

# The Impact of Japanese Management on Workers in the Indian Automotive Industry

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## Abstract

*Japan is now the 6th largest investor in the Indian automotive industry (Horn et al., 2010). This timely paper will explore the transfer of Japanese management in this industry. It will also provide insight into the development of Japanese management which has undergone major changes in the 21st Century whilst demonstrating remarkable flexibility and resilience in the face of economic turbulence (Nakamura, 2004; Abegglen, 2006; The Economist, 2007; Keizer, 2007 and Pudelko, 2009, Horn, 2012). From research interviews conducted in India from 2011-13 with academics and managers in Indo-Japanese joint ventures, it would appear that firms such as Toyota Kirloskar Motors (TKM) are entrepreneurial and creative in the way that they have adapted to the introduction of Japanese management. Japanese firms have also adapted well to India. The findings from this research may be used to train managers for Indian assignments and to develop appropriate policies for their affiliates (Budhwar, 2009).*

**Keywords:** *Japanese Management; Indo-Japanese Joint Ventures and the Automotive Industry*

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to establish whether Japanese foreign direct investment (FDI) in India has led to positive effects from the transfer of human resource management (HRM) to local companies of Japanese subsidiaries in the automotive industry. FDI can be defined as 'the objective of obtaining a lasting interest by a resident entity in one economy (direct investor) in an entity resident in an economy other than that of the investor (direct investment enterprise) (OECD, 1996). This definition not only implies a long-term relationship between both parties but also a 'significant degree of influence on the management of the enterprise' (OECD, 1996). Scullion (2005) defines international human resource management as the process by which 'multi-national corporations (MNCs) manage their geographically dispersed workforce in

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order to leverage their HR resources for both local and global competitive advantage.'

The study intends to generate better understanding of the contribution that Japanese firms make to the development of the automobile industry in India. This is a relatively new area of research as Japanese auto makers are late entrants to India. However, major investments are underway to expand production and marketing capacities (Horn et al, 2010, p.351) which demonstrates the growing importance of India to Japanese firms in the automotive industry. The author has and worked in Japan for a number of years and developed an interest in the transfer of Japanese management in the UK context when working for Toyota (UK).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Japanese Management

Japanese HRM (JHRM) is said to be made up of three aspects or 'three sacred treasures' (sanshu no jingi). They are the lifetime employment system (shushin koyo), the seniority-based wages and promotion system (nenko joretsu), and enterprise unions (kigyobetsu rodo kumiai) (Itagaki, 2009; Iida and Morris, 2008; Rose & Kumar, 2007; Kiyokawa, 2007). Nevertheless it has become clear that many Japanese companies now have a pragmatic approach to the economic problems of the last two decades and have adopted a hybrid industrial model, incorporating practices such as lifetime employment with merit based pay (Economist, 2007).

### The Japanese Business Environment

The last three decades of the 20th century were a period of unprecedented overseas investment for Japanese companies. Following the appreciation of the yen after the Plaza Accord of 1985, Japanese FDI outflows increased from US\$12 billion in 1985 to US\$22 billion in 1986 and maintained a yearly growth rate of 45% until 1989, when they reached a historical peak of US\$63 billion (IMF, 2002,p.13). During this time 70% of JFDI went to the USA and Europe. This

gave rise to a huge amount of research on the transfer of Japanese management in the USA and Europe, (Dore, 1973; Wickens, 1987; Abo, 1989; Jones, 1991; Kenney & Florida, 1993; Naylor, 2000). By 2001, although Japan was the world's 7th biggest overseas investor, Japanese FDI had fallen back to US\$32 billion of total world outflow, or 4.5% of the world's total (IMF, 2002, p.13). In 2010, despite two decades of poor economic growth at home, Japan was still the 7th biggest global investor, accounting for US\$56 billion of world outflow (UNCTAD, 2011 p.9).

The Japanese government embarked on a process of economic de-regulation from the 1980s onwards (Imai, 2011). In 2003, Prime Minister Koizumi brought in reforms which were designed to transform Japan from a government initiative-led economy to one more driven by market forces. Japanese firms now face increasing challenges at home and abroad. Overseas Japanese firms face increased competition in industries such as household electrical goods and computers from low cost economies such as China. Japanese firms must defend intellectual property more vigorously, particularly in respect to China as some firms have sold technology to potential competitors (Abegglen, 2006).

### Japanese Management overseas

The transfer of Japanese production methods overseas which involves the transfer of personnel as well as practices such as kaizen (continuous improvement) is well documented, and Japanese companies are widely believed to bring their HRM system with them when they expand overseas (Koike, 1998; Legewie, 2002; Itagaki, 2009). There has also been some research into the impact of Japanese management specifically in Asia (Choudhury, 2005; Kiyokawa, 2006; Abo, 2007; Rose & Kumar 2007).

