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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

INDO–OMAN RELATIONS: AN ANALYSIS OF DUQM PORT OF OMAN

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ABSTRACT:

This article analyses the historical and conceptual foundations of India-Oman relations with a specific focus on the emerging strategic, economic, maritime, and socio-cultural significance of the Duqm Port complex in Oman as perceived within Indian strategic and academic discourses up to the year 2014. The article synthesises pre-2014 literature to argue that Duqm Port, then primarily a developmental project within Oman's national vision, was beginning to register in India's maritime consciousness as a space of latent potential. This potential was framed through India's enduring civilisational links with Oman, its post-Cold War Indian Ocean outlook, its port-centric connectivity models, and its substantial socio-cultural presence in the Sultanate. The review identifies a nascent but fragmented engagement with Duqm in Indian scholarship, which was often subsumed within broader economic or technical port studies, highlighting a gap in dedicated IR analyses that could conceptually bridge Oman's development agenda with India's maritime strategy.

INTRODUCTION

The geopolitical cartography of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) at the dawn of the 21st century presented India with both an enduring imperative and a novel challenge. The imperative was rooted in history: to secure its peninsular flanks and the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) that carried the lifeblood of its burgeoning economy—energy, trade, and the remittances of its diaspora. The challenge was contemporary: to articulate and operationalize a maritime strategy commensurate with its rising economic stature and strategic autonomy in a post-Cold War, increasingly multipolar ocean space (Government of India, 2007; Raja Mohan, 2012). Within this complex milieu, India's relationship with the Sultanate of Oman emerged as a paradigm of continuity and quiet strategic convergence. Anchored in millennia of dhow-borne trade and cultural interchange across the Arabian Sea, the modern partnership, particularly after 1991, evolved into a multifaceted engagement encompassing energy security, defence cooperation, and a massive expatriate presence (Wadhwa, 2013; Singh, 2013). It is against this backdrop that the Duqm Port project—a colossal national undertaking by Oman under its Vision 2020 to transform the central Al Wusta region into an integrated economic and logistical hub—began to register, however tentatively, within the Indian strategic and academic imagination in the years leading up to 2014.

This narrative review article, situated firmly within the discipline of International Relations, seeks to analyse Indo-Oman relations through the specific, nascent lens of Duqm Port, strictly limiting its temporal scope to the period ending in 2014. Its purpose is not to chronicle operational developments, which were minimal in this phase, but to engage in a conceptual excavation. It aims to uncover how and why Duqm, then a developmental project in its early stages, began to be perceived as a space of latent strategic, economic, and socio-cultural significance from an Indian perspective. The analysis is consciously framed through the voice and conceptual frameworks of an Indian research scholar, reflecting the dominant strands of India's maritime strategic thinking, its post-Cold War 'Look West' policy, and its unique foreign policy ethos that blends realist interests with civilisational linkages and soft power (Pant, 2012; Scott, 2012).

The significance of this inquiry lies in its focus on a period of *anticipation* rather than realization. By 2014, Duqm was not the overtly militarized, strategically charged Indo-Pacific node it would later become in geopolitical discourse. Instead, it was primarily an article of Oman's domestic economic diversification—a commercial port, dry dock, and special economic zone under construction (Valeri, 2013). Yet, as this review will demonstrate, Indian scholarship and strategic commentary were already engaged in a process of interpretive prospecting. This process was guided by several interlocking themes that form the core of this article's structure.

First, the analysis is grounded in the **historical and civilisational foundations** of the bilateral relationship, which provided an intuitive, trust-based context for viewing any major Omani initiative, including Duqm, as inherently accessible and potentially cooperative. Second, it examines Duqm through the prism of **Oman's National Development Vision**, understanding it on its own terms as a commercial-logistical enterprise, while simultaneously noting how its inherent geographical attributes—its location outside the Strait of Hormuz, its vast coastal land, and its proximity to key SLOCs—resonated with Indian maritime sensitivities. Third, it explores **India's own evolving maritime and port-centric outlook**, as reflected in domestic scholarship on port-hinterland dynamics (Thill &Venkitasubramanian, 2014). This scholarship provided a logical framework for assessing Duqm's potential utility as a future node in India's westbound connectivity networks, complementing its own port modernization drives.

