

India and the World

I extend my heartiest good wishes to the people of India on the eve of your 76th Independence Day. Ambassador Shyam Saran, my good friend, I thank you for your generous introduction, and for inviting me to speak today. I would also like to express my gratitude to Yamini Aiyar and the Center for Policy Research for giving me the opportunity to speak on the occasion of *Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav*. I am honored to be a part of this flagship lecture series commemorating India's momentous and joyous milestone.

The theme of the lecture series is "India and the world". However, I will begin my talk by first reflecting on India's special friendship with Bhutan. Then I will briefly touch on India's relationship with her neighbors. And finally, I will share my thoughts on India's influence on the world.

On June 15, 2014, I sent out a one-word Tweet. It said simply, *Swagatam!* My tweet was a welcome to Shri Narendra Modi Ji who had just landed at the Paro International Airport. It was his first foreign visit as the prime minister of India, having secured a landslide victory in the general elections that year. Having won an overwhelming mandate to lead the world's largest democracy, Modi Ji could have opted to celebrate his historic victory by visiting any bigger and more powerful country. Yet, he chose Bhutan as his very first official destination. He chose to visit us to call on His Majesty the King and to connect with the people of Bhutan.

And connect with the people he did – almost immediately – when he famously described the relations between our two countries as B4B: Bharat for Bhutan; Bhutan for Bharat. The idea of B4B is rooted in a deep understanding of our strong relationship and complete commitment to further strengthening our special friendship.

Prime Minister Modi's visit to Bhutan has been interpreted the world over as putting close friends first above all else. And rightly so. India and Bhutan enjoy a friendship that has stood the test of time and politics; a friendship that is truly unique in every sense of the word.

To begin with, our two countries are bound together by geography and by history.

You see, Bhutan is made up entirely of tall mountains and narrow valleys. All our valleys descend into India, and all our rivers flow into your great plains. That is why engaging with our Indian neighbors has not only been necessary, it has been easy; it has been most natural. This, in my view, is how geography connects us intrinsically to India.

But history binds our two countries as well. We are a Buddhist country. And our spirituality comes from India. In fact, we call India *Jagar* or *Jagar Phagpi Yuel* which literally translates to India, the Land of the Enlightened. Why? Because, India is the source of the Lord Buddha's teachings. That's why our scholars and great masters have always traveled to India to study, to meditate and to practice. Today, India continues to be regarded as a land of immense spiritual significance for all Bhutanese, and to undertake a pilgrimage there, especially to the sacred

sites where Lord Buddha walked, preached and attained enlightenment, is a compulsory journey for every Bhutanese. Incidentally, my wife and I had the good fortune of going on our pilgrimage to India in 2015. That was immediately after we took part in the Vibrant Gujarat Summit that year.

So yes, indeed, history and geography bind our two countries together. And yet, the differences between our countries could not be more stark.

On the one hand, Bhutan is one of the world's smallest countries in the world. We have barely 750,000 people. On the other hand, with more than 1.4 billion people, India is set to become the world's most populous country. But despite our huge differences in size, our relations can serve as an example to the world. Our special friendship, unique as it is, is a shining example of how large countries and their smaller neighbors can and must live in harmony with mutual trust and goodwill towards each other.

Before India's independence, Bhutan had resolutely stuck with a policy of self-imposed isolation. This policy proved very successful in that it kept us free from the colonial ambitions of British India. However, immediately after India's independence, we opened our doors and our hearts to India. Ever since, India has stood by us, shoulder to shoulder, in all aspects of our development journey. In 1971, for example, it was India who sponsored and supported our membership to the United Nations, thereby guaranteeing our independence and sovereignty. That is what B4B symbolizes and exemplifies: a friendship that has withstood the test of time.

Even today, India continues to be our biggest development partner. Each and every one of our five-year development plans – and there's been 12 of them so far – has succeeded largely due to India's generosity and support.

During my tenure as prime minister, I had the opportunity to work closely with Prime Minister Modi Ji, and I saw first-hand his ready support for Bhutan. It was because of his unwavering support that my government could build schools and hospitals, erect bridges and pave roads, and expand an economy that was in dire straits when I assumed office. It is because of that continuous and committed support, that we in Bhutan have been able to prosper. It is because of that friendship, that we are now on the verge of graduating from the LDC group.

All this and much, much more has been possible in spite of the asymmetries between our two countries. Our land, our populations, our economies could not be more different. But both India and Bhutan have been mindful of these differences and have always supported each others vital interests.

