

Indian Diaspora in The Gulf: A Pillar of Cultural Diplomacy

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Abstract

The Indian diaspora in the Gulf has a long and historical presence. It has a very influencing impact on the developmental track of both home and host lands. That is why, this research paper was planned to explore the role of the Indian diaspora in the Gulf, and focus on its impact through cultural diplomacy and economic contributions. In this paper, we have used discourse analysis approach in order to study and examine the cultural aspects of Indian diplomacy and its economic influences. By assessing both the benefits and challenges, it also investigates the link between India's foreign policy and its diaspora policy. Regarding social, strategic and financial issues, the research underlines the value of the diaspora as an asset. Particularly, it shows how relevant its function is as a tool for soft power in the framework of Indian foreign policy. The research is being done to evaluate this prospective outcome based on the idea that India may raise its international impact and diplomatic relations by properly utilising the potential of its diaspora. Moreover, the findings would contribute to a more thorough understanding of the part the Indian diaspora plays in the Gulf region, par-

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ticularly with regard to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030 that the United Nations has developed under Indicator 10.7.2.

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Introduction

The broad range of goals, interests, and values developed by any state to conduct its relations with other nations is referred to as foreign policy (Khanna, 2004, pp. 1-3). It has been said that India's foreign policy is the result of a complicated combination of history, geography, prior experience, current needs and political agreement (Dutt, 1984) Indian policymakers later adopted anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, anti-racism, non-alignment and maintenance of international peace and security as the pillars and principles of India's foreign policy both at the regional and global levels as a result of living under oppressive and racist colonial rule (Malhotra, 2019). The Indian diaspora, in its essence encompasses individuals and their descendants who have migrated from India and settled abroad (Jayaram, 2004, p. 147). According to Nye (1990, pp.153-171), is a feasible and less expensive alternative to using military force or economic incentives to affect the behavior and actions of others. Rather than depending exclusively on military force or financial inducements, states may use soft power methods to win people's hearts and minds and build a real desire to support their goals. Cultural Diplomacy is yet another mechanism of soft power mechanism wherein a nation utilizes its cultural assets to build bridges with other countries across the globe. This includes hosting cultural festivals such as music, art, literature viz., Japan's Cherry Blossom, K-pop music and French festivals which

are prime examples of global cultural dissemination. The technology and innovation can boost a country's image and influence. In order to achieve this, digital platforms and social media play an important role to directly engage with the international audience and aid shape the narratives. Lastly, in our opinion the sporting events also help provide soft power diplomacy. For instance, India is all set to host 2025 Women's World Cup of Cricket which will be a major tool to promote diplomacy

India is an excellent example, exhibiting its "soft power" via cultural components such as language, talent, Bollywood, food, and yoga, as well as democratic values, tolerance, non-interference policy, adherence to international law, and multilateral diplomacy. Similarly, diaspora populations are known to use a variety of techniques to influence important actors in their home and host nations, such as election participation, among others. (Gharekhan, 2018).

The Indian diaspora also contributes economically by remitting large sums back home, which helps the economy of their host Gulf nations. Institutions such as Bahrain's Indian Social Club and Kalamandalam, Kuwait's India Social and Cultural Centre and Indian Community Welfare Committee, Qatar's Association of Indian Professionals and Bharathi Kalai Mandran, Saudi Arabia's Indian Doctors Forum, and the UAE's Indian Tamil Fine Arts Association are examples of active Indian cultural entities in the Gulf that are legally established in their respective host countries.

Despite their lack of citizenship rights, Indian expats wield significant socio-political power, playing an important role in the smooth operation of

political processes in Gulf countries and in defining India's foreign policy towards these countries. Despite a historical propensity to disregard the Indian diaspora in the Gulf, current developments show a change. Prime Minister Modi's diplomatic interactions with West Asian and Gulf states, notably Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Iran, and Israel, highlight India's growing relevance in the Gulf geopolitical scene. (Hindustan Times, 2024) This diplomatic engagement has been reciprocated, as indicated by the UAE in initiating various projects aimed at the development of Indian culture there. The shift in attitude might be ascribed to the large migration of Indian labour to the economies of the Gulf Cooperation Council states. This migrant population of around 9 million people has had a significant economic influence on both the Gulf area and India.

The Role of the Indian Diaspora in Shaping GCC Countries

The oil boom of the 1970s resulted in a significant increase in the rate of emigration from India to the West Asian areas. From the mid-1970s through the early 1980s, there was a significant inflow of both unskilled and skilled or semi-skilled laborers looking for manual or clerical employment. (Chanda, 2018, pp. 179-197).