Fourth, and crucially, the review integrates the **socio-cultural and diasporic dimensions**, a cornerstone of India's Gulf policy. Studies on intercultural communication, such as that by Mehta and Heble (2014), reveal the deep-seated soft power and human capital represented by the Indian community in Oman. This diaspora was not merely a subject of study but an active enabler, making the contemplation of large-scale projects like Duqm more feasible and familiar. Fifth, it considers **environmental and coastal geographical studies** (Choudri&Baawain et al., 2014) which, while not strategic in intent, highlighted the vulnerability and strategic value of coastal zones like Duqm, subtly informing a holistic understanding of sustainable maritime engagement.

Finally, the review identifies and reflects upon the **analytical gaps in pre-2014 Indian scholarship** on Duqm. While the port was mentioned and its potential noted, dedicated International Relations analyses that conceptually bridged its developmental profile with India's strategic maritime future were sparse. The discourse was often subsumed within broader economic studies or technical port analyses, revealing a field of inquiry still in its infancy.

Therefore, this article contends that up to 2014, Duqm Port existed in the Indian strategic consciousness as a *conceptual harbinger*. It was a geographical and developmental fact that Indian analysts began to map onto their own evolving templates of maritime strategy, economic connectivity, and soft power projection. By synthesizing literature from Indian strategic journals, maritime studies, diaspora research, and regional analyses, this review constructs a pre-history of a now-prominent strategic relationship. It offers a foundational academic narrative that captures how, before concrete

agreements and visible naval footprints, the seeds of strategic interest in Duqm were sown in the fertile ground of historical friendship, convergent economic visions, and a slowly crystallizing Indian maritime doctrine for the western Indian Ocean.

Historical Foundations and Oman in India's Maritime Imagination

To comprehend the nuanced Indian perspective on Oman's developmental projects, such as the Duqm Port, one must first navigate the deep historical channels that have long connected the Indian subcontinent with the southeastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula. This relationship is not a construct of late-20th-century statecraft but is etched into the very geography and collective memory of the Indian Ocean world. For millennia, the seasonal monsoon winds dictated a rhythmic exchange, with dhows carrying timber, spices, textiles, and horses from Indian ports like Calicut, Surat, and Beypore to Omani harbours of Sohar and Muscat, returning with dates, pearls, copper, and later, incense (Chaudhuri, 1985; Risso, 1995). This wasn't merely trade; it was a civilisational dialogue. The influence is tangible in the architectural lexicon of Oman's coastal towns, where traditional wooden doors and ornate balconies bear the unmistakable imprint of Gujarati and Konkani craftsmanship, and in the linguistic remnants of Gujarati and Balochi within Omani Arabic (Al-Salimi& Staples, 2019). Politically, the Omani Al Bu Said dynasty, which consolidated power in the 18th century, maintained intricate ties with Indian polities, at times seeking refuge or arbitration from the Marathas and later, engaging in treaty relations with the British East India Company from its Indian headquarters (Bathurst, 1967). Thus, Oman has perpetually existed within what Indian strategic scholar K.M. Panikkar termed India's "vital sphere of interest" – the Arabian Sea – not as a distant foreign land but as a familiar neighbour in its maritime neighbourhood (Panikkar, 1945).

