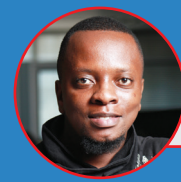


# On the Spot

With



Paheja Siririka

## Namibia, India ties that bind

In one of his last interviews with a local journalist, former Indian High Commissioner to Namibia Mandarapu Subbarayudu (MS) sat down with *New Era's* Paheja Siririka (PS) at India House in Ludwigsdorp to reflect on his 15-month stint as India's top diplomat in Namibia.

The interview covered a buffet of issues, including projects completed, as well as the significance of fostering Namibia-India relations and strengthening South-South cooperation.

**PS: How do you feel right now?**

**MS:** I'm happy that I got the special opportunity to represent India in Namibia, and for the last 15 months, I was able to spend every day productively. I thoroughly enjoyed my stay here.

**PS: What are the key projects that got your attention during your short tenure?**

**MS:** What I love about Namibia is the relationship built on people-to-people contact, something that India also does. There are also economic and commercial, development partnerships. Skills development and capacity building have been pillars of our relationship so far. Before I came here, I was looking at how we can strengthen these avenues for mutual benefit. I looked at sectoral engagement with various sectors like healthcare, education, mining, energy, especially renewable energy. Defence, security, agriculture and food security were my focus areas.

**PS: During your tour of duty, what did you achieve or initiate with your team?**

**MS:** The first one was the inaugural meeting of the joint commission between India and Namibia, which happened at the beginning of my term here. It allowed the leadership to review entire relations, and give action points that were unique. In terms of achievements, I am happy to mention that the bilateral trade according to India's official figures, the highest ever, total N\$15 billion, and of that amount, N\$6.6 billion were exports to India. These trade ties are a real development in the relationship. This shows there is enormous scope to improve. Namibia's exports can go up significantly. I consider that a very important aspect of our partnership.

Another achievement is the development of cooperation. More than 1 700 Namibian students and professionals were able to attend courses in India with the help of scholarships. That area is important. In wellness and health segments, more than



1000 Namibians took up yoga classes, and around 1 500 participated in yoga workshops.

The new initiatives that will come to fruition include a contribution to the health sector, where India will be giving a cancer treatment machine called Bhabhatron Radio Therapy Machine, which will be installed at the Oshakati Intermediate Hospital. We are just waiting for the infrastructure to be developed at the centre to meet people's requirements.

We have also proposed to Namibia the implementation of the public pharmacy scheme. It is a social welfare scheme, through which a wider network of pharmacies is made available to the public at affordable prices, compared to the market price.

We gave a concept note, and drafted a memorandum of understanding for consideration by the Namibian authorities. If it is found beneficial, India will support the scheme and provide training to the personnel as well as the software required. Through the signing of the memorandum of understanding, we would be able to supply medicine which will help people, particularly rural and remote communities, to have their medicine. More than 2 000 types of medicines are available under this scheme, in addition to surgical items.

**PS: India has also invested a lot in entrepreneurship. What is the scope in that area as far as the cooperation between the two countries is concerned?**

**MS:** We have a proposal in the pipeline, which is the entrepreneurship development centre. We are now finalising the government-to-government agreement to set up the centre. The Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship Development will be the implementing agency with the local implementing agency identified by Namibia. This is expected to help the youth gain additional skills, and become employment-creators.

**PS: What strengths does Namibia have to continue the bilateral relations with India?**

**MS:** The strengths of Namibia include the young population aspect, that's a huge bonus. The same with India, Namibian youths are talented, but they need opportunities, so employment-generation become crucial. We need to utilise technology to empower the youth. Our focus is to see how we can make use of technology, improve productivity and expand industries. Climate change is an issue affecting the world, and we would like to partner Namibia, especially in the renewable energy sector. Namibia is a big country in terms of land mass but with a small population, and these are positive factors. Frankly speaking, Namibia is advantaged in size and resources.

Another strength for Namibia is that you have specialised expertise in offshore mining, and India is looking forward to learning from Namibia.

**PS: Apart from education and**

**entrepreneurship, what capacity-building is India advancing in Namibia?**

**MS:** I must mention the role and contribution being made by Indian diamond-cutting and polishing units here. They have established some state-of-the-art facilities, and what makes me happy is that about 500 Namibians have been recruited in the sector.

In diamonds, you require precision, and Namibians are trained in that. Regarding trade and investment, I think we are going to have a caucus to look at factors that are hindering trade and investment between our two countries.

One positive aspect that I always mention wherever I go is that the 860% growth in Namibia's exports to India is an extraordinary development in the country's financial year. This is mostly attributed to copper and copper products, which means some local processing was done before exporting to India.

**PS: Namibia has positioned itself quite well in the world of tourism. What role has that played in India's economy?**

**MS:** This forms part of tourism. Namibia gifted India eight cheetahs, and out of that, with the births that we have recorded, we now have a total of 13. Some multiplied and there were casualties, but the net figure is 13, they are doing well.

They even survived the recent heatwave in India. I spoke to some experts there, and the cheetahs are doing well.

We are forever grateful for the animal diplomacy with Namibia, and the reintroduction of these extinct species. Those cheetahs are now known as Namibian ambassadors to India. People love it because Namibia is the first country to grant that gesture.

Namibia has beautiful landscapes and features that attract people from everywhere in the world. This offers mutual collaboration. I think Indian companies have started looking at that because there is constant revenue for the state. It's a gift from nature, and we look forward to enhancing cooperation in tourism.

**PS: What is your message to Namibians?**

**MS:** I want to remind them that Namibia is a peaceful, beautiful and politically-stable country that welcomes everyone. They should never forget that.

They have an amazing country that is a friend to everyone and an enemy to none. I thoroughly enjoyed my stay here, and got to travel and see the beautiful scenery. I will miss that.

