

# **Diaspora, Identity, and Diplomacy: How Indian Communities Shape India–Oman Relations**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The relationship between India and Oman is often narrated through trade routes, energy cooperation, and strategic diplomacy, yet its most enduring foundation lies in people rather than policies. Indian communities in Oman have, over centuries, acted as quiet architects of trust, continuity, and mutual respect between the two societies. This paper explores how the Indian diaspora in Oman shapes India–Oman relations by weaving together everyday practices, cultural memory, and informal diplomacy. From merchants who once sailed across the Arabian Sea to contemporary professionals working in healthcare, education, construction, and administration, the diaspora has transformed mobility into belonging without erasing attachment to home. The study situates diaspora not merely as a demographic presence but as an emotional and relational bridge that humanises interstate relations. Through shared festivals, linguistic exchange, intergenerational narratives, and community institutions, Indian migrants contribute to a social environment where diplomacy is lived daily rather than confined to official statements. At the same time, the paper acknowledges the layered nature of identity within the diaspora—marked by region, religion, class, and gender—and examines how these internal diversities influence patterns of representation and engagement with both the Indian and Omani states. The India–Oman case demonstrates how migrant communities can sustain diplomatic warmth even during geopolitical uncertainty, reminding us that diplomacy ultimately rests on human connection.

**Keywords:** Indian diaspora, Identity, Informal diplomacy, India–Oman relations, Migration and foreign policy

## **INTRODUCTION**

India–Oman relations represent one of the most enduring and emotionally textured connections in the Indian Ocean region. Long before the emergence of modern diplomacy, formal treaties, or nation-states, the Arabian Sea functioned as a connective space through which people, goods, languages, and beliefs moved with remarkable continuity (Ho, 2006). While contemporary policy discourse often frames bilateral relations in terms of strategic cooperation, energy security, and defence partnerships, such narratives risk reducing a deeply human relationship to institutional abstractions (Nye, 2004). This paper argues that the true strength of India–Oman relations lies not only in state-level engagements but in the lived experiences of Indian communities who have

made Oman a place of work, residence, and belonging across generations. The Indian diaspora in Oman has historically served as a stabilising social force, sustaining trust and familiarity even during periods of political transition and regional uncertainty (Cohen, 2008; Kapur, 2010). From early trading communities along the Omani coast to present-day professionals in healthcare, education, infrastructure, and administration, Indian migrants have contributed to the everyday functioning of Omani society. Their presence has transformed migration into a relational process rather than a temporary economic transaction. By foregrounding diaspora experiences, this study seeks to reframe diplomacy as a lived and emotional practice shaped by memory, identity, and everyday interaction rather than solely by state policy (Adamson and Demetriou, 2007). In doing so, the paper

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engages with broader debates in diaspora studies, human geography, and international relations that question state-centric models of foreign policy. It advances the argument that informal diplomacy—practiced through social embeddedness, cultural exchange, and interpersonal trust—plays a crucial role in sustaining bilateral relations. The India–Oman case offers a compelling example of how migrant communities function as ethical and relational actors, quietly shaping diplomacy through presence rather than proclamation.

### **Diaspora as a Social and Historical Connector:**

The Indian diaspora in Oman cannot be understood merely as a contemporary labor force responding to economic opportunity. Its roots extend deep into the precolonial Indian Ocean world, where maritime trade fostered durable social and cultural ties between South Asia and the Arabian Peninsula (Ho, 2006). Indian merchants, sailors, and artisans were historically embedded within Omani coastal settlements, contributing to commercial networks while participating in local social life. These early interactions laid the groundwork for mutual trust that continues to inform bilateral relations today. In the modern period, this historical continuity has been reinforced through large-scale migration driven by Oman's development trajectory and India's expanding labor mobility (Kapur, 2010). Indian nationals today occupy a wide spectrum of roles in Omani society, ranging from skilled professionals to service-sector workers. Their contributions are not limited to economic productivity; they extend to knowledge exchange, institutional stability, and social cohesion. Everyday interactions in workplaces, neighbourhoods, schools, and marketplaces generate forms of social capital that quietly reinforce diplomatic goodwill between the two countries (Vertovec, 2009). Cultural practices play a significant role in sustaining this connective function. Shared celebrations, culinary exchange, linguistic adaptation, and community rituals contribute to a sense of familiarity that transcends national boundaries. These practices humanise international relations by embedding them in everyday life. Rather than existing solely within official frameworks, India–Oman relations are lived and reproduced through countless ordinary interactions. The diaspora thus operates as a social infrastructure of diplomacy, one that is resilient precisely because it is informal and deeply rooted (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014). Importantly, this form of connection is not without negotiation. Indian migrants navigate

cultural difference, legal structures, and social hierarchies within the host society. Yet it is through this negotiation that durable forms of coexistence emerge. The ability of diaspora communities to adapt while maintaining cultural memory enables them to act as intermediaries between societies, translating norms, values, and expectations across contexts. In this sense, the diaspora does not merely connect two states; it connects two social worlds.

