

India's Diaspora Diplomacy in the Twenty-first Century

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Abstract: *This Paper explores the Indian government's Diaspora diplomacy in the 21st century. The paradigm shift of the Indian government in diaspora policy in the 21st century has resulted in its engagement with Indian diaspora at various levels of policy making and tapping their potential diplomatically for the advantage of India from institutionalized engagement, to Public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, economic diplomacy as well as the Knowledge diplomacy. This has helped the Indian government in gaining benefits at both the domestic and the international level. But diaspora as a diplomatic instrument has yet not been completely exploited by the Indian government.*

Key Words: *Indian Diaspora, Public, Cultural, Economic, Knowledge, Diplomacy, Remittance. Gulf, US.*

1. Introduction:

India's diaspora is a product of a long history of migration from India. The existing Diaspora community was mainly created during the colonial regime and later in the post-Independence era. The migration from India was mainly for economic reasons. These migrations led to the spread of the Indian community across the world and not specifically to one region. The diverse Indian society led to the creation of a diverse diasporic community. The identity of the diaspora underwent drastic change in their respective social space except for their ethnicity which made them distinct from the native population. Indian diaspora played a major role in the freedom struggle in the pre-Independence era. Overseas Indians mostly the indentured labourers were hopeful that sovereign India will provide them with assistance and support in the hostland country against the atrocities they were suffering. On the other hand the Indian government rather detached itself completely from its overseas population and in 1955 passed the Citizenship Act which shattered the hope of overseas Indians of enjoying dual citizenship. This detachment phase continued for a long time and thus the rise of diaspora diplomacy was visible only in the 21st century and not prior to that. Indian Diaspora policy has evolved with the establishment of High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora. The report of the committee defines Indian diaspora as those individuals who have migrated to various parts of the world but have still maintained their Indian identity and thus it includes Non-Resident Indians (NRI) as well as Person of Indian Origins (PIO) as a part of Indian diaspora. The reports of the committee spearheaded the paradigm shift in the India's diaspora engagement policy. Though the traces of such changes could also be seen during Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi's era but it was overshadowed by India's Non-interference (Panchsheel) and detachment policy as well as the existence of a closed economic policy.

Post 1991, structural changes within India with the opening of the economy enabled the shift wherein the role of diaspora became significant to ensure India's development in the new millennium. The shift was also in context of the rapidly changing role of non-state actors in domestic and international relations. The major changes in the diplomatic channels with respect to international relation were the proliferation of public diplomacy accompanied with the soft power of the respective countries. Soft power as per Joseph Nye is the source of power which leads to 'attraction' while Public diplomacy on the other hand means the shift from the old traditional bureaucratic diplomatic channel towards the involvement of non state actors mainly molding, stimulating and taming public opinion and support for securing one's national interest. India complied with the changing norms of diplomacy in the international society and resorted to the public diplomacy based on the support of its huge resources of soft power in 21st century. The opening of economy and globalisation along with the rapid technological advancement then ensured that the main component of India's public diplomacy were the Indian diaspora. Hence, Indian government's diaspora diplomacy is about protecting and promoting national interest by tactfully engaging (shift from no engagement policy) with not only its diaspora but also with other essential actors via its diaspora.

2. Institutionalised Engagement:

The Indian government officially started engaging with its diaspora by creating 'High level Committee on Indian Diaspora' in 2000 and the committee submitted its report on December 2001. Accordingly the strategy of engagement and public diplomacy was forged out by the Indian government. The acceptance of the term 'Diaspora' in relation to overseas Indians was also the result of such effort by the Indian government. This was followed by the declaration of 9th January 2002 as the *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas* in memory of Mahatma Gandhi, an overseas Indian who returned to India on the same date in 1915 and contributed in his motherlands freedom struggle thus, considered to be an inspiration for the other overseas Indians to cooperate in India's development. This was followed by the annual and later biannual celebration of the *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas* with the participation of India diaspora. It was accompanied with the recognition, respect and honours conferred to one of the most successful and powerful overseas Indians. The creation of MOIA (Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs) in 2004 (later merged in MEA in 2016) was responsible to collaborate and work with the overseas Indians for the development of both India and the overseas Indians. Government of India also introduced PIO and OCI Card scheme for the person of Indian origin. The reason for introducing OCI card was to address the demand of diaspora for dual citizenship though this card did not out rightly accept the dual citizenship demand but gave various rights to the person of Indian origin thus bringing them at par with the NRI. The introduction of OCI card would have also eased the migration (multiple entry and exit) of the diaspora which would ultimately encourage more economic engagement. The upsurge in the diaspora's role in international relations across the world led to the favourable diaspora policy to woo the strength and support of the diaspora to affect the homeland and hostland relation. Dr. L.M. Singhvi, the Chairman of the High Level Committee on Indian Diaspora states-

"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. PIOs were called FIOs or forgotten Indian Overseas. I coined an alternative usage for NRIs- I call them the National Resource of India. PIOs are Positive Indians Overseas. Indeed the diaspora is and ought to be a part of our response to the vagaries of globalisation and its West-centred politics"¹.

