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Role of the Monarchy in Expanding Japan's Diplomatic Reach: Tracing Emperor Akihito's visits to India in 1960 and 2013

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Being the oldest continuing hereditary monarchy in the world, Japan's Chrysanthemum Throne is a metonymic concept that represents the monarch and the legal authority for the existence of the Japanese government. Being a constitutional monarchy in which the monarch "reigns but does not govern", the constitution of Japan regards the emperor as "the symbol of the State and of the unity of the people" who "shall not have powers related to government." The metonymic meanings of the Chrysanthemum Throne encompass the modern monarchy and the chronological list of historical monarchs of Japan. Unlike its British counterpart, the concept of Japan's monarchy evolved relatively differently before 1947 when there was, for example, no perceived separation of the property of the nation-state from the person and personal holdings of the emperor. According to the *Kojiki* (published in 712) and the *Nihon shoki* (720), Emperor Jimmu became the first Japanese monarch with his enthronement in 660 BCE, and founded the Empire of Japan.

State-building as an Essential Component of Political Modernization:

Importance and Role of Japan's Imperial Institution

A primary reason for the dynasty of the Sun Goddess to retain its position since time immemorial is that the emperor, as a rule, has not insisted on making political decisions. He has been a constitutional monarch, by and large, wherein others made the decisions and took the consequences.¹ Throughout history, the emperor has thus been a legitimizer of power in Japan rather than its exerciser. In a 1969 paper, Theodore McNelly argued that in Japan "... the Imperial Institution turned out, historically, to be more permanently institutionalized

¹ This argument by Herschel Webb was cited in *The Japanese Imperial Institution in the Tokugawa Period* (Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 27.

than the Shogunate... The institutionalization of structures involves the creation of a set of attitudes and practices which tend to perpetuate the structure even if its functions change.”² According to George Sansom, as early as the sixth century, “... the Soga clan made a valuable contribution to the system of imperial rule as a political institution, by diminishing the actual power of the emperor to govern while upholding and perpetuating his right to reign as a symbol of national unity.”³

The emperor in contemporary Japan is the principal symbol of the Japanese state. It took form of becoming this symbol with the constitution of 1946, with modern Japan being built around a modern constitutional monarchy. Although the imperial line goes back centuries, the emperor had become the center of the new modern polity in 1868. All of Japan’s modern institutions were built around the emperor: the constitution, the parliament, the bureaucracy, etc. In the Meiji constitution of 1889, all sovereignty rested in the hands of the emperor. While the Japanese monarchy has been around for a long time, but it really evolved in its own way. Japan has played an important role in the global conversation of what it essentially means to be a modern state and a modern constitutional monarchy. Clearly, the Japanese monarchy has its own style.⁴

The imperial institution of Japan has survived for nearly 2000 years while its social, economic, and political infrastructures were undergoing evolutionary and revolutionary changes. Japan’s

imperial throne has done far more than merely surviving modernization. It has played a positive role in political modernization and evolution – that is, in the establishment of stable and effective governments.⁵ According to Japan’s traditional order of succession, Emperor Naruhito is the 126th and present Japanese monarch to occupy the Chrysanthemum Throne, acceding on May 1, 2019. This saw beginning of the *Reiwa era*, following the abdication of his father, Emperor Akihito. The latter is a member of the Imperial House of Japan, and was the 125th Emperor of Japan of the Yamamoto dynasty from 1989 until his abdication in April 2019. Emperor Akihito presided over the *Heisei era*. Born in 1933, Crown Prince and later Emperor, Akihito, succeeded his father Emperor Hirohito, posthumously known as Emperor Showa.

Imperial Visit of Crown Prince Akihito to India in 1960

Indo-Japanese diplomatic relations have entered their 70th year in 2022. Indeed, it has been a seven-decade long journey of significant milestones and shared visions for the future. The *India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership* remains firmly rooted in history. Common values are its mainspring for advancing shared strategic objectives and regional progress. When India declared its independence from British colonial rule and governance on August 15, 1947, Japan was among the first nations to recognize the former’s sovereignty. India, on its part, declined to attend the San Francisco Peace Conference in 1951, arguing

2 For more details see, Theodore McNelly, “Structure and Function: A Dialectical Approach,” a paper presented at the 1967 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, p. 10; for related references and reading also see, McNelly’s paper presented at the 1968 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C.