### **Identity, Belonging, and the Practice of Informal Diplomacy:**

Diasporic identity in Oman is shaped by multiple and intersecting factors, including region of origin, religion, class position, gender, and length of residence. These layered identities challenge simplistic notions of national belonging and instead reveal identity as fluid, negotiated, and relational (Brubaker, 2005; Mishra, 2007). Indian migrants often experience a dual sense of attachment—rooted in cultural memory of India while simultaneously developing emotional and social ties to Oman. This duality does not weaken allegiance to either society; rather, it enables forms of belonging that are expansive and inclusive. Such hybrid identities are central to the functioning of informal diplomacy. Indian community organisations, educational institutions, religious spaces, and cultural associations serve as sites where dialogue and understanding are cultivated. These spaces facilitate interaction not only within the diaspora but also between Indian migrants and Omani citizens. Through these engagements, diplomacy is enacted through empathy, care, and long-term presence rather than through formal negotiation (Adamson and Demetriou, 2007). This form of diplomacy is particularly significant in times of geopolitical uncertainty. While state relations may fluctuate in response to global or regional dynamics, diaspora networks provide continuity. Trust built over decades of coexistence cannot be easily disrupted by short-term political shifts. The Indian diaspora in Oman thus acts as a stabilising force, sustaining warmth and mutual respect even when formal diplomacy faces challenges. By emphasising affective ties and lived experience, this paper challenges dominant realist approaches to international relations that prioritise power, strategy, and material interests (Nye, 2004). It aligns instead with human-centred and relational perspectives that recognise emotions, memory, and ethics as integral to political life. The India–Oman case illustrates that diplomacy is not only about alignment of interests but

about the capacity of societies to live together with dignity and mutual recognition. Ultimately, this study argues that understanding India–Oman relations requires attention to the human geographies that underpin them. Diaspora communities are not passive subjects of foreign policy; they are active participants in shaping it. Their everyday practices of coexistence, care, and cultural exchange remind us that diplomacy, at its core, is a human endeavour.

### **Labor, Visibility, and the Politics of Contribution:**

Labor is the most visible and immediate site through which the Indian diaspora engages with Omani society. Indian migrants are deeply embedded across Oman's economic sectors, from infrastructure development and energy services to healthcare, education, retail, and domestic work. Their labor sustains not only economic growth but also institutional continuity and social stability. Yet, the politics of labor migration is marked by uneven visibility. While skilled professionals often enjoy recognition and relative security, low-wage workers frequently remain socially invisible despite their indispensable contributions. This uneven visibility reflects broader hierarchies within global labor migration regimes, where nationality, class, and skill shape access to rights and recognition (Raghuram, 2009). However, even within these constraints, Indian migrants exercise forms of agency that extend beyond economic productivity. Through reliability, professional ethics, and long-term commitment, many workers cultivate reputations that contribute to mutual trust between Indian and Omani institutions. Such trust, accumulated over time, becomes a form of diplomatic capital—quietly reinforcing bilateral relations without formal negotiation (Gamlen, 2014). Importantly, labor functions not only as an economic activity but also as a relational practice. Daily interactions in workplaces generate familiarity, cooperation, and shared problem solving. These micro-level engagements foster interpersonal trust that gradually scales up into broader social acceptance. In this sense, labor becomes a medium through which diplomacy is practiced informally, transforming abstract bilateral agreements into lived cooperation. The Indian diaspora's sustained participation in Oman's development thus exemplifies how contribution, when embedded in everyday life, acquires political and diplomatic significance.

### **Care, Community, and Emotional Infrastructure:**

Beyond labor, care constitutes a critical yet often

overlooked dimension of diaspora influence. Indian migrants in Oman are deeply involved in care work, both formally and informally. Nurses, doctors, teachers, and social workers provide essential services that directly shape human well-being. Simultaneously, informal care networks within the diaspora support families, newcomers, and vulnerable individuals, creating a sense of community in a transnational setting. These practices of care form what can be understood as an emotional infrastructure underpinning bilateral relations. Care generates trust, gratitude, and social cohesion—qualities that are rarely measured in diplomatic assessments but are central to long-term relational stability. For instance, the presence of Indian healthcare professionals in Oman has not only strengthened institutional capacity but has also fostered interpersonal bonds rooted in compassion and professionalism. Such experiences humanise the image of the migrant community, countering reductive narratives that frame migrants solely as labor units. Community institutions play a vital role in sustaining this emotional infrastructure. Cultural associations, educational initiatives, religious spaces, and language schools serve as sites where identity is nurtured and transmitted across generations (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004). These institutions also function as mediating spaces, facilitating dialogue between Indian migrants and Omani society. By promoting cultural literacy and mutual respect, they contribute to a social environment where difference is negotiated rather than resisted. Care, in this context, extends beyond individual acts to encompass collective responsibility. It reflects an ethical orientation toward coexistence, where migrants seek not only economic survival but meaningful participation in the host society (Vertovec, 2009). This ethical dimension challenges utilitarian models of migration and diplomacy, emphasising instead relationally, empathy, and shared humanity.

