

Learning the ropes in a new land

From unfamiliar streets to new syllabuses, expat parents share how they navigate a fresh start in Mumbai

NASRIN MODAK SIDDIQI

WHEN Keiko Matsubara's family moved from Japan to Mumbai in May, they knew the transition wouldn't be simple. A new city, a new language, and a new school system for their three children (ages 10, 7 and 4) — especially the younger two who spoke little English — felt like a steep hill to climb.

"There were gestures and ways of communicating that felt unfamiliar," says Keiko Matsubara. "In Japan, so much is understood without words. Here, you need to ask questions, provide explanations, and follow up. It took some getting used to, but we adapted."

Cultural adaptation, emotional adjustment, climate shifts, and building relationships from scratch can overwhelm expat families. "I've seen families feel completely lost — from navigating the city to figuring out where to buy groceries," says Fatema Agarkar, Educationist, School Board Advisor and Mentor to Finland International School (FIS). Her son has studied alongside international families and often heard how hard it was to break the ice. Yet, she adds, Mumbai's melting pot spirit shines through. "It's a city that welcomes."

What made a big difference for the Matsubaras was the community. "The Japanese moms were incredible," says Keiko Matsubara, adding, "Even before we joined the school, they were sharing tips and reassuring us. After admission, parents from our class reached out with helpful information. It was such a relief," she says.

Choosing to live in an apartment complex with other expat families —



Keiko Matsubara with her three children, navigating a new city, language, and school system after their move from Japan to Mumbai in May. PIC/ATUL KAMBLE

both Japanese and non-Japanese — was also intentional. "That mix helped us feel less alone."

For the Bruckls from Oshiwara, too, a new country, unfamiliar systems — everything from curriculum structure, to teaching style and academic calendars — felt different. Dad Andreas Gerhard Bruckl is German, and his wife Seveda is Turkish. Their daughter Veronika is moving from Sr Kg to Grade I in 2025-26 at JBCN International School, Oshiwara. "We weren't just looking for academic alignment; we wanted a space where our child could thrive emotionally and culturally, too," says Andreas.

Academically, the Matsubara

family was navigating unfamiliar waters. "The grade and age cutoffs were different from Japan, but that wasn't too hard to manage. I'm still learning what's expected here academically," Matsubara admits, "but it hasn't felt overwhelming."

The family chose FIS, a school with a small, diverse student body. "Even among Indian students, many have lived abroad. That blend of backgrounds made us feel we weren't the only new ones trying to find our place." The school supported their transition through clear communication — WhatsApp, email, and an app that shared classroom work and updates. Trial classes and a detailed walkthrough helped the children gain confidence before formally

joining. "Other Japanese students who already spoke English helped our kids adjust. That peer support meant a lot," she adds.

In a surprising twist, the move lifted a burden for their eldest. "She had been under a lot of pressure preparing for junior high school entrance exams in Japan. Here, she's able to study what interests her, without cram school (a private institution that provides intensive tutoring and exam preparation). It's a relief," says Matsubara.

School lunch was one of the early cultural bumps. "Some dishes were spicy at first, so the school allowed us to send home-packed tiffins," she smiles. "But eventually, my kids wanted to try what others were eating."

Reflecting on the journey, she says, "The transition wasn't easy, but the warmth of the community and the school made it better than we imagined. We didn't just move countries — we found new rhythms, new support, and new friends."

At FIS, transition support is central. From trial classes and multilingual assistance to cultural clubs and hands-on staff, every family gets tailored help. "We preempt needs — from transport and uniforms to financial support — so families always have a go-to person," Agarkar says.

Community is key, and the cultural fusion extends beyond classrooms — every festival is marked, from Diwali to Japanese Mother's Café, with food, music, books, and storytelling. Field trips to Japan and Finland, along with guest speakers from consulates, bring global learning to life.

