

# Victorian Delegation to the Republic of India 2025

Sheena Watt MLC  
International Travel Report  
Friday 30th May - Saturday 14th June  
Electorate Business

## Itinerary - Base Cities

- Delhi (Agra)
- Amritsar
- Thiruvananthapuram
- Kannur
- Hyderabad
- Vijayawada
- Bengaluru
- Delhi

**Reason for Travel:** Electorate Business to strengthen ties between India, Victoria and the Northern Metropolitan Region. Northern Metropolitan Region has one of the highest Indian diasporas in Victoria and significant economic interests with a focus on education and trade.

**Member objectives:** Given the vibrant northern suburbs that I represent and their significant strategic, cultural and economic ties, I sought to deepen my understanding of our two nations and further understand opportunities that may exist to expand collaboration between the Northern Metropolitan Region and India.

## Deep Cultural Resonance the Northern Metropolitan Region

Victoria's relationship with India continues to grow in strategic, economic, cultural, and diplomatic significance. Through strengthened ties in trade, investment, education, and cultural exchange, the Victoria–India partnership has become a cornerstone of the state's international engagement.

Victoria proudly embraces the culture, knowledge, and prosperity brought by the Indian community; now one of the largest and most vibrant in the state. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Northern Metropolitan Region, where the Indian community comprises over one-third of the population. Their presence is felt across local businesses, festivals, places of worship, and community organisations, contributing richly to the region's diversity and vitality.

The Northern Metropolitan Region is home to more than seven places of worship representing the four major Indian religions, over 100 Indian restaurants and cultural shops, and a multilingual community speaking more than 17 Indian languages and dialects. The region actively celebrates key cultural and religious events such as Diwali and Holi, as well as major community festivals like the National Gallery of Victoria's Indian Community Day.

The Indian community maintains a strong and meaningful connection to the Northern Metropolitan Region, supported by inclusive and community-focused initiatives such as the Anti-Racism Taskforce, the Victorian Multicultural Commission's Regional Advisory Councils, and the Multifaith Advisory Group. These structures ensure that the voices of Indian Australians are heard and valued, while reinforcing the region's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

## **The Evolving Trade Relationship between Victoria and India**

India is one of the fastest-growing major economies in the world, with its expanding working (class) it offers a vast array of opportunities for Victorian business. With trade relations growing every day, Victoria has seen immense growth, supported through mutual interests and strategic collaborations.

### Trade Overview:

- Our relationship with India is closer and more important than ever.
- India is the fifth largest and fastest growing major economy.
- India is Australia's seventh-largest trading partner and fifth largest export market.
- In the calendar year 2023, the two way-trading ended with a total of \$49 billion.
- India's growth creates opportunities for Australia's goods and services, including agricultural products, minerals, resources, education and skills training. It also affords new two-way investment pathways, such as renewable energy.

### Underlying Drivers:

The Victorian Government is committed to liberalising and broadening trade ties with India, the basis of the ever-growing and flourishing trading association.

### Key Exports and Imports:

The launch of the air freight route between Melbourne and Mumbai is a clear demonstration of Victoria's ongoing investment in strengthening economic ties with India. This crucial connection supports the efficient transport of perishable goods, such as seafood, dairy, fruits, and vegetables, from India to Victoria, opening new trade and revenue opportunities for both regions.

Victoria and India share a dynamic and evolving trade relationship, reinforced by high-level meetings and policy dialogues during recent delegations. This relationship is further supported by national initiatives such as the New Roadmap for Australia's

Economic Engagement with India, which outlines a long-term vision for deepening economic collaboration, and the annual \$3.8 million investment in the Australia-India Strategic Research Fund, which fosters cutting-edge innovation and joint research.

As we move forward, it remains essential to build on these foundations, advancing strategic partnerships that deliver lasting benefits and mutual prosperity for both Victoria and India.

#### Strengthening Bilateral Ties:

Victoria has significantly deepened its bilateral relationship with India by prioritising key areas such as trade, investment, and tourism. This strategic engagement has led to the development of robust economic linkages, fostering mutual growth and prosperity. Through increased collaboration in business, the facilitation of investment opportunities, and the promotion of two-way tourism, Victoria and India have cultivated a dynamic and enduring economic partnership that continues to evolve and strengthen over time.

