

“Tap, Pay, Go”
Op-Ed by Ambassador Ruchira Kamboj

In August 2019, while addressing the students at the Royal University of Bhutan, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had said that **no two countries** in the world understand each other so well or share so much as India and Bhutan, and that New Delhi and Thimphu are “natural partners” in bringing prosperity to their people.

These words embody the spirit of India - Bhutan collaboration, one that never ceases to keep pace with the demands of our ever changing world.

India and Bhutan stand out as an epitome of exceptional neighbourly relations - a bond that is beyond a mere political tie but instead, is one of friendship and compassion. The friendship is rooted in our Dharma, a sacred thread binding our two countries, carving our connected spiritual heritage. So what we do here in Bhutan is not diplomacy, but instead an authentic friendship we choose each day.

Ours is a bond with a proud legacy of supporting each other over decades. But simultaneously one that is not frozen in time. India and Bhutan are together stepping into the future with confidence and poise, determined to better the lives of our people. His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo's philosophy of Gross National Happiness and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of *Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas* (Together with all, Development for all, Trust of all) is the ideal that inspires us.

Whether it is a project to design and build a satellite from scratch or a project to create a free information highway - our two countries are committed to projects that use cutting-edge technology to give wings to the human imagination.

For example, fin-tech is one of the fastest growing sectors in India, with an endless array of applications that improve the daily lives of people. Whether it's scanning a QR code to instantly pay for a cup of coffee (without having to rummage through your bag for cash) or transferring money to a friend at the click of a button using your smartphone, technology has made the movement of money quick and seamless. With over 1,300 fintech start-

ups and investments worth USD 5.7 billion from 2014–2018, India has been spearheading many fintech initiatives, providing the canvas for creation and growth. For two friends that are rooted in tradition yet ever ready to embrace the future, fin-tech opens up a new world of possibilities for cooperation.

And thus, I would like to say that today is indeed a special day for India and Bhutan.

In August 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi undertook a successful state visit to Bhutan, shortly after winning the general election for a second term. The Joint Statement from that visit became a vision document for our two countries to elevate our engagement.

Notwithstanding the obstacles posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, the technical teams from the Royal Monetary Authority of Bhutan and the National Payments Corporation of India collaborated on bringing BHIM- a popular mobile payments application in India- to Bhutan.

The result in practical terms? Any Indian national can now make quick and easy payments in Bhutan by simply scanning the merchant's QR code with his/her BHIM application. The money will move smoothly from an Indian bank account to a bank account in Bhutan, obviating the need for Indian nationals to carry cash to Bhutan. It also gives Bhutanese merchants and shopkeepers a new option to accept payments in addition to cash and card from Indian nationals.

The option to make payments at Bhutan's cafes and shops will also incentivise spending by Indian nationals, who are expected to visit Bhutan in large numbers once the pandemic abates, given Bhutan's formidable reputation as a top travel destination.

All up - this is yet another illustration of a cooperation that undoubtedly benefits both sides.

Today's success also builds on the earlier accomplishments of the RuPay card, a global card payment network from India, which was introduced in Bhutan in two phases.

Phase I launched during Prime Minister Modi's visit to Bhutan in August 2019 made it possible for RuPay cards issued in India to be accepted at POS terminals across Bhutan.

Phase II launched in November 2020 made the reverse a reality- RuPay cards issued by Bhutanese banks are now accepted across the length and breadth of India. Even in the absence of tourism due to the travel constraints imposed by the global pandemic, the Indian issued Rupay cards have seen a transaction value of around Nu 40 million at Bhutan's ATMs and PoS terminals. Similarly, around 2400 RuPay cards have been issued by Bhutan since November 2020 with a transaction volume of over Rs 4 million.

Since it is people who are truly at the heart of the India-Bhutan friendship, this single step of financial integration between our two economies will greatly benefit the people of our two countries. One cannot imagine visiting a foreign country without withdrawing cash and converting the currency in advance. I am proud to say that Bhutan and India are an exception to this rule.

As "*Tap, pay, go*" quickly becomes the new mantra of the payments industry, India and Bhutan are committed to further explore avenues of collaboration, not only in fintech, but in all areas which allow us to leverage technology for a better future. But for now, we can pat ourselves on the back.

Congratulations India and Bhutan for achieving yet another milestone of bilateral cooperation!
