

# EXTRAORDINARY AND PLENIPOTENTIARY DIPLOMATIST

SPECIAL REPORT

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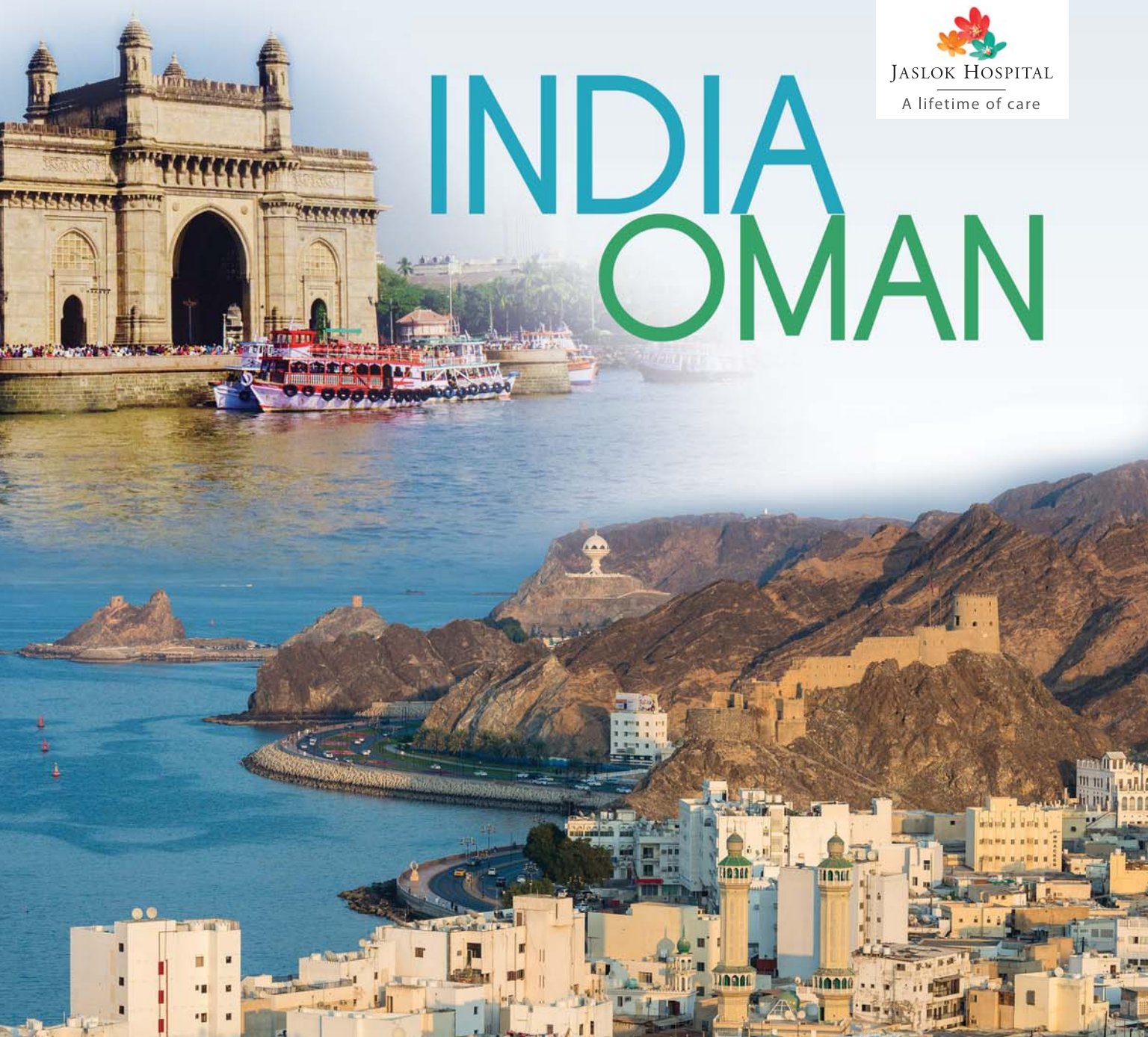
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# INDIA OMAN





*Prime Minister attends India-Oman Business Meet in Muscat, Oman (February 12, 2018)*

# INDIA-OMAN RELATIONS

## A PRODUCT OF HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL BONDS

By Dr. Lakshmi Priya\*

India and Oman share a strategic and cordial relationship, well reflected in their multi-faceted bilateral engagements across various fields. India as well as Oman have respected each other's sovereignty and share an enduring bond which has only been growing stronger with time.

