



INDO – SAUDI TIES: AN ANALYSIS OF CULTURE, BUSINESS AND MUTUAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Indo-Saudi ties signify many dimensions of two way relationship between the largest democracy (India) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) which is known as the centre of Islam. Apart from many odds, India and KSA have been maintaining friendly, considerate and progressive ties on every front. Though the bilateral bonds are age-old, the actual diplomatic relations started soon after India became free and independent in 1947. Crucial ties between the two countries have gradually strengthened in the area of trade, cultural exchange, education, technology and what not. Millions of Indians (irrespective of religion, region, caste, race) are employed in India, and they have been an important source of foreign income compared to any country. Saudi Arabia plays a key role is the oil supply to India. On the other hand, India is one of the top seven trading partners and the fifth biggest investor in KSA.

IndexTerms - Culture, ties, diplomatic, education, technology, trade

I. BACKGROUND

India and Saudi Arabia have been maintaining cordial and diplomatic ties since 1947. It has been strategically followed up from time to time in order to strengthen the bond keeping current situations in view. KSA took initiative when Saudi King his majesty Saud bin Abdulaziz Al Saud visited India in 1955. Later, Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru made an official trip to KSA in 1956. The Nehru vision was strengthened by his daughter and prime minister Indira Gandhi who made a diplomatic trip to Saudi Arabia in 1982 which resulted into further consolidation of all kinds of ties between the two nations.

The pace of strategic and bilateral ties was increased by a long awaited royal visit when King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud came to India in 2006. The historic visit witnessed a crucial signing of the 'Delhi Declaration'. It was perhaps the first visit of its kind when a Saudi king simultaneously visited both India and Pakistan despite the fact these countries did not enjoy a good relationship due to many reasons. Despite Pakistan's hidden agenda to isolate India from Saudi Arabia and other Arab world, King Abdullah gave a clear message of KSA's diplomatic and strategic connection and ties with Pakistan's neighbor (India). Not only this, KSA donated good amount of money even to Jamia Millia Islamia. In response to initiative taken in the direction of education, many Saudi students started getting admissions to Indian universities, and many Indians joined Saudi universities on scholarship which included bachelors to doctoral programmes in different field of study. Indian premier Dr. Manmohan Singh's visited to Saudi Arabia in 2010, and signed the 'Riyadh Declaration' which was proved to be a step ahead towards realization of collective vision and mission of the two countries. Later, the visit of the then deputy prime minister prince Salman to India in 2014 gave a fresh momentum to the long lasting bond between the two countries, however the focus this time was 'defence.'

The current Indian prime minister has been quite popular in the Middle East for his personal connection and friendly relationship. His official visit in April, 2016 targeted the area of development in the field of global politics, regional security, bilateral ties focusing on business-trade, economy, security and defence.

The success of diplomatic initiative taken by Mr Modi was confirmed to a great extent when he received extremely prestigious award 'highest civilian honour'. A new beginning took place with the royal visit of the Saudi crown prince Mohammad bin Salman to India (2019) during which many historic announcements regarding Saudi investments in India were made. The attraction of the trip targeted a trade and investment which was estimated around US \$ 100 billion. In addition, an increase in the Indian Hajj quota to 2,00,000 was also announced which is not the highest but the second/third highest number of Hajj pilgrims to holy Makkah. Quite recently in 2019, Indian prime minister visited Riyadh where a joint strategic partnership agreement was signed in addition to MOUs on energy, security, aviation, defence, petroleum, medical products, drug control, industries related agenda.

II. ECONOMIC TIES

It is not a secret anymore that Saudi Arabia is India's fourth largest business ally following China, USA and Japan respectively). KSA fulfils around 18% of its crude oil requirement of India apart from 30 % of its LPG need, and this can never be ignored in any circumstance. During 2019-20, the Indo-Saudi trade/business was estimated around US \$33.07 billion. During this period only, India imported goods from Saudi Arabia at a rough estimate of nearly US \$26.84 billion. The amount is huge and no sensible nation can underestimate such an opportunity of economic growth and development.

