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Uniquely Ours - A Look Back on a Sterling Legacy

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Nomita Dhar
Publisher & Editor-in-Chief

Things Uniquely Ours

As India's High Commissioner to the Republic of Singapore, HE Jawed Ashraf, prepares to leave for France to take up his new assignment, it's a good time to look back on his tenure and see how he, along with his team, have contributed so richly to the strengthening and robust development of the India-Singapore bilateral engagement.

In HE Ashraf's reckoning Singapore is home to one of the most accomplished Indian diaspora in the world. Little wonder then that he has been nurturing Singapore's huge Indian diaspora and his encouragement for it to participate even more vigorously in the people-to-people connectivity, a significant role player in bringing the two nations closer on many fronts. There are several areas of this engagement that have been shared and are now 'Uniquely Ours' in the sectors of business, trade, technology, education or culture arena. It is for this self-

same reason that he has propagated the culture of keeping the doors of the high commission open for every citizen who needs to reach out to them... even citizens and students of other countries.

If ever there was a time for people and nations to come together it is in these anxious times of the Corona virus pandemic. The High Commission has worked closely with both the Singaporean and Indian governments to extend support to stranded Indians and ensure the safety of its Mission staff. Given the circumstances video conferencing at the High Commission has, to some extent, kept the bilateral engagement open between the two countries.

On the occasion of the ASEAN India Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) held in January 2018 in Singapore, the vision and of the and efforts of HC and his team's facilitation of the event, contributed significantly to the celebration of, not only the many achievements of the Indian diaspora, but also the ties between India and Southeast Asia that go back over two millennia. In this issue we also review some critical areas of engagement between India and Singapore. They include:

India making its mark in the 4th Singapore FinTech Festival, 2019, that HE oversaw the signing of the MOU between the Singapore Fintech Association (SFA) and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) to share information and collaborate on mutually beneficial initiatives that would further the development of the FinTech industry in both countries. HE Ashraf was of the belief that there are a lot of exciting possibilities in this part of the world and he was seeing 'more and more of India's young people looking eastward towards this region and how one can build over here.' Two other events late last year, initiatives of the Indian High Commission under HE Ashraf, that were an outstanding success was India-Singapore-The Next Phase, the region's first business and innovation summit and Inspreneur 3.0 the third edition of the India-Singapore Innovation and Start-up platform, launched in 2018.

Acclaimed as "one of the gems of Indian foreign service; knowledgeable, friendly, an excellent speaker, innovative, and a great achiever" by Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy, a Visiting Fellow, S Rajaratnam School of International Studies at NTU, HC Ashraf's engagement with the diplomatic community and the achievements of the Mission under his watch have garnered many accolades in Singapore from many quarters.

Happy Reading!

Shikhar

शिखर The India-ASEAN Connection

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Why Singapore is a **Natural Partner** of India in Many Areas



High Commissioner Jawed Ashraf shares his insights and perspectives during his tenure here with IN Diplomacy's Editor-in-Chief Nomita Dhar before he leaves for his next posting in Paris

I t's been three and a half years and you are ready to go back. But it feels as if you just arrived and we do not want to let you go.

Well unfortunately, time really gathers wings over here in Singapore. It's a busy station for everyone, particularly for India. It feels the same way for me; three years have just gone by in a blur. But that also means that it's been very enjoyable, very productive. And certainly, at a personal level very rewarding and enriching too.

You kept everyone busy, and you've been very busy. I'd like to know where you get this much energy from and how you have achieved so much? India was seen at a scale which is unprecedented. I've been reporting on India for 27 years and I haven't seen its profile raised so much on this scale. For you what were the highpoints achieved in these three and a half years?

Where do I get my energy? I don't know whether I have that much energy, but I certainly feel like I could do with some more. I guess it's just the joy of working and that keeps me going and also recognizing that there is a huge responsibility that I shoulder, both on behalf of the country I represent and the community that is here.

I think it is something that I haven't thought

about. It just comes naturally. And I guess, in some sense, it is just a self-driven thing. Hard to really explain, and I'm not even sure whether I should say I have a lot of energy - but if you say so there might be something in it.

About the scale and achievements. Frankly, I don't think that I should arrogate any achievements to myself. Firstly, it is teamwork and secondly, it is a combination of factors, including the support we get from the Indian and Singapore governments.

But beyond the two governments it's also from the larger community of stakeholders, which is the business community, the people in the worlds of art and culture, technology, innovation in the defense and security space and the academics of think tanks. And finally of course this absolutely wonderful, talented, highly accomplished, and deeply connected Indian community in Singapore.

Our job is really to capitalize all the forces that are on our side and bring them together so they're working together, so that we can make that huge difference. As I'd say this has been an important element that we've always tried to tap into the opportunities, for the talent, for the resources. And that's enabled us at least to



(Above left): PM Modi's visit in 2018 laid the foundation for the signing of more than 30 bilateral agreements between India and Singapore. (Above right): VIPs at The Next Phase's InSprenur 3.0 event in September 2019

say that, yes, we've achieved some of the goals we've set for ourselves. Does that mean that we have done everything we'd wanted to do? I'd say probably not. Certainly, this is a clean slate that you can keep writing on it as much as you like and as much as others would let you write on it.

Overall, I think we are just a catalyst in the process. India and Singapore have certainly advanced the relationship. In the course of these past three years we have made progress across every dimension of a truly comprehensive strategic partnership.

As far as the High Commission is concerned, yes, there were a number of things that we did which were our initiatives. You've seen we've had mega events such as the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas - the ASEAN India diaspora event; the two memorable visits here of Prime Minister Modi, And then of course, we have this absolutely massive The Next Phase Business and Innovation Summit in 2019.

We have also done some absolutely new pioneering work in areas such as technology, innovation, FinTech and startups. These are areas which were really our own initiative, for example, the International launch of Indian payment products like the Rupay and BHIM QR. It was something which happened in Singapore, because we pushed for it.

We're also working on a number of other initiatives, including connecting the payment infrastructure in Singapore with the payment infrastructure in India and connecting MSMEs (Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises) through a digital hub.

Also, as we have done in India with the India Stack, how do you work with Singapore to make it into a global stack. This is again one of our initiatives, which is an ongoing process.

We've done well also in other new initiatives such as in defence and in helping more Singaporean companies invest in India; likewise, helping Indian companies invest here. For that, we've had constant round of events, to create those bridges to build those connections to build a better understanding of processes, and to create networks of people who can collaborate and work with each other, government with business as well as business with business. And, and we've tried to keep this process going.

I think one of the joys here has been to work in the realm of art and culture. And I think we've successfully worked with an extraordinary pool of local talent, local events, organisations, and institutions to help create an Indian cultural and art calendar that can rival some of the major cities of India. And this has really been something that's been a source of great joy.

Now, about the last part of your question - where do we get the money? Where do we get the resources to do an event such as a sit-down dinner for 2,800 people and have a giant stage with five, six giant screens and do that over a two-day period?

It's largely corporate sponsors, we've been fortunate many people have been very generous in supporting our ventures. That shows two things. One, is the great commitment on the part of corporate entities in India and in Singapore, to this strategic partnership, and that's very encouraging. Much more than the fact that we've been able to raise those resources is the fact that there is such keen interest and such a high level of commitment. The second, I think they have confidence in our ability, despite our own very lean team here at the High Commission, that we would be able to deliver on the vision and they certainly liked our vision. At the end of it all, they've been very happy.

We've also tried to do things differently here. For example, the International Day of Yoga is celebrated globally, and there was a tendency in every city to organize one mega event with you know, thousands of people at an iconic venue which is identified with that city such as New York's Times Square, Trafalgar Square or Hyde Park in London or the Eiffel Tower in Paris.

For Singapore we wanted to take yoga over to the whole community. So last year, we held 180 yoga sessions in 120 venues in Singapore. That means one venue per six square kilometers of the city. I think that might be a world record for the International Yoga Day. That's like the highest density of venues and events anywhere in the world. We were able to partner with 40 organizations, including SGactive, Narpani Pearavai (the Indian Activity section which is part of Singapore's People's Association) as well as practically every yoga institution here. We were able to do it in hospitals, in homes for the elderly, in mental health institutions and in schools, colleges and universities!

I find that there is just an enormous reservoir of goodwill and willingness on the part of people to not just do things but to do them really well, which is, I think is also the reason for the country's success.

In terms of your diplomatic career, how has being in Singapore affected you?

Well, it was three wonderful years to start with, in terms of my diplomatic life. My wife and I have certainly enjoyed being here for a number of reasons. We've got to experience Southeast Asia for the first time. Singapore, again, is a very special country for reasons beyond what is generally said and we made some wonderful friends. These are relationships that will last well beyond my tenure here and will be, I think the compelling reasons to return here from time to time.

COVID-19 CHALLENGES

You have built an excellent momentum towards getting investments, getting the attention of investors and so on. But we are meeting today in a different setting - a time when COVID-19 has destabilized many of our plans. So, as a diplomat, how did things change for you with the pandemic and how did you face the situation with your diaspora here?



At MTR restaurant 13th May 2020: HC Jawed and volunteers packing snack and drinks for healthcare workers in hospitals

That's a good question. I mean the last 3-4 months we've been extremely busy. We have almost entirely focused our minds on dealing with the pandemic. We have actually been working full time in our office, seven days a week with a skeletal staff. Our local staff was working from home and we tapped them when we needed to. But we generally operated with a very small team with the diplomatic staff deployed here by the government from India.

When we had a lockdown in India, there were many people stranded here. We've had other circumstances, workers and professionals who've been laid off as well as Indians on short term visits here to see their children, relatives or for business or tourism. They were all stuck here. We also had a number of students. I mean, I'm just amazed at the number of students from India. Some financed their studies through part

time work, others had finished their courses and could not return. Then we had those who have had a bereavement in their family in India and wanted to return. We even had women who were in advanced stages of pregnancy! For those who needed it we had to look after them in terms of their accommodation, food and medicine.

So at one stage at one level, we have had to look after those who were stuck here. We had also set up a number of helplines and dedicated email facilities; in addition to this we were responding to queries on social media channels such as Twitter and Whatsapp.

We were also supported enormously by many Indian associations who were independently looking after those who were stranded as well as by places of worship and religious organisations.

The Hindu and Sikh temples, the mosques, and several civic organisations all doing their own bit and we were in touch with them. So a lot of our time was actually spent also talking to people because they were stuck here and anxious. Remember the entire month of April, we had no repatriation flights.

The students (many in the 16 to 18-year group) were feeling anxiety as they were also in a sense, stripped of all kinds of social contacts. They were isolated in their rooms because of the Circuit Breaker and uncertain when the flights will resume and their parents were getting worried about them; so we also appointed some counselors, to speak to them on a 24-hour basis. They included myself and my colleagues and we tried to reassure and calm them down.