India thus diplomatically started the institutionalisation of diaspora engagement by creating India Development Foundation of Overseas Indians (IDF-OI) to encourage philanthropic activity, The Indian Community Welfare Fund (ICWF) to help the Indian Nationals in need; Overseas workers Resource Centre (OWRC) and Migrant Resource Centre (MRC)) to assist and support the future migrant workers. National Pension System (NPS) for NRI; The Pravasi Bharatiya Bima Yojana (PBBY) is a compulsory insurance scheme to promote the safety of the Indian emigrant workers falling under Emigration Check Required (ECR) countries; the scholarship programme for diaspora children as well as for talented and skilled diaspora is also initiated by the Indian government. The Overseas Indian Centres Abroad has been created which serves as a grievance redressal mechanisms for overseas Indians, the Centre also provides necessary institutional arrangements to deliver a host of services to Overseas Indians in economic, social and cultural matters, directly, through outsourcing or through appropriate public-private partnerships. In addition to this the state government within India were also advised to create the department for overseas Indian to promote socio-political and economic engagement of diaspora with their ancestral native place. The drastic paradigm shift in India's diaspora policy came after Indian government realised the significance of approximately 30 million diaspora in promoting India's national interest in the globalised world. As per UN Global migration report 2020, the Indian diaspora population (the criteria for considering a diaspora not clarified by the UN) was approximately 17.5 million making it the largest diaspora community in the world.

2.1. Gulf & Remittances :

The remittances from the diaspora especially from the gulf countries have contributed immensely in the nation's development. India for more than a decade now has been the top most remittance receiving country in the world. As per World Bank Report of 2020, India was the recipient of approximately \$83.332 billion dollar in 2019². These remittances play a major role in the economy of the country and to maintain a foreign exchange reserve as well as essential financial source for the respective family receiving those remittances. Indian government thus has made it easier for the diaspora especially NRI to transfer their money easily to their homeland. Indian government in the light of this development has

¹ Singhvi, L. M. (2012). Indian Diaspora. *Diplomacy & Diaspora*. Prabhat Prakashan, p 214.

² For more detail see, World Bank staff estimates based on IMF balance of payments data. (n.d.). *Personal remittances, received (current US\$)- India*. World Bank. Retrieved from https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.CD.DT?end=2019&locations=IN&name_desc=false&start=2012, Accessed on 26 October 2020.

also ensured that diaspora in the gulf countries that mostly comprises of blue collar (semi-skilled) workers are not being exploited because of the lack of knowledge hence, a pre-migration orientation programme along with certain insurance scheme for the migrants to ECR countries is being undertaken. Indian government also ensures security of diaspora during crisis in gulf and have evacuated its diaspora during crisis or from conflict zone areas. This led to the evacuation of thousands of Indians from Libya, Yemen, Iraq and South Sudan in between 2014 to 2016 and also during the pandemic years of 2020 (not just in gulf countries but across the world).

Indian diaspora consisting of skilled and semi-skilled labourers have contributed extensively in the development of the region. The role of medical professionals and the business ties between the entrepreneurs of gulf countries and India have added to the development of both the hostland and the homeland. The cultural exchange through diaspora between gulf countries and India has ensured better understanding between the two. The remittance from the Gulf region and the presence of such large Indian diaspora community in the region has also impacted India's bilateral relation with the gulf countries in a more positive way in a globalised world. This was reiterated in 2019 visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Bahrain, being the first Indian Prime Minister to visit the Kingdom, he was welcomed by thousands of Indian diaspora in a jam packed national stadium of Bahrain along with the King of Bahrain. The proof of better bilateral relation of India with the region could be traced from the various treaties and agreements signed on economic, trade, educational etc issues as well as India successfully garnering the support from most of the Arab countries on the issue of Jammu & Kashmir. More so, Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the same time was conferred with the highest civilian honor of Bahrain and UAE. Indian diaspora has thus become strategic element in India's 'Look West' policy.

