

Oman and India: Retracing Historical Voyages and Forging New Strategic Connectivity

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ABSTRACT

India anchored by the concept of the 'New idea of India' is gradually emerging as the spokesperson of the global south. With its new-found stature and recognition which has been cemented with the successful culmination of G20 under her presidency and the successful landing of Chandrayaan in the Lunar space, India is gradually voyaging more assertively in forging strategic relations with the world. Oman figures prominently in India's current strategic calculus and furthering its sphere of influence across the region. Maritime trade relations between the two civilizations are historic. Oman's strategic location with prominent ports like the ports of Muscat, Sur, Qalhat along the Arabian Sea, and the Gulf of Oman served as a gateway for all ships sailing across the Strait of Hormuz, the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea. Project Mausum launched by India in 2014 is one such project in which Oman's indispensable role, cooperation and collaboration is required. Project Mausum is a revisit of the past and an attempt to rekindle the lost age-old ties in understanding how the wind-system impacted and shaped the countries and communities connected by the Indian Ocean. This project is a counterbalance to China's "21st century Maritime Silk Route" in the Indian Ocean Region. This paper critically analyses Oman and India's new strategic initiatives and trade connectivity, by revisiting the old maritime trade and links and assessing the extent to which Oman can help India in fulfilling the objectives of Project Mausum. It will also study the potential limitations and challenges that may hinder the realization of these shared goals.

Keywords: *India-Oman Maritime relations, 'New idea of India', Project Mausum, New strategic trade connectivity*

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INTRODUCTION

Oman and India historical trade relations

The historical contacts and relations between the Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of India date back to the early Bronze Age. As per historian Vogt, “Harrapan impact on the Oman peninsula started as early as the middle of the third millennium BC”. On the Indian subcontinent, the Bronze Age began about 3000 CE, which marked the beginning of the Indus Valley Civilization. Archaeological discoveries indicate that because Harappa was situated beside the Arabian Sea, its inhabitants traded along the Red Sea. The upper Gulf region, encompassing Dilmun and Qalhat, has yielded a number of archaeological discoveries from ancient Harappa, including carnelian beads, pottery, coins with inscriptions, and shards with engravings in the Indus Valley script (Gosch & Stearns, 2007). These archaeological findings confirm that trade links persisted in the later Bronze Age between the Harappan colonies on the Makran coast. Furthermore, it also confirms that there were many other kinds of interactions, including commercial, economic, cultural, and religious exchanges, because of the close proximity and personal relationships.

The Sultanate of Oman, located in the southeast coast of the Arabian Peninsula, enjoys a high geo-economic and geo-strategic importance in international maritime trade (Donkin, 2003). The maritime history of Oman is rich with traces in historical discourses dating back to Yalainous (23-79 AD), who was one of the earliest Roman historians to have mentioned Omana (now Oman). The ancient Magan civilisation flourished in the present-day Sultanate of Oman and there are archaeological evidences that show close trading relations between Magan and the Meluhha¹ Civilisation i.e. the Indus Valley Civilisation as they were connected by a maritime route. Sohar represents the first millennium BC. The artefacts found in Sohar depicts that it was an important trading site and the findings of terracotta earthenware is suggestive of being imported from India. The finding of a small bronze statuette of an Indian girl in the port city of Salalah in the Dhofar province of Oman constitutes material evidence of a relationship between India and Oman (Pasha, 2022). Historical evidences and archaeological findings suggest of vibrant trade exchange between India and Mesopotamia during 2300 BC. Items like copper, carnelian, gold and ivory were on demand

¹Meluhha meant ‘materials of great purity’, also as ‘many’ or ‘abundance’- a theme in harmony to a great degree with the type of merchandise which Magan shipped to Mesopotamia.

(Gosch & Stearns, 2007). The most recent archaeological excavations in Pattanam (Kerala) in 2020 have revealed a variety of tangible evidences for South India's trade links with Oman, at least from First century. (Cherian & Rocco, 2024).