#### Focus on Education:

Education holds an especially strong link between Victoria and India, with Indian students making up as the third-largest source of international students state-wide. Many of these students attend university and tertiary education institutions within the Northern Metropolitan Region such as the University of Melbourne, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), Australian Catholic University (ACU) and every Melbourne city campus of universities across the state.

Spotlighted in Victoria's international education strategy, Victoria recognises the contribution and relationship that India influences in the state.

#### Investment Initiatives:

- New Roadmap for Australia's Economic Engagement with India.
- Investing \$3.8 million each year to continue the Australia-India Strategic Research Fund.

# Schedule

## **Day 1: Friday 30<sup>th</sup> May - Arrival**

Flight - Melbourne to Singapore to Delhi

Stayed at Le Meriden Delhi.

## **Day 2: Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> May - Agra and Taj Mahal.**

The Taj Mahal stands as one of the most iconic symbols of love, artistry, and architectural achievement in the world. Located in Agra, the Taj Mahal was commissioned in 1632 by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his late wife Mumtaz Mahal, the white marble mausoleum blends Persian, Islamic, and Indian architectural styles with striking symmetry, intricate inlay work, and a majestic dome that instantly recognisable around the world.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1983, the Taj Mahal is widely regarded as a masterpiece of world heritage and is often cited among the Seven Wonders of the Modern World. It draws millions of visitors annually, symbolising India's rich cultural legacy and its historical contributions to art and architecture.

The Taj Mahal remains a cornerstone of Indian tourism and beyond its physical grandeur, the Taj Mahal holds deep emotional and cultural resonance, evoking themes of love, loss, and eternity. It continues to inspire artists, historians, and visitors alike as a universal monument to enduring human expression.

Stayed at Le Meriden Delhi.

## **Day 3: Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> June- Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS)**

The Swaminarayan Akshardham in Gnanmunudas Swami (New Delhi) stands as a Hindu Temple, hailed as an eternal place of worship, and a centre of spiritual and cultural campus of learning and enrichment. It renders the timeless teachings and abundant culture of Hinduism through its intricate art and designs of history and faith.

The temple is a humble dedication to the Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the revered figures of Hinduism; this structure was inaugurated on 6 November 2005 with the blessings of HH Pramukh Swami Maharaj and through the devoted efforts of skilled artisans and volunteers.

During our captivating tour of the 70-acre facility, we were able to pay our respects to Swaminarayan and intake the dedication to spiritual stalwarts of the ingrained culture of Hinduism.

We also attended The Sahaj Anand Water Show, a breathtaking water show depicting the story from the Kena Upanishad which transported attendees to the land

of the dead where they witness the fearless Nachiketa confront Yama, the God of Death, and ultimately receive from him the knowledge of immortality and eternal happiness. BAPS in Victoria, which also has a Sanstha (Temple) in Cranbourne which is near my electorate, the Northern Metropolitan Region, which were involved in facilitating this visit.

Flight – Delhi to Amritsar

Stayed at Le Meriden Amritsar

#### **Day 4: 2 June 2025 - The Golden Temple Amritsar**

The Golden Temple Amritsar is the holiest shrine in Sikhism, and a symbol of human brotherhood, equality and humility. Founded by Guru Ram Das in 1577 and completed in 1604, it reflects the distinct identity, heritage, and glory of the Sikh faith. Open to all, regardless of caste, creed, race, or religion, it embodies the inclusive values of Sikhism and offers spiritual solace without discrimination. At its heart lies the Sikh holy scripture in gold, promoting devotion to God and universal harmony.

The temple also houses the world's largest free community kitchen, known as a *Langar*, which serves over 100,000 people daily. Run entirely by volunteers, it embodies Sikh principles of *seva* (selfless service) and equality through every part of the temple. More than a religious site, the Golden Temple stands as a living symbol of peace, service, and spiritual resilience.

Meeting with the Temple devotee and Administration Officer Jatinder Pal Singh and Information Officer Sri Harmadir Sahib graciously provided a breathtaking tour of the temple, highlighting the significance and culture of the Golden Temple.

