

Dynamism of Indian Diaspora

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To cite this article: Somra, S. S., (2023), 'Dynamism of Indian Diaspora', *Indenture Papers: Studies on Girmitiyas*, Vol. 3: 123-131.
<https://girmit.ac.fj/ip-2023-somra/>

Date Published: 7 December 2023

Other articles in this volume: <https://girmit.ac.fj/current-issue/>

Editorial Board: <https://girmit.ac.fj/editorial-board/>

Notes for Contributors: <https://girmit.ac.fj/notes-for-contributors-2/>

Abstract

Human migration and mobility are age-old continuing events. Several reasons determine the movement of people. Movement could be forced or voluntary. Factors like magnitude or frequency of disasters, economic challenges, and extreme poverty or conflict affect decisions on movements. The Indian diaspora is emerging as an important force globally. Basically, two states of mind, the old and the new diaspora are often used to understand the history of the Indian diaspora. India is one of the largest sources of labour globally, supplying highly skilled as well as unskilled human resources to many countries. The Indian diaspora is considered one of the most vibrant and dynamic ones outside India. The top positions held by people of Indian origin in several leading MNCs with profound impacts on global economic output is noteworthy. The diaspora contributes to the local economies, as well as India through remittances. This paper traces the dynamic and vibrant aspects of the political-economy and issues of the Indian diaspora.

Keywords: Indian Diaspora, Migration.

Introduction

The place and role of Indian diaspora has become very important in the 21st century. Recognising this, the Government of India commenced a *Pravasi Bhartiya Divas* (PBD) in 2003 as a day dedicated to the Indian Diaspora. Celebrated annually on 9th January, this day is an officially recognised day to discuss and celebrate Indian Diaspora. 9th of January was selected for PBD on the basis that on this day in 1915, Mohandas Gandhi returned from South Africa to India. Gandhi had gained fame for highlighting issues concerning Indian diaspora in Africa through new methods of protest like non-violence and satyagraha. He later took over the leadership of the Indian freedom struggle. The Pravasi Bhartiya Divas conventions have been organized annually in different states in India. The event has become a good way for the Indian diaspora to express their connection with India, define it and underline their roles, including assessing their contribution to the development of their countries and India.

India, however, has viewed the diaspora as extensions of India abroad. The Indian Prime Minister stated clearly in the 2018 convention that every Indian living abroad is in the role of a national ambassador on foreign soil, representing the diversity of this country; he labelled the diaspora as 'true and permanent ambassadors' of the country. Academics have projected this diaspora and their influence in countries of their residences as India's 'soft-power'.

Contributing to the development of their countries, the elements of the diaspora not only maintain their position (of influence or lack thereof of it) in their home societies, but also add to the image of India in places of their domicile. Other than their emotional attachments, the diaspora also have a sense of belonging created through their remittances.

To convert the Indian 'brain-drain' into 'brain-gain', the Government of India has tried to ensure 'maximum convenience' and 'minimum inconvenience' for workers going abroad in search of better economic opportunities.

Indian Diaspora

The notion of the diaspora as India's 'soft-power', is becoming increasingly recognized in India. However, to make good use of this migrant dividend, India needs to conduct its diplomacy keeping in mind the sensitivities attached to it. The present Indian government has taken important decisions to connect the overseas Indians. It has become a norm that all representatives of the government on foreign visits, need to take time out to meet the diaspora of the country they are visiting.

Indentured labourers were taken to Mauritius, Suriname, Guyana, Reun-

ion Islands, Fiji, South Africa and a number of other countries. In many respects, these workers laid the foundation for modern democratic nation states. The desire for political empowerment has been one of the most interesting examples of the emergence of democracy and pluralism in these regions.

Contemporary globalization (which has seen the contraction of time and space), and the revolution in communication and information technology, has accelerated the networks and flows of people, capital, knowledge and media. These are no longer limited by the boundaries of nations. Globalization and internationalism have led to the emergence of networks. The growing importance of the Indian Diaspora in playing a decisive role in the politics and economy of many countries of the world is being felt today not only in India but across the globe.

Although, the Indian diaspora of the 21st century is an amalgamation of both the 'new diaspora' and the 'old diaspora', the Indian diaspora having struggled hard to establish its identity by adapting to the social conditions of the new destination countries on the strength of their skill and creative ability has been preserved. The Indian diaspora has made successful efforts to preserve its languages, dialects, religious values and cultural beliefs. At the same time, it has warmly demonstrated its potential in the development of popular culture (music, dance, and cinema, etc.). Due to their efforts, India is emerging as a major cultural force in the modern global village; it is also underlining a new identity of Indianness. In a positive way, the country of origin and the country of destination benefit from migration as do the migrants themselves, but unfortunately never without risks and cost (Middleton. 2013).

