

# Policy Brief

## Singapore-India Relations: Cultural Engagement and Foreign Policy



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL  
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**  
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

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# **Policy Report**

## **Singapore-India Relations: Cultural Engagement and Foreign Policy**

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# Singapore-India Relations: Cultural Engagement and Foreign Policy

## Executive summary

Bilateral relations between Singapore and India have deepened in recent years. With India's continued rise as well as its links with a fast-growing East Asia, Singapore-India relations are set to develop further. Currently, Singapore-India relations are mainly focused along the more traditional lines of diplomatic, military and economic engagements. However, India's historical, cultural and civilisational heft also opens up other cultural and intellectual possibilities for strengthening Singapore-India relations. This brief pursues these possibilities, and drawing on recent scholarly work, as well as fieldwork interviews conducted in New Delhi in 2013, it suggests how bilateral relations can be further enhanced through expanding our conceptions of foreign policy. This can be achieved through broader engagements between academia and policymaking, and through recognising the ways in which culture – and cultural processes related to film and literature – contributes to foreign relations and security. This brief concludes with three policy recommendations aimed at enhancing Singapore-India relations: (i) active support of film and literary festivals; (ii) inclusion of Indian film and literature into Singapore's educational curricula; and (iii) fostering greater engagement between academic communities of Singapore and India in these aforementioned areas of research.

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## Singapore-India relations: An overview

Singapore-India relations date back to pre-modern times, preceding the two entities' mid-twentieth century emergence as independent modern states. During the British colonial era, the two entities shared close administrative and economic links. Singapore was governed by the colonial administration in Bengal, and the Indian National Army was formed in Singapore. A small

but significant number of traders, administrators, free and indentured labourers arrived in Singapore from British India, many of whom eventually remained in Singapore.

When Singapore became independent in August 1965, India played a pivotal role in helping Singapore gain entry into the Non-Aligned Movement. A year later, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew visited India with the aim of fostering closer



*Photo Credit: The Indian Express*



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bilateral and regional relations. Singapore had also looked to India as a successful example of state planning for economic development, at a time when India appeared to be on the cusp of becoming a thriving society and a great power.

Singapore-India relations effectively took off after 1991, when India “opened up” with its Look East Policy (LEP) following the end of the Cold War, and after Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong’s 1994 visit to India. This was when Singapore-India relations re-established a “confluence of interests”,<sup>1</sup> undergirded by a shared “pragmatic” approach to foreign policy that, in India’s case,



Photo Credit: [eresources.nlb.gov.sg](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg)

sought “manageable coalitions” and integration into the world economy.<sup>2</sup>

Given that it has only been twenty years since bilateral relations substantially took off in 1994, Singapore-India relations can be said to have come a very long way. Political ties have expanded and bilateral relations are broad-based and multi-faceted. These are underpinned by a convergence of political, economic and strategic interests, all the more as India has placed Singapore at the heart of its LEP.



Photo Credit: *Times of India*

There are currently regular high-level exchanges of visits between Singaporean and Indian officials. Singapore played a key role in helping India upgrade its partial dialogue status with ASEAN into being a full dialogue partner in 1995. Subsequently, India joined the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1996, and then the ASEAN+3. This expanded into the India-ASEAN Summit meetings, mooting of the ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement, and India’s entry into the East Asia Summit. Throughout, Singapore had firmly advocated India’s greater geo-strategic presence in ASEAN, and was a supporter of its permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faizal Yahya. “Singapore-India: A Confluence of National Interests”, *Asian Studies Review*, 19(2), (2007): 25-36.

<sup>2</sup> Rajesh M. Basrur, “Global Quest and Regional Reversal: Rising India and South Asia”, *International Studies*, 47, (2010): 267-84, 271.

