

INDIA – MALAYSIA

Bilateral Relations in the 21st Century

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Dr. I. Parvin Banu

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First Edition

Chief Editors

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**AN OVERVIEW ON INDIA-MALAYSIA’S CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL
CONNECT – A COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP**

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Abstract---India established diplomatic relations with the Federation of Malaya, the predecessor state of Malaysia, in 1957. Since then, the two nations have enjoyed a traditionally friendly relationship, marked by regular high-level exchanges between their leaders. In 2022, India and Malaysia celebrated 65 years of diplomatic relations. Economic and commercial ties form the backbone of their bilateral partnership, with the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA), covering goods, services, and investment, coming into effect on 1 July 2011. India-Malaysia defense relations have also grown steadily over the years. Initially focused on military training, these ties have expanded to include the supply of defense equipment and enhanced security dialogues. The 1993 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Defense Cooperation serves as the foundation of their current defense relationship, paving the way for joint ventures, development projects, procurement, logistical support, and training. A significant number of Malaysian students have historically studied in India, particularly in the medical field, with a large percentage of doctors in Malaysia receiving their education in India. Organizations like the Association of Indian Universities (AIU) and the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) work towards mutual recognition of educational qualifications. Expanding cultural and educational ties can enhance mutual understanding and promote people-to-people connections. Religious festivals and traditions are another focus area depicting cultural attributes. Hence the present study focuses on over viewing the Educational and Cultural partnership that exist between the two countries - India and Malaysia.

Keywords---Educational, Cultural, India Malaysia, ICCR, Diaspora.

1. Introduction

India established diplomatic relations with the Federation of Malaya, the predecessor state of Malaysia, in 1957. Since then, the two nations have enjoyed a traditionally

friendly relationship, marked by regular high-level exchanges between their leaders. In 2022, India and Malaysia celebrated 65 years of diplomatic relations. Economic and commercial ties form the backbone of their bilateral partnership, with the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA), covering goods, services, and investment, coming into effect on 1 July 2011. India-Malaysia defense relations have also grown steadily over the years. Initially focused on military training, these ties have expanded to include the supply of defense equipment and enhanced security dialogues. The 1993 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Defense Cooperation serves as the foundation of their current defense relationship, paving the way for joint ventures, development projects, procurement, logistical support, and training. A significant number of Malaysian students have historically studied in India, particularly in the medical field, with a large percentage of doctors in Malaysia receiving their education in India.

2. Education Relations

Education has been a vital component of India-Malaysia relations. Historically, many Malaysian students pursued higher education in Indian institutions, particularly in medicine. For Example, between the 1960s and 1970s, around 30,000 Malaysian students studied in India, with over 30% of Malaysia's doctors having been trained there. This trend continues today, with institutions like the Manipal Global Education Group establishing campuses in Malaysia to meet the educational needs of Malaysian students.

3. Cultural and Social Issues

The Indira Gandhi Centre for Indian Culture (IGCIC) at Kuala Lumpur is the Cultural Centre of Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). It was formally inaugurated on 10th February 2010 by His Excellency Dr. Karan Singh, then Hon'ble President of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, along with Datuk Dr. S. Subramaniam, Minister of Human Resources, and Malaysia. The Indian Cultural Centre has now renamed as Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Indian Cultural Centre (NSCBICC). The renaming of the Centre was done under item no.29 of the Joint Statement issued on the occasion of the visit of the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi to Malaysia from 21st to 23rd November 2015. The NSCBICC is the Cultural Wing of the High Commission of India in Kuala Lumpur. The Centre promotes bilateral cultural linkages between India and Malaysia, by organizing cultural programmes, cultural seminars, workshops and trainings engaging India based Gurus professionals and trainers for Yoga, Hindi, Indian Classical Carnatic Vocal Music and Indian Dances such as Kathak and Manipuri. In

addition to hosting leading artistes and cultural troupes from India, the Centre relies on the large reservoir of accomplished Malaysian exponents of Indian art forms, many of whom have received formal training in India. Promoting cultural exchange programs and initiatives to support the Indian Diaspora in Malaysia can enhance mutual understanding and cooperation.

4. Cultural and Educational Exchanges

Promoting Cultural Understanding: Increasing cultural exchanges through festivals, arts and education programs can build a stronger foundation for bilateral relations. Educational Collaborations: Student exchange programs and academic partnerships can strengthen ties and develop long-term relationships. Initiatives like the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Program (ITEC) and the Malaysian Technical Cooperation Program (MTCP) highlight these efforts. Students of Omega traveled to Malaysia and Singapore as part of the Youth Exchange Program in Feb 2019, aimed towards Global Understanding of Sustainable Development (GUSD).

The youth exchange program promoted youth participation at the International level through various measures, using Exchange program, Interstate/country cultural forum, Inter Country Youth forums and policy formulation to raise the voice of the youth and experience the principle of “Be Seen, Be Heard”. It helped them to create peace talks, understand civic responsibility, cultural understanding, and policy exchange and also helped them work on their management skills, communication through a rich and diverse experience coupled with field visits and more. It created a wide opportunity for youth to develop, engage with societal issues and be part of a new generation as a change agent.