According to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), there are around 9 million Indian expats living in Gulf nations (Government of India, 'Annual Report, 2015-2016). These expatriates primarily work in three job categories: semi-skilled or blue-collar jobs, which include roles such as craftspeople, drivers, artisans, and various technical workers; unskilled labour, which

includes roles such as household maids and other domestic workers; and white-collar jobs, which include professions such as doctors, nurses, engineers, architects, and accountants. Skilled employees account for around 30% of the entire Indian immigrant population in Gulf nations, with the remaining 70% made up of unskilled or semi-skilled workers (Pethiyagoda, 2017, pp. 3-32). Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are the most popular destinations for Indian immigrants in the Gulf area, accounting for more than 60% of the overall Indian migrant worker population. The possibility of economic benefits is a major incentive of migration from India to these locations. The primary driving force for emigration to Gulf nations is a lack of economic prospects and unemployment in many parts of India. (Sasikumar, 2023).

The Contribution of the Indian Diaspora to Remittance Inflows

The diaspora population benefits both their host and home nations. Remittances serve an important role in poverty alleviation, job creation, and economic stability in these nations, and are typically seen as more consistent than foreign direct investment (FDI). The quantity of remittances has been steadily increasing at both the global and national levels each year, emphasizing the significant influence of diaspora communities on the economy of their home nations (Dilip Ratha, 2011). The contribution of Indian labour migration to the Gulf area to remittances sent back to India by the Indian Diaspora has been remarkable (Ratha, 2003). In absolute terms, during the financial year 2021-22, India received foreign inward remittances of

\$89,127 million which was the highest ever inward remittances received in a single year (Finance Ministry, Government of India, 2023). This classification is based on the influx of private transfers, highlighting the considerable amount of money transferred back to India by abroad Indians (Chishti). Remittances sent via official channels increased significantly as well. Remittances via formal channels were anticipated to be approximately \$55 billion in 2010, increasing to \$71 billion by 2014. (Dilip Ratha, 2011). However, it is crucial to highlight that remittance receipts have fluctuated in recent years. According to a World Bank study from 2018, the number of remittance receipts in India fell by \$80 million. While this drop might be driven by a variety of variables, it highlights the need of closely monitoring and analyzing the factors influencing remittance flows to maintain their stability and sustained contribution to India's economic well-being. (IMF, 2011, pp. 48-51).

Based on the above concise review of literature, major argument of this research paper is based on trying to fill the gap of review of literature concerning around the Indian diaspora in the Gulf a pillar of cultural diplomacy and economic influence under the aspect of sustainable development goals (SDGs) 2030 for achieve the vision of Viksit Bharat @2047. Methodology of the paper is based on "textual" analysis of related literature under the approach of retrospective to prospective manner of the study design with objective of to find out the study of role of Indian diaspora in the Gulf and influence of cultural diplomacy and economic influences.

India's Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power Engagement in the GCC

The Indian diaspora plays an important part in India's foreign policy initiatives, acting as valuable assets in preserving friendly ties with governments all over the world. The Gulf area has grown as a primary location for a huge community of Indian expats over many decades. This feeling of belonging serves as a catalyst for greater mutual understanding, cooperation, and collaboration, and it is critical to the building of diplomatic relationships and the broader connection between India and the Gulf area. (Khanday A. H., 2019, pp. 15263-15264).

The presence of a sizable Indian population in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries has had a considerable influence on commerce, economic, and people-to-people connections between India and the GCC countries. The robust Indian diaspora has been instrumental in strengthening economic connections and increasing bilateral commerce between the two areas. From construction and manufacturing to information technology and hospitality, Indian entrepreneurs and experts have developed profitable firms and contributed to the development of many sectors in the GCC nations. This has resulted in increasing trade, investment, and joint ventures between Indian and GCC companies. Furthermore, the existence of a substantial Indian community has permitted a regular flow of visits and tourists between the areas, improving cultural interchange, increasing tourism income, and developing a better understanding of each other's communities. (Khanday A. , 2019) The effect of the Indian diaspora on commerce, business, and people-to-people relationships has been essential in developing and enhancing India's overall relationship with the GCC nations. (Abraham, 2012, pp.

125-126)Currently, around 9 million Indian expatriates are employed across various sectors in the Gulf countries, making them the largest expatriate community in the region.

Labour laws in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries prohibit foreign migrants, including Indians, from owning businesses or properties without a local citizen or agency as a major partner in a joint-venture enterprise. These regulations have influenced the dynamics of employment opportunities and investment possibilities for Indian workers in the region.

