

# Growing Up Indojin

What makes you feel like you belong is profoundly personal — especially for those who grew up in the close-knit Indian diaspora of Kobe, Japan.

**Aarti Virani**

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The author's paternal grandfather, grandmother, father, and friends, on a weekend excursion to a temple site in the Kansai area of Japan. (Jhaveri family)



On a misty morning in May 2017, I maneuvered a stroller along the winding slopes of Kobe, Japan. Inside it, my 6-month-old son gurgled, entranced by a swirling weathervane. I snuck a glance at the anchor-shaped pines on a mountain peak in the distance. Both are iconic emblems for this charming city, one of the first Japanese ports to open its gates to international trade in the late 19th century. “*Youkoso, baby-chan,*” I murmured, welcoming him to the Victorian mansions of Kitano-cho, an elegant district on the foothills of Mount Rokko, once home to most of the city’s foreign merchants.

We’d flown in only the day before from New Jersey, the jetlag hitting us like a circadian tidal wave. But that hadn’t stopped me from showing him around. I was born in Kobe, and it’s where my parents — part of a close-knit Indian diaspora community in Japan that traces its roots to the early 1950s — still reside today.



The author dressed in traditional wear for Shichi-Go-San, a rite of passage for children aged 7, 5, and 3, held every fall. (Jhaveri family)



Though I was on a quest for coffee that day — my mom brewed almost only ginger-and-lemongrass chai at home — I couldn't help but pause at the koban, or police box, recalling that time I'd trudged in to report a stolen bicycle as a crestfallen kid. The city's only Jain temple, an ornate vision in sandstone and marble (my late grandfather had spearheaded its construction), stood just a few feet away. I'd spent countless afternoons in the narrow lanes that surrounded it, skipping prayers to collect marumushi, or curled-up pill bugs, with my younger sister. Around the corner, the site of a deserted parking lot shuttled me to 1995, to the uncertain days that followed the Great Hanshin Earthquake, a tectonic disaster that claimed the lives of more than 5,000 Kobe residents. My parents and other community members sought refuge here, sleeping in our cars as the ground beneath us trembled. Each of these neighborhood dots, when connected, formed important family history.

It began to drizzle lightly as we slipped into a coffee shop, taking our place in the line that snaked around the counter. As I ordered, momentarily blanking on the Japanese word for skim milk (courtesy of nearly two decades spent in the U.S.), a young woman behind me squealed. "*Nihongo jyozu desu ne!*" she exclaimed, applauding me on my mediocre language skills — I can hold conversations in Japanese and my family's mother tongue is Gujarati, but I can claim complete fluency only in English — before inquiring where I was from. Then she peered into the pram. In earnest but halting English, she asked to take a photo of my son, in awe of his sparkly brown eyes. Before I could decline, he began to whimper loudly. "*Sumimasen,*" I blurted, excusing myself, abandoning my cappuccino and whisking him out the door.

As we made our way back to my parents, my cheeks grew warm with embarrassment. If this was meant to be a homecoming, why did I feel like a perennial outsider? From the customs officer at

Kobe's only Jain temple, in the city's Kitano-cho neighborhood. (Parul Jhaveri)



Established in 1985, Kobe's Jain temple, or derasar, is a vision in sandstone and marble. (Charmie Jhaveri)



Kansai Airport, who quizzically peered at me, to the bartender at a local izakaya, pulling out a laminated all-English menu before I could even utter a word, I was repeatedly — though, politely — reminded of my gaijin, or foreigner, status. My visits were temporary, of course. I would parachute in for two weeks a year before jetting back to America, where I was a newly minted citizen. But my thoughts often drifted to my parents and their surrounding Indian community. At last count, Japan was home to approximately 38,000 Indian nationals; more than half live in the capital city of Tokyo, about 300 miles north of my hometown. In a country where minorities make up roughly 2% of the total population, could generations of immigrants aspire to belong?