<sup>3</sup> ASEAN Briefing, “Singapore Urges Deeper ASEAN-India Relations”. Accessed August 2, 2013, <http://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/2013/08/02/singapore-urges-deeper-asean-india-relations.html>

<sup>4</sup> High Commission of India, Singapore. Accessed January 21, 2014. <http://www.hcsingapore.gov.in/pages.php?id=76>

**Figure 1: India-Singapore Trade 2000-2013**

Year	Export to Singapore	India's Total Export	Growth of Exports to Singapore (% over preceding year)	Growth of overall exports (% over preceding year)	Imports from Singapore	India's Total Imports	Growth of Imports from Singapore (% over preceding Year)	Growth of overall imports (% over preceding Year)
2000-01	877.11	44,560.29	30.39	21.01	1,463.91	50,536.45	26.17	1.61
2001-02	972.31	43,826.72	10.85	-1.65	1,304.09	51,413.28	-10.92	1.74
2002-03	1,421.58	52,719.43	20.29	20.29	1,434.81	61,412.14	10.02	19.45
2003-04	2,124.83	63,842.55	21.10	21.10	2,085.37	78,149.11	45.34	27.25
2004-05	4,000.61	83,535.94	88.28	30.85	2,651.4	111,517.43	27.14	42.70
2005-06	5,425.29	103,090.53	35.61	23.41	3,353.77	149,165.73	26.49	33.76
2008-07	6,053.84	126,414.05	11.59	22.62	5,484.32	185,735.24	63.53	24.52
2007-08	7,379.2	163,132.18	21.89	29.05	8,122.63	251,654.01	48.11	35.49
2008-09	8,444.93	185,295.36	14.44	13.59	7,654.86	303,696.31	-5.76	20.68
2009-10	7,592.17	178,751.43	-10.1	-3.53	6,454.57	288,372.88	-15.68	-5.05
2010-11	9,825.44	251,136.19	29.42	40.49	7,139.31	369,769.13	10.61	28.23
2011-12	16,857.71	305,963.92	71.57	21.83	8,600.29	489,319.49	20.46	32.33
2012-13	13,607.12	300,462.36	-19.28	-1.80	7,732.58	490,885.51	-10.09	0.32

[Figures in USD Million]  
 Provisional figures from MO C & I, FTPA data  
 Source : Department of Commerce, Government of India

Source: Indian High Commission in Singapore, "India-Singapore Trade 2000-2013." Accessed May 23, 2014. <https://www.hcis-gapore.gov.in/pages.php?id=76>

The signing of the India-Singapore Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) in June 2005 – a free trade agreement that also facilitates cultural, educational, and people-to-people exchanges – was a major step forward. CECA enabled a steady expansion in bilateral trade and investment: in 2005-2006, there were US\$5,425.29 million

in Indian exports and US\$3,353.77 million in imports to and from Singapore; by 2013, these had increased to US\$13,607.12 million and US\$7,732.58 million respectively. These represent an annual increase of 25 per cent in export growth and eighteen per cent in import growth in the period 2000-2013.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> High Commission of India, Singapore. Accessed January 21, 2014. <http://www.hcis-gapore.gov.in/pages.php?id=76>





*Photo Credit: Singapore Ministry of Defence*

Singapore's ties with India are also steadily expanding in security and defence. They constitute one of its strongest relationships with another major or rising power. From 1995, there have been joint military exercises, e.g. "MILAN", and in anti-submarine warfare, search and rescue operations, and anti-piracy exercises. The defence cooperation agreement signed in October 2003 became the basis for regular joint military exercises, personnel training, and intelligence exchanges; the defence MOU signed in 2005 commenced the first army-to-army exercises. There are now joint working group discussions on intelligence cooperation in combating terrorism and transnational organised crime, as well as a signed Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty in criminal matters to further consolidate cooperation against terrorism. Singapore now has unprecedented access to Indian military training facilities, with the Singapore army and air force conducting exercises on Indian territory and over Indian airspace. Singaporean air force personnel train at the Kalaikunda air base in West Bengal, where Singapore has permanently placed its air assets.

### **Re-thinking upon the 50th anniversary of Singapore-India relations**

So far, economic and security cooperation have been the focal areas of Singapore-India relations. With the arrival of the 50th anniversary of Singapore-India relations, signalling a deepening and maturing relationship, it may be timely to broaden the relations by strengthening the cultural and societal dimensions of this relationship.

No doubt, relations are currently expanding in the less overtly strategic areas: in tourism, education and culture. A Joint Action Plan on tourism cooperation signed on August 2009 has enabled increased air connectivity, and Indian arrivals now constitute the fourth largest group with 894,600 visitors in 2012, after ASEAN, Japan and Hong Kong.

