

Strengthening People-to-People (P2P) Connectivity through Cultural Exchange: Malaysia-India Bilateral Relations in a Globalised World

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ABSTRACT

The centuries-old relationship between Malaysia and India was initiated and sustained by trade, but the impact of socio-cultural influence was equally dominant in shaping the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural façade of Malaysia. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this cultural exchange has been a vital factor in shaping the history of Malaysia. In recent years, socio-cultural factors have assumed greater importance and significance in the continuity of bilateral relations between Malaysia and India. This paper examines how culture boost ties between Malaysia and India especially through the Indian diaspora, movies, dance, drama and music. It analyses how globalisation has intensified the cultural interactions and connectivity between Malaysia and India.

Keywords: Globalisation, Malaysia-India relations, people-to-people (P2P) connectivity, socio-cultural

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia-India relations have come a long way since diplomatic ties were established in 1957. Traditionally, their diplomatic relationship was shaped by political-nationalism factor, the present ties

are invigorated by economic, trade, and socio-cultural issues in the increasingly interdependent and inter-connected world. Globalisation has also impacted significantly on people-to-people connectivity. Society and people are more closely linked now than ever before. This paper analyses how the process of globalisation has bolstered the cultural relations and connectivity between Malaysia and India.

In the case of Malaysia and India, the movement of people between these two countries has highlighted the role of the

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Indian diaspora in facilitating economic and cultural exchange between them.

GLOBALISATION AND CULTURAL INTERACTION

One of the impacts of globalisation is in the cultural aspect whereby different cultures are increasingly coming into contact with one another. Globalisation has led to an intensification of cross-cultural exchanges which, in turn, is transforming local cultures without necessarily producing cultural uniformity (Singh, 2012). Griffin (2000) who defines culture as a “way of life”, submits that contacts between cultures have led to a myriad of exchanges and adaptations that benefit all parties in food, primary commodities, art and architecture, music and dance, craft and household technology. What is evident today is that globalisation has increased the frequency of cultural exchanges, fostered deeper interactions and enabled more rapid intercultural contacts (Ardic, 2009). The wave of cultural interchanges has prompted some quarters to conclude that we are witnessing the advent of a ‘global culture’ as the local cultures are being submerged under an irresistible tide of Western influence. It is often alleged that culture is becoming more homogeneous worldwide, where soft drinks such as Coca-Cola, jeans, and western fast food are penetrating local markets. Local dialects and languages are fast diminishing in importance and traditional ways of life are being abandoned in favour of the American way of life. The expansion of American values through e “McDonaldization and

Starbuckization” is visible across the globe and have become symbols of cultural and economic globalisation. The cultural dimension of globalisation upholds the homogeneity argument that the world is sharing a more or less singular global culture (Ardic, 2009).

However, the heterogeneity argument of cultural globalisation is premised on the notion that global culture involves an increasing ethnic and cultural plurality and that diversity of modern societies undermines the power of the nation-state from within, weakening its integrative functions and leading to a crisis of legitimacy. Ardic (2009) rejects the idea of homogenisation by highlighting the existence of a “postmodern”, global culture which is fluid, fragmented, hybrid and syncretic. Appadurai (2000) maintains that cultural globalisation is both homogenous and heterogeneous across the globe, but these elements of culture are constantly contextualised, hybridised and reshaped by the peculiarities of different localities. This is clearly the case in Malaysia-India relations where people bond through music, art and culture.

Indian Diaspora

The Indian diaspora in Malaysia has strengthened people-to-people ties and promoted cultural understanding and cooperation between the two nations. Besides the historical linkages, they also foster business and facilitate economic cooperation between both countries.

In general, the term “Indian diaspora” refers to all persons of Indian descent living outside of India and they preserve some major Indian ethno-cultural characteristics (Naujoks, 2009). According to Jain (2012), diaspora can be defined as “ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with countries of origin”. The Indian diaspora is estimated to be the second largest in the world and has a scattered global presence. According to a United Nations survey (2015), Indian diaspora is the largest in the world with 16 million people from India spread across more than 200 countries such as in the Middle East, the United States of America, Malaysia, and South Africa (Times of India, 2016). Different waves of migrations over the years, driven by a variety of reasons, culminated in the dispersion of people from India and the creation of Indian diaspora.