Mental health is also a priority. Through Switch for Schools, an Australian emotional wellness program, FIS tracks daily emotional shifts. During one visit, the Consul General of Finland noted how Japanese families in the community felt so at ease that it hardly seemed like they were living abroad.

This, says Agarkar, reflects what international education in India can aspire to be — helping both expat and local families navigate change with greater ease.

At JBCN International School's five branches — Parel, Oshiwara, Borivli, Chembur, and Mulund — personalised onboarding, buddy programmes, and cultural familiarisation events

Continued on page 15



STEPHEN JAMES
TUMPENE

Whatchu staring at, Gen Z?

Have you been hit by the Gen Z stare in the workplace yet? **Sunday mid-day's** resident Gen Z seeks to explore what's behind the dreaded look — silent judgment or social awkwardness



Wednesday Addams is the most famous representation of the Gen Z stare in pop culture. PIC/PINTEREST @SNIKTAM

HIYA JAIN

HAVE you ever felt the dread of walking into a store with questions about a product, only to encounter a poker-faced Gen Z shop attendant who looks least interested in customer service? You pluck up the courage to approach them, only to be met with a deadpan stare that makes you feel stupid for asking the question in the first place.

You've just been hit with the Gen Z stare — the latest social phenomenon that's brought the youngest generation in the workforce back in the headlines again. The term refers to the prolonged blank expression that appears on the faces of many teens and 20-somethings when they are asked a question, which



PARAS
SHARMA

MANASVI
BHATIA

they are unable or unwilling to respond to.

From confused employers trying to decode their new recruits' fixed gaze, to Gen Z employees explaining why someone deserves their death stare, the term has gone viral recently. Here are some customer service situations in which Tik Tokers have admitted to deploying the Gen Z stare: "I've been asked to make somebody's iced tea less cold," or "I've been

asked to give them a cheeseburger without the cheese."

Lakshman Nagasuri, a 21-year-old intern, says, "If someone asks me a stupid question I just look at them like — bro, are you for real? Are you really asking me this question? What's going on?"

But what's really going on behind those glassy eyes? Is it just silent judgment or social awkwardness in a generation that has grown up perpetually online?

Corporate intern Rifa Khan, 19, often finds herself giving the blank stare to people. "Sometimes I just can't comprehend the question. Other times, it's pure confusion and disbelief that causes the stare," she discloses.

"The workplace is one of the few

Continued on page 15

Continued from page 14

help new learners and parents settle in with ease. Coffee mornings, family days, and community circles turn introductions into friendships, and friendships into a sense of belonging.

"The first thing we focus on is belonging," says Stephen James Tumpane, Principal, JBCN International School, Oshiwara. "If a child and their parents feel part of the community, learning follows naturally."

For the Bruckls, the experience was immediate. "From the first week, she had a buddy showing her around, and we were meeting other parents over coffee. It felt less like starting over and more like joining an extended family," says Andreas.

Adapting to a new school in a new country can be daunting, but the Bruckls found the transition seamless. "Veronika settled in far quicker than we imagined. Our only real challenge has been keeping up with all the playdates," laughs Sevda. They credit the warm parent community, active WhatsApp groups, and open communication with making them feel instantly included. "I've already attended more school events here than my parents did in my entire schooling," says Andreas.

Social-emotional learning is embedded from the early years through initiatives like Rainbow Week and empathy campaigns. "Happy educators create happy classrooms," says Tumpane, noting that staff wellness is as much a priority as student wellbeing.

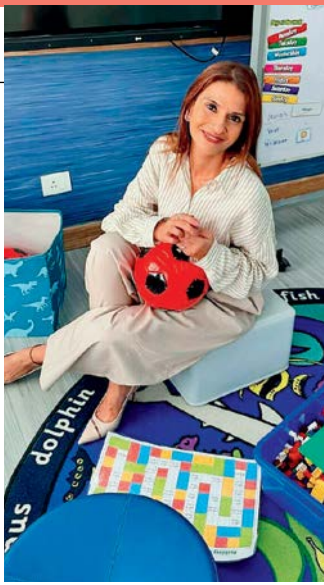
For the Bruckls, that philosophy has been more than words. "We've never felt like just another family on the list," says Sevda. "Here, you're seen, you're heard, and you're part of something bigger."

