

REPUBLIC DAY SPECIAL INTERVIEW

AMBASSADOR VINOD JACOB MEETS STUDENT PRESS CORPS



When you hear talk of the promise of India, the first mention is of the country's youthful demographics – more than 65% of the 1.4 billion Indians are under 35 years of age. But often, young people in their teens and twenties hardly get to have a say in shaping their world. In the Bahrain Indian community, we only see youngsters when they present music and dance events or participate in the many annual school and club 'cultural fests'.

Indian Ambassador Vinod Jacob, himself one of the youngest diplomats to serve the community, had a plan to change that. Early in his term, the Ambassador instituted a practise of inviting schools to send batches of senior students on a tour of the embassy and interaction with officials, including himself, so that they would have more of a three-dimensional understanding of how the embassy connects with the community.

For this special Republic Day issue, we took up this idea and requested that the usual official interview be conducted by a Salaam Bahrain Junior Press Corps made up of four students nominated by four Indian schools in the Kingdom. To our delight, Ambassador Jacob was game to try the new format and our student interviewers vied to present questions which would not just tap the more serious aspects of India-Bahrain relations but also stuff that interested their age group.

The resulting interview was a sparky mix of interesting ideas exchanged and informal chatting and we believe that our youngsters got a real insight into how an articulate and focussed diplomat can serve the community and further bilateral ties.

P.S. The best part of the interaction took place when Ambassador Jacob and the students walked through the Kargil exhibition at the embassy and through the embassy garden. The mics were off and the mood casual – but the Ambassador spoke so passionately about the Indian valour which won the war, the diplomatic restraint that accompanied it and how it shaped his choice of a career in the foreign service, that it left the students spellbound.

(They also learnt a valuable journalistic lesson: that often, the best moments come unstructured and when the mic's off!)



Student Shan Diamond
Louis of The Indian
School Bahrain

Student Mohammed
Rakib of Ibn Al
Hytham School

Student Thanishka
Chakkarayan of
New Indian School

Student Sagar
Mohan Asnani of New
Millennium School



Sagar Mohan Asnani (NMS School): Sir, as a UPSC aspirant myself, it was quite fascinating to know that you stood fifth in the All India Civil Services Examination. Who inspired you to take up this journey and what were the challenges that you faced throughout?

AMBASSADOR: At the outset, let me wish you all the very best for your attempts at UPSC. I can tell you it's a wonderful career, joining the government service. By the time you join the UPSC, the challenges of today will be long past, and the way in which diplomacy is conducted will be different. So first and foremost, I would advise you to look at the changes so that you are familiar with that because every exam has its own methodology of preparing for it. But I can tell you, there is not one single person who inspired me to join diplomacy, but rather, there was a specific instance or an incident which encouraged me to make the choice. That was the Kargil War.

If you go back, it was fought and won under very difficult circumstances. And Indian diplomacy also played a very important role in supporting the Indian Army in this India war and ensure that Indian national security was protected. I was in college at the time preparing for the UPSC and that sort of clinched my decision to go into the foreign service and my choice of subjects also were similar to that.



Shan Diamond Louis (Indian School Bahrain): Your Excellency, do you believe that we young people have the power to shape relations between countries, Indian-Bahrain, for example, or are we pigeon-holed just as students who study, write a few exams, win a few medals, but do not have any significant impact in the larger picture? Do you believe or how can we Indian students contribute towards improving India's relations with Bahrain, with the GCC and with the world?

AMBASSADOR: I think that's a very useful question and dovetails entirely into the work - part of the work - that the embassy is doing. You must be aware that ever since I took charge here, I have been actively engaging with the schools. We started off with the Indian schools and now even Bahraini schools. We are engaging with them under what is called the Visit Embassy Programme, where groups of 15 to 20 students from each school, from grades 9 to 12, visit the embassy, have interactions with my colleagues who are dealing with various responsibilities in the embassy. They learn about the consular work, they learn about the outreach activities, and in the end of their two-and-a-half-hour stay, they spend around 45 minutes with me, talking about international relations, India-Bahrain bilateral relations. We have had, I think, 17 such visits till now.

I believe that students contribute to the future of the relationship. The whole idea behind the Visit Embassy Program is to prepare the ground for India-Bahrain relations to go to the next level in

the coming decades or so, because school students today are going to lead the India-Bahrain relationship 15-20 years down the line. And I hope that such an approach will be very useful to be applied in other countries and other continents as well.

This, I would say, is a direct way in which we are engaging the students. Apart from this, students have participated in various other initiatives of the Embassy of India.



Thanishka Chakkarayan: Your Excellency, as a civil officer, how do you think we can build diversity and inclusivity in public service? And, sir, what is your approach to this? And also, do you think our generation is in a better place to understand the importance of these essential qualities?

AMBASSADOR: One of the big advantages that I have as a representative of the Government of India, is that we have a very vibrant constitutional ethos, we have a very vibrant constitution, the constitutional provisions which deal with employment opportunities in the Government of India provide for these diversity and inclusivity initiatives that are there. This has been there since the adoption of the constitution in the 1950s and it has grown from strength to strength. There are also many pronouncements of the Supreme Court of India, High Courts of India for improving this system and we are constantly fine-tuning it to make sure that every able and capable member of Indian society is able to contribute to public service to the extent that he or she wants.



