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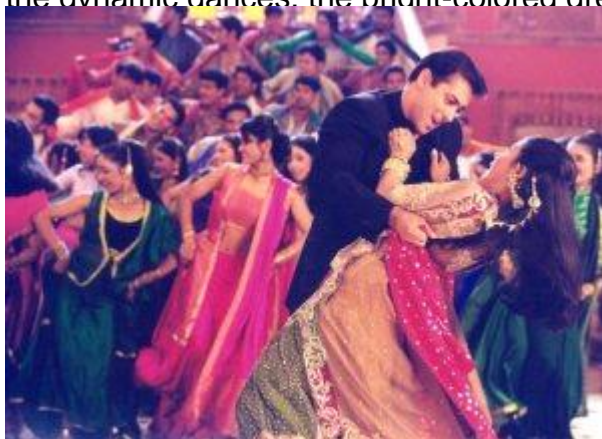
India Blog Series: Experiencing India from Morocco ^[1]

APDS Blogger: Mona El Hamdani

Morocco's geographic position is at a major crossroad where different and rich cultures meet and thrive. Throughout the ages, Morocco has been open to influence by African, Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and European civilizations and cultures. However, this post is not about the diversity of Morocco or how it has been influenced by different cultures. This post will reflect on my personal experiences as a Moroccan, and how I got to know, interact with, and learn to appreciate cultures that are foreign from my own, specifically Indian culture.

Growing up as a young woman in Morocco, I was exposed directly and indirectly to a number of foreign cultures. Movies, television shows, music, pop culture items, and languages were among the major cultural elements that built my perception about countries and peoples beyond my country's border. These elements conveyed a tremendous amount of information about other cultures and have helped shape, in a major fashion, the way I imagine and think about people I have never met and things I have never experienced. These experiences have presented both facts about foreign places and peoples, but unfortunately built a block of stereotypes and prejudices as well.

In Morocco, **I have come to experience India through two main elements: Bollywood movies and sari fabrics.** Looking back at college, I remember borrowing an Indian DVD titled, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* from one of my friends. Back then, as it is now, watching Indian movies was a popular entertainment pastime among many Moroccans. The beautiful actors, the dynamic dances, the bright-colored dresses, and the classic love stories made Indian for Moroccans to buy, rent, and exchange.



Another tradition that brought me closer to Indian culture are the beautiful bright sari fabrics. Moroccan women love their Caftan (traditional Moroccan dress worn during special occasions and celebrations) and are willing to spend generously to acquire one. These Caftans are handmade and their fabrics are carefully chosen. Among Moroccan women, the Indian silk



of the best fabrics that a Caftan can be made from. Many fabric
mselves on importing and selling the best Indian silk saris in what
rnation of the old Silk Road trade.

International trips have been incredibly effective in opening my eyes and mind, and adjusting my perceptions about the world. Under the Fulbright program, I had the opportunity to come to the United States to pursue a Masters in Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California. At the academic and professional level, this journey has allowed me to better understand the different aspects of public diplomacy through culture, educational exchanges, sports, etc. At the personal level, I had the chance to meet and interact with many ethnic groups, including Indians, and forge friendships that are very close to my heart.

This journey continues, as I am embarking with seven students from my program in a public diplomacy trip to India called "India: Inside Out". Our goal is to research how public diplomacy is communicated by or towards India, with each one of us focusing on a specific aspect. Given my background and research interests, I am exploring public diplomacy initiatives between India and Arab countries.

The Indian Diaspora in Arab countries is heavily concentrated in the Gulf oil rich countries, especially in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait. The majority of the Indians who immigrated to these countries came as a working force. They work in different domains ranging from engineering and medicine to construction and services. According to statistics from 2007, the Indians living and working in the Gulf were estimated to be around 6 million, 1.5 million of whom are staying in the UAE 📄. This concentration of Indians in the Gulf countries raises many questions about the opportunities, challenges and initiatives that can be created between these nations within the public diplomacy realm.

Through the "India: Inside Out" trip, I am hoping to meet with practitioners of Indian public diplomacy, as well as representatives from the Arab diplomatic corps in India, specifically the Gulf countries, to answer the following questions: What kind of diplomatic relations exist between India and the Arab World? Are there any public diplomacy initiatives and if not how

can they be created? What is the role played or that can be played by the Indian Diaspora, living in Arab states, in this field? And most importantly, what are the challenges and problems facing the process of public diplomacy between India and Arab states?

Mona El Hamdani is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Public Diplomacy at The Annenberg School for Communication at USC. She is a Fulbright Scholar from Morocco. Mona previously worked as a Country Program Manager for The Media Diversity Institute (MDI) in Morocco. Mona was also a Program Coordinator at the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and was in charge of program evaluation and monitoring. Through her work with NDI, she encouraged youth and women to participate in Moroccan politics.
