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India-UK ties at 75: Looking back, moving forward

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📷 Queen Elizabeth II (Photo: AP)

This year marked Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee celebrations across the UK. It also marks the 75th anniversary of India's Independence. A year after India-UK ties were elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2021, it is an opportune moment for us to reflect upon the rapidly evolving relationship and its multifaceted legacies having grown into an enduring strategic bond between two of the world's most vibrant liberal democracies.

The historical legacy has its own imprint on the relationship. But what is truly remarkable is the broad range of partnerships that have evolved between the two countries, transcending trade, investment and strategic affairs. This broader partnership between the world's fifth and sixth largest economies has its foundations on three critical aspects: education, common law system and the increasingly influential role and impact of the Indian diaspora in the UK.

The two countries have always demonstrated a high level of commitment to further educational ties, with India being one of the largest contributors to the UK's higher education system. As of 2019-20, there are more than 53,000 Indian

students studying in universities and colleges across the UK. The UK issued nearly 22,000 study visas to Indian nationals for the year ending June 2019 alone, recording a 42 per cent increase from the previous year.



According to the latest report from the UK Home Office, the Tier 4 (study) visas issued to Indian students increased by 102 per cent in the 12-month period between September 2020 and September 2021, with the total number of student visas rising to 90,669, from 44,992 at the beginning of that period. The UK student visa issue rate for Indians is 96 per cent, which underscores the tremendous significance of the India-UK Higher Education partnership. Undergraduate applications from India through Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UK's shared admissions service for higher education) to commence courses in the UK in September 2022 grew by 11 per cent year-on-year to 8,660 applicants, compared to 7,830 in 2021, and almost double since 2019 when there were 4,690 applicants.

India's new National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has championed the expansion of such international collaborations to address the current challenges in harnessing the overwhelming potential of India's human capital. India has by far the largest global youth population under the age of 35 -- a demographic dividend that is expected to form the backbone of the Indian economy and society in the years to come. The UK's continued collaboration in the higher education sector and investment in vocational and entrepreneurial skills will allow India to hone the talents of its 850-million-strong youth population, especially in the light of the visionary objectives of the NEP.

A mutually beneficial knowledge-intensive partnership between India and UK is the next gear both countries should be accelerating to boost the volume of trade and investment between them, in turn generating more jobs and wealth for their citizens. A knowledge partnership will also enable India

to promote dynamic tertiary education among its citizens, thereby fostering UK's expansion of its global footprint in a post-Brexit world order.

The India-UK partnership is based on shared values, respect for the rule of law and common law, and institutional integrity protected by democratic institutions in the both the countries. India follows the British common law system that was introduced by the British East India Company, and has continued as a post-Independence legacy. It is characterised by a strong emphasis on British jurisprudential legacy that is often referenced by India's high courts and the Supreme Court. This bond of shared values between the administrative and legal systems of the two nations, combined with shared proficiencies in the English language, has a profoundly positive impact on the conduct of business and investment-management.

While historical ties between the UK and India continue to stimulate animated intellectual debates in both nations, we must also address the great potential for advancing the bilateral economic relationship as much as harvesting shared soft power assets. The estimated 1.5 million-strong Indian diaspora in the UK has acted as a robust cementing factor, ensuring strong bilateral ties and deeper cultural cooperation between the two democracies. Over the last few years, Indians in the UK have become one of the most prosperous and influential ethnic minorities in the country. They have made outstanding contributions to diverse fields such as the academia, business and industry, science, sports, literature, arts, medicines and politics, among others.

Rabindranath Tagore, India's first Nobel laureate, famously lost and recovered his manuscript of Gitanjali at the Baker Street Underground in 1912 before going on to impress William Rothenstein and W.B. Yeats and the Nobel committee. In 2009, India-born British structural biologist Sir Venkatraman Ramakrishnan won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry, before going on to become president of the Royal Society. From cricketing legends like Ranjitsinhji, Duleepsinhji and I.A.K. Pataudi in the pre-Independence era, to more recent exemplars like English cricketers Nasser Hussain, Rony Irani and Monty Panesar, various Indian-origin cricketers have

represented the England cricket team. The London-born actor Dev Patel (who starred in the Oscar-winning movie *Slumdog Millionaire*), and Indian filmmaker Gurinder Chadha (director of *Bend It Like Beckham* and *Bhaji on the Beach*) are only a few names that immediately spring to mind among the vast number of Indian and Indian-origin luminaries in the UK who have strengthened the ties between the two nations -- not to mention the long heritage of Indian professionals and entrepreneurs on the British culinary scene since Sake Deen Mahomet established the first Indian restaurant in Britain, in Portman Square, in 1810. The list is indeed endless, commanding an encyclopaedic venture.

A key area where the rise of Indians in UK has been particularly significant is business and industry. To put things in context, 30 years ago, the wealth generated by Indian diaspora-owned businesses was estimated to be around £7 billion. The figure today has increased by more than 10 times and is closer to £75 billion as the number of Indian diaspora-owned businesses has increased to 65,000. The Indian diaspora's perseverance and ambition is reflected in their high rate of employment and educational qualification. It is estimated that over 50 per cent of Indians in the UK have degree-level qualifications and more than 40 per cent work in professional occupations.

While India and the UK strengthen their strategic ties over mutually sustained economic stability, looking at Vision 2047, collaborations in the field of education promise to be a resilient source of consolidating mobility between the two nations. Partnerships of resilience in technology, science and humanities research are bound to aid greater and sustainable economic growth for both countries -- a premise that calls for innovative means of sharing intelligence and resources in the field of education. While the Science and Innovation Council, inaugurated in 2010 with Indo-UK collaboration, has been playing a key role in fostering scientific knowledge transfer, greater exchange and mobility in non-STEM fields can galvanize hitherto untapped potential in shared soft-power assets. As we celebrate the historic collaboration between the UK and India in producing the Covishield vaccine, and look forward to the much-awaited signing of the bilateral Free Trade Agreement, we should not

lose sight of the tremendous power that transnational university-wide collaborations can leverage in the accord. Education, research and knowledge partnership ought to become the centre-piece of the India-UK relationship at 75, as we move forward.

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