Oman is India's Maritime Gateway to the Arab world and beyond. Oman's ports were important hubs for trade and trans-shipment to India. The principal transit ports were Omani ports such as Khor Rori, Qalhat, Sur, and Muscat until Ptolemy VII, the Hellenistic King of Egypt, encouraged traders to sail directly between Egypt and India.¹ Hippalus, the Greek, discovered a crucial development that reduced the importance of Omani ports- the use of the South-West monsoon winds. However, Oman had already established itself as the principal shipbuilding center in the Indian Ocean at that point.² By the beginning of the third century, there was increase in the sea movements in the Gulf which made the Omani ports very vital. Around the same time, the rapid spread of Islam under the Abbasid Caliphate helped promote trade. The Gulf and the Red Sea worked as two strong pillars of the Caliphate which otherwise were contesting waterways. By having a direct access to the Islamic empire, Oman enjoyed a special position in the trade. Around this period, trade with Malabar rose phenomenally. Besides commerce and trade of products from Malabar, the materials for shipbuilding especially teak wood was an essential item. Omani hulls and dhows were built from the teakwood. An important part of the East-West Indian Ocean trade was played by Oman. Carpenters from Oman would travel to India to construct ships using teak and coconut wood. The method of shipbuilding was done without using nails but with joints and pegs. This type of method is still found today in many ports of Gujarat, Mandvi, Veraval and Vanakbara on the island of Diu, where the same kind of traditional wooden ships are still being built today. It is undoubtedly the Omanis who have introduced the method of shipbuilding techniques to India. The architecture designs and type of designs have some similarity. The type of wooden roof structure illustrating details of the wall-painting in Ajanta Cave, datable to 5th century AD is also very similar to those of present Kerala (Shokoohy, 2018). Marco Polo in his accounts mentions Sohar and Dhofar (known at that time as al-Mansurah) as major centres of trade and Dhofar was a major exporter of horses to India.

¹Shasir was the principal trade centre in Neolithic period and Dhofar of Oman was the link between Sumer, an ancient Egypt and India.

²Indian teakwood has been found at numerous Sumerian sites and also Sumerian inscriptions reveal evidences of shipbuilding in Oman and its trade in the Indian Ocean.

The trade in spices from India was one of Oman's major contributions to the Indian Ocean trade. During the period 750-1500 AD, Sohar, Qalhat, Sur, Kuriyat, Batinah, Matrah, Muscat and the smaller ports of Batinah coast were main ports which the Omani mariners controlled and shared maritime trade with India and rest of Asia. Oman's geographic location thus enabled Oman to play a major role in the India Ocean trading activity. It was primarily the monsoon winds that eased sailors from Oman to make their voyage to India relatively smoother.

OMANIS IN MALABAR AND INDIANS IN OMAN: BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

One of the most striking outcomes of this vibrant development of trade and commerce in Malabar was the migration of merchant communities from Oman. In Malabar, Omani Arabs gradually formed the aristocracy of the coast. They were undoubtedly the most influential foreign Muslim settlers along the Malabar Coast. Calicut served as the nerve center of Arab trade. For the Omanis, Calicut was known as the 'City of Truth.' Ibn Batuta, who provided the first detailed account of Omani settlements in various parts of Kerala, noted that trade on the Malabar Coast was dominated by people from Oman. Ezhimala, another major trading point in northern Kerala, also had an Arab settlement primarily composed of Omanis. Ibn Batuta's writings make it clear that the Qadi (judge) and Khatib (orator) in many coastal towns were from Oman. Scholars, Sufis, and traders played a significant role in spreading Islam to India. Batuta also noted the presence of Omani Sufi scholars involved in the Islamization of coastal peoples from the eighth century onwards.

Malabar ports were well connected with Hormuz, Dhofar, Aden, and Jeddah. According to K M Pannikar, these ports continued to be connected and in business up to the time when Vasco Da Gama arrived in Kerala in 1498. It is interesting to note that Ahmed Ibn Majid an Omani sailor guided the way to Vasco Da Gama from Malindi on the coast of East Africa to Malabar Coast in India. Several Omanis resided and did their academic pursuits from India. We have instances like Sultan Taimur bin Faisal who came to India in 1332. After his death, he was buried in Mumbai, India. We have the Mayo college in Ajmer, Rajasthan honouring the names by dedicating two halls in the name of Sultan Saeed bin Taimur and Fahd bin Taimur who studied there. However, the coming of the Portuguese was a turning point in the history of Malabar-Oman-Arab relations.

