



India@75: Policies and practices for engagement of diasporas

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Abstract

India and her Diaspora have a long history that goes back thousands of years when Indian merchants, sailors, travellers, monks, teachers and others have traversed the world over land and sea. It comprises of over 18 million Persons of Indian Origin (PIO) and 13 million Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), making it the largest overseas community in the world. They maintain close bonds with their motherland and play an essential role in economic development through remittances, promoting trade and foreign direct investment, creating businesses and spurring entrepreneurship, and transferring new knowledge and skills. Despite their contributions, they face many problems and challenges, such as xenophobia, racial discrimination, violation of contractual terms, inhuman working conditions, wage-related issues, being caught in conflict/war-affected zones, and others. Though India is celebrating 'Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav' to commemorate 75 years of independence, there is no clear-cut policy of engagement with the diaspora. The government has signed social security agreements with many foreign countries to protect them in those countries. Moreover, many positive measures such as a separate Ministry, PIO Card, *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas*, *Pravasi Bharatiya Samman* Award, Overseas Citizen of India Card, NRI funds, fellowship and scholarship for students, voting rights for Indian citizens abroad and others have been initiated for their engagement. This paper will make an overview of the Indian policies and practices for their engagement-economic, social and cultural-as the promoter of development, both within India as well as in the host countries and turning brain drain into brain gain.

Keywords: Indian diaspora, *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas*, brain drain, persons of Indian origin, NRI

Introduction

Diaspora is a word of Greek origin that means scattering or sowing of seeds. It refers to people who leave their native lands to live in other parts of the world for employment, business or any other purpose. The Government of India (GoI) used the word 'diaspora' to describe people who have migrated from territories currently within the borders of the Republic of India. So, it includes a group of people who can trace their origins to India or are Indian citizens living abroad, either temporarily or permanently. This includes NRIs, PIO, and Overseas Citizens of India (OCI). The Indian diaspora has been a companion of the Indian journey under the present government as it makes no distinction between the people in India and those living abroad.

According to 15th report of the Committee on Ministry of External Affairs, the Indian diaspora is the largest overseas community globally, comprising over 18 million PIOs and 13 million NRI. They are known for their talent, exemplary discipline and hard work and have made significant contributions to science, technology, music, literature, politics and business. They have also emerged as a major source of investments, knowledge transfers and capacity building.

There are many Diasporas of other countries who had contributed immeasurably to their mother country such as the Jewish, Italian and Lebanese Diasporas. The 15th report of Ministry of External Affairs has recommended that the government should introduce a policy document that can serve as a "guiding principle for a deeper and wider connection with NRIs, while also playing a more proactive role in developing closer contact with them."

One of the greatest economic contributions of the Indian diaspora has been in terms of remittances. According to a World Bank Report, India received approximately 87 billion

dollars in remittances in 2021, with the USA being the biggest source, accounting for over 20% of these funds. So, the remittance and investment helped India to come out from its foreign reserve crisis and fuelled its economic growth. The Indian diaspora of the US, United Kingdom and Canada comprise a relatively small proportion of total population, but they have emerged as powerful economic players in their own right and in their ability to strengthen economic ties with India. The diaspora professionals actively contributed to policy reform in areas of Indian telecommunication regulation, science and technology policy, reform of educational institutions and capital markets. The diaspora is a national asset, and should be engaged and deployed as such.

However, there is rising incidence of hate speech and crimes against diaspora by the locals due to racism, sectarian crisis, increasing anti-globalization and terrorist activities, communalism emboldened by coming of nationalist and ultra-nationalist governments to power in many countries. The nature of problems faced by the Diaspora in Middle East and Gulf countries is different from that encountered in developed nations. The employers in the Middle-East and Gulf region like holding back of passports, non-payment of salaries and work under stifling conditions whereas the students and young professionals in countries like UK, Canada and Australia.

Moreover, the conditions of employment and emoluments vary greatly within the various categories of employees. While professionals are allowed to bring their family with them, labourers are not. The latter category is prone to exploitation both in the Gulf countries and at home. In the former, their problems range from recruiting agents, the poor barrack like accommodation allotted, long working hours beyond the legal 8-hour workday, deduction of

various fees from their salary, withholding of salaries and return passages and poor or non-existent medical facilities to the apparently mandatory retention of passports by their employers on arrival in all result countries.

The government has signed Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) on manpower with UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, Jordan and Malaysia for the protection and welfare of Indian workers. India has also signed bilateral Social Security Agreements (SSA) with Belgium, France, Germany, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Denmark, Austria, Portugal, South Korea, Hungary, Czech Republic, Norway, Finland, Canada, Japan and Sweden that provides for the protection of the interests of cross-border workers. The government vigorously takes up the issue of protecting its citizens abroad with the countries concerned wherever circumstances so demand by contacting foreign authorities.