Despite the recent Toyota recall crises, it would appear that Japanese HRM practices, such as those exemplified by the Toyota Production System (see Appendix 1) form a vital part of Japanese firms' overseas strategy. However,

Wickens (1987) and Ackroyd (1988) found that that Japanese firms only transfer those HRM practices which can easily be assimilated into the

existing business culture This is borne out by the findings of more recent work by Kawamura (2007) and Kumon (2007).

### Appendix 1

<p><b>Toyota Production System (TPS)</b> <i>(adapted from Toyota.com)</i></p>	<p><b>Outcomes</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To provide customers with the highest quality vehicles.</li> <li>2. To provide members with work satisfaction, job security and fair treatment.</li> <li>3. Gives company flexibility to respond to market changes and achieve profit through cost reduction.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Kaizen - continuous improvement</b></p>	<p>The heart of the TPS. Continually striving for improvements in every sphere of activity from manufacturing to serving the customer and the wider community.</p>
<p><b>Just-in Time</b></p>	<p>Allowing the production process to be regulated by supply and demand. Customer demand stimulates production of a vehicle. In turn the production of a vehicle stimulates production of the delivery of parts. The Kanban card system-whereby a card is attached to every component that is removed and returned when it is used-signals when a component needs re-ordering. This is integral to the JIT system.</p>
<p><b>Jidoka - Automation with a human touch</b></p>	<p>Any member of the production team can stop the production line if abnormalities occur. Thereby minimising defects and maintaining quality.</p>
<p><b>Suppliers and TPS</b></p>	<p>Suppliers are encouraged to adopt the TPS in order to improve productivity, quality and working conditions.</p>

In order to transfer these successfully and retain competitiveness, Japanese MNCs have adopted the practice of sending large numbers of expatriate managers overseas. This practice has been condemned on the one hand as it limits promotion prospects for local staff (Legewie, 2002; Whitley et al, 2003; Gamble, 2008). On the other hand it is praised for its efficient transfer of Japanese management (Rugman and Li, 2007; Itagaki, 2009).

This section examined some of the main issues relating to the transfer of Japanese HRM overseas in past two decades. These include the expatriate

based management system criticised by Legewie (2002) and defended by Itagaki (2009). In addition it was seen that Toyota's rapid expansion led to the company abandoning some key aspect of their production system to the detriment of quality and safety. However it would also appear that Japanese MNCs are now beginning to admit foreigners to top positions, CEOs of Nissan Carlos Ghosn is one example (Stevens, 2008). One of the main reasons behind this is the prolonged recession in Japan. The following section examines the transfer of Japanese Management in India.

### **The Transfer of Japanese Management in India**

There have been a number of works examining the transfer of production methods from Japan to India via Indian subsidiaries of Japanese companies (Okada, 2004; Kiyokawa et al, 2006; Altenburg et al, 2008; Shintaku & Suzuki, 2009; Panizzolo, 2011) and research comparing the development of HRM in India since liberalisation with that of countries such as Japan also exists (Budhwar & Sparrow, 2002; Singh, 2004; Bjorkman & Budhwar, 2007; Capelli et al, 2010, Som, 2011). However the most significant research in terms of this report to date is that of Choudhury (2005) who investigated the transfer of Japanese management in Honda Siel, Greater Noida, outside New Delhi.

Choudhury (2005) made a number of observations regarding the transfer of Japanese management in India. Firstly, she points out that Japanese HRM management techniques are not capital intensive so they could be easily implemented. Secondly, she believes that the successful adoption of Japanese management depends on training rather than education, so low levels of education in India are not problematic. Thirdly, Japan is an Asian country so there is an affinity between the two countries and psychic and cultural distance is not a barrier (Choudhury, 2005; Shintaku, 2009; Buckley et al, 2012). She also believes that Japanese firms reputation for high quality and productivity have much to offer India.

Choudhury (2005) examined the transfer of lifetime employment, the seniority system and enterprise-based unions in Honda Siel. Her key findings were that the most transferable practices are soft aspects which are not sensitive to the employer/employee relationship but help to motivate workers. These include the suggestion system, part of kaizen (continuous improvement) which allows workers to suggest ways to improve quality and save production costs. In terms of the transfer of lifetime employment, she points to the decline of this practice in Japan and this is one facet of Japanese management which has not been transferred to Honda Siel. Enterprise-based unions were

another facet of Japanese management which was not transferred. Unionisation and the links to left-wing political groups are often seen as problematic in India and Japanese expatriate managers at Honda Siel were reluctant to relationship establish the kind of company union they have in Japan. This caution may seem justified now as a manager was set on fire and others injured by union member at Suzuki-Maruti's plant in Haryana in July 2012, after workers believed that the company may close the plant and move to Gujarat (Economic Times of India, 2012). There is some evidence from my own study which supports Choudhury's earlier findings.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The following section sets out initial findings from a survey sent to HR managers of a majority Japanese-owned Joint Venture (JV) auto maker in Karnataka in May 2011. This was followed up with telephone calls in July of that year. This is part of on-going research at three Japanese firms (two joint venture and one wholly Japanese owned) which will take place over the next 12 months. The author also conducted interviews with key contacts in the auto industry in May 2013. These included a journalist who writes for the Economic Times of India; a senior Indian manager at a supplier firm and Dr Srabani Roy Choudhury whose work was discussed previously and is now a government advisor on Japanese investment in India. The purpose of these expert interviews was threefold; to gain an overview of the research context 'on the ground' in India; to help with networking and to seek advice and guidance from people with experience of working with Japanese auto firms in India.

