

Ambassadors of Culture and Arts

India's culture is one of the most recognisable characteristics for travellers across the world. Author and philanthropist **Sudha Murty** shares her views on the county's many distinguishable attributes that make it easier to form bonds that transcend borders



International dancers perform *Bhangra* (a folk dance from the state of Punjab) at the Walk for Reconciliation in Vancouver, Canada

Similarly, whenever I get a chance to travel overseas, I make it a point to understand and research about why it is popular. Following this regimen, I have managed to travel to some destinations that are not-so-known amongst Indians. The research that I do, the interactions that I enjoy and the information that I manage to exchange, are, when you

It's common for tourists to research about the destination to be visited before arriving. Not only does this help a traveller to plan a trip better but to also make the experience of going around and discovering new places more immersive. Before travelling, I too do my diligence to understand the destination and its facets. It's always a delight to know why a certain tradition is being followed for centuries. What also intrigues me is the cultural and historical connect between the place I am visiting and India. And with our vast repertoire of heritage, it's not so tough to find a link. For me, the historical significance of a place often guides my decision to travel

there. For example, a hobby I took up a few years ago, to learn Kannada as it was originally spoken in the eighth and ninth century made me travel through the southern parts of India extensively.

Tradition



think of it, the very framework of people-to-people relationships that eventually bring nations closer.

Take for example a recent trip that I made to Israel following the footsteps of Jesus Christ. My aim was to not just explore the country's natural beauty but also to be educated and informed about the events that transpired when Christ himself travelled these lands. I enrolled in a three-month long Bible study so that I could better recognise the history and the culture of the destination. I was in India, mythological lands that have inspired countless and a religion that is internationally popular. It surprises me the popularity of contemporary Indian culture in the world, even in the remotest parts, and across every

age group. A school of classical

the beats of bhajans in New York, yoga being practised from Tokyo to Toronto, Indian restaurants in London and the global reach of Hindi films! Everywhere I have travelled, my country's heritage and my Indian-ness have been my cultural passport!

The response of local people to my Indian roots has only made me a better human. When you see the beautiful and ancient mosques of Iran or the exquisite temples of Hindu deities in Cambodia, you realise they are in no way inferior to what they may even be better than the ones back home. But, this revelation does not make you feel inferior, it only opens your eyes to different possibilities.

An audience of over 2,000 moviegoers enjoy the premiere of a film starring Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan in the splendid open-air setting of Somerset House in London

Bollywood actor Salman Khan unveils his waxwork figure at Madame Tussauds in London. Bollywood actors have long been promoters of India's cultural and artistic heritage across the world

A simple attire of a saree or a *khadi* kurta can immediately put someone you are meeting for the first time at ease and can speak volumes about humility. In this regard, Bollywood has played a major part in spreading our delightful cultural nuances to the farthest corners of the globe. I remember during my journey through Iran, I had approached a shopkeeper for some fresh *naan* (a thick, fluffy flatbread resembling a pita/pancake). When the shopowner handed me my order, he looked at my saree and said, "Amitabh Bachchan?" When my response didn't showcase his enthusiasm, he continued, "Salman Khan? Shah Rukh Khan?". After hearing the names of the famous Hindi movie actors, I realised what he was trying to say. "Yes, I am from the same country as them," I replied. He smiled and said, "No money". Even when I insisted, he refused. In broken English, he explained, "India. Bollywood. Very nice. Good dance. Good dress. Good music. Iranian like!" I couldn't help but smile.



Bollywood has graduated from being a part of the movie industry to becoming a vital partner when it comes to business generation

Tradition



Top: Vibrant colours and iconic decorations adorn the facade of an Indian apparel store in London

Bottom: Author Sudha Murty. Her books, inspired from her travels around the world, often depict instant friendships and cultural connections formed through a common love for Indian movies, music and dance

A Spanish fellow traveller added, “I too love Hindi films. They have increased the popularity of Spain and have also increased tourist footfall to the country. The song “*Senorita*” from the movie *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*, which was shot in Spain has made our country a household name in India. The movie also brought the traditional Tomatina festival into the limelight!”

My travels also took me to Bukhara, a city in Uzbekistan. As I went for an evening stroll, the faint tunes of a familiar Bollywood song had me following it. Within minutes, I found myself outside a restaurant by a lake — Lyabi House. “I am from India and this song is from my country,” I said to the artist the moment he stopped singing. “*Hindustan?*” he asked. I nodded. “*Namaste!*” he greeted me with a grin and nodded his head vigorously, as if to acknowledge this new-found link between us. I revelled in the little nostalgia for my homeland, while for the singer, it was his first brush with a person from a land about which he sings songs! It wasn’t about a big achievement such as a space mission or a sports victory, but more



Restaurants serving Indian cuisine have been very popular across the world and are often based on the theme of Hindi movies



about the exhilaration that comes with running into common people rejoicing in an experience from India in a remote corner of the world. I was proud that I belonged to a special country.

In England also, I have often seen the overwhelming influence of Bollywood: from Bollywood-themed restaurants that are quite popular among Britishers to Hindi movie songs being played in public.

But then, Bollywood, can be considered as India's most popular cultural ambassador. There is a statue of late Yash Chopra, a renowned Indian filmmaker, in Interlaken, Switzerland, and a poster of actors Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol at the entrance of Mount Titlis, a mountain

of the Uri Alps. These memorabilia are not just examples of popular cinema, but rather, the popularity of an entire culture – the idea behind India's movies, the stories from the country and everyday tales of its people.

While traces of Indian culture can be found across the world, I believe that every time we travel, we too become an ambassador of India, spreading its traditions, its philosophies and its soul.

Former US First Lady Michelle Obama joins students for a session of Indian dance in the State Dining Room of the White House on November 5, 2015



Sudha Murthy is an Indian social worker and bestselling author. The Padma Shri awardee is known for her philanthropic work through the Infosys Foundation.

She is also a member of the public health care initiatives of the Gates Foundation.