Generally, all the important factors that motivate people to migrate can be classified as economic factors, demographic factors, socio-cultural factors, political factors and miscellaneous factors. There has been a continuous global migration of various groups from India in search of religious-cultural propagation, commercial entrepreneurship and opportunities (Somra, 2021).

Importance of Indian Diaspora

Contemporary India is keen about its diaspora. The growing influence of the diaspora and their potential use in promoting India's foreign policy objectives was identified about two decades ago. Efforts to engage them on a permanent basis were started. Initiatives like Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, Know India Program (KIP) and Study India Program (SIP) were launched. A Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs was established in 2004. Currently, measures such as relaxation of visa norms for expatriate communities, merging of OCI (Overseas

Citizen of India) and PIO (Person of Indian Origin) functions, improving physical connectivity etc. are policy initiatives to establish more in-depth access to the diaspora.

India has deemed its diaspora as its *soft-power resource*. It is taking a strategic approach towards using this resource to enhance the nation's image abroad. The Indian Diaspora is one of the wealthiest minorities in many developed countries. The importance of the positive role of these migrants is evident in diaspora diplomacy, whereby they act as an important link in strengthening relations between India and the countries of their domicile. An important example of this is the Indo-US civil nuclear deal, successfully lobbied for the signing of this nuclear deal by people of Indian origin in America. Groups like the United States India Political Action Committee (USINPAC), Friends of India, Canada India Foundation (CIF) and Canada India Business Council (CIBC) are actively striving to value India's interests. Yoga, Bollywood, Indian cuisine etc. are famous all over the world. In these the diaspora plays important roles as promoters of soft power of India (Pant, 2022). The India Pride Project has successfully lobbied to bring back the famous Stolen Antique Artefacts of Nataraja statue from Australia and the sandstone Yakshi statue from the United States.

However, the diaspora has been critical of Indian bureaucratic processes and the slow pace of economic reforms. These issues need to be addressed to make full use of the potential of the diaspora.

Another aspect is that the Indian diaspora is not only a part of India's soft power, but also a fully transferable political vote bank. Many people of Indian origin hold top political positions in many countries, which increase India's political standing in multilateral institutions such as the United Nations.

Money remitted by Indian expatriates has a positive effect on the balance of payments, which helps in reducing trade deficits. India is the largest recipient of remittance money by expatriates in the world. Migration of low-skilled workers (particularly towards West Asia) has helped in reducing disguised unemployment in India. Migrant workers have facilitated the flow of indirect information, commercial and business ideas and technologies into India.

The World Bank (2020) expects a high return-migration and low prospects of new emigration would cause an absolute decline in the total numbers of emigrants, generating a more severe global crisis than the 2008 crisis.

Dynamic Aspects

People of Indian origin spread all over the world have achieved great achievements with the help of their talent and skills. Apart from science, eco-

nomics, literature and medicine, in the field of politics, NRIs have raised flags in many countries of the world.

Indiaspora's release of a list of Indians who have reached the highest levels in civil services across the world, show that in 15 countries, including America and Britain, more than 200 people of Indian origin sat in high positions of civil service. Of these, 60 have also made it to the respective cabinets (<https://www.indiaspora.org/>).

Currently, the market capitalization of companies led or owned by Indians is more than \$6 trillion, which is more than 10% of the total market capitalization of all companies listed on NASDAQ. The list of these giant American companies includes big names like Adobe, Alphabet, Microsoft, IBM, Novartis and Starbucks.

Industrialist and investor, Rangaswamy, also the founder of *Indiaspora*, states recognised the US Vice President as an asset of India: 'It is a huge source of pride to have the first woman and first person of colour as the Vice President of the world's oldest democracy be someone of Indian heritage' (PTI, 2021). US Congressman Ami Bera said, 'It is a matter of pride for me to be included in the list of 2021 Indiaspora Government Leaders. As the longest-serving lawmaker in Parliament, I am proud to be a leader of the Indian American community. This community has become an integral part of American life and society' (PTI, 2001)).

In addition, Indian diaspora has contributed significantly in explaining the reality of Kashmir in various countries. In the United Kingdom Pakistani pressure groups were leading negative and misleading narratives on Kashmir. For many years, such propaganda contributed to keeping the United Kingdom silent on the atrocities in Kashmir. Indian diaspora contributed to changing the narratives.

Likewise, the impact of Indian diaspora on foreign journalists, writers and bloggers, who fell victims of the influence of anti-India forces, have begun to re-visit the angles of their narratives. Positive media coverage of India's initiatives within India seems to be on the increase globally. By working as wiser groups in some countries, the diaspora is playing an important role in the formulation of foreign policies of many countries. India is reaping the benefits of such activities directly as well as indirectly on the world stage.

Dynamism

The International Labour Organisation in 1989 has classified international migration for employment in two major categories: settlement migration and

contract migration. The ILO's 2020 report on international migration confirms that the Indian diaspora is one of the most 'vibrant and dynamic' ones. It is the largest diaspora in the world. It is also considered as a catalyst for economic development in India and host countries.

