

Keynote speech by Ambassador Hiramatsu at “Rethinking Cultural Heritage: Indo-Japanese Dialogue in a Globalizing World Order”

1 Introduction

It is my great pleasure to be invited today to speak at this international conference co-hosted by the India International Centre and the Institute of Chinese Studies. I am glad to see that renowned academicians not only from India and Japan but also from across the world have gathered in the conference, to discuss on how to re-interpret the common cultural heritage and values shared by India and Japan in a globalizing world order. I am honored to join you for this invaluable opportunity.

Today, I would like to talk about how the two countries have developed and nurtured their cultural and intellectual ties over the years.

2 Japan-India cultural/ intellectual ties from the 6th century to the 17-18 century

(1) Buddhism

Our cultural / intellectual ties actually took off with the arrival of Buddhism from India, which has made a tremendous and indelible impact on Japanese culture and philosophy. According to Nihonshoki, which is the first historical record book of Japan, Buddhism was officially introduced to Japan in the 6th century, through China and the Korean Peninsula.

There are divergent views regarding when Indian people first set foot in Japan. India maintained its supremacy in maritime transport in the Bay of Bengal and the South East Asian Sea, between the 3rd Century BC and the 7th century AD. Thus, a large number of Indians migrated to South East Asia and established their community therein. It would be reasonable to assume that a few Indians may have moved further north to Japan from South East Asia through the maritime route, already in the ancient times.

According to a confirmed historical fact, however, the first Indian person who reached Japan was Bodhisena, who assumed the role of “Master of Ceremony” for the Consecrating Ceremony of the Great Buddha statue at

the Todaiji Temple in Nara, in 752. Bodhisena was said to be born in 704 in South India, and arrived at Japan in 736 upon the invitation of Emperor Shomu. .

(2) Sanskrit, arts

Bodhisena and his Vietnamese disciple named “Buttetsu” were engaged in propagating not only Buddhism but also Indian culture, including Sanskrit, music and dance. There remains a record that ancient dances, “Bugaku” and “Gigaku”, were performed on the occasion of the Great Buddha Consecration ceremony at the Todaiji Temple. If you have the chance to see a performance of “Bugaku” and “Gigaku”, you can clearly discern the influence of Indian culture on these ancient dances.

The Sanskrit language was introduced into Japan in two ways: in the form of Sanskrit studies as such, as well as by means of constituting a basis for the creation of the Japanese Hiragana and Katakana syllabaries. Japanese monks were required to study Sanskrit out of the necessity to master Buddhism from the Indian original sutras and textbooks, from the 8th century onwards.

(3) Hindu gods and goddesses

Hindu gods and goddesses arrived in Japan from India via China, through Buddhist scriptures. As many of you have already been aware, Japanese people are surrounded by so many gods who originally came from India. We worship Kissho-ten (which is Lakshmi), Taishaku-ten (which is Indra), and many more.

In relation to Hindu gods and goddesses who were worshipped in Japan, we should not forget mentioning the Gion festival. Gion festival of Kyoto is one of the three major festivals held in Japan. Gion is the Chinese name of the Indian Jetavana (ジェータヴァナ) Buddhist Monastery (祇園精舎), which was built on the outskirts of Sravasti, the capital of ancient Kosala state, which is known as Saheth in UP State now. The Guardian Deity of Jetavana Monastery is Gosheersh (ゴーシールシヤ), who is said to have the sacred power to expel epidemics. Deity Gosheersh is believed to be originally the Deity of Mount Malaya at the south end of the Eastern Ghats of India.

The legend of Gosheersh was introduced together with Buddhism into Japan, in the ancient times. When epidemics raged throughout entire Kyoto in 869, people prayed to Gosheersh, the Guardian Deity of Gion for countering epidemics, by marching with 66 tall spears. This was the origin of the Gion festival. For over 10 centuries, people of Kyoto have been celebrating this festival unaware of the ties with India. Our ties with India do not stop here. The main feature of Gion festival is a parade of 31 giant chariots (wheeled floats) through Kyoto's boulevards. If you have a chance to see the parade, you will notice that people of Kyoto decorate some of these giant chariots with carpets from the Mughal Empire, or pieces of antique Indian cotton textiles. These items are thought to have been brought to Japan by Dutch merchants in the 17th and 18th century. The people of Kyoto at that time, who were commercially very successful, bought these treasures from the Dutch merchants and have been taking great care of these items since then, in order to decorate their communities' chariots. I would also like to add that Indian cotton textile at that time was renowned for the world's best dyeing technology, which exercised great influence over Japanese dyeing, such as the "Yuzen-zome".

3 Japan-India cultural/intellectual ties from late 19th century to early 20th century

So far, I have illustrated how Japan and India cultivated their ties since their commencement in the 6th century. It was Buddhism, arts or beautiful crafts with cutting-edge technology that connected the two countries. However, direct people-to-people exchanges were very limited in those times. It is only in the late 19th century when our people-to-people exchange started expanding appreciably.

