

Interview with His Excellency Sibi George, Ambassador of India to Japan

India-Japan: a 1,000-Year Relationship that Is Skyrocketing

By Japan SPOTLIGHT with Mohan Gopal

On a cold but sunny weekday morning in mid-January, *Japan SPOTLIGHT* visited the Embassy of India in Tokyo. It faces Chidorigafuchi moat in the Kudan area, a popular area in spring when the cherry-blossoms are in full bloom. We are here to meet with Ambassador Sibi George and are ushered into his spacious office. The ambassador is an amiable soft-spoken gentleman, who greets us warmly and asks us to be seated. Delicious Indian tea is served, and the interview begins.

(Interviewed on Jan. 23, 2024)

JS: Could you please briefly tell us about your diplomatic career and, in particular, what experience you would consider as most important for your career?

Ambassador: In India, a diplomatic career begins when one is selected for the Indian Foreign Service through an All-India Civil Services examination. I took this examination in 1993 and have been a diplomat ever since. In the initial years after joining the Indian Foreign Service, one is required to specialize in a region and language. I specialized in Arabic, basically the Arab world, and started my overseas career at the American University in Cairo followed by a stint at our Embassy there. My subsequent posting was to Doha, Qatar. The Gulf region is very important for India as it is our extended neighborhood. Qatar is an important economic and energy partner for India. After three-and-a-half years there, I moved to New Delhi, where I was placed in charge of the Japan Office in our ministry. Thus, my connection to Japan began 20 years ago. I was very happy with that and for almost four years I was able to engage in our relationship with Japan. That was the time – in 2000 – that Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori visited India, followed by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's visit to Japan in 2001. Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited India in 2004. It was a period which was a turning point in the relationship between India and Japan, and this has continued to progress since then.

After successive postings at our Embassies in Islamabad, Washington D.C., and as deputy chief of mission at Teheran and Riyadh, I was back at our headquarters in New Delhi. My first ambassadorship was to Switzerland, Liechtenstein and the Holy See.



Sibi George

Following this, I was back in the Gulf as ambassador to Kuwait. In November 2022, I came as ambassador to Japan. I am also concurrently accredited as ambassador to the Republic of the Marshall Islands.

JS: Thank you. Indeed, a very distinguished career. Generally speaking, your expertise seems to be in the Middle East and the Arab world. As a layman, I feel that Japan and the Middle East seem completely different.

Ambassador: From India's point of view, each region is very important. Japan is very important. East Asia is very important. Why? If you look at the map, India's most important

trading partners are to her east – Southeast Asia, South Korea, Japan, Australia, the United States. Japan has been a long-time, dynamic partner and this continues. The Indo-Pacific region – a confluence of two oceans – is important for India and espousing this, our Prime Minister Narendra Modi has initiated a project named SAGAR (Security and Growth for all in the Region). Japan is a maritime country, and India is also a maritime country. We have many islands – the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago, Lakshadweep and others – in addition to a long coastline. India is as important a maritime power as Japan is. In a nutshell, we cannot say that any one region is more important than the other.

Equally crucial as this region is to us is our extended neighborhood to our west. In addition to energy cooperation, there are 9 million Indians working in the Gulf region. This huge body of Indian diaspora working there is in itself a strategic partnership involving multiple countries in the Gulf.

JS: You have already answered my second question, as to how your thoughts have been about Japan as one of India's partners, so I will go on to my next question. I am curious about your impression of Japan. You worked in the Japan division of your ministry about 20 years ago and now you see Japan as the ambassador of India. Do you see any change in your impression?

Ambassador: For several centuries Japan and India have had a connection, Japan and India had a connection, a traditional, civilizational cultural connection. Daikokuten, Benzaiten, Buddhism, leaders like Swami Vivekananda, Rashbehari Bose, Subhash Chandra Bose, Justice Radhabinod Pal – lots of connections existed at people-to-people level. We maintained that relationship between the two countries. When it comes to 20 years ago at the start of my engagement with Japan, we had a good relationship, but it was more of government-to-government. ODA was a very important element of this. Japan had projects in India; for example, the Delhi Metro project happened during that period. Gradually that relationship transformed into a business-to-business relationship. Later it evolved into a strategic relationship followed by a global partnership. In 2014, that partnership became a special strategic and global partnership which was signed between Prime Minister Modi and then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. This year is the 10th anniversary of that partnership. It marks a complete transformation in our relationship. As ambassador here, I have travelled to more than 40 prefectures. Wherever I have gone, I have met the governor, local assembly members, the local media, academia, and of course the local Indian diaspora if present. One thing I noticed wherever I visited, that this is a moment for the India-Japan relationship. The India-Japan story is a good one; a great one. An ambassador is a salesman and can sell a good story. I am very happy that we were able to connect with each of these places.