Unspool my family's migratory DNA, and Kobe astonishingly features on both strands. My maternal great-grandfather, a Gujarati yarn merchant from Mumbai, came in the 1920s, likely inspired by a clutch of successful Indian silk traders who preceded him in the early 1870s. Indians first landed in Japan soon after the 1868 Meiji Restoration, a political reboot often credited with ushering in an era of Westernization, marking a formal end to the country's military government. As World War II crept closer and British sanctions halted shipping between Japan and India, my great-grandfather fled back to the subcontinent with his wife and five children (my grandmother, the youngest, was just a toddler at the time). Even after he returned to Mumbai, his friends affectionately called him "Jesinghlal Japanwala" as a tribute to his one-time home.

My paternal grandfather, a Jain pearl dealer from Patan, Gujarat, arrived solo via steamship in 1949, spending two years in Tokyo before settling in Kobe. My grandmother and father would follow suit. "By the late 19th century, Jains exercised a remarkable domination of the Bombay pearl market, then the main one in the world," William G. Clarence-Smith, professor of the economic



Virani's paternal grandfather was one of the community members who spearheaded the construction of Kobe's derasar. (Parul Jhaveri)



history of Asia and Africa at SOAS University of London, told me. “The global pearl market was revolutionized from the 1920s by the Japanese development of cultured pearls. After World War II, Kobe became the unofficial world capital,” he continued, shedding possible light on why my grandfather sacrificed the luxury of familiarity to bootstrap a life in a country where even the simplest street signs were undecipherable.

From the 1950s onwards, merchant communities started cropping up in Japanese cities such as Osaka, Kobe, and Yokohama, according to Megha Wadhwa, a postdoctoral fellow at the Institute of Comparative Culture at Tokyo's Sophia University. “Japan offered safety and security with its booming post-war economy.” Despite blueprinting a successful pearl business and spending the majority of his adult life here, my grandfather — like many of his fellow Indian trader friends — never pursued naturalization, a labyrinthine paper chase that is still defined by *jus sanguinis*, or citizenship by blood.

As a result, neither did my father, who attended an international Catholic school on Kobe's coast, followed by a five-year stint at a university in upstate New York, before returning to Japan to join his father's company in 1977. I suspect their families' mutual links to Japan played a pivotal part in my parents' arranged marriage. And though I can't speak to what exactly compelled my mother, a bona fide Bombay girl, to trade her kinetic city and proximity to her extended family for the relatively sleepier — and, dare I say, lonelier — streets of Kobe, I reach for one of her favorite phrases: “You marry the man, not the city.”

Much of my mom's current support system is quilted together from my late-grandparents' social network. After nearly 40 years in Kobe, though, there are connections she's kindled independently and proud to call her own — a dear classmate at an



The author and her mother, a Mumbai native, on a family holiday on the coast of the Seto Inland Sea, in 1985. (Jhaveri family)



introductory Japanese-language class she took shortly after her arrival, fellow mothers at my local yochien or kindergarten, and regulars at her local gym. My father, whose closest friends are fellow Gujarati jewelers with similar origin stories, is also part of a local entrepreneurs' club comprised almost entirely of Japanese business owners, which has met for lively dinners monthly since 1981. Despite occasional forays into the larger community, though, much of my parents' social life revolves around Kobe's Indian population — roughly 300 households, consisting of Gujarati, Punjabi, and Sindhi families, whose original members arrived shortly after my grandfather.

“Can we expect the next generation to go through the same integration issues we've faced?” mused Sanjay Rajpopat, whose father, a Gujarati textile and green-tea trader, arrived by way of Afghanistan in the early 1950s. As the proprietor of Gaylord, one of Kobe's longest-running Indian restaurants, Rajpopat confessed mixed feelings about the future of the city's Indian merchant community. “There's something here that is...not worth the trouble. It takes 10 or 15 years just to enter the Japanese culture and milieu,” he said. “And it's not the American Dream. The Japanese Dream is very middle class. There's a certain level of status that gaijins have, but there's a glass ceiling, and we'll always remain foreigners.”

My father put his own spin on that sentiment. “Somehow, we have all imbibed, indirectly, this concept that the nail that sticks out gets hammered down,” he told me. “We want to remain low-key. We know that we can remain here comfortably, but we cannot succeed *too* much. Look at [Carlos Ghosn](#), for instance,” he said, referring to the notorious French Lebanese auto tycoon, the fourth non-Japanese CEO to lead Nissan, who captured headlines for financial misconduct late last year.

