

Bhutan-India relations, an epitome of immaculate neighbourly relations

On the eve of the 74th Independence Day of India, Ambassador of India to Bhutan, Ruchira Kamboj speaks to Kuensel on bilateral relations between the two countries

The 74th Independence Day of the Republic of India on August 15 coincides with the peaking of Covid-19 cases. What would be the special focus of this year's celebrations?

This year's Independence Day is somewhat unusual. Covid-19 is yet rampant, and Bhutan is in the midst of a nationwide lockdown. But what stands out in the midst of all this, is the exemplary solidarity between longstanding friends, Bhutan and India in combating the crisis together. Going forward, India will stand alongside Bhutan to get past Covid-19, and to ensure a sustainable recovery.

Importantly and coinciding with Independence Day 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has launched key initiatives, Atmanirbhar Bharat or the Self Reliant India Campaign, a new National Education Policy and the One Nation, One Ration Card scheme, all of which are aimed at the socio-economic development of the people of India.

Aatmanirbhar Bharat is chosen as the theme of the 74th Independence Day. What is the significance?

Without exception, the Covid-19 crisis has demonstrated the importance of self-sufficiency. Addressing the nation on 12 May 2020, Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi recognized this imperative and, accordingly, launched the Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyan or Self-Reliant India Campaign. To deal with the economic challenges posed by the pandemic and bring our economy back on track, the Prime Minister announced a stimulus package of nearly US\$ 270 billion (Rs. 20,000 billion).

When India speaks of self-reliance, we are not advocating a self-centered system. Rather, we believe that a self-sufficient India, a country that is an emerging global leader, will inevitably lead to a more



► Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Lyonchhen Dr Lotay Tshering

prosperous world. Our aim is to ensure India's position as a key participant in global supply chains. Through building capacities at home, we also intend to contribute to mitigating disruptions in global markets. We see no contradiction between wanting to build our economic capacities and looking to play a bigger role in the global economy.

The Self-Reliant India Campaign is structured around five key pillars of strengthening our economy, infrastructure, a system driven by modern technology, our vibrant and young demography, and meeting our growing demands by playing a bigger role in the global supply chain. Achieving rapid growth and development will depend substantially on successful integration and assimilation of all of these factors.

For instance, at the start of the pandemic, India did not produce sufficient medical equipment such as ventilators and personal protection equipment kits. Today, after having built up our capacities over a period of a few months, we are now producing these items on a massive scale and are even supplying them to other countries, as well as to our neighbours in the region,

including Bhutan. This was possible only because India set out on a path to achieve self-sufficiency.

Furthermore, Prime Minister Modi launched an Agriculture Infrastructure Fund of Rs. 1000 billion on 9 August 2020, which will benefit farmers and help agri-entrepreneurs in building farming assets and post-harvest infrastructure, thereby promoting self-sufficiency in the agriculture sector. Similarly, the Government of India has decided to manufacture 101 defence items indigenously, reflecting another step towards self-reliance.

Bhutan was one of the first countries to recognise India's independence in 1947 laying the foundations of close relations. How have the relations changed?

Bhutan-India relations are indeed privileged, serving as an epitome of immaculate neighbourly relations for the rest of the world.

This multifaceted relationship covers myriad areas: development cooperation; hydro power; trade and commerce; education and, of course, our shared historical, cultural and people-to-people linkages. Importantly, and in this technology-driven era, we are

also cooperating in new areas: space science and technology, financial technology cooperation and digital connectivity.

Currently, we are working towards multiple goals which were agreed during the visit of Prime Minister Modi in August 2019. Taking forward His Majesty's vision in harnessing space resources for the benefit of the country and its people, both sides are collaborating on the joint development of a small satellite for Bhutan. Other activities include, the development of a geo-portal system for Bhutan towards the mapping of natural resources as well as for disaster management, using remote sensing and geo-spatial data. India's National Knowledge Network is now connected to Bhutan's DrukREN, creating thereby an information highway, encouraging greater interaction between our Universities, as well as our research and student communities.