Then in the second week of May we were able to mount the flight repatriations. We did 34 repatriation flights and were able to send back more than 7,000 people. We had at that point in time another 7,800 still to go as the numbers kept growing.

“Obviously the demand for repatriation to any destination outstrips the supply, so we had to prioritize the passengers according to compelling reasons. For example, pregnant women, bereavement, illness, etc. So we've had to deal with just some extraordinary humanitarian situations. My team was just working around the clock and they have been very sensitive.”

Air India is the carrier for the flights and we are the managers of the repatriation process and there are very, very stringent requirements for travel to India. We had to liaise with the Indian states who have a big role in this exercise as they are the ones who finally take care of those returnees for quarantine, testing etc. It was a very complex exercise in terms of repatriation; we have spent a lot of time on this and continue to do so to date.

And obviously the demand for repatriation to any destination outstrips the supply, so we had to prioritize the passengers according to compelling reasons. For example, pregnant women, bereavement, illness, etc. So we've had to deal with just some extraordinary humanitarian situations. My team was just working around the clock and they have been very sensitive. We try to respond to everyone's emails, phone calls.

At the same time, we are also working quite closely together with Singapore in keeping the supply chain lines open (for example for essential medical and food supplies) despite the Circuit Breaker here and the restrictions in India.

Then there was the rapid spread of infection among Indian and migrant workers living in dormitories (not just in purposeful dormitories but also in those factory converted dormitories). We had to, of course, deal with that working closely with Singapore's Ministry of Manpower and other agencies of the government.

These are the things that have kept us very busy.

As to Singapore's responses to all the above challenges I'd like to say a few things: One, that I think everyone who's ever lived here or have been here through these difficult times have felt reassured and confident about the way the Singapore government was handling the pandemic. The measures of restrictions were always incremental and appropriate to the situation at a particular point of time.

Second, they (Singapore) have maintained the supply lines, and all supplies were available throughout the outbreak.

Third, they have been proactive, aggressive and transparent. Transparency in terms of information sharing in terms of press briefings in terms of clarifying issues, putting out even individual cases contact tracing issues, all in the public domain gives people a sense of confidence.

We had a moment of concern in Singapore when Singaporeans and PRs were returning from abroad. In the middle of March to the end of March, we saw a spike and then from April. From 28th March 2020 onwards, we began to see this infection grow in dormitories.

I think in the dormitories, I have to say that authorities here have done extremely well. Not only have they worked very proactively and aggressively in testing the workers, contact tracing and treatment, isolating those who have symptoms from those who were healthy. They ensured the dorms were decongested by making temporary arrangements for both those who



First chartered flight under Vande Bharat Mission to India on 18th Jun 2020 landed in Hyderabad with 146 passengers

"I think in the dormitories, I have to say that authorities here have done extremely well... They ensured the dorms were decongested by making temporary arrangements for both those who were healthy workers and employed in essential services and those who have symptoms, but did not require hospitalization."

were healthy workers and employed in essential services and those who have symptoms, but did not require hospitalization.

In addition to that, they were providing free medical care at each dormitory. The workers were assured of their salaries by lawyers. They got three meals a day, and the meals were catered to taste - I mean, the Indians needed Indian food they were getting Indian food.

They got care packages which included thermometers. And importantly with the pandemic like this it is not just a health crisis but there are also social, psychological and emotional consequences. Singapore has gone into the level of providing free SIM cards (from M1), providing free Wi-Fi and an access to some multiple hundreds of news and entertainment channels so the workers can stay connected with their families and friends and occupy their time watching TV programmes if they wanted to.

To boost morale they've got messages from public figures in the sports and entertainment worlds including: Rajinikanth, Kamal Haasan, Shankar Mahadevan and Sachin Tendulkar. I think Singapore Minister for Communications and Information and Minister for Cyber Security, Mr S. Iswaran, played a role in that; other Singapore Ministers that played a proactive role in helping the migrant workers included Minister of Manpower and Second Minister for Home Affairs, Ms Josephine Teo, Minister of State in the Ministry of National Development, Mr Zaqq Mohammed and Minister of Home Affairs and Law, Mr K. Shanmugam. I saw all of them playing a very proactive role.

Whenever people in the community wanted to work for the migrant workers, we would direct them to the migrant workers center

As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has said there's a long road ahead for everyone. But I see today the community spread is almost negligible. And the situation in the dormitories has stabilized. The numbers have come down drastically. There are very rigorous protocols in place as they've explained to me, to declare someone COVID free. You require two PCR tests interspersed by a 14-day quarantine. Both must be negative and you must not also show any symptoms. So I think it's been it's been handled well. But we all still need to be alert and cautious.

This current state would not have been possible if it's just been the government alone. This is where social solidarity and social contract becomes important, a partnership between government and society. So people have also been largely responsible in the way they have accepted the restrictions and the safe distancing norms that were prescribed by the government.

And I would also say that so many people have come forward to provide services to the community, to those affected and also taken care of people they might know living alone in homes etc. It's a whole of society effort that makes it a success. I'll give you an example. I frequent the very popular Indian restaurant MTR. For two months, they were supplying fresh snacks and coffee to healthcare workers in eight hospitals. So these are the things that make it work.

HIGH COMMISSIONER'S INTERVIEW

I also got a great sense of what I think is geopolitically and economically one of the most important regions in the 21st century, and it is not just Southeast Asia. From here you can get a great view into a much broader east. And all of this has really enriched me professionally.

Singapore is also at the cutting edge of technology, finance, logistics, and transportation as well as one of the global hubs for businesses. So you get exposed to the great currents of thought in business, technology, finance and trade. And that is something that you can carry with you to other parts of the world.

Personally, it has been very enriching and rewarding. It's a city which has its arms open to the world. At the same time holds them together in a tight embrace of its diversity. Usually when people speak of Singapore they mention it as a global financial trading hub, a great central business district and superb infrastructure. The images conjured up are excellent highways, wonderful hotels, convention centers - all the hardware of progress.

But I think the bedrock is important and that bedrock is success in many dimensions. One very important dimension, of course, is investment in human resources. The second is the openness and the ability to constantly renew itself and constantly try to stay ahead of changes that the world will always go through. Its policy domains have been excellent. For example, investment in education. I mean, it's now got world class universities and great research centres.

Here's something that's probably not entirely appreciated abroad. Part of the bedrock of its success is that a religiously and culturally diverse country, where 5.7 million residents live within 719 sq. km, has been able to craft a truly harmonious multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-lingual society. It is not just the laws, which work as deterrence against emergence of fault lines or hate or fighting or violence or animosities and conflict, but that people from leadership downwards work together to foster a sense of togetherness, understanding and appreciation. So, in a sense you do not only just coexist but you embrace each other and that's a very important pillar of Singapore success.

I think this is an inspiration for the rest of the world. It is not by any means something to take for granted. It is also something that you have to constantly work at. We've seen it elsewhere in the world - the fabric that holds society together can be very fragile.

Another thing I feel many Singaporeans themselves do not actually notice but many people who come here from abroad appreciate is the way the city is planned. You may have disadvantaged families, but you don't have disadvantaged neighbourhoods!

Generally, you don't see many cities having enriched neighbourhoods sited together along with the middle class, and then very poor families. HDB homes coexists with the most expensive condos and share common spaces and facilities such as schools. So, it creates a great sense of community existence.

And finally, of course, I think what we've really enjoyed is a green city. The island's economic model is really something to look at. It's a great combination of market and state capacity. I think, the state definitely plays a more important role

the world, and who have achieved remarkable things. Look at our own Prime Minister. Some of the achievements over the last six years are simply unbelievable. In 2014 to achieve the scale of his vision in an astonishingly and impossibly short timeframe seemed impossible. But he did and we've seen those results.

Similarly, of course, Singapore has this outstanding talent in terms of ministers. The system is different. They come through different processes. But as in every democracy, certainly the ministers here are accessible, they are very open, very easy to converse with. They have extremely good domain knowledge. And they have certainly deep connections with the constituencies. And high level of merit also.

I think what we see in common is that in India or in Singapore or in any other democracy, there is that sense of accountability to the constituencies they represent and to the institutions, which they now belong to. There are many similarities, but we also have very different contexts in which political leadership in India and Singapore operate.

What will you miss most about Singapore?

As I have already spoken about I will certainly miss friendships, and many wonderful aspects of this city, including an amazing variety of

cuisines. I'll also miss the majestic and beautiful India House. It's lovely and historic. We've enjoyed every moment, of our stay.

Any new dishes here you have not tried before?

I mean I've tried practically everything; you get this most extraordinary range of cuisines at all price points. And each of them is an experience, whether you're talking about the best of the fine dining restaurants, or you're talking about hawker centers, which is also an intangible heritage, and I hope UNESCO at some stage recognizes, (something I will certainly advocate for when I'm in Paris). The Peranakan food was a new discovery.

I understand the Indian Ambassador's Residence in Paris has its own history and grandeur as well?

Yes, in Paris, it is a historic house situated right next to the Eiffel Tower! I look forward to living there for the next three years or so.

High Commissioner, it has been a joy and a privilege to work with you, learn and grow with you. Thank you for your support, and we



On 1st June 2018 PM Modi used the opportunity to share India's vision for the Indo-Pacific region which set off the international and regional discourse on the concept

here. So that it isn't really about market versus government, private versus public; it's really about a governance model. So, these are some of the things I've learned some of the things that I've enjoyed over here

You have interacted with many Singaporean and Indian ministers. What are the most significant similarities or differences between Singapore and India?

That's not a question I can really answer. I mean, we inhabit two very different worlds. India is a country of 1.4 billion people, the most extraordinarily diverse nation in terms of religion, languages, cultural traditions, even geography. And there are so many Indias within India with its federal setup. And so therefore, it's a far more complex place. India is, of course, the world's largest democracy and a vibrant one, which is fiercely competitive.

I think I've met Indian politicians of great wisdom, great insight, who have done some extraordinary work in India. Since and before independence, we've had leaders, and we continue to have leaders who are a source of inspiration to us as well as to others around

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will continue to serve you from Singapore. We wish you all the best!

Well thank you its always been a pleasure and thank you for what you've done for *Shikhar* magazine and for being such a strong supporter of what we have been doing at this High Commission.

Excellency, what are the highlights of India-Singapore bilateral ties during your tenure during these three and a half years?

India and Singapore truly share a very warm relationship. It stems from our connected histories, comfort and familiarity of culture and just extraordinary people-to-people ties. If you just look back into history, India's engagement in this part of the world was natural and continuous. Even the colonial period added a different dimension to it.

So we have had a good base as independent nations for a long time, we weren't as close as we should have been, but 1990 onwards as India began to open up to the world, and with the instincts honed over centuries, turn to the east, Singapore was the immediate partner. It helped us intellectually connect with this region, but also became a important political, economic, diplomatic and security partner for us.

