

Chapter 12

The Dynamic Role of the Indian Diaspora in Shaping India's Relationship with the Middle East

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Abstract

This abstract delves into the influential role played by the Indian diaspora in shaping India's bilateral ties with the Middle East. As a critical demographic dispersed across various countries in the region, the Indian diaspora has emerged as a crucial bridge between India and Middle Eastern countries, fostering cultural, economic and political exchanges. The Indian diaspora's historical presence in the Middle East has deep-rooted connections, dating back to centuries of trade, cultural exchange, and migration. Leveraging their cultural affinities and linguistic ties, the diaspora has facilitated seamless interactions between India and the Middle East, acting as agents of cultural diplomacy and mutual understanding. Economically, the Indian diaspora's contributions have been significant, with their diverse skill sets and entrepreneurial spirit propelling growth in various sectors. Remittances from the diaspora play a vital role in India's economy, bolstering trade and investment between India and Middle Eastern countries. Politically, the Indian diaspora's active engagement in the political landscapes of their host countries and India has served to strengthen ties between governments. Lobbying efforts and advocacy for shared interests have contributed to enhanced diplomatic relations, facilitating cooperation on regional and global issues. The article explores successful initiatives initiated

by the Indian diaspora, such as educational exchanges, cultural festivals and humanitarian projects, which have further deepened people-to-people connections between India and the Middle East. In conclusion, the Indian diaspora's pivotal role in shaping India's relationship with the MENA region cannot be underestimated. As cultural ambassadors, economic contributors and political advocates, the diaspora's impact continues to be instrumental in fostering cooperation, understanding, and prosperity between India and Middle Eastern nations.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy, Diaspora, India, Middle East, Soft Power

Introduction

In the present era, our world is experiencing an unprecedented level of globalisation. This interconnectedness has ushered in transformative changes that were once unimaginable, knitting the global community together. While many associate globalisation solely with enhanced economic and political collaboration, heightened international trade, and a surge in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), it encompasses a significant and often overlooked consequence: the substantial movement and migration of individuals across different parts of the globe. Given these conditions, the examination of diaspora takes on significance and becomes noteworthy. Diasporas are highly diverse in terms of language, identity and social standing. Understanding their socio-economic and political impact, as well as their level of integration and assimilation, becomes pivotal, as these factors play a crucial role in preserving and safeguarding the cultural traditions that foster connections between two countries.

The term “diaspora” originates from the Greek words *dia* (through or over) and *sporio* (dispersal or to sow), which translate to “scattering” or “dispersion”. Initially, the ancient Greeks employed the term diaspora to describe citizens of a prominent city who migrated to a conquered land with the intention of colonisation, aiming to assimilate the territory into their empire. In the context of the Indian diaspora, India

serves as the shared ancestral homeland from which people, driven by diverse reasons, have voluntarily or involuntarily migrated to various regions across the globe. This movement of people led to the formation of the Indian diaspora (Lal, 2007, pp. 14–17). As per the Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences, Diaspora refers to a Greek term used to describe a nation or a segment of a nation that is separated from its state or territory and scattered among other nations. Despite this dispersal, the diaspora maintains and preserves its distinctive national culture. Thus, the Indian diaspora can be described as a collective group of people who can either trace their origins to India or are Indian citizens residing abroad, whether temporarily or permanently (Biswas, 2020). There is a common misconception that India's diaspora solely comprises Non-Residential Indians (NRIs). However, the diaspora encompasses a much broader community, including Non-Residential Indians (NRIs), Persons of Indian Origin (PIO), and Overseas Indian Citizens (OICs). This diverse diaspora serves as a significant linkage between different countries. In this article, we will explore the Indian diaspora in the MENA region and examine how it has influenced India's relations with this area.

Diaspora communities may come into existence due to voluntary or involuntary migration, mass exile, or the emigration of economically disadvantaged groups seeking better opportunities abroad. Recent shifts in the global political and economic landscape have led to significant population movements across various regions. The connection between these diasporic communities and their homelands opens up the potential for their eventual return from the adopted country. As such, migration serves as the fundamental origin of the diaspora. These communities, residing as ethnic minorities in their host countries, maintain profound emotional, sentimental, and material ties with their countries of origin (Sinha, 2019, p. 5).

The roots of the Indian diaspora can be traced back nearly four millennia, closely intertwined with India's historical trade connections. Even during the ancient Indus Valley

Civilisation, trade flourished with ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, laying the foundation for small merchant communities that would later evolve into the modern Indian diaspora. From 500 to 1600 AD, trade continued to play a pivotal role as significant Indian diasporas emerged along the Indian Ocean rim (Brahmachari, 2011). These diasporas spanned regions from Zanzibar and Egypt in the West to Yemen and Oman in the Arabian Peninsula, and extended to Arakkan and Malacca in the Far East. The 20th century and India's independence brought forth a new generation of Indians who sought opportunities abroad, contributing to the further expansion of the diaspora. Simultaneously, the oil boom in the Middle East attracted thousands of Indians from southern states, who moved to the region to take up various mid and low-level jobs in the burgeoning petroleum sector. Over the past thirty years, the migration of Indians to Middle Eastern countries has exhibited a consistent upward trajectory, resulting in a robust diaspora of 9.3 million individuals by 2019. A significant portion of Indian migrant workers in the Middle Eastern region gravitates towards the UAE, and Saudi Arabia and Oman are also recognised as prominent destinations. Although most Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries experience a periodic influx of fresh Indian migrants every five years, there was a notable alteration in this pattern subsequent to the 2014 oil price shock, leading to a substantial decline in the numbers of new migrants.

