

India-Bhutan ties: Enduring through tests of time

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to Bhutan for the 70th birthday of the Fourth Druk Gyalpo, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, provided an opportunity to observe something that is often overlooked in day-to-day diplomacy: the India-Bhutan relationship has established a rhythm that is unusually stable for the subcontinent.

The ceremonies themselves were brief, but the atmosphere around them conveyed a great deal. The current King, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, and India's Prime Minister interacted without the stiffness that often shapes high-level meetings. The ease came from long familiarity. Neither side needed grand language to signal goodwill; it was already understood.

To understand why this relationship feels distinct from many others in the region, it is helpful to trace its development. When India gained independence in 1947, Bhutan remained cautious about external involvement, maintaining limited contact with the outside world. The 1949 Treaty of Friendship established a basic framework for cooperation between the two countries. Its value lay in its simplicity. It reassured Bhutan that its concerns, territorial, economic and administrative, would be taken seriously, and it signalled that India intended to build the relationship through new terms of engagement, not on the hubris of the British Empire.

Jawaharlal Nehru's 1958 journey, during which he carried young Indira Gandhi on a mule through some of Bhutan's toughest terrains, set the tone for the next several decades. Bhutan at the time was preparing for a gradual, carefully managed opening, and Nehru's visit helped remove lingering doubts about India's intentions. His insistence that Bhutan would always be free to decide its own course resonated strongly with the leadership in Thimphu. The visit also fostered deeper developmental collaboration, which took more precise shape in the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, Bhutan's priorities were straightforward: it

needed physical connectivity, basic institutions and trained administrative personnel. India responded in ways that aligned with these objectives.

The Border Roads Organisation constructed the Phuentsholing-Thimphu highway, the Paro-Thimphu route and the vital east-west highway that eventually connected Bhutan's central and eastern districts. These projects altered Bhutan's economic geography. Areas that had previously required days of foot travel became reachable by road, enabling schooling, healthcare and local administration to expand with unprecedented speed. India's support extended to the construction of bridges, the early development of a telecommunication network, and several district-level hospitals and schools. These efforts were carried out with Bhutanese planners at the helm, ensuring the developmental process remained consistent with Bhutan's own priorities.

The hydropower partnership, which emerged slightly later, is one of the most consequential examples of this collaborative approach. Bhutan had the rivers, and India had the capacity to build and absorb the electricity; both sides saw a long-term benefit. The Chukha project, which began operation in 1988, became the prototype for future ventures. Revenue from electricity exports provided Bhutan with stable financing for social services, helping to reduce its dependence on external aid.

India gained a reliable power supply without compromising Bhutan's ownership of the sector. Security cooperation, although less publicly visible, also followed the same principles. When militant groups from India's northeast established camps in southern Bhutan in the 1990s, the challenge tested the steadiness of the bilateral relationship. India did not insist on acting unilaterally. Bhutan took the time to assess the situation, attempted negotiations with the groups, and eventually concluded that the camps posed a threat to its own internal security. In 2003,

Bhutan launched Operation All Clear, a complex military operation executed entirely by its own armed forces. It cleared the camps and restored stability along the border. For India, the operation demonstrated the depth of Bhutan's commitment to the bilateral relationship. The episode remains one of the clearest illustrations of reciprocal trust between the two states.

The political transformation of Bhutan in the 2000s introduced a new phase. As Bhutan prepared for a democratic constitution and parliamentary elections, India's role was deliberately understated. Technical advice was provided upon request, and Bhutanese officials engaged with various Indian institutions to gain a deeper understanding of electoral processes, legislative procedures, and judicial arrangements.

Crucially, the 2007 revision of the Friendship Treaty removed language that no longer reflected Bhutan's political reality. By updating the treaty before Bhutan's first democratic elections, both countries signalled that the partnership did not depend on the nature of Bhutan's domestic political system. It was grounded in continuity. Over the last decade, cooperation has broadened far beyond its earlier pillars. Hydropower remains central, with the Punatsangchhu-II project now inaugurated, but new sectors have gained prominence. India has supported Bhutan's digital governance ambitions, including work on identity systems, online public services and ICT training. The pandemic underscored the importance of connectivity in healthcare, with telemedicine and medical supply chains playing crucial roles. Recent discussions have also covered renewable energy diversification, youth employment, tourism revival, and academic exchanges.

Infrastructure remains a key area of shared focus. The proposed Kokrajhar-Gelephu rail link has the potential to transform cross-border mobility and give Bhutan direct rail access to Indian industrial and logistical centres.

Improvements along border points at Samdrup Jongkhar, Gelephu and Phuentsholing are intended to reduce transportation costs for Bhutanese exporters. Road widening and maintenance projects on the Bhutanese side have also involved close coordination with Indian agencies.

One of the most ambitious contemporary initiatives is the Gelephu Special Administrative Region, an economic zone envisioned by the Bhutanese King to attract global investment in sustainable industries, high-end services and technology. India has emerged as an early partner in exploring financing models, infrastructure planning and the integration of the zone with Indian markets and transport corridors. Discussions have also covered curriculum collaborations for training institutes, renewable energy clusters and long-term power-purchase frameworks.

As Bhutan widens its foreign policy horizons, engaging more actively with European states, the United States, and multilateral institutions, it is responding to internal transformations rather than external pressures. Bhutan's economic aspirations, ranging from climate finance to specialised services, require a broader set of partnerships. Engagements with China, too, stem from Bhutan's interest in resolving boundary issues that have persisted for decades. These developments reflect Bhutan's assessment of its own needs as it enters a new phase of development.

India has approached Bhutan's diversification with composure. The bilateral relationship has accumulated enough institutional and historical depth to accommodate Bhutan's external engagements without anxiety. What sustains the partnership is not the absence of other actors but the transparency and predictability with which the two sides communicate. Bhutan has consistently anchored its foreign policy in caution, deliberation and long-term thinking. India, for its part, has refrained from framing Bhutan's choices in competitive terms. This is one reason the relationship has been

remarkably free of public friction.

The trajectory of India-Bhutan relations today reflects several decades of accumulated confidence. Both governments rely on institutional memory, regular communication and clearly defined mechanisms of co-operation. This allows them to navigate new issues, ranging from economic reforms to climate vulnerability, without reopening old debates. Modi's participation in the Fourth King's birth anniversary was therefore significant not simply as a diplomatic gesture but as a reminder of how the partnership has evolved: quietly, steadily and with an appreciation for continuity.

In a region where bilateral ties often move between phases of enthusiasm and tension, the India-Bhutan relationship stands out for its consistency. It has adapted to political change, economic transformation and shifts in global alignments without losing balance. The partnership remains rooted in respect for sovereignty, a shared interest in stability, and a recognition that development cooperation can work when driven by mutual priorities rather than strategic competition.

Bhutan's external engagements will continue to expand, and India's regional and global responsibilities will grow. Yet the underlying logic of the relationship has shown remarkable resilience. The historical foundations laid through road networks, early institutions and hydropower have now broadened into a multidimensional agenda focused on connectivity, technology, sustainability and long-term economic planning. This maturity makes the partnership one of the strongest and most stable in South Asia, an exception in a neighbourhood often marked by volatility.

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