Historical background

The history of migration from India goes back at least 2000 years. The migration started around 1st century AD during the reign of Emperor Kanishka when Romani people (gypsies) migrated towards the northwest and eventually settled in Eastern Europe. Around 500 AD, the Chola, who were great sea powers, migrated to Southeast Asia and conquered what is now known as Indonesia and Malaysia. It is evident amongst the royal Brahmin kings of Thailand, the archaeological sites of the Kingdom of Angkor in Cambodia, and Indonesia, especially in Central Sumatra and Bali. However, these people are no longer considered to be of Indian origin, as they are mixed with the local population. The devastating famines, exploitation, rising rents, floundering local handicraft economies and a generally miserable future forced the peasants to be lured by unscrupulous recruiting agents and subsequently shipped off to various crown territories during British rule. In the colonial period, broadly three distinct patterns of Indian emigration were identifiable: “indentured” labour emigration¹, *Kangani* and *maistry* labour emigration, and “passage” or “free” emigration.

The Dutch merchants sold Indians as slaves in the then Dutch Cape Colony in South Africa. The indentured labourers on the plantations were mainly from Bihar,

Eastern UP, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, to be followed later by Gujarati traders who went is free passengers.

The Indians diaspora settlement started in Fiji from 1879 when Indian labourers were brought under indenture system to work on sugarcane plantations. Similarly, indentured Indian labour settled in Guyana, Suriname, and Trinidad & Tobago for large scale cash-crop plantations. The construction workers from the Punjab laid the East African Railway across modern-day Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Many Indians moved to Western Europe to fill post-war labour shortages and thousands from the southern states moved to take up mid and low level jobs in the petroleum sector due to oil rush in the Middle East in the 1940s and 1950s.

The globalization and liberalization of the world economic system and the rapid development of transport and communication technologies have strengthened socio-economic, political and cultural ties with their countries of origin. PM Rajiv Gandhi was the first to appreciate the potential role diaspora could play in advancing national development and improving India’s ties with the US.

The Indian Diaspora can be divided into the Old Diaspora, the New Diaspora, and the Gulf Diaspora. From the table-1 given below, it can be said that Mauritius has the highest percentage of Indian people settled there as their ancestors were sent as indentured labourers during British rule. It was followed by Trinidad & Tobago, Guyana, Fiji, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Singapore and UAE. In Guyana, Trinidad & Tobago, they came as indentured labourers to work on the sugar plantations after the abolition of slavery in 1833 as a cheap and steady labor force. Many of these immigrants chose to stay upon the termination of their contracts, establishing vibrant communities, continuing traditions while radically altering their own identities. The Gulf labourers remained different from the migrants to the West.

The recent development of the Indian Diaspora is the so-called “Gulf Diaspora”. The oil boom in the Middle East during 1970s attracted significant semi-skilled and unskilled workers, primarily from South India, to the gulf countries on temporary contract in services, construction and oil industries.

Table 1: Major Indian Populations outside India (As on December 2018)

Country	Overseas Indian in 2018	Total national population as on 2018	% of Indian population
Mauritius	894,500	1,189,265	75%
Trinidad & Tobago	556,800	1,389,843	40%
Guyana	297,793	779,006	38%
Fiji	315,198	883,483	36%
Qatar	692,039	2,781,682	25%
Kuwait	929,903	4,137,312	22%
Bahrain	316,175	1,569,446	20%
Oman	689,145	4,829,473	14%
Singapore	650,000	5,757,499	11%
UAE	3,104,586	31,528,033	10%
Malaysia	2,987,950	31,809,660	9%
Saudi Arabia	2,814,568	33,702,756	8%
Sri Lanka	1,614,000	21,228,763	8%
Myanmar	2,008,991	53,708,320	4%
New Zealand	200,000	4,743,131	4%
UK	1,825,000	67,141,684	3%
South Africa	1,560,000	57,792,518	3%
Canada	1,016,185	37,074,562	3%
Australia	496,000	24,898,152	2%
USA	4,460,000	327,096,265	1%

The more recent migration of skilled and highly-skilled labor went to the developed countries like the USA, UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand and formed parts of new Indian Diaspora. There has been a growing interest in EU member States in attracting Indian IT expert, who have already made a mark in the US.