We have also launched STEM-based cooperation initiatives that are aligned with the priorities of the Royal Government of Bhutan. Subsequent to the signing of MoUs between RUB and IITs Delhi, Bombay and Kanpur during the visit of Prime Minister Modi to Bhutan last year, Bhutanese engineering

students are heading to our prestigious IITs on full ride scholarships, most notably IIT Kanpur, IIT Bombay as well as IIT Delhi. Furthermore, an annual Youth Exchange Programme has been developed by the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, with the active collaboration of the RUB and the Royal Government of Bhutan, which is poised to take off, once the pandemic situation is behind us.

By October 2020 we should see enhanced financial technology cooperation between our two countries through a full inter-operability of the RuPay card launched jointly by the Bhutanese and Indian Prime Ministers last year, boosting e-payments, both ways. We are also working on the use of the Bharat Interface for Money (BHIM) App in Bhutan to promote the culture of cashless payment on both our sides.

On Hydropower we have recently inked the Kholongchhu Concession Agreement, the first joint venture project between our two countries which should open up a whole new chapter of beneficial cooperation in Bhutan's East.

We are also working towards enhanced connectivities between our two countries, we have recently opened an additional trade route through the Pasakha Industrial Area, and we are exploring rail connectivities as well.

We are also honoured to work with Bhutan as you set up a Multi-Disciplinary Super Speciality Hospital in Thimphu, which will backstop the existing health infrastructure in the country.

Against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, India has extended the fullest cooperation and support to Bhutan in terms of ensuring uninterrupted movement of commodities, facilitating the return of over 1,350 Bhutanese nationals, handing

Bhutan-India relations, an epitome of immaculate neighbourly relations

From Pg 5

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.

It is said that hydropower has been the backbone of Bhutan-India relations. As both countries look forward to chart a 21st century economic roadmap, what new areas could be of interest in new relations between Bhutan and India?

Hydropower cooperation has indeed been an important pillar of India-Bhutan relations, and we remain committed to partner with Bhutan in this vital sector, for the mutual benefit of our two countries and people. However, even as Bhutan prepares its 21st Century Economic Road Map, we have begun exploring cooperation in new areas, in sync with the priorities espoused by His Majesty the King of Bhutan, including education, technology, and innovation with a focus on empowering the youth.

During Prime Minister Modi's visit to Bhutan in August 2019, we have jointly launched a number of new initiatives. In the space sector, Thimphu is now connected to ISRO's South Asia Satellite and our two teams are also working to develop a small satellite for Bhutan. In the education sector, the focus is on STEM, through an institutional tie-up between premier Indian Institutes and their counterparts in Bhutan. We have established an Information highway interconnection to enhance knowledge-sharing between Universities of both our sides, through a tie up between India's National Knowledge Network and DrukREN. In the financial sector, we have made great strides in integrating our economies and promoting cashless payments through the introduction of

the RuPay cards in Bhutan and the subsequent launch of Bhutan's Quick Response code, which will enable the use of the BHIM app, an Indian digital payment interface, in Bhutan.

A recent important visit was that of the Indian Minister of Railways and Commerce & Industry, Shri Piyush Goyal, to Bhutan for the first-ever 'Bhutan-India Start-Up Summit'. One of the key outcomes of the visit was a tie-up between Bhutanese agri-producers and major Indian supermarkets for retail marketing of Bhutanese organic food products in India. Another outcome was that the Confederation of Indian Industry, one of India's leading industry associations, announced that they would open their first South Asia office in Bhutan, which will facilitate enhanced Indian investment in Bhutan, providing as well real time assistance & support to the Bhutanese private sector.

On the connectivity front, we have recently opened a new land customs station at Ahliay in Bhutan's southern Industrial area of Pasakha. This has not only facilitated bilateral trade but has also led to decongestion of vehicular traffic along the busy Jaigaon-Phuentsholing route. Our two sides are also exploring rail connectivities for further bolstering trade and commerce for the benefit of our two countries and people. We are also committed to providing technical support towards a Multidisciplinary Super-Specialty Hospital in Thimphu, to backstop the existing health infrastructure in the country.

The Government of India recently launched a New Education Policy that in PM Modi's words is the foundation of "new India." Education is one area Bhutan had been gaining from India's progress. How can Bhutan benefit from the NEP?

