

## **Diaspora in International Relations: Emerging Role of Indian Diaspora**

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### **Introduction**

The notion of 'Diaspora' has acquired a renewed importance and emerged as an international force in the contemporary international relations. The process of globalization has created an environment which has enabled nation states to look beyond rigid national boundaries for economic and other development aspirations of the people. The world is not only being organized vertically by nation states and regions, but horizontally by an overlapping, permeable, multiple system of interactions. The space for multiple affiliations and associations that has been opened up outside and beyond the nation state has now allowed a diasporic allegiance to become both more open and more acceptable. In fact this has enhanced the practical and affective roles of Diasporas, showing them to be particularly adaptive forms of social organization. In the face of powerfully defended nationalist sentiments it has, until recently, been difficult for diasporic groups to express their true attitudes to the nation states in which they have found themselves (Cohen, 1996). Many states with their inability to construct a stable, pluralist, social order, have turned away from the idea of assimilating or integrating their ethnic minorities. On their part, minorities also no longer desire to abandon their pasts. Many have retained or acquired dual citizenship, while the consequences of globalization have meant that ties with a homeland can be preserved or even reinvented. Now it cannot be denied that many Diasporas want their share of opportunities. They want not only the security and opportunities available in their countries of settlement but also a continuing relationship with their country of origin and co-ethnic members in other countries (Cohen, 1996).

Thus, with emergence of Diasporas as an important and permanent feature in the imperfect nation-state system, they are now receiving growing attention from decision makers around the world. They are among the most prominent actors which link international and domestic spheres of politics. They may influence life in both, their home as well as host countries.

Influence in the home country often works through ethnic linkages and cultural identity. It may also develop political and economic interests in due course of time. They may be a force in the global economy assisting homeland economies and also transmit the entrepreneurial spirit and skills that their home countries lack. Diasporas can be active actors influencing the foreign policies of their homelands. According to Shain and Barth (2003), Diasporas that achieve economic and political power can and do directly affect the foreign policies of their homelands. Diaspora help may be critical to nation-building and state consolidation in the homelands. They often support homeland struggles against neighbouring states or kin-communities. Diasporas are involved in numerous activities in various areas. On the one hand, positive Diaspora activities include: individual and collective remittances, their productive investment and the funding of development projects; the promotion of trade; the transfer of knowledge and technology to the countries of origin; contributions to tourism revenues; activities in disaster relief, conflict prevention, peace-building, or post-conflict reconstruction; the political activities of migrants in the country of destination, etc (Brinkerhoff 2008). On the other hand, negative Diaspora activities, include fuelling and funding of armed conflicts or terrorism, both in the countries of origin and destination (Vertovec, 2006, p.5).

Diasporas have been around for a long time and their activities are not new and have played important roles throughout history. However, in recent years, with the ‘discovery’ of expatriate populations (Larner 2007, p.334), an increasingly prominent discourse is seen that portrays them as groups of actors, accompanied by a growing number of states and international organizations reaching out to them, more migrants organizing in groups, and a certain institutionalization of Diasporic activities (Brinkerhoff 2008; Ostergaard-Nielsen 2003). Thus, in the contemporary sense the word ‘Diaspora’ is used for the people of a common origin, who reside outside their homeland and in more than one country. While some analyst emphasize this residence on permanent basis, others look at it in a broader sense to include expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities (Sheffer 1986). In most of the situation they may be distinguished between permanent settlers and short term migrants. There is also an emerging literature on Diasporas and their involvement in international politics, based on the claim that ‘it is widely recognized that Diasporas have an enhanced presence on the world stage today’ (Vertovec 2006, p.3). As different states are reaching out to their Diasporas with new initiatives and policy frameworks, their involvement is also taking several forms like philanthropy through

remittances, knowledge and technology transfer as well as the political engagement (Ostergaard-Nielsen 2003).

