

## IN THE NEWS

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## I will be among the first to vaccinate: PM

*Vehicles are left stranded for the want of more hands whilst full mechanization yet to take effect*

By **Puran Gurung**  
Thimphu

With myriad opinions expressed across social media platforms on the safety of COVID-19 vaccines, the Prime Minister coming live on his official Facebook account this week clarified that the vaccine is absolutely safe, and that he will be one of the firsts to be inoculated.

“I will not get inoculated if the vaccine’s quality is bad just to boost the confidence of the people and steer the nation into a grim fate. I am a medical practitioner and I know about it. We simply won’t accept bad quality vaccines. I will only get inoculated if the vaccine is good, so that it benefits the nation as a whole,” said the Prime Minister, DASHO (Dr) Lotay Tshering as he clarified on the issue.

To assure the people of Bhutan that the vaccine is safe, Prime Minister announced to the nation that he would be the first to take the jab in Bhutan. It was announced through Prime Minister’s Office Official Facebook Page.

Lyonchhen Dasho (Dr) Lotay Tshering assured the people that the vaccine will not have any long-term side-effects. However, Lyonchhen said that to see the effects of the vaccines, it will take another three to five years. The vaccine is also expected to work on the new strain of the COVID-19 virus.

Further adding on the safety of the COVID-19 vaccines, Lyonchhen remarked that if the vaccine had more

harms than good, the vaccine won’t get the validation (Emergency Use Approval) of the World Health Organization (WHO) in the first place as all the vaccines have to undergo three different phases of test to get the “Emergency Use Approval”.

On the inoculation of Bhutanese people at one go, Prime Minister reiterated that the government will wait for the remaining vaccines to arrive in the country. India assured that Bhutan will receive the remaining vaccines in coming months. The government is also in mid-stages to procure vaccines from India and United States of America through the state’s coffers.

The Prime Minister is also banking on the cold storage infrastructure that Bhutan possesses. It will help to maintain the shelf life of the vaccines brought to the country. Bhutan has one of the best chain systems in the region, the Prime Minister assured.

Upon His Majesty’s command, every single Bhutanese must be inoculated for free and government should procure the vaccine even if the cost of vaccine skyrockets. His Majesty has also assured the government that even if the cost of vaccines escalates, His Majesty would grant funds to the government from His Majesty’s Fund.

“Therefore, no Bhutanese will have to pay for the COVID vaccines. Even if Bhutanese are residing abroad the government will reimburse the cost of the inoculation,” the Prime Min-

## From humble mule tracks to the frontiers of space

*Indian Ambassador to Bhutan Ruchira Kumboj say Bhutan-India relationship, though ancient and stretching across the sands of time, is fully geared to respond to the requirements of the 21st century, and where the sky is the limit to its growth.*

By **Puran Gurung**  
Thimphu

The skies are the limit indeed. From humble beginnings like travelling on mule tracks to building the first motorable roads that first connected the two countries in the early sixties, today the friendly ties and cooperation has expanded to the vast frontiers of space where the two nation’s collaboration is geared to take-off in the years

ahead.

In the history of bilateral ties across the globe, the Indo-Bhutan cooperation has been an exceptional bond – that is built on the foundations of love, respect and equality.

Today, it has gained unparalleled heights as the two nations look forward to exploring and harnessing space technology for accelerated socio-economic development. On this note, the two sides had agreed on the development of a joint satellite in August 2019, and to

turn this dream into reality of launching Bhutan’s own satellite by 2021, four young Bhutanese space engineers joined ISRO for an intensive training in January this year.

Financial technology is another new area of bilateral cooperation while education has always been a priority for our two countries. And finally, the ongoing fight to contain the coronavirus pandemic has also been a collective effort whereby, the Indi-

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## From humble mule tracks to the frontiers of space

**...Pg 01** an government has dispatched millions worth of Covid-19 equipment apart from direct financial aid to help spur this initiative.

And, as Bhutan looks forward to its long awaited dream of a covid vaccine to inoculate its population, India has been particularly a steadfast partner as it dispatched the first 150,000 doses of the vaccine as a gift and a goodwill gesture to its most trusted ally. Further, more such deployments are on the cards as the two nations continue to carve and build the existing foundations laid by our pioneering forefathers.

As the republic of India celebrated its 72nd Republic Day this week, India's Ambassador to Bhutan Ruchira Kumboj spoke to Bhutan TODAY on an exclusive range of issues that not only touches the chords of the two nations but ensures of a bolder and brighter road ahead.

The following are excerpts from the interview:

**Q. India celebrates the spirit of democracy with the marking of its 72nd Republic Day celebrations this year, what is your thought on India's journey and its role in a democratic world setup given that the Indian Republic is one of the largest and most vibrant democracies in the world?**

**A:** The journey has indeed been remarkable. The Indian constitution built upon the edifice of our freedom struggle in the effort to create an equal and just society, one in which every individual was guaranteed fundamental rights intrinsic to human freedom and dignity. And to make democracy broad based, our constitution makers had the vision to undertake the bold adventure of universal adult

franchise. Today, India is the world's largest democracy, a nation united in its religious, cultural and linguistic diversity.

In the 1950's, India had a growth rate of 3.5% and 72% of the total working population was engaged in agriculture. Fast forward to present times: India is one of the fastest growing major economies in the world and is expected to be one of the top three economic powers in the world over the next 10-15 years. We are abound with tales of multi-million dollar businesses that started out of small shops and minimal work-spaces, a testament to our capacity to imagine and innovate. Every year, Indian companies make it to the most prestigious global lists of the world. Just recently, IMF has projected an impressive 11.5% growth rate for India for 2021, predicting a strong rebound in the economy.