JS: What do you think are the most important issues in the agenda of bilateral relations between India and Japan, in general and also specifically?

Ambassador: First and foremost is our strategic partnership. The Indo-Pacific is one of the most important geopolitical constructs today – the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. In 2007, late Prime Minister Abe called it the confluence of two seas. Any developments in the Indian Ocean have a direct impact on Japan's prosperity. Similarly, any developments in this part of the world have a direct impact on India's prosperity. Therefore, it is imperative that Japan and India maintain their strategic connection and are able to work together for peace, stability and security in the Indo-Pacific. I am

very happy that we are working bilaterally, and working as the QUAD, and also working in multilateral organizations. So, the strategic partnership is the most important part in our relationship.

Second, equally important is our people-to-people connection. Indians like the Japanese and Japanese like Indians. How many Indians are there in Japan? 40,000. That is not enough. There is so much that we can address together, like the shortage of skilled manpower in Japan. I mentioned that 9 million Indians work in the Gulf. They are Indian citizens. They work there, contribute to economic progress, then return. That is a system we could look at in Japan. Indian students – how many are there in Japan? 1,500. I would like it to be 15,000. There are good universities in Japan and I think this awareness has to be spread in India.

Third, business. There are 1,500 big Japanese businesses in India. I would like it to be 15,000. We need to have small and medium enterprises looking at India. India is an opportunity; it is growing. It has transformed. It is digitally connected. There are more cranes operating in India than anywhere else in the world – there is so much construction happening. Our tax system has improved. India has reformed. Japan must not miss this bus. If India and Japan work together strategically and in business, it will be good for both countries, it will be good for the region and it will be good for the world.

JS: India has a growing young population, while Japan unfortunately has a declining one. Perhaps India and Japan could work together on this?

Ambassador: I fully agree with you. In fact, in the Embassy we have set up what we call "The India-Japan Skill Connect". It is a platform for Indians to know about opportunities available in Japan and for Japanese businesses to be informed about what types of skills they can source from India. India has some of the best universities in the world when it comes to science and technology. We are good at mathematics. India's Chandrayan mission to the moon was done with completely indigenous technology. All materials were made in India. If India can send a completely Indian-made satellite to the moon, surely Japan and India can collaborate in the field of science and technology. In fact, I am celebrating this year as the India-Japan Year of Science and Innovation.

JS: I will now move on to my questions relating to the global economic and political situation. What role do you think India could play amidst the current geopolitical crises?

Ambassador: India is the world's largest democracy. It is a country which has always stood for peace. What India brings to the table is



His Excellency Sibi George and Naoyuki Haraoka, editor-in-chief of Japan SPOTLIGHT at the Indian Embassy

solutions. Any problem, we can find a solution. We do not bring problems to the table. For example, take the case of the G20. India held the presidency for the last year. The world has seen how India addressed the concerns of the Global South. Despite the world being divided, we were able to bring together the G20 countries and have a joint declaration. That is a major achievement – a declaration covering 83 points providing an agenda of hope for the world for the coming years. It was a unanimous declaration that was adopted. In a world that is divided and in conflict, when it came to the G20, we were able to have a document of consensus. This is what India brings to the table – solutions.

JS: In the Indo-Pacific region, as you know, several free trade agreements are in progress – the CPTPP, RCEP and others. What do you think about the role of such multilateral forums, particularly for economic growth and development in the Indo-Pacific region?

Ambassador: When it comes to India, we are very clear in our mind. We will go by any trade agreement that is in our national interest. India is one-sixth of the global population; India must take care of this one-sixth of the global population. We have always believed in fair trade. In business, if one country follows the rule of law and another country doesn't, the agreement does not work. For free trade agreements – bilateral agreements, multilateral agreements – to work, the countries who are signatories must all play by the rules. One party violating the rules in order to enter another's market – it just does not work like that. India actually has a lot of free trade agreements – both bilateral and multilateral. The basic rule of thumb is that it must benefit the 1.4 billion people of India.

JS: Could you please give us your views on the WTO? The Japan Economic Foundation has been supporting the WTO for a long time but unfortunately the WTO's role is declining.

Ambassador: I agree with you. We stand for a strong WTO. India has always stood for the WTO carrying out its responsibilities. We always stand for multilateral organizations performing their roles: for example, the United Nations. We would like to see a reform of the UN as we believe it is stuck in the past – in the 1950s. It is very important that the UN plays its role so that it can help the world. Unfortunately, it is not able to do so as it is stuck in the past. Who represents the African nations in the permanent part of the security council? Nobody. It is not represented. Latin America is not there; the world's largest democracy is not there. So reforms are needed. The same is the case with the WTO. We stand for the reform of multilateral organizations so that they can better address the needs of everyone in the world.

JS: You have stressed the importance of the India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership and mentioned some key priorities. Could you kindly explain some details of those priorities?