Here's a good example: Now many of you would have heard about Gross National Happiness. For Bhutan, Gross National Happiness or GNH is very important. GNH is a development philosophy that puts the wellbeing and happiness of people at the center of the development agenda. This is done by balancing economic growth with social development, sustainability, cultural preservation and good governance. These are high ideals. But we have been able to

stay true to the ideals and principles of GNH largely because India — our larger, richer and stronger neighbor — has always been mindful of our challenges as a small, landlocked country with a tiny population, a fragile economy and a unique culture.

Ultimately it is this level of understanding and cooperation that has helped nurture a truly special friendship between our two countries and peoples.

Last year, on Bhutan's National Day, His Majesty King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck conferred on Prime Minister Modi the Order of the Druk Gyalpo in recognition of his many contributions to further strengthening the special ties of friendship that our two countries enjoy. I would like to reiterate my congratulations to Prime Minister Modi for receiving Bhutan's highest civilian award. This is an exceptional achievement.

But B4B is not just about Bharat for Bhutan. It is also about Bhutan for Bharat, as Bhutan too has always been mindful of India's interests and concerns, and, as such, has been steadfast in its support of India through thick and thin.

When India's security has been at risk, Bhutan has not hesitated to act decisively. One example that stands out is that of His Majesty the Fourth King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who personally lead his soldiers, from the front, to flush-out Indian militants who had lodged deep inside Bhutan's thick jungles.

In reciprocity, India's gratitude for Bhutan's support is evident from the number of times our kings have graced India's Republic Day Parade as the chief guest. Bhutan has had the distinction of overseeing the Republic Day celebrations on four different occasions. This is by far the highest number of times that any head of state or government has been invited as chief guest to your Republic Day celebrations. And it is confirmation of the importance and significance that India attaches to our friendship.

In 2007, our two countries amended and updated our friendship treaty recognizing each other as sovereign equals. This, in my view, is another testimony of our special relations. The very concept of B4B, friends and partners – equals – irrespective of each other's size and strength is something other nations can surely learn from and emulate. This is especially so in this day and age, when large and powerful countries readily flex their muscles to interfere, intimidate and even invade their smaller neighbors.

It is obvious that India's friendship is not just limited to Bhutan, but extends to all its neighbors in South Asia. Prime Minister Modi has made it clear, without mincing words, that all of India's neighbors are important. And he has consistently favored the projection of India's friendship over the projection of India's power. To me, that is the unshakeable bedrock of India's Neighborhood First policy. In 2014, Prime Minister Modi invited the leaders of all the SAARC countries for his inauguration after holding the region and the world spellbound throughout his election campaign and victory. No other country outside the SAARC membership was extended that honor.

His gesture of goodwill was aimed at bringing together and strengthening all the countries in the neighborhood. That message of uniting and fulfilling SAARC's potential has somehow not been accorded the urgency and importance it deserves. We must do more.

Similarly, in 2019, after coming to power for a second term, Modi ji invited the leaders of the BIMSTEC nations for his inauguration ceremony. Once again, he had demonstrated India's resolute commitment towards its neighbors. But once again, our neighborhood has failed to capitalize on the opportunity for meaningful regional cooperation. Like SAARC, BIMSTEC too has a long way to go.

Given India's leadership, and as the biggest, richest and most powerful country in the region, surely India can and must do more to bring both organizations, SAARC and BIMSTEC, to realize their huge and full potential.

However, on this the auspicious eve of your 76th Independence Day, we must not limit our discussions to India and Bhutan, or, for that matter, to India and the neighborhood. Our discussions must be broader; they must be wider. After all, India has emerged as a force to be reckoned with, in every aspect of global life. So allow me to share my views on how India has influenced outcomes the world over and, more pressingly, how India can provide context and hope in such uncertain times, and shape our collective future.

In 2015, when I was serving as prime minister, I had the opportunity to take part in the IDEAS Conclave in Goa. The theme of the conference, which was organized by the India Foundation, was 'Learning through Civilizations'. I thought long and hard about what I should say at the conclave. But, I wasn't sure ... until I was well on my way to Goa, flying above the vast and constantly changing landscape of your beautiful country. It was at that time that I had an epiphany, so to speak.

Looking out of the airplane window, I realized that the great plains below were home to India's ancient civilizations – civilizations that gave birth to not one, not two, but four of the world's major religions: Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism and Buddhism. While all of these faiths are distinct, they all espouse the same values of love, kindness, compassion, non-violence and tolerance. In time, as these religions spread far and wide, they carried with them, the deep-rooted values of the Indian civilization to the benefit of people all over the world.