Situated across the Arabian Sea, India is Oman's natural partner with which it has been engaged in trade since ancient times. Oman hosts over 800,000 Indian expatriates who send remittances back home and are a constant source of income for India. There are more than 250 flights per week between Muscat and Salalah in Oman and a dozen locations in India. India and Oman conduct regular biennial bilateral military exercises, and the total India-

Oman bilateral trade amounts to \$ 6.7 billion (2017-18). The visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Oman in February 2018 served to further bolster the already warm and cordial relationship between the two countries.

India's capital New Delhi is geographically closer to Muscat than many Indian cities. The roots of the India-Oman relationship can be traced to the 5000 year old maritime trade between the two countries. Oman has been bestowed with a topography that isolates it within the Arabian Peninsula as well as keeps it secluded from the outside world. The Gulf of Oman, the Arabian Sea, and the Rub al Khali (Empty Quarter) of Saudi Arabia ensure that the only contact that Oman can have with outer world is through its water ways. It is no wonder,



then, that the first contact between these two countries occurred through the sea.

### Political and Strategic Ties

India and Oman share strong political ties which have survived the test of time. When Sultan Qaboos ibn Saeed was trying to bring stability to Oman after the Marxist inspired rebellion engulfed the Dhofar region, many countries withdrew from Oman. India, however, still maintained its presence in the country. When Oman emerged as an independent nation state, India supported the Sultan on most issues at a time when many Arab states voted against Oman. The then Indian External Affairs Minister Swaran Singh had welcomed Oman's entry into the United Nations. This gesture was soon reciprocated by Oman as it abstained from the debate and subsequent vote on the 1971 Bangladesh conflict at the UN. At the time, it was the only Muslim country to not support Pakistan whole heartedly.

In more recent times, the political engagement between the two countries has increasingly taken on a more strategic shape. Counter terrorism is an issue of common concern between India and Oman. Since 1994, when a plot to overthrow Sultan Qaboos by the Muslim Brotherhood was uncovered, Oman has strongly condemned terrorism and radicalism in all its forms. India, given its difficult history with terrorism, also condemns it in the strongest terms.

India and Oman have also regularly engaged in joint military, army and navy exercises. Bilateral trade and investment has been another important area of collaboration between the two countries which has seen major developments in the last few years.

### Recent past

A number of high level visits have taken place between India and Oman in the last few decades. Indian Prime Ministers including Shri Rajiv Gandhi (1985), Shri P. V. Narasimha Rao (1993), Shri. Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998), Dr. Manmohan Singh (2008) and Narendra Modi (2018) have all visited Oman while in office. Indian President Dr. Shankar Dayal Sharma also visited Oman in 1996, during which Oman conferred its highest civilian award on him as a friendly gesture. His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said visited India in 1997. Both countries are signatories to numerous MoUs dealing with hydrocarbon, space technology, fisheries, agriculture, civil aviation, avoidance of double taxation, security, defence and energy. India and Oman have also regularly engaged in joint military, army and navy exercises. Bilateral trade and investment has been another important area of collaboration between the two countries which has seen major developments in the last few years. In 2010, the India-Oman Joint Investment Fund cap was increased from \$100 Million to \$1.5 billion.

India and Oman are both part of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). Oman is also a member of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which is an Indian initiative to gain access to Afghanistan and Central Asia.

On the economic side of things, India has the potential to play an important role in the



Dr. Manmohan Singh with the Sultan of Oman, Mr. Qaboos Bin Said Al-Said in Muscat on November 9, 2008.



Prime Minister meets Sayyid Asa'ad bin Tariq Al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs of Oman in Muscat (February 12, 2018)

Oman Vision 2020 by helping Oman diversify its economy through investments in finance, insurance, and telecommunications. Both countries have made mutual investments worth \$7.5 billion. Oman has also invited Indian companies to invest in special economic zones of Oman, including SEZs in Duqm, Sohar and Salalah, during the February visit of the Indian PM to Oman.

### Historical connect

Archaeological evidence, including paintings and seals on clay objects belonging to the Indus valley civilisation found in Oman, suggest that India and Oman share historical ties that go back 5000 years. Omani traders depended on Gujarat for ship building during the seventh century. When European forces started penetrating the Indian Ocean, India and Oman intended to ward them off together. Oman took the lead in expelling the Portuguese influence in the Gulf, in India and from coastal East Africa in their quest to regain control over the main commercial region in the Indian Ocean.