In the case of Malaysia, Indians mostly emigrated as kangani and voluntary labourers to work on rubber, tea, and oil-palm plantations in British colonies. Indians who came during the British colonial era to Malaysia, then known as the Malaya, and other parts of British colonies are known as “Old Indian Diaspora”. The “New Indian Diaspora” however, includes engineers, doctors, and IT professionals who are part of the global citizens who willingly travel to countries in search of better economic opportunities (Jain, 2012). The “New Indian Diaspora” is linked to the e process of globalisation. This

transnational engagement of people, riding on the processes of globalisation, has been reinforced through global networks of families, friends and businesses, which are symbiotic and which enable the exchange of shared ideas of cultural, social and economic interests. This flow of “New Indian Diaspora” started after the Indian independence and gathered momentum with the emigration of IT professionals in the 1990s. The diaspora communities that live outside the boundaries of their countries, but maintain links with their country of origin are progressively getting larger and stronger. Globalisation and the concomitant expansion of telecommunications have made the world smaller and partly contributed to this development. The media, telecommunications and other technologies have become so extensive and pervasive to the extent that they have dramatically elevated human interactions to entirely new and unprecedented levels. Given the increasing numbers of Indians residing all over the world, the Indian government cannot ignore their presence and has therefore devised various schemes to protect and safeguard the interests of the overseas Indians.

Among the programmes that Malaysia has benefitted from is the ‘Know India Programme’ (KIP) which is a three-week orientation programme for youths (between the age of 18-26 years) of Indian origin to introduce India to them and promote awareness on different facets of Indian life. This programme provides a unique forum for students and young professionals

of Indian origin to visit India, share their views and bond closely with contemporary India (Education Wing Coordinator). After completing KIP, the Indian Diaspora Youths become Youth Ambassadors of art, culture, and heritage. More than 75-80 Malaysian students/youths participated in this programme in 2016 (MIC, 2016).

Another programme in place is the 'Overseas Indian Youth Club' (OIYC) whose aim is to keep the overseas Indian youths in touch with the developments in India and create a sense of belonging towards their country of origin. The core membership of OIYC is youths who had participated in the KIP (Education Wing Coordinator). In an effort to create stronger affinity and networking with the diaspora youths with their ancestral motherland, the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) supported the opening of Overseas Indian Youth Club in the following places:- (a) Consulate General of India Durban, South Africa, (b) High Commission of India in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, (c) High Commission of India Colombo, Sri Lanka, (d) High Commission of India Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago and (e) High Commission of India, Port Louis, Mauritius. Funds have also been provided to the Consulate General of India, Melbourne and High Commissions of India for launching Overseas Indian Youth Clubs.

Malaysia has also established its own International Indian Youth Games (IYIG). This tournament was initiated by Malaysia in 2010 and is being conducted annually. This tournament was established with the

objective of fostering brotherhood through sports as well as providing an international platform for Indian youths to excel in sports. It concentrates on strengthening the Indian communities from different nations and providing avenues for social interactions. The IYIG first started as a sporting event between one particular state from India i.e. Tamil Nadu and Malaysia. Given the strong response, other countries were also invited to participate. This tournament attracted six nations: Singapore, India, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Maldives, and France. Malaysia has been the host for this tournament since its inception in 2010. Among the sports included in this tournament are football, karate, swimming, badminton, bowling, squash, and tennis. According to the organiser of this event, such sports activities have forged closer interactions among the people of both nations. In 2016, a football competition was held and countries like India participated in the event (MIC, 2016).

There is also a day celebrated by the Indian diaspora called Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD). *Pravasi* literally means non-resident or overseas Indians, *Bharatiya* means India and *Divas* means day. Hence, *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas* (PBD) is regarded as 'Non-resident Indian Day'. This event is a flagship event held with the cooperation of the Indian government, specifically the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), the Confederation of Indian Industry(CII) and the Ministry of Development of the North

