

India & Japan in the 21st Century

– Bilateral Relations 1,500 Years Old –

By Aftab Seth



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INDIAN civilization is the product of 5,000 years of history. Like the mother cultures of Greece and China, Indian culture had an influence way beyond the geographical boundaries of the Indian subcontinent. Unlike Chinese culture, however, which extended its influence primarily in the immediate vicinity of its geographical boundaries, i.e. Vietnam, Korea and Japan, India's civilization had a more extensive reach: from present-day Turkey in the West to Japan in the Far East.

India and Japan therefore began their cultural exchanges 1,500 years ago. For example, the Indian monk Bodhisena was present at the consecration of the *Daibutsu* (Big Buddha) at Todaiji temple in Nara more than 1,000 years ago. It is also more than

probable that the democratic features in Prince Shotoku's constitution had been imbibed from the Buddhist tradition of India, which emphasized "*soudan*" (consultation) and "*icchi*" (consensus), the two values that are so typically Japanese even today.

In the 20th century, Japan's Okakura Tenshin (1862-1913), a famed writer and art curator, and India's Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the Nobel laureate poet, writer and philosopher, strengthened the old bridges of understanding between our two great Asian nations.

India & Japan After 1947 – India's Independence

After the attainment of India's independence, then Japanese Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke's visit to India in 1957 was a landmark, since India became the first country in the world to receive Japanese yen loans. In 1986, Japan became India's largest donor, a position which it retains to this day, India being the largest recipient of Japanese ODA in the world.

Dawn of 21st-Century Global Partnership

India and Japan realized together that at the beginning of the 21st century the world was inevitably moving towards globalization and interdependence. The leaders of both countries perceived clearly that this new situation offered fresh opportunities for India and Japan to enhance their engagement for mutual benefit.

In order to take their relationship to a quantitatively new level, Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro made a historic visit to India in August 2000. Though I was ambassador to Vietnam at the time, my appointment as ambassador to Japan had been announced and so I was privileged to accompany Prime Minister Mori during his stay in India. It was at that time that he and Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee announced the "Global Partnership of India and Japan in the 21st Century."

These solid foundations laid in 2000 were further strengthened when Prime Minister Vajpayee visited Japan in December 2001. Several important decisions were taken to enhance the security relationship, including joint exercises by our naval and coast guard forces, in order to ensure the safety of the sea lanes through which our trade passes.

In April 2005, Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro visited India and he and his counterpart Manmohan Singh declared a "Japan-India Partnership in the New Asian Era." This was a recognition by both countries that Asia is emerging as the leading growth center of an increasingly interdependent global economy.

Certain important decisions were also taken to promote cooperation in the field of education and culture. The "Eight-fold Initiative for Strengthening the Japan-India Partnership" called for comprehensive engagement in all spheres, including cooperation in the reform of the United Nations.

Illustration: Iwasawa Akio

Economic Cooperation

In December 2006, Prime Minister Singh held wide-ranging talks in Tokyo and addressed members of the Diet and the business community. Confident that India is on a sustained path of high growth, the Indian leader invited Japanese participation in the rapidly developing sectors of India's knowledge-based economy, such as information technology, biotechnology and pharmaceuticals. He also invited participation in the massive investments being made in the development of the physical and social infrastructure of India, involving roads, railways, ports and airports. The Indian aviation industry, for example, is the fastest growing in the world and there is great scope for Japanese participation in this and other infrastructural fields. Likewise the mobile phone industry of India is the fastest growing in the world with six million handsets sold every month!

Working Together in Education & Culture

An important development that took place during Prime Minister Singh's visit to Japan was the signing of an agreement between the Japan Foundation and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. One of the significant aspects of this new cooperation is the emphasis being placed on the study of Japanese in India. This process had begun during Prime Minister Koizumi's visit in 2005 and was given a fresh impetus by the agreement arrived at between the Japan Foundation and the ICCR in December 2006.

2007 is the year of Japan in India and the year of India in Japan. Both sides have taken several steps to arrange dance and music performances, exhibitions of jewelry, *taiko* (Japanese drum), the tea ceremony



and several other interesting events. These festivals of India and of Japan will serve to further cement ties at the people-to-people level.

An economic partnership agreement between the two countries, which is now under discussion, will help in further tightening economic connections. On Feb. 14, 2007, the India-Japan Business Cooperation Committee met in New Delhi, encouraging interaction between the top business leaders of the two countries and giving an impetus to the proposed EPA.

The Road Ahead for 2 Major Democracies

India and Japan are two major Asian countries that share important values. We both cherish freedom, democracy, respect for fundamental rights and a firm commitment to the rule of law. The agreement of the two prime ministers in December 2006 clearly reflects this spirit and underpins their decision to establish a "Strategic and Global Partnership" between the two countries.

Japan and India share a global vision of peace, including, most importantly, a firm adherence to the goal of universal nuclear disarmament. We are equally determined to achieve prosperity with stability, based on sustainable development, which respects the environment. The *Shinto* and Hindu-Buddhist traditions are deeply imbued with the ideal of respect for non-human Nature. We must nurture these ancient traditions.

As the two most developed democracies in Asia, Japan and India are natural partners, with a stake in each other's progress and prosperity. We have a responsibility to respond together to global and regional challenges and a duty to play an active role in the promotion of tranquility and stability in Asia and the world at large.

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