2.2. USA:

Indian government used its diaspora diplomatically to influence India's bilateral relation with the other countries as well. Indian lobby in US being one of the powerful lobbies were successful in pressurising the US government to accept Indo-US Nuclear deal in 2008. Indian community in US are dominant enough to affect the domestic and foreign policy of US in relation to India. This was done amidst the various sanctions imposed on India post Pokharan II 1998. USINPAC –US India Political Action Committee, an Indian lobby group active in US created after being inspired by Jewish lobby played a significant role in Indo-US Nuclear deal. The role of Indian diaspora has been time and again acknowledged by the Indian government. During the celebration of the first Pravasi Bharatiya Divas in 2003, Atal Bihari Vajpayee the former Prime Minister of India officially stated-

*"Friends, India has been deeply appreciative of the support of the Pravasi Bharatiya community at times of need. Whenever India has faced a challenge to its security or to its territorial integrity, you have tirelessly championed its cause and then when there was an effort to isolate India after our nuclear tests of 1998, you came forward to stand by India. Your enthusiastic response to our Resurgent India Bonds in 1998 helped us raise over 4 billion dollars when we needed it the most"*³

Indian government banking on Indian Diaspora's strength in US to affect the bilateral relation could also be analyzed through the various incidents in the recent past like- in 2016 the former President Obama while in office celebrated Diwali in the White House by lighting diyas and later on, another President Donald Trump as well continued with the practice of Diwali celebrations to woo Indian-Americans⁴. In another incident Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first ever grand reception by the diaspora in the Madison Square in 2014 set the course for the open public diaspora engagement by the Indian Prime Minister in various hostlands. Such events and the numerical turnout of the Indian diaspora affect the host government's attitude not only towards this diaspora community within their country but also their bilateral relations with India. The Silicon Valley of US being another example of India's diaspora diplomacy since the Silicon Valley is dominated by the Indian Diaspora, the business elite from the diaspora community are also being wooed by the Indian government to participate in India's development. Not so long ago in 2019 the Howdy Modi event in Houston in USA was another open engagement event of Indian Prime Minister and Diaspora. This event was attended by the US President Donald Trump and his party members wherein the US President was seen to be banking

³ Bhure. R. & Singh. S. (2017). Connecting with Diaspora: BJP's foreign policy mantra in the twenty-first century, in R. Kothari & E. Khan(ed.), *India Becoming a Global Power in the Twenty-First Century*, pp 125- 140. New Delhi: Atlantic.

⁴Donald Trump Celebrates Diwali at White House. (2017, October 18). *Economic Times* Retrieved from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/donald-trump-celebrates-diwali-at-white-house/articleshow/61129397.cms>, Accessed on 27 January 2020.

on the popularity of the Indian Prime Minister by walking hand-in-hand to woo the Indian-Americans vote in the upcoming presidential election⁵. Indian government also ensured that amidst the current rift between India and Pakistan the issue of Jammu and Kashmir which was being internationalized by the Pakistani counterparts in various countries mainly in US and UK is being defeated by the support of Indian diaspora. Rather the open engagement strategy of the Indian Prime Minister with the diaspora has been beneficial for India in isolating Pakistan in International relations. The public diplomacy or an open platform engagement with the diaspora has been used by the Indian Prime Minister to highlight the wrong doings of Pakistan through foreign land making it an international issue and hence creating International pressure on Pakistan. Diaspora has been diplomatically utilized by the Indian government through multilateral means to achieve multiple objectives.

2.3 United Kingdom:

Indian diaspora in UK have also played an important role in turning the waves of domestic policy in favour of India. Indian diaspora is one of the biggest vote bank in UK. Amidst the Brexit taking place in European Union India has become essential for UK to forge trade deal and ensure economic ties. Indian diaspora thus could become an important link in forging this relation. Indian Diaspora has been diplomatically utilized by the Indian government to challenge the Anti-India narratives in UK. The resounding victory of the Conservative party under Boris Johnson to an extent could be attributed to Indian Diaspora. The Labour party and its leader Jeremy Corbyn's anti-India stance cost them the 2019 election. The anti-India narrative on Kashmir was not appreciated by major section of the Indian diaspora. The Overseas Friends of BJP (OFBJP) in UK through campaign also ensured the loss of Labour Party in the election. Indian government recently on Republic Day in January 2020 bestowed one of the highest civilian awards Padma Shri on the Labor Party MP Barry Gardiner for his support for India amidst the anti-India stance of his party. Padma Shri was also awarded to the Conservative Party MP in UK parliament Bob Blackman for his support to strengthen India-UK ties, in fact after receiving the awards he didn't forget to give credit to the Indian diaspora in UK⁶. Both the MP recognized by the Indian government played a major role in promoting Indian diaspora's interest as well as strengthening UK –India ties.

