

'Our partnership has been agile in responding to the needs of the time'

The outgoing Ambassador of India to Bhutan, Sudhakar Dalela, speaks with Kuensel Assignment Editor Thukten Zangpo about Bhutan-India relations

As your tenure as Ambassador of India to Bhutan comes to an end, how would you describe the last three years? What is the most notable milestone during your time as Ambassador?

It has been a very fulfilling experience for me. I have had the honour to be associated with the extraordinary India-Bhutan partnership for about two decades, but the kind of energy I have witnessed in our partnership during the post-Covid phase has been unparalleled. It is a testament to the vision and wisdom of Their Majesties of Bhutan and the political leadership of India and Bhutan who have nurtured our close partnership.

It has been a privilege for me to serve in Bhutan to contribute in expanding our exemplary ties of friendship and cooperation, together with friends from Bhutan. My profound gratitude to Their Majesties for their guidance, encouragement and support during my tenure in Bhutan. Each of my conversations with His Majesty the King have been inspiring, and have guided me and my team to be imaginative and do more to deepen our enduring partnership.

While it is difficult for me to choose a particular milestone, what gives me immense satisfaction is that we have managed to place our partnership on a higher, positive trajectory in every sector. This not only includes traditional areas like trade, economic, energy, development cooperation and people-to-people ties but also newer areas such as space sciences, environment, technology, youth engagement and landmark Royal initiatives such as Gelephu Mindfulness City and the Gyalzung National Service Programme.

While our bilateral ties have been strong over the years in traditional sectors like trade, development support, and



hydropower, do you think that both governments have responded to the changing times and expanded cooperation in new areas?

Ours is a close partnership that has witnessed momentous milestones, has constantly adapted to changes, and has always sought to meet shared aspirations for progress, happiness, and mutual prosperity. Today, the India-Bhutan partnership covers diverse sectors, ranging from education to economy; health to hydropower; sports to space; and trade to technology.

We have stepped up development partnership for Bhutan's 13th Five Year Plan, in line with the priorities of the Royal Government of Bhutan. During the State visit of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi to Bhutan in 2024, both sides had

announced a Joint Vision Statement on India-Bhutan Energy Partnership. This provides us with a roadmap for our energy partnership going forward. The recent completion of the 1020MW Punatsangchhu-II project is an outstanding example of the mutually beneficial cooperation we share in the hydropower sector. Both sides are working together for resumption of work on the 1200MW Punatsangchhu-I project.

Beyond traditional areas of collaboration, we are now actively exploring newer domains such as technology partnership, STEM education, skill development, youth engagement, creative sector, sports, climate change and environment, and strengthening cross-border connectivity in its broadest sense to facilitate trade,

investments, and the movement of people. We have jointly identified critical sectors that align with His Majesty's vision and the priorities of the Royal Government, where India can play a collaborative role.

Our partnership has been agile in responding to the needs of the time. As a close friend of Bhutan and its privileged development partner, India is committed to working together to strengthen our enduring partnership, effectively responding to new opportunities.

A special aspect of our partnership has been the bond of friendship between our peoples. Can you highlight some recent steps taken to boost these connections?

Close people-to-people connect and a mutual

feeling of goodwill, friendship and solidarity, are hallmarks of our unique bilateral ties. Our shared cultural and spiritual heritage of Buddhism is the foundational pillar of our partnership. In just a few days, His Holiness Je Khenpo will be presiding over the consecration ceremony of the Royal Bhutan temple at Rajgir. I am sure this will be welcomed by Bhutanese pilgrims visiting Rajgir and will be equally appreciated by Bhutanese scholars studying at the Nalanda University.

Collaboration in education is one of the most important pillars of our partnership. In recent years, we have tried to make educational opportunities in India more attractive for Bhutanese students by increasing the number of scholarship slots and improving the terms of the scholarships. Further, we are focussing on expanding our sporting ties, as well as increasing youth exchanges.

The India-Bhutan Foundation, which I co-chair, has been actively encouraging exchange and interaction between our peoples through effective, short gestation projects in diverse areas such as education, sports, arts, literature, culture, cinema, environment, science and technology, skill development and capacity building.

Through the Nehru Wangchuck Cultural Centre, we have endeavoured to curate interesting conversations and presentations that celebrate the richness and diversity in both our societies. The activities at the Centre have been received with much enthusiasm by our Bhutanese friends.

