



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## Cultural Diplomacy In India–UAE Relations: The BAPS Hindu Mandir

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### Abstract

The inauguration of the BAPS Hindu Mandir in Abu Dhabi on February 14, 2024, represents a landmark moment in India–UAE relations, highlighting the role of cultural diplomacy in strengthening bilateral ties. This paper examines how the temple serves as a symbol of religious tolerance, soft power, and deepening strategic cooperation between the two nations. By analyzing the historical context of India–UAE relations, the significance of the BAPS Mandir, and its implications for economic and geopolitical collaboration, this study explores how cultural diplomacy complements broader diplomatic engagements. The paper also discusses recent developments, including high-level visits, trade agreements, and diaspora influence, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the evolving partnership.

Keywords: India, UAE, Cultural Diplomacy, BAPS Hindu Mandir

### 1. Introduction

Cultural diplomacy has long been recognized as a vital instrument in international relations, fostering mutual understanding, trust, and cooperation between nations beyond traditional political and economic engagements. Unlike conventional diplomacy, which often revolves around state-centric negotiations, cultural diplomacy leverages shared heritage, religious values, artistic expressions, and people-to-people connections to build enduring partnerships. In an era of globalization, where soft power increasingly shapes geopolitical influence, nations are investing in cultural exchanges to strengthen their international standing. The inauguration of the Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) Hindu Mandir in Abu Dhabi on February 14, 2024, stands as a landmark achievement in this regard, epitomizing the deepening cultural and diplomatic ties between India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The BAPS Mandir is not merely a place of worship; it is a symbol of religious pluralism, architectural grandeur, and diplomatic goodwill. As the first traditional Hindu stone temple in the Middle East, its construction was made possible by a historic land grant from the UAE government in 2015, followed by years of meticulous planning and collaboration between Indian artisans and Emirati authorities. The temple's inauguration, attended by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, UAE officials, and global dignitaries, underscores its significance as a bridge between two civilizations. This event was not just a religious milestone but also a strategic assertion of India's soft power in the Gulf, a region where cultural diplomacy has often been overshadowed by energy and security considerations.

The UAE, under the leadership of Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, has actively promoted policies of tolerance and interfaith dialogue, as seen in initiatives like the Ministry of Tolerance (2016) and the Abrahamic Family House (2023), which houses a mosque, church, and synagogue in Abu Dhabi. The inclusion of a grand Hindu mandir in this landscape reflects the UAE's recognition of its 3.5-million-strong Indian diaspora—the largest expatriate community in the country—and its desire to position itself as a global hub for multicultural coexistence.

For India, the temple serves as a testament to its civilizational outreach, reinforcing its role as a cultural and spiritual anchor for the Indian diaspora worldwide.

## 2. Historical Context of India–UAE Relations

The relationship between India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is deeply rooted in centuries-old trade, migration, and cultural exchanges, long before the UAE's formation as a federation in 1971. However, the modern diplomatic partnership has evolved significantly, transitioning from economic and labor-based ties to a comprehensive strategic alliance encompassing trade, defense, energy, and cultural cooperation.

### Pre-Independence and Early Diplomatic Ties

- **Ancient and Medieval Trade Links:**

India's western coastline, particularly Gujarat and Kerala, had strong maritime trade relations with the Arabian Gulf (then part of the broader Indian Ocean trade network). Key commodities included spices, textiles, pearls, and gold, facilitated by monsoon winds.

- The Baniyas and Kutchis (Indian merchant communities) played a crucial role in Gulf commerce, establishing early economic and cultural linkages.

### British Colonial Influence:

- During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Trucial States (precursor to the UAE) were under British protection, while India was a British colony. This period saw Indian traders, bankers, and laborers migrating to the Gulf, laying the foundation for future diaspora ties.

### Post-Independence and the Oil Boom (1971–1990s)

#### Formal Diplomatic Relations (1972):

- The UAE was established as a federation in December 1971, and India was among the first countries to recognize it, establishing full diplomatic relations in 1972.
- The Indian Embassy in Abu Dhabi and Consulate in Dubai were set up, reflecting growing engagement.

### Labor Migration and Economic Dependence:

- The 1970s–1980s oil boom transformed the UAE into a global economic hub, attracting a massive influx of Indian expatriate workers (primarily from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Punjab).
- By the 1990s, Indians became the largest expatriate community in the UAE, working in construction, healthcare, finance, and services.

