

Resurgent JAPAN

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The path to recovery

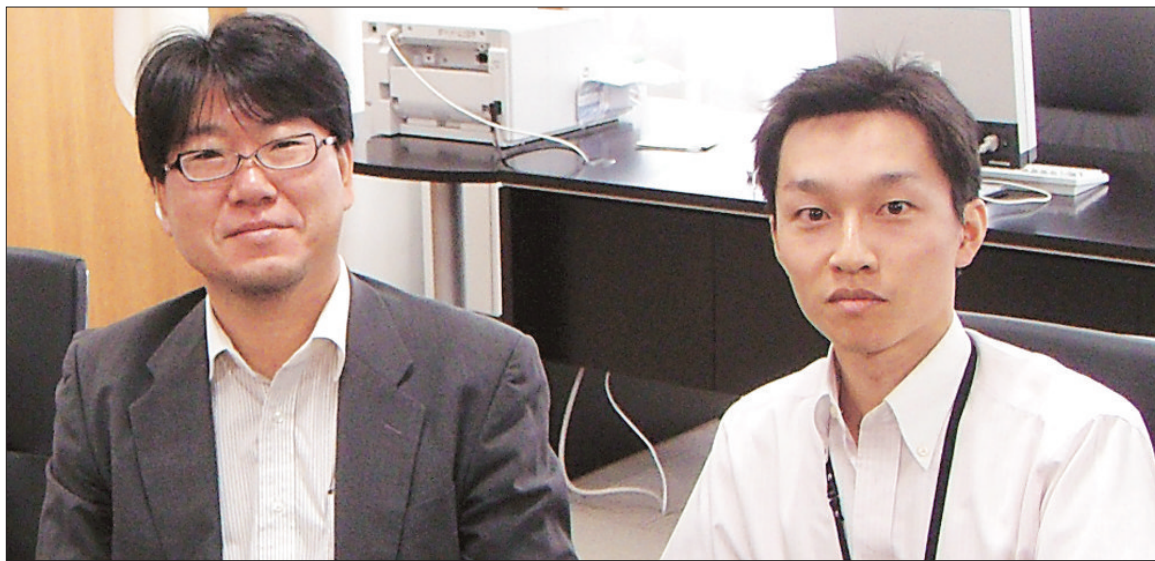
Barely three months after the 'Great East Japan Earthquake', factory output rose by 5.7 per cent—the highest in more than five decades. Behind the unexpected recovery is the country's determination to convert the tragedy into an opportunity for resurgence. **Manu Pubby** travels to Japan to capture the sentiment

THE government calls it the 'Great East Japan Earthquake', a massive trembler registering 9 on the Richter scale that devastated the country's eastern coast on March 11, followed by a killer tsunami that took close to 16,000 lives and left more than 124,000 displaced.

The earthquake and tsunami caused an instantaneous loss of 16.9 trillion yen (\$216 billion) to the Japanese economy. Massive as the scale of the tragedy was, the earthquake came in the midst of another gripping crisis—a stagnation of the Japanese economy brought on partly by the world crisis.

Yet, barely three months later, Japanese factory output rose by 5.7 per cent – with supply chains restored and factories running to capacity – the highest in more than five decades. In the third quarter, Japan's economy grew by an annualised 6 per cent on the back of increased exports, defying all speculation about a massive slump. By the end of the financial year, the Japanese economy is expected to grow strongly, barring any global downturn.

Behind this unexpected recovery is Japan's extraordinary determination to convert the tragedy into an opportunity for resurgence. Planners and government officials who are the architects of reconstruction – the national Reconstruction Design Council – are determined to use the devastation of the industrial hub of Tohoku



Yoshio Ando (left), a counsellor at the secretariat of the reconstruction headquarters, says they would not just reconstruct the Tohoku area to what it was before but make it a pilot case for a new Japanese society

(the region hit the hardest) as an opportunity to create a model state.

