

PROFESSOR AKIO TANABE

'Japan can learn a lot from India'

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Professor Akio Tanabe of Japan's Kyoto University and convener of Contemporary India Area Studies (INDAS), who was in the Capital recently, talks about Indo-Japan relations, how the two countries can contribute to the world and exchange opportunities. Excerpts from an interview.

Tell us about INDAS.

We realise that it is necessary to conduct comprehensive area studies on contemporary India and South Asia in order to gain a better understanding of the dynamics of the 21st century. In 2010, the INDAS (Contemporary India Area Studies) programme was launched at the initiative of the National

Institutes for Humanities, which is under the Japanese government. It aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of the present dynamism of India from a holistic and long-term perspective. This research project is conducted, in collaboration with the National Institutes for the Humanities (NIHU), by the INDAS Network which consists of six research centres at Kyoto University, The University of Tokyo, Hiroshima University, National Museum of Ethnology, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and Ryukoku University.

How is Japan seen as a study destination for Indians?

The Japanese academia was not good at initiating links with the outside world. Japan and India had links with Europe and the US but less within Asia. Japan has a network of six centres which are keen to establish links with Indian academia. We want to see more face-to-face exchanges rather than just exchanges on paper. We want to globalise our academic links and invite more Indian scholars and researchers to Japan. We hope to get governmental, civil and personal support for this.

In August this year, there has been an agreement of intent to establish cooperation between the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), Indian Council of Historical

Research (ICHR) and Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS). We want to substantiate this agreement in a way so that there will be actual exchanges.

What about Indian students in Japan...?

There are many students from China, Nepal and Bangladesh from Asia, but few from India. One reason is the language barrier and lack of civil support. Till now, the medium of instruction in Japan was Japanese. We now want to adopt English as a second language and be bilingual so that we can get more students from India and other countries. The standard of learning has improved both in India and Japan. When we think of sending Japanese students abroad, we only think of Europe and the US. We need to change our cultural conscience and look at other destinations too.

What do you expect from the new Indian government?

There are many opinions about the new government. A lot of people in Japan are happy that Prime Minister Narendra Modi chose Japan as his first destination outside south Asia. He visited Kyoto first before entering Tokyo. Kyoto is a very important cultural centre... we can call it the cultural capital of Japan and I am glad that he is planning the smart heritage city on the Kyoto model.

■ Professor Akio Tanabe