Diasporas are ethnic groups of different geographic origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin. Most often they are ethnically distinct and differ from the population of the host countries in race, religion, culture and language (Weiner 1986, p.47). In the host countries they usually remain minority groups and preserve their ethnic, religious identity and solidarity. This solidarity serves as the basis for maintaining and promoting constant contacts among the diasporic groups and has economic, social and cultural significance for the host as well as homelands countries (Sheffer 1986, p.1). The networks created by the ethnic Diasporas are thus becoming more important in the international arena and have peculiar and interesting characteristics due to their being part of a complex triadic relation with their host and homelands countries (Dubey, 2000, p.88).

There are instances where the Diaspora has assumed political and administrative significance in the host country. They operate as ethnic lobby groups in liberal host lands and as advocates of multicultural foreign policy. The degree to which the Diaspora can influence the life in the host and the home country depends on several factors. Firstly, the nature of the role played by Diaspora depends upon the willingness or acceptance of that role by the home and the host country. Secondly, the available means motives and opportunity for the Diaspora to play that precise role. Thirdly, the context of international situation and also the nature of the political system operating in the host or the home country may influence the role played by the Diaspora. The nature and degree of the Diaspora influence also depends on the numerical and financial strength, as well as the mobilization of Diaspora resources. The Diaspora could be contributor to the home country economic stability through remittances/investment or by giving greater visibility to the home country through skills, competence and entrepreneurship or through political support to the interest of the home country. This role is complemented through a series of other significant and effective activities like fund raising for a range of social, economic and philanthropic activities and by lobbying to influence the host countries policies and the world public opinion at large.

Viewed within this context, Diasporas have become crucial development actors for their respective home countries, contributing to the transfer of essential financial, social, and human capital. The level and impact of diasporic contributions to homeland development have been found to depend on multiple variables, of which perhaps most relevant is the

government policy towards the Diaspora. Thereby, Diaspora activities are framed in an instrumental way, whereby migrants are often portrayed in terms of resources to be tapped or 'as assets that can be mobilized' (Brinkerhoff 2008, p.3). Hence, the involvement of Diaspora is understood in terms of their comparative advantages through the use of their resources, such as enhancing the efficiency of development through remittances and local knowledge, or to undertake lobbying activities in the country of destination.

Consequently, Diaspora has emerged as an important actor in International Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They are increasingly able to promote transnational ties, act as bridges or catalyst or as mediators between their home and host societies, if there is willingness on the part of host and home countries as well as the Diaspora to accept the diasporic linkages for their shared developmental goals. Many countries have successfully used their diasporic community to mobilize economic and diplomatic support. The Indian Diaspora also has a vast potential to promote the national interest of India. At a time when the world is searching for new anchorage in terms of technological bind and global accumulation of capital in the age of knowledge based transformation of economic and social processes, the Indian Diaspora could be a strategic asset in promoting India's economic growth.

### **Indian Diaspora**

Indian migration to the different parts of the world is not a new phenomenon. Indian migration started more than five thousand years ago, when saints and seers moved in different directions, although not in large numbers. It continued with the migration of Indian traders who travelled throughout the world for trade and business. During the colonial period after the abolition of slavery by the British parliament, Indians migrated to various parts of the British colonies to form an alternative labor force to fulfill the needs of the European settlers. Indian migration continued after independence, with the migration of professionals like doctors, engineers, chartered accountants and businessmen to the west. The Indian diaspora is currently estimated to number around 30 million, composed of PIOs and NRIs (Pathak, 2018). They live in almost every country of the world, and span the spectrum of class, profession and history, ranging from fifth-generation descendants of indentured labours in the Caribbean and Africa, to fourth-generation descendants of traders and mercenaries operating under British colonialism in Africa, to second-generation descendants of doctors and engineers in North America. Thus, the Report of the High Level Committee on Indian diaspora rightly proclaimed that 'Sun never sets on Indian Diaspora' (Pathak, 2018).

