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India's soft power diplomacy towards the GCC countries

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Abstract

The relationship between India and the Gulf states is not a new phenomenon. They date back many centuries. These ties have always been warm, strong, and beneficial to both the region. Many researches have been carried out to understand the various aspects of Indian Diaspora to the Gulf region. According to some research, these Gulf migrants are not only contributing to the region's economic development but also bringing India closer to the Gulf countries. They work as highly skilled and semi-skilled workers in nearly every sector of the economy. As a result, India receives a large amount of remittances, boosting the country's foreign exchange reserves. In 2018, India received over \$80 billion in remittances. These remittances have a beneficial effect on the Indian economy and society. On the other hand, the Gulf region is receiving competent workers at a low cost, which is critical for the region's economic development. As a result, we may say that labour migration from India to the Gulf region benefits both greatly. How these large Indian diaspora strengthened both the regions would be analysed in this paper. It is also witnessed that Diaspora has emerged as powerful soft power tool in terms of foreign policy strategy. The contributions of Indian diaspora in the Indian economy and society are significant. It is in fact considered as big socio-cultural, strategic and economic assets. Taking this into view, the paper would focus on the role of diaspora as an important source of soft power in India's foreign policy.

Keywords: India diaspora, soft power diplomacy, foreign policy, gulf region

Introduction

India's relations with West Asian Countries especially the GCC have always been cordial friendly and strong. There are about 9 Million Indians Living in the region. Relations between India and the Gulf area extend back more than two millennia, when Arab seamen learned the mysteries of the monsoon winds and utilized them in navigation to boost trade. The Gulf Cooperation Council is a political and economic alliance of six West Asian countries Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman. With the GCC countries, India has long-standing friendly ties and cooperative relationships. India has a critical interest in the GCC States because of its long-standing historical links with them, rising oil and gas imports, expanding commerce, investments, and the presence of huge number of Indian expatriates there. In the Gulf region, Indian diaspora and migrant workers play a significant role in buttressing a positive image of the country vis a vis strengthening our existing cordial bound with GCC countries. Indian labourers are frequently seen as being peaceful, tolerant, and eager to put in long hours under challenging circumstances. According to the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, the organisation devoted to supporting India's diaspora. The tolerant, pluralistic society in India, "in which people of various faiths, languages, ethnicities, and persuasions co-exist and thrive," is crucial to the country's favourable migratory movements and labour mobility, The diaspora's longstanding presence contributes to the stability of bilateral relations. This has real advantages, such as making things easier for Gulf nations to convince their citizens to support the deepening of links with India in delicate areas like defence cooperation.

Foreign policy indicates the total sum of objectives, interest and principles formulated by any state to conduct its affairs with other states ^[1]. It is a set of principles with calculated goals which summarizes how a state will interact with other states at political, economic, and military levels. It also outlines how states can achieve and secure their national interests through peaceful means in the complex conflictual international system. States pursue their foreign policies to protect their national interest, ideology, economic interest, and national security ^[2]. India's foreign policy has been described as the outcome of complex reciprocity of history, geography, past experience, present requirements and ideological consensus ^[3]. In the post-Independence era, India maintained friendly relations with all countries based on preserving India's territorial integrity and independence, promoting international peace and

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security, securing national interests, ensuring India's inclusive development^[4].

Soft Power, a term coined by Joseph Nye was defined as, "when one country gets other countries to want what it wants-might be called co-optive or soft power in contrast with the hard or command power of ordering others to do what it wants" (Nye, 1990). Soft power is the ability of a country to persuade others to do what it wants without resorting to force or coercion. Soft power, lies in a country's attractiveness and comes from three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority). Though slower to yield results, soft power is a less expensive means than military force or economic inducements to get others to do what we want. India's soft power is clearly visible in terms of culture, language, skills, Bollywood, food, yoga, its democratic character, neutrality, and non-interference, international law and multilateral diplomacy to name a few.

During recent time the reliance on soft power diplomacy as a foreign policy tool has been incorporated by our Prime Minister of India, Mr. Narendra Modi. The presence of Indian Diaspora abroad has also become an important element of spreading ones' soft power prerogative on the world. They are looked upon as an unofficial ambassador to foreign policy and an important bridging link between two regions. One cannot deny the fact that Indian Diaspora in the Gulf has always been neglected. It is only recently, that India accords importance to the Gulf region which is clearly evident in the diplomatic visits paid by Indian PM to the countries of the West Asia in general and to the Gulf States in particular for example Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Iran, and Israel, to which UAE reciprocated by allowing land for the construction of temple there. Lately, this changed in stance has been due to large influx of labour from India to the economies of the GGC, which account for nearly 9 million contributing significantly for both the economies of India and the Gulf.