Historically, India's maritime trade connected it with various parts of the world, including the Middle Eastern region. Traders from India, especially from coastal regions, ventured into the Middle East and Arabian Peninsula to engage in lucrative trade with the Arab merchants. This trade facilitated the exchange of goods, culture and ideas between India and the Arab world. The Indian Ocean trade routes brought Indian traders, sailors and merchants to the Middle Eastern region, leading to the establishment of settlements along the coasts. Conversely, Arab merchants also visited India and left a considerable cultural impact, particularly in the coastal regions of western India, such as Gujarat and

Kerala (MEA, 2016). Significant Indian migration to the Middle Eastern countries began during the 19th and early 20th centuries, when traders and workers from India moved to the region in search of better economic opportunities. Indians played an essential role in the development of the Middle East's pearl diving industry, trade, and construction sectors. A large number of Indian workers, particularly from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh, migrated to countries like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain to work in various industries. Over time, the Indian community in the Middle Eastern region has grown significantly. These communities have retained their cultural identity while also integrating with the local culture.

Despite the GCC retaining its allure as a favourable destination for Indian labourers, migrants have encountered challenges due to the prevailing employment structure in the area, which results in the exploitation of workers. Operated through the sponsorship system, commonly known as kafala, this framework assigns private employers control over both the immigration and employment status of migrant workers. In recent times, countries within the region have taken measures to address this situation, such as introducing the Wages Protection System (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2020) in 2019 and enacting various regulations to counteract discrimination. Certain transformations have been brought about through diplomatic efforts, as evidenced by the Indian government's engagement in signing MoUs on labour rights and contractual terms with Middle Eastern nations (Gupta A., 2019).

In addition, Indian festivals, cuisine, music and Bollywood films have become popular in the region, reflecting a strong cultural exchange. The remittances sent back by the Indian diaspora in the Middle Eastern region have been crucial for India's economy. These financial inflows have helped support families back home and contributed to the country's foreign exchange reserves. In this context, the chapter argues that the significance of the Indian diaspora in influencing India's ties with the Middle Eastern region cannot

be overstated. Serving as cultural ambassadors, economic contributors and political advocates, the diaspora's profound impact remains instrumental in promoting cooperation, mutual understanding and prosperity between India and the nations of the Middle Eastern region.

Review of Literature

In his article titled *India and the Gulf: Exploring Beyond Energy, Islam, and the Diaspora* (2013), Ranjit Gupta highlighted the significant and close interaction between the populations of India and the Middle Eastern region. Several factors contribute to this strong relationship, including bilateral trade, mutual dependence on gas and oil, substantial remittances, and the substantial presence of the Indian diaspora living and working in Middle Eastern countries. As a result of these factors, the GCC countries have emerged as India's primary global socio-economic partner. Additionally, the political and diplomatic ties between India and the Middle Eastern region are continuously strengthened.

In their study titled *What We Know about Diasporas and Economic Development*, Kathleen Newland and Sonia Plaza (2013) emphasised the significant role played by diasporas in fostering economic development in both their host and home countries. The authors presented evidence showcasing how diasporas contribute to trade, investment and technology transfer between the countries they are residing in and their countries of origin.

In her 2007 article titled *Does Migration Matter in Trade? A Study of India's Exports to the GCC Countries*, Sajitha Beevi Karayil investigates India's exports to the Middle Eastern nations, with particular attention to the impact of migration on these trade relationships.

Indian Interests in the Middle East

Post-independence, India established energy relations with the Middle Eastern countries, but these were primarily commercial. Despite having a significant Indian population working in the region, India did not forge political and strategic ties with the Middle Eastern countries. This was due to three main reasons: Firstly, India perceived U.S. dominance in the Middle Eastern countries as a legacy of colonial forces. Secondly, India viewed Israel as responsible for the Arab-Israel conflict. Thirdly, India favoured secular and socialist regimes over conservative monarchies. However, these reasons are no longer relevant today. Presently, the USA is one of India's allies in the region, and India has developed security and economic relations with Israel. Moreover, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have become crucial partners for India (Alterman & Mohan, 2022). The focal points of India's interest in the region are centred on ensuring a stable energy supply, enhancing trade relations and safeguarding Indian nationals employed in the Middle East (Sevilla, 2020, p. 16).

Given India's status as the third-largest consumer of oil and its heavy reliance on energy imports from the Middle East, the Middle Eastern region has become a strategic priority for India. This newfound focus on the region aligns with Saudi Arabia's interest in diversifying its allies beyond traditional Western partners, coinciding with India's realisation of its geopolitical and geo-economic interests. As a part of this growing relationship, major oil companies like Saudi Arabia's ARAMCO and the UAE's ADNOC have increased their engagement with Indian companies, particularly with ONGC. Despite their strong ties with Pakistan, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE refrained from criticising India after the repeal of Article 370, which revoked the special status of Kashmir (Khushnam, 2020). This demonstrated how India's robust economic ties with Middle Eastern countries have led to diplomatic benefits.

Conversely, India holds significant geopolitical interests in Iran, which happens to be the primary regional rival of the

Middle Eastern countries. India's efforts to establish a port in Iran's Chabahar city date back to the 1990s. Despite the impact of sanctions on Iran, the Chabahar Port was eventually completed. On October 29, 2017, India achieved a milestone by initiating the first shipment of wheat to Afghanistan through the Chabahar Port. This port is of utmost importance to both India and Iran as it allows them to reduce their reliance on the Suez Canal for transportation to Europe. Additionally, the Chabahar Port plays a vital role in establishing transportation connectivity between Europe, Central Asia, India and Iran. Given that India does not share a border with Central Asia, the Chabahar Port serves as a key link for India to access the region, which is abundant in natural resources. Furthermore, the competition surrounding the Zaranj-Deleram highway between India and Afghanistan facilitates Afghanistan's access to the sea through the Chabahar Port (Pant & Mehta, 2018). Hence, the Chabahar Port provides India with additional leverage over Afghanistan. By reducing shipping costs and transit times between India and Central Asia by 50% (ANI, 2022), this route significantly enhances trade efficiency. Moreover, the Chabahar Port serves as a countermeasure to Pakistan's Gwadar Port, which was developed by China as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). By offering an alternative trade connectivity option that bypasses Pakistan, the Chabahar Port provides India with strategic advantages.