### Strategic Shift (2000s–2010s): From Labor to Partnership

#### Economic Diversification and Investments:

- The UAE's shift from an oil-dependent economy to a global trade and tourism hub (Dubai Expo 2020, Free Zones) opened new avenues for Indian businesses.
- Major Indian corporations (Lulu Group, DP World-JNPT collaboration, Tata Group) expanded operations in the UAE.
- Remittances from Indian workers became a critical economic factor, exceeding \$20 billion annually.

### High-Level Diplomatic Engagements:

- 2015: PM Narendra Modi's first UAE visit (after 34 years by an Indian PM) marked a turning point, upgrading ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.
- 2016: UAE conferred the Order of Zayed, its highest civilian award, on PM Modi.
- 2017: The UAE named a major Dubai road as "Mahatma Gandhi Street", symbolizing cultural respect.

### Recent Developments (2020s): A Multidimensional Alliance

#### Economic Integration

- 2022: The India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) was signed, boosting bilateral trade (now \$85+ billion annually).
- Rupee-Dirham Direct Trade: Efforts to reduce dollar dependency in transactions.

## Defense and Security Cooperation

- Joint Military Exercises (Desert Cyclone 2024).
- Counterterrorism and Maritime Security collaborations in the Arabian Sea.

## Cultural and Diaspora Diplomacy

- BAPS Mandir (2024) as a symbol of UAE's religious inclusivity and India's soft power.
- 3.5 million+ Indians in UAE—now influential in politics, business, and culture.

### 3. The BAPS Hindu Mandir: A Symbol of Cultural Diplomacy

The Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) Hindu Mandir in Abu Dhabi is far more than a religious landmark—it represents a strategic confluence of faith, diplomacy, and soft power in India-UAE relations. As the first traditional stone-carved Hindu temple in the Middle East, its inauguration in February 2024 marked a watershed moment, reflecting the UAE's commitment to pluralism and India's growing cultural influence in the Gulf.

#### 3.1. A Monument of Interfaith Harmony and UAE's Vision

The temple's construction was made possible by a historic land grant (27 acres) from the UAE government in 2015, personally facilitated by Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. This gesture aligns with the UAE's broader "Year of Tolerance" (2019) and its Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence, which promotes interfaith dialogue. Key aspects of its symbolic value include:

##### Architectural Syncretism:

- Built using pink sandstone from Rajasthan and white marble from Italy, the temple blends Nagara-style Hindu architecture with subtle Arabesque motifs, symbolizing cultural fusion.
- Features seven spires (shikhars) representing the seven Emirates of the UAE.

##### Inclusivity in Design:

- The complex includes a visitor center, prayer halls, and exhibitions on Hinduism and UAE-India ties, welcoming non-Hindu visitors.
- Nearby, the Abrahamic Family House (mosque, church, synagogue) reinforces Abu Dhabi's image as a global hub for religious coexistence.

#### 3.2. Diplomatic Significance: From Modi's Vision to UAE's Strategic Calculus

- The temple's inauguration was a high-profile diplomatic event, attended by:
- PM Narendra Modi (framing it as a testament to India's civilizational reach).
- UAE ministers and Arab dignitaries (signaling regional acceptance).
- Why the UAE Supported the Temple:
- Recognition of the Indian Diaspora:
- With 3.5 million Indians in the UAE (35% of the population), the temple caters to their spiritual needs while acknowledging their economic contributions.

##### Soft Power Leverage:

- The UAE positions itself as a modern, tolerant Muslim nation, contrasting with regional conservatism.
- Aligns with the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2015) and CEPA (2022) to deepen bilateral trust.

#### 3.3. India's Soft Power and Diaspora Diplomacy

For India, the temple is a tool of cultural statecraft:

##### Diaspora Engagement:

Reinforces emotional bonds with NRIs, who remit \$20+ billion annually to India.

Countering Extremist Narratives:

Showcases Hindu-Muslim harmony in a region often marred by sectarianism.

**Global Hindu Identity:**

Follows similar temples (e.g., Akshardham in Delhi, Swaminarayan Mandir in London) as symbols of Hinduism's global revival.

**3.4. Geopolitical Implications**

The temple's impact extends beyond religion:

**Balancing Act in the Gulf:**

The UAE, while maintaining close ties with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, signals its independent foreign policy by embracing India.

