

Address by Foreign Secretary at AIDIA Distinguished Lecture

November 27, 2020

H.E. Ambassador Dr. Madan Bhattarai,
H.E. Ambassador of India Shri Vinay Kwatra and my colleagues in the Indian Embassy,
Founder AIDAI Shri Sunil KC
Former Ambassador of Nepal to India
Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen
Namaste and Good morning,

1. तपाईंहरू सबैको साथ साथै virtually जोडिनुभएका नेपाली मित्रहरूलाई सम्बोधन गर्न पाउनु मेरो लागि सम्मान र सौभाग्यको कुरो हो । म यो अवसरको लागि Asian Institute of Diplomacy and International Affairs (AIDIA) and its founder Shri. Sunil KC प्रति आभारी छु।

2. म नेपालका पूर्व विदेश सचिव Ambassador Dr. Madan Bhattarai लाई पनि राम्रा शब्दहरूका लागि धन्यवाद दिन चाहन्छु। म उहाँलाई लामो समयदेखि चिन्छु र व्यक्तिगत रूपमा उनलाई भेट्दा मलाई खुशी लाग्यो । Dr. Bhattarai you're a Diplomat, scholar, academic, intellectual. You combine all these rare qualities, we have great respect and regard for you.

3. मैले तपाईंको यो सुन्दर शहरको धेरै चोटि भ्रमण गरिसकेको छु तर विदेश सचिवको रूपमा यो मेरो पहिलो भ्रमण हो। मलाई पहिले नै आउन मन थियो तर COVID 19 ले गर्दा ढिलाइ भयो ।

4. For my opening remarks I'll switch to English. I want to say that I have been to this wonderful city of Kathmandu after a gap of a decade or so. People who ask me , "Does it feel different this time?" The answer is both "yes" and "no". "Yes", because I have never previously visited Nepal wearing a mask; and "no" because the buzz and vibrancy of Kathmandu are undiminished, rather they have been enhanced. The transformation of the city is apparent. Economic and social upgrade, a construction push, the energy of youth and enterprise – it is all extremely impressive. And it is apparent even in these restrictive pandemic conditions. The hearts and smiles of friends and interlocutors I have met remain unchanged. These hearts and smiles, and such sentiments, are unreservedly reciprocated by us in India.

5. The Nepal-India relationship is intricate and exists in various paradigms. We share the same geography, civilisational heritage, culture and customs. There are affinities in religious and spiritual traditions, even food habits. The people-to-people linkages are so strong and so powerful that quite frankly we in government only complement these. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi put it during when he visited Nepal two years ago, "India's relations with Nepal are familial and friendly, which stand on the strong foundations of mutual and deep relationships between its people, which are much above the relationship between the two governments."

6. Recent years have given the relationship a new momentum. For India, Nepal is fundamental to our "Neighbourhood First" approach. India's development and modernisation are incomplete and intrinsically and symbiotically linked to the development and modernisation of neighbouring countries such as Nepal. That is why leaders from our neighbouring countries were invited to Prime Minister Modi's swearing-in ceremony in 2014 and in 2019. We are deeply appreciative of the Nepalese leadership's gesture in travelling to New Delhi for these cherished occasions. They celebrated our mutual commitment to inclusive democracy and governance, dedicated that to the welfare of all citizens and all sections of society.

7. Our Prime Minister's visit to Nepal in August 2014 was the first at that level in 17 years. It injected a fresh energy into the relationship and created a steady stream of two-way travel and developmental initiatives. Over the past six years, Prime Minister Modi has visited Nepal four times and the Prime Minister of Nepal has been welcomed in India seven times. At the level of head of state or head of government, our leaders have met 16 times. At the level of Foreign Minister, our Joint Commission has convened three times, and there have been innumerable other official engagements. Our bilateral calendar has never been busier.

8. Our people – Nepal's people and India's people – are our strength, and our endeavours are meant to assist and enable them. Our aspiration of "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas" and your goal of "Samriddh Nepal, Sukhi Nepali" are entirely compatible. In my meetings here in Kathmandu, with the President and the Prime Minister of Nepal, the Foreign Minister, and my counterpart, the Foreign Secretary, and other dignitaries and officials, I have been left with no doubt that our countries are on the same page and share the same vision. I must acknowledge here that the welcome that my delegation and I have received. It has been moving and memorable.

Friends,

9. Aside from our common civilisational inheritance, India's relationship with Nepal rests on four pillars – development cooperation; stronger connectivity; expanded infrastructure and economic projects; easier and enhanced access to educational opportunities in India for the young people of Nepal. Underlying all of these is a steadfast principle: we will work to Nepal's priorities. The structure that the pillars hold up is also well-defined and unchanging – mutually beneficial people-to-people contacts. And in all this technology, particularly digital technology, is to my mind a force multiplier.