This relationship has continued to grow and is free from contest and claims, it is filled with goodwill and warmth, there is no doubt and hesitation on this partnership, our only challenge is that we should never be complacent and continue to push the relationship to the potential that we both recognize exist for us.

One of the most important things is beyond the simple metrics of the relationship, the numbers of trade, investment tourism, all of that, there is this indescribable bonding, a sense of mutual respect, and admiration, for what we are as democracies, as multicultural societies, and as strong advocates of rules based international order, in which every country large and small are sovereign and equal, and free and fearless in the choices it makes. And this is an abiding principle for India and Singapore.

Therefore we not only work bilaterally together, but we work in a number of regional and multilateral forums, from G20 to Commonwealth to the Indian Ocean Rim Association and, of course, in the ASEAN-related forums that include the Indian-ASEAN Summit, and also East-Asia Summit. We have

an extraordinary range of relationships, the highlights I would say, beside the political one, we have a tremendous defence cooperation relationship. that is a reflection of the mutual trust and confidence we have with each other

During this period, our defence cooperation deepened significantly. In 2018, we marked the 25th anniversary of our naval exercises, the longest continuous exercise that India has with any country. The exercises conducted by Army, Navy and Air Force of our two countries increased in scale and complexity. Now we have started trilateral exercises with Thailand. Singapore participates in India's multinational exercise. We also signed the mutual logistics agreement and renewed our bilateral army, navy and air-force cooperation agreements. The exchange of ship visits has increased.



High Commissioner Jawed Ashraf launched the Bharat Interface for Money (BHIM) QR Pilot Launch at Singapore Fintech Festival 2019

During the annual defence ministers' dialogue, we have identified new areas of cooperation that also address some of the new challenges in defence.

In the area of trade Singapore is now the leading source of investment in India for the last few years, particularly the last two to three years. Singapore is also a leading destination for Indian investments abroad. What I've seen in the last three years, a trend for many new Indian companies to set up base here to enter not only the Singapore and the region but the wider global market as well. India is Singapore's third largest source of tourism and this is growing at double digit rates. We expect the same level of growth on the other side as well.

Another exciting new area of partnership that has progressed enormously in the last three years is in technology innovation startups and fintech. As I have said, we have taken some pioneering initiatives at government-to-government level and in catalysing industry-to-industry collaboration.

People-to-people ties have grown, but I think a significant new element is how we are tapping the collective capabilities of the diaspora to support the India-Singapore partnership. They are a professionally highly accomplished and talented group, with a great amount of understanding of India, a great commitment to Singapore, and therefore they can build a very big bridge. In the course of these last three years, we've been able to bring together this diverse pool of talent to a common platform and to use that effectively in promoting our relationship.

We have heard from President Halimah Yacob, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat, and other Singapore Ministers and leaders, that the relationship has certainly moved forward in the last three years in every area.

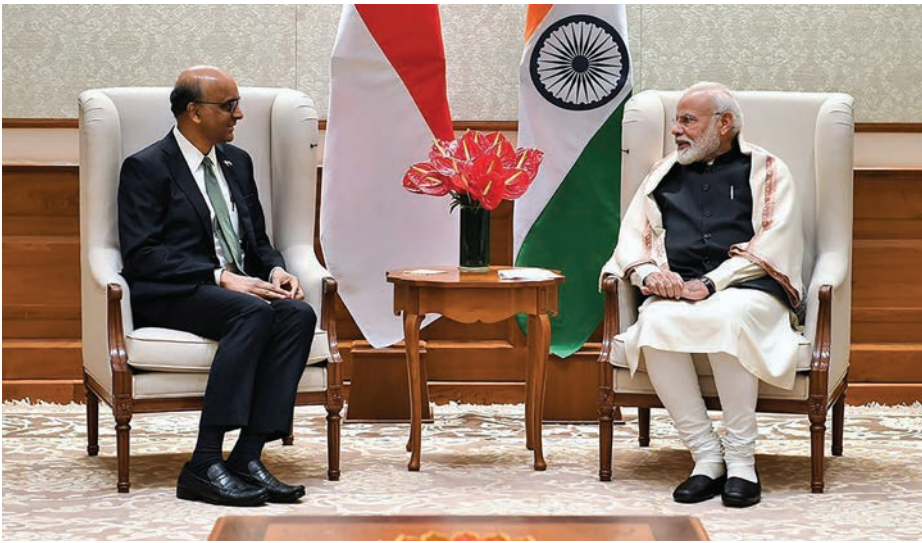
And I think this is a continuous process. We hope that this becomes a springboard for much deeper ties. In the world we are entering into, in the post pandemic era, all the trends we have witnessed in the last three years such as a more digital future will actually accelerate and the future we anticipate will arrive much sooner than later. It will be a world where the old economic orthodoxies of the past decades will not persist. It will certainly be more turbulent during this transition, more uncertain, more contested, maybe fractious. It is in this context that I think we can both work more closely, to reinforce each other's prosperity.

India is an enormous market opportunity and Singapore for us is not only a source of capital and a partner in many areas of development priorities, but also gateway to the region and beyond. We can also work together and with other countries to advance an open, balanced and inclusive regional architecture in the Indo-Pacific Region that's critical to both of us; advance the course of a rule-based international order, respect for sovereignty of countries and respect for international law. These are things that are important for both of us.

In general, we should continue to support and promote multilateralism as it is under retreat. The last 70 years we have done well globally because we have had strong institutions and agreements for multilateralism. And now we have to work together on new transnational challenges in the future from pandemics, cyber security to climate change.

VISITS & EVENTS

Focus on Singapore Ministers Visits to India



The Indian PM (right) extended his warm New Year's wishes to Shanmugaratnam and through him to Lee Hsien Loong, Prime Minister of Singapore.

SM Tharman Shanmugaratnam Begins New Year with Working Visit in India 5th - 8th Jan 2020

Senior Minister (SM) Tharman Shanmugaratnam, accompanied by Singaporean officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's Office, was in New Delhi and Mumbai during the course of his working visit from 5-8 January 2020.

On January 6, 2020 SM Tharman called on Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi, to discuss bilateral relations between India and Singapore along with matters of mutual interest. Discussions between PM Modi and SM Tharman included the need for greater economic cooperation, including infrastructure, skills, India-Singapore Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) and the digital economy. According to a statement released by PM Modi's office he and Mr Tharman expressed satisfaction at the "rapid pace of bilateral relations" between Singapore and India. The statement also noted PM Modi's expressed desire to boost cooperation between India and Singapore in the areas of infrastructure, tourism, digital payment systems, innovation and governance.

Post his meeting with PM Modi, SM Tharman shared that he and Mr Modi had a good discussion on India's economic and social strategies to ensure sustained growth and inclusivity in the years to come. He also said that Singaporean companies are optimistic about India's long-term prospects and are looking to grow their investments in the country, including in the area of technology parks and logistics. "We are also deepening collaboration in the digital economy, including linking up our payments systems and national single window platforms for trade," he said.

Lauding the huge strides made in social transformation, particularly in sanitation, electrification of villages, bank accounts for all and health insurance by the Indian government, SM Tharman shared that: "This will be coupled with further reforms in economic transformation, particularly to ensure job growth for India's young population."

Following his visit to New Delhi SM Tharman arrived in Mumbai to deliver the Third Suresh Tenukar Memorial Lecture, hosted by the Reserve Bank of India. Mr. Tharman spoke on the theme of "Broad-based Prosperity: Tackling the Fundamentals" focusing on problems and challenges in social and economic transformation that are critical to achieve broad-based prosperity. SM Tharman also called on Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray, and met with business leaders in the city.



DPM Heng Swee Keat co-chaired the India Economic Summit.

DPM Heng Swee Keat @ India Economic Summit 1st - 4th Oct 2019

The first leg Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) and Finance Minister, Mr Heng Swee Keat, was in India to Co-Chair India Economic Summit and strengthen India-Singapore bilateral relations. In his first visit to India in the capacity as DPM of Singapore, Mr Heng arrived in New Delhi on an official visit from October 1- 4, 2019. DPM Heng, who also holds the portfolio of Finance, was in India as co-chair of the closing session of the World Economic Forum (WEF) Indian Economic Summit (IES). He also met with Prime Minister Modi and senior officials of the Indian government with regard to bilateral ties between the two countries.

At the Opening Plenary, of the Indian Economic Summit, DPM Heng spoke on the need for governments, businesses and communities to come together to create solutions for the global commons. During his session on "From Digital Divide to Digital Dividends", he stressed the importance of citizen-centricity and digital literacy to enable citizens and businesses to succeed in the digital age.

DPM Heng called on the Prime Minister Narendra Modi, for discussions on bilateral relations. Both, DPM Heng and PM Modi reaffirmed the strong, broad-based and future-oriented relationship between Singapore and India, underpinned by frequent high-level exchanges and robust cooperation across various sectors. They also discussed India's social and economic transformation,



Panel discussion in New Delhi (Photo: MCI / Fyrol)

DPM Heng highlighted the opportunities between ASEAN and South Asia and the benefits that would accrue with both regions working together...potential areas of collaboration including infrastructure, digitalisation, logistics, air services, trade facilitation, and tourism.

how technology has changed the way governments provide services and reach out to citizens, and areas for further collaboration, including infrastructure, FinTech, research and innovation, as well as tourism.

DPM Heng also had met with Minister of Finance and Minister of Corporate Affairs, Nirmala Sitharaman. Discussions between the two focused on regional and global economic developments, with both agreeing on the importance of countries working together to address common challenges.

In his interactions with Minister of Railways and Minister of Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal, DPM Heng highlighted the opportunities between ASEAN and South Asia and the benefits that would accrue with both regions working together. Both ministers also spoke about the potential areas of collaboration including infrastructure, digitalisation, logistics, air services, trade facilitation, and tourism. DPM Heng also paid tribute to Mahatma Gandhi at Rajghat on 2nd October 2019.



India's PM Narendra Modi, Minister Ong Ye Kung, NTU President Subra Suresh and India's High Commissioner Jawed Asraf (Source: NTU Coverage Newsletter)

Singapore's Education Minister Ong Ye Kung Visits India for Singapore-India Joint Hackathon Award

28th - 30th Sep 2019

Singapore's Education Minister Ong Ye Kung visited India to participate in the awards ceremony for the 2nd Singapore-India Joint Hackathon, presided over by PM Modi, on 30th September 2019, in Chennai, Tamil Nadu.

In September 28th-30th 2019, 120 university students from India and Singapore grouped into 20 teams participated in the 2nd Singapore-India Joint Hackathon held in Chennai to develop solutions to challenges in education, healthcare, and green energy over 36 hours. Minister Ong Ye Kung noted that such hackathons - where students collaborate to come up with solutions to real-life challenges in education, healthcare and clean energy - show how institutes of higher learning are becoming more experiential.

