

A HISTORIC YEAR FOR INDIA-BAHRAIN TIES

Indian Ambassador Vinod K Jacob speaks to the community through Salaam Bahrain

IN CONVERSATION WITH MEERA RAVI



The winds of change are blowing across India. The country just completed a remarkable exercise in democratic affirmation which brought the NDA to power for a third term albeit with the support of other political parties. The Indian opposition too has been strengthened, underscoring India's reputation as the largest democracy in the world.

2024 is also the tenth year since the historic visit of His Majesty King Hamad on a State Visit to India and the fifth anniversary of the official visit of PM Modi to Bahrain in 2019 – the first by an Indian PM.

Against this interesting backdrop, Salaam Bahrain met Indian Ambassador Vinod K. Jacob and explored what the 78th Indian Independence Day means.

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Salaam Bahrain (SB): Could you tell us what the visit of PM Modi meant for India-Bahrain relations?.

Ambassador Vinod Jacob: The state visit of PM Modi, in August 2019 was historic and successful and he had excellent discussions with

the Bahraini leadership, HM King Hamad and HRH Prince Salman bin Hamad. Let me explain the success of the visit with some statistics.

If you look at the investment that has come into Bahrain since 2019, the data shows that in the past 5 years, a 40% increase has occurred. In fact, Q1 2023 to Q1 2024, US\$ 200 million has come into Bahrain from India.

When you look at trade and India's export basket, traditionally India used to export food items, poultry, dairy and other products. But now you see engineering goods, electronic goods rising. The trade gap has also reduced quite substantially. From April 2023 to March 2024, the trade gap between India and Bahrain was a miniscule US\$ 80 million. This is down from around US\$ 150 million, two years back.

There has also been increased cooperation in the areas of space research and I.T. and also a recognition of India's potential in terms of the entertainment industries around the world.

So you can see there is a there is a sense of purpose to this relationship and this purpose is directly coming from the consensus reached during PM Modi's visit and we have created a partnership which is comprehensive in every sense of the term.

The rate at which India's economic growth is taking place today is around 8% and the world economic growth which is around 3%. The difference of 5% represents a great opportunity for Bahrain over the next 25 years – I call it the demographic dividend which Bahrain and India can benefit from but time runs fast and it is my hope that we can work together.

Between April 2023 and March 2024.
The trade gap between Bahrain & India
shrank by about **US\$ 70 million**
showing healthy uptick in Indian exports.

now signed 2 hotel deal to come to Bahrain. And this is really a landmark opportunity for what was what is still considered one of the flagship hotel chains of India. Please let us have your opinion on this and how this will impact tourism and trade relations between India and Bahrain.

Ambassador Vinod Jacob: I'd like to say it's a very welcome development. More and more Indian companies establishing a presence in Bahrain, contributing to the economic prosperity of Bahrain. The Taj group, of course, is well-known for its contribution to the India growth story, and I hope that they will be able to, have a successful stint here and continue their journey of expanding to different parts of the world.

SB: The Indian embassy has been engaged in a tourism push and facilitated more than one discovery trip to India for Bahraini and Arab journalists. How does India compare in tourism popularity with neighboring countries like Sri Lanka.

Ambassador Vinod Jacob: Tourism is a very important area as far as India is concerned. Last year the data showed around 1,000,000 Indian nationals visited Bahrain for tourism and we are

INDIAN INVESTMENT TO BAHRAIN



40% INCREASE IN 5 YEARS

SB: The whole of Bahrain is talking about the fact that the Taj group of hotels have



A group of Bahraini journalists explored India on a fam trip – the first of many such promotions. They are seen here with Ihtas Aslam C.S., Second Secretary (POL & PIC)



Teaching them young – senior students of Indian schools in Bahrain are encouraged to visit the embassy, interact with the Ambassador and officials to understand its workings

seeing the rise of Indian wedding tourism in the Kingdom.

Bahrainis also travel frequently to India. The Bahraini journalists who undertook the familiarisation visit - this was also in the context of the G20 presidency which took place last year. We hope to send more such delegations to India. You know, I was recently in India, a couple of weeks ago and I went to places where I'd been last 20 years ago. I can tell you India changes and evolves immensely and I'm sure that India will leave a deep impact on the young Bahraini and Arab journalists.

SB: Despite changing emphasis on engineering and tech goods, food is the main import from India. What are the trends in food export from India to Bahrain? And how is India viewed vis a vis partnership with Bahrain in the area of food security?

Ambassador Vinod Jacob: In the period 2023 to 2024, the food exports which includes rice, dairy, poultry to Bahrain was in the order of US\$ 115 million. We recently had a visit by an APEDA delegation which explored opportunities for taking this cooperation further. In this regard, I can tell you one example which proves India's continuing commitment to Bahrain's food security - the speed with which I was able to work with the Bahraini Ministry of Commerce and the department of food production back in India to get a specific exemption for Bahrain from the onion export ban which was introduced in India.

SB: What in your opinion is the nature of labour relations between Bahrain and India? And how do you see them evolving?

Ambassador Vinod Jacob: If there is one responsibility I consider as foremost priority in my present posting, it is taking care of the interest of Indian nationals in Bahrain. In that I get a

lot of support from the friendly government of Bahrain. The labour relations in particular, are governed by an MoU that India and Bahrain signed in the year 2000 which confirms the support of the Bahrain government. All the agencies involved have always been very helpful.