This historical intimacy forms the indispensable subtext for post-colonial and post-Cold War relations. Following India's economic liberalization in 1991, its foreign policy consciously sought to reconnect with this western periphery through what analysts termed a 'Look West' policy, an intentional complement to the more heralded 'Look East' policy (Mohan, 2003). Oman, under the astute and visionary leadership of Sultan Qaboos bin Said from 1970, presented an ideal partner. It was a model of stability and moderate non-alignment in a volatile region, having maintained a tradition of balanced diplomacy. For India, Oman offered a triad of critical interests: **energy security** (as a reliable supplier of crude oil and LNG), **expatriate welfare** (hosting one of the largest concentrations of Indian workers in the Gulf, whose remittances constituted a significant financial flow), and **strategic access**. Oman's geographical location, straddling the Strait of Hormuz and overlooking the vital chokepoints into the Gulf of Aden and the wider western Indian Ocean, endowed it with outsized strategic significance (Pradhan, 2013).

The institutionalization of this strategic comfort was achieved through key agreements in the 2000s. The **2006 Memorandum of Understanding on Defence Cooperation** was a watershed, providing a formal framework for joint military exercises, training, and logistical support (Wadhwa, 2013). The biennial naval exercise **'Naseem al Bahr'** (Sea Breeze), initiated in the early 1990s and steadily enhanced in complexity, became a symbol of this operational synergy, fostering interoperability and mutual trust between the Indian Navy and the Royal Navy of Oman (Singh, 2013). This defence partnership was not directed against any third party but was rooted in a shared concern for the security of sea lanes and a common desire to build maritime domain awareness against non-traditional threats like piracy and smuggling.

It was within this context of deepening multi-sectoral trust that Oman's ambitious national development plans began to be closely monitored by Indian strategists and scholars. Sultan Qaboos's **Oman Vision 2020**, launched in 1995, explicitly aimed at economic diversification, reducing

dependence on hydrocarbons, and developing infrastructure, logistics, and tourism (Valeri, 2009). Indian analysts perceived this not just as Oman's internal economic policy but as a potential alignment of opportunities. Oman's need for technology, expertise, and investment dovetailed with India's growing capabilities in construction, IT, and project management, and its desire to secure long-term energy and logistical partnerships.

The **Duqm Port project**, conceived as the centrepiece of this diversification in the remote Al Wusta governorate, therefore entered India's strategic calculus through this historical and contemporary prism. It did not appear as a sudden, standalone geopolitical opportunity. Rather, it was perceived as a **logical and tangible extension of the existing partnership**. If historical ties provided the cultural comfort, and the defence agreements established the strategic trust, then Oman's Vision 2020, with Duqm at its heart, presented the next logical frontier for collaboration: economic and infrastructural partnership. For Indian maritime thinkers, Duqm's location—south of the Strait of Hormuz—echoed familiar themes of alternative routing and redundancy, concepts deeply embedded in India's own energy security thinking. The project resonated because it fit into an existing narrative: Oman was a proven, reliable partner, and its efforts to build a new maritime gateway were of natural interest to a India seeking to enhance its own connectivity and secure its western approaches. Thus, by 2014, Duqm was not an alien strategic outpost but a familiar idea in a friendly land, its potential significance filtered through centuries of interaction and a robust, modern partnership

Duqm Port: Oman's Developmental Vision and Latent Strategic Geography

The port city of Duqm, situated on Oman's central Al Wusta coast roughly 550 kilometers south of Muscat, represented in the period up to 2014 one of the most ambitious and geographically consequential infrastructure projects in the contemporary Arab Gulf. Its development cannot be understood merely as port construction; it was the physical manifestation of Sultan Qaboos bin Said's long-term strategic vision for Oman's post-hydrocarbon future, articulated formally in the **Oman Vision 2020** document. From an Indian analytical perspective pre-2014, Duqm was therefore primarily examined through the dual lens of **national developmental economics** and its inherent, though not yet fully activated, **strategic geography**. Indian scholarship engaged with it cautiously, recognizing its commercial intent while simultaneously noting the geopolitical implications embedded in its very location.

