

Cultural and Heritage Connections between Malaysia and India: A Shared Legacy

*S.Velmurugan & A.Rajalakshmi

Department of Computer Science with Data Analytics & Department of Tamil
Tamilnadu, India

Manuscript received 21 July 2025

Manuscript accepted 2 September 2025

*Corresponding author/First Author

Abstract

India and Malaysia share a rich and enduring bilateral relationship, shaped by deep historical, cultural, economic, and strategic ties. Their collaboration is evident across diverse sectors, including trade, defense, education, and technology, with both nations actively engaged in regional agreements such as ASEAN and RCEP. The influence of Indian culture, particularly through the Tamil diaspora, plays a significant role in fostering cultural exchanges, while shared traditions, festivals, and religious practices further strengthen these ties. Joint efforts in fields like medical tourism, space research, and sustainability highlight the depth of their cooperation. Both countries also collaborate on regional security, particularly in maritime security and counterterrorism initiatives. This paper explores the cultural and heritage connections between Malaysia and India, emphasizing their shared legacy and the areas of mutual benefit that continue to shape their partnership in the contemporary world.

Keywords: *Cultural Exchange, Tamil Diaspora, Bilateral Cooperation, Heritage Connections, Regional Security.*

Abstrak

India dan Malaysia berkongsi hubungan dua hala yang kaya dan berkekalan, dibentuk oleh ikatan sejarah, budaya, ekonomi, dan strategik yang mendalam. Kerjasama mereka jelas merentas pelbagai sektor, termasuk perdagangan, pertahanan, pendidikan, dan teknologi, dengan kedua-dua negara terlibat secara aktif dalam perjanjian serantau seperti ASEAN dan RCEP. Pengaruh budaya India, terutamanya melalui diaspora Tamil, memainkan peranan penting dalam memupuk pertukaran budaya, manakala tradisi, perayaan, dan amalan keagamaan yang dikongsi bersama mengukuhkan lagi ikatan ini. Usaha bersama dalam bidang seperti pelancongan perubatan, penyelidikan angkasa lepas, dan kelestarian menonjolkan kedalaman kerjasama mereka. Kedua-dua negara juga bekerjasama dalam keselamatan serantau, terutamanya dalam keselamatan maritim dan inisiatif antiterorisme. Kertas kerja ini meneroka hubungan budaya dan warisan antara Malaysia dan India, menekankan legasi bersama mereka dan bidang-bidang manfaat bersama yang terus membentuk perkongsian mereka dalam dunia kontemporari.

Kata kunci: *Pertukaran Budaya, Diaspora Tamil, Kerjasama Dua Hala, Hubungan Warisan, Keselamatan Serantau.*

Introduction

The relationship between India and Malaysia is built on a foundation of shared history, culture, and mutual respect, with deep cultural and heritage ties that have shaped both nations for centuries. India, with its ancient civilizations, religions, and traditions, has profoundly influenced on Southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia, through trade, migration, and cultural exchanges. The Tamil diaspora, in particular, has played a significant role in preserving and promoting Indian cultural practices, languages, and religions in Malaysia.

Over the years, the partnership between the two countries has expanded to include strong economic ties, educational collaborations, and scientific advancements. Both nations are integral players in regional organizations like ASEAN and RCEP, which foster economic integration and cooperation. Furthermore, India and Malaysia share common strategic interests, particularly in the realms of security, counterterrorism, and maritime cooperation.

Historical and Cultural Connections

Table 1 presents a comparison of the historical and cultural ties between India and Malaysia across several key aspects. It highlights how India, with its ancient civilization, has influenced Malaysia in areas such as religion, language, architecture, and festivals. The table outlines the following key areas:

- **Historical Background:** India’s ancient civilization and its role as the birthplace of major religions, while Malaysia was influenced by Indian traders and settlers since the 7th century.
- **Religious Influence:** The spread of Hinduism and Buddhism from India to Malaysia, along with the later arrival of Islam through trade routes.
- **Literature and Language:** The impact of Indian languages like Tamil, Sanskrit, and Hindi, with Tamil widely spoken in Malaysia due to migration, and Malay influenced by Sanskrit.
- **Architecture:** Indian architectural styles, such as Dravidian temples, seen in Malaysian landmarks like Batu Caves, and iconic Indian temples like Brihadeeswarar Temple.
- **Festivals:** Shared celebrations such as Diwali, Pongal, and Thaipusam, with Indian-origin Malaysians continuing these traditions in Malaysia.

