

# **From Hiroshima to Human Capital: Why Universities Should Define the Future of India-Japan Relations**

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The story of Japan's post-Second World War transformation is a remarkable chapter in modern history that warrants careful study. Most often, this story is narrated through the lens of Japan's extraordinary growth and development driven by industrial policy, manufacturing excellence, technological advancement, infrastructure development, and a conscious commitment to export-led growth. All these factors contributed significantly to Japan's development. However, they tell only part of the story behind Japan's economic miracle and developmental transformation.

In 1945, Japan emerged from the Second World War devastated in every sense of the word. The cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were ravaged by atomic bomb attacks. Japan's industrial infrastructure lay in ruins, its economy was shattered, and national confidence had fallen to one of the lowest points in its modern history.

Yet, within a few decades, Japan became one of the most remarkable examples of recovery and transformation in human history. By the 1960s and 1970s, Japan had emerged as a global industrial and innovation powerhouse. By the 1980s, Japanese corporations had become world leaders in automobiles, engineering, robotics, electronics, and advanced manufacturing.

The story of Japan's transformation was not solely about capital and technology. It was also about a deliberate national commitment to education, research, innovation, and human resource development centred on people, ideas, and institutions. Japanese universities became vehicles of national imagination and intellectual recovery. They produced engineers who revitalised industries, scientists who advanced technology, leaders who fostered innovation and entrepreneurship, and managers who helped build globally competitive corporations. They also nurtured researchers who contributed to the development of a knowledge economy that strengthened economic competitiveness.

The Japanese state understood that national strength could not be built solely through infrastructure or industrial policy. It had to be founded on investment in human capital. That insight became central to Japan's renaissance and carries important lessons for contemporary India-Japan relations.

Over the past two decades, India-Japan relations have evolved into one of Asia's most promising and enduring strategic partnerships. Cooperation between the two countries spans multiple sectors, including infrastructure, defence, maritime security, economic development, and technology transfer. Investments by Japanese companies and government agencies have transformed sectors ranging from automobiles to logistics and supply chain management.

The Delhi Metro, the Mumbai-Ahmedabad High-Speed Rail Project, and several industrial corridors stand as examples of this growing partnership and its contribution to India's development. Despite these achievements, academic and knowledge partnerships between India and Japan remain significantly underdeveloped.

The number of Indian students studying in Japan remains small relative to India's population and educational aspirations, while the number of Japanese students studying in India continues to be modest. Joint research programmes remain far below their potential. Very few Indian universities have dedicated centres for Japanese studies, and India-focused academic engagement in Japan remains insufficient to reflect the vast potential of the relationship.

This imbalance presents a significant challenge. Partnerships focused primarily on geopolitical alignment or government-to-government engagement can be vulnerable to shifting priorities. In contrast, people-to-people and university-level partnerships are among the strongest and most enduring forms of international engagement because they bring together generations of individuals who understand one another. Universities have a vital role to play in fostering that understanding.

## **Why Universities Matter More Than Ever**

Universities are not merely educational institutions; they are centres for knowledge creation, innovation, cultural understanding, policy engagement, and societal transformation.

During the twentieth century, the United States expanded its global influence in part through the strength of its universities. More recently, China has invested heavily in higher education to support economic and human development, leading to the emergence of globally recognised universities.

Japan's post-war transformation was similarly supported by world-class universities and cutting-edge research. Today, Japan possesses one of the strongest higher education systems in Asia. Institutions such as the University of Tokyo, Kyoto University, Osaka University, Waseda University, and the Institute of Science Tokyo consistently rank among the world's leading universities. The presence of numerous globally recognised institutions reflects sustained public investment in research, innovation, and human capital, complemented by significant contributions from the private sector.

Japan's inspiring journey from the devastation of Hiroshima to becoming a global economic powerhouse demonstrates what nations can achieve when they prioritise human capital alongside infrastructure development. Agreements, infrastructure projects, and investment flows are important components of India-Japan relations, but they are ultimately instruments of collaboration. The true foundation lies in the human capital that drives them.

In today's world, technology can be imported, but innovation must be cultivated through universities and human expertise. To foster a culture of cross-border and collaborative research, education should become a central pillar of the India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership. If this partnership is truly "special", it must extend beyond trade, investment, and strategic cooperation to create lasting transformation. Education should therefore serve as the foundation that strengthens all other pillars of bilateral engagement.

India has developed globally respected institutions that have contributed significantly to science, technology, management, and public policy, enhancing its reputation as a knowledge economy. As India aspires to become a developed nation by 2047, it is essential to recognise the role universities have played in shaping the country's economy, polity, and society.

The future of India-Japan relations should be built upon a recognition of the strengths of higher education institutions and a commitment to expanding educational partnerships. The objective should not simply be to create more academic collaborations but to establish a lasting India-Japan knowledge corridor.

## **Building the Knowledge Architecture of the Future**

The next phase of India-Japan relations should be guided by a simple yet powerful vision. Infrastructure projects can connect cities, but universities can connect societies. Investment generates growth, but knowledge creates transformation. Governments can sign

agreements, but students build relationships. Political leaders can strengthen ties, but researchers and educators sustain those ties across generations.

The history of post-war Japan has demonstrated to the world the transformative power of investing in universities, research institutions, and human capital. Such investments can produce enduring and far-reaching results. Hiroshima's transformation from a city devastated by the atomic bomb in 1945 to a global symbol of resilience, peace, education, and human development is particularly inspiring.

Japan's reconstruction was achieved not merely through economic policies but through a sustained commitment to developing knowledge, capacity, and human capabilities. This experience offers valuable lessons for India. Today, India and Japan have a unique opportunity to build a partnership inspired by those lessons—one that places education, research, and human capital at the heart of bilateral cooperation.