

# On a mission

By P. Unnikrishnan

Indian Ambassador Piyush Srivastava expressed India's pride in its strong friendly relations with the Kingdom of Bahrain, and the two countries' mutual respect and coordination. In an exclusive interview with The Daily Tribune's Managing Editor P. Unnikrishnan, the Ambassador said he was thankful to the Kingdom of Bahrain for the care and attention accorded by the government to the Indian community. Here are the excerpts from the interview.

**Q: Your Excellency, today is a great day in the history of India and Indian democracy. As we celebrate the 74th Independence Day of India, can you tell about major developments taking place in India?**

**A:** First of all, let me convey my greetings and best wishes to the members of Indian community and friends of India in the Kingdom of Bahrain on the occasion of 74th Independence Day of India. It is a proud day for every Indian.

Today, India is entering into a new era of economic transformation. Indian economy has become one of the fastest growing economies in the world. Skilled human resources, improvement in 'ease of doing business' and a huge market are some of the factors empowering India into a most preferred manufacturing destination. While I can go on and on speaking about giant strides made by India in almost all sectors including key sectors of space, ICT, hi-tech and digital sectors, energy, health, education, infrastructure, civil aviation etc. I would like to focus here on our response to the most difficult challenge of our times – COVID 19 pandemic.

India has dealt with the pandemic relatively well. Even though the absolute number of COVID 19 infections may appear large, our recovery rates are among the highest and mortality rate are among the lowest in the world. While India continues to battle the Covid-19 crisis, the government has made persistent efforts for reinvigorating the economy. The challenges have been turned into opportunities with the Government undertaking several transformative reforms. Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi in May 2020 announced the 'Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan', which focusses on making India self-reliant and contributing towards a more prosperous and resilient world. India's role as a "pharmacy of the world" has come into focus during this crisis. We have a world-class pharmaceutical industry that is the producer of choice for critical medications with brand recognition in all geographies and markets. India continued to be a favored destination for foreign investment. Even during COVID 19 crisis, the country attracted more than USD 20 billion FDI (during April-July 2020). The Government has further liberalized FDI policy including in the crucial energy and defence sectors.

India has been in forefront of global and regional cooperation in fighting this pandemic. India and Bahrain have also cooperated and coordinated their efforts in this regard.

I am sure that various policy initiatives and reforms undertaken by India will lead to greater economic engagement with friendly countries like Bahrain.

**Q: Being the head of a diplomatic mission is a very challenging job. I understand that you had worked and stayed in various foreign countries including Nepal, Bhutan, Ghana and Germany before coming to Bahrain. What was your most memorable experience and why?**

**A:** I have been fortunate to serve as Indian diplomat in countries in different regions of the world. In addition, at headquarters also I served in Divisions dealing with diverse countries. Each place has its unique positives as well as challenges, thus providing varying experiences. My all assignments have been memorable and great learning experience and made me better understand global issues. The experience gained thus far, I am sure, will help me tremendously as I begin my tenure as Ambassador of India to Kingdom of Bahrain.

**Q: With your rich experience in Indian foreign ties and economic diplomacy, what do you think is an opportunity that India should explore in the Middle East?**

**A:** India has close civilizational and friendly relations with the countries in the Middle Eastern region. Traditionally, our relations have been characterized by the presence of large Indian diaspora in the Gulf countries and energy security.



Indian ambassador HE Piyush Srivastava with P. Unnikrishnan chairman and MD, The Daily Tribune

With almost 8 million Indian expatriates in this region, ensuring the well-being of Indian citizens remains a priority area for the Government of India. In recent years, with focus on India's extended neighbourhood policy, our relations with the Gulf and West Asian countries have become an increasingly important pillar of our foreign policy. These have been further strengthened and diversified to include new areas of cooperation in maritime security, trade, investments, space technology, capacity building etc.

**Q: What are India's plans for boosting foreign relations with Bahrain, especially in terms of economy and trade?**

**A:** Our age-old and deep bonds of friendship and cooperation have been nurtured by the leadership of both countries in recent years with frequent high-level political exchanges and opening up of new vistas of cooperation in the fields of health, renewable energy, space technology and hydrocarbon sector. Bahrain, the gateway to the GCC market, has also embarked on the journey of diversification of its economy with liberalization of FDI regime in a number of promising sectors such as financial services, ICT, logistics, manufacturing and tourism. As I mentioned earlier, several transformative economic reform measures taken recently by the Government of India, have opened up several new opportunities for trade and investment in India. The Government has further liberalized FDI policy including in the crucial energy and defence sectors. Thus, the developments in India and Bahrain have created a new, dynamic synergy between the two countries and have led to the opening up new avenues for enhanced trade and investment.

**Q: We have many Indian expatriates who wish to leave for good or are planning to take a short break from Bahrain because of virus concerns. What are your plans for the repatriation of these Indian expatriates?**

**A:** During the initial period of COVID-19 pandemic, there was a sense of panic and urgency amongst many members of Indian community in Bahrain to return back to their near and dear ones because of the uncertainty the pandemic and its adverse impact on the economy. The same was the case with people across the globe, which is understandable, given its unprecedented scale. Government of India launched its largest ever repatriation programme, Vande Bharat Mission for bringing home the stranded Indians abroad. Under Vande Bharat Mission, with more than 52 special Air India flights, almost 9100 Indians have returned from Bahrain to India. In addition, about 60 chartered flights organized by Indian community repatriated approx. 10000 Indian nationals back home. I would like to thank the Leadership of Kingdom of Bahrain for extending their full cooperation and support for Vande Bharat Mission as well as for ensuring the welfare and well-being of the large Indian community in Bahrain during these difficult times.

As we are now learning to live with this pandemic and the situation is somewhat stabilized, many Indians are now willing to come back to Bahrain for work. We have been receiving many requests in this regard since last few weeks. Both governments are working towards establishing an Air Bubble Arrangement between India and Bahrain so as to facilitate return of Indian expatriates, of course with a valid visa, who are willing to come back

to Bahrain.

**Q: There are more than 350,000 Indians living in Bahrain, making Indians the largest expatriate community in the Kingdom. Could you please tell me what are your plans to enhance the existing system to improve the standard of life for the Indian Expatriates?**

**A:** Indian community constitutes almost 30 percent of the population of Bahrain and thus plays a big role in the development of Bahrain which has been publicly acknowledged by the Leadership of Bahrain on several occasions. Our

vibrant community in Bahrain plays an important role in promoting our bilateral ties and further strengthening the existing goodwill between our two countries. It is one of my key responsibilities to ensure the welfare and well-being of members of Indian community in Bahrain. These are my early days here. Going forward, it will be my endeavor to further strengthen and diversify trade and economic cooperation between India and Bahrain, in which our Indian expatriate community plays an important part and I look forward to working with them in this regard.