

INDIA – MALAYSIA

Bilateral Relations in the 21st Century

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Dr. I. Parvin Banu

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INDIA AND MALAYSIA: CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL EXCHANGE

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Abstract---India and Malaysia have enjoyed a dynamic and multifaceted relationship that is deeply rooted in shared historical, cultural, and civilization connections. Among the various pillars of bilateral cooperation, cultural and educational exchanges occupy a central and enduring position. These exchanges are not only a reflection of their age-old ties but also a means of fostering people-to-people contacts in the 21st century. The presence of a significant Indian Diaspora in Malaysia comprising mostly Tamils has contributed to the seamless integration of Indian culture into Malaysian society. This has led to the preservation and celebration of Indian traditions, languages, festivals, and arts within Malaysia's multicultural landscape. In the realm of education, both countries have taken active steps to deepen cooperation through government scholarships, institutional tie-ups, academic exchange programs, and faculty collaborations. Malaysian students continue to pursue education in India, particularly in fields like medicine, engineering, and the humanities. Conversely, Indian institutions and cultural centers have played a pivotal role in promoting Malaysian culture and language in India. Cultural centers like the Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Indian Cultural Centre in Kuala Lumpur and literary collaborations further enrich this bilateral dialogue.

1. Introduction

India and Malaysia share a longstanding relationship rooted in deep historical, cultural, and educational ties. These connections trace back centuries through ancient maritime trade, religious exchanges, and migration, especially with the significant Indian Diaspora in Malaysia. The cultural interaction between the two nations is reflected in language, cuisine, festivals, and religious practices, showcasing a harmonious blend of traditions that continue to influence Malaysian society. In recent decades, bilateral efforts have focused on strengthening educational cooperation through academic partnerships, student exchange programs, and mutual recognition of qualifications. Institutions from both countries are increasingly collaborating in research, technical training, and digital learning, fostering people-to-people connections and mutual understanding. As both

nations navigate a globalized world, cultural and educational exchanges remain vital pillars of their diplomatic engagement, contributing not only to shared growth but also to regional peace and cooperation.

2. Cultural and Educational Exchange

I. Current Landscape of Educational Exchange

1. Student Mobility:

- Thousands of Malaysian students of Indian origin, as well as ethnic Malays and Chinese, travel to India annually to pursue degrees in medicine, dentistry, engineering, and pharmacy.
- India remains a popular destination due to quality education and cost-effectiveness.
- Similarly, Indian students are now increasingly enrolling in Malaysian universities offering courses in business, hospitality, and information technology.

2. Institutional Collaboration:

- Several MoUs have been signed between Indian and Malaysian universities for faculty exchange, dual-degree programs, and joint research projects.
- Institutions like the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), and Universiti Malaya collaborate on science, technology, and humanities research.

3. Scholarships and Government Programs:

- The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) offers scholarships to Malaysian students for undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral programs in Indian universities.
- Similarly, Malaysia provides scholarships under its Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme (MTCP) for Indian professionals and students.

4. Digital Learning and ICT Use:

- Both countries are increasingly using digital platforms and ICT tools for distance education and online courses.
- Indian platforms like SWAYAM and NPTEL have Malaysian users, while Indian students can access courses through Malaysia's Open University and related e-learning initiatives.

3. Current Landscape of Cultural Exchange

1. Historical Background of Cultural Ties

India and Malaysia share deep-rooted historical and cultural ties, with influences evident in language, religion, and architecture, particularly due to trade routes and the significant Indian diaspora in Malaysia. These connections, dating back centuries, were strengthened during the colonial era and continue to evolve through diplomatic and cultural exchanges.

Cultural Influences:

❖ Language:

Elements of Sanskrit and other Indian languages are present in Malay vocabulary and place names, indicating historical linguistic exchange.

❖ Religion

Indian religions, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism, were introduced to the region, with historical temples and artistic representations reflecting these influences.

❖ Architecture:

Indian architectural styles can be seen in some structures in Malaysia, further highlighting the historical connections.

Contemporary Relations:

❖ Indian Diaspora:

Malaysia is home to a large Indian diaspora, which plays a vital role in strengthening cultural and people-to-people ties.

❖ Cultural Exchange:

Both countries actively promote cultural exchange programs, including festivals, art exhibitions, and educational initiatives, to further strengthen their bond.

❖ Diplomatic Engagement:

High-level visits and agreements between the two countries have led to enhanced strategic partnerships and cooperation in various fields.

❖ People-to-People Connections:

Initiatives like establishing Ayurveda and Tiruvalluvar chairs at Malaysian universities aim to promote Indian culture and traditions.

2. Indian Diaspora in Malaysia

The Indian diaspora in Malaysia is a significant community, representing roughly 8% of the country's population, or about 2.75 million people. Malaysia has the third-largest Indian diaspora population in the world. Majorities are of Tamil origin, but there are also Telugus, Malayalees, Punjabis, and Sindhis. The Indian community has contributed to Malaysian politics, education, business, and entertainment. Cultural organizations and temples play an important role in preserving Indian heritage in Malaysia.

