

Remarks by H.E. Ambassador Sibi George at the SME Connect Event
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Mr Onkar S. Kanwar, Chairman, IJBCC and Chairman, Apollo Tyres Ltd.

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Mr. Kazuya Nakajo, Executive Vice President, JETRO

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good afternoon!

I welcome each one of you, our friends from India and Japan today. I acknowledge the presence of senior officials from Government of Japan, senior officials from JETRO and other important stakeholders in India - Japan relationship.

2. Today's Conference India - Japan SME Connect is an important event. Most of you present here are familiar with the transformation in India - Japan relations in recent years, 'Special Strategic and Global Partnership'. This year we are celebrating 10th anniversary of this partnership entered into by PM Shri Narendra Modi and Late PM Abe in 2014. This special partnership continued to flourish under the leadership of former Prime Minister His Excellency Suga and under current Prime Minister His Excellency KISHIDA Fumio.

3. As an old Japan hand who worked closely on India - Japan relations in the past, I can tell you this. In my over twenty-five years in engagement with Japan, I have seen India Japan relationship evolve from what significantly was a G to G relationship with ODA at the heart of it, into a very much B to B relationship. The ODA part is still very important, G to G is indispensable, but the landscape of our engagement has become so very much broader signifying the maturing of the relationship, with economic and strategic partnership very much at the heart of this relationship. This is evident from the dialogue architecture we have put in place over the years, bilateral, trilateral, quadrilateral, plurilateral and multilateral, the many MoUs and Agreements

that we have signed and the Joint Statements and Vision documents that we have issued over the years.

4. Today, our relationship covers a wide range of areas, trade & investment, industrial development, infrastructure, rail, metros, digital, energy, human resources, critical and emerging technology, climate change, health security, space, and defense and security. This has been made possible by the sustained focus and guidance provided by the leadership at the highest level in both the countries. Japan is a reliable partner in India's economic transformation. Today, India Japan relationship is a unique partnership involving many stakeholders; business establishments, industry and commercial chambers, investment boards, factories, universities, science and technology establishments, academicians, scholars, students, innovation and research organizations, think tanks and the growing vibrant people to people contacts.

Dear Friends,

5. 2023 has been a special year in India Japan relationship, filled with multiple high-level engagements. Prime Minister HE Mr. Kishida visited India in March 2023, whereas Prime Minister Mr. Modi visited Japan in May 2023, to attend the G7 Summit in Hiroshima. In September 2023, Prime Minister HE Mr. Kishida visited New Delhi for the G20 Summit and also held a summit meeting with PM Mr. Modi. There have been hundreds of delegations including multiple business delegations from India to Japan and Japan to India. Former Prime Minister HE Mr. Yoshihide Suga visited India in July 2023 leading a major Parliamentarians and Business delegation and also met Prime Minister Mr. Modi. All these engagements were crucial in reaffirming the Special Strategic and Global Partnership between Japan and India Last week we had the visit of Hon'ble External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar for the Strategic Dialogue which has set the road map for 2024 to realize the full potential in our bilateral relations.

6. Last year, there have also been several delegations from Japan who visited India to attend the G 20 meetings, over two hundred of such meetings held all across India. They all returned with one message. India has transformed. India has changed. What they saw is a New India. Its

infrastructure has changed, its vision has changed, its business environment has changed. Its digital transformation is significant. Today it is world's fastest growing economy. Some of our friends, including Japanese friends used to say, India needs to become more business friendly. Dear Friends, let me tell you this, loud and clear. India has changed. It is a New India. The world is coming to India, investing in India.

Dear Friends,

7. I am happy to share that in the last one year, I have been able to travel to over forty prefectures of Japan and interact with Governors, Assembly Speakers, Business Chambers, Universities, Media Houses and a large number of people from all sections of society. With JETRO we have organized several business seminars focusing on SME sectors. What I have witnessed during these interactions is a real momentum, an overwhelming enthusiasm, a spirit of partnership towards building a relationship with India. Wherever I went, I came across a large number of stakeholders, companies, big, medium and small eager to look at India. There is more coverage of India in Japanese media both national and local, Indeed, there is a real momentum. What we should be able to do is to convert this momentum to concrete outcome.

8. Today, in Japan one could see an overwhelming appreciation for India's economic growth story. India's emergence as the fifth largest economy overtaking the United Kingdom last year received a lot of local attention. Its growth rate of over 7% and its march to become the fourth largest economy is watched with keen interest. Similarly, India's emergence as the largest populated country overtaking China has been noted. The fact that over 60 percent of its population is less than 30 years of age and the contributions this talent pool can make for India's growth is well appreciated. India's steady progress it makes in infrastructure, digital transformation, skill development, all have been welcomed and appreciated. I was so happy to see scientists and businessmen talk about India's scientific achievements. Its digital transformation, its space program.

9. As we prepared for an eventful 2024, let me make a few observations:

- There are around 1500 Japanese companies in India today. These are 1500 success stories. These success stories need to reach every corner of Japan. These success stories should inspire 15000 Japanese companies to move to India. Our Embassy has set an ambitious target to reach out to 15000 companies in various prefectures of Japan to tell them the Japanese success story in India. We have recently launched a SMEs facilitation center at the Embassy.
- I am told that a survey by JBIC has found India as the most favored destination in the medium term and long term engagement for Japanese companies. We should be able to take this message to every corner of Japan. We need to generate awareness about the Japan Industrial Townships in India. Here again we are engaged in an ambitious action plan working with JETRO to reach out to every prefecture in Japan in 2024, including to reach out to small and medium scale enterprises.
- We have an impressive framework with several MoUs and platforms in place, but it is time to avail the facilities offered under this framework to reduce trade barriers and promote greater market access. Our bilateral trade is stuck at US \$ 20 billion, too less a target for the 3rd and 5th largest economy to achieve. We are making progress in our target of 5 trillion-yen investment that our leadership has agreed upon.
- India's young talent pool, its skilled workers are an asset for Japan's economic growth. We need to generate awareness in India for the demand in Japan and be able to connect the dots. We also need to have student exchanges, I would like to have not 1500 students in Japan, 150,000 students in Japan. We are launching an India-Japan EduConnect and India - Japan Skill Connect platforms.

10. Let me conclude by reiterating that with stable macroeconomic fundamentals, and a visionary global outlook, India is focused on creating a sustainable, digitally driven, innovation centric economy. India is a land of billion opportunities today. Japan should not miss this opportunity. Let 2024 be a year for quantum leap in our engagement at all levels, Connecting Himalayas with Mount Fuji.

Once again thank you all.