Addressing participants of the India-Singapore hackathon in Chennai, Education Minister Ong Ye highlighted how India and Singapore enjoy a robust economic cooperation, by pointing out that how over 8,000 Indian companies operating in Singapore and hundreds of thousands of skilled manpower from India working in Singapore, have been contributing to the country's economic growth.

Minister Ong shared that, the comprehensive economic cooperation agreement between the two countries had been upgraded in June last year indicating the strengthening of economic ties. He believed that that Singapore and India should consider internship exchanges between their universities, noting that the Indian tech and fintech sectors are very vibrant and the Indian Institutes of Technology produce top-notch talent.

Minister Ong also visited Anna University's Tamil Virtual Academy, a major resource hub for teaching the language digitally through videos and virtual classrooms. At the end of his day visit, while briefing reporters Minister Ong pointed out that Singaporean universities are also doing well, and both sides understand the importance of having cross-cultural experiences.

India and Singapore Stand Tall on Bilateral Trade & Investment



On his first official visit to Singapore as Prime Minister, HE Narendra Modi met 30 senior most and most prominent CEOs from Singapore for a free and frank interaction at an event organised by the Indian High Commission in Singapore

Singapore is India's leading trade and investment partner in ASEAN and Indian firms have stepped up their sourcing of funds from Singapore for conducting their global operations

"FDI from India for the period Jan 2019 to Nov 2019, US\$3.2 billion to Singapore saw financial, insurance and business services, wholesale, retail trade, restaurants and hotels and construction being some of the top investment sectors. Tata Steel is the top investor here with an investment amount of US\$1.7 billion."

Singapore is the leading source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and is among the largest sources of External Commercial Borrowings (ECB) and Foreign Portfolio Investment. Along this bilateral trade has also expanded after the conclusion of the **Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA)** in 2005, from US\$6.7 billion in FY 2004-05 to US\$27.85 billion in 2018-19 (see accompanying box story).

CECA Contribution

The India-Singapore CECA has four key components:

- (1) A free trade agreement (FTA) in goods
- (2) An arrangement for boosting trade in services, including financial services
- (3) A package to promote investment flows and provide mutual investment protection
- (4) A new agreement for avoiding double taxation.

CECA also includes Mutual Recognition Agreements on quality certification of goods and services, liberalized visa rules for professionals, and undertakings to co-operate on several sectors like Customs, dispute settlement, intellectual property rights, education and e-commerce.

The CECA also resulted in the signing of a protocol amending the DTAA (Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement). Laying out the duties and obligations of the two countries in the above fields, CECA also provides for dispute settlement procedures and recourse to arbitration in certain contingencies.

Annexes to the CECA set out detailed information including a list of products for tariff reduction/elimination, certification and testing as well schedules on specific

In Facts & Figures

🌐 Singapore takes up a huge chunk of FDI to India as in Fiscal Year 2018-19 (1st April to 31st March) FDI flows from Singapore were to the tune of US\$ 16.23 billion, out of India's total FDI receipts of US\$44.37 billion.

🌐 In fiscal 2019-20, total inflow until October 2019 was US\$5.94 billion. Cumulative FDI from Singapore into India (April 2000 to October 2019) is US\$89 billion, accounting for 20% of total inflows into India during that period.

🌐 The outward Indian FDI to Singapore was US\$67.14 billion (April 2000 – November 2019) out of which about US\$2 billion was invested in FY 2019-20 till October 2019, making Singapore one of the top destinations for Indian investments.

🌐 Nearly 80% of India's ECBs and a majority of Rupee denominated external bonds are listed in Singapore.

commitments. The implementation of CECA is periodically reviewed by the two Governments and the closure of the first Review was announced on 1 October 2007.

Major Players from Singapore

Singapore companies continue to maintain interest in India's real estate and urban sector. **Surbana Jurong** has won a contract in Gujarat to build 15,000 affordable homes. **Keppel Land** has signed a contract



At the Singapore Symposium 2019 (above from left): • Singapore's then Minister for Home Affairs and Law, Mr K Shanmugam and currently Senior Minister, urged India to embark on greater economic cooperation with ASEAN. • Mr Nitin Gadkari, Hon'ble Minister of Road Transport and Highways; and Minister of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, Government of India and Mr S Iswaran, Hon'ble Minister for Communications and Information & Minister-in-charge of Trade Relations, Singapore speaking at the session 'India and Singapore: Partners in a Connected World'. • Dr S Jaishankar, Minister of External Affairs, Government of India at the 12th India – Singapore Strategic Dialogue with Ambassador Ong Keng Yong, Executive Deputy Chairman, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University; and Ambassador-at-Large, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore

with Rustomjee Group to build a 54-hectare township in Mumbai-Thane area. **Capital-and-Ascendas, Singbridge and Mapletree** are making significant investments in the logistics sector.

Major Players from India

For the period, Jan 2019 to November 2019, US\$3.2 billion was the total outward FDI to Singapore with financial, insurance and business services, wholesale, retail trade, restaurants and hotels and construction being some of the top investment sectors. **Tata Steel** is the top investor with an investment figure of US\$1.7 billion.

Over 80 % of listed offshore bonds by Indian issuers are listed on the Singapore Exchange (SGX). Singapore-based investors have Assets Under Management (AUM) valued at over US\$100 billion in India. **Temas-ek Holding**, a Singapore Government Fund, has invested US\$400 million in the National Infrastructure Investment Fund of India in 2018, following the announcement during PM Modi's 2018 visit.

Indian companies are increasingly using Singapore for raising funds, particularly for global operations. At least nine Indian banks are operating in Singapore, this includes **Bank of India, Indian Overseas Bank, UCO Bank, Indian Bank, Axis Bank, State Bank of India, ICICI, EXIM Bank and Bank of Baroda**.

Both SBI and ICICI have been granted Qualifying Full Bank (QFB) status with retail operations. Given the positive enabling environment provided by Singapore and its competitive tax regime it's no surprise that its encouraging Indian companies to set up both manufacturing and servicing operations in Singapore and also base their regional headquarters for the Asia Pacific regional operations here.

With the strong air connectivity (15-16 cit-

ies) and the presence of a large Indian diaspora, Singapore is emerging as a key offshore hub for corporate India. The Indian corporate presence in Singapore has also grown significantly and there are about 9,000 "Indian" companies registered in Singapore.

Among them include six PSU (Indian Public Sector Undertaking or Enterprise), nine banks, **India Tourism, CII, FICCI, Air India, Jet Airways** have their offices in Singapore.

More than 440 companies from Singapore are registered in India. 2 banks, **Enterprise Singapore (ES), Economic Development Board (EDB) and Singapore Tourism Board** have their offices in India.

The **India-Singapore CEO Forum** was launched in November 2018. DBS Bank announced the launch of its locally incorporated subsidiary, **DBS Bank India (DBIL)** in March 2019.

At the time of PM Narendra Modi's official visit to Singapore in November 2015, a joint declaration was signed between the two nations which elevated India-Singapore relations to a Strategic Partnership. PM Modi invited Singapore companies in a bigger way and assured them that the Government was committed to making it easier to do business in India and described Singapore as "Incubator to India's laboratory" for India's new goal to turn itself into a Global Manufacturing Hub.

The conclusion of the ASEAN-INDIA Free Trade Agreement (AIFTA) in Trades in Goods (TIG) in 2009 also helped in boosting India's economic and commercial ties with Singapore. India's imports from Singapore in FY 18-19 were US\$16.28 billion and exports from India US\$11.57 billion. Bilateral trade in FY 2019-20 (till December 2019) was US\$17.9 billion with exports to Singapore constituting US\$7.1 billion.

India and Singapore continue to engage on several fronts to continue to cement their relationship and to jointly work together to bring the benefits that accrue to the larger ASEAN region— be it with regard to greater economic and trade ties as discussed at the **Singapore Symposium 2019** on the issue of 'India's Engagement with a Fast- Growing ASEAN', or the spin-off from India's participation in Asia's premier International Maritime Defence Exhibition & Conference (IMDEX) ASIA at the Singapore Maritime Expo or India's Minister of External Affairs Dr S Jaishankar's focus on the **12th India- Singapore Strategic Dialogue**.

Indian High Commissioner to Singapore HE Jawed Ashraf hosted a round table to which were invited 30 senior-most and most prominent CEOs from Singapore. It proved to be an excellent occasion for a free and frank interaction between the Prime Minister and the CEOs who represented different sectors such as agriculture, agro-processing, water, urban infrastructure management, port and airport management. The round table kicked off with the Prime Minister himself seeking the views of these top CEOs, many of whom have already invested in India, Singapore is India's largest investor with \$63 billion. Immense appreciation was expressed by the CEOs over the number of reforms that he has taken personally, which had, in fact, made a marked difference in the ease of doing business in India.

At the **Singapore Symposium August, 2019** with the theme 'India's Engagement with a Fast- Growing ASEAN', Singapore's then Minister for Home Affairs and Law, Mr K Shanmugam, urged India, who is the regional grouping's seventh largest trading partner, to embark on greater economic cooperation.

Boost in Defence Bilaterals



Important strides have been taken under Indian High Commissioner Jawed Ashraf's watch, in India-Singapore defense ties in the ambit of the two country's bilateral arrangements

India and Singapore have nurtured a longstanding and comprehensive partnership in the arena of defense. The scope of this critical partnership includes: Annual Ministerial and Secretary level dialogues; Staff level talks between the three wings of Armed forces; training of Singapore Army and Air force in India every year; annual exercises including India's longest uninterrupted naval exercise with any other country; ship visits from Navy and Coast Guard. Singapore also participates in IONS (Indian Ocean Naval Symposium) and the multilateral Exercise MILAN (multilateral naval exercise) hosted by Indian Navy.

Test Facilities under the Defence Testing Infrastructure Scheme of India.

In 2019 Singapore also hosted the 26th edition of **Singapore-India Maritime Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX)** in May 19, in which the mighty destroyer of Indian Navy – *INS Kolkata*, the Fleet Support Ship – *INS Shakti* and P8i Maritime Patrol Aircraft participated. India on its part played host to the Singapore Army and Singapore Air Force during their annual exercises in India. In April 2019 **Exercise Bold Kurukshetra** for Singapore Army Armoured Formations was held at Babina, Jhansi.



(Top): Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi accompanied by Senior Minister of State for Defence Dr Mohamad Maliki Bin Osman, being welcomed on board the Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN)'s Formidable-class Frigate RSS Formidable during his visit to RSS Singapura - Changi Naval Base (Source: Mindef.gov.sg)

(Above): HE Jawed Ashraf, High Commissioner of India to Singapore (3rd from left), DCNS Vice Admiral MS Pawar (5th from left) along with officers of Republic of Singapore Navy visiting INS Kolkata during IMDEX Asia-2019

(Right): Defence Dialogue co-chaired by Defence Ministers Rajnath Singh and Dr Ng Eng Hen

Singapore's membership of IORA (Indian-Ocean Rim Association) and India's membership of ADDM+ (ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting - Plus) provide an important platform for both countries to coordinate positions on regional issues of mutual concern.

