

India's ambassador to Iran discusses bilateral relations on India's 77th Independence Day:

# India Open to Iran's BRICS Engagement

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As India commemorates its 77th Independence Day, we had the opportunity to sit down with India's ambassador to Iran, Rudra Gaurav Shresth, to discuss

the country's progress since gaining independence from the United Kingdom, and its long-standing relationship with Iran, a country that has been "a much older friend" for India, than the length of the existence of some of the world powers today. Ambassador Shresth offered valuable insights into the bonds binding the two countries. From politics and investment to tourism and cinema, we explored the issues that could be considered common interests of the two nations.

Ambassador Shresth has been at the helm of the Indian Embassy in Tehran for almost three months, and this is his first interview with an Iranian media outlet. A genial character and a knowledgeable career diplomat, he sincerely believes in the significance of the age-old ties between India and Iran, and the necessity of bolstering them.

The ambassador emphasizes Indians' "keen desire to show our independence every day," and reckons the friendship between the two nations - which some powerful countries oppose - as a way for India to showcase and exercise its independence. Thus, he notes that any expression of friendship between Iran and India is "for us an expression of India's independence on the world stage."



Sajjad Safari/Iran Daily

## IRAN DAILY: How does post-Independence India differ from the colonial era?

SHRESTH: When India achieved its independence in 1947, it was a starkly poor and underdeveloped country. It had very limited capacity to ensure the food-security, health, education, and economic well-being of its approximately 340 million citizens. In contrast, today India has the capacity to feed, educate and treat all its people, despite the fact that our population has grown by more than four times to 1.4 billion people.

In the colonial era, there was a systematic effort to destroy India's industrial base, and to make it a supplier of raw materials for colonial industries. Today, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of 'Make in India' and 'Make for the world', India's manufacturing sector is a leading global destination for Foreign Direct Investments, and our exports are also increasing at a very fast pace.

Newly independent India was largely illiterate, with higher education reserved only for the elite sections. Today, India produces 1.5 million new engineers every year. We have successfully sent spaceships to the moon and Mars. We are a nuclear power. Our Information Technology sector alone is larger than the

entire economies of many other countries. Talented Indians can be found in the top ranks of most major Fortune-500 companies, especially in areas of cutting edge technologies.

But more than all these economic and technological achievements, the most important difference between pre and post independence India is that today India is the world's largest democracy. Independent India's destiny is shaped by its own people, not by rulers sitting in some other country. And that is why all Indians take equal pride in their country's rising profile and stature, despite the fact that we have hundreds of languages and almost all major world religions are represented among the Indian population.

## What key expectations does the Indian Government have from Iran in order to cement political and economic ties? Which areas of cooperation between India and Iran have been overlooked or not received adequate attention? Does your Government view Iran as a viable long-term energy supplier?

India and Iran share an excellent relationship at the level of political leadership. Our populations have also had tremendous

respect and affection for each other, over many Centuries. It is notable that there are no points of bilateral friction or misunderstanding between us, which is quite rare between large and important countries located close to each other. Our leadership maintains regular contact with each other, and these meetings are always cordial and friendly, where both sides enjoy recalling our cultural, linguistic, and literary commonalities with great pleasure.

Both our countries have created an elaborate architecture of dialogue forums and cooperation mechanisms in various specific sectors, and many of our specialised agencies, such as our Central Banks, our Plant Protection bureaus, our Narcotics Control organisations, our security agencies, etc. maintain regular contacts with each other.

We also collaborate well in international and multilateral forums. India welcomed Iran's recent entry into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, while India was chairing this regional body. While our political, diplomatic, security and institutional relations are excellent, it is true that our economic ties, and our people-to-people exchanges remain below potential at present. Both countries are determined to correct this, and this remains a regular point of discussion between

us.

Our traditional business and trade links have remained somewhat concentrated in only a few commodities - with energy exports from Iran playing a dominant role in these exchanges. This is natural, because Iran is a close and friendly neighbour with abundant energy resources, and hence an obvious supplier for meeting India's growing energy needs. However, because of the traditional dominance of energy products in our bilateral trade, we have perhaps given less attention to other possible goods and commodities.

There is plenty of scope to diversify our trade basket. We need to raise greater awareness among our businesses about the competitive advantages of each other's products. Both countries are working together to create such awareness. Recently, the Trade Promotion Organisation of Iran organised a useful event which saw good participation from Indian industry also. We need to organise more such events, and focus on newer products and sectors, where we have good capacities but where our present trade volumes are limited. Our efforts are already bearing fruit - as per the latest data released by the Iran Government, our bilateral trade increased by 47% in the Iranian Calendar year 1401, to reach almost 5 billion US

Dollars.

It must be admitted that in recent years our economic links have also been impacted by external geo-political factors such as sanctions and banking restrictions. While both countries have tried to find solutions to these constraints, they do continue to affect our trade potential. We hope for an eventual easing of these extraneous factors, so that both countries can realise the full potential of our trade and investment exchanges.

Increasing people-to-people contacts, especially between our younger generations, is important for preserving the warmth and cordiality of the India-Iran friendship. That is why we are focused on increasing contact and collaboration in the fields of education, sports and culture, so that our youth get an opportunity to get to meet and appreciate each other directly, rather than knowing each other through the eyes of others. Our Embassy is in regular contact with relevant Iranian educational, cultural and sporting organisations, to boost such exchanges. We are receiving excellent and enthusiastic

