

**Commercial and academic exchanges being strengthened to deepen people-to-people connectivity
between India and ASEAN : Preeti Saran, Secretary (East), MEA at the
9th edition of Delhi Dialogue**

NEW DELHI, July 5, 2017. Ms Preeti Saran, Secretary (East) Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, said here today that India and ASEAN were actively engaged in negotiations for a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement, which is likely to be concluded by this year end. The negotiators will meet shortly in Hyderabad and thrash out issues such as those relating to telecom, health, transport and communications in a bid to tap the potential that exists in these sectors in India and ASEAN member states.

Addressing the **inaugural business and academic session of the 9th edition of the Delhi Dialogue, organised by the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India in partnership with FICCI, CII, ASSOCHAM, ICC, AIAI and Observer Research Foundation (ORF)** here on Wednesday, Ms. Saran said that the Government of India accords the highest priority to cultural, people-to-people connectivity and “we hope to deepen these links through the development of commerce and academic exchanges”.

Ms. Saran laid stress on cross border trade and investment between India and ASEAN for which the Indian Government was making concerted efforts to make 106 of its rivers navigable, expediting the work on the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway project and was considering its extension to Cambodia.

Secretary Saran said that India has put forward proposals for establishing high capacity fibre optic network to enhance digital connectivity. “The time is ripe to consider grid connectivity with Bangladesh and extend it to ASEAN nations,” she said.

In order to connect with the Indian diaspora in ASEAN nations, she said the Government of India is set to organise a regional Pravasi Bhartiya Divas in Singapore in December this year.

Ms Naina Lal Kidwai, Past President, FICCI and Chairperson, Max Financial Services and Advent Private Equity, in her welcome remarks, mentioned that there are two areas where India and ASEAN must seize the opportunity to do more. There are economics and regional connectivity. Closer cooperation will spell continuous productivity gains and skill-upgrading, leading to improvements in production in tracking global competitors. There is a great opportunity for India and ASEAN to work closely in regional connectivity promoting trade, bringing people closer, and integrating economies. Improving connectivity - air, surface and sea - is an imperative to take our relationship to the next level. There is a dire need for direct flights between India and the ASEAN member nations.

On its part, FICCI has announced the First India-ASEAN Start up Awards, starting with the CLMV countries in the first year and helping the best of the technologies to commercialise for the market. The Chamber is also working on a major project aimed at promoting traditional textiles of India and ASEAN and taking them to the global market. The project – India ASEAN Weaving textile relationships – culminates in a coffee table book and a unique textiles show to be held during the commemorative summit. Furthermore, FICCI, supported by the Government, is working on the first India ASEAN Youth Awards.

Ms. Shobana Kamineni, President, CII & Executive Vice Chairperson, Apollo Hospitals Enterprise Ltd., pointed out that in order to keep up and increase the momentum of trade with ASEAN nations, innovative and new age linkages were being explored and meaningful contacts between academics were under way. CII, she said, had unfolded several initiatives to take the momentum forward in areas such as textiles, health, tourism, connectivity, SME activation and organisation of special expositions to highlight what Indian companies had to offer.

Mr. P K Jain, Senior Managing Committee Member, ASSOCHAM and Chairman & Managing Director, ASSOCHAM, said that India must continue to further deepen collaboration with ASEAN countries. The partnerships should promote economic revival, strategic cooperation to fight terrorism and enhance maritime security and defence cooperation. The Chamber has been in the forefront of conducting activities that aim at strengthening India-ASEAN relations. Organising trade exhibitions in ASEAN countries, economic forums, hosting ASEAN Heads of States and business delegations in India and mounting high-powered delegations to ASEAN countries are an integral part of the Chamber's activities.

Mr. Rudra Chatterjee, Vice President, Indian Chamber of Commerce, in his remarks, pointed out that the Government of India had made East and North East India the fulcrum of India's 'Act East' policy and expressed the hope that the take-off of regional connectivity will promote a regional value chain. He stressed the need for strengthening academic relations between the two regions and mentioned that the inspiration could come from the fact that India's oldest university, Nalanda, was a recipient of investment from Sumatra.

Mr. Vijay Kalantri, President, All India Association of Industries (AIAI), emphasised the critical role of connectivity for expansion of business ties. He said Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) were in the forefront of the Government of India's 'Digital India' and 'Start up India' programmes and this sector could therefore be critical in building strong connectivity projects with ASEAN nations.

Dr. Samir Saran, Vice President, ORF, in his concluding remarks, stated that in a world that was in a state of flux, there was a need for re-energising India-ASEAN relationship to create a new world order. With large populations in both regions, it was important to devise ways to create equity and growth; tap the blue economy and the digital economy as new avenues for growth and harness the great opportunity to leverage conventional and traditional wisdom that resides in both regions through the setting up of innovation cluster and education connectivity.

Speaking at the **session on 'International economic trends and their impact on India and ASEAN'**, **Ambassador Anil Wadhwa,** pointed out that the ASEAN region was perhaps the only bright spot in a world buffeted by intolerance, conservatism, large scale migration, underutilisation of capacity, terrorism, the aftermath of Brexit and the Trump ascendancy.

He said the ASEAN nations enjoyed the advantage of a strong workforce and a burgeoning middle class and was transiting from export-orientation to domestically driven economies.

In this backdrop, he suggested that India and ASEAN could together reap the advantages offered by the FTA and the proposed RCEP, connectivity projects, particularly those with North East India, investment possibilities, enhanced air links and the tourism potential between the regions.

The panellists at the discussion, **Ms. Pacita Juan, Chair, ASEAN Women Entrepreneurs Network (Philippines); Mr. O P Lohia, Managing Director, Indo Rama Synthetics (I) Ltd. and Mr. Dilip Gaur, Managing Director, Grasim Industries Ltd.,** shared their experiences and perspectives on the topic.

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