

SALAAM BAHRAIN INTERVIEW

1. Your Excellency, as we stand at the start of the year-long ‘India@75’ celebrations of Indian Independence, what do you see the role of the Indian community in Bahrain in marking this milestone occasion?

The Indian community makes up around a quarter of the population of Bahrain. The Kingdom’s liberal and tolerant policies and welcoming society have made it the preferred destination for Indians, which is reflected in the steady growth of Indian community in Bahrain.

The professionalism, hard work and work ethics of the dynamic and vibrant Indian community in Bahrain, have been recognized by the Leadership and the people of Bahrain. They have significantly contributed to the economic development of the Kingdom and played an important role in promoting our bilateral ties and further strengthening the existing goodwill between our two countries.

As responsible residents, Indian community has followed the Kingdom’s COVID protocols and guidelines, and a large majority of them have already gotten vaccinated to support the Kingdom’s efforts in fighting the pandemic.

Indian community has been an integral part of our celebrations of 75 years of India’s Independence. I am glad to see their overwhelming participation in various events organized by the Embassy as well as the community events. I look forward to

the active participation of our community members in the series of events planned over course of the next year or so, for celebrating the occasion in a befitting manner.

2. In your view, how has India's relations with the West Asian neighbourhood changed under PM Modi's special attention to the region? Is the new perspective also a result of the younger generation of GCC leaders such as the His Majesty the King of Bahrain, HRH the Crown Prince and PM of Bahrain and other leaders such as the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi?

India's relations with the countries in this region are historical, deep-rooted and close, forged by generations of travellers across the Arabian Sea and people to people connect.

GCC is an important region for India, given the large diaspora and its trade and energy security interests, besides the historical deep and friendly relationship with the countries of the region. Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi has visited almost all GCC countries. The regular interaction and exchanges at the highest level between India and GCC countries have been the hallmark of our relations. As a result of these interactions, the relationship has seen constant upward trajectory over the past few years, due to the convergence in interest between the countries in the region and India. It has diversified beyond traditional sectors, and now include maritime security, robust trade and investment cooperation especially in the sectors of technology, energy, food

and agro products, engineering goods, infrastructure, health, and education. GCC region is among the top five trade and investment partner of India with trade figures reaching around US\$ 160 billion. During the India-GCC political dialogue held in virtual mode in November 2020, the Foreign Ministers of GCC countries and India undertook the detailed review of India-GCC ties and appreciated the upward trajectory witnessed in the last few years.

India and GCC countries have continued their close cooperation even during the Covid-19 pandemic. India had ensured that the supply chains from India to the Gulf were not disrupted despite the lockdowns during the pandemic. India had also taken special care to ensure the return of Indian health professionals to GCC countries and for supply of medicines, vaccines and other essential items during the pandemic. GCC countries took care of the Indian diaspora in their respective countries by providing medical and other assistance, vaccination as well as in facilitating travel of stranded Indian nationals back to India.

I am sure our robust and multifaceted partnership with GCC countries would continue to deepen and diversify in the coming years.

3. As current President of the GCC, what are the expectations from Bahrain on widening Indo-Bahraini ties commercially and culturally?

Our two countries have tradition of regular high level exchanges, and as a result, our relationship has further strengthened and diversified in all sectors including political, economic, security, culture, education and people to people connect.

The deep-rooted historical links between India and Kingdom of Bahrain date back to Dilmun civilization of Bahrain and Indus Valley Civilization of India. Our strong and cultural people to people linkages are visible in all walks of life, be it cuisine, language, dance, art, theatre, music etc. The deep cultural connect between India and Bahrain is showcased in the LITTLE INDIA in Bahrain at the heart of Manama. The cultural ties got a big boost after the signing of Cultural Exchange Program between two countries during the visit of Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi to Bahrain in 2019.

