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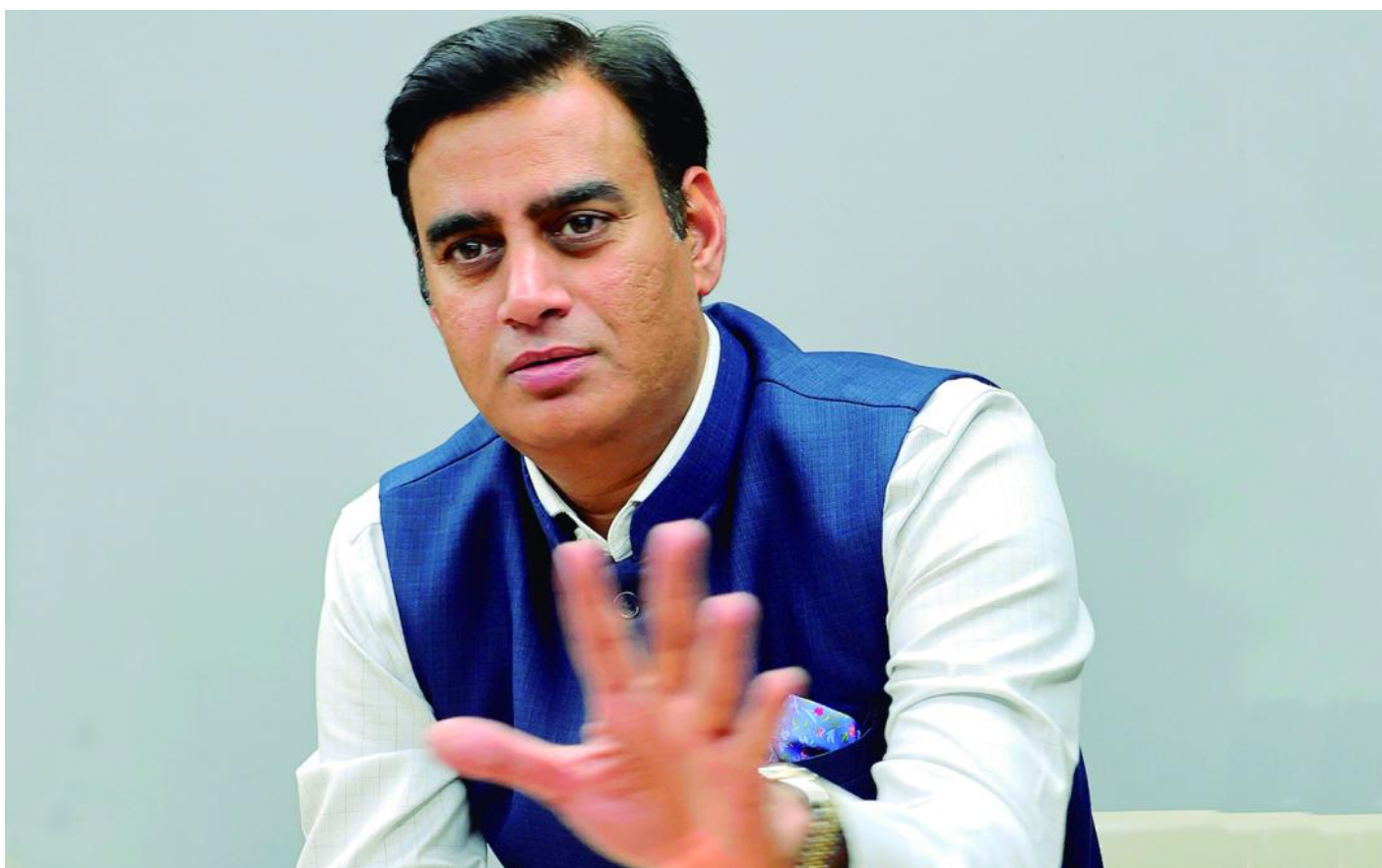


COUNTRY



INTERVIEW

Ambassador Rohit Vadhvana: "India sees Bolivia as a strategic partner in BRICS, lithium, and agricultural trade."



Rohit Vadhvana, Indian ambassador to Bolivia/Photo: Fuad Landívar

Gold is the country's main export to this Asian nation, but there are broader prospects. This year's economic commitment is already evident at Expocruz.



