



HE Rahul CHHABRA

Indo-Kenya Potential Is Unlimited

Relations between Kenya and India date back several centuries and appear to be at an all-time high. That, in fact, reached a crescendo with the historical visit of Indian Prime Minister (PM), Narendra Modi, to Kenya, the first by a sitting PM in 35 years. At the centre of these cordial ties is the Indian High Commissioner (IHC) to Kenya and the official liaison between Delhi and Nairobi, a position currently occupied by His Excellency (HE) Rahul Chhabra. Picking up from where his predecessor, Suchitra Durai, left off in representing India's foreign policy and fostering Indo-Kenya diplomatic relations, the father of two discusses trade, culture and a fascinating career that has taken him out and about, internationally.

BY HUSSEIN JIVA

You have been in office since mid-November and have taken over the reign from the former Indian High Commissioner (IHC), Suchitra Durai. How has your settling in period been like?

It is very nice and comfortable. Among the highlights thus far is when I met the Kenyan President, Uhuru Kenyatta, to present my credentials as the IHC. The emotions he expressed in his voice and actions, along with his reaction to the news of my posting, conveyed his fondness of India. Beyond that, I have also interacted with government officials and members of the business community and they have extended hands of friendship. The same applies to the Indian community, which received me in a very warm manner. Outside of Nairobi, I attended an interaction and familiarisation event in Mombasa, organised by the Assistant High Commissioner of India - the turnout was larger than expected and we held long discussions across various topics. Overall, it has been a great start to life in what is a warm and friendly country.

Prior to this posting, you were based in Budapest, Hungary. Do tell us more about your professional journey as a High Commissioner.

Working in the Foreign Service came very naturally to me. I started my professional career in 1987 in Brussels, Belgium. At the time, I was also associated to the European Union (EU) community office, which was also headquartered there. Later, I moved to Dakar, Senegal. I returned to Delhi, India where I worked to promote FDI inflows, after which I moved to Paris, France, before going to Manila, Philippines. I returned to Delhi to work as staff officer to Foreign Secretary of India before two more foreign posts, in Washington, United States and Beijing, China. After another stint in Delhi, I was posted to Budapest as India's Ambassador to Hungary, before coming to Kenya. I have been very fortunate to work in the Foreign Service and have gained tremendous exposure through various postings across the world.

Do you feel like this lifestyle suits you? After all, your work sees you migrate from country to country and you have a family to also worry about.

That is true, however, I opted for this. I have a Master's degree in Economics and a Masters in Business Administration (MBA); most of my colleagues from college joined the private sector. I am one of the few who joined the Foreign Service by choice. Joining the Service is a long drawn-out system; approximately 500,000 people sit for the exams and during my time, only 10 qualified, so the odds are against you. Furthermore, it takes about a year-and-a-half before you are confirmed. Initially, I had concerns on how the lifestyle would treat us. However, moving from country to country has taught my children, spouse and myself to become global citizens. This line of profession allows you to realise how small the planet is; traveling around brings about perspective as you learn not only of the differences, but similarities of people divided by geography.

Your Excellency, since President Uhuru Kenyatta stepped into office, there has been a shift in the country's approach; we are now more inclined to the East as opposed to West, in search of support and investment. India remains a friendly Eastern partner. What does Kenya represent for India?

The relationship dates back over a century; historically, Indians settled in Kenya to construct the railway. Furthermore, others came as top lawyers to fight legal cases for the current President's father, former President, Jomo Kenyatta. Meanwhile, others even played a pivotal role in framing Kenya's constitution. So, there remains a historical connection that India and Kenya are cognizant of. Currently, the relationship between both nations is very warm and cordial. In the last three years, PM Modi, visited Kenya while President Kenyatta visited India twice. We hope to build on this warm relationship. There is also a good relationship among the diplomatic community. For instance, when we meet at the United Nations (UN), we support each other's positions and candidatures. However, there is tremendous scope to bring Kenya even closer to the vast population of 1.3 billion Indians living in a large and diverse geographical area. That being said, I was pleasantly surprised to

learn just how many Indians, in their thousands, frequent Kenya to explore its terrains, including Maasai Mara, among other destinations.

India has a reputation for better healthcare, thus, the blossoming of medical tourism. Kenya is improving on that front and there continues to be various exchanges to promote such a relationship. How can we better this relationship to have it spread across other sectors?

We have to broaden that interaction. We have to talk to Kenyans across counties and spread knowledge on what India has to offer, beyond medical tourism. To achieve this, I hope to engage even more people. The approach is to visit universities, colleges and other learning institutions which are attended by youth with open minds. Interacting with them on such platforms allow for exchange of ideas and absorption. Speaking to them when they are young allows them to mull over it longer, as they ingest the richness of India; we hope such experiences have a long-term impact on them. It is synonymous to sowing the seeds to reap its fruits later. However, I do not want to limit interactions simply to the youth; I am already interacting with people of all age groups and with diverse backgrounds, including businessmen, journalists, artists and sportspersons. Anyone interested in learning about India is more than welcome to exchange ideas and engage in conversations on a myriad of issues.

Since the three high-profile multi-bilateral talks between President Kenyatta and PM Modi, what MoUs have been realised?

Rift Valley Textiles (Rivatex) is going on very well and we hope to have a formal inauguration of the plant in April or May. It will also feature machinery, most of which comes from India. Already, we have Indians training Kenyans on how to operate them.

Another is The University of Nairobi's library, which was under refurbishment. The refurbishment, a US\$ 1 million grant, will also come to fruition in a short period from now.

