

NEW DIMENSIONS OF INDO-BHUTANESE RELATIONS

Dr.Saroj Choudhary

*Assistant Professor, ALS
Amity University Madhya Pradesh*

Introduction

The bilateral relations between the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan and the Republic of India have been traditionally close and both countries share a 'special relationship'.¹ Diplomatic relations between India and Bhutan were established in 1968 with the appointment of a resident representative of India in Thimphu. Before this our relations with Bhutan were looked after by our Political Officer in Sikkim. The basic framework of India – Bhutan bilateral relations is the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation of 1949 between the two countries, which was updated and signed during the visit to India of His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck in February 2007.² The updated India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty not only reflects the contemporary nature of our relationship but also lays the foundation for their future development in the 21st century. The Treaty provides, amongst other things, for perpetual peace and friendship, free trade and commerce, and equal justice to each other's citizens. Our bilateral political relations with Bhutan have matured over the years and are characterised by close trust and understanding and extensive cooperation in the field of economic development, particularly in the mutually beneficial sector of hydroelectric power.³

The Treaty of 1949

On August 8, 1949 Bhutan and India signed the Treaty of Friendship, calling for peace between the two nations and non-interference in each other's internal affairs.⁴ However, Bhutan agreed to let India "guide" its foreign policy and both nations would consult each other closely on foreign and defense affairs. The treaty also established free trade and extradition protocols.⁵

The occupation of Tibet by Communist China brought both nations even closer. In 1958, the then-Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru visited Bhutan and reiterated India's support for Bhutan's independence and later declared in the Indian Parliament that any aggression against Bhutan would be seen as aggression against India.⁶

The 2007 Treaty

India re-negotiated the 1949 treaty with Bhutan and signed a new treaty of friendship in 2007. The new treaty replaced the provision requiring Bhutan to take India's guidance on foreign policy with broader sovereignty and not require Bhutan to obtain India's permission over arms imports.⁷

In 2008, India's then Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh visited Bhutan and expressed strong support for Bhutan's move towards democracy. India allows 16 entries and exit points for Bhutanese trade with other countries (the only exception being the PRC) and has agreed to develop and import a minimum of 10,000 megawatts of electricity from Bhutan by 2021.⁸

¹ Narendra Modi leaves for Bhutan on his first foreign visit as PM, The Economic Times, Jun 15, 2014, 10.08 AM IST

² Indo-Bhutan Relations, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India
<https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bhutan-February-2012.pdf>

³ *id*

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhutan%E2%80%93India_relations (1 March, 2017)

⁵ *id*

⁶ Sudha Ramachandran, India, Bhutan: No more unequal treaties, Asia Times Online, Jan 17, 2007s

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhutan%E2%80%93India_relations (1 March, 2017)

⁸ *id*

Economic Cooperation

- Mutually beneficial economic inter-linkages between India and Bhutan have been an important element in our bilateral relations. India continues to be the largest trade and development partner of Bhutan. Planned development efforts in Bhutan began in the early 1960s. The First Five Year Plan (FYP) of Bhutan was launched in 1961. Since then, India has been extending financial assistance to Bhutan's FYPs. So far, nine Five Year Plans of Bhutan have been completed.
- Some of the major projects in Bhutan carried out with Indian assistance in the past include 1020 MW Tala Hydroelectric Project, 336 MW Chukha Hydroelectric Project, 60 MW Kurichhu Hydroelectric Project, Penden Cement Plant, Paro Airport, Bhutan Broadcasting Station, Major Highways, Electricity Transmission and Distribution System, Indo-Bhutan Microwave Link, Exploration of Mineral Resources, and Survey and Mapping.
- Ninth Five-Year Plan (2002-2008): GOI assistance to Ninth Five Year Plan (2002-08) of Bhutan was Rs. 2610.14 crore. This included Rs 907 crore for project tied assistance, Rs 820 crore as Programme grant and rest as various refunds and subsidies. Major GoI assisted projects completed in the Ninth Plan include 350 bedded JDWNR Hospital in Thimphu, Regional Referral Hospital in Mongar, Phase I of double-laning of Thimphu-Phuentsholing road, double laning of Paro-Chuzom road, construction of 10 new schools, 306 low income housing units, Renovation of Semtokha Dzong, two Youth Centres, RENEW Centre, Human Resource Development, Telecommunications and projects in agriculture and allied sectors. GoI also funded feasibility studies for establishing rail linkages between border towns of India and Bhutan.
- Tenth Five –Year Plan (2008-13): The Government of India committed assistance worth Rs. 3400 crores during the 10th FYP. This includes Project tied Assistance (Rs 2000 crore for about 70 projects in key socio-economic sectors such as agriculture, ICT, media, health/ hospitals, education/ schools, capacity building, energy, culture and infrastructure etc), Programme Grant (Rs 700 cr.) and the Small Development Projects (Rs 700 cr.). During his address to the Joint Session of the Bhutanese Parliament in May 2008, Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh informed that the total bilateral economic engagement with Bhutan over the next five years to be of the order of Rs./ Nu. 100 billion.
- Some of the important projects being executed under the 10th Plan include construction of Supreme Court, strengthening of Constitutional Officers such as Royal Audit Authority, Election Commission, anti-Corruption Commission and Attorney General, renovation of major Dzongs, preparation of DPRs for major power projects, widening of major roads, scholarships and expansion of tertiary educational institutions. The regular Project Monitoring Committee (PMC) meetings and Plan Talks comprising concerned GoI and RGoB members are held regularly to monitor implementation of various projects.
- Mega Projects: In addition to the GOI assistance mentioned in the above para, GOI also provides support to Bhutan to develop various other developmental projects known as mega projects due to their size.⁹