In addition to its energy and trade interests, India has taken measures to safeguard the status of its migrant workers in the Middle Eastern states. The prevalent kafala system in the Middle Eastern region, which binds Indian migrant workers to their employers, has been identified as a form of modern slavery, leading to immense stress and even fatalities among Indian migrants. To address these concerns, the Indian government has established the Indian Workers' Resource Center in the UAE and introduced Community Welfare Funds, providing financial assistance to distressed Indian migrants (Calabrese, 2020). Given that India is the top recipient of remittances in the world, protecting the well-being of its

migrant workers in the Middle East has become a significant foreign policy objective for the country.

India's Diaspora Policy in the Middle East

Due to the longstanding trade connections between the Indian subcontinent and the Arab region, Indians have been present in the Middle East for centuries. From the early 20th century until the independence of Middle Eastern countries, Indian skilled workers played vital roles in diverse sectors of the colonial administration (Levaillant, 2017). Following the discovery of crude oil, the region also employed semi-skilled workers. From 1948 to 1970, the Indian presence in the area experienced significant growth, leading to a multiplication in the number of migrant workers. From 1973 to 1987, the surge in international oil prices resulted in a substantial revenue influx to the region. The newly independent monarchies took advantage of this opportunity and initiated ambitious development programs encompassing infrastructure, education, industry, services and agriculture. However, qualified local labour was scarce among Middle Eastern nations, prompting governments to actively encourage the immigration of foreign workers. During the 1980s, a notable shift occurred as South Asian migrants became the dominant foreign communities in the region. They were preferred over Arab workers due to their perceived advantages of being more affordable, highly skilled, and less involved in political matters. Consequently, they progressively replaced Arab workers in various sectors.

Presently, the Middle Eastern region boasts the highest proportion of foreign residents worldwide. Among these expatriate communities, the Indian population is the largest one working in the private sector. Despite facing economic recessions and a slowdown in Indian immigration to the MENA states over the years, India continues to be the primary source of labour for the region. Remarkably, approximately 80% of new workers come from India, filling various roles ranging from unskilled and low-skilled to semi-skilled, with some being illiterate. In the year 2015, the migration of Indian

low-skilled workers to different Middle Eastern countries saw significant numbers, with over 300,000 heading to Saudi Arabia, more than 200,000 to the UAE, 85,000 to Oman, and 59,000 to Qatar. A majority of these migrant workers originate from Indian states such as West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (MEA, 2016, pp. 210).

In the Middle Eastern region, the majority of migrants arrive on a temporary basis, and the implementation of short-term contracts ensures a swift turnover of migrant workers (Thiollet, 2016). Entry into the Middle Eastern countries is restricted to individuals with a firm job offer and a contract sponsored by an employer. These contracts bind employees to work for a specific period at a predetermined wage level. In return, sponsors are responsible for providing accommodation and food, and covering the travel expenses of the migrant workers (Levaillant, 2017). Unfortunately, this complete reliance on sponsors has resulted in numerous cases of abuse and mistreatment of the workers. Furthermore, the governments of Middle Eastern countries deny foreign migrants, including Indian workers, the possibility of obtaining citizenship, or political and socio-economic rights. Consequently, Indian workers find themselves in a particularly vulnerable position, relying on protective measures from entities such as the Indian government to safeguard their interests.

The Indian perspective towards its diaspora underwent a significant transformation during the country's liberalisation phase, which commenced in the 1980s. This change was closely linked to the growing emigration of highly skilled workers to the United States and the subsequent rise in remittances sent by NRIs. However, in 1990–91, India faced an economic crisis and struggled to garner support from the Indian diaspora to bolster dwindling foreign exchange reserves. As a result, policymakers gradually realised that overseas Indians could play a crucial role as a bridge to engage with foreign governments and contribute significantly to the country's economic development.

In 1998, the Vajpayee government further solidified the growing significance of the diaspora by specifically targeting highly skilled migrants residing in Western countries and encouraging them to advocate for India's economic and political interests. As part of this effort, the Vajpayee government established a high-level committee on the Indian diaspora in 2000, which produced a comprehensive report concerning the diaspora community (Thiollet, 2016). This report served as a catalyst for the establishment of the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs in 2004, with the purpose of engaging and connecting with the Indian diaspora and providing protection to Indian migrants. These initiatives highlighted a renewed focus on the overseas diaspora in the absence of any official diaspora policy.

Recently, the Modi government has placed even greater emphasis on harnessing the potential role of the diaspora in advancing India's interests abroad and attracting investments from affluent NRIs (Lakshmi, 2015). However, it is worth noting that the socioeconomic backgrounds of Indian migrants vary widely, and as of now, the Indian government has not developed a comprehensive diaspora policy to address all aspects of their needs. This has led to a noticeable disparity between the growing attention given by the Indian state to the Indian diaspora and the inadequacies present in India's migration protection system. In 2015, the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs underwent a transformation and was integrated into the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) as a Division of Overseas Indian Affairs. This restructuring aimed to achieve two main objectives: enhance coordination between New Delhi and diplomats stationed abroad and reduce government expenditures. However, this move has had unintended consequences, as per an Indian diplomat serving in the UAE in 2015. It has put increased pressure on the MEA's already limited budget for executing India's diaspora diplomacy. Consequently, Indian diplomats are now tasked with the responsibility of ensuring the security and safety of their citizens abroad, and their ability to develop appropriate responses is seen as a legitimacy test for the

ministry. In response to these changes, Indian embassies and consulates in the Middle Eastern region have undergone recent modernisation efforts. Unfortunately, the impact of these improvements has been limited due to constraints arising from both budgetary and political considerations.

