

Keynote speech by Ambassador Hiramatsu at the 13th Japan Habba
February 11th, 2017

On the occasion of
“2017 the year of Japan-India Friendly Exchanges”:
Past, Present and Future of Japan-India Relations

It is my great pleasure to be invited to the 13th Japan Habba to deliver a lecture. I am truly delighted to see a large number of people here, both Indian and Japanese, as well as people of other countries, enjoying Japanese and Indian cultures. For the last 13 years, Japan Habba has been contributing to consolidating ties between the people of Karnataka and Japan. Let me celebrate and appreciate the long and ongoing efforts made by all those engaged in this wonderful event.

In my lecture today, I will try to briefly review the events since the early 90s' that have reinforced the ties between the two countries, and explain why we need to further strengthen our people-to-people exchanges.

Before that, however, I wish to start by introducing the strong and long-standing cultural bonds between our two countries. It was already in the 6th century, when Buddhism was brought to Japan from India. According to a confirmed historical fact, the first Indian person who reached Japan should be Bodhisena, the “Brahman Buddhist High Priest” who was born in South India and assumed the role of “Master of Ceremony” for the Great Buddha consecration ceremony at the Todaiji Temple in Nara in 752. It is surprising that Indian Monks had reached Japan already in the 8th century after a long and difficult journey crossing the Himalayan mountains and deserts, as well as the rough South-China Sea and made immense contribution to the development of our culture.

Hinduism and ancient Shintoism have many aspects in common including respect for nature. Japanese people are surrounded by so many gods which originally came from India. We worship Kissho-ten (which is Lakshmi), Taishaku-ten (which is Kubera) and many more. Some of these gods are part of the group that we, in Japan, know as the “Seven Deities of Good Luck”.

In the modern period, the close interaction between our two peoples was characterized by the warm friendship between Rabindra Nath Tagore, who visited Japan 5 times, and Japanese philosopher and artist, Tenshin Okakura, in the early 20th century. As you see, our two countries share a broad history of interaction and friendship and have cherished long cultural bonds over 12 centuries.

Now, let me get back to the recent events in the early 90s'.

In 1991, the "Indian Economic Crisis" tested the strength of the ties between our two countries. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the surge of oil price under the Gulf War reduced the foreign exchange reserves of India to a perilous level, which was barely enough to pay for its import needs for three weeks. When most developed countries were reluctant to offer finance to India, Japan, together with a few other countries, offered a substantial bridge loan to bail India out of the Balance of Payment Crisis.

As you all know, after this crisis, India went through a major economic reform process, and actively invited foreign investments, especially in the manufacturing sector. Maruti Suzuki achieved a steady growth during the 1990's, thanks to a positive automotive policy.

Even though our relations remained at a somewhat subdued level after India's nuclear test in 1998, the turning of the century witnessed a dramatic transformation. In the year 2000, Japanese Prime Minister Mr. Yoshiro Mori visited India and met with the then Indian Prime Minister Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee. The two leaders launched the "Global Partnership in the 21st Century" that laid a solid foundation for the bonding between our two countries, as it stands today. Since then, Prime Minister Mori has been demonstrating his leadership in enhancing our relations by visiting India a number of times.

In 2003, India became the largest recipient of Japanese Official Development Assistance, or ODA. Since then, India stays at the top of the list almost every year, and in the last fiscal year, FY2015, the highest-ever volume of Japanese ODA loans was extended to India, more

than 350 billion yen.

The most successful achievement of the Japanese ODA so far is the Delhi Metro. Not only did the project make a great success as an infrastructure project, it also introduced the concept of “sticking to schedule” in the Indian construction philosophy. Many Indian friends have told me that Delhi Metro was a game changer in the public transportation system in India, and that it has transformed the way of life of Delhi-ites. Now, the lessons of Delhi Metro are being successfully applied to other major cities including Bengaluru.

There are, of course, other major ODA projects, like the Dedicated Freight Corridor (DFC) between Delhi and Mumbai, and the Chennai-Bangalore Industrial Corridor (CBIC). We have also assisted in various other sectors, such as river water purification, sewage, irrigation, forestry, and development of roads, ports, and electric power.

In 2007, Mr. Shinzo Abe, in his first tenure as Japanese Prime Minister, visited India. He made a speech at the Parliament of the Indian Republic, under the title “Confluence of the Two Seas”, named after the title of a book published in 1655 and authored by the Mughal prince Dara Shikoh. In that speech, Mr. Abe stated that our two countries have the ability and the responsibility to nurture and enrich the Pacific and the Indian Oceans as the seas of freedom and prosperity. This is still the underlying geopolitical vision we are working with today.

In seeking help to fight against global warming together, Prime Minister Abe appealed to the representatives of the Indian people that “There is no nation on earth for whom leading the fight against climate change would be so entirely fitting, because no people has had a harmonious coexistence with nature, so central to their philosophy throughout history, as the people of India.” This is now embodied in India’s strong commitment to tackle climate change.

On 11th of March 2011, the Great East Japan Earthquake struck with magnitude 9.0, followed by an enormous Tsunami. 16 thousand people were reported to have died and 2500 people are still missing.

Immediately after the disaster hit Japan, India sent us 27 thousand blankets, 10 tons of bottled mineral water, and 10 tons of biscuits, to help the affected people.