In the early 1960s, Virani's father, who arrived in Japan as a baby, attended a local kindergarten in Kobe, Japan. (Jhaveri family)



Though she was born and raised in Mumbai, Virani's mother is seen here in a yukata — a subtle reminder of her own family's long-standing connection to Japan. (Shah family)



Other longtime Kobe residents, such as Kiran S. Sethi, president of Jupiter International Corporation, a trading company launched in 1959 by his father, a Sikh immigrant from Mumbai, have identified silver linings to this peripheral existence. “A large portion of us are like, ‘we’re gaijin, we’re different,’ and life goes on,” said Sethi. As the product of Kobe’s international school scene, he ventured stateside to earn a marketing degree and MBA before returning to expand the family business in 1989. “It was kind of hard to get into Saatchi & Saatchi with a turban and beard 30 years ago,” he admitted, wryly.

These days, Sethi is an unofficial ambassador for Kobe’s sole gurdwara, a 54-year-old institution (a Japanese chef helms the traditional langar, or community kitchen), which he considers a crucial gathering place. “The only way to appreciate our uniqueness is by understanding our core values,” he added. “I have a Japanese wife, but I will never be Japanese. You play the role you look here, and if you deviate from it, everyone gets confused.”

The idea of sticking to a script was one I was well-versed with but had always resisted. It’s partly why I moved to America in 2002. Like Sethi and my father, I came for a college education. Unlike them, however, I chose to remain, partially scarred by the summer before my final year of high school. Much of it was spent either clumsily sorting cultured Akoya strands for my father or rolling out a succession of lopsided rotlis with my mother; despite my parents’ best efforts, I was hopeless at both. Neither activity was considered an especially unusual pastime for the Indian girls around whom I grew up. Our mothers were accomplished multitaskers who ran their households with the efficiency of Six Sigma corporations. Many selected this path due to an inability to converse in professional Japanese — most were very recent arrivals from India, unlike our fathers. It’s also a choice shaped by the traditions, namely the conservative gender roles, that our fathers’



Virani's paternal grandmother, pictured here in a kimono, arrived in Japan soon after her husband set up his pearl business, following World War II. (Jhaveri family)



families brought from India when they emigrated in the decades prior.

Unable to see an authentic reflection of myself as an ace homemaker or pearl-dealer-in-waiting, I dedicated my last year of high school to scout out a professional role model. She arrived in the form of a charismatic guest speaker: Lisa Takeuchi Cullen, a Tokyo-based *TIME* magazine reporter who regaled us with anecdotes about interviewing Japanese mafia kingpins and J-pop icons. I fixed my gaze on a journalism degree.

It turns out that there were other second-generation Indian women in Kobe actively seeking alternative paths. When I spoke to Anupa Shah, whose father — also a pearl dealer — emigrated from Mumbai in the 1960s, she unveiled her hesitations about the road less traveled. “You know that last year of college when everyone is interviewing and frantically looking for jobs?” she divulged, recapping university in Washington, D.C. “I figured, ‘well, I’m going back to Kobe.’ I didn’t have real role models to give me a vision, in terms of what the possibilities could even be.”

Ultimately, despite a brief detour involving the **arranged marriage circuit** in Mumbai, a process she describes as “pretty miserable,” Shah applied for a job in Tokyo, where she has lived since 1998. She eventually married a Japanese citizen — they now have two elementary school-aged daughters, and she is an executive director of human resources at a multinational investment bank. “When it comes to identity, I’ve never seen myself as being a specific nationality — I’m more values-based,” she revealed. “In our current neighborhood in Tokyo, we’re detached from the Indian community, so I think we can be ourselves, without external pressures,” she said. “When my girls were in kindergarten, they didn’t even notice I looked different. It’s adults who come up with those distinctions. I’m not discounting things like country or

associates of the host and announce the resignation of S. V. Shah who will join as a trainee the International House of the Kubota Iron and Machinery Works, Ltd., Osaka as of July 1. Shah will get four to six months training on power tillers which are a major item of export on yen credit to India. Left to right: Satish Shah (company staff), Jhaveri, Consul Nath and Mehta.