Indo Saudi trade

Table 1. India-Saudi trade estimate in US\$ billion

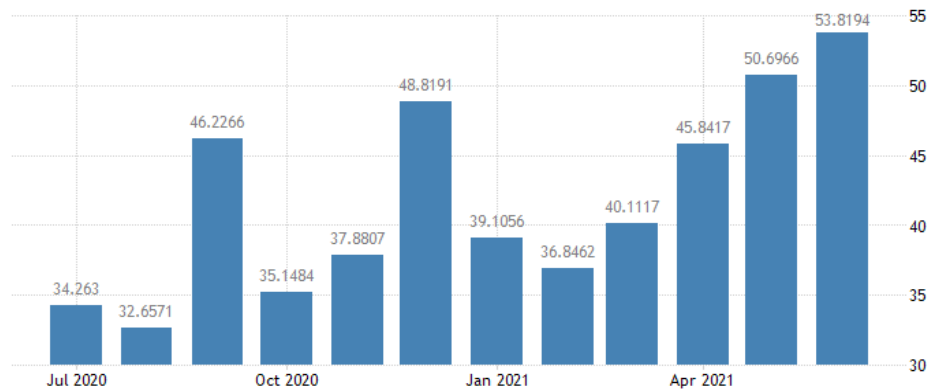
Year	Imports from Saudi Arabia	Exports to Saudi Arabia	Total Trade	% increase in Total Trade		% increase in Indian Exports
2015-2016	20.32	6.39	26.71	-31.97	-27.70	-42.71
2016-2017	19.94	5.13	25.08	-6.12	-1.85	-19.70
2017-2018	22.06	5.41	27.48	+9.56	+10.50	+5.88
2018-2019	28.48	5.55	34.03	+23.83	+29.04	+2.61
2019-2020	26.84	6.24	33.07	-2.8	-5.73	+12.18

[Source: Department of Commerce, Govt. of India]

It is interesting to note that Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority (SAGIA) reported that currently there were 476 Indian companies registered as sole/joint ventures around worth US\$ 1.5 billion in KSA as of March, 2020. Saudi Arabia is the 39th largest investor in India, and the total investments amount approximately to US \$315 million.

According to the reserved bank of India, Indian exports to KSA rose to 53.82 INR billion in June from 50.70 INR billion in May of 2021.

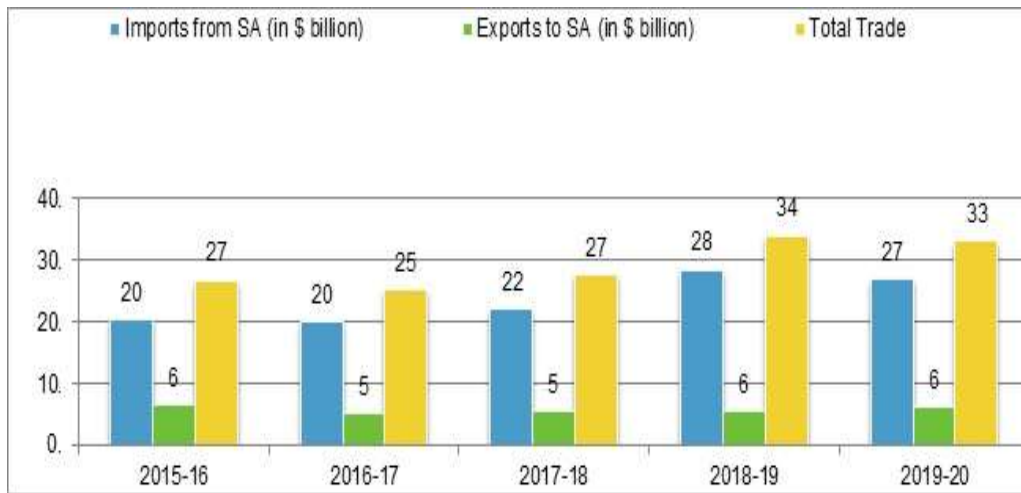
Image.1



(SOURCE: TRADINGECONOMICS.COM/RESERVE BANK OF INDIA)

If we assess the total trade between India and Saudi Arabia, the available data may happily surprise the readers. following figure is provided by the Indian embassy, Riyadh, KSA (<https://www.eoiriyadh.gov.in/page/india-saudi-business-relations/>)

Image.2. showing data related to export-import.