India also sent a 46-member team of NDRF, the Indian National Disaster Response Force, that stayed for 2 weeks in Onagawa, which was one of the cities worst hit by the earthquake and tsunami. The NDRF team helped in retrieving 7 bodies from the debris by digging the earth with their bare hands, so as not to damage the bodies. Their sensitivity was much appreciated by the local community.

Let me take this opportunity to express once again our deep gratitude for all the assistance by the NDRF as well as by the people of India.

In December 2013, Their Majesties the Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko of Japan visited India.

Their Majesties paid a visit to the Japanese Embassy in Delhi and had a look at a Bodhi tree in the garden. The tree was actually planted by the Emperor himself, 53 years before, when he visited India as His Imperial Highness Crown Prince in 1960, and has now grown to become a majestic tree. Reflecting afterwards, the Emperor stated that, during the visit, he felt that the Japan-India relations had also grown greatly, just like that Bodhi tree.

In January 2014, Prime Minister Abe visited India as the chief guest of the Republic Day parade. He was the first premier from Japan to grace the ceremony.

In September of the same year, Prime Minister Modi visited Japan, and elevated our relations to the “Special Strategic and Global Partnership” status. Prime Minister Modi said that an enduring spiritual partnership exists between the two countries.

In December 2015, Prime Minister Abe visited India. This visit resulted in a large number of significant achievements. The joint statement signed by the two Prime Ministers during this visit, which was entitled “Japan and India Vision 2025 Special Strategic and Global

Partnership: Working Together for Peace and Prosperity of the Indo-Pacific Region and the World”, serves as a guidepost for the “new era in Japan-India relations”.

In the field of security cooperation, two Agreements relating to transfer of defense technologies were signed, and Japan was invited to participate in the India-US joint exercise “Malabar” on a regular basis. Now the 3 countries of Japan, America and India are collectively referred to in the acronym JAI countries.

In the field of railways, both countries confirmed that the Mumbai–Ahmedabad High Speed Rail Corridor will be developed with the use of Japanese high speed rail technologies, that is, the Shinkansen system. A Memorandum of Cooperation on technological cooperation in the rail sector was also signed at the same time.

There are several more achievements to talk about. One is the Japanese target of having 10 thousand Indian citizens visit Japan through people-to-people exchange programs over the coming five years. Another is the relaxation of Visa requirements on both sides.

In November 2016, Prime Minister Modi visited Japan. This latest visit successfully demonstrated the steady deepening of the bilateral relationship, with tangible outcomes.

One of the most striking achievements was the signing of the Agreement for Cooperation in the Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy.

As for the cooperation on railways, the two countries announced the roadmap regarding the construction of the Mumbai-Ahmedabad High Speed Rail. As committed in the roadmap, the General Consultant started its work in December 2016, and both countries are working hard so that the construction commences by the end of 2018, and the operation starts in 2023.

I have always believed that it is essential to have a diplomacy that bears concrete results. Now, I feel that my belief is translating into reality.

When we look into the future, Japan-India relations have a vast

potential for growth, given the complementarities that exist between the two Asian economies, as well as our common values and shared strategic interests. I realize every day that the Japan-India relationship has greatly flourished and has truly entered the “new era.”

As I mentioned earlier, the Government of Japan has a long history in supporting the development of India’s infrastructure. We are very happy to see Japan’s ODA and investment providing the Indian people with not only good infrastructure, but also technology and culture of Japan’s engineering. Japan is always ready to extend its further cooperation to the development of infrastructure with high quality.

For Japan, India has been our indispensable partner for tackling together the volatile regional as well as global situations amid massive ongoing changes. The regional strategy and policy of our Prime Ministers echo in natural harmony, namely, Prime Minister Abe’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” and Prime Minister Modi’s “Act East Policy”. Both sides share their strategic visions and stress upon the importance of regional connectivity and the rule of law in the maritime domain.

Discussions on our bilateral cooperation in third countries in Southwest Asia and Africa are also progressing well. Japan and India agree with one another on their common responsibility of playing more important roles in the international community.

Nevertheless, there is still plenty of room for strengthening our relationship. Especially, we have much to do to enhance people-to-people exchanges, which is essential to deepen the mutual understanding in order to substantiate our global partnership. From this perspective, when they met last November, the two Prime Ministers decided to mark the year 2017 as “The Year of Japan-India Friendly Exchanges”. In India, we will be holding various events to promote, among others, tourism, youth exchange, educational collaboration, and cultural exchange.

In order for more Indian people, especially the younger generation, to visit Japan, the Government of Japan has started to relax the visa requirements for Indian students. We also plan to open 13 more visa application centers in major cities across India, including Bengaluru. With those measures, as well as the various events we plan to hold throughout

2017, I hope we can strengthen our bilateral ties at the people-to-people level.

Prime Minister Abe stated that the Japan–India relationship is “blessed with the largest potential for development of any bilateral relationship anywhere in the world”. On behalf of the Government of Japan, I am committed to explore all possibilities to realize every potential that exists between us. Here tonight, I would like to request all of you to support us in our mission. Let us work together to further strengthen our “Special Strategic and Global Partnership”.

Thank you.

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