1. Oman Vision 2020 and the Genesis of Duqm as a Developmental Megaproject

Oman's economic trajectory under Sultan Qaboos was marked by a prescient awareness of the limitations of a hydrocarbon-dependent rentier state. Unlike some of its neighbors, Oman's oil and gas reserves were relatively modest, prompting an early drive for economic diversification (Valeri, 2009). The **Oman Vision 2020**, launched in 1995, was the master plan to transition towards a private-sector-led, knowledge-based economy. A central pillar of this vision was the development of logistics, transportation, and heavy industry as alternative engines of growth (World Bank, 2014).

The Duqm project, officially named the **Duqm Special Economic Zone (SEZ)**, was the flagship of this pillar. Conceived as an integrated economic hub, its master plan included:

A **multi-purpose commercial port** with deep-water berths capable of handling container ships, bulk carriers, and RO-RO vessels.

A **world-class ship repair and dry-dock facility** (the Duqm Dry Dock), aimed at capturing a share of the lucrative maritime maintenance market in the Western Indian Ocean.

An **oil refinery** and **petrochemical complex** to add value to crude oil exports.

Industrial zones for manufacturing, including an allocated area for heavy industries.

Tourism and urban development components, aiming to create a self-sustaining city (SEZAD, 2013).

The official narrative, closely followed by Indian economists and regional analysts, framed Duqm as an instrument for **regional balance** within Oman. By developing the remote Al Wusta governorate, the government aimed to decentralize economic activity from the congested Muscat and Sohar corridors, create employment for Omani youth, and stimulate ancillary industries (Fromherz, 2012). Indian infrastructure and engineering firms, with extensive experience in the Gulf, saw this as a significant opportunity. The scale of the project necessitated foreign partnership, and India's capabilities in project execution, coupled with its historical ties, positioned it as a potential collaborator in what was essentially a nation-building exercise on Oman's part.

2. The Latent Strategic Geography: An Indian Analytical Perspective

While the developmental narrative was dominant, the strategic attributes of Duqm's location did not escape the notice of Indian strategic commentators and maritime scholars. Their analysis, however, was characterized by restraint, focusing on inherent geographical advantages rather than explicit militarization. Key strategic-geographic features noted in pre-2014 literature include:

Location Beyond the Strait of Hormuz:

Duqm's position, well south of the chokepoint of the Strait of Hormuz (through which a significant portion of the world's, and India's, oil transits), was its most remarked-upon feature. Indian analysts saw this as offering **strategic redundancy**. In the event of any contingency that disrupted traffic through the Strait, Duqm could potentially serve as an alternative maritime gateway for Oman and, by extension, a logistics node for regional trade (Pant, 2012). This resonated deeply with India's own vulnerability assessments regarding energy security.

Vast Land Availability and Coastal Depth:

The sprawling, relatively undeveloped coastline around Duqm provided abundant space for large-scale industrial and storage facilities without the land constraints of ports like Fujairah or Salalah. The natural depth of its waters allowed for the accommodation of very large vessels, including future aircraft carriers and large crude carriers (VLCCs). Indian maritime strategists, familiar with the constraints of their own peninsular ports, recognized this as a key logistical asset (Khurana, 2008).

Proximity to Key Shipping Lanes:

Duqm sits astride major east-west shipping routes connecting the Arabian Gulf with the Indian Ocean, and north-south routes linking the Red Sea and East Africa with South Asia. This made it a natural candidate for a **bunkering, transshipment, and repair hub**. For the Indian Navy, which was increasing its anti-piracy deployments in the Gulf of Aden, the potential for a friendly, well-equipped port facility along this operational arc was of quiet interest, framed within the existing 2006 defence cooperation agreement as a possible location for "port calls" and "logistical replenishment" (Singh, 2013).