5. Education & Cultural Cooperation

About 2000 Indian students are studying in Malaysia, while an estimated 3000 Malaysian students are studying in India. An MOU on Higher Education was signed on 20 January 2010 during Prime Minister Dato' Seri Najib's visit to India. India offers about 30 slots under ITEC and 25 under the Colombo Plan. A new Indian Cultural Centre (ICC) has been opened in Kuala Lumpur on 10 February 2010 to promote cultural relations with Malaysia. A Cultural Exchange Programme (CEP) for 2010-13 was signed on 27 October 2010 during the visit of Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh to Malaysia. People-to-People exchanges have also expanded with the signing of the Cultural Exchange Programme for 2010 – 2013. The Parliament of India has constituted an India-Malaysia Parliamentary Friendship Group headed by Shri Lalji Tandon MP as its President in

October 2011. The 150th birth anniversary of Rabindarnath Tagore was also marked in May – June 2011 by several events in Malaysia.

Essentially, cultural diplomacy is about the interactions that take place between nations, in as diverse facets as showcasing dance, drama, art, literature, music, and food habits that help understand and share the unique identity that each nation possesses. It is, in other words, actions that are “based on and utilize the exchange of ideas, values, traditions and other aspects of culture or identity, whether to strengthen relationships, enhance socio-cultural cooperation, and promote national interests and beyond”. Malaysia-India cultural ties reflect the above definition in its entirety as it impinges on its ancientness and showcases continuity. This is because of the realization that culture and its attributes serve as the best means of cementing people-to-people ties that help consolidate the societal bond.

6. Cultural Diplomacy – Post-Independent Years

The post-independent cultural diplomacy got a facelift after various foreign policy measures were taken in the 1990s and mid-2014 in the form of the ‘Look-East/Act-East’ policy that pushed for revitalizing the existing cultural connections. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) as a nodal agency in New Delhi under the Ministry of External Affairs has taken numerous steps to promote bilateral cultural ties. A dedicated Indian Cultural Centre, namely the Indira Gandhi Centre for Indian Culture (IGCIC) was inaugurated in Kuala Lumpur in February 2010 and conducts classes in classical Indian music, dance, yoga, Hindi language teaching etc. The Friends of Indian Culture Centre (FICC) has been created to advise the centre in outreach programmes. In November 2015, the IGCIC was renamed the Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Indian Culture Centre (NSCBICC) by the Indian Prime Minister during his visit to Malaysia. In October 2022, ICCR organized the 6th International Ramayana festival in New Delhi which included a delegation from Malaysia as well.

In 2017, an MOU was signed between the Association of Indian Universities (AIU) and the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) on mutual recognition of equivalence of educational qualifications. Also, financial assistance is being provided to Malaysian Indian students on an annual basis under the Indian Scholarship and Trust Fund (ISTF), besides setting up of Indian schools and the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) campus in Malaysia. Religious festivals and traditions are another focus area depicting cultural attributes. The thousands of temples constructed all across Malaysia for various Tamil

Deities not only depict the preservation of religious value systems but also the South Indian traditional beliefs that temples fulfil their identity. As noted above, the great Maha Mariamman Temple in Kuala Lumpur is one such popular temple in the country. The Tamil population in Malaysia has been instrumental in promoting such cultural attributes as revealed in the celebration of Deepavali and Thaipusam as major festivals and minor ones such as Ganesh Chaturthi, Maha Shivratri, and Baisakhi, all of which are traditional festivals of Tamil community in South India as well. Such celebration tells us the extent to which they are preserved and nourished by the Malaysian Tamils.

In August 2022, as part of 75 years of celebration of Indian independence (Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav), the Indian Prime Minister announced the “Panch Pran” or five pledges to take forward India’s ‘proud legacy’ in which nine critical themes were identified that included India’s cultural pride. As a continuation of this, the Indian High Commission in Malaysia organized several cultural events that included 75 yoga events across Malaysia in collaboration with other institutions like schools, yoga clubs, business establishments and universities in September 2022. A special musical event “India-Malaysia@65: Musical Extravaganza” was organized by the High Commission of India in Kuala Lumpur in collaboration with the Temple of Fine Arts (TFA) to commemorate the 65 years of the establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations on 10th February 2023. Celebrating sporting links between the two nations, Golf Games were organized on 10th March 2023.

7. Conclusion

Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim’s visit to India is an important opportunity to deepen the bilateral relationship between Malaysia and India. By focusing on key areas such as trade, investment, defense, and cultural exchanges, the visit aims to build on the existing strategic partnership and explore new opportunities for collaboration. This engagement not only highlights the strong historical and socio-cultural connections but also sets the stage for a future of enhanced cooperation and mutual growth.

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About the Book

This edited volume is the outcome of the One-Day International Conference on “India–Malaysia Bilateral Relations: Strengthening Economic, Strategic and Cultural Ties in the 21st Century” organized on 20th August 2025 by the PG & Research Department of International Business, Sri Ramakrishna College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore.

India and Malaysia share a rich legacy of trade, culture, and cooperation that has grown over centuries. In the 21st century, this relationship has expanded beyond traditional linkages to encompass strategic partnerships in economic development, maritime security, technology, higher education, sustainable development and people-to-people diplomacy.

The chapters in this volume bring together contributions from academicians, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners across disciplines. They explore key themes such as economic diplomacy, regional security in the Indo-Pacific, investment and connectivity, tourism and cultural diplomacy and the role of bilateral engagement in strengthening regional stability.

By combining theoretical insights with practical perspectives, the book provides a comprehensive analysis of India–Malaysia relations and highlights future pathways for deeper collaboration. It serves as a valuable resource for students, scholars, diplomats, business professionals and readers keen to understand the evolving dynamics of international relations in Asia.

At its core, this book underscores the vision of fostering mutual trust, shared growth and sustainable partnerships between India and Malaysia in the decades to come.



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