The idea is to create new townships, industrial zones, ports and industrial infrastructure that copes with the twin problems of an ageing society and a decreasing population. A model state not only for the people of Tohoku but for Japan as a whole.

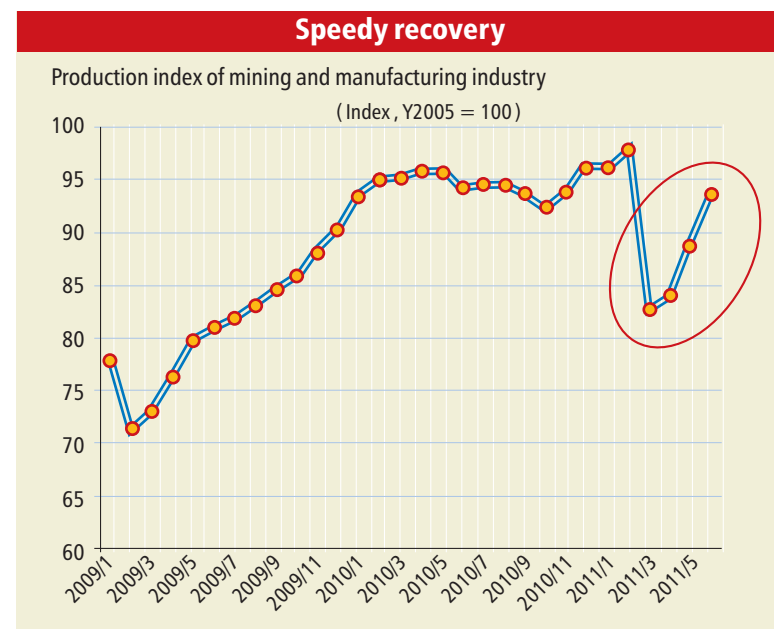
"The Tohoku area was already suffering from depopulation and an ageing society. We shall not just reconstruct it to as it was before but will make it a pilot case for a new Japanese society. With innovative ideas and efforts we want to make it a pilot case for recovery of Japan as a whole," says

Yoshio Ando, counsellor at the secretariat of the reconstruction headquarters. The new concept would factor in societal changes such as the evolving housing demand brought on by the ageing population. The plan is to promote a new concept of building towns that would use compact public transportation, be self-sufficient with maximum utilisation of local resources and have inherent disaster-resistance resources. The nuclear tragedy and the ensuing energy crises caused by the shutting down of a bulk of the nation's nuclear plants for checks and inspections has also driven home the need for developing re-

newable energy technologies. The idea being to create a society that is not only more resilient to natural disasters such as earthquakes and tsunami but also nuclear accidents.

"This could be treated as an opportunity to create future-oriented cities. Especially in areas where the Tsunami occurred, there can be a fundamental reconstruction of municipalities. We have to see whether it is possible to introduce a concept of model smart cities," says Shikata Noriyuki, deputy cabinet secretary of the Japanese government.

If the speedy reaction of the Japanese to the disaster is an indica-



tor, the road to recovery and beyond does not seem very long. A small example is the speedy reconstruction, a few days after the disaster, of transport infrastructure that was vital in softening the blow on industry. The transport and commercial artery that connects Tohoku region with the country, The Tohoku Expressway, was badly damaged in the disaster.

While 347 km of the 675-km highway was badly hit on March 11, in less than a fortnight, traffic restrictions were lifted after emergency restoration was carried out. A similar tale is reflected in the operationalisation of the Sendai airport, images of

which shocked viewers across the world after the tsunami swirled around aircraft and helicopters in a toy-like manner. The airport was restored and became useable for disaster relief within 18 days and just over a month after the tragedy, passenger flights resumed. Japan looks to be on the way to recovery as far as the disaster is concerned but worries remain on other fronts. As Noriyuki points out, the Japanese economy suffered much worse during the "Lehman Shock" of 2008. "At this time we have two issues of concern, one is the appreciation of the Yen and the other is power shortages," Noriyuki says.

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