Policies and practices for diaspora engagement

As far as policies are concerned, India does not have clear cut Diaspora policy despite their socio-economic contributions to the development of the country. It depends on the foreign relations with the host country. If there is good relationship with foreign countries, then the government holds diplomatic dialogue as in the recent war between Russia and Ukraine to safely evacuate India students from Ukraine. The lack of a comprehensive policy toolbox available has gravely limited the contribution of the Diaspora to national development.

The L.M. Singhvi Committee Report (2002) “emphasizes the requirement for developing a clearly defined policy and suitably calibrated country-specific plans for enhancing connectivity with the Diasporas.” Kenya, Canada, UK, USA and China are some examples of the countries that have specific diaspora policies to advance their interests. For instance in the case of Kenya, the country’s foreign policy ‘rests upon four inter-linked pillars: economic diplomacy, peace diplomacy, environmental diplomacy and diaspora policy’.

Initially India was very sensitive for championing the cause of overseas Indians responsible for their welfare and security but the policies of most world countries do not allow foreign countries to directly interfere in their internal matters. The then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s views were that the diaspora could not expect India to fight for their rights in host countries. Therefore India’s foreign policy in the 1950s was accordingly structured as a model of non-interference whenever the emigrant Indians got into trouble as in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, etc. However, the diaspora policy of non-interference was changed in the 1980s by Rajiv Gandhi who invited Indians abroad, regardless of their nationality, to participate in nation-building, much like the overseas Chinese communities.

The Government under Atal Bihari Vajpayee after 2000 came with a host of positive measures such as a separate Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, the Person of Indian Origin Card, *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas*, *Pravasi Bharatiya Samman* Award, Overseas Citizen of India Card, NRI funds and voting rights for Indian citizens abroad. Furthermore, in 2015, the Ministry of External Affairs launched the e-migrate system that requires all foreign employers to register in the database. The current government has launched a scheme called ‘Know India Program’ (KIP) in 2016 for diaspora engagement which familiarizes Indian-origin youth (18-30 years) with their Indian roots and contemporary India.

The GoI continues to actively engage the Indian Diaspora with schemes and policies on many fronts that encourage more investments in India, increased bilateral trade, cultural exchanges, and better working conditions for them. The basic principles of the Indian government’s engagement policy are the 4 Cs i.e. Care, Connect, Celebrate and Contribute. The government is greatly investing in all aspects by increasing the welfare schemes and activities and deepening the engagement of diaspora through various

events and platforms. The *Vande Bharat* Mission during COVID-19 period stands out as an extraordinary example on the scale of this commitment. Some of it is briefly discussed in subsequent paragraphs to have an overview of the engagement with the Diasporas.

The *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas*, also known as Non-Resident Indian Day (2003), is celebrated on 9th January to strengthen the engagement of the Indian community abroad with the GoI and reconnect them with their roots. The day was chosen to celebrate since it was on this day in 1915 that Mahatma Gandhi returned to India from South Africa, led India’s freedom struggle and changed the lives of Indians forever. This day plays a significant role as the overseas Indian community gets a shared platform to get themselves engaged with the government and the native people of the land. It also acknowledges the difficulties faced by Indian expatriate workers living abroad.

On this day, the Government also confers *Pravasi Bharatiya Samman* Award, the highest honour conferred on a Non-Resident Indian, Person of Indian Origin or an organization/institution established and run by Non-Resident Indians or Persons of Indian Origin who have made significant contributions in better understanding of India abroad, support India’s causes and concerns in a tangible way. The theme of the 17th PBD was “Diaspora: Reliable Partners for India's Progress in *Amrit Kaal*”. The next 25 years will shape the destiny of India when the country will celebrates 100 years of the Indian Independence,

The External Affairs Ministry has been holding Regional *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas* Conferences (RPBD) in response to a large and consistent demand for such events to reach out to the great majority of our diaspora who, for different reasons, are unable to attend and benefit from the main biennial event in India.

The Ministry of Science and Technology has formulated a number of plans to provide fellowship and research initiatives for Indian researchers living abroad to work in Indian research institutes and universities. The Ramanujan Fellowship is meant for brilliant Indian scientists and engineers below the age of 40 years, who want to return to India from abroad to take up scientific research positions. The fellowship is scientist-specific and very selective. The fellows can work in any of the scientific institutions and universities in the country and they will be eligible for receiving regular research grants through the extramural funding schemes of various S&T agencies of the GoI.

The Ramalingaswami Re-entry Fellowship was started in 2006-07 to attract high quality Indian brains working abroad to pursue their research interests in life sciences, biotechnology and other related areas in India by providing them an attractive avenue to pursue their R&D interests in Indian institutions. It was thought that this step will create a pool of highly skilled and trained researchers working on cutting edge technologies in Indian laboratories, available for the absorption in Indian academic system through recruitment.