### **Negotiating Belonging, Authority, and Representation:**

Diaspora engagement with diplomacy is shaped by ongoing negotiations of belonging and authority. Indian migrants in Oman navigate legal frameworks, cultural norms, and social hierarchies that define the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. While many experience a strong sense of attachment to Oman, this belonging is often conditional, mediated by visa regimes, employment contracts, and citizenship policies (Gamlen, 2014). Such conditions produce a form of partial belonging that is

neither temporary nor fully permanent. Within this space of negotiated belonging, questions of representation become significant. Who speaks for the diaspora? Which voices are amplified, and which remain marginalised? These questions reveal internal power dynamics shaped by class, gender, region, and profession. Professional elites and community leaders often act as intermediaries between the diaspora and state institutions, both Indian and Omani (Adamson, 2019). While this mediation can facilitate dialogue, it may also obscure the experiences of less visible groups, such as domestic workers or temporary labourers. Despite these asymmetries, the diaspora collectively contributes to shaping perceptions and expectations within bilateral relations. Their conduct, adaptability, and respect for local norms influence how India is perceived in Oman, often more powerfully than official narratives. Similarly, the Indian state's engagement with its diaspora—through consular services, cultural diplomacy, and policy initiatives—signals recognition and responsibility, reinforcing migrants' sense of connection to the homeland. These dynamics underscore the need to view diplomacy as a multi-layered process involving not only states but also communities and individuals. The Indian diaspora in Oman exemplifies how authority in international relations is dispersed and negotiated rather than centralised (Adamson and Demetriou, 2007). Through everyday practices of negotiation, migrants continuously redefine the terms of coexistence, contributing to a relational form of diplomacy grounded in lived experience.

### **Transnationalism and the Making of Diasporic Identity:**

Transnationalism provides a foundational lens for understanding how diaspora communities maintain simultaneous connections across national boundaries. Rather than viewing migration as a linear movement from one nation-state to another, transnational theory emphasises the circulation of people, ideas, emotions, and practices across multiple spatial and social fields (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004). Indian migrants in Oman exemplify this condition of simultaneity, sustaining social, cultural, and emotional ties with India while actively participating in Omani society. Diasporic identity within this framework is understood as dynamic and negotiated rather than fixed. Identity is shaped through everyday interactions, institutional engagement, and collective memory (Vertovec, 2009). For Indian communities in

Oman, identity is not solely anchored in nationality but is informed by region, language, religion, profession, and migration history. This multiplicity enables flexible forms of belonging that allow migrants to navigate diverse social contexts without relinquishing attachment to either society. From a theoretical standpoint, this fluidity of identity is significant because it enables diasporic agency. Migrants act as cultural translators, mediators, and connectors who can move across social and symbolic boundaries. Their ability to inhabit multiple worlds simultaneously allows them to contribute to bilateral relations in ways that are subtle yet enduring. Transnationalism thus provides a conceptual foundation for understanding how everyday practices—such as maintaining kinship ties, participating in cultural events, or engaging in professional networks—acquire diplomatic significance over time (Smith and Guarnizo, 1998). This study draws on transnational perspectives to argue that diaspora diplomacy is not episodic or event-driven but continuous and relational. It is produced through repeated interactions that gradually build trust, familiarity, and mutual recognition. In this sense, the Indian diaspora in Oman operates within a transnational social field where diplomacy is embedded in lived experience rather than confined to formal representation.

### **Relational Power and Informal Diplomacy:**

Traditional international relations theories often conceptualise power in material or institutional terms, emphasising military strength, economic capacity, or formal authority. In contrast, this study adopts a relational understanding of power, focusing on how influence emerges through social relations, trust, and moral legitimacy (Nye, 2004). Diaspora communities exercise power not by commanding resources but by shaping perceptions, expectations, and relationships over time. Informal diplomacy is central to this relational approach. It refers to the everyday practices through which individuals and communities contribute to international understanding outside official channels. Indian migrants in Oman engage in informal diplomacy through workplace interactions, community participation, ethical conduct, and cultural exchange. These practices may appear apolitical, yet they play a crucial role in sustaining bilateral goodwill (Cohen, 2008). Relational power operates through visibility, reputation, and continuity. The long-standing presence of Indian communities in Oman has created a reservoir of social trust that cannot be easily replicated