The Environmental and Developmental Vulnerability Lens:

Interestingly, studies on Oman's coastal geography, such as the work by Choudri et al. (2014) on coastal vulnerability, provided a complementary, non-traditional security perspective. By highlighting the environmental pressures and sustainability challenges of rapid coastal development, this research indirectly underscored the **strategic value of a resilient coastal infrastructure**. For India, a responsible maritime stakeholder, the long-term viability of a port like Duqm was linked to sound environmental

and developmental planning, suggesting another avenue for potential bilateral cooperation in areas like coastal zone management.

A Space of Potential, Not Yet a Strategic Asset

In summary, the Indian view of Duqm Port up to 2014 was one of attentive observation and calibrated assessment. It was firmly contextualized within Oman's sovereign development agenda. Indian scholarship respected this framing, analyzing Duqm first and foremost as a commercial and logistical mega-project with significant economic potential for both Oman and interested Indian businesses. However, the analytical community simultaneously, and almost inevitably, engaged in a process of **strategic geography mapping**. They identified the latent advantages of Duqm's location—its Hormuz-alternative position, its scale, and its proximity to vital SLOCs—and began to contemplate its possible future roles in regional trade logistics and maritime security. This dual-track analysis—developmental yet attuned to strategic undertones—characterized India's pre-2014 engagement with the idea of Duqm. It was seen not as a ready-made strategic asset, but as a **space of immense potential**, whose ultimate strategic relevance would be determined by the pace of its development, Oman's foreign policy choices, and India's own capacity to proactively engage with its economic promise.

India's Maritime Outlook and the Port-Centric Logic of Connectivity

The Indian perspective on a foreign maritime project like Duqm prior to 2014 cannot be disentangled from India's own, often introspective, re-engagement with the seas in the preceding decades. This period witnessed a profound shift from a continentalist mindset, dominant for much of the Cold War, towards a reluctant yet growing recognition of maritime primacy for India's security and prosperity. The conceptual frameworks that emerged from this shift—particularly the **port-centric logic of connectivity**—provided the essential analytical prism through which Indian strategists and scholars began to assess the potential of emerging nodes like Duqm. This perspective was less about territorial control and more about network influence, positioning Duqm not as a standalone asset, but as a potential vertex in a web of commercial and strategic relationships that India sought to weave across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

1. The Resurgence of Indian Maritime Strategic Thought (Post-2000)

The catalyst for this resurgence was multifaceted: the economic imperatives of globalization following the 1991 reforms; the stark lessons of the 1999 Kargil War regarding maritime neglect; the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, which highlighted coastal vulnerability; and the growing presence of extra-regional navies in the IOR. Formal doctrine began to codify this shift. The Indian Navy's 2004 *Indian Maritime Doctrine* and its 2007 follow-up, *Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy*, explicitly articulated a vision of the navy as an instrument of state policy, tasked with ensuring a "favourable and positive maritime environment" through a combination of hard security, diplomacy, and cooperative engagement (Indian Navy, 2004, 2007). Think tanks like the **National Maritime Foundation (NMF)**, established in 2005, became critical hubs for generating scholarship that advocated for a proactive, "outward-looking" maritime posture (Prakash, 2010).

Central to this strategic thought was the concept of **sea lines of communication (SLOC) security**. However, Indian strategists like GurpreetKhurana and Vijay Sakhuja argued that security could not be achieved through naval power alone; it required **enmeshing economic and diplomatic threads** with regional littorals (Khurana, 2007; Sakhuja, 2011). This evolved into the idea of **port diplomacy** and **port-led connectivity**. The logic was compelling: investments in and partnerships with foreign ports would enhance India's economic reach, create natural points for naval interaction and logistics support, foster

interdependencies, and build a latticework of influence that would underpin a stable regional order favorable to India. This was a distinctly Indian variant of soft power projection—pragmatic, commercially justified, and rooted in developmental partnership.

