

Role of Indian Diaspora: Navigating opportunities and obstacles

Dr. Amrita Jaiswal¹

Abstract: The term ‘Diaspora’ refers to the displacement of an individual, community or groups of people from the original homeland to an alien territory. A country’s Diaspora, and the Diasporas it hosts, can be a huge asset for its development. In the 21st century the Indian government has taken various positive steps to foster reconnection between India and its Diaspora. Indian Diaspora based on their knowledge, expertise and skill can really contribute in a constructive way in the development and the growth of the country. The present paper attempts to understand and explore the concept of diaspora, reviews government policies, and analyses benefits and challenges of diaspora engagement.

Keywords: Diaspora, Migration, Soft Power, Brain Drain, Brain Gain

1.1 Introduction

Migration is not a new phenomenon in human history. It has shaped and reshaped the entire course of mankind’s development and Indian’s are no exception to this rule. In the ancient period, Indians have mainly migrated as priests, merchants and traders and this has resulted in the emergence of various Indianized kingdoms like Funan, Champa, Khmer, Sri Vijaya, Sailendra, Majapahit etc and also led to the spread of Buddhism in China, Korea, Japan and parts of South-East Asia. The migration among ancient Indians was rare which got a boost during British era and is continued in the post-independent years as well (Singh, 2018: 1154). For the most part in Indian history, Indian emigration has been a peaceful process unlike the Jews Diaspora. Probably that was the reason for the Indians not associating their migrant population with the term ‘Diaspora’- Greek term meaning ‘to sow widely’ used initially in a positive sense to describe the various migrant population but later, when used mainly in context of Jews it became a terminology associated with the forcefully involuntarily exiled population. ‘Indian Diaspora’- the term became popular only in the 21st century with the ‘Reports of High-level committee on Indian Diaspora in 2001. This community was previously addressed as ‘Indians Abroad’ or ‘Overseas Indians’ (ibid). Present paper is an attempt to understand the changing trends in Indian Diaspora, and to understand their increasing role and the shift in the government policies in the last few decades and examines if India’s attempt at

¹ Assistant Professor & Head, Department of Political Science, Bihar National College, PU

engaging the Diaspora in a high volt manner in public places. Therefore, present paper will also provide systematic understanding of Diaspora and the role and the contribution of Indian Diaspora in India's growth story.

1.2 Understanding Diaspora

The term Diaspora, owing to its growing usage, has proliferated and "dispersed" so much from its core meaning that Roger Brubaker (2005) has gone to the extent of calling it "Diaspora" (Pande, 2013:59). It has become more or less a "generic" term, sharing meaning with words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community (Tololian, 1991: 3-7). The Indian diaspora is a generic term to describe the people who migrated from territories that are currently within the borders of the Republic of India. It also refers to their descendants (Agarwal, 2018:1385, Vrajlal, 2015). The Diaspora is currently estimated to number over twenty million. Residing in distinct land, Indian Diaspora members have succeeded spectacularly in their chosen profession by dint of their single-minded dedication and hard work. What is more important they have retained their emotional, cultural and spiritual links with the country of their origin (Vrajlal, 2015). As far as the Indian Diaspora/overseas Indians (the two terms are interchangeably used) is concerned, it has taken the widest possible outline to include the wide variety of people living outside India. On deconstruction, the term comes out with specific groupings, i.e. persons of Indian Origin (PIOs), who are no longer Indian citizens and the ones who continue to be full-fledged citizens of India holding Indian passport, non-resident Indians (NRIs) (Pande, 2013:50). According to N Jayaram (2011: 34) *"It is a heterogeneous and complex phenomenon subsuming under it many diverse phases, patterns and processes. There is a long way to go before we could confidently theorize the Indian Diaspora, what is important is that to unravel as many aspects of diversity as we can, from as many perspectives as we can, so that in due course we will have sufficient building blocks of data and conclusions to build a theory upon."*

1.3 Brief History and the Government Policies

Migration of Indians to various parts of the world got a boost during British era. The various voluntary migrants like merchants, traders, travellers etc were accompanied by the labourers as well. The abolition of slavery in 1833 in the entire British Empire led to the mass migration of Indian indentured labourers, beginning with Mauritius in 1834, soon followed by demands of such cheap labours, especially as plantation workers from other colonies of British Empire like Guina, Malaya, Trinidad and Fiji etc. These

contract labourers were so beneficial to the colonies that they even tried to legally restrict their right to return but were unsuccessful in their attempt (Singh, 2018: 1154).

