

An overview of India's Cultural Diplomacy with United Arab Emirates

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ABSTRACT

This research paper historically studies India's cultural relations with UAE. The paper begins with a brief background establishing the traditional age-old connection between the two countries. It then goes on to review exciting literature on India's cultural diplomacy and India's soft power. It then studies the tools of India's cultural diplomacy with UAE. The paper concludes with suggestion to improve the effectiveness of India's Cultural Relations with UAE. This paper will be descriptive in nature and will include both primary and secondary sources.

1. Background

India maintains good relations with a number of countries in the West Asian region. United Arab Emirates (UAE) holds a unique place in Indian foreign policy because it has been the largest trading partner as well as a strategically important country. Cultural and commercial exchanges between India and its extended neighbourhood dates as far back as three millennium B.C. During Indus valley civilization timber, spices and grains were shipped from Gujarat to various West Asian destinations. People to people contact and barter trades in clothes and spices from India, dates and pearls from Sharjah, Dubai and Ras al Khaimah existed for centuries. Sharjah and Dubai, two of the important Emirates have been the main hubs for trade with the west coast of India particularly the Malabar coast. Multiple factors are responsible for bringing the two countries closer like historical linkages, culture, economy, polity, security and changing geostrategic and maritime environment.

The impact was more visible especially in the North West and Southern part of India. It was trade and commerce which facilitated the contact and formed the initiation of the liberal environment for cultural exchange. Indian art, architecture, music, science, technology, medicine and its philosophy started having a spillover effect in the West Asian region. Indian physicians were well recognised and acknowledged for their medical expertise and Ayurveda. The Origin of India's cultural contact with the Arab world pre-dates even the genesis and spread of Islam in this area.¹ However, the rise and expansion of Islam was also an important factor which helped in the flourishing relation between Arabs and the Malabar Coasts.

India was a fulcrum of world trade and thrived as a meeting point of Western and Eastern trade routes. It is in the context of great traffic of people along with their ideas, cultural exchanges between Indians and Arabs found its first expression and appearance. When people move from one place to another for trade, they not only carry commodities and

good for exchange but also their ideas, beliefs, customs, language, traditions, rituals, artistic items, handicrafts. People from different societies got familiarized socially and culturally with each-others also well. This two-way process was also ensured by its maritime tradition. The Mappila community and the Arabic Malayalam Language were the other imprints of cultural contacts between India and West Asia. Malabar was not only the place where communities of Arabian heritage grew, but the ancient cities of Tamil Nadu like Kayalpatnam, Tirunelveli and Kilakarai close to the bay of Munnar were also equally important trading centres.² Thus, in the ancient time and throughout the medieval period India and West Asia was the recipient of each other's culture and ideas until the Portuguese sailor arrived in the Indian Ocean region in 1498. It was a landmark in the colonial history of India and impacted the trade relation between India and West Asia. The European colonization disrupted the close proximity between Indians and the Arabs. British colonizers used Indian soldiers to dominate the Arab Gulf States and therefore many Arabs suspected Indian as collaborators of British Imperialism. Indian colonial history also has documented the struggle of Indian soldiers opposing the British mandates and imperialism. India's struggle for freedom characterised as a struggle against colonialism and imperialism supported and was in solidarity for the Arab struggle for freedom.

Since the Indian maritime region was more plural and diverse in their approach and population in terms of religion, ethnicity and culture, the mosaic-like social environment and liberal atmosphere gave further impetus for the cultural exchanges. In so far as Gulf coast is concerned many Indian migrated there either to seek employment with Arab traders, establish business or to escape instability. Sindhi and Gujrati merchants played a dominant role in maritime trade and finance across the Indian ocean. During the later and first half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, Indo-Gulf relations became multi-faceted. India's trade relations not only flourished but its impact on the socio-cultural life such as cuisine, music and architecture were substantial. Gulf region was virtually an extension of British India and the Indians in the

¹Pasha A.K. (2007) , India's Cultural Diplomacy in West Asia , in M.H. Ilias and P.J. Vincent edited India-West Asia Relations, Understanding Cultural Interplay, New Century Publication : New Delhi

²Rajamony Venu (2009) , India and the UAE In Celebration of a Legendary Friendship , Indian Expression Management Consultancy : UAE

Gulf around that time was British subject. Besides trading, a wide variety of commodities Indians were also involved in the pearl fishing industry especially in UAE. Many of the Arab families had trade links with India and the main commodity of exchange during that time was pearl. The gulf merchants also had a strong commercial base for pearl in Bombay to sell their harvest. The presence of Indian traders was also felt during the pearl harvesting months. The polishing of the pearls was often conducted in Bombay to turn it into jewellery to be sold in the European markets and to the Indian ruling elites. This commercial activity was put under a regulation under British colonialism.³ In the year 1909, the first Trucial state post office was opened in Dubai and was run by the Indian Postal service until 1947.⁴ With the decline of the pearl industry in the 1920s and 1930s and the emergence of the gulf countries as oil-producing and exporting economies accelerated the relation between the two regions. The demand for labour market increased which in turn changed the size and complexion of the Indians and the other expatriate communities in the region.