In the Middle East, Indian diplomats rely heavily on the financial and material assistance offered by local Indian associations, which bring together highly skilled workers and businessmen engaged in charitable activities. Recently, Indian embassies have established Forums for the Indian volunteer community to aid workers with medical, legal and financial support, particularly during dedicated open days for migrants organised by Indian diplomatic missions (Abraham, 2012, p. 134). One critical aspect of this support is the provision of legal assistance by volunteer lawyers to workers facing issues with their employers or those who have been arrested. Additionally, volunteers act as interpreters, bridging the communication gap between migrants and Indian diplomats. In some cases, initiatives like the establishment of a shelter for women in the Indian embassy in Oman, funded and supported by an Indian social club's charity, have been implemented. Moreover, the Indian community networks serve as efficient informal channels, enabling the Indian government to monitor, track and reach out to repatriated Indians effectively.

Indian Diaspora as Agents of Cultural Diplomacy in the Middle East

The Indian diaspora has a rich history of cultural exchange and interaction with the world. One of the regions where the Indian diaspora has played a crucial role in fostering cultural diplomacy is the Middle East. With a significant presence in countries like the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait, the Indian diaspora has acted as cultural ambassadors, facilitating a deeper understanding and appreciation of Indian culture in the Middle East. The presence of the Indian diaspora in the Middle East dates back centuries. Historically, Indians have traveled to the region for trade, commerce and

cultural exchange. Over time, these interactions have led to the establishment of vibrant Indian communities across the Middle East. This historical legacy forms the foundation upon which cultural diplomacy between India and the Middle East thrives today. The Indian diaspora in the Middle East plays a pivotal role in preserving and promoting Indian culture. They maintain strong ties with their motherland, celebrating traditional festivals, and organising cultural events and religious ceremonies. Through these activities, they showcase the richness and diversity of Indian culture, creating an atmosphere of cultural vibrancy in the host countries.

Indian cultural elements, such as music, dance, cinema and cuisine, have left an indelible mark on Middle Eastern culture. Bollywood movies, Indian classical dance performances and music concerts attract a wide audience in the region. These art forms act as powerful tools of cultural diplomacy, bridging the gap between the two cultures and fostering a sense of familiarity and affinity among Middle Eastern audiences toward India. The Indian diaspora in the Middle East has actively contributed to the establishment of educational and religious institutions (Gautam, 2013). Indian schools, language centres and cultural academies promote Indian languages, history and arts, strengthening cultural ties and promoting a positive image of India in the region. Likewise, Indian places of worship provide a sense of community and spiritual connection for expatriates while fostering interfaith harmony with local communities. Cultural festivals and events organised by the Indian diaspora in the Middle East serve as a platform for cross-cultural interactions. Diwali, Holi, Eid and other festivities are celebrated with great enthusiasm, attracting people from diverse backgrounds. For example, Holi celebrations at the Corniche in Abu Dhabi saw participants from various nationalities joyfully celebrating the festival with Indian colours and music. Also, Diwali celebrations at the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, illuminated with Indian tricolour lights, showcased the UAE's recognition of Indian festivities and cultural heritage (Singh, 2012). These events offer a glimpse into the traditions and customs of both India and

the Middle East, fostering mutual respect and understanding. The Indian diaspora's role in cultural diplomacy extends beyond the realms of art and entertainment. In the business world, cultural diplomacy plays a significant role in fostering economic ties. Shared cultural values and practices often act as a catalyst for business relationships between Indian and Middle Eastern entrepreneurs. The diaspora's insights and cultural understanding facilitate smoother business negotiations and collaborations (Singh, 2012).

Bollywood, the vibrant and prolific film industry of India, has captivated audiences worldwide with its colourful storytelling, foot-tapping music and dazzling dance sequences. Over the years, Bollywood has expanded its horizons and ventured into international filming locations, with the Middle Eastern region becoming an increasingly popular choice. From sprawling deserts to luxurious cities, the Middle East has provided an exotic backdrop for several Bollywood blockbusters. The romantic movie *Dilwale*, starring Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol, was filmed extensively in the UAE. The picturesque locations of Dubai and Abu Dhabi provided the perfect setting for the film's larger-than-life sequences. The iconic Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building, showcased its majestic presence in the film, adding a touch of grandeur to the story. The vibrant and bustling streets of Dubai added a charming flavour to the movie, making it a visual treat for audiences worldwide. The gripping action thriller movie *Baby*, featuring Akshay Kumar, was shot in various locations in the Middle East, with Abu Dhabi being a prominent setting. The city's modern architecture and dynamic urban landscapes added a sense of authenticity to the film's thrilling narrative. The film's gripping chase sequences, coupled with the stunning desert landscapes, showcased the Middle East's versatility as a filming destination. In addition, the high-octane action blockbuster *Tiger Zinda Hai*, starring Salman Khan and Katrina Kaif, was filmed extensively in the UAE and Morocco. The exotic locales of Abu Dhabi and its neighbouring Emirates served as the backdrop for the film's adrenaline-pumping action sequences. Additionally, Morocco's scenic

landscapes, including the picturesque Atlas Mountains, contributed to the film's visual grandeur.