The Indian diaspora is diverse, comprising:

- Tamils (majority) – Brought during colonial rule, they form the cultural backbone of the Indian-Malaysian identity.
- Telugus and Malayalees – Many arrived as traders or civil servants and contributed to commerce and education.
- Punjabis and Sindhis – Often engaged in business, security services, and religious leadership.

3. Shared Celebrations and Festivals

Major Indian festivals such as Deepavali, Thaipusam, Pongal, and Navaratri are widely celebrated in Malaysia.

- Deepavali (Festival of Lights): A national holiday celebrated with open houses, temple visits, and cultural performances.
- Thaipusam: Celebrated by Tamil Hindus at the Batu Caves; attracts thousands of devotees and tourists. Kavadi bearers fulfill vows in a spiritually intense procession.
- Pongal: Harvest festival with cultural programs in schools and community centers.
- Navaratri and Vishu are celebrated regionally within their linguistic communities.

These festivals foster inter-ethnic unity, invite participation from other Malaysians and are often supported by local governments and media broadcasts. These festivals promote tourism and showcase Indian traditions to Malaysians of all backgrounds.

4. Educational and Cultural Exchange Programs

- Several Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) have been signed between Indian and Malaysian universities to encourage student exchange and joint research. Student

exchange programs allow Malaysian youth to study Indian languages, Ayurveda, classical music, and dance.

- Indian Cultural Centres (Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Indian Cultural Centre) in Kuala Lumpur and Penang offer free classes in Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Hindustani music, Indian classical dance, Hindi classes, yoga, and meditation.
- Scholarships and fellowships are offered by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) to Malaysian students.
- Joint cultural seminars and academic conferences between institutions such as University of Malaya and Jawaharlal Nehru University foster intellectual engagement on shared heritage, philosophy, and contemporary issues.

5. Influence of Indian Cinema and Media

Indian cinema is a powerful cultural force in Malaysia, especially Tamil and Hindi films are extremely popular in Malaysia. Many Indian film stars have fan clubs in Malaysia. Indian actors such as Rajinikanth, Vijay, Shah Rukh Khan, and Aishwarya Rai are household names. In recent years, there have been collaborative film productions between Indian and Malaysian filmmakers. Malaysian-born Indian artists like Jaclyn Victor and Reshmonu have gained international fame, often blending Indian and Malaysian musical styles.

Tamil films from Kollywood dominate the Indian-Malaysian media space. Indian channels like Sun TV, Zee TV, and Star Vijay are widely available through satellite and online platforms.

6. Cuisine and Cultural Identity

- Indian cuisine in Malaysia has become a part of the national food culture such as Roti canai, nasi lemak with curry, murtabak, nasi kandar, teh tarik and banana leaf meals are popular among all ethnicities. Indian-Muslim restaurants (mamak stalls) are cultural institutions, especially in urban centers. Banana leaf restaurants are found in every major Malaysian city.
- Traditional Indian sweets like laddu, jalebi, and murukku are in high demand during Deepavali and other festivals.
- Tamil is taught in schools and broadcast on Malaysian media.
- Indian dance schools across Malaysia teach Bharatanatyam, Kathak, and Odissi.

➤ Cultural events like Malaysia Kalai Ulagam Awards and Tamlar Thiruvizha honor Indian artists and performers. Cultural identity is preserved through language (Tamil, Telugu, Punjabi) traditional dress and rituals.

7. Government and Institutional Support

Annual events such as Festival of India in Malaysia was a year-long series of events including dance, music, yoga, film screenings and academic talks and Malaysia-India Cultural Week are held. Indian PM Narendra Modi's visits emphasized cultural diplomacy as part of the Act East Policy. The High Commission of India regularly hosts exhibitions, food festivals, yoga camps, and lectures to connect with the Indian community and Malaysians interested in Indian culture.

Malaysia supports Indian temples and schools under its multi-religious, multicultural national policy. Indian and Malaysian officials meet annually to review bilateral cultural exchange plans under the framework of the Cultural Cooperation Agreement.

4. India-Malaysia Institutional Initiatives

- ❖ CECA (Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement): Supports education, professional services, and mobility of skilled labor.
- ❖ India-Malaysia CEOs Forum and Higher Education Summits: Promote policy dialogue and institutional linkages.
- ❖ ASEAN-India University Network: Encourages multilateral academic cooperation with Malaysia as an active participant.

5. Conclusion

The cultural and educational exchange between India and Malaysia continues to serve as a cornerstone of their strong bilateral relations. Collaborative initiatives in arts, language, higher education, and digital learning have opened new avenues for intellectual and cultural growth. With the increasing involvement of academic institutions, government bodies, and civil society, both nations are building a knowledge-based partnership that transcends borders. As global challenges demand greater cooperation, the deepening of cultural and educational ties between India and Malaysia will play a pivotal role in shaping a more inclusive, connected, and resilient future for both countries and the region as a whole. India and Malaysia's cultural connections continue to thrive in the 21st century, serving as a bridge between their peoples. Both countries have cultivated a rich

and multidimensional cultural relationship that transcends historical legacies. These ties go beyond history, resonating through vibrant festivals, artistic collaboration, shared values, media, education, cuisine, and strong Diaspora engagement; the two countries continue to inspire each other in shaping a culturally inclusive and globally connected future and a thriving Diaspora.

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