In 1857, India's first movement for independence occurred. Nationalist sentiment was growing strongly among the Indian people. As for Japan, where the Shogunate had been staunchly following its national isolation policy since the 17th century, it now started to open its doors to overseas countries. As a consequence of this new policy, especially after the Meiji restoration in 1868, Japan began to expand its contacts with the world, including with India.

(1) Commercial Sea Route

In the 1880s, as Japan underwent the industrial revolution, its economy developed with a central focus on light manufacturing, especially in spinning technology. At the end of the 19th century, the shipping route between Japan and India was dependent upon foreign companies such as the British P&O Company. This was a barrier for the import of raw cotton from India. At that time, J.N. Tata, who founded the Tata Group, visited Japan and met with Eiichi Shibusawa, a renowned Japanese industrialist who is widely considered today as “the father of Japanese capitalism”. They together determined to end the existing monopolistic situation.

In order to open a new Indian shipping route, it was necessary to assure a certain volume of cargo. In 1893, it was agreed that 3 cotton-spinning companies and 2 import companies from the Japanese side would ensure the intake of cargo amounting to 50000 bales a year, and that the Tata Group will commit for an equal volume of raw cotton to be shipped from the Indian side. This is how NYK Line opened its Bombay route. With the stable supply of raw cotton, Japan could advance the process of its industrialization and modernization.

As a result of the launching of the Bombay sea route, the distance between Japan and India shrank considerably and people-to-people exchanges accelerated. An increasing number of Japanese people started visiting India for business purposes, and the Consulate General of Japan was established in Bombay, in 1894. In Calcutta, another focal point for Japan-India trade, the Consulate General of Japan was established in 1907.

(2) People-to-People contact among artists and intellectuals

The exchange of people was not limited to business purposes. In the early 20th century, Japanese artists including Senrin Kiriya (桐谷洗麟) and Kosetsu Nousu (野生司香雪) visited Indian Buddhist sites for inspiration. As many of you know, Rabindranath Tagore visited Japan 5 times and interacted with Tenshin Okakura, a famous Japanese thinker, as well as other Japanese intellectuals. Tenshin Okakura himself, along with his disciples, also visited India and interacted with Indian artists and

intellectuals. Through their friendship, the two thinkers fostered deep understanding of each other's culture, and initiated the exchanges between Japanese and Indian arts. This friendship continues to have relevance today and is alive at Shantiniketan in West Bengal. Furthermore, during the same period, Indian nationalists escaped from India to stay in Japan. One of such nationalists was Rash Behari Bose, who was given shelter by Japanese intellectuals at a restaurant called Nakamura.

From the 19th century to the early 20th century, in the midst of our countries' modernization, the scope of our people's interactions were multidimensional, ranging from artists to intellectuals visiting India and Japan, nurturing mutual understanding of each other.

4 Closing (Current Japan-India relations and the importance of rethinking our cultural heritage)

India-Japan relations have been greatly expanding since the beginning of the 21st century. During my two and a half years tenure as ambassador of Japan, I have witnessed that the Japan-India relationship has flourished to a great extent, and the ties between the people of the two countries have become stronger than ever. As you saw in the historic visit of Prime Minister Abe to Gujarat last September, Japan-India relationship has entered a new era. The significant achievements we have made recently include 1) the convergence of India's 'Act East Policy' and Japan's 'Free and Open Indo Pacific Strategy'; 2) the launch of the High Speed Railway project; 3) Agreement for Cooperation in the Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy; 4) the fundamental upgrading of our economic relations, and 5) the significant deepening of people-to-people exchanges.

Despite this unprecedented progress, we have yet to unlock the untapped vast potential of the Japan-India relationship, which was described by Prime Minister Abe as "the most promising bilateral relationship in the world". We are now working non-stop, together with our Indian counterparts, to unleash this potential and further broad-base our partnership in various areas.

At this juncture, to re-interpret the cultural /intellectual foundation we

have shared between Japan and India carries a tremendous significance for elevating our partnership a notch higher, to the next level. However, not many people are aware of the deep cultural and historic ties between our two countries from the 19th century to early 20th century, and I believe it is essential for us to have a better understanding of this rich part of history. One possible idea to foster such understanding is to have a joint research project among academicians of our two countries that will look deeper into this unique era. This will enable us to see how our two countries strived towards the path of democracy, and affected each other's thinking through various religious and cultural interactions. This interesting part of history is the foundation of the strong bond between our two countries now, where we share fundamental values including democracy and the rule of law. To know such a deep rooting of shared values exists between our two countries will definitely enhance our bilateral relationship on various levels. It is sometimes said that Japan is the oldest democracy and India is the largest democracy in Asia. I am intrigued why the two countries have maintained this democratic system for so many years. I would like to see some common beliefs, philosophy, values and historical background which can explain this.

This is the reason why I feel this conference is being held in a very opportune and timely manner, and I highly appreciate the India International Centre and the Institute of Chinese Studies for their initiative to organize this event.

I very much look forward to an active and fruitful discussion during the conference.

Thank you very much.