2. Review of Literature

Culture is a set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group that also encompasses lifestyle, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs. (UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity 2001)

Trade between India and Arab countries also ensured cultural exchange between the two societies. When people moved from one place to another for trading, they carried their own culture, ideas, religions, philosophy, customs, traditions, rituals, books, art, and painting along with them. Commercial ties also led the way to cultural relations. (Pasha 2008)

Samir Pradhan (2009) has observed that Indian presence in the Gulf region is civilizational which has developed into a vibrant relationship over the years, primarily based on a complementary abundance of entrepreneurial skill and wealth.

Abdulla Elmadani's (1999) work is based on the relationship between India and the Gulf region from ancient times. He cites evidence from archaeological findings from Indus civilization and the Gulf to prove his point. His work not only throws light on the commercial links between these two regions but also traces the roots of the socio-cultural ties between India and the Gulf countries. Prakash. C. Jain's (2007) edited work however, is more focused on the presence of Indian expatriates in the region. He begins by tracing the roots of Indian's presence in the region since the ancient period. Venu Rajamony (2014) has seen political and diplomatic relations between India and UAE in the larger context of the independence of both countries from colonial rule. Venu Rajamony has given a detail account of number of political visits starting from Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al-Maktoum, the vice president of UAE and the ruler of Abu Dhabi in 1974 to

Sheikh Zayed visits in 1975 which ensured the establishment of an institute of petroleum studies at the Aligarh Muslim University. He also analyzed the visit of Indira Gandhi in May 1981 just after one year of the outbreak of Iran-Iraq war giving India- UAE relation a major boost. Zakir Hussain (2008) has observed that two components, movement of labour and transfer of energy resources, have been two significant complementary pillars which sustained India-GCC economic relations into new era of post 1990 which is marked by globalization, liberalization and privatization.

Kadira pethiyogoda (2015) makes a study of the importance of Indian culture in India's foreign policy towards Gulf. His study also analyses different elements of Indian's culture and how it influences India's approach to the region through values and identity. He analyzed Indian's dominant political values like non-violence and pluralism and its implication in the growing relation between India and Gulf.

Cultural Diplomacy is the deployment of a state's culture in support of its foreign policy goals. Cultural Diplomacy facilitates exchanges as it rest on the assumption that art, education and language are among most significant entry points into culture. It involves an attempt to promote values and image of a country amongst other foreign audiences as well as try to understand values, culture and image of other countries and their people. (Fox 1999) While there are many definitions of cultural diplomacy in the literature, the definition of Milton Cummings (2003) is the most referred one, which defines cultural diplomacy as the exchange of values, ideas and culture-art elements among nations and their people to foster mutual understanding. It includes the study of another country's language, tradition and lifestyle Richard Arndt (2005) is more precise and clearly differentiates cultural diplomacy from cultural relations. He argues that cultural diplomacy only takes place when government pays attention to this complex field and tries to put it at service of the elusive national interest whereas cultural relations, or relations between national cultures, those aspects of intellect and education lodged in any society that tend to cross borders and connect with foreign institutions. According to Simon Mark (2009) there are two important reasons as to why cultural diplomacy faced problem in international relations. Culture usually is associated with non- governmental institution and it is difficult to judge its efficiency and genuine impact. The concept of Soft power has been debated and discussed, among both international scholars and practitioners of foreign policy ever since 1990. Joseph Nye, the eminent former Harvard political science professor is credited with popularizing the concept within the discipline of international relations. Culture has gained importance in international politics very recently especially with the theoretical work of Joseph Nye. Soft power is basically the ability of a state to achieve what it wants in terms of international politics because of its intangible assets like culture, policies, and values. The presence of these three elements in their foreign policy makes the state desirable and attractive to the other states and actors. Cultural diplomacy helps in promoting connectivity at the people to people level and thereby promoting understanding not only among people but also among country's progress to a better bilateral economic and political links.