The rapid growth of the Indian economy, as well as the Indian expatriate community in Singapore, has led to the establishment of numerous Indian educational institutions and tie-ups. In May 2012, the Singapore Management University and

**Figure 2**

**VISITOR ARRIVALS BY COUNTRY OF RESIDENCE** (TABLE A11.1)

					2011		2012				2013		2013
	2009	2010	2011	2012	III	IV	I	II	III	IV	I	II	III
	<b>Thousand</b>												
<b>TOTAL</b>	9,682.7	11,641.7	13,171.3	14,491.2	3,486.1	3,329.6	3,576.2	3,506.1	3,648.6	3,760.3	3,881.4	3,768.0	4,012.0
ASEAN	3,684.8	4,821.8	5,414.3	5,777.6	1,397.8	1,412.7	1,341.7	1,487.4	1,406.2	1,542.3	1,389.0	na	na
Japan	490.0	529.0	656.4	756.9	189.9	181.6	193.0	151.6	209.9	202.5	218.6	na	na
Hong Kong SAR	294.4	387.6	464.4	472.1	137.1	98.8	104.6	117.1	132.8	117.5	131.1	na	na
India	725.6	829.0	869.0	894.6	190.4	228.0	184.6	293.9	191.1	225.0	201.3	na	na
China, People's Republic of	936.7	1,171.5	1,577.5	2,033.4	472.0	347.8	542.1	436.1	537.2	518.0	647.7	na	na
Taiwan	156.8	191.2	238.5	282.2	79.1	48.8	76.1	64.6	79.8	61.6	94.4	na	na
South Korea	272.0	360.7	414.9	445.2	115.1	96.3	125.4	98.7	121.2	99.9	130.2	na	na
Australia	830.3	880.6	956.0	1,049.7	252.7	239.2	229.8	247.5	285.8	286.7	276.7	na	na
United Kingdom	469.8	461.8	442.6	446.4	99.6	112.5	139.4	90.8	100.4	115.8	140.1	na	na
United States	370.7	417.2	440.6	477.1	107.2	110.0	126.6	115.4	113.3	121.8	133.3	na	na
	<b>Percentage Change Over Corresponding Period Of Previous Year</b>												
<b>TOTAL</b>	-4.3	20.2	13.1	10.0	14.7	8.4	14.7	8.3	4.7	12.9	8.5	7.5	9.9
ASEAN	3.2	30.9	12.3	6.7	10.4	5.8	10.9	6.7	0.6	9.2	3.5	na	na
Japan	-14.2	8.0	24.1	15.3	29.8	26.2	15.6	28.5	10.5	11.5	13.3	na	na
Hong Kong SAR	5.9	31.6	19.8	1.7	12.5	3.6	4.3	-8.7	-3.1	19.0	25.4	na	na
India	-6.8	14.2	4.8	2.9	7.7	2.7	7.7	5.3	0.3	-1.3	9.0	na	na
China, People's Republic of	-13.2	25.1	34.7	28.9	46.2	21.5	31.7	26.0	13.8	48.9	19.5	na	na
Taiwan	-10.9	22.0	24.7	18.3	35.5	24.6	44.8	11.3	0.9	26.3	24.0	na	na
South Korea	-35.7	32.6	15.0	7.3	24.4	17.4	16.7	2.8	5.3	3.7	3.8	na	na
Australia	-0.3	6.1	8.6	9.8	7.2	5.0	3.5	2.3	13.1	19.8	20.4	na	na
United Kingdom	-4.7	-1.7	-4.1	0.9	1.1	-6.6	4.9	-7.0	0.8	2.9	0.5	na	na
United States	-6.5	12.5	5.6	8.3	3.7	4.3	9.7	6.9	5.6	10.8	5.3	na	na

Notes: 1 Figures exclude Malaysian arrivals by land.

2 The term "ASEAN" stands for "Association of South East Asian Nations" and refers to the ten-country political association comprising Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Philippines, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. However, when used in the statistical tables, the term excludes Singapore.