3 Cited in, *A History of Japan to 1334* (Stanford, 1958), p. 45; and see, Theodore McNelly, “The Role of Monarchy in the Political Modernization of Japan,” *Comparative Politics*, vol. 1, no. 3, April 1969, pp. 368-369.

4 For details see, Brandon Baker, “Japan’s modern monarchy: How it works,” *Asian Studies & History* (School of Arts & Sciences), University of Pennsylvania, May 22, 2019, available at <https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/japans-modern-monarchy-how-it-works>

5 McNelly, *Comparative Politics*, n. 3, p. 366.

against the limitations being placed on Japan's sovereignty, and further pointing out that the United States had failed to take due recognition of the wishes of the Japanese people. Instead, India chose to enter into a bilateral peace treaty with Japan in 1952, as part of which, New Delhi waived all reparation claims against Japan. Besides, New Delhi also became one of the first Asian nations to establish diplomatic ties with Tokyo on April 28, 1952. During the same decade, Japanese Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi became the first Japanese prime minister to visit independent India in 1957, and subsequently, Japan began providing Official Development Assistance loans to India in 1958 — the first Japanese yen loan aid extended by the Japanese government to nay nation.

It was in the above setting that the first visit of then Crown Prince Akihito, accompanied by then Crown Princess (and later Empress) Michiko was planned to India – with the objective of enhancing the mutually beneficial Indo-Japanese ties. In fact, India's then Vice President S. Radhakrishnan visited Japan in October 1956 and had cordial meetings with the Emperor Showa, Empress Kojun, and then Crown Prince Akihito. Notably, former Emperor Akihito was the first Japanese monarch-in-waiting to visit India in 1960 as its Crown Prince.

Incidentally, the couple travelled to India just a year after their wedding in April 1959.

Writing on Japan's monarchy, Kenneth J. Ruoff's monograph, *Japan's Imperial House in the Postwar Era*, traces the symbolic valence of the throne that has been measured by the extent to which it represents popular values. Ruoff argues that the monarchy of the masses was very much a product of social evolution, especially the dramatic changes of the late 1950s and early 1960s.⁶ Though the role played by Crown Prince Akihito and Crown Princess Michiko in helping define, as though they were “natural”, the fact remains that for the most part, social change was pushing the monarchy, rather than the monarchy driving social change.⁷ Akihito's engagement to Michiko and the middle-class image of the young imperial couple provided considerable reassurance to the Japanese that their society was egalitarian.⁸

The young duo toured India from November 27–December 6, 1960 on an official state visit and were welcomed by the first ring of independent India's leadership – then Indian President, Rajendra Prasad, Vice President, S. Radhakrishnan, and Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru in New Delhi. It needs to be remembered that those were critical years for Japan, given

6 For Kenneth J. Ruoff, *Japan's Imperial House in the Postwar Era, 1945–2019* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2020) p. 352; in this book, Ruoff argues that few institutions are as well suited as the monarchy to provide a window on Japan. For the first seven decades after the end of World War II, this national symbol of Japan experienced momentous change. Throughout the modern period (1868–present), Japanese supporters and opponents of the throne have used it to define themselves and their nation. The monarchy, which is also a family, has been significant as both a political and a cultural institution. Indeed, an examination of the monarchy requires that we abandon a strict division of the political from the cultural and of the symbolic from the political. The emperor has embodied the modern Japanese nation-state, and nationalism is a phenomenon that belies the compartmentalization of politics, culture, and symbols.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid; Ruoff argues that any serious examination of the Japanese monarchy, especially in the modern era, must take into account the “invention of tradition” paradigm. It has been well documented, however, that the invention of tradition was a significant feature in the construction of modern national identities throughout the world, and was especially evident in reference to monarchies adjusting to modernity. In this context and reference, the Japanese monarchy is emblematic of the tremendous cultural diffusion that has taken place globally over the past 200 years – a national symbol that is recognized explicitly as an amalgam of domestic practices, most of them of modern origin, and practices ... the distinctiveness and timelessness of the Japanese national community.

that it was making considerate efforts to regain its identity in Asia following World War II. Being the first such visit by the Japanese royal family post-1945, India accorded the 1960 Imperial visit, the status of a state visit with a ceremonial guard of honor awaiting the Crown Prince upon his arrival in New Delhi. Archives have recorded the warmth accorded to Japan's royal Crown couple when photographs of Indian public gathering on both sides of the roads to greet and welcome the Crown Prince and Princess as their cavalcade crossed central Delhi's Connaught Place area.⁹ And it would be fitting to state that this royal visit played a major role in becoming a sort of testimony to the growing proximity in Indo-Japan relations, given that it generated tremendous goodwill among the peoples of both Asian countries.

