

Friends of India in the Netherlands (FIN): a positioning paper

The more than four hundred years old Dutch link with India is now further reinforced by the increasing trade relations between both the countries and the growing interest of the Dutch people in Indian art and culture. The Netherlands is now the fourth most important foreign investor in India, and is the largest investor in India among the EU countries. Indian companies are also investing in the Netherlands substantially.

A number of cultural, trade and commercial organizations are active covering “bilateral issues” between India and the Netherlands. But, there is no apex group which coordinates activities of these separate groups and more important, in the area of Indo-Dutch relations there is no group which communicates at the political level cutting across the party and interest group lines. As a result a better understanding of problems of India and stimulation of cooperative activities at higher levels are not facilitated.

With a view to tackle these issues a few like minded people got together and after some discussion they came up with the idea of starting a “Friends of India” group in the Netherlands to be active at the political level. To translate the idea into reality, it was decided to start with a small working group - a core group of not more than 6 persons, 2 from the Dutch community, 2 from the Surinamese Hindustani community and two from the Indian community. As the group develops its basic ideas further more persons will be invited to join.

Objectives of Friends of India Group:

This Group should be in a position to contact Dutch parliamentarians who have substantive interest in India. The main objectives of the Friends of India group are:

1. To promote friendly relations between The Netherlands and India in the broadest possible sense, to be achieved by means of networking among all interested parties with a view to arriving at synergy, in particular at the political level.
2. To raise the awareness level of the Indo-Dutch cause among major players by showcasing the relative strengths, respectively, of The Netherlands and India.

Some of the issues which need immediate attention are:

1. The long period required for issuing visa and work permits to Indians and lifting of the hurdles in the process.
2. As a signatory of the Apostille Agreement, acceptance of documents issued by the Indian government.
3. Creating an environment enabling Dutch and Indian companies and organizations to develop full potential of mutual relations in different sectors in the context of growing Indian economy.
4. Under the banner of human rights, organisations like the Naga International Support Center, the Boro Support Group etc. are active in the Netherlands supporting the activities of the insurgent groups in India. These support groups support the creation of sovereign nations thereby destabilizing India, a sovereign democratically elected friendly nation. Dutch organisations supporting their activities should be informed of the effect on the local society in India by insurgent-triggered violence.
5. At present due to the very aggressive lobbying by a few Dutch NGO's there is a negative image of India and Indian companies in the area of child labour, trade union activities etc. The actions taken by India in these areas and a balanced reporting of these issues for the Dutch public is needed.
6. Due to funding policy of the Dutch government there is an erosion of Indian studies in the Dutch universities and it is now in a deplorable situation. It is at present limited to Leiden University. Along with China, India is going to be a major world economic power. In order to educate the specialists who would be able to interact with India, attention should be given to India and Indian studies in the Dutch universities.

Present status of the formation of FOI group:

At present Mr. Rajindre Tewari and Wahid Saleh are the two active members of the Friends of India group. Within a short time the group will have two new members – one from the Surinamese community and another from the Indian community. The group expects the Dutch members to join the group once it starts functioning.

So far the FOI is able to contact two Dutch MP's who have expressed interest in the activities of the group. FOI is trying to contact others also. At present FOI is following several leads to get more politicians interested in the activities of the group.

Actions taken by the Friends of India group:

Although the Friends of India group is not yet functioning officially, the initiating members are taking actions if and when needed, as indicated below:

1. Requesting the Friends of India in the European Parliament to bundle their strength and draw the attention of their fellow MEPs and member States to the controversial activities of the so-called human rights organisations. Further a suggestion was made to the Chairman of the Friends of India Group in the European Parliament to convene a meeting of like-minded persons and organisations to discuss these issues.
2. The 25-member Union has asked the Kashmiri lobbyists to delete any reference to the EU in their activities. As this was not the case and as their internet site www.kashmircentreeu.org gave the impression that they are a part of the EU organization, attention of the Chairman of the Friends of India at the European parliament was drawn to the above fact and was requested to take necessary action.
3. The initiating members Participated in discussions in different symposia and meetings relating to Kashmir and tried to present the Indian viewpoint on the issue. As a result a discussion paper on “Lobbying by Pakistan and Pakistanis and lessons to be learned” prepared by FOI for distribution to a few interested organisations.
4. FOI has already taken up the issue of payment of Dutch Social Security in India with the authorities concerned in India and the Netherlands and informed some of the possible beneficiaries of the measure.
5. FOI has also taken up the issue of Overseas Indian Citizenship with the Dutch Ministry of Justice (IND) as well as Ministry of Foreign Affairs clarifying that the OCI is not dual nationality.
6. FOI has taken up the issue of Dutch Consular Assistance in India for OCI cardholder with a Dutch passport.
7. FOI have submitted a Petition to Funding Agencies like Oxfam, Novib not to associate their names with organizations like Boro Support group.
8. Reacted to Press Releases giving wrong information by groups like Naga Support Centre, Boro Support Groups, etc and also to articles published in the print media.
9. Another area where action has been taken is to start an “India-desk” at the Schiphol airport. This is meant for Indian businessmen, students and the

tourists. After their arrival at the Amsterdam airport, they will be able to get first hand, relevant information about the Netherlands. Mr. Tewari has already spoken about this subject with the responsible Alderman of the municipality of Haarlemmermeer. This has already been discussed with the Amsterdam municipality which is very positive about this idea.

10. A request has been sent to the new Dutch ambassador of the Netherlands in India to invite a group of Indian parliamentarians to visit the Netherlands and meet and interact with the Dutch parliamentarians.

Finally, this FOI initiative is not meant to set up another institution competing with the current entities. Moreover, this initiative aims at lobbying with the members of the Dutch parliament using Dutch influencers and those Indians residents in the Netherlands who are fully integrated with the Dutch society and are in the position to leverage the outcome of this effort for promoting mutually beneficial trade and other activities.

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