

## First India-Bhutan rail link soon: PM

The first rail link between India and Bhutan will be built soon, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced Saturday as he pledged Rs.100 billion (\$2.5 billion) over the next five years as part of a package of economic engagement with that country.

Addressing a joint session of Bhutan's newly elected National Assembly and the National Council, the first foreign leader to do so, Manmohan Singh pointed out that the Indian market offered vast opportunities for Bhutan's agriculture, industry and service sectors.

'We will work towards the further improvement of connectivity between our two countries so that our borders become the gateways for mutually beneficial undertakings,' the prime minister said before winding up his two-day visit here.

'I am particularly happy to inform this august house that we will begin construction of the first ever rail link between India and Bhutan, connecting Hashimara to Phuentsholing, called the Golden Jubilee Rail Line,' the prime minister said.

'This link will connect Bhutan to the entire railway network of India,' he added.

In his speech, which underscored the strong ties between the two countries, Manmohan Singh made it amply clear that India supported Bhutan's transition from a kingdom to the world's youngest democracy.

'As Bhutan enters a new era in its history, you can continue to count on India as a friend. As we enter a new era in our ties and a new century, I come to seek and reinforce the same meeting of minds,' he said.

Detailing the progress that had been achieved by both sides in various sectors in the last four decades, he outlined a future roadmap where more could be achieved.

'India and Bhutan are well placed to create a new paradigm for inter-governmental cooperation in the areas of water security and environmental integrity.

'We should evolve a development and economic cooperation strategy that complements our mutual resource endowments. We know we are on the right path when electricity generated in the mountains and valleys of Chukha, Kurichhu and Tala lights homes in Bihar, West Bengal and Delhi and generates wealth for Bhutan,' he said.

On Friday, India announced a significant move to broaden its energy basket by pledging to import 10,000 MW of electricity by 2020 from Bhutan, a country with one of the world's largest hydropower potentials.

Manmohan Singh also pointed out that the signing of the updated India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty last year, which gave Thimphu more freedom in international diplomacy and non-lethal military purchases, was a watershed event.

Following his address, Manmohan Singh dedicated the Tala project, built with India's assistance, to

Bhutan and laid the foundation of the 1,095 MW Punatsangchhu hydroelectric project.

'We will commence the preparation of detailed project reports for four new projects,' Manmoahn Singh said. He pointed out that implementation of these projects will help achieve the target of at least 5,000 MW of electricity from Bhutan to India by 2020.

Manmohan Singh also offered to strengthen Indo-Bhutanese ties with institutional linkages between the judiciary, election commissions and other constitutional bodies.

The prime minister also took the opportunity of driving some home truths about how to make a functioning democracy before his Bhutanese audience. He pointed out that the ability to accommodate dissent and show tolerance to the others' point of view are some of the crucial elements to make a democracy work.

'We do know that democracy is not merely about holding elections. Democracy requires sustained commitment to tolerance and the judicious exercise of power as a societal trust to be used for public good.

'It requires a deep commitment to the rule of law. It requires the building of strong institutions of governance and respect for the other's viewpoint.'

But he also made it clear that evolving 'a model of sustainable, inclusive and equitable development' will be a challenge for both India and Bhutan.

'Today our relations are a model of how two neighbouring countries, uneven in physical size and attributes, can coexist in perfect harmony and understanding. Both our countries have a vital stake in each other's well-being and prosperity,' Manmohan Singh said.

*Murali Krishnan ( © IANS / India eNews)*