

Keynote address by H. E. Hiroshi SUZUKI,
Ambassador of Japan to India,
at the 4th India Japan Intellectual Conclave in Shillong,
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- Ambassador Riva Ganguly, Governing Council, Asian Confluence,
 - Shri Periasamy Kumaran, Special Secretary, Economic Relations and Development Partnership, Ministry of External Affairs
 - H. E. Amb. Mustafizur Rahman, High Commissioner of Bangladesh to India,
 - Shri Moses Chalai, Secretary, Northeastern Council
 - Shri Donald Phillips Wahlang, Chief Secretary, Government of Meghalaya
 - Shri Sabyasachi Dutta, Executive Director, Asian Confluence,
 - Honourable Members of Parliament,
- Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, and my friends,

Thank you for attending the 4th India Japan Intellectual Conclave. I am very pleased that this Conclave is being held in this beautiful city of Shillong. It is exciting to see so many people involved in the development of the Northeastern Region coming together for future-oriented discussion. It is encouraging to see that the background of the participants are growing more diverse, and I do feel that this conclave is maturing into a premier forum for wide-ranging stakeholders to discuss the development of this region.

It was in Delhi last March that Prime Minister Kishida launched the New Plan for Free and Open Indo-Pacific. The Concept of

creating an “Industrial Value Chain” in the Bay of Bengal region, spanning the wide areas of Northeast India and Bangladesh, is now almost one year old. As discussed in the earlier panel, a number of significant developments have taken place over the past year towards the creation of such an industrial value chain. To name just a few:

- ① The opening of the Akhaura–Agartala border railway: this enables rail transport from Kolkata through Dhaka to the Northeast.
- ② A new Integrated Check Point (ICP) in Dawki: this came into operation recently to facilitate cross-border trade, and JICA has worked on road improvement project between Shillong and Dawki.
- ③ The ICP in Sabroom: this is expected to open in the near future, and will dramatically improve logistics access between Matarbari Port, Chittagong and the North East.

As you know, Matarbari is a deep sea port, and this will be the game-changer when it becomes commercially operational in 2027, only 3 years from now. JICA is constructing road that runs through Tripura, and on the Bangladeshi side, road is being constructed under Japan–India–Bangladesh cooperation.

Also on the Bangladeshi side, there have been a number of developments. To list just a few:

- ① a state-of-the-art coal fire power plant was commissioned last year in Matarbari Port.
- ② Following last year’s conclave in Agartala, my Embassy cooperated with the Japanese Embassy in Dakha to organise a

mission consisting of Japanese business leaders and media representatives in Delhi. They visited Matarbari Port last September and attended a networking event with Bangladeshi counterparts in Dhaka.

- ③ The soon to be expected launch of EPA negotiations between Japan and Bangladesh and the recently resumed direct flights between Dhaka and Tokyo will further strengthen economic links between Japan and the Bay of Bengal region. If the air connectivity between Dhaka and the Northeast improves further, it would also enhance connectivity between Japan and the Northeast.

The JICA' s cross-border survey now in progress will examine the way forward to build on these developments.

And next week, Foreign Secretary Kwatra and I will hold the Act East Forum in Delhi, where we discuss further concrete initiatives to realise this Industrial Value Chain concept with the participation of officials from each northeastern state. To prepare myself for this, I would like to get fresh ideas for bringing new investments to the Northeast. To break the ice, let me share with you some of my wishes, my dreams for new investments.

- ① First potential sector is agriculture. There is a Japanese company which is interested in introducing best-quality "Shiitake" mushroom farming in the Northeast, by harnessing the geographical features and climate similar to Japan, and utilising Japanese fungus technology and machinery.

Another Japanese company has conducted an experiment on smart agriculture by using drone technology here in Meghalaya, with the North East Centre for Technology Application and Reach (NECTAR). It would be wonderful if Japanese technology and know-how could be utilised to bring innovation in agriculture to start a new industry in the Northeast.