³ Jain, P. C. (2007) "An Incipient Diaspora: Indians in the Gulf Region", in Jain, P.C. (ed.), *Indian Diaspora in West Asia*, Delhi: Manohar.

⁴⁴Rajamony Venu (2009), *India and the UAE In Celebration of a Legendary Friendship*, Indian Expression Management Consultancy : UAE

Indian foreign policy analyst C. Raja Mohan (2003) argued—Bollywood has done more for Indian influence abroad than the bureaucratic efforts of the government. From classical and popular music to its cuisine, from the growing impact of its writers and intellectuals, India now has begun to acquire many levers of soft power. Shashi Tharoor (2008) is perhaps the most enthusiastic scholar and writer to draw attention to India's soft power. India's soft power is projected through its cricket team, tennis players, and Indian women sweeping the Miss World contests, Indian cinema's claims for Oscar nomination. (Tharoor 2008). However, he argues that India is yet to utilize its soft power to its full potential.

It goes without saying that, India has considerable soft power resources that include sports, music, art, film, literature, and even beauty pageantry. To this list, others have added India's anti-colonial history, democratic institutions, free press, independent judiciary, vibrant civil society, multi-ethnic polity, secularism, pluralism, skilled English-speaking workers, food, handicrafts, yoga, the rapid growth of the information technology sector in places such as Bangalore, and the existence of a large Indian diaspora in certain countries (Blarel 2012; Malone 2011; Purushothaman 2010; Hymans 2009; Mohan 2003).

Lahiri (2017) argues that India has always had various soft power strategies, but its success had been limited as they were not coupled with hard power such as strong military force and advanced defense capabilities. A similar argument has been placed by Rohan Mukherjee (2014) who argues that India's soft power resources are over-exaggerated. India lacks the hard power to match its soft power potentials. India has intended to substitute hard power with soft power. Both hard and soft power complement each-other and it cannot be substituted by one another. He also argues that India is entangled with internal tensions: gender-based violence, poverty, ethnic violence etc. that also possess a major challenge for India to develop a coherent and concrete strategy for soft power promotion.

3. India's Cultural Diplomacy

India is not new to cultural diplomacy. Though as a sub-variant of soft power Cultural Diplomacy became popular later India had its encounter with cultural diplomacy long before the word was coined. According to C. Raja Mohan, "India's self-discovery of its rich cultural heritage and its global reach played an important role in shaping its modern nationalism."⁵

Since its independence in 1947, India's cultural diplomacy has tried to enhance mutual understanding amongst countries and their peoples. India's cultural diplomacy was promoted shortly after its independence because India was genuinely committed to building up a post-colonial world different from what is characterised colonialism.

The soft power assets of India were factored in foreign policymaking till the 1990s. Not that the policymakers were not aware, rather the founding fathers of modern India were themselves ambassadors of soft power, but they displayed

recalcitrance to use soft power tools to realize foreign policy goals. Those attempts were more aimed at tracking the Indian origin population outside. Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and the Indian Council for World Affairs (ICWA) played a role in cultural diplomacy. The objective of ICCR, founded in 1950, was "to establish, revive and strengthen cultural relations and mutual understanding between India and other countries" (ICCR, 2016).

India remained a latent soft power till forces of globalization and information technology became an important element of world order. It was in the 1990s, cultural diplomacy was given a concrete shape. There was a significant shift in the 1990s in the policy. Emphasis was put to factor soft power towards promoting foreign policy goals. According to Ian Hall, five new developments can be identified in what he terms "new Indian public diplomacy" since 2000. Those are efforts to reach out to overseas Indians; building connections with foreign business interests; foreign aid and development programme; promoting events to showcase and "nation-brand" India; and, using new social media to reach out younger generations (Hall, 2012). The Indian diaspora mostly neglected in foreign policy discourse of early post-independent India. Diaspora became increasingly important in the post-cold war world. Ministry of Non-Resident Indians' Affairs was established in May 2004, which was transformed as Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) in September 2004. MOIA merged with the Ministry of External Affairs in January 2016.

4. India's Cultural Diplomacy with UAE

During the colonial period, most of the protectorates of the British Empire in the gulf were administered from India. The commercial relations between the two countries flourished after Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan took over as Sultan of Abu Dhabi in 1966. Since the creation of the Federation of UAE in 1971 both the countries have indulged in sincere efforts to improve relationships in all fields. The presence of Indian population in UAE increased on a wider scale after the oil boom in the Gulf in the 1970s. They have not only helped in the development of cultural relations but have also helped in strengthening their economies through remittance sent back home to India.