During their 1960 visit, Crown Prince Akihito and Princess Michiko laid a wreath at *Rajghat* (a memorial dedicated to *Mahatma Gandhi* in Delhi that marks the spot where he was cremated following his assassination on January 31, 1948). The importance accorded to the visit in 1960 could be discerned by the fact that the Imperial Highnesses, then Crown Prince and Crown Princess of Japan, were hosted by then President Dr. Rajendra Prasad with a state banquet in their honor at the *Rashtrapati Bhawan* (President's House) where Crown Prince Akihito delivered a memorable speech. President Prasad described the visit of the Crown Prince and Princess as "the most auspicious event in the history of Indo-Japanese

relations."¹⁰ Moreover, then Prime Minister Nehru made a courtesy call on the royal couple and later also met them along with Vice President Radhakrishnan at the Prime Minister's official residence, the *Teen Murti House*. Describing Japan's "rapid economic recovery as a source of inspiration for Asian countries," Prime Minister Nehru lauded Japan's rapidly changing society in which "traditional patterns are gracefully adapting themselves to modern requirements."¹¹

As part of their visit, the Imperial Highnesses visited a village *Nistoli* (Loni Development Block) where they were warmly welcomed by the village locals. Subsequently, Crown Prince Akihito laid the foundation stone of New Delhi's iconic India International Centre (IIC), which has been set up on the lines of Tokyo's International House of Japan. The IIC continues to be New Delhi's hub for socio-cultural and intellectual offerings. Their Imperial Highnesses also visited many National Institutes in India, including the National Physical Laboratory, along with the famous wonder of world, the *Taj Mahal* in Agra. Besides, they travelled fairly extensively across the length and breadth of India, while also visiting the home of world-renowned poet and India's first Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, Calcutta, situated on the eastern bank of the Hooghly River in India's east.

Further, as a religious-cultural homage, Their Imperial Highnesses paid visits to important

9 For further details see, "First visit of Crown Prince and Crown Princess of Japan to India-1960," *Photo Features*, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, available at <https://www.mea.gov.in/photo-features.htm?910/First+visit+of+Crown+Prince+and+Crown+Princess+of+Japan+to+India+1960>

10 Cited in *The Hindu*, November 30, 1960.

11 Ibid.

Buddhist sites in *Gaya*, *Nalanda* and *Rajgir*.¹² Till date, these sites attract hundreds of Japanese pilgrims annually. While Gaya is a city of immense historical significance that has been sanctified in the Buddhist religion, Bodh Gaya, in particular, is the spot where Lord Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment, and remains one of the four holy sites of Buddhism. More specifically, the Mahabodhi Temple complex at Bodh Gaya is a World Heritage Site.

It would be apt to state that Their Imperial Highnesses' first visit to India was full of symbolism and goodwill, with a number of cultural programs and public receptions organized in their honor, including, a children's rally held at New Delhi on November 30, 1960 under the National Discipline Scheme. The photograph of Princess Michiko pinning a medal on a player's jacket after watching a polo match remains among the highlights of that event. Almost four decades later, in a September 1998 keynote address at the 26th Congress of the *Board of Books for Young People*, the significance of Empress Michiko's public role was symbolized. In her videotaped speech delivered in absentia, the empress made touching references to her 1960 India visit, and stated:

I have many fond memories of the Land of India where the present Congress is being held. In 1960, I visited India, accompanying His Majesty who was still Crown Prince then. At the time, I was twenty-five and the young

mother of a nine-month baby. In India, which some thirteen years earlier, after long years of hope, had at last achieved independence, it was the time of President Prasad, Vice-President Radhakrishnan and Prime Minister Nehru. The days I listened with deep feelings to the conversation of these distinguished people, their thoughts on freedom, democracy and peace; the warm welcome in which people enveloped us; the days of travel in Calcutta, New Delhi, Agra, Bombay, Bodh Gaya and Patna; all these I recall with keen nostalgia.¹³

Besides their 1960 visit, Their Imperial Highnesses also stopped over in India twice—in 1962 enroute Pakistan, and in 1975 enroute Indonesia.