All in all, with a long history of friendship and solidarity between the peoples of India and Bhutan, I am delighted to see that these ties remain strong, and that both governments continue to foster newer avenues for interactions and exchanges, while looking into the future. » Pg15

'Our partnership has been agile in responding to the needs of the time'

From Pg 13

As India and Bhutan share a long land border, the people on both sides regularly interact and share organic linkages. What efforts have been made by the two countries to facilitate such interactions and boost connectivity?

Strengthening cross-border connectivity remains a critical priority for us, as it plays a vital role in boosting trade, promoting tourism, and stimulating economic activities between our two countries. Under India's Neighbourhood First policy, there is a concerted effort to enhance connectivity in the region.

I firmly believe that the cross-border rail link between the two countries will facilitate trade and the movement of people by providing Bhutan with connectivity to the vast Indian railway network. The Ministry of Railways has completed Detailed Project Reports for two proposed rail links connecting Kokrajhar to Gelephu, and Banarhat to Samtse.

The inauguration of Daranga (Assam), which borders Samdrup Jongkhar (Bhutan), as an immigration check post for third-country nationals, has been one of the major initiatives in this direction. It is expected to boost the regional economy, enhance tourism, and deepen people-to-people ties. Similarly, the Jogighopa multi-modal logistics hub will provide a boost to cross-border connectivity.

I have traveled extensively along the India-Bhutan border: Jaigaon-Phuentsholing, Gelephu-Dadgiri, Samtse-Banarhat, Samdrupjongkhar-Darranga, Pathshala-Nganglam and more recently, Samrang, to assess firsthand what more we could do together to modernize border trade infrastructure, boost cross-border connectivity, and strengthen people-to-people connect. This has been and will continue to remain a priority for us.

In the last almost two decades that you have known Bhutan, what aspects of our country will you take back with you as you move on to the next chapter in your journey?

While I have had the privilege to be associated with the exemplary India-Bhutan partnership for about two decades, it is only through my travels across Bhutan during my tenure as Ambassador that I got an opportunity to experience and understand the beautiful Druk Yul, its people, its rich cultural and spiritual heritage, its diversity, and its unmatched natural environment.

In our travels to Rigsum Gompa, Chorten Kora, Gomphu Kora, the sacred caves in Tundra Aminey, Taktsang, Sangchen Chhoekhor Monastery, Linzhi Dzong, Ap Chhundu Lhakhang, Tango Monastery, Kurje and Tamshing Lhakhangs, Khoma textile heritage village, Rhododendron Festival in Merak, the sacred temple in Bhairakund, and various Tshechus, we have had many personal learning experiences through meeting people who shared their customs, cultural traditions, food, crafts and music with us most graciously. Hearing about experiences of pilgrimages made by Bhutanese friends to Buddhist sites in India allowed me to appreciate the depth and strength of our shared Buddhist connect.

Our travels to Manas, Pangbang, Laya, Phobjikha, Bumdeling, Merak, Sakteng, Jomotsangkha, and Phibsoo enabled us to experience Bhutan's rich biodiversity, natural landscapes, and wild-life habitats.

During our visits to Gyalsung academies, Desuung Skilling Centers, and school and college campuses, we witnessed the enthusiasm, energy, and resolve of Bhutanese youth to acquire a wide range of skill sets to contribute to nation building.

These and numerous visits to border areas and India-Bhutan development projects across Bhutan allowed me to witness firsthand the people-to-people connection and our strong bonds of friendship.

During these travels, what stayed with me most profoundly is the value that the people of Bhutan attach to their rich traditions and culture; the spirit of community engagement and community



vitality which manifests itself during the celebration of Tshechus and local festivals across Bhutan; the manner in which Bhutan is able to strike

a balance between development needs and preservation of environment; and most importantly the resilience, will to excel, warmth and

humility of the people of Bhutan. These are some valuable impressions and learnings that we will carry with us from Bhutan.

Amul

Joy in every sip with Amul T-Special.

PREMIUM DAIRY WHITENER

T-Special

Rich,
Creamy Tea

Right
Consistency

Nu. Affordable
Price

1kg
Nu. 440*

*MRP (Incl. of all taxes). Conditions Apply.