India and Bahrain have robust trade and economic ties. Despite restrictions imposed by COVID, the relationship at all levels have remained stable and strong, including in trade where the bilateral trade figures have remained stable at around USD 1 billion. Total investment from India to Bahrain including that of Indian community in Bahrain is over USD\$ 1.25 billion, making India the 6th largest investor in Bahrain. The investment from Bahrain into India has also shown increasing trend. As of March 2021, total investment figure is US\$181 million. There are encouraging signs for this year's trade figures so far.

With Bahrain as GCC Chair, I am sure that our close and strong ties with Bahrain and other GCC countries as well as the region will further be deepened in all areas.

4. Besides the usual trade figures and traditional lines of business such as energy, aluminium and food security, are there new areas of mutual benefit that India and Bahrain are exploring such as solar energy, technology transfer in space studies etc.?

As I have already mentioned that India-Bahrain have robust trade and investment partnership. This continued even during pandemic times. Despite challenges, both trade and investments have shown positive trends.

Both sides are working together to promote bilateral cooperation in the new and emerging areas of space, renewal energy including solar, wind and clean hydrogen, FinTech besides traditional areas of tourism, hydrocarbon, infrastructure and construction. Several measures taken by both governments for post COVID economic revival has opened up opportunities for further collaboration in sectors such as health & pharmaceuticals, IT/data centre, education and food security, I am sure that our multi-faceted bilateral cooperation will reach newer heights in times to come.

5. In recent years, there is no denying that while Indians have made huge strides in Bahrain as CEOs and entrepreneurs, few Bahrainis have been looking East to India for education and important support such as medical knowhow and tourism. Now that we have such a strong presence in the global stage in these areas, how can we make Indo-Bahraini relations reflect this changed India?

As you yourself have mentioned, India has made tremendous strides in all spheres of life. We are celebrating the glorious journey of our country during celebrations of the 75th anniversary of India's Independence. The progress made by India in key sectors of IT, health, space, education and other scientific, technological and industrial advancement is there for all to see.

Our bilateral cooperation with Bahrain has also seen this trend in contemporary times. We have a number of CEOs and entrepreneurs working in Bahrain and giving valuable contribution to the country and its economy. India is a preferred destination for medical tourism. Both sides are also working to step up cooperation in the education sector as India has world class institutions which I am sure will be attractive to Bahraini students. On similar lines, cooperation between universities of two countries will benefit students of both countries.

6. There is no denying that India holds great fascination for many Bahrainis-especially of the younger generation, whose knowledge of Indian culture, cuisine, yoga and Bollywood is amazing. How can the Indian community capitalize on this

‘soft power’ better? Right now, our events and happenings are largely limited to within the community and there is no real cross-cultural sharing. Will there be any plan for such a sharing space in this 75th year?

India-Bahrain cultural and people to people connect goes back thousands of years to the period of Dilmun and Indus valley civilisations. Indian diaspora in Bahrain has been instrumental in spreading Indian culture and values in Bahrain. Since the time I arrived in Bahrain, I have been really impressed by the knowledge of Indian culture, cuisine, Yoga and Bollywood among the Bahraini youth. Footprints of Indian culture is visible in all walks of life in Bahrain viz. cuisine, dance, art, theatre, Yoga and traditional medicines.

We have always believed that participation of our Bahraini friends in our events is a great encouragement for us. The presence of Bahraini dignitaries and friends in the event and their enthusiasm towards India is always inspiring and satisfying. While there may be some events organised at a smaller scale which are limited to the community, majority of our events have seen active participation of our Bahraini friends.

I would like to specifically mention about the month long celebration of International Day of Yoga by the Embassy in June this year. All the major events were graced by dignitaries from the

Government of Bahrain and Indian as well as Bahraini yoga practitioners and enthusiasts.

I look forward to celebrating a series of events lined up over the course of next couple of years, in collaboration with the Indian community and organizations, with the support of concerned agencies and together with our Bahraini friends.

