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Valedictory Address by Foreign Secretary at the Conference on "India-Bhutan Relations: The Road Ahead"

December 05, 2018

(Organized jointly by the Indian Council for World Affairs, New Delhi and the Royal Institute for Governance and Strategic Studies, Bhutan on 4 December 2018)

It is a privilege to be here at the Sapru House at the valedictory session of the Conference on India-Bhutan relations, organized jointly by the Indian Council for World Affairs and the Royal Institute for Governance and Strategic Studies of Bhutan.

At the outset, let me thank the ICWA and RIGGS for their joint initiative in organizing the Conference in the Golden Jubilee year of diplomatic relations between India and Bhutan. It was in the year 1968, fifty years ago, that our resident representative Late Mr. B. S. Das, presented a letter from our Prime Minister to His Majesty, the Third King of Bhutan, and the foundation stone of the India House in Thimphu was laid by the Prime Minister of India.

I am happy that the Conference has deliberated upon the fundamental drivers of India-Bhutan ties, the challenges facing our region such as climate change, terrorism and disaster management, and ways to advance this wide-ranging bilateral partnership in the coming years.

I would like to particularly express my appreciation to all the eminent speakers and participants from both India and Bhutan who have enriched the Conference with their valuable insights and suggestions.

India and Bhutan share extraordinary ties of friendship and cooperation marked by mutual understanding, goodwill and respect for each others' interests. It is a partnership forged not only by our shared experiences but also by close historical and cultural ties, contacts at all levels that have existed for several centuries. And, to my mind, at the heart of India-Bhutan friendship is the belief that we have each other's interest at heart.

We have vital stakes in each other's progress and well being, and in peace and prosperity in the region. Indeed, our time tested relations serve as an exemplary model of good neighborly relations for the rest of the world.

But our partnership has shown remarkable capacity to adapt with the contemporary times. The updated India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty of 2007 provides a solid foundation for development of our friendly ties in this Century.

That our bilateral ties have continuously maintained an upward growth trajectory is testimony to the wisdom and vision of the Druk Gyalpos of Bhutan and the successive governments in India, who have imparted character, direction and substance to this relationship, and nurtured it for mutual benefit.

The Golden Jubilee celebrations this year witnessed a vibrant set of almost fifty commemorative events and exchanges. It began with External Affairs Minister of India and former Foreign Minister of Bhutan opening the events in February this year. It covered a number of cultural and sporting activities across different cities in India and Bhutan that truly capture the essence of our enduring friendship.

The opening of the Consulate of the Royal Government of Bhutan in Guwahati this year, the Festival of Assam in Thimphu, the Bhutanese Film Festival held in Sikkim, the recognition accorded to Indian teachers who have contributed to education sector in Bhutan, have highlighted our robust people to people ties, especially involving the bordering States in India.

Of special importance to us, something which we really felt was very special this year, was the first ever official visit of His Holiness Je Khenpo to Bihar in the Golden Jubilee year, in fact just last month, where he laid the foundation stone of a Bhutanese temple in Rajgir. This is of immense significance and underscores the spiritual context the two countries have.

The Bhutan Week celebrations were held in New Delhi in September. This was the largest event by Bhutan ever held in India, and Hon'ble Vice President of India was the chief guest at the opening of the event. With participation of over 300 participants from Bhutan, it gave an experience first-hand to many Indians, particularly younger ones, on the rich cultural heritage of Bhutan, its arts and crafts, cuisine, textile, and enchanting music and dance traditions.

As we celebrate our friendship and exemplary bilateral partnership, the Golden Jubilee year provided us an excellent opportunity to reflect upon new pathways to further expand this unique partnership, which meets the aspirations of the two peoples.

Both India and Bhutan have witnessed momentous changes and unprecedented economic growth and prosperity over the past five decades. Bhutan gave itself a Constitution and ushered in a democratic constitutional monarchy under the guidance of Their Majesties, the Kings of Bhutan. The recently concluded third election in Bhutan is a testament to the strong democratic institutions and processes that have now taken roots in Bhutan.

Bhutan has given the world a unique development paradigm where preservation of cultural traditions and economic advancement go hand in hand, where there is a value placed on the happiness quotient and where emphasis is laid on the protection of the environment and on sustainable development.

It has been India's privilege to be a close partner of Bhutan in its nation building efforts and socio-economic transformation. Besides regular high-level political exchanges that have taken place between governments, we are now interacting closely at the level of Parliamentarians, constitutional institutions, civil society and the media, all of whom constitute important pillars in a democratic polity.

Today, the canvas of India-Bhutan relations encompasses almost all areas of human endeavor. Our robust development partnership has translated into a number of successful projects and initiatives that are positively impacting the lives of Bhutanese citizens.

Over the years, this mutually beneficial co-operation has been anchored in the remarkable cooperation in the energy sector. This year, we hope to commission the flagship 720 MWs Mangdechhu hydro-power project, hopefully this month itself. We are working together on a number of ongoing and planned projects, which promise to ensure that our relationship in this sector continue in the future.

Enhancing connectivity – in its widest possible definition - is a central pillar of our 'Neighbourhood First' and the 'Act East' Policy. Our focus on boosting connectivity has contributed in expanding trade and economic opportunities and forging knowledge partnerships with Bhutan.

While the cooperation in conventional sectors such as education, health, information technology, skill development continues to grow, our cooperation with Bhutan has also expanded to new frontiers such as space technology where the South Asia Satellite provides new opportunities to the people of Bhutan and which can provide access to wide ranging applications such as disaster management, weather forecasting and communications.

As one of the world's fastest growing economies, the Indian market offers tremendous opportunities to the business communities from our two countries. Both our countries are blessed with the young population. New technologies and social innovations are pushing our societies to continuously adapt. It is incumbent on us to respond to the expectations and aspirations of our youth and adapt to the rapid changes taking place around us.

As Bhutan enters its 12th Five Year Plan, India stands firmly committed to partner Bhutan in its quest for bringing greater prosperity and happiness to its peoples. While doing so, it is incumbent that we respect the priorities of the people and government of Bhutan.

I am glad that the topic of Gross National Happiness was deliberated upon in the Conference. This is an enlightened concept, which is Bhutan's gift to the world. We, in India, are much in awe of Bhutan's philosophy of Gross National Happiness as an indicator of economic well being and growth. We should be incorporating the happiness dimension in our educational curricula.

I have had the honour of visiting Bhutan thrice during this Golden Jubilee year. During every visit, I discover new strands of complementarities between India and Bhutan that can be maximized for mutual benefit.

As we look into the future, we see a positive trajectory for India-Bhutan relations, with expanded engagement in pursuit of common prosperity and happiness for our two peoples.

Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi's motto of 'Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas' is also echoed in Prime Minister Dr. Lotay Tshering's call for 'Narrowing the Gap'. These are complementary visions for inclusive development. As a friend and close partner, India is committed to harnessing the true potential for growth of cooperative ties with Bhutan, and exploring newer avenues for advancing it further. The Road ahead for India-Bhutan ties is one of tremendous potential and opportunities.

Before I conclude, allow me once again to thank the ICWA and RIGSS for this timely initiative.

Thank you!

Tashi Delek!

New Delhi,
December 4, 2018



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