The Indian diaspora is regarded as hardworking and competent. They have done well in the economic domain of old diaspora countries. From a humble beginning as indentured labourers, they have progressed to a point where in spite of their minority status (except Mauritius), have contributed and played a significant role in the political, economic and social transformation of their host countries. The PIOs have done quite well economically and professionally in almost all old diaspora countries and also enjoys the political influence in some of these countries. They have the strength to become prosperous, advance professionally and intellectually and share a common identity and attachment with India. In many of these countries, even the smaller population of Indian diaspora is significant economically and their presence works as a catalyst for closer interaction.

In new diaspora countries, Indians are a small but wealthy minority. They are known for their economic, professional, academic, scientific and artistic successes (Rao, 2012). The success of Indians in diverse professions like Academics, Media, Film and IT apart from successful entrepreneurs, CEOs, scientists, and other professionals has created trust in India's intellectual abilities abroad. It has been a crucial factor in branding India as a source of well-educated and hard-working professionals. Besides, Indian diaspora has also been instrumental in safeguarding India's interests in their host countries. For example, the Indian diaspora in the US, lobbied hard as a pressure group to promote Indian interests during Kargil war, India's nuclear tests, for blocking the Burton amendment, and during the agreement between India and the US on civil nuclear cooperation. Moreover, many of them are first generation immigrants whose families and close relatives are in India and thus they send remittances back home.

Indian diaspora has been contributing significantly to the development of India, especially in terms of remittances, investment, foreign trade, transfer of technology and skills, apart from harnessing the cultural linkages with foreign countries. Given their strength and potential, they could be well a strategic asset in promoting India's bilateral relations with the host countries.

### **Emerging Role of Indian Diaspora in India's International Relations**

Today, economic development has become the primary concern of Indian foreign policy. It is now more realistic in the pursuit of national interest and is based on the recognition that India's place in the community of nations will be determined by the economic and military strength. India is now backing its political and economic diplomacy with soft-power

diplomacy in international relations. She is among the few nations with strong cards in the arena of soft power. The spiritualism of India has attracted people from all over the world, and its Gurus have travelled around the world selling yoga and mysticism. Bollywood has done more for Indian influence abroad than the bureaucratic efforts of the Government. From classical and popular music to its cuisine, from the growing impact of its writers and intellectuals, India now has begun to acquire many levers of soft power. The biggest instrument of Indian soft power is the Indian Diaspora apart from music, films, sports, yoga and Ayurveda. People of Indian origin are extremely important sources of support for the Indian Government in the execution of its policies through the influence and respect they command in the countries in which they live (Raja Mohan, 2003). Indian Diaspora has helped India to take its standing abroad and has spread Indian influence. In fact Indian Foreign policy has received a boost with the new initiative to rope in its Diaspora for strengthening its external relations with the world. First, Indian diaspora is a good market for trade within the host population and has also potential to bring investments and know-how to strengthen the Indian economy. Second, the Indian diaspora has the potential to act as lobbying or pressure group to promote and safeguard the Indian interests. It can play a positive role in mobilizing support in favour of India related issues. Besides, they could also contribute significantly in development of cultural linkages with the host countries. Third, Indian diaspora could provide an opportunity to India and their respective host countries to strengthen their relations with Indian diaspora forming the bridges of cooperation. In this context, it's important to understand India's evolving Diaspora policy.

### **India's Diaspora Policy**

In the decade of 1990s, the strategic, economic and political positions and equations between different countries had an obvious shift with the fast changing world conditions, and that is also true for India and its Diaspora policy. In the wake of economic reforms in the 1990s, India started actively engaging its diaspora to support its economic development. It began to resolutely court its diaspora and started setting up dedicated institutions and also created incentives for overseas Indians to invest in India. Though economic factor has remained the most important driver of India's policy approach towards its Diaspora (especially the diasporic remittance and its use for the country's economic transformation), however it led to the realisation of many other aspects related to the significance of Indian diaspora for the country's growth and development. The new feature of India's diplomacy since 1990s has been also to strengthen its partnership with different countries. Thus, India is engaged in a

vigorous strategy to rope in its diaspora not only for economic purposes but also to strengthen its relations with their host countries. People of Indian origin are extremely important sources of support for the Indian Government in the execution of its policies through the influence and respect they command in the countries in which they live (Pathak, 2018).