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He is India's first resident ambassador. Previously, his country handled affairs with Bolivia from Peru. He spoke with EL DEBER about the challenges of his mission.

- What does the presence at Expocruz mean for the relationship between India and Bolivia?

I'm happy to have participated in Expocruz. I visited it twice and saw the presence of many international companies. This reflects its importance. The Indian Embassy in Bolivia is new, having only opened in March of this year, and that's why we invited our companies to attend. This first time, we brought a seven-member delegation, with three companies in the agricultural, medical, and household products sectors.

We also organized a business roundtable at Cadex, where 30 Bolivian companies were able to interact with our delegation. They not only participated in the fair, but also met with companies in the sector. Our goal is for the next one to be larger, because India is very interested in doing business with Bolivia.

Three years ago, India was Bolivia's largest export destination: US\$2.3 billion, mostly in gold. India is the world's largest buyer of gold, but recent regulations in Bolivia have reduced those exports. Still, our trade relations are good, and we want to expand them.



- How is cooperation within BRICS reflected, given that Bolivia has expressed interest in joining this group?

BRICS began with Brazil, Russia, India, and China; later, South Africa joined. It's a rapidly growing economic group of countries. Bolivia expressed interest in joining and received support from everyone, especially India. Today, Bolivia is an associate member and will have our support. There is a BRICS bank and financing options. If Bolivia requests support, India will be in favor.

- India is interested in strategic resources like lithium. What specific areas of collaboration are being explored with Bolivia?

India is making significant progress in electric vehicles, and to achieve this, we'll need large quantities of lithium. We're a market of 1.4 billion people, and we also manufacture and export vehicles for brands such as Hyundai, Toyota, BMW, and Mercedes.

Bolivia, with the world's largest lithium reserves, is key. We signed a cooperation agreement on mining and minerals, although lithium falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Hydrocarbons, so we are managing that specific channel. Both our government and our companies are interested in lithium projects across the entire value chain: exploration, extraction, processing, and marketing.

We've already brought delegations to Potosí and to Bolivian mining cooperatives. We've seen that mining here is still artisanal, while in India it's completely mechanized. We want to support with training, technology, and equipment so that Bolivia can make the leap toward more modern mining.

- Beyond natural resources, what potential is there for expanding trade and investment between India and Bolivia?

India is the largest exporter of pharmaceutical products to Bolivia, with quality and affordable medicines. We are working with Bolivian insurance companies to import them directly from India, which will reduce costs and benefit patients. We also recommend considering India as a medical tourism destination: a cancer treatment that costs \$200,000 in other countries costs \$50,000 in India, according to international standards.

In education and technology, India is a world leader in IT. We see great potential in Bolivia, with its young and talented population in cities like Santa Cruz and Cochabamba. We propose replicating India's path: from call centers to software development. In addition, we offer open digital platforms, such as biometric identity, healthcare, and tax systems, which Bolivia could implement without licensing costs.

In higher education, we want to open doors to Bolivian students. CEOs of global companies like Google, Microsoft, Mastercard, and Adobe are Indians trained in our country. We want to offer full scholarships and exchange programs: next year we plan to welcome between 10 and 15 Bolivian students.

- Beyond gold and gas, are there markets for products from Santa Cruz and Bolivia in general?

Yes. Bolivia produces highly valued foods in India, such as quinoa, chia, and wine. We are 1.4 billion people; we can consume all the quinoa and chia they produce, as well as Bolivian wine. What's missing is a solid marketing channel. We've instructed our companies to seek out these products because they generate employment in Bolivia and because the Indian market is enormous.

- What message do you want to send to Bolivia, to the entrepreneurs and authorities here in Santa Cruz?

My message is clear: India is an open country and a friend of Bolivia. We want to walk together, work together, and achieve a relationship that benefits both countries.

PROFILE

Diplomat. He has served in Iran, the United Kingdom, Kenya, and New Delhi. A lawyer and political scientist, he speaks four languages and is the author of literary works in Gujarati and English. He is married to Femida Shaikh.

In Bolivia, he has fostered relationships between companies from both the country and his native India.

