

# Modi's visit likely as India works to boost Bhutan ties

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

**New Delhi:** With the new government in Bhutan settling in fast, India has stepped up engagement with its strategically located eastern neighbour. While foreign secretary Vijay Gokhale just concluded a two-day visit to Bhutan which the two sides used to discuss economic and development cooperation, PM Narendra Modi is also said to be considering visiting Thimphu next year.

Before that though, Bhutan PM Lotay Tshering is likely to visit India. Gokhale extended an invite to him on behalf of Modi during his meeting with the Bhutan PM.

Tshering told Gokhale he was committed to strengthening the special bond of friendship and cooperation shared by the two countries.

Significantly for India, Tshering also said that "Our foreign policy should not change every five years with change in government".

During his visit, Gokhale held talks with his counterpart Sonam Tshong and also called on Bhutan foreign minister Tandi Dorji. The foreign secretary also had a meeting with Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, the King of Bhutan. In his interactions, Gokhale conveyed that India attaches the highest priority to further expanding its unique ties of friendship and cooperation with Bhutan, based on the priorities of the Bhutan government, said the government in a statement.

"The two sides discussed all aspects of bilateral relations, including high-level exchanges, economic and development cooperation, hydro-

power cooperation, people to people ties, and commemorative activities being jointly organised in the Golden Jubilee year. The two sides also shared their views on regional matters and other issues of mutual interest," it added.

The visit of Gokhale, officials said, was in keeping with the tradition of regular high-level exchanges between the two countries. The two countries also discussed Bhutan's 12th Five Year Plan and other developmental activities. For India the challenge, now that a new government has taken over in Thimphu, is to ensure that Bhutan doesn't lean too far away from India in trying to diversify its economy. India is aware that the Tshering government is looking to reduce its dependence on hydropower which is controlled by India.