The recently launched National Education Policy 2020 is poised to bring about transformational reforms in the school and higher education system in India. The principal objective is Universalization of Education with 100% Gross

Enrolment Ratio (GER) in school education by 2030 and increase of 50% GER in higher education by 2035. Key aspects of NEP2020 that should find resonance with Bhutanese policy makers are: the emphasis on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy with no rigid separation between academic streams as well as extracurricular and vocational streams in school; vocational education to start from Class 6 with internships so that on completing school, every student is proficient in at least one vocational skill; the higher education curriculum to have flexibility of subjects; multiple entry/exit and transfer of credit through an Academic Bank of Credits; the setting up of a Gender Inclusion Fund; Special Education Zones for disadvantaged regions and groups; the use of technology in digitally equipping schools, teachers and students and the introduction of 'coding' from Class 6 onwards to equip students with computational skills, mathematical thinking and a scientific temper from an early age.

These key policy elements draw immediate parallels in Bhutan with vocational education & skilling finding focus through the Build Bhutan Project. The difficulties being faced by students in some Dzongkhags could be overcome through improvement of digital facilities through a planning of Special Education Zones. Stranded students ordinarily enrolled in Universities abroad could earn credits while studying in Bhutanese Higher Educational Institutions, and complete their degrees/ diplomas etc. without loss of an academic year through the concept of the Academic Credit Bank.

It was learnt that some Bhutanese students were selected on a special basis to study in top Indian engineering universities with GOI scholarship. Please elaborate.

We are deeply mindful of the emphasis on STEM placed by His Majesty the King of Bhutan. In this vein, we have since last year fostered an institutional build-up between our top-most technical institu-

tions and their counterparts in Bhutan.

I am pleased to share that pursuant to the announcement of the India Bhutan Friendship Scholarship in 2020, two students from Bhutan will be heading to IIT, Kanpur this year, which is a first time achievement for Bhutanese engineering students. Similarly and marking another first, two Bhutanese students will soon be joining IIT Bombay and another student has been provisionally admitted to IIT Delhi, all three being recipients of the Government of India's Nehru Wangchuck Scholarship. The latest 'success' is that one more student has been accepted by IIT Tirupati, another first for the Bhutan-India friendship.

We are, indeed, delighted that these talented youngsters from Bhutan will be studying at our best institutions.

One of the many reforms in the Indian NEP is on the use of technology. Bhutan's similar vision is challenged by connectivity. The government of Bhutan is trying for a third internet gateway from Bangladesh. Your Excellency said the issue is under consideration of both sides and a mutually acceptable decision is expected within the earliest time frame. Any developments in this area?

The significance of connectivity in this digital era cannot be overemphasized. The matter of a third internet gateway is under consideration of our two sides, every effort is being made to work towards a mutually acceptable resolution of the matter.

In the wake of the pandemic, some interest groups had been threatening to stop vehicles carrying essentials to Bhutan from Jaigaon if the border is not opened for trade. Did the Embassy intervene?

In full solidarity with the Royal Government of Bhutan, the Government of India has ensured the uninterrupted movement of essential as well as non-essential commodities to Bhutan, through the Covid-19 crisis. This will continue,

going forward. India will always stand alongside Bhutan.

India recently started human trials of Covid-19 vaccines. The Bhutanese government have expressed its interest to be a part of the trials. Would the GoI facilitate any tests in the country any soon?

The Government of India has received information related to Bhutan's interest in being a part of the Covid-19 trials. We understand that private companies who have developed the vaccines will be conducting trials in keeping with the established protocols for such procedures.

The government is trying to revive the economy by initiating some economic activities and by re-prioritising the 12th Plan even as it is challenged with budgetary problems. How is the GoI helping in terms of the 12th Plan budget assistance?

Against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, Bhutan has re-prioritized its 12th Plan activities. The Government of India is pleased to reinforce Bhutan's efforts in minimizing the negative impact of the pandemic on the economy of Bhutan. The fundamental principle of India's development cooperation is respect for our partners, the priorities, wishes and aspirations of the Bhutanese people being the uppermost. In line with this principle, we have agreed to the addition of 10 new priority Projects in the Plan, as identified by Bhutan. This includes assistance to the 'Build Bhutan Project' as part of the Economic Contingency Plan for the skilling and re-employment of Bhutanese in domestic sectors, similar to the 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' scheme of India. As well, a focus on connectivity through the construction of key roads across Bhutan, and hospital infrastructure in Eastern Bhutan.

We are optimistic that these Projects will backstop the new priorities of the Royal Government of Bhutan, with a focus on youth unemployment.