

Bilateral Relations: India-British Virgin Islands

Overview:

The **British Virgin Islands (BVI)**, popularly referred as **Virgin Islands**, is one of the British Overseas Territories in the Caribbean, located to the east of Puerto Rico (US State). The Virgin Islands were discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1493. They became the possession of Great Britain in 1666 when the English Planters took control from the Dutch settlers and have been a British colony since 1672. The Virgin Islands became a Territory on July 1, 1956 and is currently a British Overseas Territory which falls under the jurisdiction of the United Kingdom (UK).

The BVI comprising 4 main islands and many smaller ones. The largest island, Tortola, is home to the capital, Road Town. The official currency of the British Virgin Islands has been the United States dollar (US\$) since 1959, the currency also used by the United States Virgin Islands. The British Virgin Islands consist of the main islands of Tortola, Virgin Gorda, Anegada, and Jost Van Dyke, along with over 50 other smaller islands and cays. About 15 of the islands are inhabited. The capital, Road Town, is on Tortola, the largest island, which is about 20 km (12 mi) long and 5 km (3 mi) wide. The total area of the BVI is about 151 sq km. The official language of the Islands is English.

The current population of the BVI is 35,802 (Dec 2018). The majority of the population (83%) are Afro-Caribbean, descended from slaves brought to the islands by the British. Other large ethnic groups include those of British and other European origin. British Virgin Islanders are British Overseas Territories citizens and since 2002 are British citizens as well. Although the territory is not part of the European Union and not directly subject to EU law, British Virgin Islanders are deemed to be citizens of the EU by virtue of their British citizenship.

Political:

The BVI is ruled as a parliamentary democracy with ultimate executive authority is vested in the Queen, and is exercised on her behalf by the Governor of the British Virgin Islands. The governor is appointed by

the Queen on the advice of the British government. Defence and most foreign affairs remain the responsibility of the United Kingdom.

The most recent constitution was adopted in 2007 (the Virgin Islands Constitution Order, 2007) and came into force when the Legislative Council was dissolved for the 2007 general election. The head of government under the constitution is the Premier (before the new constitution the office was referred to as Chief Minister), who is elected in a general election along with the other members of the ruling government as well as the members of the opposition. Elections are held roughly every four years. A cabinet is nominated by the Premier and appointed and chaired by the Governor. The Legislature consists of the Queen (represented by the Governor) and a unicameral House of Assembly made up of 13 elected members plus the Speaker and the Attorney General.

The last general election to the Legislative Assembly was held in February 2019 and the next general election is due to be held in Feb 2023. The 2019 election result was easy victory for the opposition Virgin Islands Party (VIP) over the incumbent National Democratic Party (NDP). Out of 13 elected seats in the House of Assembly, 7 seats were needed for a majority and VIP secured 8 seats, by virtue of this, the VIP has formed the government with its leader Mr. Andrew Fahie as Premier of BVI since Feb 2019. Mr. Augustus Jaspert, is a British Diplomat who is presently the Governor of the BVI since 22 August 2017.

Trade and Commerce:

As per the latest data available, the total GDP of the Islands is US\$ 500 million with a per capita average income of around US\$ 42,300. BVI as a tax haven with an opaque banking system, enjoys one of the most prosperous economies of the Caribbean region. The "twin pillars" of the economy are tourism and financial services. Politically, tourism is the more important of the two. The economy is closely tied to the larger and more populous US Virgin Islands to the west; the US dollar is the legal currency.

Indian community:

Indian community is estimated to be very small numbering up to 100 members but vibrant and contributing significantly to BVI economy and Indian community includes a few Sindhi business families who are well

established in the field of retail jewellery and electronics business, a small number of doctors, nurses, teachers, chartered accountants, and other professionals are also there. A sizeable number of Indians are also employed in the Indian owned business establishments and the local hospitality industry including hotels and restaurants. **On 6 September 2017, Hurricane Irma devastated the island of Tortola. An estimated 80% of residential and business structures were destroyed or damaged, communications disrupted, and local roads rendered impassable. Our Mission had evacuated Indian effected there and now the number of Indian communities living in BVI is extremely small.**

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