Significance of Indian Diaspora in the GCC Countries

Indian diaspora is considered important assets in India's foreign policy in maintaining India's cordial relations with abroad countries. Gulf region is the hub of huge Indian expatriates since decades. The presence of huge diaspora populace has created a strong sense of togetherness between India and Arab particularly Gulf region^[5]. The presences of huge Indians have also increasing the trade, business, and visits of people between India and GCC countries^[6]. Along with remittances sent back to India and participations to the economic growth of Gulf countries, the Indian diaspora has continued to make significant contributions to establishing an Indian presence in the Gulf countries and expanding the scope of India's soft power by displaying Indian culture and social values on various platforms and in various forums. Through legal registration in host countries, a number of Indian associations have been active in the Gulf, including the Indian Social Club and Kalamandalam (Institute of Performing Arts) in Bahrain, the India Social and Cultural Centre and Indian Community Welfare Committee in Kuwait, and the Association of Indian Professionals and Bharathi Kalai Mandran in Qatar, the Indian Doctors Forum in Saudi Arabia, and the Indian Tamil Fine Arts Association in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Although the Indian

expatriate populations, who do not enjoy citizenship rights, have a significant social impact and are essential to both India's foreign policy toward the Gulf area as well as the generally efficient operation of political processes in the Gulf countries.

With regards to India, Since the 1930s, when oil was discovered in the Gulf area, a sizable section of its people has worked in administrative and technical roles for oil corporations. The few surviving Indians work in low-skilled and middle-skilled occupations including those in the housing and construction industries. Furthermore, with the rise in oil prices and the start of large-scale development projects in Gulf nations in the mid-1970s, large number of white-collar and Indian workers moved to region owing to an insufficient labour supply from the West Asia. In the early years of 1970s period GCC countries spent their huge investment in different development sector such as industry, infrastructure, transport, communications and agricultural sector. Political instability and shortage of manpower has provided a great opportunity to foreign countries like India to send their skilled, unskilled, and semi-skilled workers to the region. From 1970 India witnessed nearly 200 percent growth rate and its expatriate community has also grew up to 39.1 percent^[7]. As per the 2007 and 2008 reports released by the India's Ministry of External Affairs, nearly 70 percent of Indian migrant workers in Gulf consisted of mainly unskilled labors, who are engaged in construction projects, companies, agricultural sector, and municipalities. The remaining 25 percent of skilled and semi-skilled expatriates and professionals such as engineers, accountants, doctors, and businessmen are employing in several government and private sectors^[8]. Only five percent of migrant workers are working at domestic level. At present around six million Indian expatriates are working in different sectors in the Gulf countries which is the largest expatriate community residing in the region.

India's Soft Power Assets in the Region

Diaspora is considered as an important asset of soft power^[9]. For instance, Indian expatriates are sending huge sum of remittances to India, and are contributing immensely to the economic development of the Gulf countries^[10]. Indian diaspora has continuously contributed to the country's economy and established a strong Indian presence in the Gulf region, which ultimately expanded India's soft power by showcasing Indian ideas, culture and values on different international platforms. Further, because of its diaspora, several Indian associations are active in the Gulf region, such as Indian Social Club and Kalamandalam is active in Bahrain, the Association of Indian Professionals and Bharathi Kalai Mandran is functional in Qatar, India Social and Cultural Centre and Indian Community Welfare Committee is active in Kuwait, Indian Fine Arts Association in UAE, and Indian Doctors Forum is active in Saudi Arabia^[11]. Furthermore, Indian cultural associations has brought needed dynamism to the Gulf region, throughout the gulf Indians continue to be considered as the preferred expatriate community due to their high quality skills, expertise, and discipline, their capacity to adjust in Gulf lifestyles, and their reputation of peaceful behavior and accommodative nature.