Not every expat family gets the cushion of an international school. For some, the landing is more challenging, the learning

For Andreas, Sevda, and their daughter Veronika Bruckl, a new country meant navigating unfamiliar systems, from curriculum to calendars



curve steeper, and the safety net non-existent. An American mother and Indian father, who moved with their three children to India and chose a non-IB curriculum, have not had it as easy. The mother, who wishes for the family to remain unnamed, says that while her daughters were young, the bigger adjustment they faced when they moved was understanding how different the system here is. "In the US, most families send their children to excellent public schools. Private schools were rare, and when I was growing up, they were usually for the wealthy or for kids who needed a different environment. Here, education feels more like survival of the fittest — an intense curriculum and high-stakes exams. We're just trying to make sure our kids keep their childhood intact while navigating it."



Fatema Agarkar admits that breaking the ice may not be easy but Mumbai's welcoming, melting-pot spirit soon takes over

Socially, her children love their school and haven't had challenges fitting in. But academically, there's a steep learning curve, especially in subjects like Hindi. "In the US, if a child needs extra help, the school steps in — there are support classes and specialised teachers. Here, the responsibility falls squarely on parents. The school partners with you to close learning gaps; here, it's up to the parents to make it happen. That changes your role completely, but it also teaches you to be resourceful and proactive. Hindi is taught as a first language, even for non-native speakers, which makes it tough for newcomers."

While the school's communication is straightforward and they meet with the counsellor when needed, parts of the system are hard to understand. "Much of the teaching here focuses on covering the curriculum, with the expectation that tutoring will fill the gaps. In earlier years, we had tutors for all subjects. Now, we focus on Maths and Hindi — Cuemath has worked especially well," she adds.

"Unlike international boards, there's no expat parent network, support group, or orientation at other boards. We simply had to 'jump on the train' and keep up."

smdmail@mid-day.com

Continued from page 14

places where Gen Z is interacting with people from different generations; not just Millennials, but also late Boomers," says Paras Sharma, 37, director of The Alternative Story, a mental health service. "It can get very confusing to manage expectations of how they're supposed to respond in a formal setting, such as the formalities and niceties that are expected by older generations."

The stare can have a particularly unsettling effect on Millennial employers who "like to think of themselves as laidback compared to Boomers", but are affronted by Gen Z flouting traditional societal niceties.

Manasvi Bhatia, 31, founder of design studio Local Lab, says,

"Compared to older generations where employees showed more loyalty to the company, Gen Z is not always loyal to their company. Millennial employers will need to put a systematic structure in place to teach Gen Z about the work culture."

Recent studies have shown that

If someone asks me a stupid question I just look at them like — bro, are you for real? Are you really asking me this question?

Lakshman Nagasuri, intern

Gen Z expects their work environment to be more purpose-driven and laid back, which often contrasts with the modern reality of most workplaces which are more traditional and hierarchical. Gen Z has also been known to prioritise their mental health over adhering to social norms, and is much more comfortable with setting boundaries as compared to the other generations before them.

Perhaps it's just that Gen Z doesn't blindly hold the customer or boss to be always right, and neither does it believe that it owes fake niceties to people. In either case, it's safe to say that this generation's youths are not afraid to be themselves and to speak up — or not — when they want to.

smdmail@mid-day.com

Secrets of the nuclear statesman

Five things you didn't know about Atal Bihari Vajpayee, from the author of a two-volume biography on the 'dour conservative'

VIDYA HEBLE

WHY is Atal Bihari Vajpayee important? The answer seems to lie in the introduction to *The Believer's Dilemma*, the recently-released second volume in Abhishek Choudhary's two-part biography of the sage elder. "Vajpayee, for all his grumbling, helped the RSS and its affiliates function as India's deep nation," it says. A vivid — albeit poignant — picture emerges from these words: "In his last public appearance, in 2008, the stroke-battered patriarch allowed himself to be stretched off to the Parliament House to vote against the Indo-US nuclear deal, whose seeds he had himself sown while in office."

