

Address by Ambassador SUZUKI Satoshi
“Development of North Eastern Indian Region:
Indo-Japan Collaboration for Connectivity, Commerce,
Culture and Conservation”
March 5th, 2021

Ambassador Harsh Vardhan Shringla,
Foreign Secretary of India,
Mr. M.P. Bezbaruah, Chairman, Governing Council,
Asian Confluence,
Mr. Sabyasachi Dutta, Executive Director,
Asian Confluence,
Distinguished Guests from all quarters of Japan and
North Eastern India,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. **Introduction**

It is my great pleasure to address you all today. I would like to thank the Asian Confluence for arranging this symposium, connecting the intellectuals of Japan and India and bringing our attentions to India’s North East. I am pleased that my Embassy could support this important event, our first dialogue to focus on intellectual exchanges with the North East.

The North East is full of potentials not only for its own sake or for India’s further development, but also for the stability and prosperity of a wider region. That is why Japan has been a staunch and reliable partner of the North East. Japan also has historical ties with the North East. But I believe such ties could be further strengthened by connecting peoples of Japan and the North East, not just at the government-level but also between the

intellectuals as well as at the grass-roots level.

I have recently had the privilege of visiting the State of Assam with External Affairs Minister Dr. Jaishankar. I told the Assamese and other North Eastern people how much I felt at home being there. Indeed, any Japanese person who visits the North East would find natural affinities and be drawn closer to the region. Likewise, I believe North Eastern people who visit Japan would find similar bonds.

That shows there exist good possibilities for the peoples of Japan and the North East to get better connected. This symposium presents a very good opportunity to open the door to such immense possibilities by promoting intellectual dialogue between our peoples.

The North East stands on a strategically important place to realize a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific. In Assam, Dr. Jaishankar said, historically, “India was a great country only when eastern India was prosperous and secure.” I fully agree with him.

The Act East Forum embodies our commitment to the development of the North East, anchored on the trust and friendship that Japan and India have long nurtured. Japan is the only country that holds a dedicated forum with India for the development of the North East. At the end of January, I had an honour to co-chair the fifth round meeting of the Act East Forum, together with Foreign Secretary Mr. Shringla, and had fruitful discussions to provide orientation for our future cooperation in the region. Then in mid-February, as I said, I paid a visit to Assam with Dr. Jaishankar, which was my second visit, to demonstrate our commitment to the region. On that occasion, I had meaningful interactions with the Chief Minister and other leading Ministers of Assam, learning

first-hand the priorities for the State and the region.

2. Unleashing NER's potentials -Supporting connectivity-

Today, first I would like to talk about how we can unleash the vast potentials of the North East. I would say, enhancing connectivity is the first key to unlock them. It is both natural and necessary for India to enhance connectivity in the North East and to its Eastern border. It is not simply because of geopolitical reality that exists at India's western border, but because the future of Asia lies in that direction. The link to the East, from Bangladesh to ASEAN to Japan, is the source for further growth of India and its North East.

On the ground, Japan has been actively promoting connectivity both within the North East region and with the neighboring countries. Our national highway projects, be it in Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, or Tripura, will be extended to the border of Bangladesh. Japan and India have been working road connection improvement projects in Bangladesh as well. With these road network projects, the North East will find outlet to the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean and to ASEAN, being able to utilize such ports as in Chittagong or Matabari. The North East will no longer be a land-locked place.

Let me tell you my personal experience. Like the North East, my hometown, North of Hamamatsu City in Shizuoka prefecture, is surrounded by beautiful mountains and segmented by a big river. The river used to function as an inland waterways to export cedar woods.

The Brahmaputra River in Assam is also an important traffic means. But this enormous river disrupts road traffic. People have to make a long detour to cross the

river. However, the people of the North East will have a wonderful experience shortly: Japan is supporting the construction of the Dhubri-Phulbari bridge, whose foundation laying ceremony was just recently held with the presence of Prime Minister Modi. This is going to be a longest river bridge in India and to cut short the travel time across the river from more than 8 hours to less than 30 minutes. Furthermore, the bridge will create a corridor stretching from Bhutan, through Assam and Meghalaya to Bangladesh. This is the power of connectivity.

3. Unleashing NER's potentials –“Yaramaika” or give it a try spirit-

Now I want to introduce to you one word in my hometown dialect. It is “Yaramaika”. I would translate this as a “give-it-a-try spirit”. I believe this spirit is the second key to unlocking the potentials of the North East. My hometown, Hamamatsu City, is a mid-sized city, but it has produced a host of entrepreneurs who drove the post-war economic miracle of Japan. Those who started such big companies as HONDA, SUZUKI Motor Corporation, and YAMAHA are all from Hamamatsu City.

My hometown bred these energetic entrepreneurs, buoyed with “give-it-a-try” spirit. I feel a similar vibe existing in the North East.

