

Indian Ambassador to Japan Alok Prasad

Working Together for the Future of Asia

Celebrating the 60th Anniversary of India-Japan Diplomatic Relations

Interviewer: Naoyuki HARAOKA Writing: Helen FUJIMOTO

On the historic occasion of the 60th anniversary of India-Japan diplomatic relations, *Japan SPOTLIGHT* is very privileged to have an interview with Indian Ambassador Alok Prasad. In the following, he discusses the importance of the countries' friendship as a key to the future of Asia.

Haraoka: What are your foremost memories of the year since your inauguration as ambassador of India?

Ambassador Prasad: When I look back over the past year, I feel there is a lesson for the world from the people of Japan in how to face adversity with calmness and courage. At the official level we were able to send some assistance in the form of goods like blankets and drinking water and biscuits, and a 46-member relief team also came to Tohoku. They worked under very difficult conditions but they were able to form close bonds with the local people.

The other thing which impressed me was the remarkable solidarity of the people of India for Japan. I was really surprised by the thousands of messages I received from ordinary Indians, who have no direct connection with Japan. So many people said that they were holding prayer meetings for Japan, and they wanted to ask how they could help in a more concrete way. Somehow they felt a civilizational link with a fellow Asian country. Those two things are my foremost memories of the year since my inauguration as ambassador.

Haraoka: What do you think are the main factors in the great friendship between India and Japan?

Ambassador Prasad: India-Japan relations are now at a historically high level. That is partly the result of the fact that the India-Japan interaction has never been one of hostility. Throughout our history, there has been a continuous exchange of ideas and knowledge and spiritual values. In the modern context we are both democracies, both committed to the rule of law and to human rights.

In recent years we have elevated our relationship to a global and strategic partnership, declared in 2006. Every year since then, the leaders of the two countries have been meeting, and we are very happy with this exchange. In addition to the meetings between our prime ministers, a number of top-level meetings have also taken place between our foreign ministers and the ministers of defense and



Alok Prasad, Ambassador of India to Japan

the economy. There is a really rich and robust agenda that has developed for India-Japan relations.

Haraoka: This year is the 60th anniversary of India-Japan diplomatic relations. Is there any plan at embassy or governmental level to organize a commemoration?

Ambassador Prasad: We will be holding commemorative events all over Japan throughout the year. When the two prime ministers met in 2010, they decided that this anniversary should be celebrated in a fitting manner. It was also decided that here in Tokyo the Indian Embassy would take the lead in organizing events in Japan, supported by the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs, while the Japanese Embassy in New Delhi would take the lead in India, with the support of our Ministry of External Affairs.

We have already held four events. We started with a retrospective exhibition of very rare photographs of important events in our relationship during the past 60 years, including the visit to Japan of Netaji Chandra Bose, and of Rabindranath Tagore, and the occasion of Pandit Nehru gifting the elephants to Ueno Zoo. It was a wonderful exhibition, inaugurated by former Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori.

We have just concluded our participation in the Sapporo Snow Festival, where they sculpted the Taj Mahal in ice. We brought a cultural group from Bollywood to Sapporo for the occasion and it was quite remarkable to see the dancers in their colorful costumes against the background of the Taj Mahal there in Sapporo.

We have also held a number of academic seminars, and there are art exhibitions and cultural performances scheduled to take place throughout the year, in various prefectures. We have devised a logo symbolizing the 60 years of Japan-India relations, to be used to publicize all the events to be held throughout Japan.



Haraoka: Turning now to the economy: in spite of the chaotic situation of the European economy, the Indian economy seems to be very robust, with stable growth. What is the current situation?

Ambassador Prasad: This has been a difficult year for everyone but we still expect growth to be around 7%. Our financial year ends in March, like Japan. The growth rate has fallen a little in the past few years but we hope to come back up to the earlier rate of 8% or 9% in the next year or so.

Haraoka: Asia is an area of high growth, unlike most other areas in the world. What do you think about the role that free trade is playing in this process?

Ambassador Prasad: Trade is extremely important. But unlike many other countries, Indian growth is driven mainly by domestic consumption. That is one of the reasons why the country has continued to do well in spite of the financial crisis of 2008 and the difficulties of this year. But in spite of those difficulties, trade has been growing in a very encouraging way.

India-Japan trade grew by about 40% last year and this year's new data from JETRO shows a further growth of 26% in our bilateral trade. Our two countries signed a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, which came into effect last August, and we expect trade to continue to increase at a very encouraging level.

Haraoka: Are you happy with the FTA between Japan and India?

Ambassador Prasad: I think it's a very comprehensive and far-reaching agreement, which covers most of our bilateral trade. The only negative is the agricultural items, but for 94% of our trade, there will be tariff elimination within 10 years.

We feel it is very important to encourage this process. We have signed FTAs with South Korea, Singapore, and with ASEAN as a whole. This is part of the policy of the gradual integration of India with Southeast Asia.

Haraoka: Do you plan to conclude an FTA with any other country or region, such as the EU or US?

Ambassador Prasad: We are already in discussions about an FTA with the EU.

Haraoka: What do you think about depending on FTAs and regional trade agreements rather than on the World Trade Organization?