3. Domestic & Cultural Engagement:

Indian government has been working to collaborate and cooperate with the Indian Diaspora in not just these few countries but across the globe. Indian Diaspora's role as a knowledge partner in India's development was also promoted. Indian government came up with various agreements to first of all promote the exchange of students with various countries and also ensure exchange of professors, scientists as well. Indian government has not just encouraged the connectivity of the diaspora and the government but also through various political parties like Akali Dal, BJP, Congress etc. All the political parties have been trying to garner the overseas Indian support in either promoting the agendas of the political party through diaspora or to win the election with the support of the diaspora. The role of the state government is also important in promoting India's relation with the diaspora. The State of Gujarat, Kerala, and Punjab etc have not just attracted the diaspora towards India but have also assisted in the creation of new diaspora by collaborating and helping the new migrants. The diversity which is an essential feature of India is also visible through its diaspora. Indian diaspora is as diverse as its nation and thus needs to be connected and engaged through various ways. The Indian diaspora is mainly the result of networking. The transnational network diaspora is essential for India's development in the interdependent world. The ethnic Indian diaspora has also been seen to be dominating the highest political position like the Parliament members or the post of Prime Minister and President in many countries and it thus presents an opportunity to the Indian government to promote better improved ties with the respective hostland.

Indian government has also resorted to the use of ICT in the 21st century to connect with its diaspora and to resolve their disputes. The MEA website provides much needed information to the diaspora. The initiative by the MEA under Sushma Swaraj as the foreign minister to connect with the overseas Indians through social media like Twitter has also been a successful attempt of the Indian government to connect with the diaspora especially those in distress. The transparent engagement with the diasporic group through media has also led to the awareness among the diaspora about

⁵ Top US official says Trump created history by joining 'Howdy, Modi!' event. (2019, October 3). *Business Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.businesstoday.in/current/economy-politics/top-us-official-trump-created-history-joining-howdy-modi-event/story/382710.html>, Accessed on 25 January 2020.

⁶ Tondon, L. (2020, January 30). British leader and 4 time MP from Conservative Party Bob Blackman dedicates his Padam Shri to Indian diaspora. *India Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/uk-tory-party-bob-blackman-padamshri-dedicates-indian-diaspora-1641425-2020-01-30>, Accessed on 30 January 2020.

the various laws and in general about India. Dr S. Jaishankar the foreign minister of India on 9th January 2020 on the day of *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas* choose to engage with the diaspora through digital video conferencing and the live telecast of the interaction was being done. This ensures the connectivity and the spread of awareness about the diaspora policy and also a way of confidence building measure by connecting with diaspora of so many countries together in real time.

*Sushma Swaraj the former External Affairs Minister in 2015 during Pravasi Bharatiya Divas celebration called diaspora to 'Connect' with India, 'Celebrate' their cultural heritage and 'Contribute' to the development of homeland thus giving three C's mantra for engagement with diaspora*⁷

The Cultural influences through diaspora have also helped in strengthening the relation of India with various countries. The promotion of classical dance or song even exchange of artists has helped in constructing India's relation with the hostland. Indian diaspora are the carriers of the Indian culture to their respective hostlands and have thus left a significant mark on the overall culture of their respective societies. The language, the religious philosophy, spiritualism, yoga, food habits, customs etc of Indian society can be found in this hostland. Indian diaspora plays a major role in constructing the image of India in the foreign land. Thus Indian government has time and again addressed the Indian diaspora as the unofficial ambassador of India. The construction of the image of India as a global power needs to be projected through its diaspora as well. The cultural influence of Indian diaspora could be seen in the South East Asian countries, US, UK, Canada etc. The cultural diplomacy is also undertaken by the Indian government to ensure friendly relation with various countries. Institutions like Indian Council for Cultural Relation (ICCR) has been working in this area by encouraging cultural exchange programmes and connecting with the countries through cultural diplomacy which includes various lectures, seminars and classical dance, song performances in the foreign land and also welcoming various overseas delegates in India to exchange the cultural understanding, it even provides scholarship to the overseas students to experience and learn more about the vibrant culture of India.