Mahatma Gandhi epitomized these values like no other. He was a true champion of India's ancient ideals. So it is fitting that we remember him today, on the 76th anniversary of your independence. Despite suffering centuries of continuous colonial abuse, the Mahatma chose to fight for Independence not through hatred and violence, but through the ideals of ahimsa and tolerance. India's independence movement succeeded spectacularly, and in the process, inspired millions of freedom fighters, all over the world, to break free from the shackles of their colonial masters.

Similarly, Mahatma Gandhi and India's ancient teachings have inspired countless champions of human rights to free their people from hatred and oppression, deliberately choosing nonviolence over terror and bloodshed. Dr Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela are but two great examples.

Today, the Indian diaspora is in almost every country. And they've taken along with them India's rich culture, food and art. So much so, that fine Indian cuisine is readily available in every major city in the world, and Bollywood movies cater to a huge and growing fan base.

But what is exceptional, is the number of people of Indian descent that have risen to leadership positions in the countries that they have adopted. Perhaps it is the ancient Indian values of nonviolence and tolerance, of kindness and compassion, of diligence and perseverance that generate trust and confidence from their hosts.

What is exceptional is the number of Indians that are leading and driving some of the world's biggest businesses. They include Sundar Pichai of Google; Satya Nadella of Microsoft; Parag Agrawal of Twitter and Arvind Krishna of IBM.

What is even more exceptional is the sheer number of Indians that have led their national governments. Surinam, Mauritius, Portugal, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, the Seychelles and Fiji have all had Indians serve as heads of their governments. Kamala Haris, the US Vice President, is of Indian origin. And Rishi Sunak might just become the UK's next prime minister. Chances are that India's colonizers might just get an Indian as their prime minister soon. In just 75 years, how the tables have turned.

Whether it is in business, technology, the arts or in politics, be it in India or abroad, India's ancient values of wisdom, compassion, perseverance and courage seem to underpin Indian leadership. This, to me, is Indian exceptionalism.

The world, as we now know it, is becoming increasingly divided among various power centers and blocs. As such, international trust and cooperation is losing ground to dangerous rhetoric, economic sanctions and blockades. And the use of nuclear weapons looms dangerously. Add to this dangerous mix the constant threat of militancy and terrorism. In these difficult times, the world will naturally look to India for leadership. And rightly so. India can provide balanced leadership that is rooted in its ancient values. It can provide leadership that favors compromise and harmony over divisiveness.

So now, more than ever, as the world becomes an increasingly dangerous place, India must assume its global responsibility and lead the way towards non-violence, harmony and co-existence. And who better to fulfill this responsibility than Prime Minister Modi, a seminal figure on the world stage, the epitome of Indian exceptionalism.

To begin with, India must play a bigger role in the United Nations. But for that we must reform the United Nations, the world's most important organization, but one that was established based

on the circumstances that existed even before India became independent. I have had the opportunity of addressing the UN General Assembly on two occasions. Once in 2015 and then again in 2017. On both occasions I called for UN reform to reflect current geo-political realities. On both occasions I called for India to be included as a permanent member in the UN Security Council.

India will soon be the world's most populous country. And it already has the military prowess to boot. It is also among the world's biggest economies. Therefore, it is only natural that the world must call on India to assume permanent membership at the UN Security Council. The world has much to gain from it.

A shining example of India's leadership is in the area of climate change. Our world is at a tipping point. We are now at a crossroads: we can reduce greenhouse gas emissions and hope to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels, or we can continue ignoring the many warnings and head towards an unsustainable 3 degrees Celsius increase in global temperatures.

While all big countries and economies have repeatedly pledged to address climate change, most of them are yet to translate their promises to effective policy. Profit and politics continue to trump climate action. India, on the other hand, have not just made bold promises – they have been backing up their commitments by courageous action.

In the last 8 years, for example, India has achieved an 18 fold increase in its solar energy program, and it is well on its way to produce 500 GW of renewable energy in the next decade. The world is witnessing the largest renewable energy expansion program – a solar energy revolution – thanks mainly to India's efforts.

India is leading the International Solar Alliance, and under what Modi Ji has called “one sun, one world, one grid” India and UK have established the Green Grids Initiative. This initiative, which is backed by 80 other countries, will connect an international energy grid allowing renewable energy to be transported seamlessly and shared throughout the world.

The Green Grids Initiative will have far reaching consequences in the world's efforts to limit greenhouse gas emissions. In Bhutan, we see the Green Grids as an extension of what has been called the epitome of India-Bhutan cooperation, and that is the development of hydropower in our country. Since the 1970s India has helped Bhutan build run-off-the-river hydropower plants on our fast-flowing rivers. Much of the green, renewable energy produced in Bhutan is then exported to India, offsetting carbon emissions there.

