

# The Assam Tribune

## Beyond Trade and Technology: Why India and Japan Must Build Asia's Most Trusted Civilizational Partnership

C Raj Kumar | 18 June 2026



PM Modi with Japanese PM Sanae Takaichi on the side lines of the G20 Leaders' Summit in 2025. (Photo: X)

Beyond trade and technology, Japan's Prime Minister is expected to visit India, and a summit-level meeting with the Prime Minister of India is expected to take place in Guwahati, Assam. Understandably, the special strategic and global partnership between India and Japan will focus on trade and technology. It will also have contours for geopolitical alignment and issues relating to international security within the Indo-Pacific region.

There is no doubt that these aspects of Indo-Japan relations are critical, but they do not comprehensively capture the need for why India and Japan ought to build Asia's most trusted international partnership. There is a need to recognize that the India-Japan relationship is not only different but needs to be established on a different footing, beyond the obvious aspects of trade and strategic thinking. That is a deeper and more profound foundation, a relationship that is deeply embedded in history, values, civilization, culture, and heritage.

### **The Civilizational Foundations of India–Japan Relations**

The strength and contours of the India-Japan relationship need to transcend investments and infrastructure. It is founded on something more enduring, a civilizational partnership that has flourished for centuries with origins older than the modern state, contemporary diplomacy and the foreign relations establishment.

The philosophical foundations of Buddhism that built bridges between the two countries were a very important part of the relationship. From the sixth century, Buddhist ideas that originated in India travelled across Asia and ultimately reached Japan through China and Korea. While the Buddhist traditions transformed and integrated local traditions into their imagination in Japan, Japanese people continued to regard India as the sacred, original land of the Buddha.

Among the earliest recorded historical links, the two civilizations came into contact in 752 C.E. when the Indian monk Bodhisena participated in the consecration of the Great Buddha at Nara. This is one of Japan's most important religious ceremonies. Even 12 centuries later, this historical connection remains relevant. It is in this context that the development of India's Buddhist circuit is more than a tourist initiative. It represents the reimagination and renewal of one of Asia's oldest civilizational collaborations, heeding the legacy of respect and trust.

### **Justice Radhabinod Pal and the Foundations of Trust**

Indo-Japan relations deepened during the 20th century. One of the most overlooked historical incidents came after the Second World War. Japan's role in the Second World War was seen with a sense of guilt, and many countries around the world approached Japan largely through the lens of war-torn responsibility. India historically adopted a more reconciliatory approach.

A case in point was the judgment of India's renowned judge and jurist, Justice Radhabinod Pal, as a member of the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal. It is well known that his dissenting judgment, questioning the legal basis of the Tribunal's judgments including the argument of victor's justice, has had strong foundations in international law but even enabled the development of trust between India and Japan.

In 1952, India further manifested its goodwill by signing a separate peace treaty with Japan while declining to seek war reparations. These early goodwill gestures and trust-building decisions laid the foundation for the post-war bonhomie between India and Japan.

Trust is undoubtedly the most critical currency in international relations. There are only a few bilateral relations in Asia that compare with this as far as mutual trust and respect are concerned.

### **Why Civilizational Partnerships Matter Today**

The unprecedented degree of uncertainty in the 21st century requires enduring partnerships between countries and societies. The transformation of societies through artificial intelligence, the impact of economies through climate change and environmental degradation, the growing pressures on democracies to fulfil people's expectations, and the competition imposed by technological

developments create challenging situations around the world. This is coupled with social fragmentation, leading to even greater challenges.

In this precarious environment, partnerships that are foundationally created and evolved through economic interests may not fulfil the sustainability of relationships. India and Japan have a unique relationship that has its foundation on a shared commitment to tradition and modernity.

This has established an opportunity for India and Japan to provide global leadership in three critical areas.

### **1. Protecting and Defending Democratic Values in the Indo-Pacific**

India and Japan have historically grown as Asia's most vibrant democracies. These two countries together represent one-fifth of humanity living under democratic rule. While India is recognized as the world's largest democracy, Japan has ensured that stable democratic systems are the only way of achieving social and economic progress and has remained a beacon of hope in the Asia-Pacific region since the end of the Second World War.

This is particularly significant when many countries and their democratic institutions have suffered from political polarization, information blackouts, eroding public trust, and even political and social disempowerment. India and Japan have consistently reinforced that democracy has civilizational roots and that democratic engagement with people is a universal idea that is capable of evolving in Asian societies.

From a strategic standpoint, the Quad partnership also provides for a shared commitment to a rules based Indo-Pacific collaboration that is free, open, and respectful of national sovereignty and international law. India and Japan have also transcended security cooperation and have an opportunity to work towards strengthening democratic values, transparency, accountability in institutional governance, institutional resilience, protecting against social vulnerabilities, and helping the development of citizen participation in democracy across the region.

### **2. Human-Centered Technology and AI Governance**

The growth and dominance of AI in the world are witnessing a race with humanity. However, rarely are questions asked as to how AI should serve humanity as opposed to asking the question of who should develop AI first?

India's commitment to democratize access to technology through digital public infrastructure has provided one of the world's largest governance platforms.

Japan brings high-tech and differential strengths to this collaboration. It has a well-established tradition of reliable technology, globally benchmarked standards of safety, engineering excellence based on precision and integrity, and a deep and pervasive commitment to ethical innovation.

India's vast and diverse population and Japan's emphasis on reliability can help in the establishment of a global model of human-centred AI governance, a model that brings the welfare of human beings to the centre and the future of technology with dignity, inclusion, equity and trust.

### **3. Sustainability as a Civilizational Responsibility**

The issue of climate change is not an environmental challenge. It has deep civilizational implications, and the future of humanity is at stake.

For many decades, Japan has been among the world's most energy-efficient industrial economies. Notwithstanding the challenge of available natural resources, Japan has built a culture of conservation, sustainability, efficiency, and shared responsibility towards the use of resources.

India, on the other hand, has become one of the world's fastest-growing renewable energy markets. This has resulted in India's commitment towards achieving 500 GW of non-fossil fuel electricity capacity. It is here that there is an amazing opportunity and alignment of Japanese efficiency and Indian scale. This will build one of the most influential partnerships based on sustainability and mutual benefit in Asia.

### **A Partnership for the Asian Century**

The development of India-Japan relations will indeed focus on trade agreements, infrastructure projects, artificial intelligence, robotics, technology-based partnerships, and geopolitical strategy collaboration. However, for this relationship to achieve its fullest potential, we need to rely on something more, deeper, and meaningful.

The future of India-Japan relations should be guided by a simple but compelling insight: strategic partnerships are strong when they rest on civilizational foundations. The fact remains that in this increasingly changing world, trade agreements may change, technologies may evolve, and geopolitical alignments may also shift, but values endure.

As these two great democratic civilizations of Asia look toward the future, the Guwahati summit between the Prime Ministers of Japan and India provides for the development of a partnership that should not only focus on national interests. It should move towards recognizing that economic development, technological changes, democratic governance, cultural cohesion, and commitment to human values can co-exist.

This should become the most important contribution that India and Japan can make for the future of 21st century development.

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