New Areas of Cooperation

In the year 2019 all these dialogues progressed very satisfactorily and culminated in the highly successful **Defence Ministers' Dialogue** in November with the visit of India's Defence Minister, Rajnath Singh, to Singapore. While these series of dialogues saw consolidation of ongoing defence cooperation activities in the field of training, joint exercises and information sharing, they also led to identification of new areas of cooperation and collaboration such as HADR (Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief), Submarine Rescue Support, Cyber Security and Space in which there is much scope for both countries to work together.

During the Defence Ministers' Dialogue, India conveyed its readiness to allow Singapore to conduct missile test firing at Chandipur Integrated Test Range. The two sides agreed to enhance maritime information exchange, intensify HADR cooperation, explore cooperation in areas like geo-spatial data, cyber security and setting up of Joint





(From left): Visit by India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh to the RSS *Stalwart* at Changi Naval Base and Sembawang Air Base

Trilateral Maritime Exercise

New developments include the inaugural **Trilateral Maritime Exercise between India, Singapore and Thailand (SITMEX)** which was hosted by India off Port Blair in the Andaman Sea in September 2019. Indian Naval Ship *Sagardhwani* visited Singapore in August 2019 to promote scientific collaboration between Indian agencies including DRDO (Defence Research and Development Organisation) and Singaporean agencies.

The year 2020 will see the defence relations between both countries poised to be further strengthened with several new agreements on the anvil and a very warm people-to-people connect.



PM Modi Visits Changi Naval Base

2nd June 2018

Prime Minister Modi on his Singapore tour for bilateral talks and the Shangri-La Keynote address in 2018 also visited the Changi Naval Base indicating the strongest, uninterrupted and longest navy to navy exercises that have abided with Singapore down the decades. The visit was aimed at further strengthening the India-Singapore maritime ties. The PM also briefly interacted with the sailors on board the *INS Satpura*.

India Coast Guard Calls on Singapore

9th Dec 2019

The India High Commission welcomed DIG Jyotindra Singh, Commander of the Coast Guard ship *Shaurya*. The Coast Guard regularly calls in Singapore and elsewhere in this region supporting India's role in maritime security in the Indo Pacific Region. Changi Naval Base in Singapore is always a good host and the *Shaurya* boarding team here underwent simulated boarding training with Singapore Police Coast Guard and shared best practices to further enhance coordination between the two maritime agencies



4th India-Singapore Defence Ministers' Dialogue

19-20th Nov 2019

Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh was accorded a warm welcome by Singapore on his two-day visit for the 4th India-Singapore Defence Ministers' Dialogue, aimed at building on the defence relations between both countries. The Minister was received by Brig Gen Gan Siow Huang, Chief of Staff-Air Staff, Republic of Singapore Air Force at Sembawang Air Base. Mr Rajnath Singh and Dr Ng Eng Hen jointly co-chaired the meeting Defence Ministers' Dialogue that saw a meeting of minds and new areas of cooperation within the already strong relations that exist between the two countries. In the course of his visit Mr Rajnath Singh took a familiarisation air sortie in a Super Puma Helicopter of Republic of Singapore Air Force and interacted with the RSAF aircrew. He also boarded *RSS Stalwart* during his stay. The Defence Minister also met Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat, and they both reaffirmed the commitment to further deepen this strategic partnership for a stable, peaceful and prosperous future for the region.

The Arts & Culture **Connect**



Ground-breaking India-Singapore joint production of Anushasanam the Cosmic Flow of Yoga at ASEAN-India PBD 2018

In the course of his three year tenure as Indian High Commissioner to Singapore, Mr Jawed Ashraf has vigorously used the arts and culture platform to promote and strengthen the people-to-people ties between the two nations

In HE Jawed Ashraf's view one of the most important aspects of his work in Singapore has revolved around the great Indian diaspora residing in the island-nation. The High Commissioner shares how important it has been for him and his team to keep that connectivity strong and vibrant. In fact, he is of the opinion that a very unique feature of Singapore, which makes it even more interesting, is that it is home to one of the best and most accomplished and talented Indian diaspora in the world. According to his experiences here it is one of the places in the world where India, or Indian-ness, doesn't seem supplemented – it appears to be organically part of Singapore. And that, he feels, is what makes a big difference. He reiterates that it has been a very important factor for him and his team at the High Commission. "We have been able to develop a network of resources, talent and professional organizations within the diaspora, and outside, and to work with them as a team, and not as a community working as a set of people outside, but together," says he.

Ethnic Indians constitute about 9.1 % or around 3.5 lakhs of the resident population

of 3.9 million in Singapore. In addition, of the 1.6 million foreigners residing in Singapore, about 21 % or around 3.5 lakhs are Indian expatriates holding Indian passports, mostly serving in financial services, IT, construction and marine sectors. Singapore has a sizeable community of Indian students as well as the highest concentration of IT and IIM alumni in any one city outside India.



It is Mr Ashraf's belief that people-to-people ties are the binding force between nations and that cultural ties will always be a source of great strength to this partnership between India and Singapore. He points out to the enriching and highly rewarding aspect

of the strong Indian element in Singapore's multicultural fabric. So much so that faiths, festivals, food, performing arts, languages have become a shared heritage. As cultural events pave the way for greater interaction Singapore has joyfully emerged as a nursery of Indian performing arts. Singapore's large Indian diaspora through a number of cultural societies and Singapore's official support, has sustained a high level of cultural activity in Singapore supported by ICCR and the Indian Mission.



ASEAN-India Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD)

6-7 January 2018

A milestone in the cultural partnership between the two nations was the ASEAN-India Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) held in Singapore on 6-7 January 2018 as part of commemoration of 25 years of ASEAN-India Partnership, with the theme, "Ancient Route, New Journey" and showcasing ASEAN Indian diaspora talent and expertise. The 16 thematic sessions covering business, technology, connectivity to culture, youth and diaspora attracted an average of 3,000 participants at any given time at the venue. Additionally the event featured a slew of other activities on literature, cinema, an art exhibition, Yoga and Ayurveda conference. The competitions for youth on essays, poetry (English, Hindi, Tamil), classical dance and music, photo competitions and online Grand Challenge around PM's flagship initiatives received enthusiastic response. "The Asean-India Pravasi Divas is still remembered vividly. We are still surprised as to how much we were able to achieve in those 2 days... What an extraordinary breadth of activities was covered in that time," shared the High Commissioner.



PM Modi Unveils Gandhi Memorial Plaque

2nd June 2018

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Emeritus Senior Minister (EMS) of the Republic of Singapore, Goh Chok Tong jointly unveiled the memorial plaque at the Clifford Pier, a historic site dedicated to Mahatma Gandhi, whose ashes, in part, were immersed here in the sea in 1948. The unveiling of the Gandhi plaque by PM Modi was another important milestone highlighted the sacred thread that connects India and Singapore pointed out Mr Ashraf.



Prime Minister Modi launches Kala Sangam Crafts Platform

2nd June 2018

In the presence of Mdm. Grace Foo, Minister of Culture, the Hon'ble PM Narendra Modi inaugurated 'Kala Sangam', a permanent crafts platform at the Indian Heritage Centre, a joint initiative of High Commission of India and Indian Heritage Centre, to invite Indian artisans in rotation for a month each to demonstrate their craft and make and sell their products. Funds have been set aside to pay for their air travel, daily allowance and lodging in Singapore. A visit here is a must -do if you want to see what Singapore has done to preserve and nurture Indian heritage.



HC celebrates International Day of Yoga

21 June 2019

The 5th International Day of Yoga was celebrated on 21 June 2019 through 200 yoga sessions and attended by around 8500 people. Seminars on traditional Indian medicine were organised with participation of experts from India and Singapore

ARTS & CULTURE - UNIQUELY OURS



Indian Heritage Centre's Exhibition on history, culture and contributions of the Tamil Community

22nd June 2019

It may be common knowledge that the Tamil community has been present in Singapore for 200 years now, what is not so well known is that Tamil connections with Singapore and the region can be traced to more than 600 years before the year of Raffles' arrival. The exhibition explored these lesser known narrative through more than 230 objects from local and international collections as well as 3D holographic showcases that bring the past to life.



Sikh Community Harmony Walk

20th August 2019

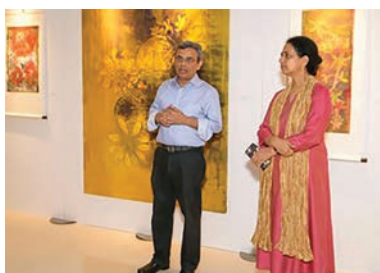
Singapore has a vibrant Sikh community of about 12,000 members. The first Sikhs made an appearance in the island-nation back in the 19th century. They have made an enormous contribution to public life, economy, culture and diverse professions in Singapore. The Community organisations sustain and nurture the community, cultural and spiritual life of the Sikhs. As part of the 550th Birth Anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, the Singapore Sikh community organised Community Harmony Walk for inter-racial harmony. Altogether 500 people from different places of worship joined Singapore's Senior Minister of State Chee Hong Tat and senior India High Commission officers on the Harmony Walk. A Sikh Heritage Day and exhibition was organized in June 2019, which was inaugurated by Her Excellency Mdm Halimah Yacob, President of Singapore.



Expressions of the Earth

16th Nov 2019

The High Commission of India, Singapore presented a special showcase of art inspired by nature and interpreted very differently by two Singapore based artists of Indian origin, one a painter, Kavita Issar Batra, and another a ceramic artist, Vinata Goswamy. Their work was presented in a one-day 'Open House' at India House. Their artworks, while rooted in their origins and influenced by where they live, transcend borders and point to the common humanity that binds.



Amjad Ali Khan Enthralls at Confluence - Samaagam Concert

23rd January 2020

A concert with support of the Mission was showcased with the musical collaboration of Indian Sarod Maestro Amjad Ali Khan and the Singapore Chinese Orchestra. It was the first time that in the island-nation, two great traditions - Indian and Chinese, which have had a such a deep influence in shaping Singapore, with their classical musical heritage - were coming together, revealed the High Commissioner.