Ambassador: Now, why is our relationship called “special”? It is called special for a reason. India and Japan have had no history of conflict. It has been only a history of friendship. That in itself makes it special. When it comes to strategic relationships, I mentioned how important the Indo-Pacific region is. It is very important to maintain peace, stability and security in the Indo-Pacific. Towards this, the two major democracies in the region – India and Japan – have to work together. This is very important. Four like-minded democracies have come together in the Quad for stability and prosperity in the region. In India's priorities, we have identified the Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative. It has several elements articulated by India, including maritime connectivity and security. Japan is an important partner in this initiative, particularly in maritime connectivity. This is one priority we have to work on.

The second priority is that it is very important to deepen business engagement. We have been stuck in just 1,500 Japanese companies in India for the last 15 years. Increase! As I said before, India has changed; it is an opportunity. Look at the strategy point of view and enable more businesses to come. It is happening now, but I would like to see a much faster pace.

Third, is our defense relationship. We have excellent defense engagement. We did three major joint exercises last year – Dharma Guardian, Veer Guardian and Malabar. There are regular visits by ships and by defense personnel. We have to work more on defense

technology cooperation.

Fourth is critical technology – semiconductors, quantum computing, AI. These are areas we must work in. We recently signed an MOU on semiconductors. We need to do more of this. It is happening, but again, the pace has to be much faster.

JS: How about cooperation between start-ups in the two countries? We need entrepreneurs in Japan to stimulate economic growth. We need start-ups especially in the IT area.

Ambassador: I see this as a very important area for collaboration. In fact, India has one of the best start-up ecosystems. We have more than 100,000 start-ups and at least 100 unicorns. I see a huge opportunity. We have been having a monthly “India-Japan Start-up Pitching” event here at the Embassy for the last two or three years. So, we are collaborating and can do even more.

JS: My next question is about cultural exchanges between the two countries. You mentioned that student exchanges should be encouraged more. I agree with you. What about some other areas, such as the film business?

Ambassador: I am very happy to mention that a big Indian movie is now being filmed in Hokkaido. Yes, films are a huge opportunity. You can see the popularity of some Indian movies in Japan – *RRR* was a big hit. Have you watched it? It even won an Oscar for the music. There is a connection between India and Japan through films. Also, let me mention food. Very important for both sides. Indian wine is famous in Japan, as also Indian whisky. India has become a good wine producing country now. Of course, Indian curry is already famous in Japan. So food is also a connection between India and Japan. I would like to mention that there is a huge cultural exchange happening between the two countries. We have a cultural center here in our Embassy, which organizes classes in music, dance, yoga and *tabla*. These are attended by hundreds of Japanese. Last year, I presented certificates to 400 students who learnt our cultural art forms. Similarly, we are making other connections – between the saree and kimono; *ikebana*, the Japanese flower display, and *rangoli*, the Indian color display in complex geometrical patterns made on the floor. These are strong connections which we must bring forward. Above all is the connection related to our two civilizations. I have already mentioned Daikokuten.

JS: Yoga is gaining popularity in Japan. Might that be another connection?

Ambassador: I am very happy to mention that over 8 million people practice yoga in Japan. But what is my target? Anyone who breathes is a potential *yogi*. There is much more potential.

JS: Also, vegetarian restaurants. One of the reasons many young Indians hesitate to come to Japan is that we do not have many vegetarian restaurants. I think we should have more.

Ambassador: (Laughs) Yes, yes, that’s right.

JS: The last question is on your views about the future of the India-Japan relationship. Do you see bright prospects?

Ambassador: India is now in what we call “*Amrit kaal*” (Note: In Indian philosophy, this is the best period for peace and prosperity). In 1947, we became independent. After 23 years, in 2047, we will be 100 years old. We have a vision – a vision to become a developed country. A vision to ensure that every Indian is living in a developed country. And we have a partner – Japan. Japan was the first Asian country to become a developed country. Japan was the first Asian country to become an industrialized country. There is a lot that India can learn from Japan. For Japan, India is an opportunity. As India becomes a developed country, Japan is a partner in its progress. We are now a \$3 trillion economy. Soon, we will become a \$5 trillion economy. In 20 or 25 years’ time, India will be a major world economy. And in that, Japan is a partner. We have to work together. My vision of the India-Japan future is one of two major democracies, two developed economies in the region working together for the peace, stability and prosperity of both countries, of the Indo-Pacific region and the world, and in a reformed United Nations where our two countries are on the Permanent Security Council.

JS: I think India’s GDP will exceed Japan’s soon. I hope our relationship is enriched and grows dramatically. I will conclude the interview here. Thank you very much.

Ambassador: Thank you very much.

JS

Interviewer: Naoyuki Haraoka is editor-in-chief of *Japan SPOTLIGHT* & executive managing director of the Japan Economic Foundation (JEF).

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