In 1968, the same decade when Crown Prince Akihito visited India, Japan celebrated the 100th anniversary of the accession of the Meiji emperor, who granted a modern constitution to the Japanese people in 1889. Certain aspects of the imperial tradition were positive aids in modernizing Japan during the Meiji period:

- 1) The passive and symbolic character of the Throne
- 2) The emperor symbolized national unity, a precondition for successful policies of modernization, or, of any other kind
- 3) The emperor further symbolized national continuity, and his presence had helped to make the transition from shogunal rule

12 Gaya is a holy city beside the Falgu River, in the eastern Indian state of Bihar. Nālandā is a renowned Buddhist monastic university in modern-day Bihar (Ancient India's Magadha Kingdom) considered by historians as the world's very first residential university, and greatest centers of learning in the ancient world operating from 427 to 1197 CE. Nālandā played a vital role in promoting the patronage of arts and academics during the 5th and 6th century CE – a period that has since been described as the 'Golden Age of India' by scholars. Rajgir, meaning 'The City of Kings' is a historic town in the district of Nālandā in Bihar, and was the first capital of the ancient Kingdom of Magadha—a state that eventually evolved into the Mauryan Empire. The 2,500-years-old cyclopean wall is also located in this region.

13 For details see, Keynote Speech by Her Majesty Empress Michiko of Japan for the 26th Congress of International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) in New Delhi—Reminiscences of Childhood Readings, available at http://www.mofa.go.jp/j_info/japan/ibby/congress26.html

- relatively orderly
- 4) He symbolized national independence, hence freedom from foreign restraints and the national strength necessary to maintain that freedom¹⁴

The Imperial (or Meiji) Constitution of 1889, which declared the sovereignty of the emperor, also provided that the emperor would rule “according to the provisions of the present Constitution.” Because the 1889 Constitution was flexible enough to permit the emergence of parliamentary democracy in the 1920s, Prime Minister Shidehara had said in 1945 that it would be possible to democratize Japan without amending the Imperial Constitution.¹⁵ State-building is an essential component of political modernization, and the importance of the Japanese imperial institution in this connection is undeniable. In Japanese tradition, the imperial dynasty preceded and established the state, and there is no hard historical evidence to disprove this theory.¹⁶ The Japanese state was a functioning institution centuries before the states of Western Europe – a fact that is often taken into account by scholars of comparative modernization.¹⁷ All along, Japan has had unusual advantages in terms of its geographic isolation and racial and cultural homogeneity (in addition to its ancient monarchy) which many emerging nations did not really enjoy.¹⁸

Emperor Akihito’s Return to India after 53 years in 2013: The Heisei Era

The Emperor and Empress’s next India visit happened in December 2013 on the heels of the 60th anniversary of Indo-Japan diplomatic relations (1952–2012). This visit happened 53 years after they first visited the country as the Crown Prince and Princess. Interestingly, the second visit took place around the same dates as the previous visit, more than five decades ago. The imperial couple’s visits to India, be it in 1960, or 2013, came up at crucial times for the overall bilateral partnership between India and Japan.

In 2013, being the first such visit by a Japanese emperor to India, and to South Asia for that matter, the importance and symbolism attached to the India visit was very high. Emperor Akihito became the first Japanese Emperor to ever visit India, with the 2013 visit becoming a trip down memory lane. For India too, the occasion was special, in that, it was the first time that it was hosting a state visit of dignitaries who had been hosted on a state visit more than 50 years ago. According to Tamaki Tsukada, then Minister-Economic at the Japanese Embassy in New Delhi, “India is the only country they are visiting on this trip as well as in the year.” Tsukada further mentioned that the Japanese royal couple receive 40-

14 McNelly, *Comparative Politics*, n. 3, p. 367.

15 Ibid., p. 372.

16 Ibid., p. 368.

17 Ibid., p. 368; McNelly argued that political development is “the institutionalization of political organizations and procedures.” On the international factor in the modernization of political systems, McNelly further cited Lucian W. Pye, *Aspects of Political Development* (Boston, 1966); For striking parallels in the modernization of Japan and of Germany, see Inoki Masamichi, “Nihon to Doitsu no Hikaku” [Comparing Japan and Germany] *Gakushikai Koiho*, no. 698, January 1968, pp. 4-10; Further see, William H. McNeill in *A World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), wrote on “Medieval Europe and Japan, 1000-1500,” and argued, “Even the survival of an ineffective suzerainty in Japan resembled the vague deference paid to the imperial idea by Europeans... By 1500... Japanese society and culture had become comparable in complexity, formidability, and sophistication to other civilized communities of the Old World.”