## **FINDINGS**

It would appear from early research findings that there are many differences between Indian and Japanese companies. The main differences highlighted are ways of thinking and the way that strategy is executed. Examples include the

standardization of processes and the way in which processes are monitored. In particular, genchi genbutsu (go and see) which aims to get to the heart of problems by employees searching for and solving the root cause of them.

When asked to identify any management practices that he perceived as 'Japanese' the HR manager explained that the Japanese way of thinking is different from what he termed the Indian way. He explained that in his firm the company combine both the Japanese philosophy and Indian culture. He believes that this hybrid approach has been a success, particularly in terms of the salary structure and the communication between workers and management. When asked how these been modified for the Indian business environment, he explained that his firm transferred their HRM and production practices with some customisation to India.

This study was designed to test some of the theories and ideas which have come out of research into the transfer of Japanese management in India. In the light of scant previous work in this area, it was hoped that some basic insight would be gained into how key aspects of Japanese management are transferred in the Indian context.

A number of interesting areas regarding how and why Japanese HRM have been transferred have emerged which relate to the secondary research set out in the literature review. In particular, how Japanese management is adopted by Japanese subsidiaries in the Indian auto industry and how it perceived by Indian managers and workers. It is hoped that the qualitative data collected through further interviews with Japanese and Indian managers and workers will allow for a thorough and up-to-date examination of these issues.

However it has become clear Japanese firms had adapted well to India, aided by the experience of 'serial ex-pat' managers who appear to take the role of pioneers in introducing and developing the complex global supply chain networks firms

such as Honda depend on. Some of these views such as that of a director of a Japanese JV in New Delhi, who comments on the hierarchical nature of decision-making in Japanese joint ventures, reinforce earlier evidence from Legewie (2002) who discussed the insider-outsider ethnocentric nature of Japanese culture which implies that managers from the home country are superior in knowledge and ability to those of the host country. However this may not always be the case, particularly in India where local managers understand the frugal nature of the culture much better than the Japanese.

In terms of the perception of the Japanese as employers, Dr Choudhury who has conducted extensive research on Honda's Indian strategy, concurs with Gamble (2008) on the issue of the promotion process being slow in Japanese firms in overseas, this is in contrast with Itagaki (2009) who found that whilst fast-track promotion in Western MNCs may lead to a higher salary, job security is low. Itagaki (2009) also states that the low prospect of promotion in Japanese affiliates is often cited as the reason behind high employee turnover despite the fact that the promotion process is quicker in overseas subsidiaries. However all three interviewees said that Japanese managers were perceived as being fair employers who paid reasonable wages in India.

On the role of unions Dr Choudhury cited the incident which led to the death of an Indian manager in Haryana in 2012 as an example of the extremes to which industrial conflict can lead to. All three interviewees discussed how the media and politicians incite workers who may not check all the facts. Mahmood (2013) also points to the fact that most labour laws enacted since liberalisation have been pro-firm rather than pro-worker, which may be a contributory factor to industrial unrest. According to Monaco (2013) workers in the auto industry are often expected to work over 8 hours a day with few breaks and work overtime frequently. Saini (2007) states that although there are 150 HR legislations in India many are outdated and poorly implemented. Furthermore the ILO (2012) points out that the

rigidity of labour laws hindering India's economic growth.

## CONCLUSION

Budhwar (2009) explained that there was a scarcity of research on HRM in subsidiaries of MNCs in emerging markets such as India until the beginning of this century when scholars began to examine the dynamics of managing in the context of countries such as China from the firms' perspective. Some of this research was examined in the literature review.

The views discussed here are those of experts 'on the ground' in India and are based on their individual knowledge and experience of the Indian auto industry. They cited examples where

training and development has improved working standards and relations between workers and managers. It would also appear that Indian managers and workers in firms such as Honda are entrepreneurial and creative in the way that they have adapted to the introduction of Japanese HRM in India.

These interviews have identified some important issue which will be explored in greater depth during the second stage of the fieldwork. They include; the devolution of decision-making to Indian managers, the perception of 'serial expat' Japanese managers regarding the Indian business environment; the perception of workers regarding Japanese firms as good employers and the impact of labour unions.

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