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India and Bhutan continue to build on present multi-faceted ties: Indian Ambassador

Indian Ambassador to Bhutan Ruchira Kumboj says that 'India and Bhutan continue to build on present multi-faceted ties' in an interview with Bhutan TODAY on the occasion of 73rd Republic Day of India.

By Puran Gurung
Thimphu

BT: India has come a long way since 1947. What are some of the defining moments in the making of a sovereign socialist democratic republic Bharat as it celebrates the spirit of democracy with the marking of the 73rd Republic Day celebrations this year?

IA: The founding principles of the Indian Republic speak to the values of democracy, justice, equality, liberty and fraternity. India's constitutional vision guarantees fundamental rights to all citizens of the country without exception. Despite however being a nation of astounding cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity, India remains strongly united. One of the earliest instances of democracy were found in the Republics of ancient India. Today, Indian elections are the largest democratic

exercises in human history. 912 million voters were eligible to vote in the general

elections held in 2019. India guarantees to its citizens an array of constitutional rights- most significantly, the right to freedom of speech and expression, right to equality, right to the freedom of religion and cultural and educational rights.

A defining moment in our journey as a young Republic has been the transformational economic changes that have pulled people out of poverty and put the Indian economy on the fast track to growth and prosperity. In the 1950's, India had a growth rate of 3.5% and 72% of the total working population was engaged in agriculture. Fast forward to today: India is the world's fastest



growing major economy and is expected to be one of the top three economic powers in the world over the next 10-15 years. The recently released World Economic Outlook published by the International Monetary Fund projects India to grow by 9% in 2022. India is abound with tales of multi-million businesses that started out of small shops and minimal work-spaces, a testament to our capacity to imagine and innovate. India is home to 84 unicorns with a total valuation of more than USD 240 billion. India added 44 unicorns in the last one year alone and is expected to add another 45 this year! India is the third largest start-up ecosystem in the world;

more than 10,000 start-ups have registered in the last six months alone!

Truly,

India's progress since independence has been remarkable. The pace of infrastructure construction has doubled in the last five years. We are today a country with one of the cheapest data connectivity in the world. Under our Jal Jeevan Mission, safe drinking water will be provided to every household by 2024. The India of today is also a hub of ideas, innovation and leadership in the field of technology, including space. Analysts have said that this decade will indeed be a "techade" for Indian companies and businesses. Under the Make in India Initiative, there is a renewed thrust on transforming India into a global

design and manufacturing hub. This is in consonance with Prime Minister Modi's vision of an Aatmanirbhar Bharat- a self-reliant and progressive India. To counter gender inequality on a war footing, India is providing opportunities in employment and education to its women. We are also powering our growth keeping our green credentials intact. At the recently held COP 26 in Glasgow, Prime Minister Modi pledged to increase India's non-fossil fuel power generation capacity to 500GW and meet 50% of its energy requirements from renewable sources by the end of this decade. The International Solar Alliance launched by India and France in 2015 captures India's dedication to harnessing solar power. The intangible cultural heritage of Yoga, the alternative medicine system of Ayurveda, and Bol-

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India and Bhutan continue to build on present multi-faceted ties: Indian Ambassador

...Pg 01 lywood, - India's multi-billion dollar film industry - have all added to India's rise globally. Our 75th Independence Day on 15 August this year will be a celebration of this spirit - the pride of Sanatan India juxtaposed with the glow of modern India!

BT: One of the key achievements of democratic India has been, and still is, befriending its neighbouring nations in their developmental efforts of which Bhutan is one of the key partners following India's expansive foreign policy encompassing neighbourhood first policy. How do you think that the close ties of friendship between the two nations have blossomed over the years?

IA: The India-Bhutan friendship since its inception has been nurtured by the wise and visionary leadership of Their Majesties, as well as successive Indian leaders, who have set an example for the entire world of exceptional neighbourly relations. Relations since 1914 in particular, have been on a fast track.

