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Colombia's growing tango with India

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Bogota: Sai Baba, tea, airline pilots and solar energy - Colombia is slowly but increasingly discovering India.

It has certainly been a busy year for India's ambassador Deepak Bhojwani, who had to fly home briefly to prepare for the visit of Colombia's Defence Minister Juan Manuel Santos in the last week of November.

But the trip got postponed due to an unexpected tiff between leaders of Colombia, undoubtedly the most pro-US country in the continent, and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez over hostage negotiations with leftist rebels here.

The momentum of increased diplomatic contacts between India and Colombia is leading up to the visit of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe in April 2008, which Bhojwani said would demonstrate the leader's priority for New Delhi. In fact, the president has written the prologue for a book of Mahatma Gandhi's writings we released recently, Bhojwani told a visiting IANS correspondent.

Across Colombia, India is still synonymous with mysticism, and the Indian embassy frequently issues visas to Colombian devotees of Sathya Sai Baba, who is based in southern India. But there is much more.

A visit to a supermarket in Bogota demonstrates that the only domestic tea brand, marketed as a new age relaxant, in this coffee-loving nation is sold with a logo of a cross-legged turbaned holy-man labelled "Hindu Tea".

Colombia is also the largest source for foreign pilots for the fast-growing Indian aviation market. "This year alone we issued visas to about 60 Colombian pilots," Bhojwani said.

Sometimes, an Indian link comes up unexpectedly -- as it did in a resort inside the Tayrona National Park, not too long ago an inaccessible and fierce battleground between security forces and narcotic smugglers. The park, in north Colombia, is where a plaque marks India's donation of a solar electrification plant. 12/1312007

The Indian gift powers the luxurious resort, packed with tourists and located among dense foliage on the cliffs of Sierra Nevadade Santa Marta, one of world's highest coastal mountain ranges.

For India and Colombia part of the blame for the mutual absence from each other's mental landscape could be laid at the door of the daunting physical distance of over 15,000 km. With no direct flights to the South American continent, it usually takes a trip through New York or Europe to reach Bogota, at a total flying time of over 22 hours. Despite the intimidating journey, Colombia and India have suddenly focused the limelight on each other - the fact startly illustrated by the number of ministerial visits.

As opposed to the odd ministerial visit every other year, 2007 has witnessed four Indian ministers finding their way to the 46-million strong country, which is often credited for having the best-educated workforce in South America. Urban Development Minister S Jaipal Reddy was in Colombia in May to study its urban transport projects. Minister of State for External Affairs Anand Sharma arrived a month later for bilateral discussions. Minister for Women and Child Development Renuka Chowdhury attended an international seminar and Tourism Minister Ambika Soni participated in a UN meet in November.

One reason for India's discovery of Colombia could be credited to the image change this country has achieved. Once dubbed the world's riskiest, there has been a change in its security situation encouraging foreign investment and fuelling an economic boom in the country that took the growth rate to a record high of 6.8 percent in 2006.

Indeed, Bhojwani elaborates the reasons for Indian business to come to Colombia - "improved security environment, stable government and incentives for investment. He said Bogota was much safer than other major Latin American cities. "We are already working on a double taxation avoidance treaty and a Business Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement to make them ready for the state visit next year, Bhojwani said. Other agreements in the pipeline are a cultural exchange programme and cooperation in bamboo technology.

While India does not source oil or gas from Colombia due to the distance, ONGC Videsh Ltd has a major presence with an oil production joint venture with China's Sinopec. It was allotted three new gas fields in September. Recently, Mumbai-based Zoom Developers and Lakshmi Mittal's Ispat have been sniffing around for projects.

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