



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurates on Wednesday the BAPS Hindu Mandir in Abu Dhabi, the largest Hindu temple in the UAE. AFP

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

India's PM inaugurates Abu Dhabi's first Hindu temple

BAPS Hindu Mandir is also the first UAE temple built using traditional techniques

Sanjay Kumar New Delhi

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday inaugurated the first Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi.

Developed in the desert on 27 acres, the BAPS Hindu Mandir stands off the main highway linking Abu Dhabi to Dubai. It has been constructed from more than 25,000 pieces of pink sandstone from Rajasthan, and white Italian marble carved by artisans in India and assembled in the UAE.

Modi arrived at the site on Wednesday afternoon to perform consecration rituals with the temple's priests.

Bollywood stars, including actor Akshay Kumar and singer Shankar Mahadevan, and members of the Indian diaspora in the UAE gathered at the BAPS Hindu Mandir to witness the ceremony.

The temple was built by BAPS, or Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha — a Hindu organization headquartered in Modi's home state of Gujarat.

Navdeep Suri, who served as

India's ambassador to the UAE from 2016 to 2019, told Arab News that the inauguration of the temple marked a "key milestone" in India's ties with the UAE under Modi's leadership.

"It was in August 2015 that he made his first visit to the Gulf nation — the first by an Indian Prime Minister since Indira Gandhi in 1981. The bilateral agenda was wide-ranging and set the foundation for a truly remarkable transformation in India's ties with the UAE," he said.

"Modi also used the opportunity to put in a request for the allocation of land for a Hindu temple that would meet the long-standing religious and spiritual needs of a large section of the 3.5 million-strong Indian community in the UAE."

The land was donated by the UAE government and the temple's groundbreaking took place in 2019 — the year which the UAE observed as the Year of Tolerance.

Home to the largest population of Indian citizens outside India, the UAE opened its first Hindu temple in Dubai in the 1950s. Several more were built since

then, but this one in Abu Dhabi is the first built using traditional techniques.

It is also the largest and can host up to 10,000 people.

The temple's construction reflects a "success of India's cultural diplomacy" and the UAE's "respect for all religions," according to Anil Trigunayat, former diplomat and a distinguished fellow at the Vivekananda International Foundation think tank in New Delhi.

FASTFACT

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"The temple is significant as it meets the aspirations of 3.5 million Indians working in UAE," he said.

"Temples and places of worship also act as anchors of the self and due to that it is very important."

For Muddassir Quamar, associate professor at the Center for West Asian Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, the temple also shows India's growing cultural relations with the Gulf region.

"Through cultural diplomacy, India has worked toward gaining greater international recognition and status," he said.

"The inauguration of the BAPS temple underlines continuous efforts towards promotion of India's soft power."

The inauguration of the temple marks Modi's seventh official visit to the Gulf state, during which he witnessed the signing of multiple memoranda in the areas of digital infrastructure, investment, electricity interconnection and trade.

The prime minister was welcomed in Abu Dhabi by UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan on Tuesday, and on Wednesday was received by UAE Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum as guest of honor at the World Governments Summit 2024 in Dubai.

The visit highlights the robust development of UAE-Indian relations in the past few years under Modi's leadership.

In 2020, the countries signed a free-trade deal aimed at doubling their bilateral trade to \$100 billion.