The popularity of Bollywood films has led to a growing interest in Indian cinema, with Indian film festivals becoming regular events in the Middle East. The *Indian Film Festival of Dubai* is an annual event that showcases Indian cinema, attracting movie enthusiasts from the Middle East and India, further strengthening cultural ties (MEA, India-UAE Bilateral Relations, 2017). Indian classical dance forms like Bharatanatyam, Kathak, and Odissi, along with traditional music, have captivated audiences in the Middle East. Indian artists and dance troupes regularly perform at prestigious events and festivals, adding a touch of cultural finesse to the region's cultural landscape. For instance, the *Festival of India* organised in Qatar brought together renowned Indian classical dancers and musicians, promoting cultural exchange between the two regions.

The Indian diaspora has contributed significantly to the Middle East's culinary scene. Indian cuisine, with its rich flavours, aromatic spices, and diverse array of dishes, has earned global acclaim as one of the most beloved and sought-after culinary experiences. The Middle East, a region known for its own vibrant food culture, has warmly embraced Indian cuisine, resulting in a significant surge in its popularity over the years. Historically, the Middle East has shared strong trade and cultural ties with the Indian subcontinent for centuries. These interactions facilitated the exchange of spices, ingredients and culinary traditions, laying the groundwork for the integration of Indian flavours into Middle Eastern cuisine. The presence of large Indian expatriate communities in countries like the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Kuwait has further deepened cultural affinities, creating a demand for authentic Indian eateries. In recent years, culinary innovation has played a significant role in the Middle East's growing appetite for Indian cuisine. Many restaurants have creatively fused Indian flavours with local ingredients, resulting in exciting fusion dishes that cater to the diverse tastes of the region's cosmopolitan population. This culinary fusion has

opened up new horizons for both Indian and Middle Eastern chefs, leading to unique and delectable dining experiences. The *Taste of India* food festival in the UAE celebrated the country's diverse cuisine, showcasing the unique flavours and regional specialties from various parts of India. Indian expatriates frequently organise food festivals, cooking workshops and cultural exchanges centred around Indian cuisine. These events not only introduce Middle Eastern audiences to Indian delicacies but also encourage cross-cultural interactions. For instance, the *India Food Festival* in Saudi Arabia provided a platform for Indian and Middle Eastern chefs to collaborate, creating innovative dishes that blend traditional elements from both cultures (MEA, 2022).

The Indian diaspora has actively contributed to the establishment of Indian schools and language centres in the Middle East. These institutions not only provide education in Indian languages but also teach Indian history, culture and values, fostering a sense of cultural identity among Indian expatriate children. The Indian High School in Dubai is a prominent educational institution that offers a comprehensive curriculum and cultural activities, strengthening ties between India and the UAE.

Indian diaspora communities in the Middle East form cultural associations and community groups that organise cultural events, seminars and art exhibitions, promoting Indian culture and heritage. The *Indian Cultural Forum* in Kuwait organises regular cultural events, providing a platform for Indian artists and performers to showcase their talent to a diverse audience.

Thus, the Indian diaspora in the Middle East serves as a potent agent of cultural diplomacy, facilitating a deeper understanding and appreciation of Indian culture in the region. Through their contributions to art, cuisine and festivals, they have created an enriching cultural exchange that bridges the gap between India and the Middle East. Examples of Bollywood's influence, culinary fusion, Diwali and Holi celebrations, and the establishment of educational and

cultural institutes demonstrate the diaspora's commitment to promoting cultural ties and fostering mutual respect between the two regions (MEA, 2022). As cultural diplomacy continues to flourish, the Indian diaspora's role as cultural ambassadors remains pivotal in nurturing the cultural bond between India and the Middle East.

Education: Fostering People-to-People Partnerships

In recent years, Indian education diplomacy in the Middle East has witnessed a remarkable surge, reflecting India's commitment to fostering educational collaborations with its regional neighbours. The Middle East's growing demand for quality education and the increasing recognition of India's academic prowess have paved the way for several successful initiatives. This article explores recent examples of Indian education diplomacy in the Middle East, highlighting the strategic partnerships and cultural exchanges that have cemented India's position as an influential academic destination in the region.

a. Educational Partnerships and Scholarships:

Indian universities and institutions have been actively establishing partnerships with Middle Eastern counterparts to enhance academic cooperation. One such example is the MoU signed in 2020 between India's Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. This MoU aims to facilitate faculty exchanges, joint research projects and student mobility between the two institutions, fostering a deeper understanding of each other's cultures and academic expertise. Additionally, the Indian government offers scholarships and incentives to attract Middle Eastern students to pursue higher education in India. The *Study in India* initiative, launched in 2018, has witnessed increasing participation from Middle Eastern students, offering them affordable access to a wide range of disciplines in reputed Indian institutions.

b. Promoting Indian Culture and Language:

India has been actively promoting its rich cultural heritage and languages in the Middle East, fostering a sense of camaraderie between the two regions. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) has been instrumental in organising cultural events, music festivals and art exhibitions in the Middle East. For example, the *Festival of India* held in the UAE showcased various aspects of Indian culture, including traditional dance forms, musical performances and art exhibitions. Language training programmes have gained popularity among Middle Eastern students, with Hindi and Urdu language courses being particularly sought after. Institutes like the Indian Cultural Center in Bahrain offer language classes to not only promote cultural exchange but also facilitate smoother communication between Indian diplomats and Middle Eastern citizens.

c. Alumni Engagement and Skill Development:

Indian alumni associations in the Middle East have played a significant role in strengthening educational ties. These associations provide a platform for networking, knowledge-sharing and professional development. The Indian Embassy in Kuwait, for instance, actively collaborates with Indian alumni to organise career fairs, workshops and skill development programmes for Indian students and professionals in the region. Furthermore, India's expertise in vocational training and skill development has garnered considerable attention in the Middle East. The *Skill India* initiative provides training and certification to thousands of skilled workers, empowering them to contribute to the region's economic development.

d. Academic Exhibitions and Seminars:

Indian participation in educational fairs, exhibitions and seminars in the Middle East has been a significant catalyst in promoting Indian academia. The Indian Education Exhibition in Dubai, held annually, provides a platform for Indian universities and institutions to showcase their academic offerings to Middle Eastern students and parents. Such events

facilitate face-to-face interactions and provide valuable information to aspiring students, encouraging them to explore education opportunities in India.