Although the Gulf countries face a labour shortage, it is important to note that foreign workers, including Indians, are unable to obtain citizenship or permanent residence in most GCC countries, with the exception of Oman, which has implemented the Omanisation policy, which allows foreign workers to fully integrate after thirty years in the country. Despite this advantage, the geographical closeness and strong economic rewards continue to draw a huge number of Indian migrants to the Gulf area. As a consequence, the region's Indian migrant population remains considerable across all three labour groups. The mix of appealing job possibilities, closeness to India, and the possibility for considerable economic benefits has remained a powerful lure for Indian migrants seeking employment in Gulf nations. (Majeed, 2019).

In order to ensure the welfare and protection of Indian migrants in the region, it is critical to address the challenges they face, such as fraud, exploitation, and mistreatment, through strong regulations, labour rights enforcement, and bilateral cooperation between sending and receiving countries. (Abraham, 2012, pp. 126-128).

Diaspora Diplomacy: Mobilizing Soft Power through the Diaspora

In terms of soft power, the diaspora is an influential and important asset. The Indian expatriate community, which plays a critical role in defining India's soft power impact, is an outstanding illustration of this. The active engagement of the Indian diaspora in the economic growth of the Gulf nations not only strengthens India's soft power but also lays the groundwork for stronger cultural and people-to-people ties. (Pattanaik, 2007, pp. 3-32).

The Indian diaspora has made significant contributions to India's economy while also developing a strong Indian presence throughout the Gulf area. This presence has not only increased India's soft power, but it has also enabled Indian ideas, culture, and values to be exhibited on a variety of foreign venues. The active participation of the Indian diaspora has resulted in the development of various Indian organizations across the Gulf area, further strengthening the Indian community's cultural and social fabric.

The Indian diaspora, which is noted for its high-quality skills, experience, and discipline, remains the favored expatriate population across the Gulf. Their ability to adapt to Gulf lifestyles, along with a reputation for peaceful behavior and an accommodating attitude, has garnered them respect and affection from both local people and Gulf administrations.

The Indian diaspora's contributions go beyond economics, as they have been essential in developing cultural understanding and people-to-people relationships between India and the Gulf area. The active participation of Indian groups, as well as the favorable image of the Indian community, have increased India's soft power in the Gulf. Participation in diverse cul-

tural, social, and professional activities by the diaspora has enhanced idea exchange, strengthened cultural links, and fostered mutual respect and admiration. (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2024).

The presence of Indian cultural organizations has enhanced the Gulf region's cultural scene, adding to its richness and vitality. These organizations actively organize and engage in a wide range of cultural events, festivals, and performances that highlight the diversity of Indian traditions, music, dance, art, and food. These cultural exchanges bring individuals from all origins together, increasing understanding, appreciation, and conversation among varied populations. Their cultural contributions not only foster intercultural peace, but also help to build India's soft power by portraying the country's ideals, history, and variety. Indians in the Gulf have established cordial connections with their host populations, thereby strengthening the affinity between India and the Gulf nations. (Kumar, 2020, pp. 112-115).

Cultural Ambassadors: The Role of the Diaspora in Promoting Indian Culture

Indian culture and ideals have a strong reputation throughout the Arab world, inspiring a profound feeling of admiration and respect. The rich fabric of Indian culture, with its many customs, music, dance, food, and philosophy, speaks to Arabs. Both Indian and Arab cultures share characteristics such as hospitality, respect for elders, familial relationships, and the quest of knowledge, offering a common platform for cultural peace.

The hosting and promotion of Indian cultural programmers and events in the Gulf area helps India's soft power potential tremendously. In Bahrain, the Indian Association's Coordination Committee, in partnership with the Bahrain Cultural Association, routinely organizes crucial cultural events on important Indian occasions such as August 15th (India's Independence Day) and January 26th (India's Republic Day). These events highlight the richness and variety of Indian culture, facilitating cultural interchange and a greater knowledge and respect of India's legacy. (Sharma, 2021, pp. 45-58). Promotion of Arts and Literature is yet another manner in which the Indian diaspora promote their culture worldwide. The Indian artists, musicians and dancers who live abroad frequently organize live concerts, exhibitions and dance performances, thereby showcasing Indian artistic traditions and this often attracts diverse audience, which in turn leads to promotion of Indian culture.

