



**THE HINDU CENTRE**

for

Politics and Public Policy



States and Foreign Policy

## Infusing a New Dynamic to Sister Cities

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Mar 30, 2015



Hyderabad Mayor T. Krishna Reddy and the Mayor of Suwon City, Korea, Kim Yong Seo, exchange documents after signing International Sister City Relationship agreement in Hyderabad in March 2005 - Photo: Mohammed Yousuf

*The Narendra Modi-led government in India has taken a rather unconventional approach to diplomacy evincing interest in granting a more meaningful role to provinces and cities in building ties with the outside world, says **Tridivesh Singh Maini**. Such bonds, which have paved the way for sister provinces and sister cities, have the potential to promote India's 'soft power' to the world by looking beyond mere economics and ensuring greater people-to-people exchanges.*

It would be fair to say that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's unconventional approach to diplomacy as well as pragmatism have surprised not just his critics but even supporters. In most areas of foreign policy, especially on relations with the U.S., China and countries in the neighbourhood, the Prime Minister is mostly building on the work of earlier Prime Ministers – notably Manmohan Singh and Atal Bihari Vajpayee – although the political power he enjoys has ensured that he is able to push the envelope on important issues without too much obstruction.

One area of foreign policy, in which he has evinced interest in is granting a more meaningful role to provinces, as well as cities in building ties with the outside world. Modi has spoken about this not only in the context of economics, but even greater people-to-people exchanges and the promotion of India's 'soft power'. <sup>1</sup> Earlier Prime Ministers, too, have encouraged the participation of States in foreign policy, prominent examples being then Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh Chandrababu Naidu's outreach to the U.S., which received support from the Vajpayee government . <sup>2</sup>

Similarly, Manmohan Singh was supportive of State participation in foreign policy with neighbouring countries, although in certain cases, such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, this was obstructive and damaged national interest rather than furthering it. <sup>3</sup> Yet, not much emphasis has been laid on establishing sister city and province agreements with the outside world.

Modi, having been Chief Minister of a State, understands the relevance of such links. While as a Chief Minister, Modi tried to enhance linkages between Gujarat and other countries, there were some province-to-province engagement as well, including with the industrial power house Guangdong (China), though an official agreement for sister-province relationship was signed only during President Xi Jinping's visit in September 2014. The province of Queensland also had reached out to Gujarat when Modi was Chief Minister. <sup>4</sup>

### **Renewed interest**

Since taking over as Prime Minister, Modi has also been trying to promote linkages between Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh) his parliamentary constituency and other cities abroad. During his visit to Japan, a partnership agreement was signed to make Kyoto and Varanasi sister cities. Kyoto has been able to retain its heritage, while also developing world class infrastructure. <sup>5</sup> It is believed that the Prime Minister was in favour of the U.S. President, Barack Obama, visiting Varanasi, just as Chinese Premier Xi Jinping visited Ahmedabad. <sup>6</sup>

The real challenge for Modi is not just to increase province-to-province, city-city exchanges but to ensure that a larger number of States and their cities and towns – especially those that are yet to emerge as important economic hubs – participate in such exchanges and benefit from them. This is a challenging task since the primary interest is naturally economic. So, another province from China, Japan or the U.S. will first seek to enhance ties with States that are economically progressive, though in many instances historical and cultural linkages are an important factor as well. During his recent visit to India, Obama spoke about greater people-to-people linkages, especially in the educational sphere, and the need for a larger number of American students visiting India. It is not just the educational sphere but even sister city linkages where both countries have a long way to go. The sister city programme was first initiated by President Dwight Eisenhower in 1956. Currently, twinning between Indian and U.S. cities is restricted only to a few provinces and has been driven primarily by economic interests. There are sister relationships between five pairs of Indian and U.S. States, and 25 pairs of Indian and U.S. cities. Four pairs of Indian and Chinese cities (Delhi-Beijing, Ahmedabad-Guangzhou, Bengaluru-Chengdu, Kolkata-Kunming) have been established with China, <sup>7</sup> while Gujarat and Guangdong Province signed a sister-province agreement during the visit of President Xi Jinping in September 2014. Three of the sister city agreements were signed in October 2013 during the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's China visit while that between Ahmedabad and Guangzhou was signed during President Xi's India visit. <sup>8</sup>

