

Development of the Japanese Department at Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, West Bengal

Gita A. Keeni¹

The seed of Visva-Bharati was sown by Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), the founder, in the year 1901 with the inception of the Brahmacharya school. The dream of Tagore, who was the Acharya (chancellor), was to create a place where “the world makes a home in a single nest” — *Yatra visvam bhavatyekanidam*, the school’s motto. The formal institution of Visva-Bharati took place on 22 December 1921 and the ordinance was formulated in the May of 1922. By an act of parliament, Visva-Bharati was declared a central university and an institution of national importance on 1 May 1951.

Inception

In keeping pace with its global character, Visva-Bharati established the Japanese department in 1954 under the guidance of Dr. Probodh Chanda Bagchi. This made Visva-Bharati the first university in India to introduce Japanese language courses. It offered a two-year certificate course and a one-year diploma course. In these early years, Japanese Buddhism and language were taught. The first Indian faculty member, Dr. Padmaruchi Mukherjee, was recruited in the mid-1980s. Before this, scholars from Japan solely shouldered the responsibility of nurturing the department and teaching Japanese. The department takes pride in the fact that despite its rural environment it has continuously attracted faculty members from Japan. Presently, the department is run by two full-time and a few part-time teachers.

From time to time, eminent scholars from Japan have visited the Department of Japanese Studies. Some of them included:

Visiting Professors from Japan:

Prof. Shinya Kasugai (December 1955–January 1964)

Prof. Tatsuo Morimoto (December 1964–April 1967)

Prof. Kazuo Azuma (October 1967–February 1971)

1 Head of Japanese Department, Associate Professor of Visva-Bharati University.

Prof. Keiyo Arai (January 1973–March 1974)
Prof. Kōichi Niitsu (October 2006–March 2007)

Japanese Nationals Recruited by Visva-Bharati:

Mr. Saiji Makino (July 1974–January 1989)
Dr. Kōichi Yamashita (June 1984–December 1994)
Mr. Keitsuke Inano (July 1995–June 1996)
Dr. Hikotarō Furuta (November 1999–December 2007)

Volunteer Teachers from Japan:

Ms. Aya Matsumoto, the first volunteer teacher from Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteer (JOCV), a wing of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), joined the department in 2007 (February 2007–December 2008).
Ms. Mami Miura, the second volunteer teacher taught at the department for a short while (November 2008–July 2009).
Ms. Mikiko Kondō, the third volunteer assisted in teaching and other activities for a period of little more than 2 years (February 2010–May 2012).

Development

In 1976, Japanese was introduced as an elective subject in the high school wing of Visva-Bharati, and presently ours is the only institution in India where Japanese language is taught at the high school level. Tagore's dream of having a "Japani Bhavana" was realized in the year 1994. The then Vice-President of India, K. R. Narayanan, inaugurated the building of Nippon-Bhavana on 3 February 1994. In 1999, a four-year BA course was offered, which was followed by the introduction of a two-year MA course in 2006 and Ph.D. course in 2012. The present number of students at the undergraduate and post-graduate courses is 120. The number of seats increases each year in accordance with various government policies as well as the demand. Present intake capacity is 36 for the undergraduate course.

Curriculum

Keeping in tune with the basic intention of the founder, the curriculum is designed to give due emphasis to teaching the Japanese language as well as aspects of Japanese society, literature, culture and history, in order to strengthen the cultural ties between India and Japan. From time to time the Department celebrates a Japan Day, with

demonstrations of Japanese flower arrangement (ikebana), calligraphy (shodō), the tea ceremony (sadō), origami and so on, for the benefit of students to give them an idea of the various indigenous art forms of Japan. In order to ensure that there is a blend of both traditional Japan and modern Japan, emphasis is put on current affairs too. Given that the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), administered worldwide by the Japan Foundation, is required for higher studies in Japan and also for employment in areas where Japanese language knowledge is a prerequisite, the JLPT syllabus is taken into consideration in the formation of the curriculum. The Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) is held twice a year at Kolkata and a large number of candidates from Santiniketan take the exam in order to assess their proficiency level in Japanese language.

The situation of the Department of Japanese Studies at Santiniketan is gradually changing. In contrast to earlier times, the number of applicants has increased to four or five times more than the seats available. Our department is at par with most other departments in terms of student interest and popularity. Various scholarships and programmes offered by the Japan Foundation and Ministry of Foreign Affairs are an added incentive to learn the Japanese language.