**Counter to China's Influence:**

As China builds Confucius Institutes, India uses mandirs as cultural outposts.

**I2U2 Alignment:**

The India-Israel-UAE-USA (I2U2) grouping benefits from such cultural bridges.

**A New Paradigm in Diplomacy:**

The BAPS Mandir exemplifies how cultural diplomacy can complement hard power. By blending faith, architecture, and geopolitics, it cements India-UAE ties while offering a model for multicultural diplomacy in the 21st century.

**4. The BAPS Mandir as a Catalyst for Economic and Strategic Relations**

The BAPS Hindu Mandir in Abu Dhabi is not merely a religious landmark—it serves as a strategic asset that reinforces and amplifies the growing economic and geopolitical partnership between India and the UAE. While cultural diplomacy fosters goodwill, the temple's inauguration has tangible implications for trade, investment, energy security, and defense cooperation between the two nations.

**4.1. Strengthening Economic Ties****A. Trade and Investment Boost**

- The UAE is India's third-largest trading partner, with bilateral trade exceeding \$85 billion (2023).
- The India-UAE CEPA (Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, 2022) has already increased trade by 15%, with key sectors benefiting:
- Gems & jewelry (25% of India's exports to UAE)
- Petroleum products (UAE supplies 8% of India's oil imports)
- Pharmaceuticals & food products (Halal-certified Indian food exports rising)
- The Temple as a Business Magnet:
- The mandir complex is expected to attract 1 million+ visitors annually, boosting tourism-linked sectors (hotels, retail, transport).
- Indian businesses in the UAE (Lulu Group, Bharat Biotech, Air India Express) gain further legitimacy and local goodwill.

**B. Energy Security & Green Partnerships**

**Oil & Gas Dependence:** The UAE supplies 10% of India's crude oil needs, with long-term contracts ensuring stable energy flows.

**Beyond Fossil Fuels:****Solar & Hydrogen Cooperation:**

- UAE's Masdar is investing in Indian renewable projects (e.g., 500 MW solar plant in Rajasthan).
- Joint ventures in green hydrogen align with India's National Green Hydrogen Mission.
- Strategic Oil Reserves: The UAE has stored millions of barrels of crude in India's underground facilities (Mangaluru, Padur).

## 4.2. Defense & Security Alignment

### A. Military Collaboration

#### Joint Exercises:

- Desert Cyclone 2024 (India-UAE special forces drills)
- Zayed Talwar (naval exercises in Persian Gulf)

#### Defense Manufacturing:

- UAE investments in India's Defense Corridors (UP, Tamil Nadu).
- Potential co-production of drones, missiles, and surveillance tech.

### B. Counterterrorism & Maritime Security

Intelligence Sharing: Critical for monitoring Persian Gulf shipping lanes and countering extremism.

Indian Naval Base in Duqm (Oman): Enhances India-UAE maritime coordination near Strait of Hormuz.

## 4.3. Geopolitical Synergies

### A. Balancing Regional Alliances

The UAE maintains ties with Pakistan & China, but its strategic tilt toward India is evident via:

- I2U2 Grouping (India-Israel-UAE-USA) for tech & infrastructure.
- Support on Kashmir: UAE blocked anti-India resolutions at OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation).

### B. Countering China's Influence

While China invests in ports (Djibouti, Gwadar), India-UAE focus on:

- Digital Payments: UAE now accepts UPI & RuPay cards.
- Alternative Supply Chains: Reducing reliance on Chinese manufacturing.

## 4.4. Diaspora & Soft Power Economics

- Remittances: \$20+ billion annually from Indians in UAE.
- Startup Ecosystem: UAE sovereign funds (ADQ, Mubadala) invest in Indian unicorns (Byju's, Ola Electric).

#### Education & Healthcare:

- Dubai's Indian universities branch campuses (BITS Pilani, Manipal).
- AYUSH healthcare centers in UAE promoting Ayurveda.

The BAPS Mandir is a strategic enabler—it doesn't just symbolize friendship but actively lubricates economic and defense collaboration. By anchoring India-UAE relations in cultural trust, it ensures long-term resilience against geopolitical shifts.

