

# INTERVIEW: INDIA'S AMBASSADOR TO BAHRAIN ON DIPLOMACY, DIASPORA, AND DEVELOPMENT



In August 2023, Vinod K. Jacob assumed office as the 16th Indian Ambassador to the Kingdom of Bahrain. With over 20 years of diplomatic experience, he has previously served

as the Ambassador of India in Beijing, a member of the Indian delegation to the United Nations Security Council, and India's Deputy High Commissioner in Colombo, Sri Lanka, among other distinguished roles.

Marking his first posting in the Middle East, Jacob focuses on strengthening ties with the Indian diaspora in Bahrain. With nearly 350,000 Indians residing in the Kingdom, the largest expatriate population, his initiatives

are centred on swiftly addressing community grievances, promoting India's tourism, and engaging the youth with the Embassy. An avid cricketer, he also enjoys playing the sport with community members in Bahrain.

On 15th August this year, India celebrates its 78th Independence Day. In this exclusive interview, Gulf Insider's Deepika Rao sits down with the Ambassador to discuss the India-Bahrain relationship, initiatives supporting NRIs and youth, and a reflection on his first year in office.

## 2024 also marks the 10th anniversary of His Majesty King Hamad's first visit to India and the fifth anniversary of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's state visit to Bahrain.

### What are the most important areas of engagement between India and Bahrain?

India and Bahrain have historically shared close relations, dating back to the time of the Indus Valley Civilization. Over the past few decades, since establishing formal diplomatic ties, this relationship has strengthened and expanded across nearly every sphere. Today, it is a comprehensive partnership in every sense of the term, encompassing economic and commercial ties, high-level political engagement, and people-to-people connections.

2024 also marks the 10th anniversary of His Majesty King Hamad's first visit to India. This year is also the fifth anniversary of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's state visit to Bahrain. These are significant milestones in the engagement between the two countries. The cooperation extends to maritime security, science and technology, and youth exchanges, and increasingly aligns on regional and international issues, such as climate change and sustainable development.

### It's been a year since you took charge of this office. What would you say have been the biggest successes and challenges you've faced?

I would divide it into two parts. The first was the latter half of India's G20 presidency, where Bahrain was very supportive. They actively participated in the Voice of the Global South Summit, hosted by Prime Minister Modi, contributing to discussions that influenced the G20 outcome document in late 2023. The Deputy Prime Minister of Bahrain was the only Gulf leader to participate in the second summit iteration in November, showcasing close political ties.

The Prime Minister had an excellent meeting with His Majesty Hamad at the COP in UAE, where they discussed climate change, sustainable development, and renewable energy. Despite the general election season in India from March to June, cooperation continued through diplomatic channels.

On the investment front, there was a 40% increase since 2019, with \$200 million of Indian investment in Bahrain between Q1 2023 and Q1 2024. We also secured royal pardons for nearly 100 Indian nationals and I'm very thankful to His Majesty for demonstrating the goodwill.

Since I've come in, we have begun initiatives like the "Visit Embassy" program, bringing in school students and delegations of 15 to 20 in classes 11 and 12 to visit the embassy and understand what we do and how we

work here.

Finally, we successfully secured an exemption for Bahrain from India's onion export ban, highlighting the strong bilateral ties. I believed Bahrain needed to receive the exemption. The Bahrain Ministry of Commerce emphasized the importance of this request, highlighting that the taste for Indian onions has been cultivated over centuries and can't be changed overnight.

This made the argument straightforward, and New Delhi recognized its validity. While Bahrain had other options, their preference for Indian onions motivated me to advocate strongly in New Delhi. I'm pleased that they were receptive to my arguments, and with support from both the Bahrain side and the Department of Commerce in India, we successfully secured the exemption.

### How can members of the Indian community most benefit from the presence of the Indian embassy in Bahrain?

I'd like to highlight some recent initiatives we've undertaken. We are starting phase two of the "One District, One Product" initiative where we will shine a spotlight on the Indian state of Punjab. We invite community members to the embassy for an inauguration, where we promote products from the Indian state and its tourism potential. I will speak in Punjabi at the event. This campaign will run for one and a half to two months, showcasing what Punjab has to offer. We also create opportunities for community associations to engage with the Indian Embassy, fostering a two-way conversation to promote specific products and regions.

Another initiative is the "Open House" event held on the last Friday of every month, where any member of the Indian community can meet the ambassador without an appointment. We've established a robust system to address complaints. For example, when I first started, we received 60 to 70



complaints per session; this has now reduced to 12.

