

Lessons from the Road: Observations from driving in Japan

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It was barely a month of my stay in Japan, when I encountered an experience, an observation that was not going to be my first and last, but one that was going to be recurring, woven into the culture fabric of Japan. This observation was the refurbishment of a section of a community road, that run along the tracks of a train line. To my surprise, it took the workers less than 12 hours to dig, refill, tar and re-mark the lanes and road signs of about a kilometre stretch. I saw the workers setting up road blocks, construction equipment and signs, lights and other equipment at around 9 pm, when I was returning to my lodge from the laboratory. To my amazement, when I was returning to the laboratory the following morning at about 8 am, walking briskly to catch the train, I realised that the street was new and completely different from the previous night. That made a great impression on me and my thought pattern. How on earth could the workers have done all that in just one night? How did they pulled this off in such a short period? How long is the maintainance expected to last? These are examples of some of the questions running through my mind as I enjoyed my walk for the train station.

Else where, it would have taken days if not weeks to complete that stretch of road. The name of the line was Keio-Inokashira line, and the station was Komaba-Todaimae. The lesson I learned was that maintainance culture expedited in time, keeps society running and moving well. This maintainance culture was not an exception, but a norm practised in every facet of the Japanese society. Drive on the highways, urban and community roads and one will soon realise that it is a common practice. The frequency of occurrence does not connote poor work that needs to be attended to regularly. Rather, it is for safety and comfortability reasons that sections of the roads are constantly maintained.

Another lesson I received, in a rather ‘hard and painful’ way was that, when in a hurry and plying a section of the highway for the first time, it is always better to observe what the majority of road users are doing and follow suit especially during heavy traffic. This is because, trying to be in a hurry while deviating form the ‘established norm’ can lead to delays, lateness and regrets. For instance, on a dual carriage where majority of drivers are using one lane more than the other, it is not advisable to go by the lane that seems to be moving faster at that moment. This is because, the faster lane might be leading to an exit, right after which is an entry point which might be much choked compared to the slow lane. Sometimes, the road signs are only shown a km or two km to the exit/ entry point, and by the time of realization, it might be too late. The lesson here is that, being in a hurry may not always lead to a faster way out, but rather it could make the ending sour and unpleasant. No hurry in life, one step at a time.

Another amazing attitude of drivers on Japan roads and highways is their readiness to show gratitude and how they demonstrate it. Making way for other road users always lead them to flash on and off their hazard lights for about 2 – 3 times saying to you ‘ありが

とうございます'. It is a common character of majority of road users in Japan. You will always find this on Aqua line, Joban high way, the Tomei, Chuo, Shuto highways and certainly on all their highways. The lesson here is simply that, one must be grateful and show thankfulness when others treat us with kindness and courtesy. Driving has always been a way to learn and observe what goes on around me. But I must say that, driving on Japan roads makes you learn much than you will expect. You learn attributes and virtues like patience, fortitude, diligence, humility and of course admiration for the environment including your immediate neighbours.