3 The STB and ICA are in the midst of transitioning to a new data processing system for tracking visitor statistics. As both parties resolve some technical issues that have arisen during this period, the latest tourism data may not be immediately available.

Source: Singapore Tourism Board and Immigration & Checkpoints Authority

Source: Singapore Department of Statistics. Accessed May 23, 2014. [http://www.singstat.gov.sg/statistics/browse\\_by\\_theme/tourism.html](http://www.singstat.gov.sg/statistics/browse_by_theme/tourism.html)

the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore entered into an MOU in management research and education. There would now be a post-secondary technological institute in Delhi, set up between the Institute of Technical Education and the Delhi Department of Training and Technological Education.

There is also cultural support from the Singapore Government and community organisations to the Temple of Fine Arts, Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society, and the Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society Singapore, which promote Indian art, craft, classical music and dance. The Indian Heritage

Centre, to be opened in 2015 under the Singapore National Heritage Board, will trace the histories of the Indian and South Asian communities in Singapore and the region. Currently, Singapore is heading an international consortium to revive the ancient Nalanda University in Patna, India.

However, these cultural initiatives as they currently stand remain largely government-driven, and they play a somewhat supporting role, mainly appealing to select interest groups. These initiatives can risk conflating cultural identities with state identities, accentuating both national and cultural differences, rather than re-shaping



or transcending them. They might overly simplify India's array of "unhomogenisable diversity", and reproduce cultural stereotypes of India, as well as state-centric perspectives that favour power politics and narrowly-defined nationalism.<sup>5</sup>

There may be a need to broaden one's conception of foreign policy and international relations.<sup>6</sup> Indeed in recent years, studies in international politics have also broadened its scope to explore how art, film, literature and even architecture contribute to international relations and security.<sup>7</sup> In this regard, India's great historical, cultural and civilisational heft opens up whole new cultural and intellectual dimensions to strengthening Singapore-India relations.

Indian film and literature may be two of the most productive avenues for exploration. India's Bollywood is a distinct zone of cultural production that is now a multi-billion dollar industry on the global stage. Long acknowledged to be significant in the "national popular" domain, "Global Bollywood" is beginning to re-frame relationships between geography, cultural production and cultural identities in ways that are transforming India and the world.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, India is a giant in literature, and this is certainly not a recent phenomenon: Rabindranath Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 – the first non-European to achieve this accolade. Since then, writers from India or of the Indian diaspora have gone on to world acclaim, especially in the realm of English literature: Arundhati Roy, Vikram Seth, Salman Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul, Kiran Desai, Anita Desai, Amit Chaudhuri and Jhumpa Lahiri, to name a few. Not only have their works transformed the idea of India, they have also contributed to the very transformation of the English language.

These aspects of culture have the potential to enhance Singapore-India relations, and could be taken more seriously in Singapore's engagement

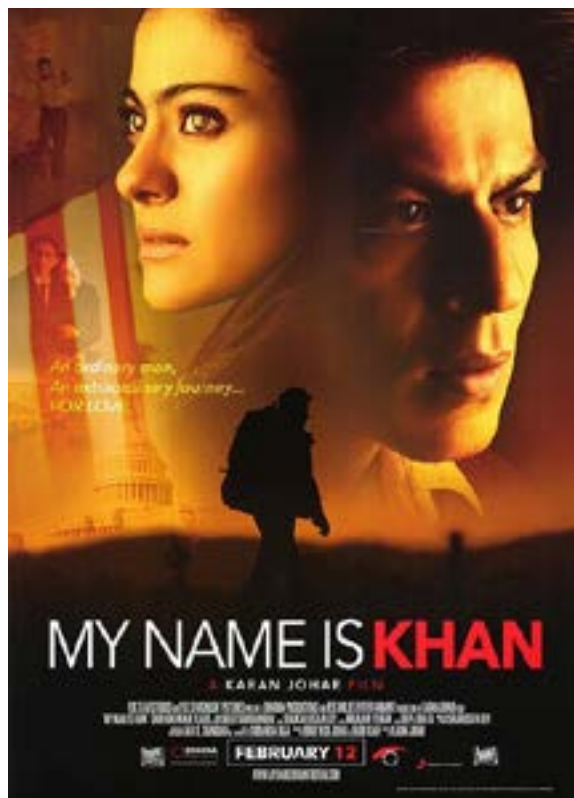


Photo Credit: Fox Star Studios, Dharma Productions and Red Chillies Entertainment

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with India. Film and literature can represent more adequately and accurately, if inexhaustively, the complex faces and natures of India. This contributes to a fuller understanding of India, and creates goodwill in the more traditional spheres of engagement.