Modi-Ji's Green Grids provides a valuable opportunity to Bhutan, and to Nepal which also has huge hydropower potential, to generate even more renewable hydropower energy for export to India, Bangladesh and beyond thereby offsetting carbon emissions in the region.

India's determination to clean-up its land, water and air through the *Swaachh Bharat* initiative is already showing results. Now, with India's bold commitments to reduce the emission of greenhouse gasses, *Swaachh Bharat* can be leveraged to *Swaachh Sansaar*.

For the Himalayas and for Bhutan, *Swaachh Sansaar* is a matter of survival; a matter of life and death. Even as we speak, glaciers in the Himalayas are melting at an alarming rate, threatening the lives of millions of people living in the region including my own. But the damage will not be limited to the Himalayan region. If our glaciers continue to melt rapidly, the livelihoods of people living downstream will be threatened. And that includes the billions of people who live in India, China, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

The lives and livelihoods of countless people are at stake. India must, therefore, play a bigger role in protecting the Himalayan glaciers. In 2019 I had called for the creation of a Third Pole Council. I had suggested that such a council should be tasked with just one purpose: to protect the Himalayan glaciers. And that it should be made up of all countries in the Himalayan region as equal members. Sadly, nothing ever came out of it.

I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate my appeal to all the countries that call the Himalayan region home, particularly to India, to take the lead in establishing the Third Pole Council. An initiative such as this could go a long way in bringing us together to protect and preserve our precious glaciers and, by extension, secure the lives and livelihoods of countless people.

Another area where India has wielded universal influence is in the field of health and wellbeing. The science of Ayurveda and the practice of yoga has helped promote the wellbeing of countless people through the ages.

Yoga is India's gift to the world. As a simple practitioner myself, I can attest that nothing balances the body, mind and spirit like yoga. This balance is even more important in this day and age, as we are continuously subjected to stresses from uncertainty and fierce competition.

Ayurveda is also India's gift to the world. All traditional medicine can, somehow or the other, trace their source to India and to ayurveda. My country, which was known as the land of medicinal herbs, continues to enjoy a culture of holistic, traditional medicine, which is completely based on Buddhist principles and ayurveda.

Even as ayurveda continues to spread, India has made huge strides in science and modern medicine. That's why India today receives wide praise as the pharmacy of the world. During the Covid-19 pandemic, India proved that it is indeed the pharmacy of the world by coming to the rescue of much of the developing world.

Given its huge population, India naturally had the largest demand for Covid vaccines. Yet it ensured vaccine relief to millions of people all over the world. Prime Minister Modi's *Vaccine Maitri* initiative not only provided relief; it restored hope and faith in humanity.

Bhutan is one of the first beneficiaries of *Vaccine Maitri*. I join my fellow Bhutanese in thanking Modi Ji and India for gifting us life-saving vaccines in spite of your own pressing needs.

Going forward, India's influence in the world is set to grow to even greater heights. This is because it will be India's economy that will fuel growth and prosperity in the world. India has the fifth largest economy in the world. But experts forecast that India will have the third largest economy by the end of this decade. In fact, measured by purchasing power parity, India's economy is already the third largest in the world.

India's population, which is already the world's largest, is still growing. And it is young. This means only one thing. India's economy will keep growing, and as it does, it will be the driving force of the world's economy. Put simply, India will be the world's factory and its market place.

As the world emerges from the Covid pandemic, many countries are hit with economic challenges: spiraling prices, unsustainable debt, growing unemployment and inequality are already spreading unrest and instability through many societies. The road ahead will be challenging for all of us. And it looks increasingly certain that the world will turn to India's young population and its growing middle class to spread and sustain economic prosperity.

In 1971, I was sent to school in India. I was 5 years old at that time. I spent the next 11 years, my formative years, in Dr Graham's Homes, a boarding school in Kalimpong, West Bengal. There I had the opportunity to join the NCC, the National Cadet Corps. On the 15th of August every year, we would march, in formation, from our school to the Mela Ground, where we would proudly take part in the Independence Day march past ceremonies.

Those were some of my most memorable moments as a young boy. Today, as I reflect on those fond memories, I wish to send out my best wishes to the youth of India, and a special shout-out to all NCC cadets, on the occasion of the 76th Independence Day.

The past 75 years have seen India overcome all manner of challenges. The past 75 have seen India grow from a colonized country to among the greatest nations in the world. The next 25 years will see India fulfill its destiny as a global leader, led by a man of destiny, my friend, Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

I wish the people of India a very Happy 76th Independence Day.

Jai Hind!

Palden Drukpa Gyalo!