

India ready to strengthen democracy in Bhutan: PM

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh Friday assured Bhutan of 'every possible' help from India to strengthen its democracy, as he arrived in the Himalayan state to a warm and rousing welcome.

'It's a momentous development - a peaceful transition from monarchy to democracy. We cherish this moment and we will use our visit to strengthen it in every possible way,' Singh told reporters on his arrival in Thimphu.

He was given a rousing welcome from the time his aircraft landed at the Paro airport Friday morning.

Cries of 'Chak De India!' and 'Namaste India!' greeted the prime minister from a large number of people who had lined up the streets to welcome him.

Children waving flags of Bhutan and India lined up the 50-km stretch from the airport to Thimphu. Large cutouts and posters of Manmohan Singh adorned the walls and street corners as his motorcade made its way to the Bhutanese capital.

Underlining special ties between India and Bhutan based on trust and a shared perception of common interests, Manmohan Singh said it was 'very exciting' to come to Bhutan at this 'momentous occasion' when the country has begun a new democratic journey.

Manmohan Singh's visit coincides with the centenary year of the Wangchuk dynasty.

'India stands ready to join hands with Bhutan and to do our bit for its accelerated development,' he said.

'We look forward to a 21st century where both countries will walk together for friendship and cooperation.'

The prime minister will address the first joint session of the new Bhutanese parliament Saturday.

The prime minister said in his earlier departure statement that the India-Bhutan friendship 'is a symbol of inter-state relations. We enjoy open borders and free trade between our two countries.

'I am confident that my visit, coming at a time when Bhutan moves toward a new democratic system of governance, will reinforce this unique relationship and that we will continue to work together for the economic benefit and prosperity of our two peoples.'

Manmohan Singh pointed out that India had been assisting Bhutan's Five Year plans since 1951.

The Indian leader's visit will focus on developing a more diversified and contemporary economic and energy partnership in tune with emerging realities in the two countries.

Manmohan Singh will hold talks with the previous king, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, and his son and successor king, 28-year-old Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuk.

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