

The Philippines should reconnect with India



THE economic rise of India has so far escaped the attention of most Filipinos. Likewise, it seems that the Philippines has yet to appear on the radar screen of Indians looking to do business with Asians. Also, Indian tourists looking at Asian destinations do not seem to notice our country.

To help bring India and Southeast Asia closer together, the Indian government last week hosted the Delhi Dialogue III. At that annual meeting, former Asean Secretary General Rodolfo Severino, during one of the panel discussions, noted that the growth in India's relations with the regional bloc has been lopsided. About a third of its investments in Asean went to Singapore, which also accounted for about half of India's tourists who traveled to Southeast Asia. As some pointed out, the statistics might be skewed, given that Singapore has a substantial Indian minority, is a transshipment port, and a stopover for countries like the Philippines that have no direct flights to India. Still, we agree with Mr. Severino that the numbers suggest a lopsided trend.

From one perspective, it seems that the Philippines is missing out on the India's economic boom. And the numbers substantiate this. For instance, some 3 million Indian tourists visit Asean countries, but in 2010, records from the Department of Tourism show that only about 34,500 visited the Philippines. Also, an increasing number of Indians book weddings in Asean tourist hotspots, like Bali, as noted by Dr. Surin Pitsuwan also at the Delhi Dialogue. He quipped that only two people get married, but as many as 300 couples typically attend—plus they stay for at least seven days. Indian weddings are famous for being big, elaborate and expensive.

On the trade front, the total imports and exports between Asean and India was nearly \$50 billion in 2007, and at the dialogue, Dr. Pitsuwan set an ambitious target, \$70 billion by next year. In contrast, the Philippine-India trade is about \$460 million as of 2006, according the website of the Philippine embassy in New Delhi. The embassy also reported that India sells more goods to the Philippine than what Filipinos buy from India.

Also, India is increasing its investments in Asean. There have been some Indian investments in the Philippines, even in the local business process outsourcing (BPO) sector. But again, the amounts invested in the Philippines pale in comparison with what others in Southeast Asia got.

For instance, India signed \$15-billion worth of deals with Indonesia in January. Indonesia, which our President Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino 3rd is now visiting, is actively courting India and is trying to catch up with other Asian countries that have more business relations with that country.

Allow visa upon entry

Mr. Severino suggested that the private sector should take the lead in expanding relations with India. We agree. And we welcome the move of the Philippine Airlines to resume direct flights to New Delhi by the end of March, which comes 16 years after suspending that service. That’s a good start.

Direct flights will cut down travel time between Manila and New Delhi to about six hours. Right now, the travel time is about 10 hours, which includes a stopover, typically in Singapore or Bangkok.

A former Indian envoy to Manila also suggested that local airlines should look at establishing direct flights to Mumbai, the commercial and entertainment capital of India. That route might be more lucrative than the one to New Delhi.

The Philippine government, too, could do more to foster better relations with India. For one, the authorities should consider giving Indian tourists a 30-day visa upon arrival in

the Philippines. This would only be a reciprocal move. Since January, India has been granting Filipinos a 30-day visa upon arrival.

Actually, the Philippine visa poses the biggest barrier to establishing closer ties with India. One Indian-Filipino businessman told us that Indians find it too difficult to obtain a visa to visit the Philippines. The Philippines should look at other Asean countries that have liberalized their visa requirements as part of a strategy to boost tourist arrivals.

Also, the Aquino government should invite top Indian leaders to visit Manila. India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh attended the East Asia Summit in Cebu in 2007, and that was followed by a state visit by former President Gloria Arroyo to New Delhi that year. India is keen on doing business in Asia, as evidenced by its two-decade old Look East Policy. The Aquino government should capitalize on that interest.

Forgotten past

Actually, India has historic and cultural links to East Asia dating back millennia. But because Filipinos are more akin to the Chinese and because of the colonial past with Spain and the US, the man on the street today is unaware of the ties between the Philippines and India. Its cultural footprint is more evident in other Asean countries, like Cambodia which has famous monuments such as Angkor Wat, Myanmar which shares a land border with India, as well as in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia.

Recent developments, though, give us a clue about a past shared with India. The late Filipino archeologist Alfredo Evangelista discovered the so-called Laguna Copperplate near Laguna de Bay in 1989. The copperplate, which dates back to the eighth or ninth century, is believed to be the earliest known written document found in the Philippines.

The Laguna Copperplate bears words in Sanskrit and old Malay. This affirms what old linguistic scholars already saw: India heavily influenced our forefathers.

Twenty-five percent of the words in Filipino languages are Sanskrit. These words are also in the living Indian tongues. Among these are buddhi, sinta, mahal, laksa, mukha, asa (Sanskrit asha), salita (Sanskrit cerita), balita (Sanskrit berita), guro (guru), dalita (Sanskrit

dharta and in Hindi the dalit are the very poor, the untouchables). These words are also in Bahasa Indonesia and Bahasa Melayu.

Expanding and deepening relations between the Philippines and India today will merely be a reconnection of ancient but forgotten ties.