan has been quite successful in adapting to the different needs of Japanese people. It owes its popularity to the Japanese need for space and reflection and its ability to offer respite in often crowded urban environments. During the early 20th century, cafés served as a refuge for modern young women – not only as a place for work but also a place to engage with public life.

After World War II, coffee shops bloomed in Japan. Music became a part of the café experience. Quite a few popular coffee shops back then were jazz establishments, where coffee and music enthusiasts could sip a cup of coffee while listening to music. Some of the shop owners then incorporated more hobbies in their shop. Consider, for example, the opening of the first manga café in Nagoya around the 1970s.

During the 1980s, Japan’s economic growth spurred a rise in the “to-go” coffee shops, enabling people to take their cups of coffee with them to work. High-end coffee shops also appeared and soon turned out to be excellent meeting places for businessmen to discuss their business or careers. Some coffee shops, especially those with old-school, vintage interiors and a retro feel, offer a more conducive place for writers and other intellectuals to study, work, or read a book. Many young adults in today’s Japan enjoy drinking coffee with a book in hand or talking with friends in a coffee shop.

By and large, Japanese people visit cafés and coffee shops to study, read books and newspapers, or just chat on their phone.

Small business meetings are sometimes also held at coffee shops. Many Japanese drink coffee because it helps to put them in a more relaxed mood or enables them to stay awake and focus on their study at night. Coffee is popular among workers as well, as they do not want to feel sleepy at their workplace. Most of them drink coffee in the morning, before they go to work.

Coffee vs Tea in India & Japan

In today’s India, tea continues to be the most popular hot beverage. Around 60% of Indian consumers drink regular hot tea with or without milk, compared to around 40% who drink hot coffee; and that is primarily because coffee brands have not been able to enhance their appeal to capture a larger market share. International coffee chains, therefore, see huge opportunities in India. Coffee intake in India has been surging with the launch of large coffee chains like Starbucks, Costa Coffee, Café Coffee Day, and Brewberry’s Café. Some of the most popular types of coffee servings in the country include Americano, Latte, Cappuccino, Macchiato and Café Mocha. The older generations, however, still prefer tea to coffee. About three decades ago, when coffee was not as popular as it is today, instant coffee was the most common type of coffee in India.

Although Japan has a long history with tea, it is one of the largest consumers of coffee in the world, importing 500,000 tonnes of it annually; and globally, it is the third country with the most revenue generated from coffee. The demand for coffee rose in the last decades due to a shift in consumer preferences, and tea consumption has been falling.

Today, Japan’s coffee culture is popular around the world. Food anthropologist Merry White, author of the book *Coffee Life in Japan*, says “Japanese coffee practices – the ways of coffee – are now exported and valued and branded as Japanese. All over the world, Japanese techniques and equipment are used. Techniques such as the pour-over method that was refined in the 1990s in Japan have become standard specialty coffee practice; no longer even said to be Japanese because they’re everywhere. What makes Japanese coffee part of this global coffee movement and yet understood to be Japanese is technical: it’s about roasting, it’s about extraction methods, it’s cultural too in the ways that people learn and refine the experience of drinking and the settings in which coffee is drunk ... Japanese cafés and brewers are destinations for travellers.”

Final Thoughts

Despite having a rich and vibrant tea culture, both Japan and India are obsessed with coffee. Coffee shops and coffee vending machines are all over the major cities in Japan, and the country has seen diversification of different styles of coffee. Starbucks has turned out

to be the new *kissaten* for the younger generation. Coffee has found a prominent place in the fast-paced lifestyle of Japanese people. Coffee intake in India is also on the rise, what with the arrival of large coffee chains and a growing number of people with disposable income in urban areas. However, unlike Japan, innovation and experimentation have not yet made their way into the Indian coffee culture.

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Interview with a Green Tea Specialist

Kei Nishida is a green tea scholar, a merchant and a connoisseur. His deep appreciation for the holistic benefits and lifestyle ritual of premium Japanese Green Tea led him to establish Japanese Green Tea Co. and later Japanese Coffee Co. In an interview, Nishida talked about Japanese coffee culture.

Williams: Tell us a bit about the coffee you sell.

Nishida: We sell Japanese Sumiyaki Coffee, and if you are in Sapporo, please visit us at our café! You see, Hokkaido, which is Japan's northernmost prefecture, is known for its beautiful water bodies, fresh air, mountain ranges, and active volcanoes. All year round, the humidity is low, and the temperatures are lower than in the rest of the country. This land, with an optimal environment for coffee brewing, was the place where Sapporo Coffee Kan was born in

the year 1982. The founding policy behind Sapporo Coffee Kan was our deep desire to give as many people as possible the experience of having a truly delicious cup of coffee.

Williams: As tea is to the British, coffee is to America. It's the defining beverage of American culture. What is the defining beverage of today's Japan – tea or coffee?

Nishida: A good question. Tea has a longer history in Japan than coffee. But it was the invention of *sumiyaki* – the charcoal roasting method – that made the evolution of coffee in Japan unique.

Williams: The traditional image of coffee in America associates coffee drinking with men and breakfast. What things or actions are normally associated with the image of coffee and what things or actions are normally associated with the image of tea in Japan? What meanings do coffee and tea connote in Japanese consumer culture?

Nishida: Tea is often associated with culture and history in Japan. It is also associated with the deep practice of the tea ceremony. Tea has a greater “cultural” look than coffee. Nowadays tea from vending machines is quite popular in Japan. Bottled tea does not have much of the historical color. Coffee goes with the Japanese fast-paced lifestyle.