(source: India embassy, Riyadh)

Indians employed in KSA

Table 3. showing the estimated population of Indians in Saudi Arabia since 1975.

year	population	year	population
1975	34,500	1999	700,000
1979	100,000	2000	1,000,000
1983	270,000	2004	1,300,000
1987	380,000	2015	3,000,000
1991	351,000	2021	2,550,000 *(https://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/saudi-arabia-population-statistics/)

(Report of the High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora, 2016)

Following is the statistics of Indian diasporas staying in different countries as per the data gathered in 2014.

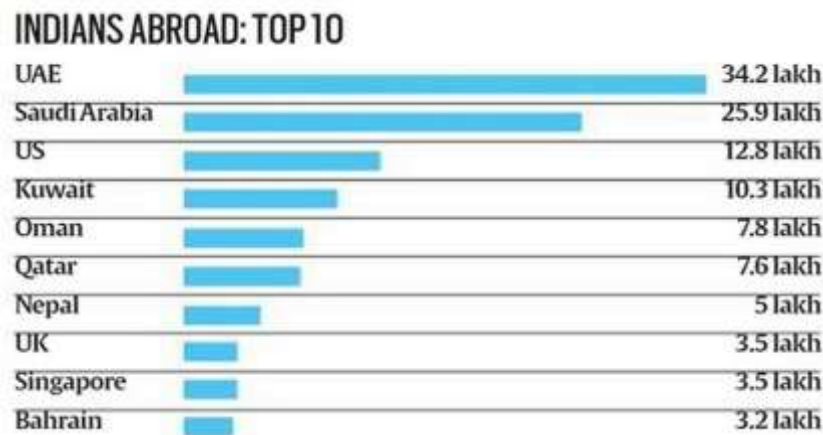
Image.3

	Country name	Size of Indian community
1.	U.S.	2,245,239
2.	Malaysia	2,050,000
3.	Saudi Arabia	1,789,000
4.	UAE	1,750,000
5.	Sri Lanka	1,601,600
6.	UK	1,500,000
7.	South Africa	1,218,000
8.	Canada	1,000,000
9.	Mauritius	882,220
10.	Oman	718,642
11.	Singapore	670,000
12.	Nepal	600,000
13.	Kuwait	579,390
14.	Trinidad Tobago	551,500
15.	Qatar	500,000
16.	Australia	448,430
17.	Myanmar	356,560
18.	Bahrain	350,000
19.	Guyana	320,000
20.	Fiji	313,798

(source: ministry of overseas Indian affairs,2014)

In addition to the related data, following is the details regarding Indians staying abroad in top 10 countries.

Image.4



(google image)

It was reported on Feb. 10, 2020 regarding Indian diaspora that there are over 1.36 crore Indian nationals living abroad, according to data tabled by the Ministry of External Affairs in Lok Sabha. It is a huge population which is not only significant due to numbers but employability, living abroad, education and remittance to India.

III. CULTURAL RELATIONS

India has been taking due interest in Saudi cultural activities. To its testimony, it participated as 'guest of honour' in the 32nd *Janadriyah* festival in 2018. The then external affairs minister Smt. Sushma Swaraj inaugurated the India Pavilion together with the Saudi king. On the other hand, Yoga as a 'sports activity' has been celebrated at the Indian Embassy since its official announcement in 2017 at Riyadh. Quite many Saudi nationals, the diplomatic corps, journalists, different nationalities and Indian diaspora were seen taking keen interest, and participated in the activity.

Cultural bonds are strengthened by the communities. Indian community in Saudi Arabia is larger than most of the expatriates, and to the interest of most of us, most of the Indian uses Arabic as a link language for communication. It is because of the reason that a south Indian may not communicate to a north Indian in any other language but Arabic if he does not know English. It has been estimated that nearly 2.6 million Indian community live, earn and transfer money to India. They are normally respected because of their humble nature, professionalism and sense of gratitude. The community is mixed mainly Muslims and Hindus while some Sikhs are also working in the kingdom. It has been witnessed that most of them do not want to leave kingdom in any circumstance despite some cultural issues according to them felt as expatriates. India being a secular state caters to the need of its largest majority. Therefore, the Indian government initiative and support for Hajj and related faculties are always appreciated by the aspirants. In the bilateral relation between India and Saudi, Hajj pilgrimage is perhaps the most important component. Due to diplomatic efficiency of the Indian government, the Hajj Quota was increased from 24,975 to 2,00,000 in 2019.