By mid-twentieth century (largely after Second World War), there emerged a new trend in the migration and settlement of the skilled and highly skilled professionals to the developed world. In the initial years such migrations were United Kingdom (UK) centric. However, as the United States (US) immigration regime became more liberal during the mid-1960s, the wave got diverted towards the US (Gottschlich 2008:156). Approximately 5 million people of Indian origin represent the Indian community there. Marked by what has been termed as the “brain drain”, this process came under severe scrutiny and prejudiced the Indian public opinion against the highly affluent Diaspora who mostly got their degrees from the publicly subsidized institutions in India (Jayaram, 2011: 62). The policies of the Indian government towards the Indian Diaspora in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s reflected many contradictions. The message that they conveyed to the Diaspora was that it should not look to India, but should identify itself with the local population wherever they lived.

The policy of disentangling of India from Indians abroad continued for a long time. During the sixties when India had a closed economy, another phase of migration, began which continued in nineties, where the educated Indians mainly belonging to the skilled service sectors like doctors, nurses, teachers and in later years IT professionals, etc started migrating to the developed countries in search of better economic gains leading to “Brain Drain” in India. These skilled Indians were seen as a liability on the motherland rather than an asset. The migrants Indians were seen to be voluntarily contributing in the development of other countries rather than their own motherland and thus were supposed to be responsible for the problems they faced in the foreign land without the support of India. But, the government and Indian in general closed their eyes to the fact that the migration of these skilled and semi-skilled workers most of the time was not voluntary, but subtly forced due to lack of opportunities in the democratic market (Singh, 2018: 1156). Moreover, with the opening of India’s economy in the early 1990s, the so-called brain drain started yielding unexpected positive results in terms of brain-regain, investments, remittances, philanthropy, and transfer of technology and skill. While the motherland connections always existed in the section of diaspora in some form or the other, but after the 1990s, it became more pronounced (Pande, 2013: 62).

The policy of reaching out to the Indian Diaspora began during the tenure of Atal Bihari Vajpayee. In 1998, the Indian government brought out NRI bonds. The Indian Government also set up a high-level committee of L.M Singhvi. On the recommendations of this committee, the government under the then prime minister

of India, Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee decided to celebrate Pravasi Bhartiya Divas. It was decided to celebrate Pravasi Bhartiya Divas on 9th January to mark the return of Mahatma Gandhi from South Africa to India in 1915. It is celebrated once in every two years to strengthen the engagement of the overseas Indian community with the Government of India and reconnect them with their roots (Mitra: 2016). During the convention, selected overseas Indians are also honoured with the prestigious Pravasi Bhartiya Samman Award to recognize their contributions to various fields both in India and abroad. The Pravasi Bhartiya Samman Award (PBSA) is the highest honour conferred overseas Indians. PBSA is conferred by the President of India as part of the Pravasi Bhartiya Divas (PBD) conventions organized since 2003 on the Non-Resident Indian, Person of Indian origin or an organization or institution established and run by the Non- Resident Indians or Persons of Indian Origin, who have made significant contribution (Agarwal, 2018:1388).

Indian government also introduced various scheme especially for the India national abroad which includes various welfare policies, insurance schemes along with emergency economic support facility to even granting voting rights to the NRIs in 2011. The shift in the policy was the result of the gradual shift in India's perception towards its Diaspora as observed by Dr. L.M Singhvi, the chairman of the High-Level Committee on Indian Diaspora- *"Overseas Indians are a smaller force but they are a resource, which can be harnessed. NRIs were at one time spurned as non-required Indians"*. (Singhvi, 2012: 214).

1.4 Role of Indian Diaspora

A country's Diaspora, and the Diasporas it hosts, can be a huge asset for its development. In the 21st century the Indian government has taken various positive steps to foster reconnection between India and its Diaspora. Indian Diaspora can really contribute in a constructive way in the development and the growth of the country based on their knowledge, expertise and skill. According to the world migration Report 2018, published by the international organization for migration, the United Nation Migration Agency, the Indian Diaspora is the largest in the world, with over 15 million people from India living abroad. If we take into consideration the overseas citizens of India, this number may well cross 30 million. The Indian Diaspora constitutes 6% of the total number of international migrants (people living outside the country of their birth), which was estimated at 243 million in 2015. UAE remains top destination for Indian migrants with around 3 million Indians migrating there. There have been many Indians migrating to United States also. The Indian Diaspora in developed countries, especially in the United States, is highly organized with many regional and pan-Indian cultural, professional, religious and charity organization (Agarwal, 2018:1386).