Mohammed Rakib (Ibn Al Hytham School): Your Excellency, Artificial intelligence is becoming a big part of our lives. Is India ready for this new wave of technology? How will it impact people-to-people relations on a global level?

AMBASSADOR: I think it's a very pertinent question - India ticks the boxes in respect of both data as well as algorithms. When I was looking at the latest information in respect of our strength in this field, I was amazed by the progress that we have made. When we look at the data usage, it is 21.3 gigabyte per month per subscriber. That is one of the highest (rates of) data usage anywhere in the world. At the same time, the data tariff is amongst the lowest - \$0.16 per gigabyte. The speed is moderate. It is 100 Mbps - medium mobile broadband speed.

At this point of time, India is the second largest telecom base in the world, with 1.2 billion telecom subscribers, 960 million internet users, 940 million broadband users. And we are the second largest smartphone market in the world. Even in terms of 5G rollout, we are doing quite well. We have already covered more than 200,000 gram panchayat or village units. So, I think we're doing quite well in respect to both data as well as algorithms. And I would put a lot of emphasis on the ability of Indians in the spheres of mathematics and logic, which naturally translates into certain specific advantages in areas such as artificial intelligence.



Sagar Mohan Asnani: Your Excellency, being a successful diplomat, what in your opinion is the most important, economic diplomacy, cultural diplomacy or helping the community and why?

AMBASSADOR: I am very clear in my mind that the protection of the interests of the Indian diaspora, Indian community here is my most important responsibility and that is the mandate that has been given. There are other mandates as well which include economic diplomacy, people to people relations, science and technology cooperation, cultural diplomacy, political relations, but all of them are aimed at strengthening, protecting the interests of the Indian community.

In this regard I must place on record my gratitude to the leadership of the Kingdom of Bahrain for their generous hospitality to the Indians here in all their initiatives, in their day to day life, in their work and in their various activities that they are undertaking. The leadership has protected the Indian community here, they have ensured that there is a spirit of cooperation and they have also been very kind in ensuring that the rule of law is applied in a non-discriminatory manner and it ensures that the interests of Indian citizens and Indian nationals are protected.



Mohammed Rakib: Your Excellency, what motivates you to learn new languages? We believe that you are fluent in Mandarin, has it been advantageous to you in the era of Google Translator and many other AI apps - do you think it's still important to learn languages?

AMBASSADOR: Yes, I think it's important to learn new languages, and I think it's important to learn new contemporary features. Language, is one which bridges both the traditional as well as the contemporary. The Mandarin language that I studied is very similar to the language that

I have been used to, which is Tamil. The reason why these two languages are similar is because they are very active and alive languages. They pick up new words, they adjust to the evolving contemporary usage. I do not think at the current stage at which we are, these AI tools or apps will replace these languages. AI tools may help us only to enable us to pick up basic sentences and structure and communicate more effectively. Let me give you an example, Chinese, for instance, has multiple tones, Vietnamese has much many more tones than Chinese, so an app that captures the precise tonal usage is still far in the future. You may be able to create an app which helps you maybe in the decades to come and then we may not need but you know the jury is out on that.



Shan Diamond Louis: Sir, how can we Indian students gain access to certain internships or mentorship programmes related to diplomacy or international relations in Bahrain?

AMBASSADOR: We have a programme for internships, but it is not a very active engagement that we think will yield results. The more active engagement is what we have seen in the case of the Visit Embassy programme because school students are able to have a real life experience, have conversations with my colleagues, go around the embassy to understand what the type of work is happening in the Indian embassy. I think the Visit Embassy programme more or less takes care of these requirements.

Mentorship is something that I am definitely open to. We can work out the way in which a mentorship program can be arranged and if there is interest from amongst the Indian students and Bahraini students, I'm willing to look at it.



Thanishka Chakkarayan (New Indian School): Your Excellency, in today's rapidly changing global economy, fostering a spirit of creativity, problem solving and entrepreneurial thinking are essential for us young people. How can educational institutions in Bahrain and India collaborate to equip students with these essential skills for a paradigm shift from job ready youth to job providers?

AMBASSADOR: In my view, these qualities have to be provided by the schools themselves. It has to be provided by the environment in the schools, in the various interactions that they have amongst the teachers and the students and also through engagement between students of different schools among themselves and engagement with the industry bodies etc.

Now when you come to collaborations between schools from India and Bahrain, I am given to understand that there is already some sort of informal arrangements by which groups of school students do travel to India. On the government to government level, what we do is facilitate the visit of youth delegations. This is done by the Ministry of Youth Affairs in the Government of India. It is a very old programme which has been going on for many decades. We have arranged such programmes for Bahraini school students and Bahraini youth as well. We are open to newer methods of engagement through virtual interactions.

(For would-be entrepreneurs) There are a lot of Government of India programmes like Skill India. There are others for start-ups. There are facilities provided to come up with new solutions because the way the Government of India approaches this is to find out new solutions to new age challenges. These are essentially development challenges, empirical based solutions. The Government of India is always ready to share these with the Government of Bahrain. That is what we can do on the government to government level and I am open to collaboration with the Ministry of Youth of the Government of Bahrain.

Please watch this interview also on our Facebook, Instagram and YouTube channels.

