

FIRST VISIT TO JAPAN

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Boarded the bus at Narita airport and reached the hotel at around 7.30 a.m. Feelings of both apprehension and enthusiasm covered my mind, while waiting at the hotel-lounge for my counterpart to come and take me to IDE. "How am I going to survive in a country where people don't speak English? The Japanese alphabets are not at all familiar. How will I buy grocery, food and other stuff?" The waiter near the front desk took pity on me, perhaps seeing my expressions, and came and asked me where I am from. He looked delighted to know that I am from India but looked very pale as soon as he heard that I am going to stay here for seven months. "Oh----- seven months!" he exclaimed. His concern made me more worried. After a while Hajime-san arrived and spoke to me in English - I was relaxed. Met others at the Institute and gradually the tension subsided. The next day I shifted to the apartment located across Makuhari station. As soon as Hajime-san left I started imagining figures emerging from the darkness of the graveyard located right in front of the apartment. I quickly locked the front door. But then I realized that the whole place is like a match box. "How will I stay here for seven months?" I asked myself in complete astonishment. I remembered my childhood days: when I used to fight with my sister for space and demarcate lines to show each others' territory in the bed room, mother used to scold both of us, "Oh you, spoilt little brats, you are never satisfied. Do you know how much space people in Japan have to live in?" Very soon my fear about the graveyard also disappeared as I learnt that it is not a place for cremation; it is only a symbol built in memoriam.

The next day I decided to get my grocery. I could not locate salt. I solicited the help of one of the employees at the store. He thought I am looking for sauce, and left me in the midst of various sizes of bottles. With great difficulty I located a place where I thought salt was kept. I picked up one packet. "But suppose this is not salt!" I thought philosophically. With a broad smile I decided to ask a middle-aged lady customer, and very eagerly she pointed out that it was 'sweeta', 'salta' was on the other rack. I went to fetch milk the next day. After some preliminary surveys I could not locate it and hence, again took the help of one of the employees at the store. He left me where mint was kept. I was convinced that the problem lied in my pronunciation not in his understanding.

The top button of my coat fell on the ground as I was trying to wear it hurriedly. I entered a store, and in action I explained to the young boy at the counter about my requirements. He replied in Japanese that they did not have buttons. I again repeated

my action: 'Not button, I need a needle and thread'. But the reply sounded the same. And then whatever description I gave, he ended the conversation with, "Hi" which resembled the American way of greeting someone.

I walked around casually and then entered an old shop which sells only snacks. I explained the old lady about my requirements. She listened to me patiently. With great care she took out a needle and a piece of thread from a box and passed it on to me. I opened my purse and requested her to accept the price. She refused to take any price and said several things in Japanese, which I did not follow. I kept repeating my request. She at the end waved her hands strongly and touched my head affectionately. The next day as I was passing by her store she called me in and gave me a piece of black thread. Again she said many things, possibly asking me not to use the white thread which she had given me earlier as it would not match the colour of the coat, and again touched my head with affection. I was touched; two drops of tears rolled down in joy. I reconfirmed that I am a fool, who would always look for right words and right expressions. When feelings dominate, words are indeed unnecessary! I don't have to know Japanese to understand the feelings of a Japanese mother, who extends her warm affection to her Indian son. I remembered one of the poems of Tagore, "Oh Lord! you have made strangers my brothers and you have shown me my home in several unknown houses."