10. India sees itself as Nepal's foremost friend and development partner. Developmental experiences that we share with you are developmental experiences that have proved successful and beneficial in our own country. Given our similarities in environmental conditions and socio-economic challenges, there is so much we can learn from each other. Let me illustrate with an example of my own career. As a younger officer, I have vivid memories of an iodised salt programme that India supported in the hilly remote districts of Nepal. It helped address the chronic ailment of goitre, and mirrored India's own battle against this pressing health problem. As someone from the hills myself I personally experienced the incidence of Goitre in many of our hill districts in India.

11. One programmatic mechanism that we have used to good effect is that of High Impact Community Development Projects, implemented in Nepal with India's support. These projects are tailored to the needs of the local community, create community assets, and promote socio-economic welfare at the grassroots level. We are mindful in designing sustainable programmes that contribute to the community and don't in any manner encumber it.

12. Such development projects have been implemented in all 77 of Nepal's districts and over a hundred of them have been completed since 2014 when our Prime Minister visited Nepal for the first time when he took over. They cover diverse sectors such as education, health, irrigation, drinking water, preservation of culture, skill development, youth training, and agriculture. These are projects that have immediate and positive impact on the lives of people, touching everybody in society.

13. Enhancing cross-border connectivity and infrastructure projects are also critical. They unlock potential of millions and in millions. Connectivity projects come in various forms. Physical connectivity projects such as highways, rail and air links and inland waterways

enhance movement of goods and people. Energy connectivity – whether power transmission lines or petroleum pipelines – contribute to the well-being of each other's citizens, and build mutual trust and partnerships. Digital connectivity through optical fibre networks is our route to the future, particularly, and as we find in India, with remote access to education, healthcare and other services through the digital medium. Finally, trade facilitation through upgraded border infrastructure makes for easier transit and seamless commerce.

14. Several examples can be provided in each of the categories. I will mention only a few:

- The Motihari–Amlekhgunj petroleum pipeline was the first of its kind in the region. It has created capacity to carry two million metric tonnes of petroleum products into Nepal, and has already led to savings of over Nepali Rupees 800 million for the people of this country

- Brisk implementation of the 900 MW Arun III hydropower power project is underway, and cross-border power transmission lines have been upgraded

- The Jayanagar-Kurtha cross-border rail line should be operational shortly. It will make Janakpur so much quicker to visit from India. Tourism from India would be an important area of employment, commerce and opportunity. We want to promote it to the extent that we can.

- The modern integrated check-posts at Birgunj and Biratnagar have transformed cross-border movement of people and goods, and work on the integrated check-posts at Nepalgunj has commenced.

15. The spectrum of our bilateral cooperation is all-encompassing. It traverses centuries, quite literally. An element of our cooperation that is often missed is the restoration and conservation of the cultural heritage of Nepal. Some years ago, at your request, we shared proposals for the conservation of monuments in the revered Pashupati temple complex. After the earthquake of 2015, India cooperated with Nepal in the restoration of 30 heritage locations, including the iconic Seto Machindranath temple in Kathmandu, the Hiranyavarna Mahavihar at Patan, and the Jangam Matha at Bhaktapur. Our best domain specialists are at the service of the living history of Nepal.

16. Yet, our endeavours are meant to not only preserve and celebrate the past but also build and nurture the future. Given the young population – both in India and Nepal – education is a crucial bridge. Seventy schools and 150 health facilities are coming up in 12 districts of Nepal with Indian support. I know that our Ambassador Vinay Kwatra and his colleagues have been working ceaselessly to ensure that many of these commitments that are being made at the level of our leadership are implemented in a timely manner. And I think going over, taking stock of the implementation projects, I find that we have done extraordinarily well despite Covid in this context. Few projects are as satisfying as those that promote learning and the health for the well-being of our citizens.

17. As a neighbour and friend, India sees itself as Nepal's natural and instinctive responder in times of crisis. The devastating earthquake of 2015 was a test for the people and government of Nepal. The courage and resilience of the citizens of Nepal, the grit and determination in rebuilding lives and livelihoods, was an inspiration for us in India and across the world. On our part, we were happy to contribute to this process, as first responders and then towards long-term reconstruction.

18. The outlay of Indian earthquake-related assistance is US\$ 1 billion but its true value is not in monetary terms. It lies in how it has helped communities on the ground. To cite an instance, 46,000 houses have been built in Gorkha and Nuwakot. They incorporate earthquake-resilient technologies in line with your motto of "Build Back Better", and they epitomise humanity's ability to triumph over adversity.