Williams: In Indian coffee shops, coffee is a background drink; in coffee houses, the center of attention is not just the coffee but also a certain experience that goes along with drinking it. What kind of experience goes along with drinking coffee in Japanese coffee houses and coffee shops?

Nishida: I lived in Chandigarh, India, for more than a year, and I love India. People in North India prefer tea to coffee. Japan's coffee culture evolved from the influence of Western culture on Japanese culture after World War II. By the 1980s, Japan had fully recovered from the devastation of war. Economic growth was rising, and people in Japan were becoming more and more busy. Perhaps that was why to-go coffee shops were opened. The Japanese could take their cups of coffee with them to their work. But high-end coffee shops were also on the rise since they were meeting spots for businessmen.

Nowadays, coffee places in Japan are unique in their own different ways. Some would conceptualize a cat café, while others would display the owner's massive collections – mostly vintage. *Kissaten* are old-school, vintage-interior coffee shops in Japan with a retro



Photo: Kei Nishida

Kei Nishida

feel, providing a more conducive place for writers and other intellectuals to study, work, or simply read a book. It may be mentioned that, traditionally, a *kissaten* is a tearoom that serves coffee. But these days, a typical *kissaten* serves coffee and light meals in addition to tea.

Williams: Where do Japanese women tend to meet – in tea shops or coffee shops?

Nishida: They tend to meet in the city. Well, there are more coffee shops in Japan these days than tea shops, and coffee shops are quite popular among Japanese women. But that does not mean that Japanese women don't go to tea shops anymore or have completely lost their interest in the traditional tea ceremony.

Williams: Does coffee serve as a background beverage to mediocre meals in Japan?

Nishida: Yes, but even at mediocre shops the level of coffee seems to be high. You see, when businesses compete, the consumer benefits the most. Consumers get the best possible products in terms of quality, quantity, and price. This competition also creates an environment that encourages innovation. It's a healthy scenario with the consumer coming out as the actual winner. Japanese convenience store coffee is a good case in point.

In normal circumstances, if you're after an enjoyable coffee experience, a convenience store wouldn't come to mind. But thanks to the rivalry among Japan's leading convenience store chains, many consumers find Japanese convenience store coffee to be a pleasant treat. The Japanese convenience store or *konbini*, as it's locally referred to, is a cut above the rest. In fact, it's considered a "phenomenon".

Williams: Please shed some light on *konbini* coffee.

Nishida: The *konbini* is a relatively new addition to the Japanese coffee scene. It entered the country from America sometime in the 1960s. But it took off in the 1970s, and ever since then, it has been an essential element of Japanese society. It has evolved into a community hub, offering a wide variety of services. At a *konbini*, you can post mail, have parcels delivered, book tickets, and buy anything from makeup and cleaning supplies to anime collectibles. It is surely a hotspot for food and drink. Of course, one of the common beverages offered at a *konbini* is coffee. The leading Japanese convenience stores are excellent suppliers of inexpensive but good coffee in today's Japan.

Williams: What places in Japan do you recommend for coffee and tea?

Nishida: *Doutor* is one of Japan's most popular signature coffee houses. The coffee house is known to be the first European style standing coffee shop in the country. It has more than 1,000 stores in all of Japan. *Ginza Renoir* is a huge coffee chain that has a 1960s feel and ambiance, and the coffee is also served in the classical style. In this coffee shop, you might also find many elderly people sipping their coffee and chatting about life; a few of them will also be smoking. Next on my list of fantastic Japanese coffee shops is *Excelsior Caffè*, which is actually a coffee chain established by *Doutor*. The coffee chain is based on an Italian theme, which is why you can find coffee flavors that are relative to Italian coffee shops. *Café de Crie* has spread all over Japan in the past two decades. They are known for their *Café au Lait* and the caramel whipped milk coffee that they serve. At *Ueshima Coffee House*, you can not only enjoy the coffee, but also the ambiance. This coffee house believes in creating a comfortable space where people can sit and have a good time with their friends or family. *Kohikan* is a 50-year-old coffee house that still holds true to its traditions and its passion for pure and delicious coffee. *Komeda Kohiten* can be regarded as your "living room in the city" – a space where you can simply walk in and make yourself comfortable, whenever you want. It is known for its hospitality and delicious coffee.

If you live in Kyoto, you can start off the morning with *Inoda Coffee*, which is something that most Japanese people do every day. *Inoda* is one of the oldest coffee houses in Japan. Another wonderful option for flavorful coffee in Japan is *Hoshino Coffee*, which is not only popular for its flavorful and aromatic coffee, but also for its homely atmosphere and ambiance. *Starbucks Coffee Toyama Kansui Park Store* is a fantastic Starbucks franchise with a view.

My favorite tea shops in Tokyo are *Tokyo Saryo* in Setagaya Ward, which presents Japanese minimalism at its finest, *Ippodo, Tokyo Marunouchi Store*, which serves excellent luxury tea, *Yamamotoyama Fujie Sabo* in Chuo Ward, which is the best place for food pairings, *Sakurai Japanese Tea Experience* in Minato Ward, which is known for its modern tea ceremony, *Uogashi Meicha* in Ginza, which is a good place for learning, and *Dobashien Tea Company*, which is known for its exclusive tea leaves.

Williams: Tea and coffee are quite popular in Japan. Which one do you prefer and why?

Nishida: This is a tough question, as I love both tea and coffee! It is always a hard choice for me. JS

Rajesh Williams is a professional editor and a writer with a background in instructional design, technical writing, technical editing, and teaching.