through formal agreements. This trust is reinforced through professionalism, respect for local norms, and collective responsibility. Over time, such practices generate a positive symbolic association that benefits both the migrant community and the sending state. This framework also acknowledges that relational power is unevenly distributed. Not all diaspora members have equal access to representation or recognition. Class, gender, and occupational hierarchies shape whose voices are heard and whose contributions are acknowledged. However, even within these asymmetries, informal diplomacy remains a collective process, produced through cumulative everyday actions rather than centralised authority (Adamson and Demetriou, 2007). By foregrounding relational power, the study challenges realist assumptions that privilege coercion and strategic interest. Instead, it aligns with constructivist and critical approaches that recognise norms, identity, and ethics as constitutive elements of international relations. The India–Oman case demonstrates that diplomacy rooted in trust and coexistence can be more resilient than diplomacy driven solely by strategic calculation.

#### **Human Geography, Space, and Affective Belonging:**

Human geography offers a crucial spatial and affective dimension to the theoretical framework. Migration is not only a movement across borders but also a process of place-making, where individuals and communities produce meanings, attachments, and memories in new environments. For Indian migrants in Oman, spaces such as workplaces, neighbourhoods, religious centres, and cultural institutions become sites where belonging is negotiated and enacted (Vertovec, 2009). This spatial perspective highlights how diplomacy is embedded in everyday landscapes. Streets, schools, hospitals, and community halls function as micro-diplomatic spaces where cultural norms are exchanged and relationships are formed. These spaces are not neutral; they are shaped by power relations, legal structures, and social hierarchies. Yet they also offer opportunities for connection and mutual recognition. Affective belonging is central to this spatial understanding. Emotions such as trust, gratitude, nostalgia, and care play a vital role in sustaining long-term relationships. Theoretical engagement with affect allows the study to move beyond rationalist models and acknowledge the emotional labor involved in migration and coexistence. Indian migrants' sense of attachment to Oman, combined

with enduring ties to India, produces a form of dual belonging that underpins their role as relational actors in bilateral relations. Memory further deepens this framework. Collective memories of historical trade, shared experiences of coexistence, and intergenerational narratives contribute to a sense of continuity that transcends political change (Ho, 2006). These memories are not merely symbolic; they inform present practices and future imaginaries. By situating diaspora diplomacy within a landscape of memory and affect, the study underscores the temporal depth of human-centred international relations. Together, these human-geographical insights enable a reimagining of diplomacy as a spatially embedded and emotionally sustained practice. They reinforce the central argument of this paper: that India–Oman relations are not only shaped by strategic interests but are continuously made and remade through human presence, care, and everyday interaction.

#### **Conclusion:**

This study has argued that India–Oman relations cannot be fully understood through the conventional lenses of strategic alignment, trade flows, or institutional diplomacy alone. Instead, their durability and warmth are rooted in human connection, sustained over centuries through migration, coexistence, and shared social life. By foregrounding the Indian diaspora in Oman as a central actor rather than a peripheral presence, the paper reframes diplomacy as a lived, relational, and ethical practice. The everyday experiences of Indian migrants—working, caring, celebrating, and negotiating belonging—constitute a form of informal diplomacy that quietly but consistently reinforces bilateral relations. The analysis demonstrates that diaspora communities shape international relations not through formal authority but through relational power grounded in trust, reputation, and long-term social embeddedness. Indian migrants in Oman contribute to economic development, institutional stability, and social cohesion, yet their most enduring influence lies in the affective and moral dimensions of coexistence. Through professionalism, cultural adaptability, and respect for local norms, they generate goodwill that accumulates over time. This goodwill functions as diplomatic capital, sustaining bilateral warmth even during periods of regional uncertainty or global disruption. By integrating insights from transnationalism, human geography, and critical international relations, the study challenges state-centric models of diplomacy that

privilege coercion, negotiation, and strategic interest. It instead advances a human-centred framework in which identity, memory, care, and everyday interaction are recognised as constitutive elements of international relations. The India–Oman case illustrates how diplomacy is not merely enacted by states but continuously produced through social relations that unfold across borders and generations.

Ultimately, this study affirms that diplomacy is not only practiced in conference rooms and policy documents but lived in everyday spaces of work, care, and community. The Indian diaspora in Oman exemplifies how ordinary lives can carry extraordinary diplomatic significance. Their presence reminds us that international relations are sustained not merely by interests and strategies but by relationships, empathy, and shared humanity. In an era marked by geopolitical volatility and restrictive migration regimes, recognising the human foundations of diplomacy is both analytically necessary and ethically urgent. The India–Oman relationship, shaped as much by people as by policy, offers a powerful reminder that the future of international relations may depend less on grand strategy and more on the quiet work of coexistence.

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