Eastern Region of India. It is an annual affair since January 2003 with a view to connect India to its vast Indian diaspora and facilitate in sharing of their knowledge, expertise and skills on a common platform. The PBD is celebrated on 9th January every year to mark the contribution of the Overseas Indian community to the development of India (JNU Library Resource Centre). In 2016, the convention was held in New Delhi, India which provided a forum for the overseas Indian community to engage with the government and people of the land of their ancestors for mutually beneficial activities (Mahatma Gandhi the greatest Pravasi, 1915). These conventions are useful for networking among the overseas Indian community residing in various parts of the world and sharing their experiences in various fields. The event also provides a forum for discussing key issues concerning the Indian diaspora. Malaysia has been an active participant at these meetings with a large annual delegation of representatives from the government and private sectors. A key outcome of this forum is that the Indian Government has permitted to its diaspora i.e. Persons of Indian Origin (PIO) now holding foreign passports (such as Malaysians) to apply for a PIO or Overseas Citizens of India (OCI) card if they themselves had earlier held an Indian Passport or their parents or grandparents had been born in India. Therefore, India recognises its diaspora as those having emigrated from the Indian territory up to four generations ago. However, this policy does not include

descendants of 5th or more generation down the line (Singh, 2012).

Governments of many developing countries together with international agencies are now highlighting the diaspora's potential for their socio-economic development. Maintaining the bonds between India and the people of Indian origin is an emotional need for Indians in Malaysia. Many Malaysian Indians, in particular, the Tamilians, Malayalees, Telugus, Sikhs, and Indian Muslims, still maintain strong family linkages with their relatives in India. Besides developing strong social bonding, it has also provided economic advantages for both countries.

Indian Movies and Music/Dance

The 'Shahrukh Khan, Salman Khan and Amir Khan' fever in the late 1990s was a new phenomenon among Malaysians, especially the Malay community who thronged the theatres to watch Hindi movies. This was unprecedented and there was no turning back after that. Historically, Ramayana and Mahabharatha have inspired the local Malay literary works (Gopinath, 2011). In fact, Ramayana and Mahabharatha are no longer considered as exclusively of Indian cultural origin given the process of diffusion, adaptation and localisation over the last two thousand years. The Malay culture exercised enough influence to make modifications to inspire the emergence of *wayang kulit*. The similarities between the art form in these two countries underscore the popularity of Indian music and dance in

Malaysia (Naidu, 2011). India's classical dances have been assimilated into the Malaysian culture and are no longer solely associated with India. There are many professional dance academies established in Malaysia like Sutra Academy which offers classes in Indian classical dances such as Bharata Natyam and Odissi. Ramli Ibrahim, the director of the Sutra Academy, is Malaysia's cultural icon and legendary dance choreographer of the Indian classical dance. He was the first Malaysian to be bestowed with the prestigious Sangeet Natak Academic Award in 2011 by the President of India. The award is recognised as the highest national honour conferred on performing artists, teachers and scholars of performing arts in India. Thus, the existence of traditional dancers like Ramli Ibrahim, who have gained international repute and acclaim, only shows the strong cultural links between India and Malaysia.

Likewise, Tamil and Hindi movies (either in Tamil or Hindi) are hugely popular among all the ethnic groups in Malaysia. In fact, Hindi movies have been a source inspiration and lifestyle for many Malaysians. Furthermore, Malaysia is among the most sought after venue for filming Tamil and Hindi movies because of its cheaper cost. The country has been featured numerous times in high profile Tamil and Hindi films. Moreover, some of the high-profile movies are released almost the same day and time as in India. The presence of many Indian movie heroes and heroines in Malaysia to promote their movies, as well as the film fair festivals and award

shows have all built closer ties between the people of the two countries. For example, an India-Malaysia Bollywood album was launched in 2013 aimed particularly at reviving interest among Indian tourists to Malaysia. Thus, there is a cultural amalgamation through Bollywood (Sinroja, 2013). Furthermore, with the MoU signed between the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry's (FICCI) Entertainment Committee and Malaysia's Multimedia Development Corporation (MDEC) in 2010, there has been a significant collaboration in broadcasting and digital content. One such collaboration is the annual exhibitions called 'Cinemascape' to promote cinema tourism. 'Cinemascape' is an annual event where leading Indian film producers meet and explore business opportunities or locations for filming together with the international tourism boards/organisations from India and other countries (Malaysia Tourism Report, 2012). Tourism Malaysia participates in this event to showcase Malaysia's attractions as well as to provide information and guidelines on filming in Malaysia. Potential Indian film producers are targeted to make Malaysia as their filming destination. Incentives such as 30 per cent discount are offered to production houses - besides facilitating all ground-level arrangements such as finding locations, getting permits, and providing transport. This annual event has proven to be successful for Malaysia as more Indian film producers view Malaysia as one of their favourite destinations. For instance, in 2016, Tourism Malaysia together with AirTravel