Indian diaspora often engages in philanthropic and developmental initiatives such as investing in healthcare and building hospitals, promoting education by building schools and investing in cultural centres. This serves two-fold purposes. Firstly, it promotes a positive image of our culture and values and secondly, it serves the local Indian communities living in India. The existence of many religious centres in Bahrain also emphasizes the country's cultural variety and inclusion. Bahrain has five churches and various Hindu religious centres, including a Hindu temple that dates back 60 years. These houses of worship serve as symbols of religious tolerance and help to foster interfaith peace in the community. (U.S. Department of State , 2022)Furthermore, since 2009, the annual culinary expo Gulfood, held in Dubai, has included Indian cuisine as part of its programmer. The growing

domestic interest in and demand for Indian food has significantly boosted regional economic activity. (Patel, 2023, pp. 55-58) The popularity of Indian food demonstrates the cultural impact and attractiveness of Indian cuisine, which strengthens India's soft power in the Gulf area.

India is able to convey its cultural history, values, and customs throughout the Gulf area by holding cultural events, supporting religious groups, and exhibiting Indian food. These activities not only build people-to-people ties, but also promote a good image of India, opening up opportunities for expanded cultural exchange, tourism, and economic collaboration. (<https://allindiatemples.in/hindu-temples-in-bahrain/>). According to Rhea Abraham: "All kinds of dishes from both the southern and northern parts of India are found in the Gulf countries, mainly in the UAE and Bahrain." Indian musical performances, including Ghazals and Qawwali, are regularly held at venues in Dubai and other Gulf cities, often supported by Indian embassies in the region. In 2010, the Indian Islamic Centre in Abu Dhabi was opened by the President of India to strengthen cultural ties between India and the UAE. Additionally, in January 2012, Abu Dhabi University hosted an Indian Cultural Week, highlighting India's diverse heritage. A seminar titled "Indo-Arab Relations through the Ages: History, Art, and Culture" was also organized in collaboration with the Culture and Media Center of the UAE and the Indian Embassy on November 22-23, 2011. (Abraham, 2012, pp. 133-136).

Building Bridges: Public Diplomacy initiatives in the Gulf

The Indian government has put in place a series of tough legislative measures to guarantee the successful participation of Indian migrants in the Gulf area. These processes are intended to give rules and restrictions that Indian migrants must follow while in the Gulf. These steps assist to protect Indian migrants' rights and interests, improve their well-being, and guarantee that their contributions to Gulf nations are recognized and respected. It hopes that by adopting these legal processes, it would improve the protection and welfare of its diaspora in the Gulf area. (Varghese, 2023). The inclusion of the diaspora in India-Gulf interaction initiatives reflects the awareness that the diaspora population acts as a crucial bridge between the two regions. The social and political impact of the diaspora in the Gulf area helps to develop bilateral connections and allows the sharing of ideas, expertise, and culture. Furthermore, the Indian diaspora's engagement in the Gulf countries' political processes demonstrates their active participation in the decision-making and governance of their adoptive homeland. This engagement not only reflects the diaspora's dedication to their host nations, but it also contributes to the development of policies and projects that benefit both the Gulf countries and India. As per Rhea Abraham opinion:

There are three phases: first, the pre-departure phase includes recruitment, obtaining a passport, searching for an appropriate job, insurance procurement, travel booking, and emigration clearance from the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs. These procedures are facilitated by a registered recruitment agent. Second, the employment phase consists of the period in which the assigned Indian migrant works for an employer in a Gulf country (also laborers who are sponsored by a national of a Gulf country). Third, the final phase in the migration process entails the return of the migrant to India (also known as the capacity-building phase), in which the mi-

In addition to creating a separate ministry, the Indian government has launched a number of public diplomacy projects in order to boost its soft power capabilities in the Gulf. One major initiative has been the negotiation of Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) and associated labour and manpower agreements with Gulf nations. For example, in 2001, the Indian Electronics and Computers Software Export Promotion Council and the Economic Growth Board of Bahrain inked important MOUs to boost the growth of Bahrain's information technology industry. Another MOU was struck to promote cooperative promotional efforts between Indian IT businesses and an Omani enterprise. Contracts were also given to Indian firms for initiatives such as developing Oman's communications network and constructing a Birla Institute of Technology centre in Muscat, Oman. Additionally, the Indian government has made initiatives to address Indian employees' welfare and concerns in the Gulf. Initiatives established by Indian President Pratibha Patil in 2008, such as the Extended Insurance Scheme for Indian Workers and the construction of the Indian Workers Resource Centre in Dubai, reflect the government's commitment to the well-being and safety of Indian expats in the Gulf.

Through the appointment of special envoys, the Indian government has also prioritized interaction and collaboration with Gulf nations. Chinmaya Gharekham was appointed as a special ambassador to the Gulf in 2005, with the responsibility of encouraging commerce and investment, education, in-

formation technology, culture, and tourism between India and the Gulf nations. This appointment emphasizes the significance of developing strong bilateral connections and exploring options of collaboration in a variety of areas. Furthermore, the Overseas Indian Facilitation Centre, established in 2007 as a public-private collaboration between the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs and the Confederation of Indian Industry, intended to increase business interactions with India. This centre provides as a venue for information dissemination, knowledge-sharing meetings, and interaction with the Indian expatriate community in the Gulf.