19. The year 2020 has brought with it an additional challenge in the form of the Covid-19 pandemic. This has been the most globally disruptive event since World War II. Its devastating impact on society and on the economy is still being tabulated. Recovery, resilience and rebuilding will require both perseverance and planning. Through this period, Nepal and India have been together. We have suffered together and we have fought back together.

20. It has not been easy. When the pandemic struck, India found itself short of critical health supplies. We did not manufacture personal protective equipment (PPEs) or ventilators. Only two companies in India made N95 masks and we were woefully lacking testing kits. In a short span of time, with a whole-of-government and I would say whole-of-society resolve, led by the Prime Minister, our people rose to the occasion. National capacities were built, by the state, by civil society and by the private sector.

21. We created 15,466 dedicated Covid-19 facilities with 1.5 million isolation beds. Today there are over a hundred PPE manufacturers in India, making 150,000 PPE kits a day. At last count, there were 48 companies making ventilators. And our Prime Minister mentioned that when we started with the Covid crisis there were 16,000 ventilators in hospitals all over India. Today, we plan to have 500,000 ventilators. Testing kits production has gone up considerably and we are conducting about a million tests a day. We are supplying masks, PPEs, diagnostic test kits and ventilators to other countries. Our pharmaceutical companies ramped up production of drugs, especially HCQ and paracetamol. We shipped these to 150 countries even in lockdown conditions. Whatever we had and whatever we could, we shared with our friends – including here in Nepal.

22. We were only too glad to extend assistance to Nepal in dealing with the Covid-19 outbreak, be it in equipment and supplies, or ensuring uninterrupted flow of goods across the border. We also assisted in repatriating Nepalese citizens from various countries along with our own citizens. Yesterday, I had the privilege of handing over 2000 vials of Remdesivir injections to the Hon'ble Foreign Minister. I would like to emphasise our continued and uninterrupted commitment to Nepal.

23. We are on the cusp of the availability of a vaccine for the novel coronavirus. As the world's largest manufacturer of vaccines, India is at the forefront of this effort. We have at least five promising vaccine candidates at advanced stages of trials. Dozens of sites across India are conducting vaccine trials on all ages and social groups. I would like to assure the people of Nepal that, once a vaccine is rolled out, meeting Nepal's requirements would be a priority for us. Given our genetic profiles, what works for India is likely to work for Nepal as well. Together we will recover from the pandemic and together we will protect our people.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

24. The year 2020 has been a defining experience for all of us. In India it has reinforced our determination to build a stronger national economy, with robust industrial capacities and deft use of technology. Technology is a cross-cutting instrument, whether in factories or farms, in software or social transformation. We have learnt this over the past few years in India as digital banking and biometric identities have made our financial system more inclusive and accessible to underprivileged sections; as renewable energy and water conservation and recharge have sought to redress ecological and environmental imbalances; and as IT and biotech have emerged as cutting-edge tools for economic opportunity and societal transformation.

25. We are dreaming of a new India, a new India as envisioned by our Prime Minister, an

India with modern amenities for all our people, an India that is a middle income society. And we are dreaming with our eyes wide open – we are persisting with efforts to realise these dreams. We would like our friends in Nepal to share our dreams and be a part of this journey. We cannot do it alone, just as you cannot fulfil your dreams alone. In our region, our South Asia, we are symbiotically linked. We need each other.

26. India's market is available to Nepal – to your companies, your start-ups, and your teeming talent pool. Nepal's hydropower potential can be a major source of clean energy for the subcontinent, and an economic game changer for your country. Together we can find solutions to climate change and environmental concerns that trouble us. Together Nepal's youth and India's young people can explore the exciting age of technology and innovation. India's education institutions, research and skilling centres, and start-up ecosystem are primed to forge partnerships with Nepal.

27. India's rise, India's economic growth and India's modernisation are inextricably linked to our region and our geography. The Indian Premier League is embellished by Nepalese cricketers and the Indian Soccer League by Nepal's talented young footballers. The arena of sport is sending us a message, whether here in Kathmandu or in New Delhi.

28. यसलाई ध्यान दिएर सुनौं अनि निर्णायक रूपमा अघि बढौं। हामी नेपालका र भारत का भावी पुस्ता हरू प्रति जवाफदेही छौं । घनिष्ठ मित्र र छिमेकी को रूपमा हामी सँगै काम गर्न आवश्यक छ। हामीले हाम्रो युवाहरूको आकांक्षा लाई पूरा गर्न आवश्यक छ। शसक्त सहकार्यमुखी भारत-नेपाल सम्बन्ध दुई देशका जनताहरूको हितमा छ।

धन्यवाद।

Thank You.