Enterprises India Limited (ATE), introduced 'Kabali' movie package deal as one of the promotional strategies to draw Indian travellers to Malaysia (Chandarvathani, 2016). The movie starring the famous South Indian actor, Rajinikanth, was filmed in Kuala Lumpur and a few other cities in Malaysia. It had indirectly promoted Malaysia worldwide as an attractive filming and tourist destination.

Another important landmark that shows the seriousness in Malaysia-India relations is the establishment of the Indian Cultural Centre (ICC) in Kuala Lumpur.

Indian Cultural Centre (ICC)

The ICC was inaugurated in Malaysia in 2010 to promote Indian culture in Malaysia. The ICC was an outcome of many discussions, deliberations and collaborations between Malaysian academicians, NGOs and the Indian High Commission. The establishment of this centre is viewed as an important initiative of the Government of India (GOI) in keeping with the high priority it attaches to its bilateral relations with Malaysia. Another goal of ICC is to give India's cultural presence in Malaysia a major fillip. The ICC is under the Cultural Wing of the High Commission of India in Malaysia and administered by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), an autonomous organisation of the Ministry of External Affairs of India, which promotes awareness and appreciation of India's composite culture and heritage abroad.

The ICC has an interesting range of cultural services and performances. In

2016, there were more than 400 students enrolled for various classes offered in ICC such as yoga, kathak dance, Hindi classes and traditional musical instruments such as *tabla*. A majority of the students enrolled in these classes are Malaysians with a small number from the diplomatic fraternity. There are also corporate leaders learn Hindi here so that they can communicate with their Indian staff more effectively. The ICC also places special emphasis on working with Malaysia's local cultural organisations such as the Temple of Fine Arts in promoting Indian culture. It is also used as a venue for music recitals, dance performances, art, craft and photography exhibitions, movie screenings, plays, lectures, lecture demonstrations, book readings, seminars and workshops attracting talents from India and Malaysia. ICC also plays a role as complementing and supplementing the efforts made by cultural organisations in Malaysia to promote Indian art and culture. It also organises symposia, seminars and social gatherings during which the Indian cultural heritage is always on display. Besides that, the Centre also places special emphasis on working with local cultural organisations in promoting Indian culture. The ICC conducts outreach programmes in the form of workshops, training sessions, seminars and plays with local institutions to promote Indian culture at the grass root levels. The ICC's work is looked upon as complementing and supplementing the efforts already being made by local cultural organisations in Malaysia. A core group called the 'Friends of Indian Cultural

Centre' was created comprising eminent personalities in the field of art, music, dance, literature, media and academia, as well as patrons of the arts. This core group also endeavours to reach out to a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic audience.

In short, ICC promotes India in its own way and serves as a bridge in people-to-people connectivity. Given that ICC was only established four years ago, it is an important 'one-stop-centre' in strengthening people-to-people connectivity in promoting Indian culture and traditions. These initiatives are taken to bridge the cultural disparities between the two countries and to forge a stronger understanding and appreciation between them.

ENHANCING PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE CONNECTIVITY

Interactions between the people of the two countries in areas such as tourism, education, culture, entertainment are undeniably important factors that have contributed to the enhancement of bilateral relations between the two countries.

Although the social and cultural aspects between Malaysia and India appear to be moving in the right direction, there are pockets of concern that pose challenges. Among them is the need to improve people-to-people connectivity by accepting Malaysia's culture in totality. It is important for India to understand that the Malays and Chinese account for 90% of the Malaysian population. Hence, there could be collaboration between Malaysia's

cultural centres such as Istana Budaya and ICC to capture the holistic dimension of Malaysia's multi-cultural mosaic. According to Moses (2012), the media also has to collaborate by providing editorial space on Malaysia-India collaboration so that people would better understand and appreciate the commonalities present in both cultures. Malaysia has its official news reporters based in New Delhi to provide updates on India.