Trade and commerce form the backbone of the bilateral relations between India and the UAE. However, diplomatic means play a crucial role in a country's effort to maintain better relations and promote its image in the international arena. Along with economic and military means, it has become equally important for a country to build upon its diplomatic relations. Cultural diplomacy which is a subset of public diplomacy uses culture as a tool by the government in promoting connectivity at the people's level. Its impact may, therefore, be felt at two levels – at the societal level and at the state's level. In this context, Indian cultural diplomacy plays an important role in promoting its image in the international arena and establishing relations at both societal and state level. India – UAE relations are also based on certain shared values like tolerance and peace and parallels can be drawn between the multicultural values of both societies. The values of tolerance, pluralism and non-violence influence India's foreign policy to a significant degree. Indian cultural diversity based on its harmony,

tolerance, stability and adaptability also compliments UAE's cosmopolitan and multicultural environment. Indian diaspora in UAE is also keen on maintaining the values and preserve their cultural identity on one hand and harmonize and adopt on the other. UAE also upholds its culture and heritage.

Over the past decades, India has recognized the importance of cultural diplomacy and the use of soft power more systematically in its international relations. Indian Cultural diplomacy towards UAE is basically the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture in order to foster mutual understanding. Ministry of External Affairs holds the responsibility for promoting India's cultural diplomacy. Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) was established in 1950 to achieve this objective of Indian foreign policy. ICCR is effective in establishing various cultural centres, chairs in Indian studies, festivals of India etc. in flourishing Indian cultural abroad and establishing international linkages. India's cultural diplomacy has always been intrinsically linked to the dominant discourse on India's national identity and promotes the ideas, norms and particular interpretations of reality that occupies a hegemonic position in the society.

Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum, Prime minister of UAE till 1990 was the visionary of modern Dubai. It was his pioneering visit in 1974 and the visit followed by the UAE's founding father and the first president, Sheikh Zayed in 1975 which laid the framework for a closer cultural partnership between the two countries. It was after 34 years of the last Prime Minister's visit to UAE, the present Prime Minister visited UAE in August 2015. The last visit was made by Indira Gandhi in May 1981, a year after the Iran – Iraq war. The visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi ensured a renewed closer tie between the two countries and gave a new impetus to the old cultural relations. The pro-active nature of the present foreign policy of both the countries shares the deep common goals of fighting terrorism, combating extremism and radicalism. India's vision of peace, stability, tolerance as laid by Mahatma Gandhi through its ideals of non-violence that attracts UAE. The President of UAE Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the UAE, has proclaimed the year 2019 to be the "The Year of Tolerance" in the UAE.⁶ The idea of tolerance, therefore, is placed at the centre of 2019 initiative and policy and is being adopted to systematically enhance cultural diplomacy as a key dimension of UAE's foreign policy. Enhancing UAE's relation with India therefore systematically exhibit cultural symbols in bilateral relations.⁷ The strategic partnership between India and UAE as testified by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi's second visit to UAE in 2018 has also triggered cultural diplomacy under the framework of the policy of tolerance, art and literature and the construction of the first Hindu Temple in UAE.

India and UAE enjoy a vibrant relation and they have signed a gamut of agreements and MoUs. The list of possible fields of mutual interest includes culture, economy, manpower services, civil aviation, managing criminal activities, developing

human connectivity and communication by exchange of news and information through print and electronic media. The cultural diplomacy between the two countries is set up through the cultural framework of 1975. Based on this framework the two countries continued their regular cultural exchanges both officially and on peoples' level. Indian Social and Cultural Center in Abu Dhabi representing Indian diaspora to enhance their social-cultural needs came into existence since 1967. It is one of the largest Indian Association outside India. In December 2009 under the initiative of ICCR, an Indian Cultural Centre was opened in the premise of Indian Embassy in Abu Dhabi. This Indian Centre became famous for conducting and organizing several cultural activities in the field of arts, seminars, Indian festivals, exhibitions, propagation of Yoga etc. However, it was closed in 2014 due to several administrative reasons. The collective associational activities of Indian expatriates are vibrant in UAE with more than 100 registered and unregistered organizations. Indians are organized around the region or language-specific organizations like Goan cultural society, Keralite associations, Tamil association, Bengal associations etc. Most of these organizations mainly promote welfare activities for the Indians in UAE but it also promotes cultural relations by spreading awareness about various Indian culture. The chief guests of most of the important occasions are attended by the ruling family members or important emirates businessmen. The Mushairas and other cultural programmes organized by the associations are often attended by the locals. UAE's relatively liberal policies towards religion have also enabled them to build churches temple and gurudwara for devotees of Indian origin who follow religions other than Islam.