When we look at the specific statistics, we have been able to reduce the number of cases that come into the Open House which we conduct on the last Friday of each month where any Indian citizen can meet me and our officials with their issues. However, we don't wait specifically for a matter to come up in the Open House. We have a robust mechanism of dealing every day with the various labour issues. And this has resulted in fewer complaints to tackle. When I had my first open house in August of last year, we had around 60 complaints whereas in the last few months, it has been in the range of 10 to 15 complaints a month.

One of the highlights of this cooperation has been the fact that King Hamad has been very merciful and granted royal pardon for almost 100 Indians in the last 6 months or so. Usually, the numbers were in the range of 15 to 20 – this time, I put in place a system of regularly evaluating specific cases for presentation to the Bahraini government for consideration for royal pardon. And I'm very happy that the system is working.

SB: To take forward bilateral relations, it's very important to engage with the future generation. Both in terms of diaspora youth from India, as well as Bahraini youth. What are the things that, the embassy puts forward that they can look forward to, taking part in and having a meaningful relationship with the India of the future and the Bahrain of the future?

Ambassador Vinod Jacob: That's a very important question because we are talking not



Noted Bahrainis such as former Minister of Labour and founding Chairman of the Bahrain India Society, Abdulnabi Al Shoa'la have taken their Indian education to the heart of Bahrain's public life. He is also an authority on Gandhian political philosophy and his book 'Gandhi: His Engagement with Islam & the Arab World' has been published in Arabic, English, Hindi, Urdu and Malayalam.

Tourism is a very important area as far as India is concerned. Last year the data showed around 1,000,000 Indian nationals visited Bahrain for tourism and we are seeing the rise of Indian wedding tourism in the Kingdom.

only of the present but also the future. In this, as you would agree this is a task which cannot be carried out only by the embassy. In this task we rely mostly on the Indian community and the Bahraini society as well. Since I have come here, I have initiated number of steps in this regard. One such is the 'Visit Embassy' programme. The aim is to get senior students to come in batches of 15 to 20 to visit the embassy spend around 2 hours at the embassy, interact with various colleagues of mine, and at the end they spend around half an hour with me where they can ask any question. So this provides an opportunity for us to explain to the students and we have had 6 or 7 iterations like that to explain to the students what are the important developments taking place in India. It basically magnifies the outreach that is being done by the government of India in this specific sphere.

The Indian central government supports the 'Study in India' programme which is tailor-

made for foreign students, students from NRI backgrounds to come to India and get the best education that is possible.

As an embassy, we have been encouraging this through various initiatives in collaboration with community associations in Bahrain. Since I came here, we have done 2 or 3 such events in November last year. In September, we also had the ITEC day - the Indian Technical and Economic, Cooperation Programme. Till date over the last 14 years nearly 100 Bahraini students have taken the benefit of this capacity building programme but it is very important for me to mention that we still have amongst us some very important luminaries on the Bahraini side who did their education in India. For instance, we have the founding chairman of the Bahrain India Society, His Excellency Abdulnabi al Shola who used to be a former minister of labour. He continues to support these initiatives.

BUSINESS NEWS

Iconic Taj resort and hotel set for Bahrain

World-famous Indian hospitality brand will add value to Bahrain tourism

The Taj brand is a fabled hotel group and people all over the world consider it an epitome of Indian luxury. Now, the Indian Hotels Company Limited (IHCL), India's largest hospitality company has announced the signing of a luxury hotel and boutique resort in the Kingdom of Bahrain, both under its iconic Taj brand. These greenfield projects mark a significant milestone as IHCL becomes the first Indian hospitality company to establish a presence in the Kingdom of Bahrain, further cementing its footprint in the Middle East.

The signing was between IHCL and Kingdom Projects, a leading Bahraini construction group.

Puneet Chhatwal, Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer, IHCL, stated, "This move is part of our strategy of growing Taj's presence in key gateway cities of the world. With a portfolio of seven hotels including four under development in the Middle East, these hotels will extend our presence in the MENA region."

Nestled amid picturesque surroundings, the Taj resort in Hamala will feature 251 luxurious rooms, each thoughtfully designed to reflect the laid-back serenity of the island. The resort will offer luxury offerings, including an all-day dining restaurant, two specialty restaurants, alongside a swimming pool and exclusive beach club. Curated to create an atmosphere of relaxation and rejuvenation, the resort will additionally encompass wellness areas such as a state-of-the-art gym and tranquil spa. The resort's 1,200 sq.mt banquet facilities will cater to grand events and celebrations, making it a key player in Bahrain's emerging leisure sector.

The 200 room Taj hotel in Downtown Seef, Manama, will cater to the needs of business travelers and tourists alike. Coupled with world-class wellness facilities including a modern gym, spa, and swimming pool, all-day dining and specialty restaurants and an exclusive pool bar, The Downtown Seef hotel will additionally feature banquet areas tailored for meetings, corporate events, and weddings.

Jalal Al Wazzan, Managing Director of Kingdom Projects W.L.L, stated, "We are delighted to welcome the prestigious and world-renowned Taj brand, a first for Bahrain, which will work towards attracting tourists in greater numbers from across the region and around the globe, thereby enhancing the tourism sector's contribution to GDP. In line with the Economic Vision 2030 driven by the Crown Prince, partnering with leading leisure and hospitality brands exemplifies Kingdom Projects' vested commitment to contribute to the development and growth of the tourism sector and thereby, the diversification of the national economy."

With the addition of these hotels, IHCL will have a presence of 7 hotels with 4 under development in the Middle East.



Jalal Al Wazzan, Managing Director of Kingdom Projects W.L.L with Puneet Chhatwal, Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer, IHCL