Another area of improvement is the Visa on Arrival (VoA) that the Malaysian government introduced. In 2006, in conjunction with VMY 2007, this VoA was offered to visitors from eight countries including India. One of the reasons Malaysia introduced the VoA was also to attract the business community. Although some 80,000 VoA were approved for India - only 30,000 Indian tourists returned home. Many Indian tourists abused this VoA by overstaying in Malaysia, becoming involved in drug cases and crimes. Hence, this VoA facility was revoked in 2010 (Mun, 2013). However, since 2014, Malaysia relaxed visa restrictions for tourists from India traveling to Malaysia through a third country, namely Singapore and Thailand. A one-week stay is granted to these tourists. The Malaysian High Commission in India had also increased visa application fees from INR1000 to INR3000 ever since it outsourced visa processing to a private company; that had affected tourist arrivals to Malaysia. Whether the increase in visa processing fee would have a big impact on tourist arrivals to Malaysia is yet to be seen.

The last area for improvement is the role of the Indian Cultural Centre (ICC) in Malaysia. Apart from conducting dance and musical classes, ICC needs to expand its role and organise inter-cultural talks and programmes. This could reduce the knowledge gap between Malaysia and India. At present, many Indian expatriates and the Indian community in Malaysia participate in ICC activities. This could be improved by attracting other communities such as the Malays and Chinese, so that it creates synergy between the people of Malaysia and India. Efforts taken by companies like Agenda Surya Communications to organise annual fairs such as Global Indian Shopping Festival, as well as facilitating Indian traders to sell their products such as textiles, food, and Indian crafts to the Malaysian market are welcomed. Agenda Suria Communications serves as a one-stop centre for shoppers to explore India. Traders from various states in India such as Kashmir, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Kerala and Punjab are invited to sell their products directly to the people in Malaysia. This event has proven to be a success and has been conducted since 2002. In 2016, this event was organised in Penang, Perak, Kuala Lumpur and Johor. Such events besides showcasing the Indian fashion and culture also benefit Indian traders.

CONCLUSION

Malaysia-India relations have been premised on strong historical, social, and cultural linkages and globalisation has not undermined that. Both governments

have used the cultural dimension to promote greater connectivity and people-to-people contacts through travel and tourism. Currently, Malaysia and India are seeking to further expand and deepen their bilateral relations. With their shared history and cultural connections, Malaysia has expressed its determination to strengthen its relationship with India through broader cooperation and engagement. However, it is evident that the process of globalisation has greatly fostered the interconnectedness of people and cultures. The reduction in the costs of air travel and increase in the frequency of flights have boosted this physical connectivity. A rich network of personal relationships through travel, study, work, business, sports, and cultural exchanges have opened the doors to forge better understanding and enhance deeper cultural appreciation between the two countries. In the context of Malaysia-India bilateral relations, this has been a catalyst in fostering closer relations. People-to-people contact between Malaysia and India are actually limited to Malaysian Tamilians who visit their relatives or temples in India. There are not many people-to-people collaborations such as student exchanges and media linkages. Therefore, the government must promote this form of collaboration. For example, although Malaysia and India cooperate on education, they should not limit it to exchange visits and twinning programmes. Instead, there should be joint projects between universities. Moreover, at present Malaysia only recognises some degrees from selected universities in India.

This could be improved in time to come. Similarly, cooperation in cultural activities helps in promoting mutual respect and appreciation for one another. Likewise, more initiatives should be launched in the tourism and movie industries focusing on viable programmes that encourage greater convergence of interests. Given that the Malaysian Immigration office in India approves an average of 450,000 visas yearly, one could only anticipate that people-to-people relations between Malaysia and India would get stronger and closer. Moreover, Malaysia has one of the largest number of Persons of Indian Origin (PIO) in the world, about 2 million (about 8% of Malaysia's population). Although the majority are Tamil speaking (over 80%), there is a significant percentage of Telegus, Malayalees, and Punjabis. The Tamilians in particular, serve as an important bridge between Malaysia and Tamil Nadu, and India as a whole. Hence, the relationship between Malaysia and India is very strong, and it could be argued that their ancient and historical linkages serve as important factors driving the bilateral relationship in the decades ahead.

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