High Level Visits

1. India's President's visits to Bhutan

- i. Shri V.V. Giri in April 1970 and June 1974
- ii. Shri R. Venkataraman in October 1988
- iii. Smt. Pratibha Devi Singh Patil in November 2008

2. India's Prime Minister's visits to Bhutan

- i. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in 1958
- ii. Smt. Indira Gandhi in 1968
- iii. Shri Rajiv Gandhi in October 1985 and September 1988
- iv. Dr. Manmohan Singh in May 2008 (State Visit)
- v. Dr. Manmohan Singh in April 2010 (for 16th SAARC Summit)

3. Visit of H.M. Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, the King of Bhutan to India

- i. In February 2007 as Crown Prince
- ii. In December 2009 (State visit)
- iii. In October 2010 (to Delhi and Kolkata)

⁹ *id*

iv. In October 2011 (State visit by H.M. the King & and H.M. the Queen, Ashi Jetsun Pema Wangchuck)

4. Visits of Prime Minister of Bhutan, Lyonchen Jigmi Y. Thinley to India

i. In July 2008

ii. In July 2009 (to felicitate the new Government in India)

iii. In Sept 2010 (to Bodh Gaya)

iv. In Sept 2011 (to Kolkata)

v. In Dec 2011 (To deliver the 4th Prof. Hiren Mukherjee Memorial Annual Parliamentary Lecture at Central Hall of Parliament in New Delhi).

Educational and Cultural Cooperation

- There is close bilateral cooperation in the educational and cultural fields between India and Bhutan. India provides technical expertise and services of specialists to Bhutan in various fields.
- Government of India scholarships are granted to 85 Bhutanese students at undergraduate level and 77 at postgraduate level every year in Indian Institutions of higher learning.
- ITEC /TCS of Colombo Plan (80 slots) training slots are provided to Bhutan every year. Ambassador's scholarships are granted to meritorious and deserving students for studies in India.
- Ten Bhutanese students are admitted to Sainik schools in India and all expenditure is borne by the GOI.
- During his visit to Bhutan, Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh announced the government of India's decision to institute a Nehru-Wangchuck Scholarship to encourage students from Bhutan to study in leading Indian universities and institutions. The scholarship has already been implemented.
- A large number of Bhutanese students study in Indian schools and colleges on private basis. To facilitate this, the Education Consultants of India Limited held a seminar- cum-counselling Session in Bhutan in May 2007 for the benefit of Bhutanese students desirous of pursuing further studies in India. Bhutan's Sherubtse College is affiliated to Delhi University. About 30 India-based lecturers are posted to this College under the TCS of Colombo Plan.
- Nehru-Wangchuck Cultural Centre: Dr. Karan Singh, President, Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), GoI, and Lyonpo Minjur Dorji, Minister for Home and Cultural Affairs, RGoB jointly inaugurated the "Nehru-Wangchuck Cultural Centre" at Thimphu on 21st September 2010.¹⁰

¹⁰ Indo-Bhutan Relations, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India
<https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bhutan-February-2012.pdf>