An article from one of Japan's few English-language newspapers, "The Mainichi Daily News," featuring the author's late grandfather, among other members of Kobe's Indian community. (Jhaveri family)



Like her father, Virani also attended a local kindergarten, and was one of a handful of non-Japanese students in her class. (Jhaveri family)

religion, but they just don't really play a part in my life."

Others, like Purvi Jhaveri, a certified yoga instructor, nutritionist, and choreographer who runs Abundance, a thriving wellness studio in Kitano-cho, openly embrace their hybrid identities. At first blush, one might conclude that Jhaveri, whose jeweler father shifted his young family from Mumbai to Kobe in 1970, opted for the traditional route: she eschewed college and was married by 19. But a chance enrollment at a meditation retreat led her to find her true north about two decades ago.

Today, most of her approximately 100 clients are Japanese, eager to partake in a thoughtful roster of Indian-inspired workshops that range from hatha yoga sessions to superfood recipe tutorials. "I try to keep a 'no problem-no-worries-let's-smile' approach that my Japanese students tell me they love," she shared with me. "I tell them they're free to express themselves however they want to. Because that's typically not how Japanese society is, right? They're not allowed to make many mistakes in their day-to-day lives," she added. "But I need to adapt to their culture, too. So I keep that kyori," she said, using the Japanese word for distance. "Just a healthy boundary. Not a brick wall."

Jhaveri's attempt to build a gateway to her South Asian heritage, one that bridges the gap between her historically insular community and homogenous host country, makes her somewhat of an anomaly. Incidentally, when deconstructed, the characters for Kobe mean "god's door." It's a hallowed one that was pried open in 1868, partly because the Japanese government — encouraged by the port's protected location — deemed it sequestered enough to keep foreign philosophies at bay. But Jhaveri's surrender to the push-pull nature of being a second-generation immigrant in Kobe, and her ability to create an identity amid its fluidity, lends me hope.





Shaping rice balls with family friends, Virani, her younger sister, and mother participated in a Japanese New Year's ritual in the early 1990s. (Jhaveri family)

These days, instead of focusing on all-or-nothing definitions of inclusion and foreignness, I acknowledge that my family's past contains generous helpings of both. Belonging is deeply and profoundly personal, I am learning, and not reliant on validation, bureaucratic or otherwise. I think back on one of my final conversations with Sethi, who perhaps, captured this most astutely. "Am I an outsider?" he wondered. "I know the inner workings [of Japanese society], but I have to remind myself I'm not the same, and I use it to my advantage," he said. "I'm not sad about it. It's all about perspective."

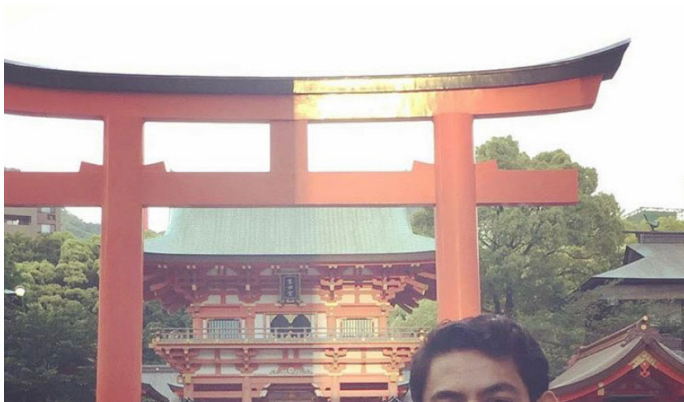
About two years after my son's initial trip to Japan (we've visited again since), we found ourselves at a crowded park in our hometown of Jersey City. As he clambered up the slide, he squeezed himself next to a boy who looked about his size. "What's your name, buddy?" I asked, drawing a blank stare. His mother emerged, informing me they had just relocated from Tokyo. Three-year-old Akira was still working on his English.

"We are Japanese," she told me, by way of explanation.

"Just like us right, Mama?" my son piped.

Perspective, I thought. Indeed.

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Virani, her husband, and son visited the local shrine on a trip to Kobe in May 2017. (Virani family)

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