Flight - Amritsar to Trivandrum

Stayed at O by Tamara

#### **Day 5: 3 June 2025 – Rest Day**

Rest Day

Stay at O by Tamara

#### **Day 6: Wednesday 4 June - Meeting with Dr N. Khrishna Kumar, Hon. Secretary of Kerala Legislative Assembly, Shri Muhammaddi P, Additional Private Secretary to the Speaker and T. Manoharan Nair, Private Secretary to the Speaker**

Kerala, located on the southwestern coast of India, is renowned for its high literacy rates, vibrant cultural traditions, and strong social indicators. With a population of over 35 million people, it is one of India's most densely populated states and is often

celebrated for its progressive governance and robust public health and education systems.

The state operates under a unicameral parliamentary system known as the Kerala Legislative Assembly, also known as the Kerala Niyamasabha. The Assembly was first established in 1957 following the reorganisation of Kerala's previous regions, originally with 127 members. Now it consists of 140 elected members who represent single-member constituencies across the state's 14 districts, alongside one nominated member from the Anglo-Indian community (a provision that is now discontinued at the national level, and in Kerala since 2021, but historically significant).

Kerala's political landscape is dynamic, with power alternating between two major coalitions. Its democratic institutions are complemented by a politically aware and engaged population, underpinned by Kerala's long-standing traditions of public discourse, cooperative movements, and civic participation. Representatives as above

Meeting with Honourable SMT Veena George, Minister for Health, Women and Child Welfare and Dr Rajan Khobragade, Chief Secretary Health and Family Welfare, Government of Kerala. The Minister graciously invited us to meet with her in her office accompanied by her Chief Secretary to discuss a range of matters including women's representation in policy decision making early detection and screening rates for cancer and public health system access. The meeting also included comparisons discussions with our relevant jurisdictions and our funding and decision-making powers held by the state and federal Ministers.

Stayed at O by Tamara

### **Day 7: Thursday 5 June - Visit Malankara Orthodox Theological Seminary in Kottayam**

Meeting with His Holiness, H.H. Baselios Marthoma Mathews III, Head of Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church (Indian Orthodox Church).

The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, also known as the Indian Orthodox Church, is an ancient Christian denomination founded in 52 A.D. by St. Thomas the Apostle. Based mainly in Kerala, it is part of the Oriental Orthodox Churches and follows Miaphysitism, emphasizing sacraments, traditional liturgy, apostolic succession, community worship, the Holy Qurbana, and deep spiritual practices.

The Orthodox Theological Seminary in Kottayam, founded in 1815 by Ramban Ittoop, is the first Orthodox Christian theological school in Asia. It was established to train clergy and provide theological education for the Malankara Church. The seminary chapel houses the tomb of Geevarghese Dionysius of Vattasseril, a revered bishop and the 15th Malankara Metropolitan. Over time, the seminary has become a key institution in both the Church's religious life and Kerala's socio-political history, and it now seeks to extend its influence across Central and North India.

His holiness, H.H. Baselios Marthoma Mathews III, The Ninth Catholicos of the East in Malankara, delivered prayers and thanks for our leadership in supporting the community of the faithful in our respective constituencies and offered his support for our efforts in reconciling our nation of our past injustices towards the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.

Stayed at O by Tamara

### **Day 8: Friday 6<sup>th</sup> June – Kerala**

Flight: Thiruvananthapuram – Kannur

Cultural program including tours of the following sites and traditional lunch.

Visit to Overbury's Folly Seaside Park & Watch Tower

Visit to Dr Hermann Gundert Museum

Experienced Traditional Kerala Lunch

Visit to Odathil Juma Mosque

Meeting with Karthik Panigrahi, IAS Officer, Judiciary and District Collector

Brief meeting to explain his role as an IAS officer and as a judiciary and district collector and its connection to local significance to the community for services and economic development.