Table 1 : Comparison of Historical and Cultural Ties Between India and Malaysia

Aspect	India	Malaysia
Historical Background	Ancient civilization, birthplace of Hinduism and Buddhism.	Influenced by Indian traders and settlers from the 7th century.
Religious Influence	Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Islam, Christianity.	Hinduism and Buddhism were spread via Indian traders. Islam came later through trade routes.
Literature and Language	Tamil, Sanskrit, Hindi, and other regional languages.	Tamil is widely spoken due to migration; Malay influenced by Sanskrit.

Aspect	India	Malaysia
Architecture	Iconic temples, palaces, and monuments (e.g., Brihadeeswarar Temple).	Dravidian and Indian architectural styles seen in temples like Batu Caves.
Festivals	Diwali, Pongal, Onam, and various regional festivals.	Diwali, Thaipusam, Pongal, and Deepavali, celebrated by Indian-origin Malaysians.

Economic Relations

India and Malaysia share strong economic ties, with both countries engaging in trade, investment, and technological collaborations. Malaysia is one of India's largest trading partners in Southeast Asia, and India is a significant source of investment in Malaysia. The economic relationship is underpinned by mutual interests in sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture, services, and energy. Over the years, both nations have worked towards strengthening their trade agreements and business cooperation, with growing investments in each other's markets. This relationship continues to evolve, fostering opportunities for further economic integration and development.

Table 2: Economic Relations Between India and Malaysia

Aspect	India	Malaysia
Trade	India is Malaysia's 10th largest trading partner. Major exports include petroleum, palm oil, electronics, and machinery.	Malaysia is one of India's largest trade partners in Southeast Asia, exporting electronics, palm oil, and machinery.
Investment	India has invested in Malaysia's manufacturing, construction, and services sectors. Major Indian companies in Malaysia include TATA, Infosys, and Mahindra.	Malaysia has invested in India, particularly in infrastructure, telecommunications, and energy sectors.
Tourism	India is a major source of tourists to Malaysia, with increasing numbers of Indian visitors every year.	Malaysia attracts a significant number of tourists from India, with growing interest in cultural, religious, and leisure tourism.
Labor Migration	A large number of Indian workers are employed in Malaysia, especially in the plantation, construction, and manufacturing sectors.	Malaysia has a significant Indian-origin community, many of whom are involved in various industries.
Bilateral Agreements	India and Malaysia have signed several trade agreements, including the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA), to promote bilateral trade and investment.	Malaysia and India maintain strong bilateral trade agreements, focusing on increasing trade volume and economic cooperation.

Table 2 summarizes of the key aspects of economic relations between India and Malaysia, highlighting trade, investment, tourism, labor migration, and bilateral agreements.

Cultural Influence and the Indian Diaspora in Malaysia

The Indian diaspora has profoundly influenced on Malaysia, contributing significantly to the country’s multicultural identity. Indians have been living in Malaysia for centuries, with the majority of them being Tamil migrants who arrived during British colonial rule. Their customs, traditions, language, and religion have shaped various aspects of Malaysian society, from festivals and cuisine to arts and literature. The Indian community in Malaysia continues to play an essential role in the country’s cultural landscape, maintaining strong ties with India while contributing to Malaysia’s diversity and development.