Indeed, interviews conducted with various Delhi-based scholars reveal an overwhelming desire for cultural engagement in these domains to be a part of foreign policy and Singapore-India relations. They note how a limited knowledge of culture can disadvantage bilateral relations,

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<sup>5</sup> Bikhu Parekh. "Re-Imagining India", in *Re-Imagining India and Other Essays*, New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan (2010): 153.

<sup>6</sup> John Hobson. *The Eurocentric Conception of International Politics: Western International Theory, 1760-2010*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2012).

<sup>7</sup> Roland Bleiker. *Aesthetics and World Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 192.

<sup>8</sup> Aswin Punathambekar and Anandam Kavoori. "Introduction: *Global Bollywood*", in Anandam Kavoori and Aswin Punathambekar, Eds., *Global Bollywood*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009).

and that India's civilisational ethos and its cultural philosophies – “parallel spaces” and “inherent pluralities” – have not been sufficiently engaged with.<sup>9</sup> India's numerous festivals and cultural strengths in film and literature have great potential to bypass instrumental policies into wider platforms of engagement between the peoples of Singapore and India. Similarly, think tanks, universities and civil societies are sites of productive exchanges of cultural knowledge that need to be utilised. As the Indian thinker Ashis Nandy observes, beneath statist conceptions of India and Singapore, “silk road cosmopolitanism” is alive and well within and between these two cultures, where “different kinds of intimacies” are

possible.<sup>10</sup>

### **Untapped possibilities: Policy-academic engagement, film and literature**

Given that the possibilities of enhancing bilateral relations extend beyond conventional foreign policy, a case should be made for their inclusion in the deliberations and formulations of foreign policy.

First, there is a need for greater engagement with scholarly ideas, especially those emerging from the “critical” edges of academic disciplines, in this instance international relations. To the extent that policymaking and academic circles seldom meet, it may be truer for policymaking circles and “non-mainstream” scholarship. In IR, critical scholarship highlights the limitations and problems with existing foreign policy thought, in theory and in practice, and points to other possibilities of doing foreign policy. Recognising the significance of film and literature and their inherent cultural politics cautions one against delegitimising them as possible enrichment to international relations. An engagement can only enrich ideas and help formulate better policies.

Expanding the intellectual conceptions of foreign policy, which may eventually feed into practice, will require policymakers to engage more actively with the ideas that are emerging from academia. It is a long-standing observation that a huge divide exists between policy circles and academia – a divide that both sides eventually produce. Policymakers might view academics as impractical or overly-ponderous. Academics might deem policymakers as too conservative, power-oriented and lacking in intellectual ballast.

However, this perception is neither desirable nor productive; to a large extent, it is also a false divide.<sup>11</sup> Policymakers seeking to understand the nature of the academic endeavour can benefit from the ideas emerging from it. Academia could extend its relevance more effectively if it



Photo Credit: Fandango Libri

<sup>9</sup> Navnita Chadha Behera, personal interview, New Delhi, March 20, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Ashis Nandy, personal interview, 27 March 2013. See also Ashis Nandy, *The Romance of the State and the Fate of Dissent in the Tropics*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> See Roland Paris. “Ordering the World, Academic Research and Policymaking on Fragile States”, *International Studies Review*, 13(1). March 2011, 58-71.

engaged more with the concerns and constraints of policymakers. In other words, engagement can lead to both better academia and better policy. Thus, more opportunities for dialogue could be created for Singapore scholars to engage with Singaporean officials. Additionally, there must also be opportunities for Singaporean and Indian scholars to meet with policymakers. These could take the forms of workshops on specific issues, but which are inclined towards academia and/or policy. In coming together to examine these issues, both constituencies engage in processes of knowledge sharing and forging common understandings.