According to S.B. Miles (1966, p.35), it is been noted that a small Hindu temple at Qalhat around the 15th century was discovered. This can be concluded that there were Indian merchants in Oman around that period. Together with the Omanis, the Hindu merchants fought against the Europeans in which the role played by ‘Narottam’ an Indian merchant is known widely. There was cooperation and tolerance and they were allowed to build temples. Around the late 18th century, the Portuguese influence declined, and also the three Islamic empires- Safavid, Mughal and Ottoman leading to “the shift of a considerable proportion of trade from Bandar Abbas and Basra to Masgat” (Risso, 1986, p.16). This allowed Oman and Omanis to gain monopoly over the Gulf bound trade. Simultaneously the Indian merchants in Oman were also growing affluent and influential to the extent that the Europeans and the Omanis were careful in their eating habits in the presence of their Hindu merchants. By the mid 18th century there were already four Hindu temples in Muscat (Kechichian, 1995, p.215). Among the three distinct Indian merchant communities in the late 18th and 19th century, it was the Liwatiyahs (Hyderabad, Sind) that tried to completely assimilate into the Omani society by adopting Arabic language and dress (Allen, 1984,). The other two communities were the Thatta Bhatthias and Kutchi Bhattia. The contact between India and Oman waned during the first half of the twentieth century partly due to the two World Wars, the great depression of 1930 and also the domestic upheaval leading to the abdication of the throne by Sultan Taymur bin Faysal in 1932. It was the signing of the Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation in 1953 that rejuvenated the age-old relation between India and Oman.

A NEW IDEA OF INDIA AND ITS VISION

India has gradually achieved global recognition and has become the spokesperson of the global South, with the successful landing of Chandrayan in the lunar space, the successful culmination of G-20 with Ukraine issue smoothly deliberated among the world leaders, the inclusion of African Union in G-20. India’s remarkable fight against Covid pandemic with the largest number of its citizens getting vaccinated and also able to help other nations in need of vaccines has led the World Health Organisation (WHO) declare ‘a prepared India is a prepared world’. This newfound global standing of India according to Harsh Madhusudan and Rajeev Mantri is because of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who under his leadership since 2014 corrected all the flaws committed by Nehruvian idea that dominated Indian polity for seven decades. According to them, it was the ethos of socialism, non-alignment and

secularism that hindered India not to progress both at the domestic and at the global front (Madhusudan & Mantri, 2020).

The Modi doctrine is a foreign policy philosophy developed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India. It is based on the idea of “neighbourhood first” and “cooperation with all”. This philosophy seeks to promote peace and stability in India’s neighbourhood, while also engaging in economic diplomacy with countries outside the region. Policymaking has considered Prime Minister Modi's own beliefs of India's place in the global system, as well as its spiritual and cultural foundations, which see the world as a family (*Vasudhev Kutumbakam*) and happiness for all (*sarve bhavantu sukhinah*). In his book, “The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World”, External Affairs Minister (EAM), Dr. S. Jaishankar (2020, p.25) wrote – “Comfort with Europe has grown, but needs more insights into its increasingly intricate politics... This is a time for us to engage America, manage China, cultivate Europe, reassure Russia, bring Japan into play, draw neighbours in, extend the neighbourhood and *expand traditional constituencies of support*”. (emphasis added). He also added, “the idea of Bharat is to have maximum goodwill and minimum adversaries.” With this cumulative understanding, India seeks to achieve a developed nation when it celebrates 100 years of independence (*Amrit Kaal*) in 2047.

Keeping this in perspective, India revisited and reformulated many policies holistically and set-up corrective measures and programmes to fulfil its objective. Project Mausum was one of them.

PROJECT MAUSUM: A STRATEGIC PROJECT

Project Mausum launched by India in 2014 is “to explore the historical and cultural linkages between countries in the Indian Ocean region. The project seeks to promote greater cultural understanding and people-to-people exchanges between India and its neighbours, enhancing regional cooperation and stability” (Ministry of Culture, GOI, 2014). It is one such project in which Oman’s indispensable role, cooperation and collaboration is required. There are early accounts recorded by Ibn Majid, and Portuguese Duarte Barbosa of sea routes undertaken from the coast of Oman following the south-west winds. Omanis were traditionally seafarers and were the experts in understanding the monsoon winds; the season when ships could sail. Understanding ‘Mausum’ the wind-system of the Indian Ocean region which enabled and shaped cultural interactions and exchanges between communities