The predominant Gulf countries have weak education infrastructure and lacks expert teachers in education sector^[12]. India as a hub of education, several professional and

white-collar Indian elites have established many schools in Gulf countries, these schools follow the Indian curriculum and are directly affiliated to Indian central educational boards like Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). At present there are about eighty-one schools run by the Indian professional class in Gulf countries, thirty-one schools are functional in UAE, nineteen in Oman, seventeen in Kuwait, three in Saudi Arabia, and three in Bahrain. Recently, the government of India and Saudi Arabia had initiated a programme under which Saudi students can pursue post-graduate and doctoral studies in India's reputed technical institutions. Furthermore, the Indian expatriate community living in Qatar currently runs eight schools in Doha (Qatar). Among the established schools, the prominent one is Middle East Education Society Indian School, which was established in 1974 and accommodates six thousand students. Second is Ideal Indian Schools which was established in 1985 and has capacity of accommodating four-thousand students^[13], Shantiniketan Indian School and the Modern Indian School are the two newly established schools in Qatar. Several Indian institutions such as Institution of Engineers, Indian Medical Association, and the Indian Chartered Accountants earn high demand and respect in all Gulf countries.

Indian physicians earn high respect and demand throughout the region, they played an instrumental role in strengthening and improving the health sector and medical institution of the Gulf countries. At present nearly 20,000 Indian qualified doctors, and 60,000 nurses and related medical professionals are employed in the health sectors of Gulf region. Further, in Gulf province some Indian hospitals like Apollo Group has an established presence in Gulf, and Indian medicinal tourism and health institutions is growing at rapid pace in the region. Some prominent as Indian educational institutions such as Manipal University has established its offshoot in Dubai, that offered medical, engineering, and management courses in public and private sector. Additionally, some research centers such as 'Gulf Research Centre', Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research, have showed their interest to study Indian foreign policy and foreign policy initiatives and active engagement of Indian researchers and policy makers. Except Business Interests Today there is not a single business organization that does not employ a senior or middle level Indian professional in an operational role. Prominent business groups and families such as Zayanis, Al-Moyyads, Mohammed Jalal, Ahmed Mansour Al Ali, and business companies like Bahrain Aluminium and Petro-Chemical and Ship repairing companies all hired top Indian professional in their senior, or middle-management cadres.

Moreover, several Indian elite professional and expatriates from Oman have established their own business and philanthropic and educational institutions in the Gulf region. In January 2003 and 2004, two prominent Indian professionals namely Kanaksi Khimji and P Mohammed Ali received the Indian Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award for their philanthropic services in the Gulf region. Similarly, in September 2011, Saudi Arabia Business Group has released a list of thirty influential Indian businessmen who are very influential in the economic development of the region and whose wealth and entrepreneurial talent are estimated to be worth of US\$ 20 billion. These influential Indian businessmen include Micky Jagtiani, chairman of the Landmark Group, Sunny Varkey, founder of GEMS

Education, Dr P Mohammed Ali co-founder of Galfar Engineering and so on. In 2005, famous Indian industrialist B R Shetty has been honored with highest civilian award in Abu Dhabi for his contribution to the economy of the Gulf region^[14].

Indian culture and its values earn a huge reputation throughout the Arab region. Both India and Arab region have close cultural ties since ancient times. From time to time the governments of both Arab and India are hosting joint cultural programmes^[15], for instance Indian Art Circle in Kuwait has established an auditorium for holding cultural events, also Indian art exhibitions are also featured in UAE and Qatar. The hosting and featuring of Indian cultural programmes, events increase India's soft power potentials in Gulf region. In Bahrain, Co-ordination Committee of Indian Association in collaboration with the Bahrain Cultural Association continuously hosts key cultural events on 15 August (India's Independence Day) and 26 January (India's Republic Day). At present, there are about five churches, several Hindu religious centres including a 60 year old Hindi temple in Bahrain^[16]. Like Bahrain, UAE is also supporting the Sikh community in constructing the Gurudwara. The biggest annual food exhibition, Gulfood has been exhibiting in Dubai which includes Indian cuisine as part of its show since 2009. Mounting interest and demand of Indian cuisine at domestic level has contributed immensely to the economic activity in the region.

India's Soft Power Diplomacy in the Region

Indian diaspora community despite their no citizenship rights exerts considerable amount of social and political influence in the Gulf region. The Diaspora is playing an important role in the smooth functioning of political processes in the Gulf, and helps India in maintaining cordial ties with the Gulf countries. In order to recognize its diasporas' importance as a tool for exerting influence in the Gulf, Indian government has integrated the Diaspora in the engagement of India and Gulf relations. Indian government has provided some stringent set of legal procedures which are to be adhering by Indian migrants to the Gulf region.