Ambassador Prasad: Ideally it would be best if we can conclude the DOHA Round. The multilateral trading system is very important and needs to be preserved and strengthened. There are many difficulties and until we make further progress, it is good to have FTAs with more and more countries. But we are firm believers in a rule-based multilateral trading system and I believe we should continue with WTO negotiations and conclude the DOHA Round in accordance with its original objectives.

Haraoka: Another important factor in regional integration is geopolitical. Regional integration seems important not only for economic reasons, but in order to achieve peace. Do you think APEC plus India could play an important role in maintaining peace and security in Asia?

Ambassador Prasad: Economic cooperation and security and stability go together. The relationship between Japan and India has expanded beyond economic and commercial matters alone and we now consult closely on security and other issues. We are also participating actively in the ASEAN Plus Six meetings, and as a dialogue partner of ASEAN. More recently, the East Asia Summit, with the inclusion of the US and Russia, has emerged as an important forum for developing the architecture for security in Asia.

As far as APEC is concerned, membership is frozen but developments in other organizations hold more promise for us, especially the East Asia Summit. We are strongly committed to continue working with Japan to conclude the Comprehensive Economic Partnership for East Asia.

Haraoka: Another important global agenda concerns the environment. The Indian government has demonstrated keen interest in the state of the global environment. What is the nature of your government's engagement in global environmental issues?

Ambassador Prasad: We have been committed right from the first Stockholm conference. The environmental issue in particular requires international cooperation. I think it was clearly recognized in Rio that all countries have a common but differentiated responsibility. We are committed to that principle of common, differentiated, responsibility in dealing with issues like ozone, biodiversity, climate change and global warming.

At the national level, we have a very ambitious program to reduce the energy intensity of our economy by encouraging more renewable sources of energy. We are doing a lot to foster the development of solar and wind power and we are also focusing on improving energy efficiency.

Haraoka: Entrepreneurship and innovation are very important ways of activating economic growth. In that context, could you discuss the partnerships now developing among Japanese and Indians entrepreneurs, in particular IT ventures?

Ambassador Prasad: We are very proud of the entrepreneurial spirit of our people. Like Japan, we don't have so many natural resources and like Japan, we have to depend on the creativity, entrepreneurship and hard work of our people. There are now many joint partnerships being established. Many IT as well as pharmaceutical companies from India have established themselves here. These partnerships are all in knowledge-intensive industries.

I am happy to say that the number of Japanese companies moving into India has also increased very rapidly. From less than 200 about three years ago, there are now more than 800 Japanese companies operating in India. The numbers could be much larger but they are growing at an encouraging rate.

Haraoka: Bilateral partnership in IT ventures may sometimes be difficult because of barriers of language and culture. What do you think is the best way to encourage the mobility of human resources between our two countries?

Ambassador Prasad: Language is somewhat of a barrier and it requires efforts on both sides. More Indians should be learning Japanese and I hope more Japanese companies will operate in English. This will become more and more important in the context of globalization as companies internationalize.

We do need to work on the area of student exchange, but here again there are issues of language. Some Japanese universities have started offering postgraduate courses in English and the number of Indian students in Japan has been increasing. We want to see much greater exchange of students as well as faculty between the universities of our two countries.

Haraoka: What are the most popular subjects of study among Japanese students in India and Indian students in Japan?

Ambassador Prasad: Japanese students are visiting India to study language, contemporary Indian development, politics and economics. Many of our students are coming to Japan for scientific studies, especially in engineering. I discovered after the earthquake and tsunami that there were more than 65 Indian scholars in Tohoku University and we had to work very hard to locate and evacuate them from the affected areas. I have just come back from Sapporo where I found there were about 30 Indian students in Sapporo University, which is encouraging.

In general, the number of Japanese students going overseas has been declining, perhaps for economic reasons, due to the recession, as well as the pressures of finding a job. I do understand the pressures they are under, but I hope that more Japanese students will travel outside the country, including to India.

International exposure is going to become more and more important and beneficial for students. A greater understanding of other cultures and of the global environment may give them the courage to take risks.



Companies are going to need people with this kind of international exposure. If you look at the number of students in US campuses, the numbers of Korean, Chinese and Indian students are huge but there are far fewer Japanese students. Even though you have excellent institutions here, it is still important for students to have overseas experience. I often go to speak at Japanese universities and talk to students and I always emphasize the advantages of international experience in their future career.

Haraoka: What do you think would be the problems for Japanese students in an international context?

Ambassador Prasad: The big difference among students that I have noticed is that Japanese students are exceptionally polite. Generally when I go to campuses, I face quite aggressive questioning, which is fun – I enjoy it. But the Japanese students all sit very quiet.

The change that the University of Tokyo is initiating regarding the timing of the academic year will be a helpful development in enabling Japanese students to take some time to go overseas to gain experience at overseas universities, even if only for a semester.

Haraoka: The Japanese population is now aging very rapidly. One of the ways to maintain economic vitality may be to accept more young immigrants, especially from Asian countries. Do you think Japan could accept more immigrants from India?