Table 3: Cultural Influence of the Indian Diaspora in Malaysia

Aspect	India	Malaysia
Language	Tamil, Hindi, Punjabi, and other regional languages.	Tamil is widely spoken, especially among the Indian-origin community; Malay has been influenced by Sanskrit.
Religion	Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Christianity, and Buddhism.	Hinduism, Sikhism, and Islam, with temples and gurdwaras across Malaysia, especially in states with significant Indian populations.
Festivals	Diwali, Pongal, Holi, Onam, and other regional festivals.	Diwali, Thaipusam, Pongal, and Deepavali celebrated by Indian-origin Malaysians, with large processions and public festivities.
Cuisine	Indian cuisine features a wide variety of regional dishes, including curries, rice, and flatbreads.	Indian cuisine is widely popular, particularly Tamil dishes like roti canai, nasi lemak, and teh tarik.
Music and Dance	Classical dance forms like Bharatanatyam and Kathak, and music such as Carnatic and Hindustani classical.	Indian classical music and dance forms are practiced, and Tamil music, especially during festivals, is a prominent feature.
Art and Literature	Rich tradition in literature, including Tamil and Sanskrit texts, and artistic forms like sculpture and painting.	Indian-origin Malaysians contribute significantly to art and literature, with Tamil literature and art forms maintaining a strong presence.

Table 3 illustrates the profound cultural influence of the Indian diaspora in Malaysia, reflecting their contributions to language, religion, festivals, cuisine, music, and the arts, which have enriched Malaysia's cultural diversity.

India and Malaysia share deep religious and architectural ties, influenced largely by the Indian subcontinent. Over centuries, the religious and cultural influence of India has permeated Malaysia, particularly through the spread of Hinduism, Buddhism, and later Islam, contributing significantly to the country's religious diversity and architectural heritage. The Indian diaspora in Malaysia has also played a key role in preserving and promoting these traditions, blending them with local cultures and creating a unique fusion that defines Malaysian society today.

Table 4: Religious and Architectural Contributions from India to Malaysia

Aspect	India	Malaysia
Religious Influence	Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, and Islam originated in India, with a deep historical significance.	Hinduism, Buddhism, and later Islam arrived through Indian traders and settlers, influencing Malaysian culture and religion.
Major Religious Sites	Temples (e.g., Brihadeeswarar Temple, Golden Temple), Buddhist stupas (e.g., Sanchi), mosques (e.g., Jama Masjid).	Temples (e.g., Batu Caves, Sri Mahamariamman Temple), mosques (e.g., Masjid India, Sultan Abdul Samad Mosque).
Architectural Styles	Indian architecture ranges from ancient temples with intricate carvings, palaces, forts, and Islamic structures with Mughal influence.	Dravidian and Indian styles in temples (e.g., Batu Caves), Islamic styles in mosques (e.g., Sultan Abdul Samad Mosque), and colonial buildings with Indian architectural elements.
Religious Festivals	Diwali, Pongal, Holi, Eid, Christmas, and numerous regional festivals celebrated across the country.	Diwali, Thaipusam, Pongal, Deepavali, and various Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim festivals.
Art and Sculptures	Rich tradition in religious art, including intricate sculptures of gods and deities, murals, and frescoes.	Indian-inspired sculptures, particularly in temples like Batu Caves, and murals depicting Hindu mythology and gods.
Cultural Integration	The fusion of regional styles led to diverse temple architectures, particularly in southern India.	Indian architectural styles were adapted and integrated with Malay traditions, visible in iconic landmarks and religious structures.

Table 4 highlights the religious and architectural contributions of India to Malaysia, focusing on the profound impact of Indian culture on Malaysia's religious landscape and built heritage. From the spread of Hinduism and Buddhism to the architectural styles that dominate Malaysia's iconic temples and mosques, the legacy of Indian influence continues to shape Malaysia's identity.

Comparison of India and Malaysia: Economic and Diplomatic Ties

India and Malaysia maintain robust economic and diplomatic relations, characterized by growing trade, investment, and strategic cooperation. Both countries benefit from each other's strong economies and mutual interests in areas such as trade, defense, culture, and regional security. Below is a comparison table, enriched with statistical data, to better illustrate their economic and diplomatic ties.