### **Success through sister cities**

On the contrary, China, which has its fair share of political differences with the U.S., has a far greater number of sister city exchanges with the U.S. The first sister city agreement between the two countries was in 1979 between St. Louis (Missouri, U.S.) and Nanjing (Jiangsu Province, China). Shanghai and San Francisco followed suit a year later and

established a sister city relationship in 1980.<sup>9</sup> Today, there are sister relationship between 40 pairs of U.S. States and Chinese provinces and nearly 200 pairs of U.S. and Chinese cities. The organisation that promotes these exchanges is Sister Cities International. Such exchanges have helped enhance links in the spheres of education, culture, and science and technology, besides promoting economic ties.

In fact, it would be pertinent to point out that ever since the 2008 recession, the priority of sister city arrangements between the U.S. and China has been to enhance economic ties.<sup>10</sup> If one were to look at specific instances of twin cities leading to greater economic linkages between both countries, one of the strongest examples is increasing investment by Chinese companies in San Francisco, which has a sister city partnership with Shanghai for over three decades. (<http://nextcity.org/daily/entry/sister-city-partnership-cities-business-economic-development>).<sup>11</sup> An organisation by the name of China SF, set up in 2008, has played a crucial role in promoting investments by Chinese real estate and tech companies in the U.S. The organisation has offices in China in Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou.<sup>12</sup> Washington DC, which has a sister city agreement with Beijing, is also seeking to attract investment from Chinese tech companies and is also setting up its second office in the Chinese capital to familiarise Chinese companies with the business climate in the DC area.

### **Time for concrete steps**

Some of the steps that can be taken in India to strengthen linkages, beyond the economic sphere, at the provincial level as well as between cities and effectively utilise India's soft power are:

(1) Provinces with a large diaspora should leverage their diaspora, especially Indians who have joined politics in Canada and the U.S. For instance, in Canada, there are a number of Indians hailing from Punjab who have managed to carve out a niche for themselves. The Canadian Consulate in Chandigarh, in fact, was set up largely as a consequence of pressure, not just from the Punjab Government, but also the Punjabi diaspora in Canada.<sup>13</sup> While sister city agreements do exist between cities in Punjab and those in the U.K. and Canada, these are mostly on paper and not much has been done to expand educational exchanges and incorporate best practices, especially with regard to infrastructure and civic amenities.

(2) If one were to look beyond the western world, there is a large Indian diaspora in South East Asia. While certain States have been able to reach out to their respective diasporas – Tamil Nadu being a successful example – other States have not been so successful, a prominent example being Punjab where the focus has been on reaching out to the diaspora settled in the U.K., Canada and the U.S. No real effort has been made by the State government to reach out to the diaspora in countries such as Malaysia and Singapore.

(3) States like Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Sikkim, which are home to Buddhist heritage sites, should seek to develop greater linkages with countries, cities and local governments in Sri Lanka and South East Asia.<sup>14</sup> There can be similar efforts to link towns and cities in India with a rich Sufi heritage to other such cities in South Asia, Iran and Central Asia.

Through these exchanges, both sides can focus on enhancing people-to-people contact and also learning from each other's experiences with regard to the upkeep of historic sites. For this, it is important not just to enhance connectivity, but for State governments also to take a greater interest in establishing these linkages.

In conclusion, it is time to take some concrete steps, and ensure that India can tap in on historical and cultural linkages with other parts of the world. Provinces, cities and towns can play a crucial role in this process. It is also important to

ensure that these agreements yield some concrete results and help in enhancing links in spheres like sports, research and people-to-people contact and are not just mere agreements.

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