

Remarks by Ambassador Ruchira Kamboj at the Flag-off Ceremony to launch the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme in Bhutan, 27 March 2021

Bhutan and India are two countries whose connection grows a lot deeper than the border we share. As Buddhism touched both our countries, as the Himalayas towered over us, we were destined to be connected. This friendship is beyond a simple diplomatic tie, but rather a deeper knot, dating to the birth of our deities.

Your Majesty;

Hon'ble Chairperson of the National Assembly;

Hon'ble Chairperson of the National Council;

Hon'ble Foreign Minister;

Hon'ble Health Minister;

Hon'ble Dashos;

Ladies and gentlemen;

Kuzuzampo; Namaskar; Good Morning!

Like all Indians, I too have a special love for Bhutan, and whenever I meet you, there is a feeling of being within my own.

The gift of 550,000 doses of the Made-in-India COVISHIELD vaccine is the truest manifestation of the friendship between India and Bhutan, arriving as these do at a time when we are confronted with our own national imperative to scale up vaccinations, following a resurgence of cases in India. This vaccine internationalization is at the heart of the *Maitri* initiative of the Government of India under which we have till date supplied 60.5 million doses of vaccine to more than 75 countries, and under which needless to say, Bhutan was a top priority for immediately being given doses of the vaccine.

The practice of “four immeasurables”, namely loving kindness (*maitri*), compassion (*karuna*), joy (*mudita*) and equanimity (*upeksha*) are central to the teachings of Lord Buddha. *Maitri*- a sublime attitude of friendliness and altruism – is the cherished idea that each one of us is responsible for the happiness of

other beings, besides our own. Through its vaccine diplomacy under the visionary leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India is doing just that. The world is one family, where guided by both a civilisational ethos and a contemporary outlook, we are determined to make a difference at a difficult moment for global society.

Indeed, the India story is one of extraordinary resilience and optimism. India launched the world's largest immunization drive on 16 January 2021 and 300,000 people received the jab on the first day itself. 52 million doses have been administered to Indian citizens and the target is to reach 300 million people by August this year. Calibrating its domestic requirements against its international duties, India began supplying vaccines to its friends and partners across the world soon after it launched its own vaccination drive. India is also supporting the World Health Organization, the GAVI and the UNICEF-led COVAX Facility - nearly 18 million doses of vaccines manufactured in India have been supplied through COVAX to 37 countries.

A word on the vaccine that is to be rolled out today. COVISHIELD is produced by the Serum Institute of India, located in the city of Pune. There is no place in the world which possesses such a manufacturing capacity, and there surely cannot be a nobler mission as the Institute continues to provide affordable yet state-of-the-art life-saving biologicals to people in need. COVISHIELD had received the nod for emergency use from the World Health Organization on 15 February 2021, and by all accounts, is a low-cost, logistically-manageable and safe vaccine with proven efficacy. Through the Institute's monumental efforts, a multitude of countries have already been given doses of the COVISHIELD vaccine and a multitude of lives are potentially being saved daily.

Truly, *Vaccine Maitri* is a validation of India's reputation as not only a world leader in high quality vaccine manufacturing but also a responsible actor in the international arena. At a time when "vaccine nationalism" is in the news for the wrong reasons, India is a shining example of human-centric global cooperation, where it will utilize its growing capacity for the benefit of human kind.

It has been India's honor to stand resolute by the Royal Government, and as Bhutan gets set to embark on its mass vaccination programme, it is our privilege to wish His Majesty, members of the Royal Family and the people and the Government of Bhutan health, healing and prosperity.

I am delighted and truly honored today to join this event.

Tashi Delek!