The complaints typically involve issues such as non-payment of salaries, passport retention, and visa problems. Despite the challenges, we've worked closely with Bahrain's government under a 2009 memorandum of understanding to protect labour interests. Our collaboration with various Bahraini ministries and immigration authorities has been effective, and

the local community has been very supportive, making Indians feel welcome here.

What satisfies me is not just the reduction in complaints, but the speed at which we can address them. We have a strong community welfare and consular wing that handles these matters efficiently. Additionally, I represent the interests of India and all Indians in Bahrain. The Indian community here, which comprises a

quarter of Bahrain's population, is well-integrated and largely adheres to local laws.

We also engage the community in various ways, such as organizing cricket matches with different groups. Although I'm usually the oldest player on the field, the chance to play with the Indian Ambassador brings out the best in the community. Beyond these activities, we assist in unfortunate situations, support women facing



challenges, and handle commercial and defence matters, further strengthening our partnership with Bahrain.

### **Does the Indian Embassy initiate specific programs that support NRI business people in Bahrain?**

This embassy operates within the laws of the host government, and I expect all Indian nationals, whether businessmen or otherwise, to adhere to these laws. Compliance with required documentation and regulations is crucial for maintaining a positive relationship between Indian nationals and the Bahraini government. There is no compromise or negotiation on this matter.

## **Programs like the “Visit the Embassy” initiative help demystify the work of the embassy and government, making it more accessible and relatable.**

The embassy’s role includes facilitating bilateral commercial engagement between India and Bahrain through our economic and commercial wing. This covers trade, commerce, tourism, science and technology, education, and investment. Additionally, the embassy offers various consular services relevant to the business community, such as attestations, apostilles, certifications for NRI status, and more, all of which are listed on our website.

For the business community, we address specific issues or structural challenges as they arise. When

permissible within the bounds of interstate relations, we take these matters up with the host government, and the Bahrain government has been very receptive in resolving them. We maintain close cooperation with the Bahrain Chamber, the Economic Development Board (EDB), and the Bahrain India Society, founded decades ago and currently chaired by Mr. Abdulrahman Juma. These platforms provide a solid foundation for continued engagement between the Bahraini and Indian business communities.

### **Can you tell us a little about the initiatives specifically directed towards the youth?**

On the education front, the Government of India’s Ministry of Education offers the “Study in India” initiative, which is open to Bahraini students for undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Scholarships are available through the ICCR and various private universities, which students can contact directly. If students need guidance on how to proceed, the embassy is here to assist.

For young journalists, we’ve arranged familiarization tours because each generation needs to rediscover one another. While Bahrain has ancient connections with India, it’s essential to stay updated on contemporary developments.

We also introduce Bahraini youth to opportunities in various Indian states, each with its strengths. For example, Chennai, Hyderabad, Bangalore, and Noida excel in different sectors. Our goal is to educate both Bahraini and Indian youth about these opportunities.

Programs like the “Visit the Embassy” initiative help demystify the work of the embassy and government, making it more accessible and relatable. By doing so, we aim to help people better understand and utilize the opportunities provided by the Indian Embassy here. In various ways, we are working to foster these connections and opportunities.

### **What is life like as an Indian Diplomat - what do you enjoy the most? Is there anything you wish was different?**

This is my first posting in this region, and as I mentioned earlier, I’m a Chinese language speaker, so I’m not familiar with the local language here. However, I’m making an effort to learn it. With the help of my colleagues, I’ve even delivered speeches in Arabic. In my 25 years of diplomatic service, this is the first relationship I’ve encountered with no fundamental issues. The degree of convergence between our two countries is remarkably high, whether on economic, political, or regional issues, including maritime security and people-to-people links.

In contrast to my previous roles dealing with China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and most recently as Deputy High Commissioner in Sri Lanka during a period of crisis, my experience here has been extremely comfortable. The Bahraini government and society have warmly welcomed me, making it feel like a second home.

Throughout my career, I’ve had many highlights. My expertise lies primarily in China, South Asian neighbours, and multilateral diplomacy. For instance, I was involved in the successful campaign for an Indian judge’s election to the International Court of Justice in 2017, a challenging yet rewarding experience. I also played a role in strengthening bilateral cooperation with Sri Lanka during a crisis, and when I left, India’s reputation there was at its highest. 