Visit to Malabar Cancer Centre

Attended Traditional Martial Arts (Kalaripayattu) Performance

The Honourable Speaker of the Kerala Legislative Assembly A N Shameer hosted us for a general discussion on respective Parliaments, Parliamentary procedures and hopes and aspirations for our respective communities in his constituency of Kannur. He spoke of his great affinity with Victoria and of his recent visit. He was most proud of his government's investment in the health and wellbeing of his community in the cancer hospital established to serve the most vulnerable in the community. The Speaker honoured us with the gracious program that he organised including a visit to a mosque, a cancer hospital and later that day with cultural leaders in display of the culturally preserved martial arts of the Kerala region. He completed his remarks with a commitment to seek to visit Victoria again.

Stayed at Government of Kerala Guest House

### **Day 9: Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> June - VNR Vignana Jyothi Institute of Engineering and Technology**

Flight - Kannur to Hyderabad

The representatives from the Institute presented their proposal to enhance the student experience at their cohorts by exploring opportunities to develop student placements or exchange opportunities in Victoria. They provided information on the credentials of the university for engaging in this opportunity and we presented our vision that Victoria remain a state that welcomes and encourages International student placements and exchange.

Meeting with Dr. B. Chennakesava Rao, Director of Advancement and Dean Administration, Vignana Jyothi, Manager and Dr Kiran Chakravarthula from VNR Vignana Jyothi Institute of Engineering and Technology

Attended dinner and cultural exchange

Stayed at Mahishmati Farm Stays

### **Day 10: Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> June Visit to Malla Reddy University and CH Malla Reddy MP**

Mr CH Malla Reddy MLA from Kessara Gutta hosted us for a welcome reception in the town square and made offerings to wish us well on our journey and time in India. The ceremony was conducted in Hindi, but I recall receiving welcome flower arrangements and warm welcomes from the community upon our arrival.

Visit to Keesaragutta Sri Rama Lingeshwara Swamy Temple, Telangana

Received blessings from the Temple Swamy to bestow good wishes, safe travels to our delegation during our time in India.

Mally Reddy University and meeting with Prof. V.S.K. Reddy (Vice Chancellor) & other faculty Members We toured the University site and understood the University responses to the historically low rates of women graduating from Engineering courses through their innovative women only course delivery and women only accommodation. They spoke of their aspirations for courses that deliver on the high number of graduates required to build the India of the future and that included enhancing the uptake of women in male dominated courses and the ultimate graduation rate of women in these courses. Industry demands on the university are consistent with their approach and they are seeing great student uptake of their bespoke women's courses.

Traditional Hyderabad lunch.

Drive - Hyderabad to Vijayawada

Stayed at Novotel Vijayawada Varun



### **Day 11: Monday 9 June 2025 - Planet Sigma, Designers and Developers Electronic Products, Hyderabad**

Meeting with Ugandhar Reddy Yalamuru, Director Business Development where in the meeting we explored the national agenda for the implementation of drone technology into industry areas including transport and logistics and the environment. We were introduced to the opportunities for the use of drone technology in mapping and monitoring parks, invasive species and natural disasters including flooding. Planet Sigma is also exploring regulatory challenges for the expansion of drone use including civil aviation safety law and skills and training requirements for drone operators, which are similarly being considered in Australian regulatory environments.

Stayed at Novotel Vijayawada Varun

### **Day 12: Tuesday 10 June - Meeting with Manda Krishna Madiga – Indian Politician, Activist and recipient of the Padma Shri ‘Lotus Honour’**

We experienced the fortune of a brief meeting with highly respected Manda Krishna Madiga, a revered leader whose life work has been to advocate for opportunities and development of the most vulnerable members of the Indian community. We heard from him about his ambitions for the poor and needy and his life's works that lead to his Lotus honour.

The Sri Vishnu Durga Hindu Temple is a sacred place of worship dedicated to Goddess Durga, a powerful and revered deity in Hinduism known for strength, protection, and fierce compassion. The temple plays a vital role in the spiritual life of devotees, offering a space for religious rituals, prayers, and traditional festivals centred around Durga worship. Beyond its religious function, the temple also serves as a cultural hub for the Hindu community, preserving and promoting Hindu traditions, values, and practices. As part of the broader framework of Hinduism—a major world religion with diverse deities and customs—the temple brings people together in devotion and community celebration. Through its religious services and cultural activities, the Sri Vishnu Durga Temple fosters a strong sense of identity, continuity, and spiritual connection among its followers, making it both a sanctuary of faith and a centre of cultural heritage.