There is increasing number of applications for the fellowship, more and more number of people is showing interest to come back to India and serve the nation. So far, 409 fellows have taken up positions in various Indian Laboratories, out of which, 250 fellows have already been able to seek permanent faculty positions. During the last 5 years, Department has awarded fellowship to 240 fellows.

The fellows have done excellent work in the form of publications, patents, few have started spin off companies. The research done by these fellows have led them to receive various prestigious awards and fellowships.

The Department of Science and Technology has launched Visiting Advanced Joint Research (VAJRA) Faculty Scheme to bring overseas scientists and academicians including Non-resident Indians (NRI) and Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) to India to work in public funded Institutions and Universities for a specific period of time. The scheme offers adjunct/visiting faculty assignments to overseas scientists including Indian researchers to promote a globally competitive environment for catalyzing cutting edge research for accelerated development of scientific and technological progress and overall economic prosperity of the nation.

The Senior Research Associateship (SRA) (Scientist's Pool Scheme) is primarily meant to provide temporary placement to highly qualified Indian scientists, engineers, technologists, and medical personnel returning from abroad and not holding any employment in India. Moreover, highly qualified candidates who have not been abroad but possess an outstanding academic record and have not been able to secure regular employment here are also eligible for selection. It is not a regular appointment, but is a temporary facility to enable them to do research/teaching in India while looking for a regular position.

The Scholarship Programme for Diaspora Children (SPDC) from academic year 2006-07 is to provide financial assistance towards tuition fee, admission fee and post admission services to children of PIOs and NRIs for completing specific undergraduate courses in Professional and Non-Professional courses (except Medical and related courses). Only fresh year students (1st year) students are eligible to get this scholarship. It was subsequently extended to the Children of Indian Workers in Emigration Check Required (ECR) countries (Afghanistan, Bahrain, Indonesia, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Malaysia, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Thailand, United Arab Emirates and Yemen) in 2015-16.

The *Pravasi Bharatiya Academic and Scientific Sampark* (PRABHASS) is an interactive digital platform to engage the global Indian science and technology community to address India's societal challenges and to contribute towards improving the lives of common man in India as well as to built linkages with the fellow Indian scientists. Through PRABHASS, the scientific Diaspora continue to work together and collaborate with Indian scientist through discussion fora and for value R&D projects, training, webinars, fellowship, etc. aimed at addressing the identified challenges and problems through S&T interventions. This effort is also aimed at developing mechanisms for participation of Indian Diaspora working in top universities, R&D organizations across the world, to further enhance the knowledge-base of Indian Research and Academic Institutions.

There are some socio-cultural awareness and engagement initiatives that encourage students and young professionals to learn about India and its development. The Know India Programmes (KIP) (2004) is an important initiative of the GoI with an aim to engage and make the students and young professionals of Indian Diaspora, (between 18-30 years), feel a sense of bond with their motherland, to be motivated and inspired by transformational changes taking place in

India and to give them an exposure to various aspects of contemporary India's forms of art, heritage and culture. It is a three-week orientation programme to create an awareness on different facets of Indian life and the progress made by the country in various fields e.g. economic, industrial, education, science & technology, communication & information technology and culture. A total of 2061 diaspora youth have participated in the KIP held so far.

An important initiative of GoI is *Pravasi Teerth Darshan Yojana* (PTDY) for the elder generation PIOs in the age group of 45-65 years living/residing in *Girmitiya* or *Jahajis* countries (Fiji, Guyana, Mauritius, South Africa, Suriname, Trinidad & Tobago, Reunion Island), providing an opportunity to reconnect with their root. The programme may be available for those PIOs in Girmitiya countries who belong to lower income group and are unable to afford to visit India. The tour would be completely government sponsored and so far 160 PIOs have successfully participated till 2021.

The Promotion of Cultural ties with Diaspora (PCTD) supports the diaspora in organizing cultural events displaying Indian culture, new initiatives and developments of modern India. It aims to nourish and strengthen the cultural bonds between India and its diaspora. The projected outcome of the scheme is to reinforce the cultural identity of OCIs. Through the PCTD, the GoI releases grants to the Indian missions abroad, which then work together with diaspora associations to organise relevant events.

The 'Indian Community Welfare Fund' (ICWF) provides contingency expenditure incurred by the Indian Missions for carrying out welfare activities for Overseas Indian Citizens who are in distress. Since 2014 till November 2020, more than INR 423 crores of funds has been utilized and around 2,40,000 Indians were extended assistance.