and countries in the age-old days still resonates today. This definitely carries strategic implications across the Indian Ocean, including the Gulf. Project Mausum is a revisit of the past and an attempt to rekindle the lost age-old ties in understanding how the wind-system impacted and shaped the countries and communities connected by the Indian Ocean. There are three specific strategic dimensions of this project. Firstly, it is to promote regional connectivity to enhance her global reach and foster cooperation with the old traditional allies. Secondly, strengthening maritime security in the light of the impending threat of terrorism, piracy, smuggling in the sea lanes and straits that disrupts the economy. Since most of the trade is through seas and one nation itself cannot deal with this menace, collaboration with countries in strategic location like Oman is imperative. Thirdly, this project is a counterbalance to China's "21st century Maritime Silk Route in the Indian Ocean Region". By collaborating with its neighbours in all vital sectors and fostering people to people contact, limits its dependency on China. Considering the cordial relations between the two countries and with Oman's strategic location, it holds paramount importance for India to fulfill her objectives. Under Project Mausum, a joint sail voyage was conducted between India and Oman which underscores Oman's strategic significance in India's geopolitical calculus. Oman and India have often celebrated their millennia-old maritime links with various projects re-creating historical journeys. A joint sailing of the Royal Navy of Oman (RNO) and the Indian Navy was conducted in November 2015 to commemorate the 60th anniversary of Indo-Omani diplomatic ties. RNO's sailing vessel *Shabab Oman* along with the Indian Navy Sail Training Ship *Tarangini* undertook the voyage from Muscat to Kochi, tracing the ancient trade route between India and Oman.

MARITIME SECURITY: PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE

The maritime space has emerged as the theatre for geopolitical competition. Multiple proactive initiatives straddling political, economic, security, technological and social domains both at the national level and at the international level has been undertaken. There are three vital reasons which made India become more engaged with the maritime security. As mentioned above, aiming to achieve a developed nation by 2047 as Harsh Pant (2009, p.282) stated, more activism both in diplomacy and military is required and it is going in the right direction. Maritime security and protection of sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) also got a rejig. Though maritime landscapes as India's strategic autonomy was always considered vital, but when it came to

development, investment and collaborations, India was passive. Hence, India shifted under Modi, from ‘maritime blindness’ to ‘matters maritime’. This is clearly shown, with India joining the Combined Maritime Force (CMF) a multinational naval force led by the US based in Bahrain.¹ India shies away from military alliances but in this case, India joined CMF in 2023 after being an associate partner in 2022. CMF is not like NATO that works on the principle of collective security. It is more flexible. Its main goal is safety and security of sea lanes. India is also in the same page as PM Modi has flagged that the two main issues confronting the International community are terrorism and piracy. Since India has experienced its own share of terrorism in 2008 Mumbai attacks which emanated from the use of seas, India is serious of its efforts to build a strong maritime security apparatus. When it comes to piracy, India plays a very vital role in ensuring that the SLOCs are safe by deploying naval ships across the Gulf of Aden. In the recent past, the Indian Navy has been putting up a formidable fight against Somali pirates and rescuing crew members demonstrating its cooperation towards international community in combating piracy. Till the time of writing, the Indian Navy have operated 18 piracy incidents. The most recent is under Operation Sankalp, wherein the Indian Navy is unflinchingly giving its best to “secure the seas” which has been intensified due to the Israel-Hamas war (Sagar, 2024).

The economy of India is largely dependent on the Indian ocean region as all the major trade and commerce is done through the seas. 95 % of trade by volume, and more than 80% of crude comes through sea (Singh, 2021). It is therefore imperative that India protects and provides security to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The second reason is the China Factor. China’s presence in the Indian Ocean has been growing and gradually and steadily marking her footprints in the Indo-Pacific region in a major way. China has now acquired the largest in many fronts like - naval force, merchant fleet, ship building industry, largest port , fishing fleet. By all accounts China has dominated the region and it is continuously striving to strengthen its presence by initiating various projects. One of the most significant initiative is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which comprises of the Maritime Silk Road and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). With China’s access to ports in Gwadar (Pakistan), Colombo (Sri Lanka) and Djibouti (Horn of Africa), it has somehow encircled the Indo-Pacific region. Issues of militarization of South China Sea by China, restrictions in navigation and installing of naval

¹CMF-44 countries naval partnership with the aim to promote security, safety and prosperity across the “Red Sea, Gulf of Oman, Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean Region”.

platforms and ports in the Indian Ocean are some of the red flags for India's security. Diplomatically also China has been able to sway the Island countries –Maldives, Mauritius and Sri Lanka towards them. India was lackadaisical as it was rest assured that the island countries including Nepal and Bangladesh was under its influence and their security provider. However, the political equations have changed and India needs a dynamic practical diplomacy along with strategic policies to reverse the situation. In April 2024, China deployed 3 vessels which are allegedly used for intelligence gathering. According to the US Department of Defence (2023), there are 370 Chinese ships and submarines, whereas India has only 29 surface combatants. There exists a huge power disparity. In the interim, working with other partners, helps India.