Workers in Dormitories Assured of Commitment to Help

Following the announcement by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on the launch of even tighter measures to control the spread of COVID-19 (dubbed Circuit Breaker), the Minister for Communication and Information, the Minister of State for Manpower and Information as well as India's High Commissioner to Singapore called on Indian and Foreign workers at their dormitories to assure them their health, livelihood and welfare are also of great concern to the Singapore government



On Sunday 5th April, the Indian High Commissioner to Singapore, HE Jawed Ashraf, accompanied the Singapore Minister of Communication and Information, Mr S. Iswaran and the Minister of State for Manpower, Mr Zaqu Mohamad, on a visit to the foreign workers dormitories in Singapore to talk to Indian and other foreign workers there. The 30-minute talk shared the High Commissioner was to: "Assure the workers that Singapore will take care of them during the four-week elevated restriction. There are tens of thousands Indian workers here and he has assured them the Indian High Commission is there 24/7 to help." The Singapore ministers and the High Commissioner told workers measures are in place to take care of their welfare, health and livelihood.

Help for Stranded

The High Commissioner Jawed Ashraf said that since the outset of the outbreak in Singapore the Indian High Commission here has faced several challenges in dealing with Indian citizens among which included 110 Indian citizens stranded in transit in Singapore just before India imposed a lock down from 23rd March 2020. The High Commissioner also said: "We had to take care of their food and conveniences inside Changi for one to two days and make arrangements for their evacuation to India. We received great support from Changi and Singapore Airlines."

"Furthermore, he said: "Beyond that, there are hundreds who are stranded here. Around 1,200 have registered with us online. Many are those whose EPs/DPs have been cancelled. There were others who were on a short term visit pass or were here as tourists. There are hundreds of students here, too, who would like to but are unable to

return to India. We are working with Singapore Government to extend their stay till there are flights for them to return to India. Meanwhile, we are taking care of accommodation and food for those who are in need. In this, we have also received support from the Indian community and places of worship. We are available round the clock on phone, email and social media to assist and counsel the stranded Indians here."

Staying Safe and Healthy

In the meantime, the High Commissioner said the directive for citizens here is: "Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi has exhorted everyone to remain where s/he is till travel restrictions are in place. This will help India is breaking the chain of contamination and reduce the risk of infection that comes from travel. He also asked Indian citizens wherever they are to observe local advisory and strictly practice social distancing and hygiene norms. An interesting dimension to his communication is encouraging people to practice yoga to deal with mental stress and to stay healthy and active. Yoga and Ayurveda are generally helpful in strengthening immunity."

"We are working closely to address the immediate challenges, including nationals of both countries and maintaining security of supply lines, especially on essentials. This is also a time for us to exchange notes on best practices in dealing with COVID 19. I should mention the special gesture by Temasek Foundation of sponsoring COVID 19 test kits capable of 30,000 tests that was sent to India on March 30. More is to follow through purchases. The Indian Mission in Singapore is involved in sourcing and arranging supply of critical items such as personal protection equipment and test kits," shared the High Commissioner.



India's People's Curfew Extended to 21-Day Lockdown



The People's Curfew was originally a symbol of the country's effort, self-restraint, and resolve to fulfil its duty in service of the nation and prepared it for the upcoming challenges of the lockdown instituted on 25th March 2020

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi made an impassioned plea to the nation to join in a successful voluntary "people's curfew" Sunday on 22nd March 2020. However, by Tuesday 24th March 2020, the Indian Government announced a total lockdown limiting the movement of the 1.3 billion population after the number of confirmed corona virus patients reached about 500 people. By the middle of April the figure has climbed to over 12,300 confirmed cases.

As it turned out the 14-hour voluntary People's Curfew was a precursor to greater challenges ahead for India. PM Modi said it was "A symbol of our effort, of our self-restraint, and our resolve to fulfil our duty in service of the nation. The success of a people's curfew on 22nd March, and the experience gained from it, will also prepare us for our upcoming challenges."

On the day of the people's curfew of 22nd of March 2020 he also wanted the nation to express gratitude to everyone who has been selflessly serving others such as doctors, nurses, hospital and sanitation workers, transport and home delivery agents etc. He wanted everyone on Sunday at 5pm to give a 5-minute standing ovation: "We clap our hands, beat our plates, ring our bells to boost their morale and salute their service."

He also prepared the nation that: "This global pandemic is also going to have a wide-ranging impact on the economy. Keeping in mind the economic challenges arising from the Corona virus, the government has decided to set up a COVID-19 Economic Response Task Force under the leadership of the Finance Minister."

Shafina Mahesh on the Rising Popularity of Women's Cricket

by Nallur Shreyas



Shafina Mahesh (above & inset) behind the stumps as she collects the ball (Source: Singapore Cricket Association)

SHIKHAR had the wonderful opportunity to talk to the captain of the Singapore Women's Cricket team. Shafina Mahesh shared her views on the role and future of women in the sport. She's 21 and working hard with the team as they have aspirations to represent Singapore at the World Cup alongside other major cricketing nations

Tell us about yourself and how you got into cricket?

Well, I am a wicket-keeper, a batsman as well as captain. I was introduced to the sport through my father, Mr Mahesh Kumar, a former Singapore national cricket player, when I was 10 years old. He was already playing and coaching when I first started and I remember I used to go down to the Kallang cricket ground to watch games and it just so happened that on one of the days, the women's team was training. I still remember it clearly.

Some of the senior players approached me and asked me to train with them. Being a sports-enthusiast myself, I agreed. That's when my journey began. I started attending training sessions regularly and eventually participated in my very first international competition, which was the Asian Cricket Council's Under-19 Tournament in 2010. At that time, I barely knew how to do anything apart from running and stopping the balls. I was playing netball for my school then, which is probably why running was something that I was good at. After the tournament, I think it was the strong circle of cricket lovers I had around me that influenced me to continue to practise hard and play cricket till this day.

Why do you enjoy playing the game?

Well first and foremost, I like it because cricket teaches me a couple of values that I religiously inculcate into my daily life. Patience is one such value that I have learnt to build up throughout the years of playing cricket. As I constantly find ways to improve myself, it takes a lot of fortitude and endurance, both physically and mentally.

Next is the adrenaline rush I feel when I play, especially during a match that is really tight and could go either way. To me that's the best kind of cricket that can be played. Just being present on the field and anticipating the ball to come to me as a fielder or playing the shots when I'm batting, nothing can top that feeling.

Possibly the best reason though why I play is the friends I've made and experiences I've shared while playing the game. I managed to interact with new people and fortunately be blessed with really amazing team mates. Not only was I able to make friends of my own nationality, but also from all around the globe. No doubt, cricket has created some of my greatest memories in my 21 years.

At such a young age, being the captain of the national women's team must be very demanding. What challenges did you face to get to where you are today?

I was given the responsibility to be the captain just last year. I am still in the process of learning and trying to change the 'ecosystem' of women's cricket, in the local context at least. Of course, being given the new and important role as captain, expectations of mine and the team's performances naturally will be raised. As a player myself, I constantly find ways to improve in the technical aspects of the game I specialise in-wicket keeping and batting.

With regards to the team, I will always make the effort to motivate the players and try my best to get everyone together and train as a team. Sometimes, I do ask for advice from the men's team captain, Amjad, as he has faced similar situations in his time as captain.

Another challenge for me was the crucial decisions I had to make along the way as I started to become even more serious about the sport. Last year when I was appointed the new captain, I was given the opportunity to go to India, the land of cricket, to the National Cricket Academy, Bangalore (NCA). As a captain it was a great opportunity for me to gain experience so that when I came back, I could share what I'd learnt and seen with the players here.

As a polytechnic graduate, I wanted to further my education in university. I had been accepted into university but since the trip was a month long, I had to postpone my admission so that I could go on the trip and gain all the expertise I could to share with my own team mates.

As a captain, trying to expand the pool of players we have is the main obstacle I face. In Singapore, cricket is not so very popular with the general public so the process of recruiting players poses a tough challenge. We are still working on this with the association, as well as amongst ourselves. We strongly hope that the pool of players will expand in time to come.

Do you feel Singapore provides enough attention to the sport of cricket? What could improve?

Frankly, Singapore could provide more

attention to the sport. Yes, we do have a decent number of people who play in Singapore, especially in men's cricket. However, just in general, awareness and exposure of the game can be improved and build on. It is a rapidly growing sport in countries outside Singapore.

"The adrenaline rush I feel when I play, especially during a match that is really tight and could go either way - to me that's the best kind of cricket that can be played."



(Top): Shafina with fellow course mates at the National Cricket Academy in Bangalore (Source www.espnccricinfo.com / Shaifina Mahesh). (Above): Shafina with Smriti Mandhana from India's Women's Cricket Team

We need to improve the support system with the help of Sports SG, who are the main sports body promoting sports in Singapore. This support system can include permanent professional coaches for both the women's and men's teams. Currently there are short-term contract coaches who train us for international tournaments. Another area could be getting physiotherapists who specialise in the sport of cricket, as recovery and fitness of the players regularly needs to be monitored to achieve optimal results.

In your opinion, what is the general perception of women's Cricket in Singapore, or even around the globe?

I am optimistic as it is definitely growing in popularity in other countries around the

world. But Singapore has not been able to achieve the same level of popularity as these countries for women's cricket.

Globally, it is on the rise and was boosted recently with the T20 Women's World Cup Final in Australia. It had the largest number of spectators in women's cricket history where major powerhouses, India and Australia, faced each other for the title in March. I hope it will continue to grow especially in Singapore and the public recognise the quality of cricket for both genders.

Where do you see women's cricket in 10 years? And where do you see yourself in that vision?

In a decade's time I would very much like to see women's cricket be in the Olympics and every other international sporting competition. I envision us to qualify for the World Cup and engaging Test-playing countries regularly. Of course, it will take

effort but this could definitely be a feasible plan to work on especially considering that our neighbouring country, Thailand, participated in the recent T20 World Cup for the first time in history and can really motivate other countries in Southeast Asia to try harder.

Any thoughts on the recent Women's T20 World Cup in Australia?

This whole Women's T20 World Cup 2020 campaign was very successful. The main team I personally supported was Australia. On the side, Thailand was also another team that I sincerely wished the best for. To see them play at that level and give other big teams a tough challenge was such an inspiration. Thailand is the one team that we personally knew some of the players and it was such a proud moment for us to see them play and do well in the tournament. I have to say Shafali Verma from the Indian team was one of the most promising players and everyone can look forward to her performing consistently well in the future. At the age of only 16 years old, she has already made a name for herself. This definitely serves as an inspiration for the young players who are interested in furthering their careers in the sport.

If you could give a piece of advice to aspiring women cricketers in Singapore, what would it be?

Great things can come when you step out of your comfort zone. Do come join us to grow women's cricket together!

Amritsar: Spirited Narratives

by Raneer Sahaney

Photos by Incredible India Tourism and Punjab Tourism

Amritsar's roots go back to the time when Guru Nanak, the first Sikh Guru, came here to visit the healing waters of a tank (later christened the sacred Amrit Sarovar) about 25 km from Lahore in undivided Punjab



Amritsar Golden Temple

Head wrapped in an embroidered chunni, the gentle intonations of her prayers from the Sikh Holy Scriptures in her shaky hand seem to make a mockery of the bedlam that prevails around her at Amritsar station. It's also an iconic moment for you as you encounter the vigorous spiritualism that defines Punjab's most sacred hub — Amritsar, which draws its sustenance from the Golden Temple—the holiest shrine of Sikhism.