During our visit, we received a Darshan blessing. Darshan refers to the experience of beholding a deity, a revered person or a sacred object. A reciprocal interaction where the viewer is seen by the divine and receives grace or a blessing. It is considered a form of worship and a means of spiritual fulfilment.

Flight - Vijayawada to Bengaluru

Stayed at Radisson Blu Atria Bengaluru

### **Day 13: Wednesday 11 June 2025 – Caring with Colour**

Meeting with Caring with Colour and Education NGO, Bengaluru

- Rajeev Annaluru, Trustee and Chief Operating Officer
- Saeed Mansoori Partnerships and Strategic Alliances
- Dr D.R. Prasanna Kumar, Government Relations and Partnerships Lead

This meeting introduced us to Indian efforts to reform the curriculum and education outcomes for the students engaged in public education. The overwhelming statistics of the number of students in India at primary, secondary and tertiary education including that over 250 million people are currently enrolled in education and that there are millions of teachers across India further highlighted the difficulty of the challenge of structural reform to Indian education. Initial conversations have been held on modelling new curriculum on Australian systems to further enhance opportunities for further education in Australian Universities.

The State of Karnataka has established a social enterprise in Bangalore to encourage small traders to access economic opportunities in the state capital. The social enterprise supports artisans and craftspeople from across the state including regional and rural areas with a particular focus on women lead businesses and the practice of sandalwood carvery. Carvery especially acquires artworks that support artists and promote the continuation of art, culture and craft skills from the region. The store has been recognised for it's efforts through a range of awards and recognition by commerce and trade associations.

Stayed at Radisson Blu Atria Bengaluru

#### **Day 14: Thursday 12 June 2025 – National Parliament**

Flight - Bengaluru to Delhi

Meeting with Kh. Ginalal Chung, Deputy Secretary Lok Sabha Secretariat, Parliament of India and Dr. Suman Datta, Chief Curator, Parliament Museum & Archives, Lok Sabha Secretariat

Tour of the National Parliament

The largest global democracy, the Republic of India recently undertook a large-scale redevelopment of its Parliament in 2020. We were provided a tour by Lok Sabha Secretariat personnel of the new building including galleries that depicted the cultures, heritages and religious backgrounds of the people of India. We had an opportunity to understand their electronic voting in the respective chambers of the Parliament and how that has led to more efficient voting practices given the large number of elected representatives that serve both houses. The respective Secretariat of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha were very generous with their time and knowledge as we compared our parliamentary processes and historical and contemporary practices under our two systems operating under Westminster principles.

Stayed at Novotel New Delhi Aerocity

### **Day 15: Return to Australia**

Flight – Delhi to Sydney to Melbourne.

## **Summary and Recommendations**

This trip has been central to my understanding of India and its people. It has presented many opportunities for collaboration, investments, study and exchange that aim to strengthen the ties between our two nations. Since my return I have already seen the benefits of this trip to my role as the Member for Northern Metropolitan region with a particular focus on education, trade and health most prominently benefiting from this delegation. I am committed to unlocking these opportunities for the people, economy and communities of the Northern Metropolitan Region and facilitating a stronger relationship between Victoria and India.

## Attachment 1

**Accommodation**

Date	Accommodation	Cost -	Costs Claimed IDR	Costs Claimed AUD
Friday 30 <sup>th</sup> May – Saturday 1 June	Le Meriden Delhi	Accommodation		\$571.95
Saturday 1 June – 2 June	Le Meriden Amritsar	Accommodation		129.11
Monday 2 <sup>nd</sup> June – Friday 6 June	O by Tamara Trivandrum	Accommodation	8681x4 nights 34,724	\$646.29
6 June – 7 June	Government of Kerala Guest House - Kannur	Accommodation	1/6 of stay 23452  3908	72.80
7-8 June	Hyderabad	Accommodation		No claim
8 June – 10 June	Novotel Vijayawada Varun	Accommodation		\$264.95
10 June – 12 June	Radisson Blu Atria Bengaluru	Accommodation	11975.70	213.41
<b>12 June – 13 June</b>	Novotel New Delhi Aerocity	Accommodation		180.47