The recent surge in Indian education diplomacy in the Middle East signifies India's proactive approach to building strong academic collaborations and cultural bonds with its regional neighbours. The strategic partnerships, language training programmes, and cultural exchanges have not only strengthened India's influence in the Middle East but also fostered mutual understanding and respect between the two regions. As Indian educational institutions continue to attract Middle Eastern students and India promotes its cultural heritage, the future of education diplomacy in the Middle East holds promise for deeper and more enduring partnerships.

Indian Diaspora Humanitarian Efforts in the Middle East

As a rising power, India increasingly employs humanitarian diplomacy to assert its legitimacy and promote its unique identity. In Buddhism, the concept of *Karunā*, meaning compassion, is one of the Four Immeasurables. Similarly, Hinduism emphasises the value of *dāna*, an act of hospitality towards the needy, as mentioned in the Vedas and the Mahabharata (Gulliot, Penan, & Grandclement, 2022). Incorporating these cultural and spiritual elements, India's approach to humanitarian diplomacy has been shaped by its historical struggle for independence and its solidarity with other developing nations. This background has profoundly influenced India's views on engaging in humanitarian efforts on the global stage. India's humanitarian aid principle finds its foundation in *dharma*, which signifies the righteous path. The norms rooted in Dharma revolve around humanity and humanitarian values, encompassing various guidelines for conducting conflicts. Humanitarian aid is categorised as a form of developmental support, constituting an essential aspect of India's foreign policy framework. In 2016, the National Disaster Management Plan was formulated to enhance India's

resilience to disasters and facilitate the effective direction of humanitarian aid. However, it is worth noting that the allocation of humanitarian aid is sometimes influenced by the ideology of Hindutva, which seeks to establish a Hindu nation within India's borders (TEKİR, 2023).

The Yemeni Civil War

The Yemeni civil war, which has been ongoing since 2014, has resulted in one of the most severe humanitarian crises in the world. As the conflict continues to wreak havoc on the lives of millions of Yemenis, the Indian diaspora has emerged as a significant force in supporting India's humanitarian efforts in the region. With their strong emotional ties to India and a deep sense of compassion, the Indian expatriate community has actively contributed to relief efforts, providing aid and assistance to alleviate the suffering of those affected by the war. This article delves into the role of the Indian diaspora in undertaking India's humanitarian initiatives during the Yemeni civil war, highlighting contemporary examples that demonstrate their impact. The Indian diaspora has been quick to respond to the humanitarian crisis in Yemen by organising fundraisers and donation drives. In countries with a substantial Indian community, such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, Indian expatriates have collectively raised significant amounts of money to support various relief organisations working on the ground. These funds have been channeled toward providing food, medical supplies and other essential aid to Yemeni civilians facing dire circumstances.

Recognising the pressing need for food security and medical assistance in Yemen, the Indian diaspora has actively contributed to distributing food packages and medical supplies to affected communities. In partnership with local and international aid organisations, the Indian community has facilitated the delivery of humanitarian aid to areas that have been particularly hard-hit by the conflict. Their efforts have brought much-needed relief to those struggling to access basic necessities amidst the ongoing

violence and economic instability. The Indian diaspora's commitment to humanitarian efforts extends to educational initiatives as well. Understanding the long-term impact of disrupted education on Yemeni children, Indian expatriates have initiated programmes to support schooling and skill-building projects. By providing resources, funding schools, and sponsoring students, the Indian community has helped maintain educational opportunities for young Yemenis despite the challenges posed by the conflict.

In response to the severe healthcare crisis in Yemen, Indian doctors and medical professionals from the diaspora have volunteered their expertise to provide much-needed medical care. Several medical missions organised by the Indian community have travelled to Yemen to offer specialised treatment and surgery, particularly to those who lack access to adequate healthcare facilities in the war-ravaged country. Also, through social media campaigns, public awareness events and advocacy initiatives, the Indian community has amplified the voices of the affected Yemeni civilians and urged the international community to step up their support for humanitarian aid efforts in the region.

The Syrian Civil War

Since its onset in 2011, the Syrian Civil War has given rise to one of the most devastating humanitarian crises globally, displacing around 14 million people. The conflict has resulted in the tragic loss of over 306,000 lives. Additionally, the war's impact has been compounded by an economic downturn, further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Syrian gross domestic product has contracted by 50%, pushing over half of the population into extreme poverty. As of 2022, a staggering 14.6 million Syrians are in dire need of humanitarian aid. The essential requirements for the Syrian people include health services, shelter, access to education and vital food assistance. The scale of the crisis demands urgent and sustained efforts from the international community

to alleviate the immense suffering endured by the Syrian population (TEKİR, 2023).