2. The Academic Toolkit: Port-Hinterland Dynamics and Network Theory

Concurrent with strategic debates, Indian academic research provided a robust empirical and conceptual foundation for this port-centric outlook. Scholars in economic geography, logistics, and transport economics began meticulously analyzing India's own port systems, moving beyond simple tonnage metrics. The seminal work by **Thill and Venkitasubramanian (2014)**, "Multi-layered hinterland classification of Indian ports," is emblematic of this trend. Their research demonstrated that a port's competitiveness and strategic value are not inherent but are derived from its **connectivity to layered hinterlands**—the immediate industrial belt, the broader national hinterland connected by rail and road corridors, and the "foreland" of overseas markets linked by shipping routes.

This framework had profound implications for how Indian analysts looked outward. It suggested that the value of a foreign port to India would be determined by:

Its Foreland Connectivity: How well was it linked to Indian ports and other key markets in Africa, the Gulf, and beyond?

Its Hinterland Potential: Could it serve as a gateway to the Omani interior or, more ambitiously, to other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) markets via planned road and rail corridors?

Its Nodal Efficiency: How did its operational efficiency, tariff structures, and logistical integration compare to competing hubs like Salalah, Jebel Ali, or even India's own emerging ports?

Applying this toolkit, Duqm emerged in analysis as a project with intriguing **network potential**. Its vast land bank and SEZ status suggested a strong, planned hinterland. Its location offered a unique foreland, positioned to connect Indian west coast ports to the southern Gulf and East Africa on an alternate, potentially less congested, routing.

3. Projecting the Logic Westwards: Duqm as a Complementary Node

Indian port modernization in the 2000s, driven by the Sagarmala initiative's precursors, focused on developing **Kandla** (later Deendayal), **Mundra**, and **Kochi** as transshipment and energy hubs. The scholarly and strategic discourse began to project these domestic developments onto a regional canvas. Could a partnership with Duqm create a virtuous **hub-and-spoke system**? Indian exports could use Mundra or Kochi as primary collection points, with Duqm acting as a forward logistics, warehousing, and distribution centre for the Gulf region, reducing final delivery times and costs. For energy imports, Duqm's refinery and storage facilities could offer a diversification point for crude processing or product sourcing.

Furthermore, the presence of the **Duqm Dry Dock** aligned with another key Indian interest: reducing dependence on foreign, often distant, ship repair facilities for both its merchant and naval vessels. Access to a modern, friendly shipyard in the western Arabian Sea would significantly enhance the operational endurance and flexibility of the Indian Navy, a point noted in strategic analyses (Scott, 2012). This was framed not as seeking a base, but as securing reliable commercial services—a nuance that fitted India's strategic culture of ambiguity and non-alignment.

4. The Conceptual-Anticipatory Gap

Despite this compelling conceptual logic, a clear gap existed between academic-strategic contemplation and concrete policy action towards Duqm before 2014. While Indian firms like **Larsen & Toubro** were involved in construction projects within the SEZ, there was no flagship, government-to-

government infrastructure partnership explicitly linking, for instance, the development of India's **Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC)** to Duqm as an overseas outlet. No Indian port had established a formal sister-port or operational agreement with Duqm. The discourse remained in the realm of **strategic anticipation**.

This gap can be attributed to several factors: the immaturity of the Duqm project itself, which was still in early-phase construction; the prioritization of India's own massive domestic infrastructure needs; a cautious bureaucratic approach to overseas equity investment in strategic infrastructure; and the lack of a consolidated "Connectivity Doctrine" that would explicitly rank foreign ports like Duqm as strategic priorities. Nevertheless, the pre-2014 period was crucial for **conceptual seeding**. The port-centric logic of connectivity, derived from both strategic doctrine and academic research, had firmly taken root. It provided a ready-made and intellectually coherent framework through which the subsequent, more tangible Indian engagements with Duqm post-2014 would be understood, justified, and operationalized. Duqm had been identified, in the Indian strategic imagination, as a node of potential within a network India aspired to shape.

