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Losing an Edge, Japanese Envy India's Schools

By MARTIN FACKLER

Suffering a crisis of confidence these days about its ability to compete with its emerging Asian rivals, Japan is in the midst of a growing craze for Indian education.



At Little Angels English Academy & International Kindergarten, founded by an Indian woman, 2-year-olds count to 20, 3-year-olds use computers, and 5-year-olds write essays in English.

By [MARTIN FACKLER](#)

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MITAKA, [Japan](#) — Japan is suffering a crisis of confidence these days about its ability to compete with its emerging Asian rivals, China and India. But even in this fad-obsessed nation, one result was never expected: a growing craze for Indian education.

Despite an improved economy, many Japanese are feeling a sense of insecurity about the nation's schools, which once turned out students who consistently ranked at the top of international tests. That is no longer true, which is why many people here are looking for lessons from [India](#), the country the Japanese see as the world's ascendant education superpower.

Bookstores are filled with titles like "Extreme Indian Arithmetic Drills" and "The Unknown Secrets of the Indians." Newspapers carry reports of Indian children memorizing multiplication tables far beyond nine times nine, the standard for young elementary students in Japan.

And Japan's few Indian international schools are reporting a surge in applications from Japanese families.

At the Little Angels English Academy & International Kindergarten, the textbooks are from India, most of the teachers are South Asian, and classroom posters depict animals out of Indian tales. The kindergarten students even color maps of India in the green and saffron of its flag.

Little Angels is located in this Tokyo suburb, where only one of its 45 students is Indian. Most are Japanese.

Viewing another Asian country as a model in education, or almost anything else, would have been unheard-of just a few years ago, say education experts and historians.

Much of Japan has long looked down on the rest of Asia, priding itself on being the region's most advanced nation. Indeed, Japan has dominated the continent for more than a century, first as an imperial power and more recently as the first Asian economy to achieve Western levels of economic development.

But in the last few years, Japan has grown increasingly insecure, gripped by fear that it is being overshadowed by India and China, which are rapidly gaining in economic weight and sophistication. The government here has tried to preserve Japan's technological lead and strengthen its military. But the Japanese have been forced to shed their traditional indifference to the region.

Grudgingly, Japan is starting to respect its neighbors.

"Until now, Japanese saw China and India as backwards and poor," said Yoshinori Murai, a professor of Asian cultures at Sophia University in Tokyo. "As Japan loses confidence in itself, its attitudes toward Asia are changing. It has started seeing India and China as nations with something to offer."

Last month, a national cry of alarm greeted the announcement by the [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development](#) that in a survey of math skills, Japan had fallen from first place in 2000 to 10th place, behind Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea. From second in science in 2000, Japan dropped to sixth place.

While China has stirred more concern here as a political and economic challenger, India has emerged as the country to beat in a more benign rivalry over education. In part, this reflects China's image in Japan as a cheap manufacturer and technological imitator. But India's success in software development, Internet businesses and knowledge-intensive industries in which Japan has failed to make inroads has set off more than a tinge of envy.

Most annoying for many Japanese is that the aspects of Indian education they now praise are similar to those that once made Japan famous for its work ethic and discipline: learning more at an earlier age, an emphasis on memorization and cramming, and a focus on the basics, particularly in math and science.

India's more demanding education standards are apparent at the Little Angels Kindergarten, and are its main selling point. Its 2-year-old pupils are taught to count to 20, 3-year-olds are introduced to computers, and 5-year-olds learn to multiply, solve math word problems and write one-page essays in English, tasks most Japanese schools do not teach until at least second grade.

Indeed, Japan's anxieties about its declining competitiveness echo the angst of another nation two decades ago, when Japan was the economic upstart.

"Japan's interest in learning from Indian education is a lot like America's interest in learning from Japanese education," said Kaoru Okamoto, a professor specializing in education policy at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies in Tokyo.

As with many new things here, the interest in Indian-style education quickly became a fad.

Indian education is a frequent topic in forums like talk shows. Popular books claim to reveal the Indian secrets for multiplying and dividing multiple-digit numbers. Even Japan's conservative education ministry has begun discussing Indian methods, said Jun Takai of the ministry's international affairs division.

Eager parents try to send their children to Japan's roughly half dozen Indian schools, hoping for an edge on the competitive college entrance exams.

In Tokyo, the two largest Indian schools, which teach kindergarten through junior high, mainly to Indian expatriates, received a sudden increase in inquiries from Japanese parents starting last year.

The Global Indian International School says that 20 of its some 200 students are now Japanese, with demand so high from Indian and Japanese parents that it is building a second campus in the neighboring city of Yokohama.

The other, the India International School in Japan, just expanded to 170 students last year, including 10 Japanese. It already has plans to expand again.

Japanese parents have expressed "very, very high interest" in Indian schools, said Nirmal Jain, principal of the India International School.

The boom has had the side effect of making many Japanese a little more tolerant toward other Asians.

The founder of the Little Angels school, Jeevarani Angelina — a former oil company executive from Chennai, India, who accompanied her husband, Sarath Chandar Rao Sanku, to Japan in 1990 — said she initially had difficulty persuading landlords to rent space to an Indian woman to start a school. But now, the fact that she and three of her four full-time teachers are non-Japanese Asians is a selling point.

"When I started, it was a first to have an English-language school taught by Asians, not Caucasians," she said, referring to the long presence here of American and European international schools.

Unlike other Indian schools, Ms. Angelina said, Little Angels was intended primarily for Japanese children, to meet the need she had found when she sent her sons to Japanese kindergarten.

"I was lucky because I started when the Indian-education boom started," said Ms. Angelina, 50, who goes by the name Rani Sanku here because it is easier for Japanese to pronounce. (Sanku is her husband's family name.)

Ms. Angelina has adapted the curriculum to Japan with more group activities, less memorization and no Indian history. Encouraged by the kindergarten's success, she said, she plans to open an Indian-style elementary school this year.

Parents are enthusiastic about the school's rigorous standards.

"My son's level is higher than those of other Japanese children the same age," said [Eiko](#) Kikutake, whose son Hayato, 5, attends Little Angels. "Indian education is really amazing! This wouldn't have been possible at a Japanese kindergarten."

Readers' Comments

Can American schools learn anything from schools in India?