Geeta Mohan wrote (in Education Today in Riyadh on April 23, 2021) that Saudi Arabia includes Ramayana, Mahabharata in the new proposed curriculum. Therefore, the students of Saudi Arabia will now learn the details of Hindu epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata if the curriculum is implemented.

As a part of Saudi Arabia Vision -2030, histories and cultures of other countries are being studied for inclusion in syllabus to enable students with more awareness about different cultures, and Indian culture is included.

The chapter about the geography and the history of South Asia includes sections like the Indus Valley Civilisation and the Aryans. Religions in India like Hinduism and Buddhism, followed by the mention of invasions have also become the part of new proposed curriculum as envisaged in vision 2030 of the kingdom initiated by his royal highness prince Mohammed bin Salam, deputy premier. The testimony of Indo Arab ties in general and KSA in particular is the following table which shows there is a good number of non-Muslim migrants to even KSA.

Table 2. Hindus in Arab world

Total population: 3.06 million (2020)			
United Arab Emirates	986,900	Qatar	335,967
Saudi Arabia	451,347	Yemen	297,103
Kuwait	425,950		

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinduism_in_Arab_states)

Above data show that a lot of non-muslim brothers live in Islamic states including KSA which has been usually criticized by so many narrow minded people and mostly those who do not actually know about these countries. UAE is an ideal place for Indians irrespective of religion or culture. So is KSA because it does not restrict recruitment policies for one specific community. Even in the phase of Saudiization and adverse impact of COVID-19, KSA did not screen out any on the basis of cultural affiliations. If anyone is exceptionally fired, the reason might be entirely different.

INDO SAUDI TIES AMIDST ADVERSITIES

An Egyptian scholar, Mohammed Soliman (cited by C. Raja Mohan, August 3, 2021 under the title 'India & Greater Middle East in the Indian express) about the significance of what he calls the 'Indo-Abrahamic Accord' signed last August in Washington, and its trans-regional impact on concerned countries including India. Soliman's concept has a genuine basis as there seems somewhat normalcy (for whatever reasons) with Israel's relation with some of the Islamic/Arab states especially the UAE and Bahrain. The UAE and Bahrain were followed by Sudan and Morocco in signing the Abraham Accords. However, Saudi stand was different. Soliman also points out regarding India's relations with the UAE and Israel under Prime Minister Modi, however, Riyadh has a different position due to its Islamic importance across the globe, and Palestine is also religiously important for Muslims. Having a relation with Israel may be a strategic need for some nations. Although Delhi had relations with Abu Dhabi and Tel Aviv for many years, they certainly have acquired political strength and diplomatic depth.

Soliman also highlighted the crucial importance of new ties between India, the UAE, and Israel despite Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan's leadership claims. Pakistan's growing alignment with Turkey and its alienation from its traditionally strong supporters in the Arab Gulf especially the UAE and Saudi Arabia is also one factor that can not be underestimated. India may not maintain a very good bond with Turkey as Erdogan has been supporting Pakistan's stand on Kashmir. Hence, it is more important to consider that Turkey's attempt for regional dominance has drawn Greece and the UAE closer. The UAE has been quite close to Saudi Arabia for many years, they had difference on the alliance with Israel, though. It was noticed quite recently even during the COVID-19 when the flights were even suspected due to UAE's closeness with Israel according to peoples' perception.

CONCLUSION

India and Saudi Arabia have been quite diplomatically close despite challenges in building, maintaining and developing partnership and ties. Quite recently, both the nations became more like strategic partners in different fields especially business trade, cultural exchange, education and mutual development. Around 40-50 years ago, KSA was not an oil based economy. The oil boom stage attracted people from India with a possibility of increase in the opportunities of employment.

Beginning of 'strategic partnership' between India and Saudi Arabia is enhancing relationship further. It is the need of the hour that Indo-Saudi relationship gets strengthened for mutual development of the countries. KSA may give genuine impression that it is a tolerant country and it is not biased on account of religion, region, culture or race. It is evident that KSA has been maintaining a very healthy relation with the USA, China despite the fact that these are not Islamic countries. Therefore, Saudi Arabia can further grow its relation with India for strategic partnership not because of the reasons that India has second largest Muslim population of the world.

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