Amid the maelstrom of Indian politics, Choudhary says, "I locate him in the larger pantheon of Hindu nationalism, and narrate the story by reflecting him in the mirror of other crucial characters."

We asked the author to tell us five things we did not know about the "nuclear statesman", that the book reveals.

1 Vajpayee founded the BJP reluctantly, more out of compulsion than ambition. This was after the Jan Sangh faction was formally expelled from the Janata Party in April 1980. Though determined not to disown his ideological roots, he wanted the new party to be seen as the true heir to Jayaprakash Narayan's legacy. Its flag echoed Janata's colours — one-third green, two-thirds saffron — with a lotus replacing Jan Sangh's old oil lamp. He did away with the Jan Sangh credo of Integral Humanism to adopt Janata's Gandhian Socialism. It was at once a tactical manoeuvre to position the party as progressive and centrist, as also a result of his intellectual awakening over the past few years.

Vajpayee never married, but he had an out-of-wedlock daughter, Namita Kaul Bhattacharya, whose identity was long kept private. That one detail puts his life in perspective

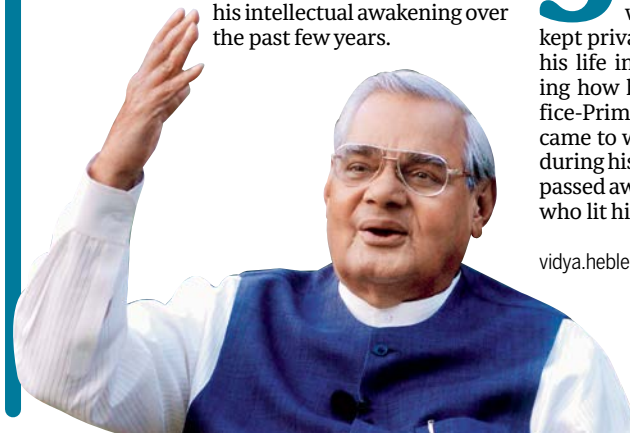
2 His cynical doublespeak during the Ayodhya movement — especially his defence of the BJP in Parliament — helped spread the impression that the razing of the Babri Masjid was a freak accident, despite much evidence to the contrary. He instead shifted the blame onto the Congress's earlier handling of the Ayodhya dispute; he maintained that the real issue was not the demolition itself but the historical and political context that had led to it. His responses were carefully crafted to avoid condemning the RSS or alienating the party base — even as he privately harboured unease about the event's consequences.

3 The 1998 nuke tests were more strategic inevitability than a political stunt by the first Hindu-right government. By this time, with the CTBT deadline approaching, the Indian political class had largely shed all moral hesitations on the nuclear question. The Treaty was widely seen as crass hypocrisy of the P5 — the permanent members of the UN Security Council — which sought to freeze the nuclear apartheid status quo. In such a context, any stable government would have tested.

4 He secretly suffered a stroke in 2007 which effectively ended his political life, though it was not publicly disclosed then. He voted against the Indo-US nuclear deal in 2008 — his last political act — mostly to ensure that his successor in BJP, LK Advani, had a shot at the top job.

5 Vajpayee never married, but he had an out-of-wedlock daughter, Namita Kaul Bhattacharya, whose identity was long kept private. That one detail puts his life in perspective — including how his Prime Minister's Office-Prime Minister's Family axis came to wield such colossal clout during his years in office. When he passed away in 2018, it was Namita who lit his funeral pyre.

vidya.heble@mid-day.com



Former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who was hailed as an imaginative moderate. PIC/GETTY IMAGES