

Prime Minister's Visit to Bhutan

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Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to Bhutan is timely and appropriate. Cooperation with neighbouring countries is one of the priorities of Bangladesh's foreign policy. The visit is a testimony to this theme.

She left on 6th November for a four-day visit to Bhutan (formal name, Druk Yul-the land of the Thunder Dragon) that lies north to Bangladesh and is separated by 30 km. of Indian territory from Bangladesh. The Prime Minister returns on 9th November.

It is noted that the Prime Minister arrived on the day of the second anniversary of the assumption on the throne of the King of Bhutan. A 24-member delegation including the Foreign Minister Dr. Dipu Moni accompanies the Prime Minister.

It is reported that the Prime Minister was accorded a warm welcome on her arrival at Paro Airport located at the altitude of 6840 feet surrounded by mountains. She was received by Bhutan's Prime Minister Jigme Y Thinley and his wife.

The Prime Minister was led in a procession from the airport to Thimpu, Bhutan's capital city- a 90- minute drive where school children and Bhutanese people lined up the highway with Bangladesh's flag.

The visit of the Prime Minister is her first to any SAARC country after her assumption of office as the head of the government on 6th January 2009.

The Prime Minister is expected to meet with the King, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk, former King Jigme Singye Wangchuk , Prime Minister Jigme Thinley and other dignitaries.

The issues that are likely to be discussed are: increasing trade, opening more transit land points between Bangladesh and Bhutan, transit rights for Bhutan's use of Bangladesh's sea ports, combating effects of climate change, export of hydro-power and fighting poverty in South Asia. A Trade Agreement is expected to be signed between the two countries, replacing the 1980 Agreement during the visit.

Bangladesh Prime Minister is expected to hand over some earthquake relief materials to her counterpart on 7th November. On 21st September, Bhutan was hit by the 6.1 magnitude earthquake in which at least 10 people died and damaged monasteries and caused homes to collapse in the country.

Bhutan is a tiny mountainous kingdom in the Himalayas, almost one- third the size of Bangladesh with a population of about 2,000,000. The country is widely acclaimed as the Asian answer to Switzerland with a distinctly mesmerizing and authentic oriental aura.

The majority of the people are of Tibetan extraction. In the south and south-west the ethnic mix is dominated by Nepalese Hindu settlers while the majority are Buddhists of the Drukpa sect, introduced from Tibet (Tantric Buddhism) in the 12 century. 25% percent are Nepalese Hindus and only 5% Muslims.

It is a land-locked country and naturally is dependent on India's transit rights for its trade and economic relations.. Until the early 70s, the country did not feel the need to extend its relations with other countries.

The 1949 Peace and friendship Treaty with India, revised in 2007, states that both the countries would cooperate closely with each other on issues relating to their national interests and not allow the use of their territories for activities harmful to the national security and interest of one another.

Bilateral Relations:

Bhutan was the second country to recognise Bangladesh on 7th December, 1971 after India that recognized on 6th December 1972..

While remaining closely allied with India, Bhutan has attempted to assert its policy in foreign relations. In 1971 Bhutan became a member of the UN with the support of India. It has opened a few diplomatic missions including one in Bangladesh

The former King, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, was crowned as the 4th King in 1972 at the age of 19. Bangladesh leaders were present at the ceremony.

As early as April, 1972 both countries expressed desires to establish close relations. However Bhutan was cautious to establish its resident diplomatic mission located in Bangladesh partly because of the Indo- Bhutan Agreement of 1949 under which Bhutan was obliged to consult India in foreign affairs.

.The first official commercial contact between Bhutan and Bangladesh began in late 70s and in 1978 Bangladesh trade delegation led by the Secretary of Ministry of Commerce paid a visit to discuss the prospect of bilateral trade between the two countries. It has to be recognised that trade between the two can be conducted through the territory of India and transit rights through the Indian territory are vital for both countries to develop trade relations.

The trade agreement was finally concluded in September, 1980. Bangladesh opened its diplomatic mission in January, 1980 headed by a resident Ambassador. Likewise Bhutan reciprocated the diplomatic gesture by appointing an Ambassador in Bangladesh in the same year.

The King visited Bangladesh in 1974 (28-30 December) and attended the SAARC Summits in Dhaka in 1985 and 1993. The Prime Minister of Bhutan attended the SAARC

Summit in 2005 in Dhaka. President Ershad visited Bhutan in 1987 and discussed the measures to prevent floods in Bangladesh.

Bilateral trade has grown, though modest, but rapidly. Bangladesh imports from Bhutan mainly boulders, dolomite, gypsum, dust coal, slate, graphite, timber and fruit products (jelly and jam) and exports principally to Bhutan consumer goods, pharmaceuticals, jute products, newsprint, chemicals, detergents, light machinery and parts. During 2005-06, Bangladesh was able to export goods worth about \$1.7million dollars.

Bhutan's Seed Corporation signed an agreement in February 2000 with a non-government organisation (BRAC) in Bangladesh to supply onion and radish seeds. Bhutan airlines operate in Bangladesh and people to people contact has increased considerably.

Bhutan has surplus hydropower, originated from construction of dams by India, which could be exported to the neighbouring countries including Bangladesh.

When the new Ambassador of Bhutan presented his credentials to the President of Bangladesh on 20 May 2009, the Ambassador reportedly showed keen interest in importing ready-made garments and pharmaceutical products. The President told him that Bangladesh is keen to import its huge hydro-power for Bangladesh.

Both countries share common experience in living within the strategic environment of powerful neighbours—China and India. Both nations are members of SAARC and are keen to develop the regional forum into a dynamic and vibrant one.

Both countries are Least-Developed Countries and have common approach to economic related policies in the multi-national forums. Both joined the Non-Aligned Movement in 1973.. Both are parties to the 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The visit will further strengthen bilateral relations between the peoples of the two countries.

Democracy in Bhutan:

The year 2008 saw a tremendous change in Bhutan. The King abdicated his throne in 2006 and decided to bring democracy in the country.

First the King called polls to choose people's representatives to the upper chamber of parliament (Gyelyong Tshogde) and thereafter the King allowed elections on 24th March 2008 for a parliament (Tshogdu) on a non-partisan basis, achieving a turnout of 80% per cent of voters.

Three months later the newly convened parliament in a joint sitting adopted the country's first ever written constitution. The 35-article constitution grants all major rights and liberties to the people and provides for a democratic government.

Finally on 6th November 2008, the fifth King (Druk Gyalpo) Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk was enthroned and received the Raven Crown from the hands of his father, King Jigme Singye Wangchuk (56) who abdicated in 2006.

Bhutan has changed its face and has struck a balance between progressive development and preservation of its ancient culture and traditions. How often does one witness of an absolute monarch who voluntarily gives up his powers, introduces democracy and abdicates the throne in order to pave the way for a younger generation!