

India-Malaysia Relations: The Diaspora Dimension

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The presence of a large Indian community in Malaysia has been a crucial factor in multifaceted relations between the two countries. Given the strong emotional, cultural and family links between Malaysian Indians and India, they have served as a useful vehicle of communication and exchange of ideas and culture between India and Malaysia. However, there is a negative side of the story as well. The marginalised condition of Malaysian Indians and mistreatment of Indian workers has worked as an irritant in bilateral relations. Given this background, the article aims to study the role of overseas Indians in shaping the relations between India and Malaysia. It also examines the major concerns and issues of Indian community in the context of Malaysian model of multiculturalism and its impact on bilateral ties.

Evolution of India-Malaysia Relations

India's interaction with Southeast Asian countries in terms of history, culture and religion are arguably unique, deepest, richest and most apparent of any of the region's external partners. Hinduism, Buddhism and to some extent Islam, as well as merchants, priests, monks and scholars inextricably intertwine India and Southeast Asia for centuries. The presence of millions of Southeast Asians of Indian origin reinforces these historical linkages.

Malaysia (known as Malaya before 1963) holds a special place in India's policy towards Southeast Asia. The country spans the sea lanes of communication along the Strait of Malacca, through which more than 55 percent of India's trade passes, making it a nation of great importance to India's maritime interests. India and Malaysia share a long history of trade and cultural relations. Textual reference about places like *Suvarnabhumi* and *Suvarnadvipa* can be found in ancient Indian literature, both Sanskrit and Pali (Majumdar 1937). For centuries, the Bay of Bengal has served as a maritime gateway for India to Southeast Asia, connecting the cultures and economies of both sides. In due time, this contact has involved the exchange of ideas, people, culture and commodities, though their proportion has varied in different historical periods. As Arasaratnam noted,

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