



## The Architecture of Synergy: Why Japan and India Need a Cultural Renaissance

*\* This article is written by Kohki Sakata and Shivaji Das of IGPI Singapore and features insights from Partha Ghosh, former Senior Partner at McKinsey & Co. and founder of Strategy/Policy advisory firm Partha S. Ghosh & Associates and the Partha Ghosh School of Leadership at IIT, Kharagpur.*

### The Thirty-Year Vacuum: A History of Hesitation in Japan–India Economic Engagement

The history of Japan–India economic engagement is a story of cautious steps (often with certain degree of doubts) taken at moments that demanded bold leaps. In 1996, during the early phase of India’s economic liberalization, a pivotal meeting was held in Tokyo bringing together bankers and manufacturing companies to assess the country’s potential. At that crossroads, the prevailing consensus among Japanese leadership was that it was simply “too early.”

While Japan waited for the perfect moment, South Korean conglomerates like Samsung and Hyundai, alongside Western multinationals, moved decisively. They didn’t wait for certainty; they built it. Today, as global supply chains pivot toward a “China Plus One” strategy, the Japan–India relationship has finally shifted from a peripheral interest to a strategic priority. Yet, much of the current engagement remains transactional – a series of trades rather than a shared destiny.

To succeed in the coming decade, both countries must move beyond a mere “entry and investment” approach and embrace what strategist Partha Ghosh describes as a “cultural injection”: a deep transformation in how these two civilizations should consider collaborating, one that is both strategic and truly transformational.

### The Indian Paradox: Scale Without Industrial Depth

India presents a fascinating paradox: immense economic scale paired with a lack of industrial depth. While India has built world-class capabilities in services—most notably in IT (though it has yet to create globally dominant B2C digital platforms comparable to TikTok or ByteDance) — it has struggled to develop globally dominant, category-defining consumer brands or manufacturing ecosystems at the same scale.

This reflects a historical orientation toward trade and services, where agility, deal-making, and quick returns are the primary objectives. However, this “trader’s agility” has sometimes come at the expense of long-cycle industrial investment and deep-tech innovation.

The IT sector is a perfect lens for this duality. India is a global powerhouse in service delivery, yet much of this success remains rooted in B2B models and labor arbitrage. As artificial intelligence begins to rewrite the rules of software, the need to transition toward true technological ownership and product development has never been more urgent.

Indian industry, across both manufacturing and services, will require not just strategic shifts, but a deeper cultural reorientation.

## The Missing Link: Shop-Floor Intimacy and Industrial Culture

The "secret sauce" of Japan's industrial success has never been just the machines; it has been the depth of the connection between management and the shop floor. Partha Ghosh recalls observing Akio Morita and leaders like Kazuma Tateishi sharing meals with factory workers—a simple act that embodied a management philosophy of proximity, humility, and mutual respect.

This "shop-floor intimacy" is the engine of continuous improvement. Ghosh recounts visiting a Nippon Steel blast furnace that was built in 1935, yet remained among the most efficient in the world half a century later. Its performance wasn't a miracle of modern hardware; it was the result of a culture where operators felt a sense of ownership, continuously refining processes through hands-on engagement.

In many emerging industrial contexts, such as in India, technology is often imported as a "black box" but never fully internalized. Sustainable competitiveness requires more than just acquiring machine; it demands deep process ownership—developing technology through direct human engagement, iteration, and pride.

## The Japanese Constraint: Vertical Strength, Horizontal Limits

If India's challenge is depth, Japan's is breadth. Japanese firms are masters of the "Vertical Village"—excelling at deep integration within their own organizational boundaries. However, they are often less inclined toward the horizontal collaboration required in a fragmented global market.

This verticality can become a cage, limiting adaptability in a market as complex and ambiguous as India. Unlike German firms, which often collaborate through industry-wide platforms, or Turkish leaders, who maintain tight networks across different organizations, Japanese firms have tended to operate in self-contained ecosystems.