Prime Minister Modi chose Bhutan as his first overseas visit after the 2014 general elections in India and again visited Bhutan in a historic August 2019 visit, shortly after being re-elected for a second term. On the occasion of Bhutan's 114th National Day, His Majesty the King of Bhutan conferred upon Prime Minister Modi the Order of the Druk Gyalpo - Bhutan's highest civilian honour. In his response to this exceptional gesture of friendship, PM had clearly enunciated his admiration for Bhutan's unique model of sustainable development and the deeply spiritual way of life, and reiterated that India will always cherish Bhutan as one of its closest friends and neighbors.

India's development partnership is a key pillar of our specially privileged relationship with Bhutan. Our policies are directed at improving the lives of people, whether it is hospitals, an ambulance project, institutes of higher learning, construction of homes, upgradation of skills and capacities or the restoration of Dzongs. We choose a people-centric and human-centric approach marked by respect, diversity and sustainable development. Importantly, our development cooperation does not come

with any prescriptive or extractive conditions. It is and will always be guided by the priorities of Bhutan.

The India-Bhutan model of cooperation in the hydro-power sector is emblematic of what two countries inspired by a common vision can accomplish together. Our projects have assured clean energy supply for India and have also driven Bhutan's economic growth. The partnership is thus a perfect example of win-win cooperation between two friends. We have seen the resilience of hydro power sector in the recent Covid-19 pandemic period. In 2020 while almost all sectors of the economy contracted, the hydro-power sector continued to grow by as much as 30% and exported electricity worth Nu 27 billion.

In addition to the traditional sectors of cooperation, we have been proactive in exploring new areas of mutual interest. In line with His Majesty's vision of harnessing space technology for accelerated socio-economic development, India and Bhutan are currently collaborating on the development of a satellite. In 2017, we had launched the South Asia Satellite to benefit our neighbouring countries. Bhutan also has a designated transponder on this satellite, which is being used for enhancing coverage of the Bhutan Broadcasting Service, for disaster management and for providing connectivity to remote gewogs in the Kingdom.

Financial technology is another promising area of bilateral cooperation, given the fact that fin-tech innovation and adoption in countries is associated with a higher annual GDP growth rate. We have launched the RuPay project, a flagship digital project, aimed at harnessing the benefits of financial integration between our two economies. More than 3500 RuPay cards have been issued by banks in Bhutan for Bhutanese transiting and traveling through India for education, work, medical needs and tourism and we expect this figure to grow exponentially once the pandemic abates.

The Bharat Interface for Money (BHIM) App, launched in July 2021 is yet another step in facilitating trade, tourism and the people-to-people connect. The app will allow Indian tourists to make cashless transactions when they visit Bhutan, thereby boosting

Bhutan's economy.

On trade connectivity, India has recently formalised the opening of seven new trade routes for Bhutan's bilateral and transit trade with India. This will improve access of Bhutanese exports to the Indian market. Bhutanese agri-producers have been matched with Indian supermarket chains for commercial supply of Bhutanese agri-products, particularly organic produce, to India. India and Bhutan are also exploring the establishment of an Entrepreneurship Development Institute in Bhutan in order to provide more startup opportunities for youth in the country. We recently mentored over 200 Bhutanese start-ups and entrepreneurs under a virtual start-up mentorship program. And all this while, the ITEC scheme continues to be on offer, for the benefit of our Bhutanese friends, currently online, in sync with the times.

India is also delivering on digital connectivity to Bhutan by providing high speed bandwidth through the National Knowledge Network-DrukREN peering arrangement. The network is being actively used by active DrukREN members including Bhutan's top universities, colleges and hospitals for education, research, e-governance and tele-medicine. The Royal Government plans to add all schools in Bhutan to the NKN-DrukREN network which will bolster Bhutan's efforts at digital inclusion.