The Global *Pravasi RISHTA* Portal and app was launched on 30th December 2020 by the External Affairs Ministry to connect with over 30 million strong Indian diaspora to create a three-way communication between the ministry, Indian missions and the diaspora. This portal and app assist during any crisis management and lend a helping hand to the NRIs and PIOs. It also enables the diaspora to reach the consular officers and services in time of emergencies. The portal provides latest information on the existing and new government schemes launched for the benefits of the diaspora. It is also be used for collecting opinion of the diaspora on important policy issues, sharing e-newsletters, conducting surveys, online B2B matchmaking, presentation of technical innovations, submission of diaspora literary and art works etc. The 4 C's- Care for their safety and security, Connect with India, Celebrate their cultural heritage and Contribute to the development of the homeland.

The OCIs are permitted to enroll in the national pension scheme, in accordance with their eligibility to invest under the provisions of the Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority Act. They are now allowed to invest into NPS-Tier-1 account (which was already allowed for Non-resident Indians). This is a welcome move for OCIs as there are many individuals of Indian origin who have taken up foreign citizenship while working overseas and may prefer to continue investing in India from their local income sources. Some OCIs have also returned to India permanently while continuing to maintain their foreign citizenship. As these individuals did not retain India citizenship and therefore did not qualify as NRIs, they were not allowed to

invest in NPS. With this relaxation, such OCIs will be able to take advantage of the NPS investment avenue and associated income tax benefits. Repatriation of the accumulated savings/annuity from the NPS Tier-I account to a bank account outside India will be governed by the relevant provisions of the Foreign Exchange Management Act.”

The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has launched a new outreach programme, focusing on state governments, called *Videsh Sampark* series. These programmes are aimed at liberalising the passport services, addressing grievances in a prompt and efficient manner and ensuring welfare and protection of Indian community abroad. The first conference under this is being held in collaboration with the Government of Telangana.

Under Section 20A of the Representation of the People Act, 1950, an Indian citizen who has not acquired citizenship of any foreign country and is living abroad on account of employment, education, etc. is entitled to be enrolled in the electoral roll of the constituency of his/her native place as per the address given in the passport. An application has to be made in Form 6A for enrolment under this provision. However, there is no special provision for voting made in the existing law for overseas electors. They can only vote in person at the polling station provided for the electors of the locality within which the address in the passport falls. Therefore, they have to be present in the country on the day of poll.

Several provisions have been put in place to promote investments from Indian Diasporas ranging from special incentives for Bank deposits, investments in the Share Market, and certain special provisions for OCIs and NRIs for Foreign Direct Investment. Amendments to rules for doctors, scientists, academics and accountants have been made or are in the process of being amended to turn brain drain into brain gain.

Despite their contribution, however, not many privileges accrue to this community, as evidenced from recent episodes. For instance, starting in early 2020, a whopping 825,000 Indian workers returned from all over the world under the “*Vande Bharat Mission*,” the government’s initiative to bring back Indians stranded in different countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, as per the parliamentary committee report. While some have gone back and resumed work in their host countries, thousands are still stuck in India due to bureaucratic hassles, non-availability of visas, and other regulatory bottlenecks.

Conclusion

The Indian diaspora are symbol of a nation’s pride and represent their country internationally. The Indian diaspora is also considered as a promoter for economic development in both within India as well as in the host countries. It is an important part of India’s “soft diplomacy” or “diaspora diplomacy”. For example, the Diasporas played a critical in the fructification of Indo-US Nuclear deal. They have become an agent of economic development after structural changes in the Indian economy. Their successes can be attributed to traditional ethos, cultural values and heritage, educational aptitude and qualifications, and more importantly, their capacity to harmonize and adapt.

Though, the government has made many reforms and other policies towards Indian diaspora, still there is a need for major improvements for their engagement. The lack of a

diaspora policy hinders India’s ability to help its migrants. The government should explore new avenues for mutually beneficial interactions, investments, technology and skills transfer, philanthropy and other emerging opportunities in the “New India”.

The government should frame Diaspora policy having clear direction and their engagement. It should clearly state to provide welfare services to vulnerable citizens and to facilitate outreach to diaspora communities. A better communication and information services should be developed about emigrants (labour) rights.

There is a need to improve the quality of domestic skilling and standardizing curricula across the country to ensure that migrant workers are able to go abroad and secure employment with better wages. The Public Grievance Redressal and Monitoring System should redress their grievances effectively. There should be easy procedures for immigration and customs clearances for Diaspora members who want to visit their motherland. So, India recognizes the importance and valuable contributions of its Diasporas, and the doors of Indian institutions will always open for them who will be equal partners in ‘*Amrit Kaal*’.

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