

The Indo-US relationship: Separated by thousands of miles, connected by culture

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Nine months before India gained independence from the British, the United States opened a diplomatic mission in New Delhi. The US Department of State upgraded the American Mission in New Delhi to an Embassy on November 1, 1946, establishing official diplomatic relations. Additionally, the United States quickly recognised India after it gained its independence in 1947. India and the US have one thing in common: they were both under British dominion. Even though it was a young nation at the time and had only been discovered in 1492, the US was the first to break away from British colonisation in 1776. India, on the other hand, has a long history and a diverse culture that make it a treasure trove of knowledge. Being an ancient civilisation, India is home to one of the largest collections of the "Intangible Cultural Heritage" (ICH) of humanity, which includes songs, music, dance, theatre, folk traditions, performing arts, rites and rituals, paintings, and books.

Despite their distance of thousands of miles and under British rule, India's culture and long-standing traditions had an impact on the United States. There were two reasons. First, American institutions began to take shape with the intention of becoming knowledge hubs and absorbing global cultural understanding. Second, a significant contribution to popularising Indian art, culture, literature, and philosophy around the world came from the German academic heritage. The Germans made extensive explorations of the United States as a young nation. In the 17th and 18th centuries, they constituted the largest immigration groups. Most of the institutions, customs, and everyday routines that several scholars today consider to be uniquely American were originally influenced by the Germans who settled in the US. Indian philosophy was first introduced to America by the Germans, who were primarily driven by a desire to understand new knowledge.

The Sanskrit language, which is regarded as the language of classical Hindu philosophy, is where it all began. The teaching of Sanskrit at the City University of New York in 1836 marked the beginning of the American connection to India. Sanskrit was a subject that Isaac Nordheimer taught at the City University of New York since he had studied it while taking a philology course at the University of Munich in Germany. In 2016, Yale commemorated the 175th anniversary of the teaching of Sanskrit and Arabic. Sanskrit was first included in the Yale University curriculum in 1841 by Professor Edward Elbridge Salisbury. With funding and materials supplied by Henry Ware Wales, who also studied in Germany, another Ivy League institution, Harvard University created the Wales Professorship of Sanskrit in 1903.

The Bhagwat Gita, Vedas, and Upanishads are among the Hindu religious texts that, together with Sanskrit, had a key influence in influencing American academics' attitudes towards Indian philosophy. The American essayist, poet, and well-known philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson had a strong interest in the spirituality of India. Indian philosophy was included in the curricula of the newly founded universities in the US. The founding of the American Oriental Society in 1842 also had a significant impact on the interaction of American culture with its Indian

counterpart. For the first time ever, Hindus presented their teachings to American audiences at the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893 in the United States. Swami Vivekananda is most known for his historic speech at the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893, during which he promoted religious tolerance and introduced Hinduism to the country.

The Americans expanded their knowledge of India beyond just the Sanskrit language and Indian philosophy in the 20th century. Around the turn of the 20th century, American academics started making academic field trips to India to study more about Indian culture, anthropology, and Indic languages. At the same time, other works were also translated, including the Panchatantra, the Hitopadesha, the Mahabharata, and "Shakuntala" and "Meghaduta" of Kalidas in the classic English works. The American institutions added collections of Indian texts to their libraries. The San Francisco Vedanta Society founded the first Hindu temple in North America in San Francisco in 1906, when there were only about a thousand immigrants from India living in America. Later, New Vedanta centres were opened in Portland, Hollywood, Providence, Chicago, New York, St. Lewis, and Seattle by the 1940s.

India's independence movement also captured the imagination of American minds. William Jennings Bryan, who visited India, and Andrew Carnegie, two of the American Anti-Imperialist League's most significant members, released papers in 1906 calling for an end to British rule. A small group of Indian revolutionaries with American bases founded the Ghadar Party in San Francisco. Since Mahatma Gandhi launched his first non-cooperation movement in 1920, Americans have been aware of him. The concept of Mahatma Gandhi, known as *Ahimsa* (non-violence), which served as the cornerstone of the Indian independence movement, also had an effect on the US. The leaders of the Indian freedom struggle gave lectures in American campuses, where they discussed Gandhi's philosophy of peaceful resistance, or "Satyagraha."