18 For further details and references see, Samuel P. Huntington, “Political Development and Political Decay,” *World Politics*, vol. 17, April 1965, pp. 386-430.

50 invitations on an average, and that each invite is carefully considered by the Japanese government and prioritized thereafter. It was argued that Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko's visit upgraded the status of India among the Japanese public and their psyche, further providing a positive impetus to the overall Indo-Japanese relations.

This visit was covered widely and described as a 'defining moment' and watershed event in the history of Indo-Japan bilateral relations. As the Japanese Government stated, India had long been eager to invite the imperial dignitaries.¹⁹ In fact, the joint statement signed by then Prime Ministers, Manmohan Singh and Shinzo Abe in May 2013 made a specific reference to it. At the banquet hosted by then Indian President, Pranab Mukherji on December 2, 2013, Emperor Akihito recalled the warm welcome the Empress and he received throughout their 1960 journey including at the citizens of Delhi reception at the historic Red Fort.²⁰

While visiting the Japanese Embassy in New Delhi, Emperor Akihito took time out and saw the *Ficus religiosa*, a Bo tree in the garden, which he had planted as a sapling 53 years ago in 1960 during his visit to India as the Crown Prince. The sapling, which has grown into a majestic tree, is symbolic of a similar growth witnessed in Indo-Japan relations, the emperor reflected after seeing the blossoming of the tree. The duo also visited my alma mater, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) to observe a class

in the Japanese Language Department, along with visiting the library to see its collection. Sharing his thoughts on the India visit, in a press conference on December 23, 2013, which also happened to be his birthday, His Majesty, Emperor Akihito said:

On visiting India this time, because of my previous visit, I did have a certain amount of knowledge about the country, but I also felt that there was much greater interest in Japan and deeper interaction between the two countries now than the last time I was there. For example, we observed the students at the Jawaharlal Nehru University having discussions in Japanese, and their discussions, all in Japanese, were very impressive. I was also struck by the Indian boy we met in a park who was thinking seriously about local environmental issues. From the many things we saw and heard, I received the impression that we can expect high hopes for future exchanges with India and for the development of the country itself.²¹

During a welcome banquet at the *Rashtrapati Bhawan* (President's House) on December 2, 2013, Emperor Akihito addressed the august gathering in attendance, and underscored the importance of the occasion of the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Japan and India, saying:

I would like to express my profound

19 For further reading on the impact of the imperial visit in the context of overall Indo-Japanese bilateral relations, the imperial couple's visit came at a time when the bilateral partnership had become stable and multifaceted. For a long time, Indo-Japanese relations were narrowly focused only on economic matters like trade, investment and economic assistance. However, the partnership in its contemporary context has diversified to encompass a wide spectrum of subjects like counter terrorism, maritime security, energy cooperation, UN reforms, regional integration and climate change, and sharing of common concerns on regional security and cooperation. In this reference see, K.V. Kesavan, "The Japanese imperial visit to India," *ORF Commentaries*, January 8, 2014, available at <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-japanese-imperial-visit-to-india/>

20 For further reference see, Address by His Majesty the Emperor at the welcome banquet on the occasion of Their Majesties' visit to India, December 2, 2013, *The Imperial Household Agency of Japan*, available at <http://www.kunaicho.go.jp/eindex.html>

21 Ibid

gratitude to Your Excellency for hosting this banquet for us ... and for your most gracious words of welcome. I visited your country for the first time 53 years ago as a representative of Emperor Showa, with the then Crown Princess, to reciprocate the visit to Japan by His Excellency President Rajendra Prasad. We were received with the most gracious hospitality by Their Excellencies President Prasad, Vice President Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. I fondly recall the warm welcome we received from the people everywhere we went on our journey around the country, including the Delhi citizens' welcome event at Red Fort organized by Prime Minister Nehru. As a student, the Empress had encountered *Glimpses of World History*, a book written by Prime Minister Nehru ...²²

The emperor highlighted proximity of Indo-Japan relations, despite the vast geographical distance between the two countries, and continued:

Given the geographical distance between our two countries, it is thought that there was little interaction between Japan and India in ancient times. But by the sixth century, Buddhism, which had originated in India, was introduced to Japan ... and by the eighth century, the city of Nara, the capital of Japan at the time, was home to many Buddhist temples, and the religion came to be widely practiced in Japan. In the eighth century, it is known that an Indian monk by the name of Bodhisena traveled to Japan all the way from India, and presided as the officiating priest at the eye-opening ceremony of the statue of the Great Buddha in Nara, in the presence of Empress Koken, Ex-Emperor Shomu, and Empress Dowager Komyo. The brush which was used in the ceremony to paint in the

eyes of the Great Buddha is preserved to this day as a treasure at the Shosoin Repository. Other than a few ancient examples such as this, exchanges between the peoples of our two countries did not take place until after the mid-19th century, when Japan decided to end its more than 200 years of national seclusion and enter into diplomatic relations with other countries. The Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, who visited Japan before World War II, was welcomed with deep respect by the Japanese people. On our previous tour of India in 1960, we visited the Tagore House in Kolkata. There I remember listening to the Indian national anthem, whose words and music were written by Tagore, being beautifully sung to the accompaniment of Indian musical instruments. Our previous journey to India spanned quite a wide area, beginning in Kolkata and covering Mumbai, Delhi, Agra, Bodh Gaya and Patna, among other places.²³

The emperor underlined the time gap of 53 years between his 2013 visit and the previous visit in 1960, acknowledging the past times and their evolution into the contemporary context of Indo-Japan ties:

The Empress and I were both very young at the time, only in our mid-twenties, and we fell far short of fully understanding the depth of your great country. But through our exchanges with then President Prasad and other leaders who had led the country since its independence, we were able to learn about India's past and become aware of these leaders' high aspirations for nation-building, based on the ideals of democracy, internationalism, and pacifism directly affiliated with Mahatma Gandhi's principle of non-violent resistance. This experience has left a strong and lasting impression on us to this day. Our tour this time includes the

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

southern city of Chennai, which we could not visit last time. We are looking forward to this opportunity as an experience to further our understanding of India’s diversity. Finally, on behalf of the people of Japan, and particularly taking into consideration the feelings of those who have lost family members in the atomic bombings, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the Parliament of India for paying tribute to Japan’s atomic bomb victims in August every year. It is my hope that our current visit will help to further deepen the mutual understanding between the peoples of our two countries and further strengthen our bond of trust and friendship.²⁴

first visit to India as crown prince and thereafter as Japan’s emperor can be dubbed as an elongated interlude vis-à-vis power configurations and foreign policy refurbishments in global geopolitics. India of 1960 was a far cry from the India of 2013. More importantly, the latter was also the time period when Japan’s centrality to western geopolitical strategies in Asia was no longer a deterrent to building a true ‘strategic partnership’ between New Delhi and Tokyo.²⁶ The transformation and centrality of the Indo-Pacific region, the founding of the *Quad* partnership, and advancing a shared vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific have become foundational pillars of Indo-Japanese collaboration in the 21st century.

Role of Chrysanthemum Throne Diplomacy in Indo-Japan Relations

Emperor Akihito accomplished a lot in his 27-year reign, most significantly being “the people’s emperor.” He was well regarded for his humane instincts in going out of his way to share the suffering of those affected by natural calamities, including earthquakes and tsunamis. For instance, when multiple neighborhoods in Tokyo underwent rolling blackouts following the 2011 earthquake, he ordered the power in his palace to be shut down during the blackout hours, in a show of his family’s solidarity and shared hardship with the people. This was considered by many as a visible demonstration of his compassion. Gestures such as these have gone a long way in the Imperial family’s command of immense respect among the Japanese public. All through his reign, Emperor Akihito tried to demonstrate his and his family’s commitment to the spirit of peace, whilst trying to optimally serve the Japanese constitution.²⁵

The return of Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko to India 2013 after 1960 was read as a distinct indication from Tokyo – of how central India had become in Tokyo’s grand strategy for Asia. In a dispatch to the *Indo Asian News Service*, it was emphasized that “the emperor represents the people, and the visit is to forge people-to-people ties between our two countries” and that the visit would augment socio-cultural understanding and exchanges between India and Japan. In fact, Japan’s Chrysanthemum throne diplomacy will continue to play a key role in enhancing interest among Indians about Japan’s society, unique value systems and exclusive cultural identity. In the specific case of India, Emperor Akihito’s humane side did manage to transcend the bilateral relationship over a period of beyond five decades.

The 53-year gap between Emperor Akihito’s

24 Ibid.

25 Yuki Tatsumi, “How Emperor Akihito Shaped Post-War Japan,” *The Diplomat*, August 10, 2016, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2016/08/how-emperor-akihito-shaped-post-war-japan/>

26 Cited in “Chrysanthemum diplomacy: Japanese emperor returns to India,” *Media Centre*, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, December 2, 2013.