Knowing the significance of its diaspora in the around the world including Gulf region, the Indian government has established a separate ministry namely Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs in 2005, to handle and manage the issues of its diaspora residing outside India. The establishment of the above ministry has helped and enhanced the potentials of Indian diaspora particularly in the Gulf region. Besides that, number of public diplomacy initiatives has been taken by the Indian government from time to time to increase its soft power capabilities in the Gulf. For Instance, the government of India has signed a number of Memorandum of Understanding (MOUs) and related pacts on labour and manpower with many Gulf Countries. In 2001, India two major MOUs agreements were signed with Gulf countries, one between the Indian Electronics and Computers Software Export Promotion Council and Economic Development Board of Bahrain to support in developing the information technology sector in Bahrain. The second MOUs agreement was signed between Indian IT companies and Omani company for joint promotional activities. In 2001, a contract was given to Indian Daily Telecommunication Consultants Ltd. to expand the telecommunication network in Oman. In the meantime, another proposal was signed to establish the centre of Birla Institute of Technology in Muscat in Oman.

In 2008, Indian President Pratibha Patil launched Extended Insurance Scheme for Indian workers working in Gulf and Indian Workers Resource Centre in Dubai. On January 17-18, 2011 a Joint Committee on Labour was organized in Doha (Qatar). In the same year, in March 2011, Indian President A P J Abdul Kalam launched a monthly magazine namely 'India Matters' to emphasize the significance of India as an emerging power in Asia. In 2005, Indian government for the time appointed Chinmaya Gharekham as special envoy to the Gulf, and assigned with the task to promote cooperation in trade and investment, education, IT, culture, and tourism with the Gulf countries. Further, in 2007, an Overseas Indian Facilitation Centre was established as a public-private partnership between the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs and the Confederation of Indian Industry with a mission to expand economic dealings with India. To achieve the above objective both Gulf and Indian authorities agreed to disseminate their information, holding of knowledge-expert meetings, and maintain general engagement with the Indian expatriates in the Gulf.

Indian Public Diplomacy Division of the Ministry of External affairs which was created in May 2006 conducted several studies through the 'Know India Programme', the above division has popularized the popularity of the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas Programme and lent its special attention on Indian migrants residing in the Gulf Countries. In the same year, the government of India established 'Overseas Indian Workers Awards Scheme' ^[17] to recognize the contributions made by Indians in the Gulf. Under this scheme, the government honored those individuals with an outstanding record towards the welfare of fellow Indian workers, those who have sacrificed their interests for the sake of others, and those who have honored and created a positive image of India through their unselfish conduct ^[18]. Furthermore, 'Indian Benevolent Community Forum' (ICBF) was established by Indian embassies on the recommendation of the government throughout the Gulf countries mainly to provide medical, financial, and health related assistance to Indian workers in the Gulf ^[19]. From time to time, the Indian government has made several concerted efforts to address some issues and problems of Indian migrants in the region, and attempted to boost the confidence and morale of its diaspora in the Gulf countries. Furthermore, Indian embassy in Abu Dhabi (UAE) in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour of UAE and the Protector of Emigrants has established an online depository of the originals employment contracts, which can be assessed in case there is a dispute between an employee and employer to avoid the abuse and harassment of Indian workers ^[20].

Conclusion

India has strong ties across the world and especially in GCC countries which has socio cultural interaction, vast Diaspora, government neck to neck diplomacy, heritage, etc. India is considered to be important in GCC countries as a leader after US and China. Multi-lateral and bilateral setup of public diplomacy has strengthened India's footprint in all GCC countries. The relation between UAE and Saudi Arabia has reached to its zenith in last couple of years. Besides this India's strong public diplomacy, spiritualism, folk and culture and others have significant aspect for soft diplomacy per se. Ministry of External Affairs has its dedicated wings for West Asian diplomacy. Institution like

ICCR, ICSSR, ICWA and India Islamic centre have played significant role in placing India as one of major soft powers in the region. Sectors like science and technology, agriculture and education, has contributed in building the might of India's soft power diplomacy in GCC countries. India is sufficiently providing non-military support to many GCC countries. The canvas of soft power diplomacy of India may not be stop therein only but also it includes various beneficiary programs, such as business conclaves, seminars and symposia to unite and strengthen NRI diaspora amongst the GCC countries.

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