

## **Most Indians agree there's more to our relationship than cricket**

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Most Indians, it turns out, quite like Australia, despite a torrent of bad press over student safety a few years ago. A groundbreaking opinion poll reveals what Indians really think of this country.

First, the good news. Sixty per cent of Indian respondents said they would like their country's government and society to be more like Australia's. Only the US stands significantly higher in their warmth and esteem. And Australia still ranks second only to the US as a place to be educated, ahead of Canada, Singapore, Britain and Germany.

This suggests reassuring resilience to Australia's reputation based on its core strengths as a developed, democratic, multicultural and egalitarian nation and is also testament to public diplomacy efforts to repair Australia's image.

But it would be a grave mistake to read these results as cause for complacency. For the poll shows lingering concerns about the kind of welcome Indians receive here, with 61 per cent still thinking the attacks against their countrymen in 2009 and 2010 were driven mainly by racism.

And 62 per cent still consider Australia a dangerous place for Indian students, although 53 per cent say it is safer than a few years ago, and 49 per cent regard Australia generally as a safe country.

The poll, a joint initiative by the Lowy Institute for International Policy and the Australia India Institute, is a nationally representative opinion survey of 1233 Indian adults conducted face-to-face late last year.

The questions were asked in seven languages in cities, towns and villages throughout most of India and at all levels of society.

The poll confirms, in detail, positive trends identified last year in an Australia India Institute report into bilateral perceptions. That report also stressed there was still work to be done to cement Australia's reputation.

When Julia Gillard went to New Delhi to launch a cultural festival, Oz Fest, last October, it seemed that controversies over student safety and the Labor Party's previous ban on uranium sales could be put to rest.

Her engagement efforts have made a difference. And it is encouraging that the Coalition is showing serious intent about India. Tony Abbott and opposition foreign affairs spokeswoman Julie Bishop have made this clear in statements of their international priorities.

They know that relations between India and Australia have deepened dramatically, a process that began in the Howard years.

India's burgeoning demand for energy, resources and education have propelled it to become Australia's fourth-largest export market. People of Indian origin are one of this country's largest and fastest-growing migrant communities. New Delhi and Canberra have stressed common interests in shared Indo-Pacific security.

And the Prime Minister's hard-fought victory in December 2011 reversing Labor's uranium ban has removed a barrier of mistrust. Seven out of 10 Indians surveyed think selling uranium is important to Australia's relations with India; only 5 per cent think it is not.

Popular feeling matters profoundly in relations between democracies. About the time Ms Gillard was hearing the music of indigenous singer Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu and sitar virtuoso Anoushka Shankar at one of Delhi's historic forts, our polling workers were ranging from Rajasthan to West Bengal, Tamil Nadu to Uttar Pradesh, taking the pulse of India.

They found a healthy pragmatism that Australia can harness for mutual advantage. More than half of Indians believe Australia is a good place to live and to get work. Two thirds say they like Australian values.

About the same proportion see Australia as a country well-disposed to theirs, while 59 per cent agree that the two countries have similar security interests.

And Indians understand Australia is becoming indispensable for their country's economic rise: 60 per cent see Australia as a good supplier of energy and resources, 57 per cent think it supplies good food, and 61 per cent agree it is known for excellence in science.

But only 51 per cent of Indians agree Australia is a country with welcoming people (71 per cent in large cities), while 26 per cent disagree. Young, urban Indians tend to be more upbeat about Australia, and with more than 600 million people under the age of 25 that is an enormous opportunity.

Three-quarters of Indians polled thought cricket projected a positive image of both countries and helped us grow closer.

But 35 per cent think cricket can sometimes cause frictions between the countries.

With this poll, crafting a partnership for the Asian Century now has a scorecard to help us all lift our game.

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