



WELCOMING **THE NEW** AMBASSADOR

Fresh from submitting his credentials to Deputy King, HRH Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, the new Ambassador of India to the Kingdom of Bahrain, HE Vinod K. Jacob, is settling into his task of strengthening the already incredibly strong ties between the two nations. Bahrain This Month sat down with him to discuss his career journey, his first experiences in Bahrain and his plans to bolster diplomatic relations.

Your Excellency, what have been the key milestones in your career to date, and how have they prepared you for your new role as ambassador?

Firstly, I spent more than two decades in the Indian Foreign Service. If I were to divide my time, it comes in three categories. The first, I spent most of my time dealing with China and furthering India-China relations both in Beijing on two occasions and once in Delhi. Secondly, I've dealt with South Asia; especially Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and then Sri Lanka. Most recently, I was the Deputy High Commissioner in Sri Lanka. The third category is multilateral, where I spent five years dealing with numerous issues. First, in New York, where I was in the permanent mission of India to the United Nations and subsequently certain stints at headquarters which turned out to be quite interesting.

One of the most important lessons that I take back from my experience is to very strongly and consistently pursue Indian national interests. Where it is possible to find convergence, you try and find it. With some countries, it may not be possible in any sphere of bilateral engagement, but you put your best foot forward and try anyway in the name of national interest.

How would you describe the current state of relations between Bahrain and India, both personally and politically?

When I learned I was coming to Bahrain on this posting, I spent some time in Delhi to understand from the Indian leadership and government officials about what their expectations and priorities from the relationship were.

Since I arrived at the beginning of August, I have heard from the Bahraini leadership, including ministers, high officials, agencies and more, and I can clearly see that there is a high degree of convergence between these two thinking. The vision of the leadership is my mandate and it is my responsibility to translate into reality. This includes many facets including politics, economics, trade, defence, climate change and maritime security. Of course, as always, the priority is taking care of the interests of the huge Indian diaspora here.

Can you share details about the latest trade figures between the two countries? What do you consider to be some of the key opportunities for further growth?

Trade between India and Bahrain has been

quite robust. In fact, last year we saw very high trade figures reaching USD1.6 billion. I would expect this coming year to see a further rise and a continuation of the building of momentum.

I believe there is a substantial scope for expansion of trade, especially in the post-pandemic period where there are unique opportunities for two-way investment, encompassing areas like tourism, technology and security.

What are some of the ways in which you plan to promote cultural exchanges which celebrate the 5000-year history between the two countries?

This will come in two different ways, both government-to-government and co-operation outside of the government sphere. In both aspects, the embassy is keen to play a facilitating role. For the former, there is the cultural exchange programme which includes bringing musicians, troupes and more from India. For the latter, Bahrain has become a cultural destination, particularly for weddings, for young Indian men and women.

As examples of how strong our bond is, our Prime Minister Narendra Modi was bestowed the highest honour in Bahrain, the Bahrain Order First Class, during his visit in 2019 to emphasise the respect that each leadership has for the other. Secondly, the warmth with which the Bahraini leadership showed to help India out during the pandemic by sending liquid medical oxygen is hugely appreciated, as is the decision to keep flights going in the same period.

Being new in your role, what are you most looking forward to about your time in Bahrain?

I look forward to promoting bilateral engagement to the highest level possible. That is always the dream of an ambassador, to achieve it in the shortest period of time. In the first six months of this year, more than 500,000 Indian tourists arrived in Bahrain so tourism is one particular aspect I am looking forward to boosting.

What advice would you offer to a young person wishing to pursue a career in diplomacy?

The diplomatic field is very interesting in that it deals with a series of issues on a consistent day-to-day basis. When I look back at the time when I joined the service, I would say that it was a much simpler time with fewer challenges and conflicts to deal with. Now

you have a much more complex international environment with the rapid development of technology. You have movement of people, movement of finances, movement of goods and services in ways and means that we never thought of.

As an example of a current issue, take the importance of renewable energy in the current climate. How do you deal with that? How much investment do nations add and what is the type of cooperation that you are going to aim for and achieve?

So, these are aspects of a diplomat's life which have gradually evolved in the last five to 10 years. These are things that make the life of a diplomat interesting. Equally, these are some of the challenges that make your life, the task of a diplomat that much more challenging because you have to answer to your own country when you are abroad and you are also to address the aspirations and expectations of the host government as well. You must be prepared to be adaptable at all times.

Is there any message that as ambassador you'd like to give both to Indian nationals here as well as the Bahrainis who are your hosts?

I must say that the Bahraini government, the royal court and the foreign office in particular, have been exceptionally hospitable and have received me with warmth. To the Indian community, I say that you are known not only for your skills, effort or resources, but also for your character. Please continue in the same approach that you have been maintaining which is to abide by the laws and rules of Bahrain, work hard and contribute to the economic prosperity of the Bahrain government and its society. That will be the best contribution you're making to India-Bahrain relations.

Anything more to add?

One of the important aspects of a country like Bahrain is that it is a civilisation; therefore there are layers and layers of nuances in a society like Bahrain. When I peel away at the layers, I see that it's even more remarkable. So I think this is a perfect place for me to be to understand its people. Whilst doing so, I am here to serve the Republic of India, and I intend to do it to the best of my ability and fulfil my responsibilities to my nation.



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