India-Czech Republic Bilateral Relations

Relations between India and Czech Republic are deep rooted. According to Czech Indologist, Miloslav Krasa, "if not earlier, then surely as early as the 9th and 10th Centuries A.D., there existed both land and maritime trade routes from Asian markets to Czech lands, along which precious goods from the East, including rare Indian spices, reached this country". Relations between the two countries continued to strengthen in coming centuries with frequent exchange of visits by academicians, artists, businessmen and political leaders. By making the knowledge of India available and accessible, the scholars in the Czech Republic are continuing the long tradition of the founders of Czech Indology, dating back to the period before and particularly after the creation of independent Czechoslovakia in 1918. The comprehensive process of learning about India and of establishing contacts between Czechoslovakia and India was facilitated and accelerated by frequent visits of prominent Indian scholars, journalists, politicians and artists in Prague and other cities of Czechoslovakia. The increase in bilateral trade created even more possibilities for establishing interpersonal contacts, especially after the Czechoslovak Consulate was opened in Bombay in 1920 and later in Calcutta. Thus, a way opened for a group of people, joined not only by professional interests, but also mutual sympathies and friendships, to come together.

India's relations with the former Czechoslovakia, and with the Czech Republic, have always been warm and friendly. Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore visited Czechoslovakia in 1921 and 1926. Pandit A bust of Tagore is installed in an exclusive residential area in Prague named after as Thakurova. The Indian leader, who visited Czechoslovakia the most times between 1933 and 1938 was Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. He founded the Indo-Czech Association in Prague in 1934 and met Edvard Benes several times as Foreign Minister and President. Jawaharlal Nehru accompanied by his daughter Indira Gandhi visited Prague in 1938, and subsequently influenced the strong condemnation of the 1938 Munich Pact by the Indian nationalist movement.

Diplomatic relations with Czechoslovakia were established on November 18, 1947. Presidents Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, Giani Zail Singh and R. Venkataraman visited Czechoslovakia in 1965, 1983 and 1988 respectively. Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru paid a visit in 1955, as did PM Smt. Indira Gandhi in August 1972 and Rajiv Gandhi in August 1986. Foreign Minister Jiri Dienstbier made the first high level contact after the Velvet Revolution in November 1990. Indian Minister of State for External Affairs R.L. Bhatia was the first non-European Minister to visit the Czech Republic following the dissolution of CSFR.

High level visits have been maintained after the Czech Republic came into existence after bifurcation of Czechoslovakia on 1 January 1993. From the Indian side: President Shankar Dayal Sharma visited in October 1996; Shri Omar Abdullah, Minister of State for External Affairs visited in February 2002; Shri Balasaheb Vikhe Patil, Minister of Heavy Industries & Public Enterprises in September 2002; Shri Anant Geete, Minister of Power in June 2003; Shri George Fernandes, Defence Minister in October 2003; Shri Digvijay Singh, Minister of State for External Affairs in September 2003; Shri Kamal Nath, Minister of Commerce &
Industry and Minister of State for External Affairs Shri Anand Sharma visited Czech Republic in September, 2008. Minister for External Affairs Shri S.M. Krishna visited the Czech Republic in June 2009. Vice President Shri M. Hamid Ansari, in June 2010; Air Chief Marshal P.V. Naik, Chairman, Chiefs of Staffs Committee in November 2010 and Shri Sriprakash Jaiswal, Minister of Coal in June 2011; Commerce, Industry & Textiles Minister Shri Anand Sharma, 9-12 September 2012 and Minister of State for External Affairs Smt. Preneet Kaur in October-November 2012.

From the Czech side: President Vaclav Havel visited India in February 1994 (He received two prestigious Indian awards (i) Indira Gandhi Peace Prize (during his State Visit in February 1994); and (ii) Mahatma Gandhi Peace Prize in January, 2004); Prime Minister Milos Zeman in March 2001; Minister for Industry & Trade Mr. Vladimir Dlouhly in March 1993; Foreign Minister Josef Zileieniec in June 1993; Minister of Industry & Trade Dr. Karel Kuehni in October 1997; Minister of Defence Mr. Vladimir Vetchy in February 2001; Minister of Industry and Trade Mr. Miroslav Gregr in March 2001; Minister of Finance Mr. Pavel Mertlik in March 2001; Minister of Agriculture Mr. Jan Fenci in March 2001; Minister of Industry & Trade Mr. Jiri Rusnok in August 2002 and February 2003; Minister of Defence Mr. Jaroslav Tvrdik in February 2003; Mr. Martin Simonovsky, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Transport in February 2005. President Vaclav Klaus paid a State Visit to India in November 2005. Prime Minister Jiri Paroubek visited India in January 2006. Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg visited India in 2007. Czech Minister of Industry and Trade Martin Riman visited India in November, 2008. President of the Senate of Czech Parliament Mr. Milan Stech in May 2011; Mr. Martin Kocourek, Minister of Trade and Industry led a trade delegation to India in October 2011 which included Mr. Milan Urban, Chairperson of Committee on Economic Affairs of Czech Parliament. Foreign Minister Jan Kohout and Minister for Culture Jiří Balvín visited India in November 2013. He was accompanied by and a trade delegation consisting of 25 Czech companies. Deputy Foreign Minister Tomas Dub visited India in the first week of February 2014 and called on MOS (PK) on 10 February. He also called on Shri, S. Natchiappan, MOS (C & I) on February 4, 2014. Czech Deputy Foreign Minister Tomas Dub visited India in the second week of February. During the visit he called on MOS (PK) and reiterated that Czech Republic considered India as an important partner in Asia.