If you are flying into the city, the gilded dome of the Golden Temple, stands out amidst the crush of buildings that reach out to its furthestmost expanses having now swallowed up vast swathes of cultivated fields with growing development - surely a telling response to its importance as another avatar as the most important trade and industrial centre of the state. Guru Nanak, who established the

Sikh religion, welcomed people of all faiths to find succor in his message of peace and brotherhood. It was the third Sikh Guru, Amar Dass who moved the Sikh headquarters to this site from Goindwal. Amar Dass' son-in-law Ram Dass, later the fourth Sikh Guru, began a village settlement here. In time when the Amrit Sarovar started attracting crowds of pilgrims, it lent the city its name.



Holla Maholla - an annual Sikh festival held in March in concurrence with the festival of Holi

Harmandir Sahib - The Golden Temple

As last rays of the setting sun transform the pool of nectar to honey gold, savour the sweet nuances of gurbani wafting over the Golden Temple's revered precincts. Harimandir and Akal Takht –Twin Pillars of Strength, are the two core structures of the Golden Temple complex . Being the spiritual and temporal head of Sikhism, it is from this vital core that the temple retains its importance as the most sacred shrine of the Sikh religion.

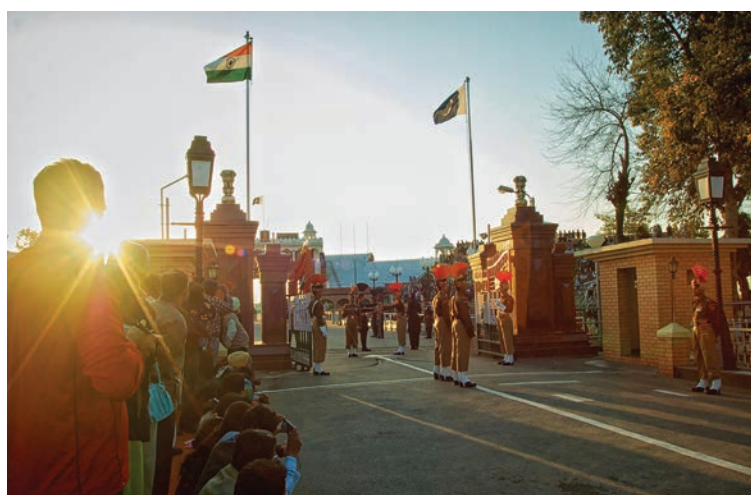


It was fifth Guru, Arjan Das, who conceived the temple (Harmandir Sahib/ the Darbar Sahib) on a little island in the middle of the sacred Amrit Sarovar. The ancient jujube, where Bhai Budha Baba sat while directing its construction tree, has witnessed much over its four and half centuries. Childless women worship here believing the tree has special powers. To the eastern bank of the sarovar stands the Dukh Bhanjani Beri, marking the spot where the original natural pool was located. Baba Deep Singh's shrine, located on the south-east-side of the tank, symbolises the Baba's defense of the Temple against Ahmed Shah Abdali.

A victorious Maharaja Ranjit Singh, (taking over the city from the Bhangi misal chiefs led by Mai Sukhan, the widow of the Bhangi chief Gulab Singh) having bathed in its sacred waters arranged that the Harmandir be rebuilt in marble and covered with gold leaf. Connected to the shore by a causeway, Harmandir Sahib was consecrated on August 16, 1604,

when the Adi Granth was first installed. The Granth Sahib is not just a book of scriptures, for the Sikhs it is a living teacher (Guru). The emotionally charged procession of the Guru Granth Sahib in its bejeweled palanquin, along the causeway over the darkened waters of the Amrit Sarovar, is an evocative daily ritual.

The four open doors of Harmandir Sahib, through which all are free to enter the sanctum, are testimony to Guru Nanak's teachings. Akal Takht, linked by a causeway to the Harmandir but in the same complex, was built in 1606. It was the hub for all secular matters dealt with by the gurus. It



Amritsar Wagah Border

also marks the transition of Sikhism from a peaceful religion to a military tradition initiated by sixth Guru, Hargobind, following the death of his father Guru Arjan Dev on the orders of the Mughal Emperor Jahangir. Savour the air of deep devotion and ceremonial splendour at dawn or late night during the beautiful journey of the holy Guru Granth Sahib between the Darbar Sahib and Akal Takht.



Durgiana Temple

Guru Ka Langar

Guru ka Langar, the free community kitchen serving hot meals to people of all faiths, and conducted by devoted volunteers, is one of the many important characteristics of a gurudwara.

Gataka

The traditional Sikh martial arts (Gataka) are conducted on the roof of the Guru Ka Langar and can be witnessed between 8.30 am and 11 pm.

Gobindgarh Fort

Built in 1809, this is a massive structure of limestone and brick with iron-studded gates; it once housed Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Kohinoor Diamond. The fort has undergone massive renovations and hosts a small museum and a sound and light show today.

Jallianwallah Bagh

Steeped in Punjab's turbulent past from the Raj era this is the city's Garden of Sorrow, a memorial of National Importance, which is held sacred for the martyrdom of a peaceful gathering of 20,000 unarmed civilians, including women and children against the controversial Rowlatt Act. A massacre was ordered on the gathering by General Dyer's troops. Look for the commemorative eternal flame here, walk through the small museum and wend your way to the original boundary walls that have been preserved with the thick pockmarks of the bullets from the massacre.

Partition Museum

A spanking new addition to the precincts of the heritage attractions of the Golden Temple, the Partition Museum showcases the retelling of lessons in history of the horrific days of partition of India into two countries.



Gurudwara Shri Anandpur Sahib

Durgiani Temple

This 16th century shrine, dedicated to Hindu goddess Durga, is located in the old city. Dussera festivities are celebrated here with great vigour.

The Walks

The Amritsar Heritage Walk offers a moving insight into the atmospheric and historic importance of this 400-year old city. Starting out at the heart of the Old Quarter from the Raj-era Town Hall it ends at the gate of the Golden Temple. Along the way visitors spend moments at the Gurudwara Saragarhi, Darshani Deori, the frescoed Thakurdwara Mandir, the Chowrasti Atari and passageway linking the old mohallas and katras.

Sign up for the Panj Sarovar Yatra, a new initiative that unveils the narrative of the five important sarovars (sacred tanks used for sacramental ablutions and other religious ceremonies) and the evolution of the Sikh faith. Beginning at Sri Santokhsar Sahib Sarovar the trail covers Sri Bibeksar Sahib Sarovar, Sri Ramsar Sahib Sarovar, Sri Kaulsar Sahib Sarovar and ends at that most sacred of Amritsar's sarovars - Sri Amrit Sarovar Sahib.

Culinary Meander

Amritsar's reputation as one of India's most revered foodie destinations, stands unassailed. What could endorse this better than Chef Manjit Gill helming the World Heritage Cuisine Summit & Food Festival at



Gurudwara Sri Tarn Taran Sahib



Jallianwallah Bagh



Wagah Border

The atmospherics are high-octane, the patriotic fervour vigorous, as the changing of the guard ceremony unfolds at sunset at Wagah, the border between India and Pakistan at Attari village. India's BSF (Border Security Force) and Pakistani Rangers performing the high-stepping ceremonial Beating the Retreat accompanied by patriotic songs and lusty shouts from the attendant crowds gathered in the stands to witness this daily ritual.



(Top): Heritage Street. (Middle): Partition Museum. (Above row): Examples of excellent street food (from left) Sarson Da Saag and Amritsar Thali

AMRITSAR

Travel Advice

When you enter the Golden Temple complex keep your head covered at all times. No photography allowed in the Harimandir, but you can take pictures around the parikrama area

GETTING THERE

Air Amritsar's Guru Ramdasjee International Airport. **Rail** Amritsar Junction, well-connected to Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata. Both taxis and autos are easily available at the station

STAY

The city offers accommodation for all budgets.

Qila Gobindgarh in Amritsar in October 2018. The highlights of this world chefs' congress included: tastings of traditional recipes by chefs from 15 countries; plating and display of traditional food by chefs from 40 countries and 20 from India; regional specialties from across India, with a special focus on Amritsar street food, under one roof.

The city was never about five star culture, where food is concerned... It's always been the street food which has been accorded the highest salute because it's clean, fresh, authentic and inexpensive. Check out Novelty and Kanha for their yummy, puri- channa and chola-bhatara; Maqbool Road for its Kulchas, sold out by late noon. Kesar Dhaba for delicious pure vegetarian

food; Katra Sher Singh for the iconic Amritsari Fish and — and chicken at Surjit Chicken House. Dessert must include Katra Ahluwalia's sinful jalebis. Don't miss eating at the daily langar at the Golden Temple.

Amritsar Hop-on-Hop-off Bus Tours

Tour 1: Amritsar- Pick-up near Golden Temple; Stops- Durgiana Temple , Gobindgarh Fort, Khalsa College-GNDU- India Gate-War Hero's Memorial , Shahi Qila, Wagah Border. Dep 10.00 am

Tour 2: Amritsar-Wagah Border-Pick-up near Golden Temple; Stops - Shahi Qila, Retreat Ceremony at Attari Wagah Border. Dep 2.30 pm

COVID-19 Notification

For the duration of the COVID-19 Outbreak many business and retail outlets may be temporarily suspended or travel and quarantine restrictions may be enforced. Please check with the travel advisories issued by the Government of Singapore or enquire with the High Commission of India in Singapore (www.hcsingapore.gov.in) to receive the latest updates when the restrictions on travelling and visiting to India has been eased or lifted.

States for the Union

by Ranee Sahaney

Wedding Destinations in India provide a superb range of gorgeous settings for that very special day for bride and groom



Vedic theme wedding in Goa

The canvas of 'Destination Weddings' in India now incorporates events and excitement for all budgets...be it Goa, Udaipur or even Mumbai, you can leave it all to a dazzling range of resorts. Wedding planners are pulling out all stops to make that special day truly memorable. It starts with the wedding venue to give you and your guests the time of their lives. Given their expertise in hospitality and fine-tuned state-of-the art arrangements for gatherings of all dimensions, leisure resorts are increasingly roped in as willing partners even if you are on a tight budget and still make it special.

India's resplendent natural beauty, its diverse history, heritage and cultural traditions—all have come together seamlessly with today's fast-paced world and conspired to shape some of the most desirable wedding destinations in the world. This fabulous treasure trove of timeless diversity seduces all the senses compelling you to explore even more deeply what delights you best and create memories to shore up a lifetime of wondrous togetherness till those twilight years.