We have the successful installment of the Bhabhatron II and digital radiotherapy simulator at the Cancer Treatment Centre at Kenyatta National Hospital. We have delivered essential medicine to the health ministry and field ambulances were given to Kenya Defence Forces (KDF). There are others that have also progressed and are in stream to realisation. There are going to be some delays, but that is normal; such projects are not achieved overnight. We, however, stress on our commitment to achieve all of them.

Since our High Commission is also accredited to Somalia, we work with the government of Somalia in their efforts to improve the lives of citizens. Grants and development assistance have been provided by the government of India in various sectors such as healthcare, education and others.

Last year itself, we delivered essential

medicines worth US\$ 1 million. It is our constant endeavour to work closely with Kenya and Somalia to support them in their efforts to achieve their objectives.

Beyond economic ties, culture presents another opportunity for societal nourishment and the enhancement of inter-country appreciation. The IHC has actively been involved in bringing in various performers from India and even held the Uraliki Ulsav last year. What plans do you have to continue this practice?

The first is to get a yoga teacher from India to be based in Nairobi and employed by the Commission. She will conduct daily classes at the Apa Pant Auditorium in Parklands, and will also be available for free-of-charge yoga camps at universities, schools, corporate houses and other institutions. Beyond the Indian community, we hope to better engage the indigenous population. A good example of this is better engaging locals and the International Day of Yoga presents one such opportunity. Another immediate cultural engagement is performance of a renowned Kathak teacher from India to perform on the occasion of Republic Day in Nairobi. Over a period of a week to 10 days, she will also visit other cities to perform. Furthermore, we are looking at bringing Indian poets and comedians to entertain the Kenyan audience. These are but a few activities that have been organised thus far and that will continue.

India appears to be losing out to China as Kenya's major market for imports. How has this changed India's approach to bilateral relations to Kenya?

Such things keep changing; different countries have different comparative advantages. Kenya, as such, will turn to markets that provide them the best value for their money. I have noticed that there are many Indian companies looking to do business in Kenya. Already, there have been plants set up, office spaces secured, Kenyans employed and products in the market. These are the first steps towards expanding businesses in Kenya. Therefore, while there may be some challenges on the trade front because of certain parameters, investments are increasing.

Do you feel Kenya and India are fulfilling the potential of their relationship?

There is much more that can be done; the potential is unlimited. What I am focusing on is people-to-people interactions. Your readers may not know this, but every day, we send one Kenyan on a government-of-India scholarship, complete with a paid ticket, tuition, pocket money and stipend, to India to pursue certain courses of their choice. And the duration of courses range from weeks to months.

Through such activities, there are bridges of friendship that we build. We do not expect anything in return; it is just our way of sharing what we have gained. We don't do this only with Kenya, but with other nations as well.

Both India and China are catalysts to Africa's growth and development. While China's trade with the continent was the largest, at US\$ 170 billion, as of mid-2018, The Economic Times article, India's trade in comparison was at US\$ 62 billion. What defines your investment strategy in Africa?

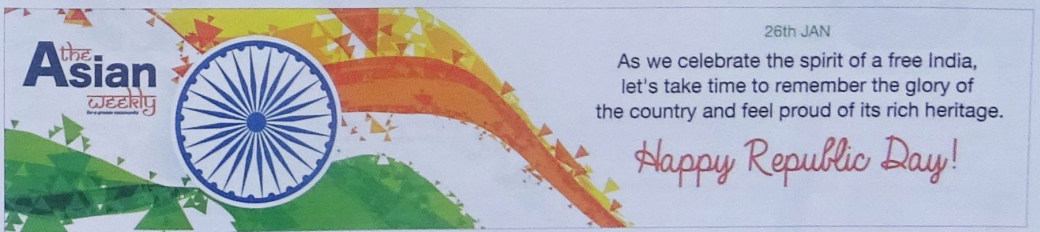
One of the differences in business approaches with India and China is that in the former, it is private-sector driven; they are based on individual company strategies. Overall, the government of India can only guide corporates based on factors such as relationships between nations or its political landscape; guidance, thus, provides a self-sustaining model for business. The approach mirrors India's economy. Of course, India has an overall strategy of promoting trade with Africa; we have lines of credit and embassies to facilitate relationships. However, beyond that, the onus falls on the private sector to decide on who they wish to trade with.

On a personal note, drawing from your vast experiences and posts, what legacy do you hope to leave in Kenya in your role as the IHC by the end of your term?

I want to leave a legacy that sees me remembered as someone who did a good job. My target is to increase interactions at all levels. Of course, we are building on a very good base. Aside from the high-level interactions between the Kenyan President and Indian PM, there have been MoUs that have been signed. I will endeavour to ensure that all commitments made under these MoUs are rapidly fulfilled. All these add to the project of increasing interactions and bettering realities.

On a final note, January 26th is India's Republic Day. What message would you share with our readers for the occasion?

To the Asian community, I express my pride at the various activities and interactions they have, not only amongst themselves but with the local communities. It makes me proud to represent them as their IHC. To make the High Commission of India more accessible to the Indian community, I am planning to hold an 'Open House' for the Indian community on first Wednesday of every month at 11.30 am, in which any member of the community can come and share his/her concern or ideas. The community is doing a great job in impacting the environment within which they reside. I recently learnt of one of the projects that see them collectively feed about 150,000 children every day - that is incredible. As such, I don't have to give them a message, they are already giving me a message! They are telling me what they know and I am very happy about it; I don't know how that can be bettered.



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As we celebrate the spirit of a free India, let's take time to remember the glory of the country and feel proud of its rich heritage.

Happy Republic Day!