In this context, let me also mention that last October the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) held a job fair in the agricultural sector in Guwahati. It was attended by 250 people.

Japanese assistance in the development of agricultural human resources in the Northeastern states will further enhance the potential of creating a new industrial value chain.

② Another potential sector could be clean energy. This region is endowed with the Himalayan mountains in the north, running through Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, Arunachal, and providing abundant water resources. This can attract the interest of clean energy-related companies. If the hydropower generated in the Himalayas can be utilised by industries in the Bay of Bengal region, it might open a new aspect of the industrial value chain.

③ Third, I would like to mention the northern neighbor, Bhutan. I am concurrently accredited as Ambassador to the Kingdom of Bhutan. A Japanese company is interested in creating a cold chain, such as cold storage of vegetables and fruits, to meet the demand for high-end resorts in Bhutan.

Another potential is the Gelephu Special Economic Zone initiative, announced in December last year. This initiative may provide new horizon for potential connect between the industrial value chain in the Northeast and Bhutan.

These are just some of my dreams. There is no guarantee that they will be realised, but I hope they will break the ice for active discussions today, I am looking for new and actionable ideas for investments, much needed to create an industrial value chain in the Northeast.

As I emphasised last year, to create an industrial value chain, we need to bring new investments. Once the infrastructure is in place, it will be up to the regional and local governments to create an environment that is responsive to business needs.

Therefore, the voice of industry must be reflected in the discussions from the beginning. I would like to take a moment to express my sincere gratitude to a large number of business leaders from both Delhi and Dhaka who are participating in this conference. I am looking forward to hearing concrete ideas from you today.

This afternoon, we have a session devoted to people to people connect. I would like to underline that without a robust human network, investment and industry will not flow in, even after infrastructure and investment policies are in place.

It is people who enable smooth communication and troubleshooting between policies and business. Who you know and who you work with

is a crucial factor in bringing new investments.

While India–Japan relations have developed very strongly, people–to–people connect and the building of grass–root momentum are the areas where greatest potentials lie for expansion.

Once a stronger human ecosystem is established between Japan and India, the economic relations will see a sea change. In order to push strongly the long–term expansion of Japan–India partnership over coming decades, this year should be the beginning year for a “Big Bang” in people–to–people connect between our two countries.

The Northeast is of particular importance in this context. In the last few years, some young people from the Northeast have travelled to Japan to work in sectors such as care–giving, agriculture and hospitality.

There is a nursing home in Fukui Prefecture called Sakura–so. They invited 15 care–givers from India, and made a phenomenal success.

Another example is in Kochi Prefecture, when they invited two agriculture workers from India. They became so successful that the Governor of Kochi met them.

Most recent success story is a woman from the Northeast who went to work in the hospitality sector in Noboribetsu Onsen in Hokkaido. This is very popular hot spring destination among the Japanese people.

I am sure you will have a chance to learn more in detail about

these early success stories in the afternoon session today.

Due to geographical and cultural proximities to Japan, it is natural that people of the Northeast fit in easily with Japanese society. They are beginning to enjoy extremely good reputation in Japan.

I am pleased to note that from here Meghalaya, 30 young caregivers are making preparations to go to Japan. In the afternoon session today, we have participants from sending organisations who help these youths smoothly settle into various workplaces in Japan. Please listen to their presentations with great interest.

There are also increasing opportunities for young Japanese people coming to the Northeast, with students from Gifu University and other Japanese universities studying at IIT Guwahati.

It is my sincere hope that these talented young people from the Northeast and Japan will become bridges between our two countries and take Japan-India partnership to greater heights.

With the development of such people to people connect, the Northeast will truly become the centre of the Act East policy, and the cornerstone linking India and Japan.

With that said, I hope the discussions today will be productive, lively, and help create new ideas and initiatives. I also hope that a good network of stakeholders will be established through today's conference and generate a strong momentum going into the future.

In closing, I can say with strong conviction that this conclave will become a major venue that will propel the creation of a new Industrial Value Chain spanning India' s Northeast and Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal.

Thank you very much.