OMAN UNDER THE CALCULUS OF INDIA'S VISION

It is at this juncture that Oman figures prominently in India's current strategic calculus and furthering its sphere of influence across the region. With rich deep historical linkages and diplomatic relations that goes back more than 65 years, Oman and India convergence of interests and their vision of their country and for the global order shares similar values and perspectives. Considering the geostrategic location of Oman and in order for Project Mausum to come to fruition, the ports of Oman are one of the key assets that will take India to reach its targeted goals.

Oman has a very important role to play for India's maritime security and to preserve India's strategic interest in the Indian Ocean. It serves as an important interlocutor for India at the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Arab League, and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).

China is a threat and with its presence growing increasingly in the region in adherence to it "BRI (*Belt and Road Initiative*)"; India needs strategic engagement with Oman. China has established military base in Djibouti. India needs Oman in counterbalancing China's dominance and ushering security efforts in the Gulf of Aden. The Strategic partnership signed in 2008, between the two countries deepened their relations with Oman providing replenishment facility to India naval ships and drydocking. India trains approximately 150 Omani sailors annually, and the Sultanate has granted berthing rights to Indian navy vessels, which India highly values for conducting anti-piracy operations near the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa. Realising the importance of knowledge sharing, Oman and India signed MoU in May 2016 focusing on maritime security and coastal security in which regular interactions among the officers and emphasis on joint training as the main rationale. It is pertinent to mention that Oman is the first country in the Gulf with which all

three branches of India's defense forces – Army, Navy and Airforce conduct joint exercises. The army exercise is called Al Najah, while the air force and the naval exercise are Eastern Bridge and Naseem-al-Bahr respectively. Oman's increasing maritime influence was underscored by National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval's when he visited the strategic Duqm port in Oman on 26 June 2023. His visit undoubtedly underscores India's keen interest in establishing ports and freight corridors that connects Europe, Asia, and Africa. The statement by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA, Press Release, 2023) succinctly states where Oman's position is in relation to India-it reads, "The visit by NSA reflects the strong bilateral relationship between India and Oman, the importance of the Sultanate of Oman as a key partner for India in the Gulf, and highlights India's commitment to strengthening its strategic partnership with Oman".

DUQM PORT, OMAN: AN ASSET FOR INDIA

Duqm Port in Oman is one of the largest Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in the Middle East and North Africa which is located approximately 550 kilometres from the capital Muscat. It is strategically located as it is close to South Asian nations like Pakistan and India and is easily accessible from East Africa. Since it is located outside the Strait of Hormuz in the middle of the Indian Ocean and global shipping routes, many nations are vying a piece of this port. In March 2019, the United States signed an agreement with Oman to grant U.S. military access to facilities and ports in Duqm and Salalah. The China-Oman (Duqm) Industrial Park, a major "*Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI)" project nearing its first phase of completion, exemplifies China's interest in linking continents through logistics and infrastructure funded by Chinese investments. Oman joined the "BRI" in 2018, enhancing its importance as China's first base station in the Gulf.

Against this backdrop, a designated zone has been allocated to India in the strategically significant Duqm port in Oman. This has bolstered the bilateral relations between India and Oman marking another transformative milestone. This development happened right on the heels of the visit of Sultan Haitham bin Tariq to New Delhi on 16 December 2023 which shows India and Oman on the same page. This development has furthered India's influence within the western and southern Indian Ocean Region. It also empowers the Indian navy by assuming the vital role of a security provider amidst the soaring tensions in the Red Sea and western Indian Ocean. Acquiring an imminent presence in the Duqm port supports its effective role in anti-piracy operations across the region. Lately, India has been demonstrating its regional leadership by effectively countering threats posed by the Houthis in Yemen.