Table 5: Comparison of Economic and Diplomatic Ties Between India and Malaysia

Aspect	India	Malaysia
Bilateral Trade (2023)	\$17.6 billion (Exports: \$7.3 billion, Imports: \$10.3 billion)	\$17.3 billion (Exports: \$7.1 billion, Imports: \$10.2 billion)
Trade Balance	India has a trade deficit of \$3 billion with Malaysia	Malaysia has a trade surplus of \$3 billion with India

Aspect	India	Malaysia
Top Exports from India to Malaysia	Refined petroleum, machinery, electrical machinery, chemicals, and diamonds.	Petroleum products, electronics, and palm oil.
Top Exports from Malaysia to India	Palm oil, chemicals, electrical machinery, petroleum products, rubber.	Refined petroleum, electronics, palm oil, chemicals.
Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)	FDI from India to Malaysia in 2023: \$1.4 billion	FDI from Malaysia to India in 2023: \$2.1 billion
Diplomatic Relations	Diplomatic relations since 1957, with cooperation on security, trade, and regional stability.	Diplomatic relations since 1957, focusing on trade, investment, defense, and education.
Strategic Cooperation	India and Malaysia cooperate on counterterrorism, maritime security, and environmental issues.	Malaysia cooperates with India on regional security and multilateral frameworks such as ASEAN and SAARC.
Cultural Exchanges	2.5 million people of Indian descent living in Malaysia, contributing to cultural integration.	India's Indian diaspora plays a significant role in Malaysia's cultural diversity, particularly Tamil culture.
Tourism (2023)	Indian tourists to Malaysia: 800,000	Malaysian tourists to India: 400,000
Bilateral Agreements	Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) signed in 2011.	Malaysia and India have signed multiple bilateral agreements on trade, education, and defense.

Table 5 presents a comprehensive economic and diplomatic comparison between India and Malaysia, incorporating key statistical data. As shown, both countries engage in a high volume of trade, with a trade balance that slightly favors Malaysia. Foreign direct investment flows are significant from both sides, and both countries continue to develop strong diplomatic and strategic partnerships. The growing people-to-people connections and cultural exchanges further solidify the strong bond between India and Malaysia.

Table 6: Unique Features of India-Malaysia Relationship

Feature	Explanation
Shared Historical and Cultural Ties	India's culture and religion have influenced Malaysia for centuries, seen in the spread of Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Tamil language. These ties have shaped Malaysian society, especially the Indian diaspora's role in preserving these traditions.
Economic and Trade Integration through Regional Agreements	Both countries are key players in regional economic groupings like ASEAN and RCEP, facilitating greater trade and economic collaboration, particularly in sectors like palm oil, electronics, and IT.

Feature	Explanation
Tamil Diaspora and Cultural Influence	The Tamil community in Malaysia is one of the largest ethnic groups, influencing the local culture through festivals, language, food, and religious practices, strengthening cultural ties.
Educational and Skills Development	India offers scholarships to Malaysian students, particularly in engineering and medicine, while Malaysia provides skill development programs in sectors like IT, healthcare, and manufacturing.
Spiritual and Religious Tourism	Malaysia's temples, like Batu Caves , attract Hindu and Buddhist tourists, including those from India. In return, Indian spiritual sites attract Malaysian pilgrims, fostering cross-border religious tourism.
Medical Tourism	Indian hospitals provide high-quality, affordable medical care to Malaysian citizens, and Malaysia's medical tourism sector is growing, with many doctors trained in India, making both countries key medical destinations.
Maritime Cooperation and Strategic Interests	Both countries share strategic interests in the South China Sea , ensuring free navigation and addressing regional security concerns through naval cooperation and joint exercises.
Collaborative Approach to Sustainability	India and Malaysia are working together in renewable energy projects, including solar power initiatives, to meet their commitments under the Paris Agreement on climate change.
Diplomatic Cooperation in Global Forums	India and Malaysia actively cooperate in global forums like the United Nations , ASEAN , and the Non-Aligned Movement , advocating for multilateralism, global peace, and development.
Cybersecurity and Counterterrorism	Both nations collaborate on cybersecurity and counterterrorism , sharing intelligence and working together on regional security matters, especially in countering extremist threats.
Space and Science Collaboration	India's ISRO collaborates with Malaysia in satellite technology and space research, with joint initiatives benefiting both countries in technology and scientific advancements.
Culinary Diplomacy	The culinary exchange between India and Malaysia, especially in the Indian cuisine adopted widely in Malaysia, enhances cultural diplomacy and strengthens people-to-people ties through food festivals and culinary events.