Second, given that culture is constitutive of international relations, more effective foreign policies can be derived from a more active partaking and production of culture. The processes, production and artefacts of culture – in these instances film and literature, as well as educational tie-ups and initiatives – will need to assume a more central place in foreign policy, as compared to the relatively marginal role they play at the moment.

The state could undertake a leadership role in promotion and facilitation. At the same time, it also needs to recognise that cultural engagement can, and needs to, flourish beneath and beyond the state. Despite being “away from the state’s hands”, these engagements and processes nonetheless are constitutive of foreign policy. In this regard, there is a need to accept expanded scopes and definitions of “foreign policy”.

State promotion of cultural engagements can have its pitfalls, even being at times controversial. But productive outcomes can be had if the state recognises, to a large extent, that culture cannot be mandated or commanded at will. And at times cultural works may even make the state itself the object of critique. The quality of cultural works – as evaluated by the intellectuals of the field – should be a guiding criterion. The state too, needs to be cognisant of the elements of the international

that are inherent in culture, and to actively draw on these potential sources of knowledge and engagement.

## **Policy recommendations**

### **1) Active support of film and literary festivals**

Bollywood films range across the various histories, realities and “ideas” of India, conveying them in vivid imagery. Should Indian/Bollywood film festivals prove to be too esoteric, they could be tied up with international and regional film festivals that are regularly held in Singapore.

Literary festivals like the annual Singapore Writers Festivals could also take on an Indian theme. Given the global recognition of Indian writers and intellectuals, this would generate significant interest not only in Singapore, but also in India and the region. India’s numerous literary festivals could point the way forward: the annual Jaipur Literature Festival, for instance, invites the best Indian and international writers for a week of readings and dialogue ranging from literature to discussions on the British Empire, the decline of America and the rise of China.<sup>12</sup>

### **2) Inclusion of Indian film and literature in Singapore’s educational curricula**

Relatedly, Indian film and literature could also be studied more deeply in Singapore’s curriculum in order to generate more substantial interest and understanding. Film and literary studies are being undertaken in Singapore’s tertiary education, though the theoretical and empirical content remain focused on the West. Thus, there is a significant gap in bringing in Indian film, literature, and theory in the learning of these areas. Additionally, for the same reasons, Indian literature could take on more emphasis in the secondary and pre-university literature curricula.

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<sup>12</sup> See Namita Gokhale and William Dalrymple, *Letters from the Festival Directors*, Jaipur Literature Festival, 2013. Accessed July 28, 2013. [http://jaipurliteraturefestival.org/about-us/directors\\_note/](http://jaipurliteraturefestival.org/about-us/directors_note/)

### **3) *Fostering greater engagement between academic communities of Singapore and India***

Increased collaboration among epistemic communities facilitates foreign policy, cultural and bilateral relations. Epistemic communities smoothen the progress of engagement and dialogue not only through Track II initiatives, but also through academic conferences and informal seminars. Thus, engaging with epistemic communities and facilitating their engagement form a key part of cultural relations. These would also enable the ideas and arguments emerging from within critical scholarship to be debated and disseminated, both between policymakers and scholars, and among the diverse groups from both countries.

Further, this cultural sub-group is also a key enabler of initiatives in generating and disseminating knowledge in film and literary studies, media and new media studies, as well as critical international relations theories that draw on these eclectic approaches. In short, academia remains a key site where the rethinking of concepts and practices of international relations

and foreign policy takes place. It engages in, and provides critical analyses and perspectives on, cultural processes and productions – leading to deeper understandings of cultural works, the other's culture, and to enhanced relations.

### **Conclusion**

The ideas pursued in this brief are decidedly non-mainstream. They go against the prevailing grain of foreign policy thinking and international theorising. Thus, this brief is necessarily suggestive. However, as is hopefully shown, these ideas are fast gaining ground from the critical edges of disciplinary international relations. Culture – art, film and literature, just a few expressions explored here – is both international and political, even if seldom recognised as such. It contains vast potential for enhancing our understandings of nations and politics, and thus for becoming a part of foreign relations. This is also well within governments' abilities to facilitate. It may be the strongest testimony of Singapore-India relations yet when this friendship begins to be forged in these cultural, artistic and everyday realms.

## Author's Biography

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