As a young democracy and an ancient civilization, India is above all a responsible power. India's rise will only benefit other countries as our foreign policy is rooted in our spiritual ethos of "vasudhaiva kutumbakam" which sees the world as one family. You can see this in India's active engagement and leadership on significant global issues such as climate change, terrorism, conflict resolution and peace-building, sustainable development or global health governance. And most recently "vaccine maitri" where we have played a central role in the development and distribution of vaccines!

**Q. One of the key achievements of democratic India has been, and still is, befriending its neighboring nations/states in their developmental efforts of which Bhutan is a key partner. How do you**

**think that the close ties of friendship between the two nations have blossomed over the years? What more milestones do we foresee to achieve in the years ahead?**

A. Bhutan and India are connected by ties of geography, history, culture, spiritual traditions and centuries old people-to-people interactions. However, the essence of the relationship is the mutual love and affection between the people of our two countries.

The seeds of this uniquely close relationship, anchored in mutual trust and understanding, were sown in 1958 when India's first Prime Minister, traversing through precipitous mountain passes, made a historic trip to Bhutan. The trust and the mutual respect that has been built over the decades led to the eventual establishment of India's resident mission in Bhutan in 1968. Since then, the relationship has been nurtured by the wise and visionary monarchy of Bhutan and successive Indian leaders, who set an example for the entire world for excellent neighbourly relations. Since 2014 in particular, the relationship has been on a steep upward trajectory. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has paid two state visits to Bhutan in 2014 and 2019, immediately after his election/re-election as Prime Minister.

The sky is indeed the limit for the India-Bhutan friendship, and the relationship, though ancient and stretching across the sands of time, is fully geared to respond to the requirements of the 21st century.

Space is a new and emerging area of bilateral cooperation between India and Bhutan. In line with His Majesty The King's vision of harnessing space technology for accelerated socio-economic develop-

ment, both sides agreed on the development of a joint satellite in August 2019. To turn this dream into reality, four young Bhutanese space engineers joined ISRO for an intensive training in January 2021. A Bhutanese satellite is expected to be launched in 2021!

Financial technology is another new area of bilateral cooperation. We have launched the RuPay project, a flagship digital project, aimed at harnessing the benefits of financial integration between our two economies. India's Bharat Interface for Money (BHIM) App in Bhutan is in the pipeline, which would be another step in facilitating trade, tourism and people-to-people connect.

Education has always been a priority for our two countries, the difference now is the focus on STEM, through a fostering of institutional tie-ups between premier Indian institutes and their counterparts in Bhutan. In this vein, many bright young Bhutanese have entered our IITs, notably IITs Kanpur, Tirupati and soon IIT Gandhinagar, for the very first time.

Finally, may I add that India is committed to helping Bhutan get past the pandemic. We are committed to the supply of the Made in India vaccines to Bhutan and will also remain engaged in helping the economy recover sustainably through innovative tie-ups between our companies as well as the execution of projects, per the wishes, priorities and aspirations of Bhutan. Suffice to say that the future of the relationship looks bright and promising!

**Q. India is considered one of the potential superpowers of the world given its demographic trends and a rapidly expanding economy and military. Will**

**this have any implications on India's geopolitical approach towards its Asian neighbours, or for that matter Bhutan?**

A. India has always believed that it is part of a larger community of nations. We realise in the spirit of "vasudhaiva kutumbakam", that our well-being is intrinsically linked to the collective well being. We also believe in the principle of "Nishkama Karma" where good needs to be done for its own sake.

We put these principles into practice during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. You are aware that India supplied medicines to over 150 countries across the globe, many of these supplies were free of cost. We sent medical support teams to many countries, on demand. We ramped up our own domestic production of essential medical items as these were required during the pandemic, from being a net importer in pre-Covid times to exporting many such items, including to Bhutan, on request.

Now that the focus has shifted to the vaccine, India has led from the front. January 20, 2021 was a practical manifestation of this global leadership role when Bhutan became the first among our neighbours to receive the Made-in-India Vaccine, this has been followed by vaccine supplies to not just our neighbours, but also to countries across the globe.

As India continues to grow, ours will be a lifting tide, relations with our neighbours are based off mutual dignity, mutual respect and mutual sensitivity. Bhutan occupies a central position in our Neighborhood First Policy, a time tested relationship that continues to accelerate and grow.

## I will be among the first to vaccinate: PM

**...Pg 05** life threatening issue, related with the vaccine and that there will be at a minimum effects like a mild swelling on the injected area just like any other vaccines.

The immediate effects of the vaccine will be swelling in the area of injection and a light fever. However, it's a good sign as the immune system is accepting

the vaccine he said.

Lyonchhen also requested people to know the best about the vaccine before inoculation and not get vaccinated or vaccinated with half-baked information.

"We will accept and adopt the vaccine that has the approval of World Health Organization and also vaccines that has been accepted

by developed countries. We are also in talks with Pfizer and Moderna vaccines as we won't be depending on Covishield alone. We will be receiving Pfizer and Moderna vaccines on a later date," PM said, adding the efficacies of all the vaccines are same and trusted by medical experts across the world.

He also added that on the morning of January 28

this week, the government had talked to Pfizer vaccine manufacturer in United States of America about the probability of availing the vaccine which, he assured, was in the affirmative.

Nonetheless, PM said vaccinated people might also spread the virus because the vaccines at times will only protect the individual keeping them positive

and asymptomatic.

While the government of India has repeatedly assured that it will help Bhutan to supply rest of the vaccines demands, the government also gave assurance that if things don't work according to the plan it hopes to strike the deal with Serum Institute in Pune that manufactures the COVID vaccine.