Socio-Cultural Dimensions and the Diasporic Bridge

The architecture of contemporary Indo–Oman relations, particularly its resilience and depth, is fundamentally underwritten by a socio-cultural substructure built over generations: the substantial and deeply embedded Indian diaspora. As of 2014, an estimated 700,000 to 800,000 Indian nationals constituted the largest expatriate community in Oman, representing nearly 20% of the Sultanate's population and forming an indispensable stratum of its professional and service economy (Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 2014). This community is not a monolithic bloc but a complex, layered social fabric reflecting India's own diversity, comprising Malayali nurses and teachers, Punjabi agricultural supervisors, Telugu construction engineers, Sindhi and Gujarati entrepreneurs, and a growing cadre of IT professionals and senior managers. Their presence transcends economics; it constitutes India's most pervasive, organic, and potent instrument of soft power, creating a human bridge that makes high-level strategic and economic partnerships, such as those contemplated around Duqm, socially intelligible and operationally feasible.

1. Intercultural Communication and the "Goodwill Reservoir"

The qualitative nature of this diasporic influence is captured incisively in pre-2014 research, most notably by Mehta and Heble (2014) in their study on intercultural communication. Their findings reveal a landscape of largely positive Omani perceptions towards the Indian community, characterized by respect for professional competence, appreciation for social discretion, and acknowledgment of cultural adaptability. Indians were widely perceived as hardworking, law-abiding, and crucially, as non-interfering guests who respected Omani social norms and the authority of the state. This perception is not accidental but the product of a long historical interplay and conscious community behavior. The diaspora has largely avoided overt political activity, focused on economic contribution, and integrated socially in permissible domains while maintaining distinct cultural identities—a balance that aligns with Omani societal preferences (Zachariah &Rajan, 2012).

This has created a deep reservoir of goodwill and trust at the societal level. For Omani citizens and policymakers, engagement with India is not an abstract interaction with a distant state; it is a daily reality experienced through trusted doctors, respected school principals, reliable business partners, and skilled technicians. This quotidian familiarity significantly lowers the psychological and political barriers to deeper bilateral cooperation. When Omani planners envisioned Duqm's development, the proven role of Indian human capital in building Oman's modern infrastructure—from roads and airports to

hospitals and universities—made the consideration of Indian partnership in this new megaproject a logical, low-risk proposition.

2. The Diaspora as a Conduit for Economic and Strategic Intelligence

Beyond soft power, the diaspora functions as a critical, informal network for knowledge transmission and business intelligence. Long before formal diplomatic or corporate delegations survey opportunities, the diaspora provides ground-level insights into market conditions, regulatory environments, and societal trends through kinship and professional networks linking Oman to Kerala, Gujarat, Punjab, and elsewhere in India. For Indian businesses considering entry into the Duqm SEZ, this on-the-ground intelligence was invaluable. It reduced the "liability of foreignness," offering insights into practical logistics, labor dynamics, and bureaucratic processes that no official report could fully capture.

Furthermore, the diaspora's stratified nature meant it could service the entire value chain of a project like Duqm. Blue-collar and semi-skilled workers would form the backbone of the construction workforce. Mid-level engineers and project managers would oversee technical execution. Senior executives and entrepreneurs within the diaspora, often with decades of experience navigating the Omani market, could act as joint-venture partners or crucial intermediaries for incoming Indian firms. This ready-made, multi-tiered human resource ecosystem made the prospect of Indian involvement in Duqm's development not just conceivable, but efficient and scalable.

3. Facilitating the Duqm Synergy: From Manpower to "Mindpower"

The Duqm project, as envisaged in Oman Vision 2020, was a nation-building exercise requiring not just capital but immense human capital and technical "mindpower." India, through its diaspora and its domestic educational institutions, was a natural source for both. Indian universities and technical institutes were already producing a surplus of engineers and managers, many of whom sought opportunities in the Gulf. The existing diaspora provided a landing pad and a socialization mechanism for new arrivals, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of skilled migration.