The unparalleled strategic location of Duqm offers India unparalleled access to key maritime routes, including the Gulf of Oman, Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea. Furthermore, Duqm's strategic integration into a special economic zone seamlessly facilitates trade and commerce, thereby fostering India's economic interests and promoting shared prosperity. Duqm port is equipped with state-of-the-art facilities' such as comprehensive ship repair yard and an expansive dry dock. Duqm emerges as a vital hub for diverse maritime activities. Since the port is very close to Muscat, just 550 kilometres, it is viable for both India and African countries for easy access to market and commerce.

In essence, India's secured zone within the Port of Duqm not only underscores the nation's steadfast commitment to reinforcing maritime ties with Oman but also fortifies its strategic presence in the region. As geopolitical dynamics continue to evolve, India enhanced maritime capabilities bolstered by its strategic allocation, are poised to play a pivotal role in safeguarding regional stability and promoting sustainable economic prosperity.



Figure 1: Duqm Port (Oman)

(Viable for both India and African countries for easy access to market and commerce).

Revitalizing India's Maritime Sector

From 2015 onwards, India refocused its attention towards the maritime domain that was long neglected. Pronouncing the vision of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All Region) in Mauritius by PM Modi with the aim to enhance capacity building for the benefit of all in the Indian Ocean Region, India started a flurry of activities; like the International Fleet Review and global Maritime Summit in 2016 in which more than 42 countries participated. The outcome of the summit was the declaration of the Sagar Mala programme- a port development with a focus to modernize and upgrade India's maritime infrastructure. India has 12 major ports and 204 intermediate ports but it has been long languishing with outdated infrastructure and inefficient workforce. Under the Sagar Mala programme, construction of six major ports is in the offing. To enhance port operations, the Shipping ministry also launched the Project Unnati. Under the Sagar Mala programme, promotion of cruise tourism is one of the objectives including "development of coastal tourist circuits lighthouse tourism, a national maritime heritage museum at Lothal and an underwater viewing gallery at Beyt Dwarka." Maritime India Vision 2030 has been brought out by the Ministry of Ports and Shipping with the objective of "propelling India to the fore- front of the Global Maritime Sector". It is based on key guiding principles "analyse current and future challenges to define initiatives, drive innovation by utilizing latest technology, create time-bound action plan, benchmark to understand current standing and adopt best-in-class practices, address capability building and human resources, explore ideas to achieve Waste to Wealth" (Maritime India Vision 2030 Document).

Maritime relations reached another milestone when both countries signed a Maritime Transport Agreement on December 24, 2019, during EAM S. Jaishankar's visit to the Sultanate. This agreement which is the first of its kind with any Gulf country, allows India to expand its presence in the western Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf, and East Africa. Many Maritime International Seminars are organised by India. One of which was MILAN-2024 by the Indian Navy at the Eastern Naval Command (ENC) base with the theme, 'Partners across oceans: collaboration, synergy, growth', "aiming to promote synergy and interoperability amidst the escalating global maritime security challenges". Such initiatives reaffirms all the more, the tireless diplomatic effort put forward vouching for inclusiveness and progress through peaceful means.

Since 2008, the Indian Navy has been supported by Oman in its anti-piracy deployments in the Gulf of Aden, and Indian naval ships are welcomed by Oman for Over Seas Deployments (OSDs) and Operational Turn Arouds (OTRs). In particular, Salalah has been the most preferred OTR destination of Indian Navy ships involved in counter-piracy patrols. This gives a unique historical continuity to the ancient links that existed when Dhofar was a bustling port having links with many Indian ports.

According to Rajeev Aggarwal (2024, n.p), Oman serves as the missing link to the IMEC (India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor) which is a connectivity project launched at the G20 Summit in New Delhi on 9th September 2023. However, before any of this project could be thoroughly examined, the Gaza War broke out on 7 October 2023 which brought the project to a halt. UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Israel which are part of the IMEC are caught in the midst of the war. The Houthi rebels in Yemen are targeting the ships and cargoes of Israel and its western allies that passes through the Red Sea. The ports in UAE which is the eastern corridor of IMEC is not a safe route as Iran has control over the Strait of Hormuz which can be used as a bargaining chip threatening to close the Strait. Rajeev Aggarwal thus opines that Oman gives the solution as its ports opens up into the Arabian Sea which evades any Iranian threat. Added to that, its ports have direct route and also the shortest to link to Indian ports.