Between 1836 and 1947, American academics and enthusiasts were chiefly responsible for fostering the connection of Indian civilisation to the 'New World'. The oldest cultural institution and research division of Congress, the Library of Congress, first publicly expressed interest in India in the 1930s. It began by strengthening the library's Indian collection after hiring Horace Poleman, an expert on Indian culture, in 1938.

A decade later, in post-Independent India, cultural cooperation took on a new form. First, the two governments took the initiative to increase people-to-people contact at the diplomatic level, such as when the US commissioned the Fulbright programme for the cultural exchange programme students, scholars, artists, teachers, and professionals of all backgrounds. Second, the academic ties were further strengthened because the US provided significant assistance to India in the 1960s establishment of the GB Pant University of Agriculture & Technology, IIM Ahmedabad, and IIT Kanpur. It also supported India's management of the Green Revolution. Additionally, a lot of US universities started offering programmes in Indian studies that also involve language instruction in languages like Hindi, Tamil, Punjabi, Bengali, Gujarati, Tamil, Marathi, etc. Third, the thriving Indian diaspora not only pursued the "American Dream," but also made Indian culture more accessible to average Americans.

Even though post-independence India maintained a nonalignment strategy during the Cold War that resulted in a cold relationship between India and the United States, there was no

interruption in people-to-people contact. Many educated professionals from India, including doctors and engineers, immigrated to the United States and left their mark on American culture. Later, the Indian software developers were successful and became advocates for better relationships as they cracked the code in Silicon Valley. It took a very long time for the relationship to become better, notably after US President Bill Clinton visited India in March 2000. As a result, two countries have now become important strategic allies and work together in the 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue.

The 4.5 million Indians living in the United States, who represent a wide range of ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds, are proof that India has assumed centre stage. In areas where the Indian diaspora is more concentrated, such as New York, New Jersey, California, Pennsylvania, and Texas, "Little Indias" - ethnic enclaves with a sizeable Indian population—have emerged. Indian food is now generally accepted in America. For many Americans, yoga has become a way of life, more so after the first International Yoga Day was celebrated globally on June 21, 2015. Bollywood has gained popularity. Bollywood-themed flash mob dances have grown widespread on many American streets. Americans are drawn to Indian classical dance, music, and instruments. In US universities, numerous chairs bearing the name of India have been established. Indians now account for 21 percent of nearly a million foreign students in the US, according to the Open Doors Report 2022. Americans are also aware of the economic and educational contributions made by the Indian diaspora. There is a widespread conviction that a powerful India benefits the United States too.

Once celebrated at Indian-American homes, there is now political patronage for celebrating Indian festivals. Diwali, the festival of lights, was first observed at the White House in 2009 by Barack Obama, who was the US president at the time. "You celebrate life's blessings—the triumph of knowledge over ignorance and good over evil. But Diwali is also a time for prayer and contemplation, to reflect on our obligations to help our fellow human beings, particularly the less fortunate," Obama said in his Diwali message. For the first time ever, the US Capitol Hill celebrated Diwali in 2013, and at the same event, a Hindu priest recited Vedic mantras. New York's World Trade Centre shone in its inaugural Diwali celebration in 2021, and fireworks were also displayed near the Hudson River. The festival of Diwali was declared an official holiday in Pennsylvania, a state in the United States, in April 2023, to be observed in November 2023.

In sum, cultural understanding of India has contributed to the realignment of Cold War-era policies that were otherwise icy at diplomatic engagements. In the 19th century, communication was only one-way; however, in the 21st century, with the development of social media, communication between individuals is more likely to influence the tone and tenor of relationships.

* The views and opinion expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the CSIR.

