

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 comprises of 4 main islands of Tortola, Virgin Gorda, Anegada, and Jost Van Dyke, along with over 50 other smaller islands and cays. About 15 of them are inhabited. The largest island, Tortola, is home to the capital, Road Town. 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 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. and the official language is English.

The current population of the BVI is 35,802 (Dec 2018), majority (83%) being 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.

Political:

The BVI is ruled as a parliamentary democracy where 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. Virgin Islands Party (VIP) formed the government by defeating incumbent National Democratic Party (NDP) and securing 8 seats in the 13-member Assembly with its leader Mr. Andrew Fahie becoming the Premier. Mr. Augustus Jaspert, a British Diplomat, is Governor since 22 August 2017.

Trade and Commerce:

BVI as a tax haven with an opaque banking system, enjoys one of the most prosperous economies of the Caribbean region. 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. The "twin pillars" of the economy are tourism and financial services. The economy is closely tied to the larger and more populous US Virgin Islands to the west; the US dollar is the legal currency.

With India, the volume of trade is small and fluctuating, though it has picked up lately. Exports comprise boats, textiles and pharmaceuticals while imports comprise precious and semi-precious stones, inorganic chemicals and mineral fuels.

Year	India's Exports (US\$ in millions)	India's Imports (US\$ in millions)	Total (US\$ in millions)
2014-15	0.66	0.82	1.48
2015-16	0.84	1.55	2.40
2016-17	0.41	6.72	7.14
2017-18	0.76	0.88	1.64
2018-19	10.69	16.83	27.52

(Source: Ministry of Commerce-Export Import Data bank)

Indian community:

Indian community is estimated to be very small numbering up to 100 members but vibrant and contributing significantly to BVI economy. 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, in the wake of Hurricane Irma devastating an estimated 80% of residential and business structures on the island of Tortola, our Mission evacuated affected Indians.