This table illustrates the diverse and growing dimensions of the **India-Malaysia relationship**, highlighting the unique areas where both countries interact, cooperate, and mutually benefit across various sectors.

The Indian Diaspora in Malaysia

1. Migration and Settlement

The Indian diaspora in Malaysia is one of the largest ethnic minorities, constituting approximately 7.3% of the population. This community is primarily composed of Tamil-speaking Indians who were brought to Malaysia during British colonial rule as indentured laborers to work in rubber plantations and railways. Over the years, the Indian community has grown to include professionals,

traders, and entrepreneurs, all contributing significantly to Malaysia's economic, political, and cultural development.

2. Cultural Contributions

The Indian diaspora has enriched Malaysian society through food, festivals, and cultural practices. Diwali (the Festival of Lights) and Thaipusam (celebrated at Batu Caves), and Pongal are widely celebrated in Malaysia. Indian cuisine, particularly Tamil and Punjabi dishes, has also become an integral part of Malaysia's food culture, with dishes such as roti canai, dosa, and biryani popular across the nation.

In the arts, Indian influence is evident in the classical dance forms like Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, and Kathak, which are practiced in cultural institutions across Malaysia. The film industry, particularly Tamil cinema, continues to have a significant following in Malaysia, and Indian music, including Bollywood hits, is widely enjoyed.

Modern-Day Relations: Economic and Political Ties

1. Trade and Investment

The trade relationship between India and Malaysia has grown significantly in recent years. In 2023, the bilateral trade between India and Malaysia was valued at approximately USD 18 billion, with both countries exchanging goods such as electronics, petroleum, machinery, palm oil, and rubber. Malaysia is a significant trading partner for India within Southeast Asia, and India is one of Malaysia's largest trading partners in the Indian subcontinent.

Both nations have also engaged in economic cooperation in sectors like information technology, education, tourism, and agriculture. Malaysia's role as a hub for palm oil production benefits from India's demand, while India exports a wide range of manufactured goods to Malaysia.

2. Diplomatic and Strategic Relations

Diplomatic relations between India and Malaysia have strengthened significantly in recent years, with both nations engaging in high-level exchanges. India's 'Act East' policy and Malaysia's 'Look East' policy have brought the two countries closer in terms of regional cooperation. Both nations share common interests in regional security, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, and collaborate in various international forums like the United Nations and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

3. Educational and Cultural Exchange

India and Malaysia have strong educational links, with many Malaysian students studying in India, particularly in fields like medicine, engineering, and information technology. Similarly, India attracts students from Malaysia to its universities, with significant cultural exchange programs fostering mutual understanding.

In the cultural sphere, programs such as the **Indian Cultural Centre** in Kuala Lumpur promote the understanding and appreciation of Indian culture, language, and arts. The establishment of the **Malaysia-India Cultural Centre** in Chennai further strengthens this exchange.

Conclusion: A Shared Future

The cultural, economic, and political relationship between India and Malaysia continues to evolve, enriched by centuries of shared history and heritage. Both nations, rooted in a rich tapestry of traditions and values, now find themselves at the crossroads of modernity and progress. The deep connections that link them, from the Tamil diaspora to trade routes and religious exchanges, continue to form a strong foundation for mutual collaboration in various sectors. As global dynamics shift, India and Malaysia's partnership remains vital, with both countries leveraging their shared cultural legacy to foster innovation, strengthen economic ties, and navigate regional and global challenges. This enduring relationship not only celebrates their past but also promises a vibrant and mutually beneficial future, one where cooperation across diverse fields will continue to grow and thrive..

References

1. Ministry of External Affairs (India). "India-Malaysia Bilateral Relations."
2. Department of Statistics Malaysia. "Population and Demographics."
3. World Bank Report. "India-Malaysia Trade and Investment Overview."
4. UNESCO World Heritage Centre. "Cultural Heritage Sites in Malaysia and India."
5. Asian Development Bank (ADB). "Malaysia's Economic Development and Trade Relations with India."