This synergy had a direct strategic corollary. In Indian strategic thinking, a large, settled, and respected diaspora is not merely a welfare concern for the Ministry of External Affairs; it is viewed as a strategic asset that enhances state influence (Dubey, 2010). The community's welfare and success are tied to the stability and prosperity of the host nation, aligning Indian and Omani interests organically. Therefore, supporting Oman's developmental goals—like the success of Duqm—was seen, in part, as supporting the long-term prospects of the Indian community. This created a virtuous circle: the diaspora facilitated Indian economic engagement, which contributed to Duqm's success, which in turn strengthened Oman's economy and the diaspora's position within it.

4. The Limits and Nuances of Diasporic Influence

However, Indian scholarship pre-2014 also recognized the limits of this diasporic power. The community's influence was circumscribed and apolitical. Its strength lay in socio-economic integration, not in political lobbying. Its continued presence was contingent on Omani national policies (like the ongoing "Omanisation" drive to increase local employment) and regional stability. Moreover, the diaspora itself was not a coordinated instrument of Indian state policy but a heterogeneous group with diverse motivations. Yet, its very existence created a permissive environment. It ensured that when Indian policymakers and strategists looked at a map and considered Duqm's geographic potential, they did not see a blank, unfamiliar space. They saw a location within a friendly country where hundreds of thousands of their compatriots already lived and worked, where Indian business practices were understood, and where a foundation of mutual respect had been laid over generations. This socio-

cultural bridge transformed strategic calculation from a cold, geometric exercise into a warmer, more confident assessment of opportunity among familiar landscapes and faces.

Analytical Gaps in Indian Scholarship on Duqm (Pre-2014)

A review of the literature reveals a distinct gap in dedicated, conceptually rich International Relations scholarship within India that focused explicitly on the strategic implications of Duqm Port before 2014. The engagement was nascent and often indirect. Discussions about Duqm were typically embedded within broader analyses of India-Oman relations, India-Gulf economic ties, or technical reports on port infrastructure in the Middle East. There was an over-reliance on economic or logistical frameworks, with the strategic and geopolitical dimensions remaining under-theorised from an Indian IR perspective. The port was seldom analysed as a distinct 'maritime space' with the potential to alter regional connectivity geometries in India's favour. This gap can be attributed to several factors: the project itself was in its early developmental stages; India's own maritime strategy was still crystallising; and the dominant strategic discourse was perhaps more focused on the immediate eastern Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca. Consequently, Duqm existed on the periphery of mainstream Indian IR analysis, acknowledged for its potential but not yet subjected to rigorous scholarly examination as a focal point of India's westward maritime strategy.

CONCLUSION

This narrative review has situated the Duqm Port project within the continuum of Indo–Oman relations as they stood up to 2014. From the perspective of Indian strategic and academic thought of that period, Duqm was perceived as an emerging maritime and developmental space of considerable latent significance. Its importance was triangulated through multiple lenses: the historical depth of bilateral ties; Oman's national vision for economic transformation; India's own growing emphasis on port-led connectivity and maritime strategy; and the indispensable socio-cultural bridge of the Indian diaspora. While concrete, large-scale Indian strategic investments in Duqm were a feature of the post-2014 period, the conceptual groundwork for viewing Duqm as a space of opportunity was being laid in the preceding years. Indian scholarship, though not yet fully focused on Duqm, implicitly engaged with its potential through its studies on Oman, port economics, and diaspora dynamics. This review, therefore, provides a foundational academic base, capturing a moment in India's strategic evolution when a port complex on Oman's central coast began to transition from a distant national project of a friendly state to a relevant factor in India's own, expanding maritime consciousness. It highlights the need for future IR scholarship to trace how these early, fragmented perceptions eventually coalesced into a more concrete strategic partnership, a development that lies beyond the temporal scope of this analysis.

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