Since 2012, bilateral trade has amounted to more than one billion U.S. dollars. During 2012, Indian exports to Czech Republic amounted to $581.80 while Indian imports were $517.72 million. Both countries have continued efforts for strengthening economic relations through frequent exchange of trade and business delegations. In 2013, for the first time in our long history of economic relations, the balance of bilateral trade tilted in India’s favour. Indian exports which were US$596.003 million against Czech exports of US$656.308 million in 2012, reached at US$630.127 against Czech exports of US$566.127 million in 2013 with a 5.7% percent increase in Indian exports. From January to November 2014, Indian exports to Czech Republic were US$647.346 against Czech exports of US$529.684 to India.

Indian companies have invested in Czech Republic in sectors like IT, vehicles, tea, textile, pharmaceutical, auto-components. Indian companies like Infosys, Ashok Leyland, Tata Tea, Alok Industries, Spentex Industries, Motherson Sumi Systems Limited, Glenmark Pharmaceuticals, Lloyd Group, Lloyd Electric and Engineering Ltd., PMP Components Ltd. have made investment in Czech Republic. Following on the original investments of Skoda Auto, Skoda Power and Tatra, there are a number
of new and prospective Czech investment projects in India in the machinery, transportation, power and automotive sectors.

A Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement was signed in October 1998. During the visit of Vice President of India in June 2010, a Social Security Agreement between India and Czech Republic and Protocol on Amendments to BIPPA Agreement as well as Agreement on Economic Cooperation were also signed.

Direct civil aviation links existed till 1991 with a direct Czech Airlines flight to Mumbai (An Air India flight touched Prague till 1971). A Bilateral Air Service Agreement was signed in 1997. There has been no progress in establishing direct air links.

An agreement for cooperation in culture, education and science was concluded in 1996 during the visit of President Shanker Dayal Sharma. Czech educational institutions – particularly technical universities and medical colleges – are interested in exchange programmes with counterpart Indian institutions; they would also like to attract more of the Indian students who go abroad for graduate and post-graduate studies. There is ongoing cooperation in educational and scientific exchanges. Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and the Czech Academy of Sciences (CzAS) have an agreement of cooperation. CzAS also has an agreement for cooperation with Indian National Science Academy (INSA).

Indology has a very old tradition in Prague, starting with the establishment of a Chair in Sanskrit in the prestigious Charles University in 1850. Czechoslovakia’s first Consul in Bombay in 1920 was an Indologist, Otakar Pertold. The period between the two World Wars witnessed a very rapid expansion in Indian studies under the guidance of Vincenc Lesny, who was a personal friend of Rabindranath Tagore. The Institute of Indian Studies at the Charles University has many students being imparted education in Indian languages (mainly Sanskrit, Tamil, Hindi and Bengali), literature, history and culture. The Oriental Institute which was set up in 1922 under the auspices of the Czech Academy of Sciences has a long tradition of research in Indian languages, literature, history, culture, politics, etc. Noted Czech Indologist, Prof. Dusan Zbavitel, who has translated 60 Sanskrit works, including the Upanishads, was conferred a Padma Bhushan in January 2006 for his contribution to Indology in the Czech Republic. Prof. Dusan Zbavitel died in August 2012 in Prague. 5 ITEC scholarships are offered to Czech students for professional courses in India.

The Indian community in the Czech Republic is about 500-strong. Some of them are Czech nationals and have married locals, while others are on long-term resident permits or permanent residence permits. Many are professionals working with multinational companies like Arcelor Mittal, Citibank, IBM, Honeywell, Microsoft and DHL. Indian companies like Infosys, and Avia Ashok Leyland have also employed Indian professionals. There are about 150 Indian students studying medicine, engineering and science in various Czech universities. There are several informal associations of Indians / people of Indian origin, who occasionally organize functions on the occasion of Diwali/Holi, in cooperation with the Embassy. Some Indians are also engaged in small time business/retail trading.

Tourism between the two countries has also been flourishing with considerable pace in recent months. The shooting of a Bollywood film in July 2014 on historical locations of Prague has also generated interest in India about the Czech
Republic and increased number of Indian tourists since. Goa and beaches in South India are most popular tourist destinations for Czechs in India.

Useful Resources
For more information and latest updates please visit
Embassy of India, Prague website:
http://wws.india.cz/
Embassy of India, Prague Facebook page:
https://www.facebook.com/EOIPRAGUE
India Global- AIR FM Gold Program featuring India and Czech Republic Relations:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vKtRjI0A6iik

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