7. Can you tell us about India's growth story of the past 75 years?

As you know this year we are proudly celebrating the 75th anniversary of India's Independence - "Azaadi ka Amrut Mahotsav" which showcases the glorious journey of 75 years of India's Independence, and its impressive growth story. The celebrations were inaugurated by Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi on 12 March, 2021, commemorating the historic Dandi March.

India's progress in its journey of 75 years after its Independence is there for all to see. India, the largest democracy on earth has made tremendous strides in socio-economic development, and industrial, scientific and technological advances in almost all sectors of economy – from agriculture, heavy engineering, infrastructure, services, health, education, to hi-tech areas of space, IT, big data, pharmaceuticals and medical. Indian economy, the 3rd largest (PPP terms) in the world today, is well poised to become the growth engine of the world. This been reflected in India's response to the COVID pandemic as well. India

has lived up to its reputation of being the “Pharmacy of the World”. India has been a leading manufacturer of medicines and vaccines and has shared them with the global community in their times of need, in line with India’s ancient philosophy of “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam,” which regards the world as one family.

The clarion call of “Atma Nirbhar Bharat” by Hon’ble Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi is the idea of an India which focusses on making India self-reliant and contributing towards a more prosperous and resilient world. It aims at India becoming a much stronger part of the global supply chain and global value chain. During the pandemic year in 2020, India received \$64 billion in foreign direct investment, the fifth-largest recipient of FDI inflows in the world. The announcement of long term investment plan by Google, Amazon and Mubadala Investment also reflect the resilience of Indian economy and the confidence of investors in India. India’s GDP growth rate for 2021-22 is projected at 9.5%.

8.2020 was a challenging year for whole world and India too suffered because of the pandemic. How do you think the setbacks of 2020 will be made up in the months ahead so that we can truly be ready for August 15, 2022?

Last year, the global community faced the major health challenge of our times – the Covid-19 pandemic. The risks presented by Covid-19 pandemic are unprecedented in its expanse, so is its overall impact on the society and economy. India had successfully handled the first wave of the pandemic and has also now swiftly recovered from the severe second wave. By

providing speedy medical care to the infected people, enhancing existing medical infrastructure and creating new ones as well as accelerating the pace of vaccination, we have now been able to contain the spread of the virus. As of today, India's cumulative Covid-19 vaccination coverage has crossed 480 million. The recovery rate stands at around 97%. India's active caseload presently constitutes 1.27% of total cases, daily infection rate has come down drastically to about 40,000. India is opening up to itself and to the outside world, slowly but steadily.

Our 'Azaadi ka Amrut Mahotsav' festival celebrating India's achievements in its 75 years of the glorious journey is a testimony to this recovery, and the role India is playing in global recovery. Hon'ble Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched "Azaadi ka Amrut Mahotsav" on 12th March, 2021 this year. The Embassy commenced its celebrations soon after, with a curtain raiser event on 20th March, 2021 followed by series of events in partnership with various Indian associations. The celebrations so far have mainly been virtual due to the COVID situation. As COVID situation improves, we hope to hold some events in the physical format as well.

9. Sir, once the pandemic is declared ended, shall we be looking at any major visits between top government officials between both countries?

The high level visits and interactions between our two friendly countries continue despite the pandemic, though mostly in virtual format.

Despite the constraints posed by COVID-19, high level physical visits also took place. Hon'ble External Affairs Minister of India Dr. S. Jaishankar visited Bahrain in November 2020, which was among his first physical visits abroad as soon as the opportunity opened up for the same in these COVID-19 pandemic times. Foreign Minister of Bahrain H.E Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani visited India in April 2021 for the 3rd meeting of India-Bahrain High Joint Commission which reviewed and discussed ways to further push the diverse areas of our bilateral cooperation.

I am sure that with constant improvement in the COVID situation in India and in Bahrain, we would see more and more high level visits and exchanges from both sides.
