

India and Bhutan: New and Emerging areas of cooperation as we Look Ahead

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It is no exaggeration when we say that Bhutan and India share extraordinary ties of friendship and cooperation. Marked by mutual understanding, goodwill and timeless respect, it is a partnership forged not only by our shared experiences but also by our civilizations growing together, overlapping in both history and culture, existing for thousands of years. And most importantly, at the heart of the Bhutan-India partnership is the belief that our future will only serve to embolden friendship.

In 2018, we commemorated fifty years since the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between our two countries. In 2020, and on the eve of India's 74th Independence Day, we could ask: what are the new and emerging areas of cooperation between our two countries?

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first visit abroad as Head of Government was to Bhutan in June 2014. Soon after being elected for a second term, he visited Bhutan again in August 2019. Both these visits ensured that Bhutan and India have branched off into new areas of cooperation that also have resonance with the themes advocated by His Majesty the King of Bhutan: education, technology, and innovation with a focus on empowering youth.

In the sector of space science and technology, the Prime Ministers of Bhutan and India have inaugurated the Thimphu Ground Earth Station of ISRO's South Asia Satellite, which is expected to greatly increase coverage of communication, public broadcasting, and disaster management in Bhutan. Our two teams are also working together to build a small satellite for Bhutan, which will include the training of Bhutanese space engineers in India.

Education has always been a priority, the



difference now is the focus on STEM, through a fostering of institutional tie-ups between premier Indian institutes and their counterparts in Bhutan. Most recently, two Bhutanese students were selected to pursue Post-Graduate studies at the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, under the newly instituted India-Bhutan Friendship Scholarship. Similarly, IITs Bombay and Delhi have also offered two full-ride scholarships for Bhutanese Post Graduate students in the current financial year. Two seats are reserved every year for Bhutanese students at the reputed All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi on a self-financing basis. Since last year, India has also begun offering two annual Undergraduate Scholarships for Bhutanese students at the eminent St. Stephen's College in New Delhi.

Even as India has recently handed over the education-focussed e-Library Project to Bhutan, we have also connected India's National Knowledge Network with Bhutan's Druk-REN creating thereby an information highway, encouraging greater interaction between the Universities and students of

both countries. Following up also on Prime Minister Modi's outreach to Bhutanese youth at the RUB last year, students from the University had paid a memorable visit to ISRO and other tech institutes in India in 2019. Importantly, this will be an annual feature, going forward.

In the financial sector, we have made strides with the introduction of Indian-issued RuPay cards in Bhutan and the subsequent launch of Bhutan's Quick Response Code. We hope soon to put the BHIM App, an Indian digital payment interface to good use in Bhutan, and also introduce Bhutanese-issued RuPay cards in India for full interoperability of the cards, thereby promoting cashless payments, immensely benefitting our nationals, both ways.

In February 2020, the Indian Minister of Railways and Commerce & Industry, Shri Piyush Goyal, had visited Bhutan for the first-ever 'Bhutan-India Start-Up Summit', which served as a platform to kick start stronger business engagement across all sectors between India and Bhutan.

One of the key outcomes of the visit was a tie-up between Bhutanese agri-

producers and major Indian supermarkets. The two sides have begun discussions to work out a commercial arrangement for retail marketing of Bhutanese organic food products in India. We are optimistic that this arrangement will boost Bhutanese agri-exports, adding a fresh dimension to the bilateral commercial relationship.

Another significant outcome of Minister Goyal's visit was the announcement by the Confederation of Indian Industry, one of India's leading industry associations, to open their first South Asia Office in Bhutan. This Office could potentially facilitate greater Indian investment in Bhutan, providing as well real time assistance and support to the Bhutanese private sector.

On the connectivity front, we have recently opened a new Land Customs Station at Ahllay, in the industrial area of Pasakha in July 2020, as an alternative to Phuentsholing. This has not only facilitated bilateral trade but has also led to decongestion of vehicular traffic along the busy Jaigaon-Phuentsholing route. Our two countries are also exploring rail connectivity, for further bolstering trade and

commerce to the benefit of our two sides.

Health is wealth as they say, and India is proud to partner with Bhutan in providing technical support towards a Multidisciplinary Super Specialty Hospital in Thimphu. This will greatly augment the capacities of the country's health sector.

Turning to the hydro sector, a traditional pillar of India-Bhutan cooperation, we have recently inked the Kholongchhu Concession Agreement. This Hydro Project is poised to bring greater growth and prosperity in the eastern region of Bhutan, very much in tune with the Bhutan Government's emphasis on an inclusive development model, where no one is left behind.

India has been steadfast in extending all possible assistance to Bhutan during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, in terms of ensuring uninterrupted movement of commodities, facilitating the return of over 1350 Bhutanese nationals, handing over essential medicines and medical supplies to Bhutan, as well as the virtual training of Bhutanese health professionals. We are honoured that India's gesture has been publicly appreciated by the Bhutanese leadership and we view this as a reflection of the special bonds of trust and understanding between India and Bhutan that have existed over decades.

Indeed, our time-tested relations serve as an epitome of immaculate neighbourly relations for the rest of the world.

Going forward, India will continue to expand and deepen this development partnership across all spheres, in keeping with the wishes, priorities and aspirations of Bhutan and its people.

The writer is the Ambassador of India to Bhutan. (Views expressed in this article are the writer's own.)