The Indian diaspora has been at the forefront of fundraising campaigns to support humanitarian organisations actively working on the ground in Syria. Through community-led efforts, charity events, and online crowdfunding platforms, Indian expatriates have mobilised resources to provide financial assistance for essential aid and relief activities. The generous contributions from the diaspora have enabled humanitarian organisations to provide food, medical supplies, shelter and other critical resources to Syrian civilians caught in the conflict. As the Syrian conflict resulted in one of the largest refugee crises in the world, the Indian diaspora has been proactive in supporting Syrian refugees seeking safety in neighbouring countries. In collaboration with international organisations and local partners, the Indian community has facilitated the provision of temporary shelters, food, and healthcare services to displaced Syrians in refugee camps. The Indian government pledged \$2 million in assistance to help Syrian refugees (MEA, 2017). India financed the construction of a steel plant, a power plant, and two artificial limb fitment camps.

Additionally, the diaspora's support has extended to initiatives that help refugees integrate into their new communities, offering educational opportunities and skill-building programmes. Indian doctors and medical professionals within the diaspora have offered their expertise in medical missions to Syria and neighbouring countries that host Syrian refugees. These medical missions have delivered much-needed healthcare services to those affected by the conflict, particularly in areas with limited access to medical facilities. The presence of Indian medical volunteers has been instrumental in saving lives and alleviating the immense strain on local healthcare systems.

Indian Government Schemes for the Diaspora

Acknowledging the significance of overseas Indians, the Indian government has initiated numerous welfare programmes for the Indian diaspora.

i. Indian Community Welfare Fund for Indians Abroad:

The Indian government has set up the Indian Community Welfare Fund (ICWF) to cater to the well-being of Indians living abroad. This fund offers the following services based on the level of need:

1. Furnishing accommodations and meals for Overseas Indian workers facing difficulties in household/domestic roles and unskilled labour;
2. Offering urgent medical assistance to Overseas Indians facing critical situations;
3. Arranging air travel for stranded Overseas Indians requiring assistance;
4. d. Supplying initial legal support to deserving Overseas Indians;
5. Spending on miscellaneous expenses and transporting the remains of deceased Overseas Indians back to India or managing local cremation/burial is covered in cases where the sponsor is unable or unwilling to fulfill this obligation as per the contract, and the family cannot afford the expenses;
6. Additionally, covering the cost of minor fines or penalties to secure the release of Indian citizens held in jail or detention centres is also provided.

ii. Mahatma Gandhi Pravasi Suraksha Yojana (MGPSY):

This initiative is a pension and life insurance fund scheme designed specifically for Overseas Indian workers with Emigration Check Required (ECR) passports. The core aim of MGPSY is to incentivise and empower these overseas Indian labourers through government contributions that facilitate:

1. Accumulation of funds for their eventual Return and Resettlement (R&R);
2. Building savings for their retirement years;
3. Acquiring a life insurance policy to provide coverage for natural demise within the covered period.

iii. Pravasi Bhartiya Bima Yojana (PBBY):

The Pravasi Bharatiya Bima Yojana is a mandatory insurance plan designed for overseas Indian workers possessing ECR passports and heading to ECR countries. This scheme offers a minimum insurance coverage amount of Rs. 10.00 lakhs, payable to the nominee or legal heir in the event of the emigrant's death or permanent disability. This applies to Indian individuals who travel abroad for employment purposes subsequent to obtaining emigration clearance from the relevant Protector of Emigrants (POE). In the unfortunate event of the emigrant's demise, the insurance company not only covers the expenses related to transporting the deceased's body but also reimburses the cost of one-way airfare for one attendant.

iv. Study India Programme (SIP):

The SIP offers an opportunity for young Overseas Indians to participate in a brief course at an Indian University, aiming to acquaint them with India's history, heritage, art and culture, as well as socio-political and economic advancements. The primary emphasis of this initiative is on academic orientation and research. The Indian Government covers expenses such as accommodation, meals, local travel, course fees for the duration of the programme, and 90% of the airfare in economy class.

v. Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Awards (PBSA):

The PBSA is bestowed upon NRIs, PIOs, or organisations/institutions established and managed by NRIs or PIOs, who have made notable contributions in any of the following areas:

1. Enhancing the understanding of India abroad;

2. Providing tangible support to India's causes and interests;
3. Strengthening the connections between India, the overseas Indian community, and their country of residence;
4. Engaging in social and humanitarian endeavours within India or internationally;
5. Promoting the welfare of the local Indian community;
6. Engaging in philanthropic and charitable activities;
7. Attaining eminence in a particular field or conducting exceptional work that has elevated India's reputation in the host country;
8. Achieving prominence in skills that have elevated India's standing in that country (for non-professional workers).

The President of India confers this honour during the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) Convention. The PBSA holds the highest distinction among awards granted to overseas Indians.

Challenges to the Indian Diaspora in the Middle East

A significant number of semi-skilled and unskilled Indian labourers in the Middle Eastern region face severe hardships and are deprived of fundamental labour rights. The conditions for many of these workers have further deteriorated due to the economic downturn linked to the recent decline in global oil prices. The majority of Indian workers employed in the private sector in the Middle Eastern region are subject to the visa sponsorship system, commonly known as kafala. Despite some recent attempts at reform, the kafala system continues to link a foreign worker's residency authorization to their sponsor. Typically, workers need explicit permission from their sponsor to switch employers or leave the country. This practice has been criticized by the International Labour Organization (ILO) (Pethiyagoda, 2017).

Besides infringing upon the fundamental human right of freedom of movement for foreign workers, the kafala system also cultivates a legal framework that lacks essential safeguards for migrant labourers. This environment provides

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ample opportunities for employers and employment agencies to exploit the system. As an example, sponsors can postpone wage payments, seize passports, and unjustly deport workers. Additionally, authorities frequently fall short of charging and taking legal action against sponsors who violate laws and contractual obligations (HRW, 2016).