Ambassador Prasad: Japan has historically been a homogeneous and close-knit society. I cannot really comment on immigration policy, but I would like to note that India is trying to address the question of labor mobility in the CEPA agreement. We are working towards much greater short-term movement in various professional categories, including IT professionals, healthcare professionals, Indian chefs and yoga teachers, among others. We feel it is important to allow a greater variety of professionals to come more freely to Japan. We hope that Japan will be more open to people of these professions.

Haraoka: In the area of health care, there has been an issue with the difficulty of the Japanese caregivers exam, which is only given in Japanese and is very difficult. It has become a symbol of the closed nature of Japan. Do you think that Indian caregivers would like to get a job here, and perhaps do the exam in English, if it became possible?

Ambassador Prasad: We have a huge number of Indian doctors and nurses working in various countries throughout the world, including in Europe, the US, the UK, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Health care and elderly care is becoming more and more important, and there should probably be more exchange in the area of health care.

Haraoka: Since Fukushima there has been a perception that nuclear power is not safe. What do you think about nuclear power as a future source of energy?

Ambassador Prasad: We are doing a lot to encourage the development of renewable forms of energy. But although renewable energy can be an important supplement, the technology is still not sufficiently developed to supply really large-scale commercial power. So in the context of climate change, nuclear energy becomes important.

We think that nuclear power has to play some role in our energy security. We want to move the share of dependence on nuclear power from the current 2% up to about 5%. There are plans to construct new nuclear power plants and we have signed a number of civil nuclear cooperation agreements with several different countries – the US, the UK, South Korea, France, Russia and Canada. We are currently discussing such an agreement with Japan, which I hope we can conclude soon.

But since Fukushima, the public attitude towards nuclear power has become more negative. We will have to work harder to convince our people that nuclear power can be used in a safe way. This should not be just a public relations exercise. We really need to ensure that we actually do implement the highest levels of safety. We will be having an intensive dialogue with Japan on the lessons of Fukushima and what extra safety features need to be added to nuclear power plants. Nevertheless, we do feel that in India we need to expand the role of nuclear power.

I would like at this point to mention something about our development cooperation. We really appreciate that Japan has been the foremost partner, and a most generous development cooperation partner with India for many years. Many projects have been concluded, including the Delhi metro, which have touched the lives of millions of people.

There is a very high regard for Japanese technology in India. We are now planning two major projects, which are not purely ODA. They are the freight corridor between Delhi and Mumbai and along that, the Delhi-Mumbai industrial corridor. The industrial corridor will basically be a series of new townships and industrial areas to feed the freight corridor. That will create a lot of opportunities for cooperation between Japanese and Indian companies, and both governments are strongly committed to moving these projects forward. There is a very exciting and full agenda ahead for India-Japan relations.

Haraoka: Do you think that improved infrastructure will help India to achieve high economic growth?

Ambassador Prasad: It is true that we need to improve infrastructure in India and this is happening in some areas, for example with the new airports in Delhi, Bangalore and Hyderabad. Indian ports have been improved, and the highway network has improved, but in several other areas we need to do more. These two projects, the freight corridor and the Delhi-Mumbai industrial corridor, will go a long way towards bridging the infrastructure gap in India and will therefore also bring more investment from Japan as well as from other countries.

Haraoka: This is very good for the Japanese economy as well.

Ambassador Prasad: Yes indeed. India has a young demographic profile and there is a huge and growing market for automobiles, consumer durables, telecommunications and a whole range of other



industries. We would like to see more cooperation and we would like Japanese companies to benefit from this market.

Haraoka: Another potential area for cooperation might be environmental technology.

Ambassador Prasad: Yes, especially clean energy, solar panels, voltaic panels and in the area of energy efficiency.

Haraoka: Do you feel that a deeper knowledge of history will lead to closer friendship between our two countries? What do you think students can learn by studying the history of India and India-Japan relations?

Ambassador Prasad: I agree that we do need to know a lot more about each other's society and history. The very fact of why 2012 is the 60th anniversary of India-Japan relations tells us a lot about the nature of our relationship. The Indian prime minister decided not to attend the San Francisco Conference. India waited until 1952 when Japan had regained full sovereignty and then we signed a treaty as equal partners – that is why we are celebrating this 60th anniversary. At that time, historically the most difficult period for Japan, there was much respect in India for Japan and the Japanese people. It is also important to remember Justice Radhabinod Pal's famous dissenting judgement, with regard to the Tokyo Trials.

There has already been a great flow of ideas and knowledge in many areas and a long exchange in the areas of art and literature between the two countries. We are doing well at the government-to-government level and our companies have been working well with each other but we need to put more energy into people-to-people exchange.

The 60th anniversary presents us with an important opportunity to showcase Indian culture in Japan and Japanese culture in India. It is my hope that the events which we have planned will go a long way to raising the awareness of India, and of our relationship with Japan, among Japanese people.

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Naoyuki Haraoka is editor-in-chief, Japan SPOTLIGHT, and executive managing director, Japan Economic Foundation.

Helen Fujimoto, an Australian resident in Japan for 30 years, is now a Speaking Circles facilitator after retiring from the Japan College of Social Work.