Indian Diaspora is spread over more than 134 countries. Indian migrants in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in 2018, alone generated remittances worth \$40 billion (Somra, 2021). India has also retained its position as the largest recipient of remittances from non-resident Indians (NRIs) and People of Indian Origin (PIOs) employed outside the country to family, friends or relatives living in India – its remittance receipt was \$79 billion in 2018, and \$83.3 billion in 2019.

Diasporas can play an important role in the economic development of their countries of origin. Beyond their well-known role as sources of remittances, the diaspora can also promote trade and foreign direct investment, create businesses, spur entrepreneurship, and transfer new knowledge and skills to both the countries of their domiciles as well as India.

During the second wave of COVID-19 pandemic, two aid groups in the US—led by people of Indian origin—raised more than \$25 million towards assisting India's health care system (Thanawala, 2021). In the UK, three Hindu temples raised more than 600,000 pounds (USD830,000). Sikhs, similarly, donated \$700-\$2,000 to each of dozens of people in need of oxygen cylinders in India.

For decades now, India's large and vibrant diaspora has been leveraging its wealth, political clout and expertise to help steer India's economic growth, while seamlessly integrating with the countries of their adoption (Prasenjit, 2021).

When Donald Trump attended the 'Namaste Trump' event in Gujarat, he had in his mind the 4.4 million Indian Americans impacting the political and economic arena in the US. In the US there were high office seeking candidates like Tulsi Gabbard and Kamala Harris. Nikki Haley as US Ambassador to the UN, Raj Shah as Trump's Deputy Assistant and Research Director, Krishna Urs as the Ambassador to Peru, Neil Chatterjee as the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission head, and Vishal Amin as Intellectual Property Enforcement Coordinator, are some example of Indian origin people in the US at the peak of political dynamism. The story of Kamala Harris ascending to the vice presidency of the US, also emerged simultaneously with the rise in her popularity among the large Indian diaspora in the US, which proudly embraced her Tamil roots.

In the UK. Rishi Sunak, was elected as the Prime Minister; he proudly embraced his Hindu culture and Indian roots. In Europe, Ireland witnessed the

rise of Leo Varadkar and Portugal saw Antonio Costa as their respective Prime Ministers. Both Varadkar and Costa are second-generation migrants whose fathers were from India - the former's is from Maharashtra while the latter's father migrated from Goa.

In the Girmitiya world, Suriname has the Indian-origin Chandrikapersad (Chan) Santokhi as its President. Ashwin Adhin, the vice president of Suriname traces his roots to Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh. Similarly, the ancestors of Mauritian Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth, son of former PM Anerood Jugnauth, are from Uttar Pradesh.

Silicon Valley hosts the largest concentration of Indian Americans. From Google's Sundar Pichai to Microsoft's Satya Nadella to Adobe's Shantanu Narayen, and Laxman Narasimhan (Starbucks), Indian Americans have risen to occupy leadership positions in global tech companies. Indian Americans also continue to be play active roles in the banking, finance, and trade sectors. More than 200,000 people of Indian origin are participating in the dairy, agriculture and domestic service sectors in Italy. The Indian diaspora also plays an important role in providing public healthcare in Europe.

Yoga has contributed immensely to raising India's image as a spiritual superpower. After the United Nations declared June 21 as the 'International Day of Yoga', large-scale yoga practices and awareness camps became prevalent in global capitals. Indian Missions have now been actively promoting ancient sciences integrating physical and spiritual disciplines. Indian yoga instructors and practitioners have been instrumental in popularizing the ancient practice abroad.

The rise in popularity of Indian films has also contributed to the rekindling of 'Indianness' among the Indian expatriate community. These cultural exports serve as a medium to explore a common bond between strangers in another country.

Conclusion

The institutionalization of diaspora diplomacy is a clear indication of the fact that the Indian expatriate community has become a matter of utmost importance to India's foreign policy and related government activities. Diaspora is intertwined with geopolitics, trade and cultural exchange, and provides opportunities for states, businesses and communities to benefit enormously. Diaspora has helped improve people's lives in both origin and destination countries and has offered opportunities for millions of people worldwide to forge safe and meaningful lives abroad. In contemporary times, enhancing India's Soft Power

policy, Indian diaspora performs a significant role in expanding India's political clout in other countries and at multilateral institutions. The current government views the diaspora as strategic assets of India.

The Indian diaspora's role as a catalyst for economic, social and political development—both in the host country and the country of birth—remains noteworthy. The largest transnational population is not just keeping the Indian values within it alive, but also constituting the cog in the wheels of India's progress, from all the corners of the world. Contemporary India is also keen about its diaspora. Social media tools have made it easier and cheaper for the Indian diaspora to keep in touch with their families and friends in India, and their connectivity with India is stronger than ever before. What I needed is transparency in policy on strengthening the relationship between India and its diaspora.

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