- How can we add value to bamboo which are abundant in the North East?
- How can we further elevate talented human resources in the region?
- What should be done in the region when healthcare and sanitation have become so important after COVID-19?

I wish to see the people of the North East to exhibit the same “give-it-a-try” spirit and take up these challenges in

an even bolder manner.

I should add that only a spirit is not enough. Obviously eco-system which would nurture and develop talented entrepreneurs is needed. In the case of Hamamatsu City, there was a good engineering institute to provide entrepreneurs with academic and intellectual backups.

I am aware there are many prestigious higher education institutions in the North East. These institutions are indispensable stakeholders to work with.

Also human capital is priceless resources. The people in the North East excel in the service industry. That is because they know how to take care of the others. This is only possible if they can grasp the situation well and think about what their clients need. These are exactly the qualities to be astute entrepreneurs. I encourage the people in the North East to think about what their region needs in a similar way. While Japan is ready to continue our support to the North East, true prosperity will only be achieved by indigenous entrepreneurs. I hope a sprouting pool of talents in the North East will bring about innovative ideas for their hometown, as my predecessors have done for my home city and the country as a whole.

When I visited Assam last month, I took a ride on an e-rickshaw, which was built in Assam by a start-up company created by young Japanese entrepreneurs. Combining the tradition of India with a new idea, they are providing eco-friendly mobility solutions to the people in the North East and other parts of India.

This is just one small example. I would like to emphasize that Japan is also ready to think together with you and with the “Yaramaika” spirit.

- We are keen to collaborating with the North East to create bamboo value chains.
- We want to assist Japanese language courses in the North East so that young talents can find internship or job opportunities in Japan through the Technical Intern Training Program (TITP) or the Specified Skilled Worker system.
- We are ready to take up the challenges of healthcare and sanitation in Assam by strengthening its healthcare system and by constructing water and sewage facilities.

Protecting the rich natural endowments of the North East can also bring about added value. Japan is supporting the conservation of forests in Sikkim, Tripura, Nagaland and Meghalaya and assisting better livelihood of farmers. I am proud to say that our project in Sikkim has led to the designation of Khangchendzonga National Park as the first UNESCO "Mixed Heritage" site of India. This example illustrates how Japan and India can cooperate to make “one plus one” produce “more than two”.

4. People-to-People exchanges and intellectual exchanges

Taking up challenges will be easier if we have friends to share both the hardship and the joy to overcome it. Another thing I want to see with “give-it-a-try” spirit is much closer and more frequent exchanges between our peoples.

When we shed off this COVID-19 craze, I hope many youths in the North East will visit Japan. As I mentioned, there are opportunities with the TITP and the Specified Skilled Worker systems. My Embassy has also invited about 100 youths of the North East to Japan for a one-week tour to discover our country. They visited not only

Tokyo, but also Hiroshima or Nagasaki. They learned Japanese history and know-how to overcome natural disasters. With their experiences in Japan, I hope these youngsters will grow into the core for furthering the future partnership between Japan and the North East. Just one-week visit to Japan will make big difference in the mind of the Indian youths and ignite their own “let’s -give-it-a-try” spirit. I am happy to note that those who participated in this Embassy program have formed some Japan Friendship Associations in Meghalaya and Nagaland. I really welcome these initiatives.

Furthermore, my Embassy organized the “Dialogue with State” in Shillong, Meghalaya, in November 2018. This is our outreach program to various States in India. In the Dialogue held in Meghalaya, Hon’ble Chief Minister, Mr. Conrad Sangma participated.

Recently, I had a chance to talk with Chief Minister and the Chief Secretary of Meghalaya in New Delhi, and they shared with me the potentials of Meghalaya. In Meghalaya, a cherry blossoms festival is held every year. Cherry blossoms are cherished in Japan and their beauty is engraved in our heart. I cannot feel it a mere coincidence that cherry blossoms are also cherished in the North East. We have something common deep inside. I am sure we can let “something” bloom through further dialogues.

5. Closing

The intellectual dialogue we are having today can inspire and stimulate our “give-it-a-try” or “let-us-do-it” spirit. Then a virtuous cycle starts.

- Let us discuss what kind of untapped possibilities there

are for us.

- Let us see if there are any low-hanging fruits that we can pick together. There can be a host of interesting ideas to explore.
- How can we combine road connectivity with inland waterways?
- What is needed to attract investment to the North East?
- Are there anything we can do to bring in more tourists so that they can enjoy the rich natural and cultural attractions of the region?
- How can we advance intellectual dialogue with the North East?

I hope today's discussions will amply shed light on these questions.

Intellectual dialogue will make us “re-discover” each other. I believe it is the North East that holds a ticket to broaden our already-rich bilateral relations, as we approach the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations next year. And beyond our close ties with the North East, we can secure a truly free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific.

Thank you.