The ruler of Mysore, Tipu Sultan, maintained diplomatic relations with Sultan bin Ahmad of Oman and both appointed ambassadors to each other's courts. Tipu Sultan sent a diplomatic mission to Oman in 1786. The mission presented jewels, elephants, sandalwood, ivory,

*Prime Minister visits Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque (February 12, 2018)*



India-Oman socio cultural relations depend, to a great extent, on people to people contact. Indians first came into contact with Omanis during the Sumerian and Harappa civilisations.

pepper, and cardamoms to the Imam of Muscat. Tipu Sultan remitted half of the duties levied on Imam's vessels and imported dates, horses and mules as a friendly gesture.

India and Oman also share deep cultural ties. Both countries have preserved their Islamic heritage and contributed to the development of the Arabic language and literature. The liberal Ibadī traditions strike a chord with religious and social tolerance, a value that is cherished by India. There is stark similarity in the zari work and wood carvings of Rajasthan and Oman. The popular Omani turban Mussar and the caps called Kummah that are an important part of the Omani traditional attire are emblazoned with Kashmiri embroidery, and were imported by Oman from India until recent times. Indian films have also been filmed in Omani locales, serving to introduce Arab culture to India and further strengthen the cultural ties between the two countries. Hindi films garner more viewership than Hollywood movies in Oman, which depicts the deep cultural bond shared by the people of both countries.

### Socio Cultural Connect

India-Oman socio cultural relations depend, to a great extent, on people to people contact. Indians first came into contact with Omanis during the Sumerian and Harappa civilisations. The Magan civilisation had trade relations with India where, in all probability, Magan referred to Oman. Even in modern times, Indians and Omanis have regularly interacted with each other. The Khuda Baksh library in Patna (Bihar, India) has books detailing the lives and times of Omani rulers belonging to the family of Sultan Qaboos. Indian trader communities including Khojas from Eastern India settled in Muscat and contributed to the development of Oman. Bhattias of Sind province were one of the earliest communities to settle in Oman. They had so much influence that their unparalleled business skills exponentially enhanced regional trade. Gradually, they also came to wield significant political influence in Oman.

Furthermore, a number of Omanis have lived and studied in India. Sultan Taimur bin Faisal came to India in 1932 and lived in India till he died and was buried in Mumbai. Sultan Saeed bin Taimur and Fahd bin Taimur studied





*The Indian community enthusiastically welcomes the Prime Minister to Muscat, Oman on February 11, 2018.*

in Mayo college in Ajmer, Rajasthan where two halls have been named in honour of Oman and our deep bond with the Omani people. Religious tolerance has been another hallmark of the India-Oman cultural friendship. Hindu temples were allowed to be built in Oman and, by the 1760s, there were four Hindu temples in Muscat alone. PM Modi paid a visit to the 125-year old Shiva temple situated in Muscat during his latest visit to Oman.

### **Thriving Expatriate Culture in Oman**

Currently, there are 800,000 Indian expatriates in Oman and they form 20 percent of the Omani population. A large number of them are engaged in white collar jobs in Oman and contribute to the growth of the Omani economy. Despite introducing the policy of ‘Omanisation’ in 1988, Oman has warmly received Indian expatriate workers as the latter enjoy an image of being hard working and apolitical. Several hundred Indians who have been living in Oman for generations have been granted Omani citizenship. Oman also has one of the best labour laws in the region, guaranteeing swift compensation to foreign workers in case anything goes wrong. In June 2018, Oman announced its policy to grant visas

on arrival to Indians who have a valid visa of US, UK, Canada, Australia, Schengen or Japan.

The Indian community in Oman is organised under the Indian Social Clubs in Muscat, Salalah, Sohar and Sur. The Indian embassy in Oman has played a seminal role in developing cultural ties between the two countries. India opened its consulate in Oman in 1965 followed by the Embassy in 1973. The Embassy organised the first ever Festival of India in Oman in November 2016. It has been organising a series of events and programs showcasing Indian culture in Oman since it hosted a special reception celebrating 70 years of India’s independence in 2017.

Given the historical, cultural and economic depth of the India-Oman bilateral relationship, it is only natural that Oman remains one of India’s foremost allies in the Gulf region and the world at large.

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