Female domestic workers in particular, employed within family households, encounter a deficiency in legal safeguards that leaves them vulnerable to various forms of mistreatment. These abuses encompass excessive workload, insufficient access to food, confinement against their will, and the infliction of psychological, physical, verbal, and sexual harm (HRW, Middle East Failing to Protect Domestic Workers, 2013). Likewise, labourers engaged in infrastructure and development initiatives frequently find themselves residing in overcrowded labour camps characterised by substandard amenities and demanding work settings. In these conditions, they are deprived of opportunities to engage in social and cultural activities (Khadria, 2014).

The cycle of abuse originates during the initial phases of employment when Indian workers are recruited for Middle Eastern positions. Recruitment agencies, which have proliferated due to high turnover, frequently deceive and mistreat workers. In some cases, these agencies collaborate with potential employers or even fraudulent employers to exploit workers who might lack education and information. They offer false promises regarding wages and working conditions, while misinforming workers about their rights.

The United Nations Development Programme acknowledges that foreign workers in the Middle East confront such difficulties, attributing them to racism, social exclusion, a lack of accountability, and the misuse of power by employers (OHCHR, 20132). The labour conditions of migrant workers in the Middle Eastern region frequently do not comply with the principles outlined in the ILO's Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. These principles encompass the right to freedom of association, the right to engage in

collective bargaining (for improved wages or benefits), and the elimination of forced or compulsory labour. Notably, Middle Eastern states have not ratified the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention adopted by the International Labour Conference in 1948. Consequently, migrant workers are unable to form unions or protest against these unjust labour practices (HRW, 2015).

Conclusion

The Indian diaspora contributes to the improvement of India's reputation and soft power. Indian migrant labourers are widely recognised for their peaceful and tolerant demeanor. According to the MOIA (Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs), India's accommodating and diverse society, where individuals from varying faiths, languages, ethnic backgrounds, and political beliefs coexist and prosper, plays a crucial role in fostering positive migration patterns and labour mobility. The diaspora serves to reinforce, solidify and evoke the historical and cultural connections between individuals in India and the Middle Eastern region. In certain Kerala communities, individuals have embraced diverse Arab cultural, culinary, financial and other traditions upon returning from their experiences in the Middle East. This is evident through various indications such as Kerala businesses proudly displaying Arabic signage. Consequently, India's diaspora plays a pivotal role in strengthening bilateral relations and offering a sense of familiarity and security to people (Philip, 2016). This familiarity can, in turn, facilitate Middle Eastern policymakers in promoting the expansion of relations with Delhi, even in sensitive sectors such as defense cooperation. Furthermore, advocating for improved working conditions for the diaspora further enhances this soft power, as it reflects the shared perspective held by Indian citizens and leaders that their civilisation is deserving of respect. This perspective has partly contributed to India's rejection of certain forms of development assistance (Pethiyagoda, 2017). Therefore, this rationale should logically extend to the rejection of acquiring

remittance income at the cost of accepting degrading conditions for Indians working overseas.

Enhancing the circumstances of overseas workers has the potential to generate substantial political advantages for Prime Minister Modi and politicians who advocate for their rights. This can be attributed, at least in part, to the increasing political influence of the diaspora. Indian labourers based in the Middle Eastern region maintain significant voter constituencies within India. The infusion of remittances has elevated living standards and reshaped social classes in countries that export labour, allowing both working-class and middle-class returnees to gradually ascend the social hierarchy. This progression has facilitated their achieving higher social standing and even intermarrying into more elevated societal circles.

Consequently, the political influence of migrants and their families has grown, prompting Prime Minister Modi to prioritise their concerns and garner their support. This becomes particularly relevant to Modi, given that a noteworthy proportion of India's migrants in the Middle East originate from states with substantial Muslim populations. It is important to note that Muslims are less inclined to support the BJP, compared to the larger Hindu community (Naujoks, 2009).

India should consistently incorporate diaspora-related issues into all aspects of bilateral negotiations with the Middle East. These bilateral engagements should be formalised through new Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs). In instances where existing MOUs lack enforcement, India should exert efforts to encourage greater compliance. With organisations like Human Rights Watch (HRW) advocating for substantial changes, Delhi could, at the very least, actively promote the need for reform.

New Delhi should take steps to prompt Middle Eastern states to revise their labour regulations, addressing the specific and intricate challenges encountered by migrant workers, often arising due to the kafala system. There

should be a concerted push for Middle Eastern countries to integrate migrant workers as essential components of their comprehensive strategies for achieving equality. Additionally, considering the substantial presence of the Indian diaspora in the Middle Eastern region, the potential departure of these workers could present a risk to the economies of Middle Eastern states. When taken together, these factors can significantly bolster the persuasiveness of advocating for reforms.

Undoubtedly, the Indian diaspora represents a significant strategic advantage, but this should not be confined to mere competition between the ruling party and the opposition. The opposition's attempts to foster a sense of unity within India have been evident through initiatives like the Bharat Jodo Yatra, and Rahul Gandhi's visit to the United States illustrates his engagement with a broad spectrum of Indian individuals, ranging from university students to truck drivers. As the importance of the diaspora continues to grow as a crucial indicator of a nation's global standing, countries in the Asia-Pacific region can draw inspiration from India's approach to valuing and leveraging their diaspora communities as a unified entity.

In light of this, the parliamentary standing committee's report on the welfare of Indian diasporas emphasises the need to reinforce trust through the implementation of policies such as worker rehabilitation and skill development initiatives. This constitutes a significant stride towards formulating strategies that capitalise on the diaspora's potential, encompassing scientists, professionals and individuals. Furthermore, this approach serves as a means to bridge geographical gaps and expand influence over the diverse landscape of Indian identity, thereby creating a broader avenue to reconnect with their origins.

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