The Ministry of External Affairs' Indian Public Diplomacy Division, formed in May 2006, has been key in undertaking several research and activities to improve Indian public diplomacy. Through programmers such as the 'Know India Programme,' the division has effectively generated awareness and popularized the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas Programme, which is especially important for Indian migrants living in Gulf nations. This programmer offers as a venue for Indians in the Gulf to be recognized and honoured for their achievements.

Positive Impacts of India's Soft Power Diplomacy and the Way Forward

In the Gulf region, it is often witnessed that culture and religious diversity are overshadowed by dominant colloquial narratives, wherein Islam is the way of life. In such a scenario, India's soft power diplomacy has played a crucial role in *fostering social cohesion, promoting inter-culturalism and*

harmony. One of the notable and most crucial impacts of India's soft power diplomacy in the region is the *construction and maintenance of religious centres*, like Gurudwaras for the Sikh community and temples for the Hindu community, signifying their respect for different religions.

With a huge collection of over 20 million dollars, a large gurudwara opened in October 2022 in Dubai, signifying the 'First Official Sikh Temple' in the entire Gulf area, thereby catering to the faith of the local Sikh community. Thereafter, foundations have been laid in various sister countries across the gulf area. It is even wholesome to learn the recent visit of our Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi to UAE, wherein the first Hindu stone temple was inaugurated, which is to be built using ancient architectural methods clubbed with scientific techniques. Not only this, the Motishwar Mandir in Oman is one of the oldest Hindu temples dedicated to Lord Shiva.

India's efforts in promoting religious tolerance in Gulf also extend to contribution in cultural events and initiatives organized by the Gulf countries in promoting cultural heritage and diversity. In its recent endeavor, Dubai is all set to host a three-day cultural festival called 'India by the Creek', which will be a vibrant celebration of the longstanding cultural ties between India and Dubai. (DD news, 2024) Such events are crucial in promoting cross-cultural appreciation and also deepen the interfaith understanding among local population. Hence, India plays a pivotal role in shaping a rather harmonious and tolerant society in the Gulf regions and fostering an environment conducive to peace, pluralism and mutual prosperity.

Another positive impact of India's soft power diplomacy in gulf region has

led to the growing popularity and promotion of Indian cuisine, thereby leading to a boom in economic opportunities and collaboration in the Gulf countries. The Indian diaspora has played a pivotal role in enhancing economic connections and increasing bilateral ties between India and the Gulf nations. Indian entrepreneurs and professionals have variedly contributed towards various sectors viz, Construction, Information Technology and Hospitality. Their involvement in these nations has led to establishment of leading and profitable businesses, thereby leading to economic growth in the region. For instance, companies like Tata Consultancy Services and Infosys operate in the GCC, which has not only led to the creation of job opportunities for the Indian professionals but has also fostered collaboration between the two nations. Indian doctors and nurses have also contributed substantially towards the workforce in the Gulf hospitals and clinics.

Lastly, the Indian diaspora has significantly enhanced India's soft power and global influence through active engagement in their cultural, social and professional spheres, highlighting the diversity of the Indian traditions. Celebrations of festivals like Diwali, Ganesh Chaturthi and Holi have drawn large crowds and have often included local participation. (Times of India, 2023).

Conclusion

India's soft power diplomacy also extends to other sectors including tourism, hospitality and entertainment. The presence of Indian cultural organizations organizing events, festivals, and performances showcasing Indian traditions, music, dance, and art adds vibrancy to the Gulf's cultural land-

scape, attracting tourists and promoting cultural tourism. These cultural exchanges not only foster intercultural dialogue and understanding but also contribute to India's soft power by showcasing its rich cultural heritage and diversity.

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Firstly, the Indian diaspora has significantly enhanced India's soft power and global influence through active engagement in their cultural, social and professional spheres, highlighting the diversity of the Indian traditions. Celebrations of festivals like Diwali, Ganesh Chaturthi and Holi have drawn large crowds and have often included local participation. (Times of India, 2023) India's dazzling cinema, captivating TV shows, and infectious music are hugely popular across the Gulf. This massive reach acts as a cultural bridge, spreading Indian traditions, ideas, and stories. It shapes how people in the Gulf view India, promoting a positive image of the country. Bollywood's A-listers often visit the region for movie promotions and events,

further strengthening these cultural ties.

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