Indian government has always been interested in the economic engagement with the Indian diaspora. This was one of the reasons for the involvement of Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) from the very beginning in the celebration of *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas* to the various means of economic engagement with the diaspora. They have recently also added a separate International Migration and Diaspora division to assist the diaspora members with various financial and investment queries as well as help the migrants and the return migrants with economic matters and promote skill development. The shift in the FDI policy of the Indian government was also seen with the government taking an initiative in 2015 to open certain sectors for 100% FDI for NRI's in India. Government has also encouraged the investment in the diaspora bond. The 'Make in India' initiative of the Indian government has been aimed towards attracting funds from the diaspora to encourage startups and indigenous manufacturing of the product. India ranked 63rd in World Bank Report of Ease of doing business⁸ the improved position of India in the report proves that Indian government is trying to gain the trust of the business community to accelerate the economic growth within the country and is also trying to provide conducive environment to the Indian Diaspora business community to attract their investment, experience, knowledge and skill for India's progress.

4. Conclusion:

Indian government's new Diaspora diplomacy has been reaping benefits for India in the 21st century but is yet to go a long way. Indian Government has been continuously improving upon its engagement strategy through institutionalizing its diaspora diplomacy. Indian Government has been observed to be symbolically engaging with its diaspora which needs to change. Indian government in spite of its all efforts has yet failed to diplomatically tap the full potential of its diaspora.

Indian government is still lacking with its permanent institutionalized evacuation system. The response of the Indian government during the crisis situation seems to be delayed. Due to late response during crisis with regards to

⁷ For more detail see, Pradhan, R., & Mohapatra, A. (2020). India's diaspora policy: evidence of soft power diplomacy under Modi. *South Asian Diaspora*, 1-17.

⁸ PMO overseeing efforts to improve ranking in World Bank's ease of doing business index. (2020, January 23). *The Hindu*. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/pmo-overseeing-efforts-to-improve-ranking-in-world-banks-ease-of-doing-business-index/article30635735.ece> , Accessed on 30 January 2020.

evacuation it leads to trust deficit among the diaspora community towards the government. This issue needs to be addressed by the government.

Indian government in spite of various economic proposals has still not been successful enough to attract the FDI from its affluent diaspora. The percentage share of the Indian Diaspora is too less in the overall FDI received by the Indian government. Indian government though has fared well in ease of doing business category and has also launched the Make in India initiative but it has failed to boost the Indian economy. Indian government has not been able to successfully translate its economic policy on paper into a reality. The slow economic growth the rising unemployment collapsing banking sector within country have all led to the existing trust deficit among the business community towards India. India needs to focus more on its economic restructuring in order to attract the affluent diasporas investment and economic support.

Indian government has even neglected the potential of 'returnee diaspora'. The migrant community carries with them the knowledge and the skills which are essential for the nation's development. The Indian government lacks the well established returnee policy resulting into detachment of diaspora community with India. The association of diaspora at one point of time was with the phenomenon of 'Brain Drain' which is still going on since India has failed to convert Brain Drain into 'Brain gain' by Knowledge circulation. The returnee from the gulf countries are hardly resettled by the Indian government. The readjustment in the changed socio, political environment after spending years in the foreign country is not an easy task which the government doesn't seem to be bothered about. Indian government has initiated various scholarship programmes, internships, short term and long term job opportunities as well to attract the best of minds to India but the incentives or the pay packages and perks are very less to attract these talents. These schemes have also not yielded the desired results because of the minimal number of seats opened under such schemes. Indian government needs to focus on this aspect of the migration as well.

Indian government have also been blamed for concentrating, appreciating, recognizing and cooperating with only the powerful and rich diaspora even the *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas* celebration considered to be so important is also dominated by these elite diaspora. The neglect of the major chunk of diaspora also leads to the detachment of diaspora which the government doesn't seem to be grasping. The differential approach towards NRI and PIO has also been a major reason for the lack of connectivity with the second and third generation of migrants.

Indian government has further divided its own diaspora community due to the internal disturbances that's been reflected at the International level. The various protest movements like anti-CAA and NRC etc have further reduced the faith of diaspora on the Indian government. The crackdown of the student's protest and the rising violence within the country has also attracted international criticism for India. The diverse Indian diaspora has also been divided on these domestic issues just like the existing division within India at the domestic level. These incidents and instability have led to the lack of foreign investment in the country as the investors are always looking for a peaceful and stable political and economic environment which India is unable to present currently.

India's diaspora diplomacy thus consists of institutionalized engagement, Public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, economic diplomacy, Knowledge diplomacy as well as their role in shaping India's image at the International platform along with effecting India's bilateral relations. But the Indian government still needs to focus more on engaging with the diaspora at all levels irrespective of class, country, geography, or generation. It also needs to focus on the grassroot level connectivity with the diaspora in all states and not just limited to a few regions within India. Indian government along with this is required to focus more on ensuring peace and socio- economic, and political stability within India and protect its democratic structure at all costs to ensure the continued support of its diaspora.

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