There has been a remarkable shift in India's Diaspora Policy, from *active disassociation* in earlier decades to *pro-active association* with its diaspora in the 1990s. The Indian policy changed significantly with the submission of the L. M. Singhvi Committee Report on PIOs (People of Indian Origin) and NRIs (Non-Resident Indians) on 8 January 2002 and may be looked at as the most important embodiment of this change in outlook and approach. The Indian diaspora policy acquired a higher momentum with Indian government taking new initiatives to engage its diaspora. Apart from the creation of a separate Ministry for Overseas Indians, several initiatives like celebration of PBD (PravasiBharatiyaDiwas) on 9 January every year (the day Mahatma Gandhi returned to India from South Africa), Mini PBDs in response to a strong demand for holding such events regionally (Regional PBDs organized to reach out to a vast majority of Indian diaspora, who for various reasons, are unable to attend the main event in India). PravasiBharatiyaSamman Award (PBSA) which is the highest honour conferred on overseas Indians, Overseas Citizen of India card (OCI), also referred to as the dual citizenship card, Overseas Indian Facilitation Centre (OIFC), Know India Programme, Study India Programme, Tracing the Roots Programme, Scholarship Programme for Diasporas Children (SPDC) were undertaken. Besides these, other policy instruments devised are India Development Foundation (to help channel contributions from NRIs towards philanthropic activities in India in a wide-range of activities), setting up of NRI/PIO University, and internship programme for diaspora youth (aiming at associating closely the younger generation of Indian diaspora with India). To engage with its diaspora in a sustainable and mutually rewarding manner across the economic, social and cultural space is at the heart of the Indian policy. To create conditions, partnerships and institutions that will best enable India to connect with its diaspora comprehensively is central to all the programmes and activities (Pathak, 2010). The PBD initiative by the Indian government is a laudable attempt which is designed to facilitate networking opportunities between the Indian diaspora, the Indian government and Indian organizations. The honouring of the Indian diaspora (PBSA) for their achievements with regard to their contribution to their host country and for improving the bilateral relations with India was another laudable initiative. As India

aspires to become a global power, it has started a strong and sustained engagement with its diaspora (Pathak, 2018).

The evolving Modi Doctrine has certainly brought changes in the Indian foreign policy. Now it is seen as more proactive and infused with rigor. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's whirlwind tours all over the world, new initiatives and vigorous personal efforts in the last two years have impacted the world's perception about India. In fact this has served the purpose of raising India's global profile. The most important feature of this doctrine is that Indian diaspora has occupied a central place in the Indian thinking and foreign policy conduct. Indians abroad are a huge asset for the country and the present Government is aptly appreciative of their contribution for the nation. The pro-active involvement and participation of Indian diaspora has been visible in most of the foreign visits of Indian prime minister during past two years, be it the US, Australia, UAE or South Africa (Pathak, 2018).

### **Conclusion**

In present times, India's economic and strategic engagement with the world is increasing. Eventually, India is gearing up to play an important role in world affairs in the current century with its Diaspora emerging as an important factor in its international relations. As India seeks to become a global player of significance, it has started a strong and sustained engagement with overseas Indians. The Indian Diaspora is in a privileged economic position and also enjoys the political influence in various countries and thus could facilitate the Indian foreign policy goals. It can play a positive role in mobilizing support in their respective host countries in favour of India related issues. They can politically lobby and propagate the Indian point of view to the relevant decision making authorities within their host countries.

In fact, the importance of Indian Diaspora is increasing over the years in the Indian foreign policy which is well evident from the recent initiatives of Indian government to rope in its Diaspora in its new drive for strengthen bilateral relations with the countries of their residence. In fact, different Diaspora countries are also trying to use the presence of Indian Diaspora in their countries as a driver for promoting their ties with India.

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