

# ADVANCING HISTORIC RELATIONS



In an exclusive interview with *Bahrain This Month* for its India in Bahrain supplement on the occasion of India's 78th Independence Day on 15th August, His Excellency Vinod K. Jacob, the Indian Ambassador to Bahrain, discusses his distinguished diplomatic career, the multifaceted and historical relationship between India and Bahrain and its future prospects.

**Your Excellency, thank you for speaking with us today. Could you give us a brief overview of your diplomatic career to date?**

I joined the Foreign Service in 2000 and have since accumulated nearly 24 years of diplomatic experience. My career began with learning Mandarin in Beijing, where I had my first posting. I have had multiple postings in Beijing and have developed expertise in dealing with India's South Asian neighbours like Pakistan, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. My most recent role before coming here was as the Deputy High Commissioner to Sri Lanka from 2019 to 2023. I also have significant experience in multilateral diplomacy, having dealt with the United Nations and other international organisations.

**You have been ambassador here for just over a year now. What are your key observations during this period?**

This is my first tenure in this region, and I was quite new to it. However, the commonalities between India and Bahrain are striking. The historical connections between the Indus and Dilmun civilisations are evident in everyday interactions, trade, cultural exchanges and even in the movies. A significant aspect is that a quarter of Bahrain's population is of Indian origin. This is the first country I have served where I have seen such a large and well-integrated Indian community. The leadership in Bahrain is notably tolerant and liberal, making it easy for foreigners, including Indians, to live and thrive here.

**What would you consider to be the key achievements and milestones of your tenure here in the last year?**

2023 was significant as it marked India's G20 presidency, and Bahrain provided substantial support during this period. Another notable achievement was receiving a royal pardon for nearly 100 Indian prisoners, which is a testament to the strong bilateral ties. Additionally, we have seen a greater convergence on important issues like climate change. This year also marks important anniversaries: the 25th year of His Majesty's ascension to the throne, the 10th anniversary of his historic visit to India in 2014, and the 5th anniversary of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bahrain in 2019.

**Could you give us an idea of the current trade relationship and trade figures between India and Bahrain?**

I had initially expected the bilateral trade to be around USD1.3 to USD1.4 billion, but it has exceeded that. From April 2023 to March 2024, Indian exports to Bahrain were around USD900 million, and Bahraini exports to India were about USD830 million, making it a near-balanced trade relationship. This is a significant improvement from two years ago when the trade gap was USD150 million. The composition of trade has also evolved, with engineering goods, electronic goods and petroleum products now leading India's exports

to Bahrain, reflecting a shift from traditional exports like rice and food items.

**Are there any other sectors that you think might be ripe for increased potential?**

Our relationship is truly comprehensive, covering trade, economic engagement, investment and people-to-people exchanges. Last year, one million Indian tourists visited Bahrain. The Indian Navy has also contributed to maritime security in the region, which is a newer area of cooperation. There is significant potential in technology, education and other areas.

**Could you share the total number of Indians working or resident in Bahrain and the sectors they are involved in?**

According to the government of Bahrain, there are 340,000 Indians here. They are active in various sectors, including business, financial services and education. This community is very law-abiding and serves as a force multiplier for the bilateral relationship.

**Are there any specific areas of cultural exchange that you think will be explored this year and beyond?**

Cultural exchange is a continuous and vital aspect of our relationship. Recent initiatives include the visit of the president of BACA to the 46th session of the World Heritage Committee of UNESCO in Delhi. We participate in programmes like Muharrag Nights and the International Music Festival, and we have started yoga and Hindi classes at the embassy. We are also promoting individual Indian states to enhance cultural and commercial ties.

**Could you share the latest developments in the education sector as far as Indian education is concerned in Bahrain?**

The Ministry of Education in Bahrain has been very supportive of our schools and students. Efforts are underway to expand cooperation to higher education, aiming for long-term university-to-university engagements. This will further strengthen our educational ties.

**Are there any upcoming delegations planned either from Bahrain to Delhi or vice versa?**

With a new government in place in India, we expect to resume high-level visits and exchanges soon. Both bilateral visits and engagements on the sidelines of international organisations like the UN General Assembly are anticipated. Bahrain is a key partner in our universal dialogue on sustainability in the context of the global south.

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**Are there any specific initiatives or plans that you would like to achieve this year?**

We aim for incremental progress in our relationship, building on the achievements of the past year. We seek to deepen and broaden cooperation in various sectors, including science and technology, defence, education and maritime security. Our shared commitment to combating climate change, piracy and drug trafficking will also be strengthened.

**Have there been any specific challenges you've faced over the last year, and how have you overcome them?**

Our bilateral relationship with Bahrain is extremely friendly, with no significant issues. The only minor challenge was the export ban on onions imposed by India for domestic reasons. However, Bahrain was one of the few countries granted an exemption, reflecting our strong bilateral ties.

**Historic relations between Bahrain and India go back 5,000 years. Is there a message you would like to give to the people of Bahrain and the Indian nationals resident here on the occasion of Indian Independence Day?**

We are at a significant period of opportunity. India's economy is growing rapidly, and Bahrain should leverage this for mutual prosperity. The historical ties between our countries can help us achieve greater economic growth and development together.

**Outside of your ambassadorial work, do you have any specific hobbies or interests?**

I have developed an interest in the Arabic language and enjoy speaking it publicly. I also play cricket with the Indian community here, which helps bring us together. Bahrain's rich history and culture are fascinating, and I take every opportunity to explore this wonderful country.

## Key Facts and Figures:

- His Majesty King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa visited India in February 2014.
- The Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, visited the Kingdom of Bahrain in August 2019.
- 340,000 Indians reside in Bahrain
- From April 2023 to March 2024, Indian exports to Bahrain were around USD900 million.
- Bahraini exports to India were about USD830 million for the same period.

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