The E-library project complements Bhutan's efforts at digital transformation and e-learning. The project includes the development of an e-library portal, establishment of a data centre in Thimphu Tech Park, creation and management of e-content and the creation of e-libraries in 49 schools and 12 colleges in each district of Bhutan. The project is presently benefiting 1.6 lakh high-school students and 9800 college-going students, particularly useful in these pandemic times when digital classrooms have become the norm.

Education has always been a priority for our two countries. India provides 375 scholarships at the undergraduate level to deserving Bhutanese students in various professional streams. In addition to this, we offer to our Bhutanese friends a wide range of scholarships such as

the Ambassador's Scholarship, the Nehru Wangchuck Scholarship, the Nalanda University Scholarship, the ICCR Undergraduate Engineering Scholarship, the AYUSH Scholarship as well as the SAARC Scholarships at the Forest Research Institute, Dehradun. The St. Stephens Fellows Programme for Bhutan is presently on offer! More than 1000 Bhutanese students in India were awarded the Ambassador's scholarship recently.

We are also focusing on awarding scholarships for Bhutanese students to study at premier Indian institutes such as IIT Gandhinagar, IIT Kanpur, IIT Bombay, NIT Silchar and AIIMS. Currently, there are 12 young Bhutanese nationals studying at the Indian Institutes of Technology. STEM education will create the next generation of innovators and critical thinkers in Bhutan.

BT: India is considered one of the potential superpowers of the world given its demographic trends, a rapidly expanding economy and the technological advancements. Will this have any implication on India's geopolitical approach towards its Asian neighbors, and for that matter Bhutan?

IA: India's destiny is inextricably linked with its neighbourhood. With all our neighbours, we enjoy unique and special ties of geography, culture and history. Speaking at the United Nations General Assembly in 2019, Prime Minister Modi had said that India has given Buddh not Yuddh to the world and has always espoused harmony, consensus building and peace. The Prime Minister had also stated that India does not eye anyone's territory and resources and that its model of development assistance is not based on "give and take." He had added that India views its relationship with other countries through the prism of human values and not through the prism of profit and loss.

As a young democracy and an ancient civilization, India is a responsible power. Our rise will inevitably benefit other countries, as our foreign policy is rooted in our spiritual ethos of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam which means that we see the world as one family. Just as a rising tide lifts all boats, India as an economic and political power will stand for the

global good and not solely for its selfish ends. One recent illustration of this has been India's leadership in vaccine equity and vaccine accessibility. Under the Vaccine Maitri Program, India supplied a total of 107.15 lakh doses of vaccines to 44 countries as a grant and 357.92 lakh doses commercially to those who bought from India-based manufacturers. Bhutan was the first country to receive vaccines under India's Vaccine Maitri Program. A total of 550,000 doses of Covishield were gifted to the Government and the people of Bhutan in early 2021 which created the momentum for a nationwide mass vaccination program.

India has also taken a leadership role on significant global issues such as climate change, terrorism, conflict resolution and peace-building, sustainable development and global health governance. In short, we will continue to be a force for good in the neighbourhood, being fully committed to improve the well-being of the region.

BT: In your Ambassadorship, the two countries have forged the India-Bhutan relationship in a multitude of ways. What other lines of partnership do you foresee that will mutually benefit both the countries?

IA: India and Bhutan continue to build on present multi-faceted ties. In addition to the traditional sectors of cooperation, the focus is now on new areas: space science & technology, information technology, fintech, cooperation in the STEM sector, start-ups and innovation, energy conservation and efficiency and digital and emerging technologies. Education will continue to be an important component of the privileged India-Bhutan friendship.

Today, we can all learn from Bhutan's unique development model. We can all learn from Bhutan's path of progress, one which has chosen not to abandon the heart of its culture and the beauty of its values.

It is India's honour to have a neighbour like Bhutan. We are proud to stand alongside Bhutan as we continue to exemplify our special thuenlam, everyday.