Mandap on a Goa beach

Goa

Sunshine, virgin beaches and exotic resorts offer wedding planners a fabulous opportunity to bring to bear all their experiences to create fairytale weddings in this all year round favourite holiday destination. Not only does the fantastic range of resort properties in Goa offer excellent support for that special day and attendant ceremonies, they are large enough to accommodate wedding guests. And they are pretty adept at theme weddings too so you can leave all the arrangements to them and just enjoy the great day. So whether it's a wedding mandap on the beach, a poolside henna ceremony or a hedonistic bachelor's bash in a Portuguese-styled venue... it's all there for the asking. Package deals on rooms and F&B offer an alluring option for hosting a wedding at these resorts, which can cost a bomb if you are looking at a 'big fat Indian wedding'. Wedding menus too can be as creative and daring as one would wish, whether it's the exotic seafood, a Japanese-style cocktail+dinner or a chocolatier brought in from Switzerland to summon up a superb dessert.

The amazing range of activities on offer in India's top beach destination will give many opportunities for both the bridal parties and those from the groom's side, to enjoy some great 'me time' as well - be it scuba diving, a cruise on the backwaters with close friends, visiting old Goa, a hand at poker or blackjack at one of the offshore casinos in Panjim, a sunset river cruise, a round-up of the heritage hot spots or just browsing in the local markets. Togetherness in a spa...a delicious meal shared together... even the post wedding period can be filled with a lot of fun things to do even before the official honeymoon, here in one of the world's most popular beach holiday hubs.



Elephant ride at Amer Fort in Jaipur, Rajasthan

Udaipur

Its evocative beauty has in the past decade made this erstwhile royal city of the Mewar kings in the state of Rajasthan one of the world's most popular wedding destinations. Though it is well famed for one of the world's most romantic water palaces (now run as a luxurious heritage hotel) there are many other resorts and venues in town to hold the numerous ceremonies linked with a wedding. Savour those offerings of this world of privilege and regal luxury, where guests can also spend time out visiting some of its superb museums (including the one with huge crystal collection, another on vintage cars). The City Palace Museum on the banks of Lake Pichola, shares space with the private residence of the Udaipur Royals; take time to browse around in the atmospheric old bazaar where you can pick up gems and jewellery and some wonderful local handicrafts.



This glittering palace turned heritage hotel in Udaipur harmoniously blending the great cultural heritage of Rajasthan is a beautiful place for social events



Hyderabad

With one of the top global hotel chains making its debut in the city of Nizam, by running one of the world's most magnificent palaces as a luxury hotel, it's no surprise the well-heeled are looking at having a small family wedding here. Wedding planners have been quick to offer this as a unique venue for creating beautiful memories. From the pre-wedding photo shoots to the lavish reception, everything is done on a grand scale. It's no wonder that other resort properties in town are taking a leaf out of their book and upscaling their own events departments.



(Top): Backwater journey through placid lakes and rivulets of Destination Wedding Kerala-Kumarakom

Kovalam

Amongst India's most well-travelled destinations in southern India, Kerala has upped the ante when it comes to giving holidaymakers a fine time. It's thus quite significant that 'God's Own Country' has also become a wedding destination of choice. So whether it's a Punjabi-style affair, a Christian ceremony or a Goa-themed option there are wedding planners and resorts aplenty who will come together to create the right ambience for the wedding. Kovalam with its top notch luxury resorts has emerged as an interesting option. The resorts here have the space, the luxury, the expertise in culinary delights and all the works that are required to accommodate a wedding party. Of particular interest is arranging a beach wedding. There's also the allure of enjoying the great tradition of the backwater cruise which acts as an interesting twist for one of the ceremonies and can be much enjoyed by wedding guests.



The Leela Kovalam Beach



(Above): Taj Falaknuma Palace, Hyderabad and (above left) its ornate Banquet Hall



Punjab Grill at Marina Bay Sands



Greenleaf Cafe Herbal Vegetarian at Cuff Rd

How **Healthy** is Authentic Indian Cuisine?

By Chintalacheruvu Siddarth

Mention Indian food and a few distinct thoughts come to mind: rich, creamy, indulgent, spicy, aromatic and tantalizing! Such descriptions are hallmarks of a cuisine that has evolved over thousands of years.

However, Indian food - especially fried Indian snacks - also has a reputation for being somewhat oily, fatty, and generally unhealthy. SHIKHAR spoke to two well-known Indian restaurants: the first is the 'vegetarian herbal' Greenleaf Cafe in the heart of Little India, and at the other end of the spectrum, the fine dining establishment Punjab Grill at Marina Bay Sands, to ask them to unravel the misconceptions and hard truths behind the healthiness of Indian cuisine

Punjab Grill - Going the Extra Mile

Punjab Grill was opened in 2011 and its head chef, Jawed Ahmad, has been working in Singapore for the past 14 years. He's been at the forefront of the Indian culinary scene here so he brings a lot of invaluable experience to the table. According to its Operations Manager, Mr Ramesh Somani, Punjab Grill has sought to distinguish itself from other Indian restaurants here by serving, "Authentic Indian food with a refreshing, modern touch and in the most creative ways possible."

There is an interesting dimension in the demographics of Punjab Grill customers as Ramesh revealed: "We have customers from different parts of the world, but most prominently, we serve many customers from the Middle East who are usually here for healthcare related matters. When it comes to healthy eating, they consider us as one of their go-to choices as we have different menus that cater to many personal preferences such as a vegan; we also have a gluten-free menu option. We also personalize our dishes according to dietary restrictions; we can prepare dishes without nuts and dairy. The orders can be specialized according to what the customer wants. When it comes to Indian cuisine, there are many patrons who are very strict, for example the Jains don't consume onion and garlic in their food. So we do our best to meet such requirements."



From Punjab Grill's Chef Special 3-Course Vegetarian menu

What constitutes healthy-ish Indian dishes among Punjab Grill's more popular offerings? "Our chaats are well sought-after, especially the Papdi Chaat. That's one of our specialities. For vegetarian options, our tandoori broccoli is really popular. It's a low calorie option that's marinated and baked to perfection in the oven. For the non-vegetarian side, our lamb chops are popular because of the special recipe we use. The dish is dairy-free and marinated with powdered spices, ginger and garlic. It's our authentic style of preparation and it's made to be healthier. When coming up with our recipes, we keep nutrition as one of our priorities too," said Ramesh.

He also agrees that here's a general perception that Indian food leans towards the unhealthy side: "Yes, definitely. Usually that perception is associated with the curries. When it comes to curries, people always think that they are loaded with cream, butter or cheese. But we do try our best to challenge that notion. Our tawa mushroom asparagus is something that has the Indian touch, but has also been inspired by fusion cuisine. It's inherently a healthy dish due to its core ingredients but we don't compromise on the signature Indian taste."

He felt that many have this perception in the first place as: "Sometimes they believe it's unhealthy because there are heavy amounts of marinades, cream, oil, butter or cheese. Especially when it comes to oil, everyone is more concerned because of the high levels of cholesterol associated with it, especially when it is reused. We are quite confident that the marinades we use are mostly healthier. We do not use much oil and cream."

The good news is that there can be a balance between healthy options and preserving the rich taste that Indian food is popular for. The Operations Manager said, "The healthier taste definitely differs slightly, but it doesn't lower the standard. For example, when you fry a Chapati as compared to when you roast it, the taste is different. This happens when you make a dish in a totally different way. It has its own properties and the taste changes accordingly." Another example he gave: "In our style of making dal, one of the staples in Indian cooking, we use a mixture of different lentils to make dal. When you eat one dish, you get five different lentils together; the protein of all five combined. That mixture is totally different, because usually everyone eats a single particular kind of dal in a dish. It's currently known as dal tadka in our menu but we authentically call it the dal panchratni - five tastes mixed together."

As more people are shifting towards a healthier lifestyle that involves a nutritious diet, this trend has affected the cooking techniques at Punjab Grill: "Baking, for example, is not a conventional cooking method for Indian cuisine, but it's getting popular. We include baked fish, mushrooms and more in our menu. Like most of our kebabs, it's a two-pronged cooking method as it goes in the tandoor and it is baked as well. This is what we mean by the incorporation of modern methods,

said Ramesh. Punjab Grill has many dishes it usually promotes as healthy options. For curries, there is palak paneer, tossed asparagus and mushrooms, chickpeas or yellow dal. When it comes to non-vegetarian fare, the chicken tikka masala and the rogan josh are the healthier dishes as they contain minimum oil, cream and butter. There is also rice options as well such as steamed and tempered rice. In light of this trend towards healthy eating, Punjab Grill took the opportunity to collaborate with the Health Promotion Board and provided them with particular dishes within Indian cuisine that are healthy options. It's an ongoing collaboration and the restaurant looks forward to promoting and sharing these dishes with the wider community.



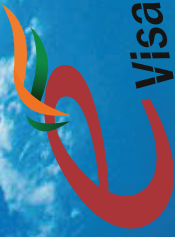
Greenleaf Cafe - the Herbal (Vegetarian) Restaurant

Greenleaf Café was set up about five years ago and started as the one and only herbal vegetarian restaurant in Singapore and according to its Director, Mr R Kalaiselvan till today, "We have maintained our philosophy. We aim to serve healthy authentic Indian vegetarian dishes, using only fresh ingredients, to the public. We brought home-style food to consumers."

On the general perception that Indian foods are unhealthy he agrees, "But it is a wrong perception. There are many healthy options available which we fail to see. Most of us go more for taste rather than healthy option. Since this is the case, food vendors choose to sell what is in demand. In a country like Singapore, non-veg meals are popular. We know veg meals has more healthy options and our Indian vegetarian food has plenty of medicinal value which has been forgotten over time."

Can there be a balance between healthy options and preserving the rich taste that Indian food is popular for? Kalaiselvan says, "Yes. Using the right ingredients and balanced spice level, you will always enjoy the best of Indian food, especially vegetarian dishes. Indian vegetables and spices have their health benefits. Food is medicine." He also felt that for those who have grown up with home-cooked Indian food, we realise that that it can be healthy and light on the stomach. He says the way to do it is "We cook like how our parents cooked for us. We do not use 'special' ingredients or mock items. We follow our five principles to make the food tasty and healthy: We do not use MSG, white sugar, preservatives, artificial colouring and no re-use of cooking oil. In this way, we can serve our customers a nice home cooked style healthy vegetarian food."

Healthy fare on the Green Leaf menu includes millet items (e.g. finger millet, kodo millet, fox tail millet etc). The Cafe also serves Indian traditional porridge (Koozh), Millet Dosas, Millet Idly, Millet Poori. It has also introduced a typical South Indian Soaked Rice dish, Pazhaiya Soru, which is commonly taken by farmers which has a lot of health benefits - a long forgotten dish in today's lifestyle. There are about 200 items in its menu; it is also well known for its authentic South Indian lunch buffet as well as a la carte and millet dishes.



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