Indian diaspora is one of the major tools of India's soft power. 3.3 million Indians living in UAE also an important source to wield influence over UAE policies for the Indian government. Both workers and businessman has contributed enormously to sustain and convert UAE into one of the finest tourists and business destination of the world. 30 percent of them comprises mainly Indians from South Indian states like Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu etc. The majority of the working class are involved in the blue-collar sector owing to its local market demand and labour requirement for its diversified economic development like construction business. Job opportunity, currency differentiation, geographical proximity are some of the basic reasons for Indian workers migration to UAE. Many Indian have also established their own enterprises and some of the major Indian business tycoons also have their base in UAE. Despite strong linkages, both India and UAE need to be more pro-active in their approach to address the problems of the workers especially the blue-collar workers, black marketing of visas, and misuse of Kafala (sponsorship) system. The working class which consist of around 60 percent of the population also are engaged in the blue-collar sector with basic wages and sustenance.

Indian educational institutions have been opening facilities for medical, engineering and management training in Dubai. Both Indian and local population find it convenient to take admission in such institution with good infrastructure and good education. Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research (based in Abu Dhabi) focuses mainly on studying India and its

⁷ Geopolitics of Tolerance inside UAE's Cultural Rush (2019?) <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/geopolitics-tolerance-inside-uaes-cultural-rush-22155>

foreign policy initiative actively engaging with Indian researchers and policymakers. Agreement for Cooperation between Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research and Indian Council of World Affairs was signed in December 2008. Professional and white collars Indians have established a large number of schools in the UAE. The academic exchange program is common between the two countries. Indian educational institutes and Universities also encourage Gulf studies. UAE's political, economic developments are widely studied by Indian academicians and scholars. Indian literature has been translated into Arabic through various projects taken up by centres like India-Arab Cultural Center, JMI. An affiliated institute of Abu Dhabi Authority of Culture and Heritage (ADACH), Ketab and Kalima have been assisting to translate some prominent Indian books into Arabic. The Indian Ministry of Resource Development in collaboration with the Ministry of External Affairs has taken the initiative to provide the opportunity to all Indians and foreign nationals residing in UAE, who holds and satisfy the eligibility criteria to appear for IIT entrance and JEE 2017 to foster educations between the two countries.

UAE is increasingly trying to tap India for tourists from both middle and high-income backgrounds. 1065 weekly flights connecting the two countries strongly shows the growing connectivity and flourishing tourism industry. Indian fashion to its cuisine, Indian culture is very popular in the UAE. UAE also takes initiative in promoting its culture and tourism in India. Cricket is another important tool of India's cultural diplomacy with the presence ICC in Abu Dhabi. Indian Premier League which was hosted in Sharjah in 2014 also catered to UAE's tourism and Sharjah is a popular destination of Indian Cricket matches. Indian Cinemas especially Bollywood and south Indian cinemas play an important role as a soft power tool in UAE. Indian cinemas incorporate cultural exchange from

language, food, music, geographical locations to architecture. It often promotes tourism in India. The Indian government also have signed an agreement to facilitate corporation between the Doordarshan Broadcasting Corporation of India (DD) and the Emirate Cable Television and Multimedia. This provided for the distribution of DD world signal in the UAE through the E-vision cable network. An information Corporation agreement was signed in New Delhi in April 2000 between the Emirates News agency and Press Trust of India and regional newspapers like the Malayala Manorama and Mathrubhoomi that have overseas distribution in UAE. Some of the Indian Radio Channels like Radio Mirchi, Pravasi Bharati, Voice of Kerala, Radio Gilli are active and also recruits presenters from a different vernacular background from India. There is a good prospect ahead in medical tourism and sports tourism.

5. Conclusion

Since time immemorial culture has been integral to India's foreign policy. Unlike the West, India is not new to cultural diplomacy. India's cultural diplomacy has covered a long journey and has evolved through it as there have been noticeable qualitative changes in the tools used by India to promote itself in the international arena. While promoting the role of Indian cultural diplomacy in UAE, there lie certain limitations of the state in becoming the sole promoter. India should also promote the involvement of non-governmental organizations. However Indian cultural diplomacy with UAE needs to more systematic in approach to compete with its regional counterpart. Bollywood still trails behind Hollywood in terms of its global reach and compared to the British Council, Confucius Institute, India is yet to promote cultural activities more rigorously through ICCR. There is still a lot of scopes to actively involve the 3.3 million Indian Diaspora in cultural diplomacy.

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