## 5. Recent Developments in India-UAE Relations (2023-2024): A Strategic Partnership in Overdrive

The past two years have witnessed unprecedented acceleration in India-UAE ties across trade, technology, defense, and cultural cooperation. The BAPS Hindu Mandir inauguration (February 2024) was just one milestone in a series of high-impact collaborations reshaping the bilateral relationship. Below is a detailed analysis of key developments:

### 5.1. High-Level Diplomatic Engagements

#### A. PM Modi's UAE Visits (2023-2024)

##### July 2023: Modi's visit focused on:

- Energy Security: Signed pact for local currency trade (Rupee-Dirham) to bypass USD.
- Tech Partnerships: Launched IIT Delhi-Abu Dhabi campus (first IIT in Middle East).



**February 2024: Temple inauguration + bilateral talks on:**

- Food Security: UAE to invest in Indian food parks for export stability.
- Defense: Progress on joint production of military drones.

**B. UAE Leadership in India**

- Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed's Republic Day Visit (Jan 2024):
- Honored as Chief Guest—symbolic elevation of ties.
- Announced \$75 billion investment in Indian infrastructure (ports, railways).

**5.2. Economic & Trade Breakthroughs****A. CEPA's Stellar Impact (2022-2024)**

Trade Growth: Bilateral trade surged from 72B(2021) to 72B(2021)to85B (2023).

Sectoral Wins:

Jewelry: Indian gem exports to UAE up 27%.

Pharma: UAE now top-3 export market for Indian medicines.

**B. Rupee-Dirham Trade Mechanism (2023)**

Oil Trade: First-ever crude oil purchase in rupees (Indian Oil Corp ↔ ADNOC).

Dedicated Trade Corridors:

IMEC (India-Middle East-Europe Corridor): UAE as key logistics hub.

UAE-India Fast Track System for perishable goods.

**C. Investment Surge**

UAE Sovereign Funds in India:

ADIA (\$5B in Reliance Retail).

Mubadala (\$1.2B in Tata's EV biz).

**5.3. Defense & Security Upgrades****A. Military Collaboration**

- Desert Cyclone 2024: Largest-ever India-UAE Special Forces drill.
- Joint Defense Production:
- Brahmos Missiles: UAE in talks to acquire.
- Predator Drones: Potential tripartite deal with USA.

**B. Counterterrorism & Cybersecurity**

- Extradition Treaty (2023): Fast-tracking fugitive deportations.
- Cyber Shield Initiative: Joint task force against China-linked hacks.

**5.4. Technology & Green Energy****A. Digital Infrastructure**

- UPI in UAE: Launched at Dubai's Burj Khalifa (2023).
- RBI ↔ UAE Central Bank CBDC Pilot: Digital Dirham-Rupee testing.

**B. Renewable Energy**

- Solar Power: UAE's Masdar-ONGC 2GW hybrid energy park in Rajasthan.
- Green Hydrogen: Adani-TotalEnergies-Mubadala \$50B investment plan.

## 5.5. Cultural & Diaspora Connect

### A. Beyond BAPS Mandir

- G20 Outcomes (2023): UAE backed India's LiFE Mission (sustainability).
- Yoga Diplomacy: UAE Armed Forces adopt yoga as training module.

### B. Diaspora Empowerment

- Pravasi Bharatiya Divas 2024 (UAE Chapter): Focus on NRI startups.
- Voting Rights: E-ballot system for Indian expats in UAE elections.

## 5.6. Geopolitical Alignment

### A. I2U2 & West Asia Quad

- UAE's Balancing Act: Despite China's GCC outreach, UAE prioritizes India in:
- Food Security: I2U2's \$2B UAE-funded Indian agri-tech parks.
- Space Tech: ISRO-UAESA lunar mission talks.

### B. Kashmir & OIC Diplomacy

- UAE Blocked Anti-India Resolutions at OIC (2023, 2024).
- Dubai's Bollywood Boom: Films like Tiger 3 promote Kashmir tourism.

From oil-to-orbit, India-UAE relations now span every strategic sphere. The BAPS Mandir is both a symbol and accelerator of this synergy—proving that cultural diplomacy and hard economics are mutually reinforcing.

## 6. Conclusion

The BAPS Hindu Mandir in Abu Dhabi is more than a religious landmark; it is a testament to the power of cultural diplomacy in shaping international relations. By fostering mutual respect and trust, the temple has reinforced India-UAE ties, complementing their economic and strategic partnership. As both nations continue to collaborate on global challenges, cultural initiatives like the BAPS Mandir will remain pivotal in sustaining their enduring friendship.

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