Cultural interactions between Oman and India: Forging Ahead with Times

The people to people contacts greatly enhance and help strengthen the socio-cultural synergy between the two nations. The exchange of ideas, culture, religious beliefs, culinary, architectural designs and ways of life led to crosspollination in a major way that significant traces of it still lingers to this day. The Ibadi aspect of Islam resonates soundly within the Indian thought and in its foreign policy initiatives. Moderation and mediation with pragmatism is Oman's foreign policy hallmark and which has been resoundingly supported by India over the years since it established diplomatic relations in 1955. Traditional Omani Musars (head scarfs) are traditionally produced in Kashmir, India. Omani Zari works and wood carvings of Rajasthan are strikingly similar. The lungi (lower garment) worn by Mappilla men in Kerala and the robe worn by the Omanis are very similar and so is their Musars.

According to historical records, it is around 815-816 AD that the first Muslims appeared on the coasts of Malabar. In Cranganur or Kotunnallur

stands a small mosque called the Cheraman Jani claimed to be the earliest mosque founded in Malabar with the date 629-630 AD. Inscriptional evidences of the presence of Muslim trading settlements in Gujarat by 13 century is well established. The bilingual inscription in Arabic -Sanskrit of a mosque built by Nakhuda Firuz in Somnath (Gujarat) is a valid testament of their presence in Indian ports. Muslim Arab merchants played a vital role in Indian commerce as early as tenth century (Kooria & Pearson, 2018), Bhattias of Sind province are recorded to be one of the early settlers in Oman. Their deft skills in entrepreneurship contributed significantly in enriching regional trade and development gradually carving a strong political niche in Oman polity. Khojas-Indian trader community from Eastern India settled in Muscat and contributed in the development of Oman.

The vibrancy of the interactions and the strong socio-cultural connect directly strengthens Oman-India partnerships to this date. The Indian diaspora comprising of around 7,80,000 which is 20 percent of Oman population is definitely the direct link to further promote its friendship and showcase India's culture. Keeping this in mind, many events, programmes and cultural shows are organised under the aegis of the Indian Social Clubs based in Muscat, Salalah, Sohar and Sur. Yoga has become very popular in Oman and the celebration of International Day of Yoga witnesses huge participation. Oman-India Friendship Association November 2020 was established by Oman's Ministry of Foreign affairs. Its members include prominent Omani and Indian-origin businessman and it is expected that such associations will give further impetus to people-to-people and business-to-business ties.

The profound sense of brotherhood and good will was manifested when the Indian community donated a record total of 1327 units of blood during the 'Mega Blood donation Drive' organized during the 'Community service Fortnight' or 'Sewa Utsav' by the Embassy of India, commemorating India's 75 years of Independence scheduled from 31 March to 16 April 2022. This gesture of love was succinctly put by Ambassador H.E. Amit Narang when he stated that "this blood donation drive reflects the core Indian thought of 'SarveBhavantusukhinah', i.e working for the welfare of others and is line with the pious service-oriented spirit of the Holy month of Ramadan". He further "added that the extraordinary effort of the Indian community for blood donation showed their love for their Omani brothers and sisters and will go a long way in strengthening India-Oman friendship" (Embassy of India, Muscat, Press Release, 2022).

The preservation of the rich Islamic heritage by both the countries which in turn has led to the development of rich Arabic language and literature. Many Indian writings were translated in Arabic like the writings of Chanakya. Panchatantra was translated in 10th century by Ibn Nadim. Many literary prose was translated in Hindi. Rabindranath Tagore 'Gitanjali' was translated in Arabic. Likewise, the lives of the Omani rulers are well recorded and kept in the Khuda Baksh library in Patna. With the view to strengthen in this field, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and Oman's Dhofar University signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), in December 2023 for establishing ICCR Chair of Indian Studies- Hindi language. In the banking sector, for seamless payment and transaction, in October 2022, the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) and the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) signed a historic Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).

India and Oman signed an MoU on Cultural Cooperation in 2010. This is renewed every five years. The first ever 'Festival of India in Oman' was organised in 2016-2017. India's diverse culture, be it- dance, music, ethnic cuisine is showcased during this festival. The display of Islamic art calligraphy and exhibition of paintings is not confined to only one place or city but it was showcased in Muscat, Sur, Sohar and Salalah.

