‘Our huge market presents an excellent opportunity to Kiwi businesses.’
- H.E. Muktesh Pardeshi

In just four months since assuming office as India’s High Commissioner to New Zealand on July 29 this year, HE Muktesh Pardeshi has had a busy schedule travelling across New Zealand and meeting the Indian diaspora, businesspeople, New Zealand ministers, politicians and officials. In his frequent interactions with the diaspora, he has endeared himself with his friendliness, candour and approachability. He has had a successful career as a diplomat most notably acting as an effective catalyst promoting trade and investment between India and the countries in which he has represented his motherland. His achievements both internationally and at home in India have been recognised and feted.

A career diplomat, he joined Indian Foreign Service in 1991. He was Ambassador of India to Mexico from April 2016 to June 2019. He concurrently also served as High Commissioner to Belize. During his tenure, India-Mexico ‘Privileged Partnership’ saw huge advancement: bilateral trade increased from $ 5.9 bn in 2015 to $10.15 bn in 2018 registering 75 per cent growth over a three-year period; India participated as the Guest of Honour Country at the 46th Cervantino International Festival 2018 and the 33rd International Book Fair Guadalajara 2019. He was named Ambassador of the Year 2018 for his contributions by Mexican diplomatic journal El Mundo Internacional.

At Headquarters in New Delhi as Joint Secretary, his leadership role in the transformation of Passport services in India (which doubled from 6 to 12 million during 2010-15) has been widely acclaimed. As the Mission Leader of Passport Seva Project, he received numerous awards, including the prestigious National Award on e-Governance (Gold) 2014-15 and Web Ratna (Platinum) Award 2014. During 2010-16, he also served on the Board of Directors of the Security Printing and Minting Corporation of India.

In a diplomatic career spanning over 28 years, Ambassador Pardeshi has earlier served as Minister/Deputy Head of Mission in Jakarta and Counsellor at the Permanent Mission of India to the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva. In 2001-04, he was Deputy Secretary (South East Asia & Pacific) in the Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi.

Mr. Pardeshi was educated at the University of Delhi where he obtained Bachelor and Master of Arts from Hindu College and Delhi School of Economics respectively (both with first position in the University) before entering the diplomatic service in 1991. He also holds a Diploma in Spanish from the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

Kia Ora India Editor Dev Nadkarni sought Mr Pardeshi’s views on a wide range of topics for this issue.
On observations and impressions of New Zealand and the Indian diaspora:

I have very pleasant impressions of New Zealand, its friendly people and the Indian community. In less than four months of my stay here, I have had the opportunity to travel and meet a wide cross-section of Indian diaspora; from the dairy farmers of the Waikato region to the prosperous businessmen in Auckland and to our student community in Canterbury. I am deeply touched by the warmth and affection showered on me by the diaspora. I appreciate the inclusivity and diversity of New Zealand society and its multi-cultural ethos.

On India-NZ relations and what needs to be done to realise their full potential:

We have very warm and cordial relations. But the relationship has not realised its full potential. The historical relationship between India and New Zealand has been described as one of ‘friendly indifference’. Though there is much in common, including shared Commonwealth heritage, English language, love for cricket and mountaineering; geography has literally kept us apart. However, I am glad to take note of the keen interest that leadership at the highest level has recently shown in taking the relationship to a new level.

Prime Ministers of both the countries had a bilateral meeting in September 2019 in New York on the sidelines of UNGA. They discussed the entire range of bilateral relations as well as areas of regional and global interest. At the invitation from Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, NZ Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern became one of the six world leaders to speak at a special commemorative event held in New York to mark the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, where she underlined the Gandhian virtues of peace and tolerance.

Speaking of bilateral trade, it has shown a healthy double-digit annual growth in the last couple of years to cross three billion NZ Dollars but there is an immense unrealised potential.

Apart from trade, companies on both sides can look at identifying opportunities for investment and technological collaboration. Connectivity is to play a very crucial role in promoting trade and it is our common endeavour to start a direct flight connection between the two countries.

Foreign Ministers of the two countries have met twice since August in third countries. Hon Ministers Winston Peters and David Parker are scheduled to visit India together in February next year. Minister of State for Trade and Export Growth Damien O’Connor visited New Delhi in the first week of November and met our Commerce and Industry Minister and other dignitaries. Even as we speak, a five-member delegation from the NZ Parliament (South and South East Asia Friendship Group) is visiting India.

Chief of Naval Staff of India Admiral Karambir Singh visited New Zealand in September, which was first visit of an Indian Naval Chief to New Zealand in nine years.

On India not signing RCEP and how this might affect India-NZ trade:

India had been engaged in RCEP negotiations with the intention of having a balanced and comprehensive deal which took care of concerns of our manufacturers and farmers. We run trade deficits with 11 of the 15 RCEP countries and there were concerns of the domestic market being inundated with cheap foreign products if RCEP was joined in its current form. However, we have not closed our doors on the deal and will be glad to join if our interests are taken on board. As far as bilateral FTA is concerned, negotiations are going on and we hope to have a mutually beneficial FTA in the near future. However, RCEP should not mean the ‘be all and end all’ when it comes to bilateral trade.

On the strong growth of the emerging Indo-Pacific alignment and India’s role in Pacific Ocean geopolitics:

India is in favour of ensuring a stable, open, secure, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific that is founded upon a cooperative and collaborative rules-based order and India’s multi-layered engagement with all countries in the region are key to realising this vision. India has been an active participant in institutional mechanisms such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the East Asia Summit, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Defence Ministers Meeting Plus, ASEAN Regional Forum, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, and Mekong Ganga Economic Corridor. Through the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC), India is engaging with Pacific Island countries. India is engaging actively in the region for promoting maritime security, better disaster management and climate sustainability.

On areas the two countries could take up as a priority based on the strengths that could be cross leveraged:

New Zealand is strong in food processing, dairy and agriculture, supply chain management and water management and partnership in these sectors can benefit both our countries. India, on the other hand, has known strengths in Information Technology, Biotechnology, Pharmaceuticals, etc. which could be leveraged by New Zealand. Though there is a definite scope for expansion of trade, businesses must look at opportunities to collaborate and invest in India. Our huge market presents an excellent opportunity to Kiwi businesses to reap benefits of scale in India. From a base in India, they can cater to the wider Asian market. Glideship is a shining example of this.

I feel happy to have attended the sixth INZBC Summit which drew good participation from NZ side. We are working with all stakeholders to develop a road map for deepening India-NZ business partnership. In this respect, I seek assistance from all entities such as industry bodies, Chambers and especially from INZBC.