To thrive in India, Japanese companies will need to complement their legendary precision with a greater openness to external collaboration and a higher tolerance for ambiguity. Fuzzy logic must coexist, if not converge, with cartesian precision.

## The "Third Way": Immersion Before Integration

How do we bridge these two distinct worlds? Ghosh proposes a counterintuitive starting point: begin in Japan.

Attempting to fuse two vastly different business cultures within the high-pressure, complex environment of the Indian market risks diluting the standards of both. Instead, bringing Indian executives to Japan to experience a "celebration of work"; particularly Ghosh emphasizes a concept that resonates deeply with the Indian ideal of Karma Yoga—can establish a shared foundation.

This echoes the call of Swami Vivekananda in 1893, who urged Indians to learn from Japanese discipline and work ethic. By internalizing these principles in a structured, immersive environment, leaders can develop the "software of success." Only then can that software be successfully adapted and scaled within the unique landscape of India.

## Conclusion: From Change Management to Architect Thinking

The future of the Japan-India relationship will not be shaped by incremental "change management." It demands a bold act of systemic design. This is where **Architect Thinking** becomes indispensable.

Leaders in both nations must first align on a shared conviction: neither country can meet the demands of the future through marginal adjustments. What is required is a deliberate, strategic synergy—one that catalyzes a deep cultural shift, not just policy alignment.

We are entering an era where leadership itself must be redefined. The task is no longer to manage inherited systems, but to architect entirely new ones.

Japan brings to this equation a profound legacy of industrial philosophy, precision engineering, and disciplined execution. India contributes a powerful counterbalance—adaptive agility, a constructive appetite for risk, and a globally networked, entrepreneurial talent base.

If these strengths are integrated—not as transactional cooperation, but as a genuine fusion of cultures, capabilities, and operating philosophies—the outcome is far greater than bilateral success. It becomes a new paradigm of collaborative prosperity.

This partnership, if designed with intent and depth, can transcend the limitations of the current global order. It can define a new template for the 21st century—one where resilience meets dynamism, discipline meets imagination, and two ancient civilizations co-create the future rather than merely respond to it.

### **About the Authors**

#### **Sakata Kohki, CEO of IGPI Singapore**

After joining Cap Gemini and Coca Cola, Kohki joined Revamp Corporation where he managed projects on global expansion and turnaround in various sectors including F&B, healthcare, retail, IT, etc. After joining IGPI, he has managed projects mainly on global expansion and cross border M&A in various sectors such as logistics, IT, telecom, retail, etc. In addition to his broad experience in implementing solutions that has been developed in Western countries, he has developed multiple methods to turnaround Asian companies with focus on setting clear vision and employee empowerment. Kohki has proven the practicality of these methods by turning around Asian companies not only as an advisor but also as senior management.

He graduated from Waseda University Department of Political Science and Economics and IE Business School.

#### **Shivaji Das, Managing Director of IGPI Singapore**

Shivaji has over 20 years of strategy consulting experience, specializing in New Business Models, Innovation Roadmaps, and Sustainability Journeys. He has worked with private and public sector clients across 25 countries in sectors like Technology, Semiconductors, Chemicals, Healthcare, Renewable Energy, and Construction. Previously, Shivaji was a Partner and Managing Director-APAC at Frost & Sullivan. His paper on Artificial Intelligence was presented at CAINE-2000 in Hawaii, USA. He is the author of seven acclaimed travel, art and business books including *The Visible Invisibles* and *Rebels, Traitors, Peacemakers* (both Penguin Random House), as well as *The Great Lockdown: lessons learned during the pandemic from organizations around the world* (Wiley, USA).

He is an alumnus of IIT Delhi and IIM Calcutta.

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137 Telok Ayer Street #05-01 Singapore 068602

TEL: +65 6226 1524

URL: <http://www.igpi.com.sg>

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