The Basic Law of Oman primarily allows freedom to worship. Adhering to this tenet, Oman do not discriminate anyone on the basis of religion and religious tolerance is what strongly binds the two nations together culturally. This is evident from the fact, that there are four Hindu temples in Muscat alone and records have shown that by 1760s, Hindus were permitted to build temples. Prime Minister Modi during his visit to Oman in 2018 visited the 125-year old Shiva temple which situated in Muscat.

Not only in the diplomatic, military and cultural aspect, but India and Oman have been cooperating and collaborating in the tourism sector where specifically cruise tourism and medical tourism were highlighted on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in 2023. One of the main reasons for Omanis coming to India for health check-up is due to its affordable and high-quality healthcare. Recognizing the potential of medical tourism, the government of Oman and India have taken step to collaborate in the healthcare sector. Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs) have been signed between the two countries to promote medical tourism and facilitate the exchange of medical expertise. These collaborations have led to streamlined processes for medical visas, making it easier for Omani patients to seek treatment in India. The Government of India is underway to bring out a policy to boost medical

tourism with subsidies and benefits for foreign nationals coming for medical treatment. As per 2019 report around 80,000 Omanis came to India seeking medical care (Al-Hashar & al- Zakwani, 2018).

Medical tourism from Oman to India is expected to flourish as the two countries' partnership deepens and challenges are addressed amicably, offering patients access to better treatment and creating opportunities for both countries to a better future. In the sphere of knowledge sharing, India initiates various programme like Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme (ITEC). The ITEC is driven by the Indian philosophy of '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' - the whole world is one family. Under this programme India offers 14,000 slots for training to 160 partner countries. Every year, more than 100 Omanis from various ministries and government organisations participate in ITEC programs. Oman also host several road shows, art exhibition in Indian cities to promote Omani's rich heritage.

Partnerships is a central pillar of India-Oman relations. It is anticipated by the International Energy Agency that by 2040, Oman has the potential of becoming the world's sixth-largest hydrogen exporter with their target set as close to 3.75 million tonnes per year by 2040 (Benny, 2024). Considering the huge potential in exporting green hydrogen and ammonia, it has been notified by India's Parliamentary Committee on External Affairs about Oman's pivotal role in New Delhi's green energy ambitions and burgeoning trade partnership with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (Committee on External Affairs, 2024). With the global energy transition, and the drive for decarbonising the planet, it has become all the more urgent for nations to go for green hydrogen which is accessible, efficient and sustainable. India is not far away from this race and various investments and engagements with Oman on solar technology and green hydrogen is in progress. India's ACME Group, a company which operates globally sustainable and renewal energy is in the process of constructing a facility in Duqm, Oman for green hydrogen and ammonia project, making it the world largest prospective green hydrogen facility. Oman's active participation in regional initiatives, secondly its strategic investment in green hydrogen and thirdly making its full potential of its geostrategic location are some of the important steps that places Oman to be a leading player in the race towards a sustainable future.

CONCLUSION

In the last decade, there has been a significant change in India's outlook towards maritime management and maritime security. The domestic factor

and the geostrategic dynamics in the Indian Ocean Region and in the extended neighbourhood, with rising China spreading its footprints, have further accelerated the process for India to recalibrate its maritime domain. In order to fulfil the developmental objectives as outlined by India, Oman comes as a natural ally to help in achieving India's vision and at the same time achieving its own. As the saying goes, Old is gold and certainly it holds true for India and Oman relations. The civilisational links and the age-old relations cemented on the basis of mutual understanding, cordial relations and respect for each other have paved way for an enduring relationship. Oman's geostrategic location along with its Ibadi tradition of moderation, mediation and pragmatism have made the relation with India a time tested one.

Fostering bonds of maritime brotherhood across the oceans is the aim of both Oman and India. India-Oman Joint Vision Partnership for the Future adopted in December 2023 outlines a roadmap for a bilateral engagement, aligned with Oman's Vision 2040 under Sultan Haitham and India's development goals under Prime Minister Modi's *Amrit Kaal* vision. Both the nations' vision is in sync with each other, therefore it is the practical action that needs to be seen- the implementation and execution aspect. Lack of infrastructure, red tapism and geopolitical uncertainties are some of the hindrances. But if there is political will to do it, then the partnership of India and Oman looks promising.

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