The people who migrate to foreign countries in such condition are creating some benefits in the country. Because they reduce unemployment burden and their remittances are raising the standard of living of the family. The remittances pushing up community consumption level and hence, raise welfare as a whole (Singh, 2020: 886). Surveys have shown that nearly 95 percent of overseas Indians send money to their families or close friends to support education, health, or other personal concerns in the homeland (Sampradaan. 2001). For years, India has been the largest recipient of remittances, estimated at \$ 54 billion per year today (World Bank 2009).

India's diaspora is a huge soft power asset. Therefore, Diaspora is an invaluable source of 'soft power'. A new form of power— 'soft power'— has become increasingly discussed in the post-Cold War era. There are millions of Indian diasporas spread across countries as far as Fiji, Guyana, Malaysia, Mauritius, Surinam, South Africa, Sri Lanka and Trinidad. They have contributed immensely to the countries they have settled in and command influence and respect in these countries. Diaspora members can help a country's build soft power, or, as it sometimes referred to today in the US, 'Smart Power'. World Bank's Dilip Ratha has highlighted because of huge population of its Diaspora; India continues to be the top recipient of remittance from its Diaspora. In 2017, India gathered USD 69 billion. The amount is nearly 1.5 times India's defence budget for 2018-2019 and an increase of nearly 9.5 percentages from 2016. While remittance increased 9 times worldwide from 1991 to 2017, remittances to India from its Diaspora increased 22 times to USD 69 billion in 2017 from USD 3 billion in 1991 (Shreehari:2018). Diasporas contribute to the economic development of the country of origin through Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and transnational entrepreneurship, including support for entrepreneurs, start-ups, and small businesses in the country of origin.

The constructive contributions of Diasporas to development in their country of origin are transfer of acquired knowledge. These Diasporas are a great source of transfer of technical knowledge and skills in the form of "*brain gain*" where knowledge exchange is concerned, Diaspora contributes to their countries of origin through philanthropic engagement in many areas. Philanthropy has a crucial role to play in advancing global equity. Diaspora organizations are seen to be getting increasingly vocal and influential in their countries of origin and of settlement (Agarwal, 2018:1387). Our PM Mr. Modi sees tremendous potential in the Diaspora. Therefore, want to see them contribute to India's growth story. At the 2017 Pravasi Bhartiya Divas in Bengaluru, Modi announced that India is moving from "Brain drain to "Brain gain", making his vision clear-that "there is only one dream (within all of us): Bhartiyata". PM Modi also praised the contributions of the diaspora, noting their role in upholding Indian social values abroad. "World leaders

praise the Indian diaspora in their country. A reason for this is the social values the diaspora brings to the societies there,” (The Times of India: 2025)

1.5 Challenges faced by Indian Diaspora

Increased focus on the Diaspora comes with its own challenges. While the Government’s initiatives are laudable, India is likely to face some important challenges as a result of the changing economic and geopolitical environment. The Indian Diaspora is experiencing uncertainty due to layoffs in the Middle East, predominantly in the construction sector as the number of government projects fell following the oil crisis. In general, there has been a significant dip in the number of Indian workers being employed in Saudi Arabia and GCC countries because of the economic slowdown. It was found that in 2016 the number of Indian workers who went to work fell by half in Saudi Arabia and by 33 percent in other Gulf countries while the number of expats in the region increased by 12.17 percent (Asif:2017). These statistics reveal the heavily reduced remittances rehabilitation centres for returning workers.

Secondly, support of the Diaspora is neither automatic nor continuous, and their interests need not be India’s priorities. For example, the Indian community in the US was not vocal enough in criticizing President Donald Trump’s proposal to restrict the H-1B visa programme that has benefited many Indians. Another challenge is that remittances may not always be used for beneficial purposes. For instance, India faced problems due to foreign funding for extremist movements like the Khalistan movement (Rubinoff, 2002). Moreover, the Diaspora is unfair in expecting India to stand by them at all times of need. This contradictory attitude of the Diaspora and the Indian government will need to be worked out.

1.6 Conclusion

Indian Diaspora presents in every part of the globe play an important role in India’s external relation with many countries; moreover, they are a strategic asset to India. A country’s Diaspora and the Diasporas it hosts can be a huge asset for its development. They are a channel through which not only money, but also much tacit knowledge, can flow, and they are a potential source of opportunities for trade, investment, innovation, and professional networks. However the Indian government’s efforts to reach out the Indian Diaspora for looking towards India, the results seem to be not up to mark. Therefore, Indian policy makers should design well-orchestrated policies to attract its Diaspora (Subramanya: 2015). The present paper has provided systematic understanding of Diaspora and the role and the contribution of Indian Diaspora in India’s growth story.

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