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## India's World - PM Modi's Visit to Bhutan

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bhutanese counterpart Lotay Tshering held wide-ranging talks and discussed steps to further **expand the bilateral partnership** across several sectors. During the **visit of the Indian Prime Minister to Bhutan**, the two countries also signed 10 MoUs in the fields of space research, aviation, IT, power and education.

The two leaders unveiled an e-plaque on the interconnection between India's National Knowledge Network and Bhutan's Druk Research and Education Network. An additional \$100 million will be available to Bhutan under India's standby swap arrangement to meet the foreign exchange requirement.

## Key Takeaways

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- The biggest thing is the broad basing of **bilateral arrangements**.
  - Largely the bilateral arrangements have remained restricted to the hydro-electric projects. One of such projects i.e. 720 MW **Mangdechhu Hydroelectric Plant** has just been inaugurated.
  - Though Mangdechhu Hydroelectric Plant was completed timely, one of the issues that both countries have been facing for a long time is the **delayed execution and completion of such projects**.
- There was a concrete recognition that both the countries have **shared security interests** and there will be mutual coordination in matters affecting each other's national and security interests.
- Another important element was the **launching of the RuPay card** which would reduce the need for foreign exchange.
- The Ground Earth Station of the South Asian Satellite, constructed with the support of the **Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO)**, was inaugurated in Thimphu.
- India announced the increase in scholarships for Bhutanese students for studies at Nalanda University from 2 to 5.

## India-Bhutan Relationship

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- The relationship between India and Bhutan has always been in a good place. In the past, there used to be visits at the level of the King and his majesty and now the visits take place at the level of Prime Ministers or Foreign Ministers.
- India has moved beyond traditional forms of cooperation i.e. besides hydropower projects, new areas such as space, digital payment, education, healthcare or people to people connection, are being explored.
- Bhutan is aware of India's sensibilities including that on the belt and road initiative. It is one of the countries which is standing with India and thus did not participate in the second forum of the belt and road initiative where most of the countries including Nepal, Bangladesh and other neighbouring countries participated.

## New Areas of Cooperation

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- **Space:** The Bhutanese Prime Minister very warmly congratulated and thanked the Indian Prime Minister for launching the South Asian Satellite.
  - The Satellite is helping Bhutan in reaching out to the people through Bhutanese Broadcasting Corporation or spreading education or dealing with disasters.
  - India has also decided to provide additional bandwidth or transponder to Bhutan.

- **Education:** Institutes in Bhutan are collaborating with premier educational institutions in India i.e. IITs and NITs.  
At the moment, 4,000 Bhutanese students are studying in India. India is inviting Bhutanese students to not only study Buddhism but also science, technology etc.
- **Defence:** The Bhutanese army has a total signature of Indian army i.e. all its officers and men are trained in National Defence Academy, Indian Military Academy and Officer Training Academy.  
India is also thinking to supply weapons to Bhutan.

## Increasing Role of China in Bhutan

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- **Border problems:** China has not sorted out its border problems, with both India and Bhutan. Doklam incident is an example.
  - In 2017, in Doklam (a disputed region between China and Bhutan), China started constructing a road in the Bhutanese area.
  - By constructing the road, China came close to the Chumbi Valley i.e. the Chicken's Neck and Siliguri Corridor, thereby bringing the region under their artillery range. In the future, this could have cut off the rest of India from the north east region.
  - After India's intervention, China after 73 days, stopped the construction of the road. However, China's dominance and influence still threatens the boundaries and relations.
- China has offered to Bhutan to give up its claim on the northern pockets if Bhutan agrees to forgo its territorial jurisdiction in the west, that is, Doklam.
  - The northern pockets of Pasamlung and Jakarlung valleys have an area of about 495 sq km against 265 sq km of Sinchulumpa, Dramana and Shaktoe in Doklam plateau in western Bhutan. China has also promised financial aid to Bhutan.
  - Bhutan has not yet accepted the offer.

## Way Forward

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- Bhutan faces the challenge of **climate change and environmental pollution**. Climate change can affect the food security of Bhutan. More than 58% of the population is dependent on agriculture and water.  
India needs to help Bhutan to address the challenge of climate change with sustainable technological development.
- Being a member of BIMSTEC, Bhutan holds **geostrategic importance** for India. The **shared sense of high strategic interest** between the two countries needs to be intensified.  
Bhutan can help India in executing its Act East-Look East Policy.

- By the year 2021, India intends to generate almost 10,000 MW of hydropower from the territory of Bhutan. The third-fourth of the hydropower generated should be bought by India to **reduce the trade deficit of Bhutan with India.**
- India needs to continuously explore new areas of cooperation with Bhutan. For example, making application BHIM available to Bhutanese, can be considered.
- India needs to focus on the youth of Bhutan, as it is the youth only, which would take the people-to-people contact forward in the future.

*Bhutan is one of the strongest allies of India in the east and is a buffer state between India and China, along with Nepal. India should address the various challenges in the relationship in order to maintain its stability.*