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Consolidating good relationship

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TODAY is India's Republic Day. It was 55 years ago when it gained independence from the British and 52 years ago that the Indian subcontinent was divided into two countries: India and Pakistan.

In fact, if I remember my history lessons correctly, India was the first colony to have achieved independence, inspiring other colonies like the then Malaya to take the same path.

Having shared the same colonial masters, India and Malaysia have many things in common, such as administrative, educational, legal, medical and monetary systems.

Even the Sultan Abdul Samad building in Kuala Lumpur was modelled on similar architectural styles in India.

The onion-like domes found on top of most mosques and palaces in Malaysia is another testament of Indian architectural influence while the world's tallest buildings, the Petronas Twin Towers, were inspired by the eight-point star shape of the Qutb Minar of India.

Historically, this relationship goes back hundreds of years before the coming of the British.

Now, both countries are good trading partners: India imports a lot of Malaysia's palm oil while Malaysia imports a lot of food from India.

However, said Veena Sikri, the High Commissioner of India to Malaysia, "We haven't looked at each other properly.

"Although the friendship between both countries goes back centuries, the interaction has not developed to a logical conclusion," she said.

"Especially now, considering the importance of both countries in Asia, there is a lot that we can do and should be doing to consolidate this friendship," she continued.

"There are many reasons to intensify the relationship," said Sikri.

She gave the example of the Asian currency crisis in 1997.

"Both countries should have looked at each other to find new markets because there is so much synergy. For instance, in information technology, India has made great strides in software technology. At the same time, Malaysia has good infrastructure with excellent facilities like the Multimedia Super Corridor," she said.

"This is one of the fields where both can complement each other. Then we can be recession-proof as we don't have to depend on markets in the West," she said.

Indeed, the marketing potential of India is huge.

She said India has one billion citizens and a majority of them are mobile young educated people.

Of the one billion, she said, about 25 per cent are poor.

"The next one-third of the population consists of people whom the International Monetary Fund defined as having increasing purchasing power parity, that is, they have the capacity to purchase goods," she said.

That means, there are about 300 million people with international purchasing power, equivalent to the entire population of the United States.

"The rest of the people, another one-third, are the newly educated whose purchasing power is growing," she added.

Thus, India is any marketer's dream because there's a large market waiting to be tapped.

Malaysian companies have been making an impact on India's infrastructure

development like the building of highways and ports.

In Malaysia, Indian companies like Ircon International Ltd have contributed to the rail transportation sector.

The Ircon-built railway line, linking Port Tanjung Pelepas in Johor with the national grid, was recently inaugurated by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed.

"Realising the importance of business between both countries," she continued, "two agreements and five memoranda of understanding were signed when Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee visited Malaysia last May."

The two agreements dealt with double taxation and the abolition of visa.

To further cement the good relationship that both countries are sharing, she said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed plans to visit India this year.

"What I find most lacking," she said, "is the fact that most Malaysians don't know enough of India's progress. There are many business potentials not exploited."

Another issue that should be developed is tourism.

Last year, about 200,000 Indians visited Malaysia while the number of Malaysians visiting India as tourists is negligible.

She said Malaysians would have no problem getting about in India as English is the working language there.

An average Indian, she said, is trilingual. They would be able to speak Hindi, which is the national language, English, and their mother tongue.

Another field that she said would benefit people of both countries is education.

In the past, Malaysians have been known to attend India's medical and engineering schools but now this has been neglected.

With the exchange rate of 11 rupees to RM1, more Malaysians should consider this option.

There are 227 universities in India with 11,089 colleges.

Among the fields that Malaysians can enrol in are IT, medicine, engineering, law, accounting, administration, e-governance, human resource in IT and smart card technology.

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