

ROLE OF INDIAN DIASPORA IN INCREASING STRATEGIC INFLUENCE IN A GLOBALISED WORLD

Parama Sinha Palit
Amitendu Palit*

The Indian diaspora¹ comprises approximately twenty-three million people spread over 110 countries² of the world. It includes people of Indian origin (PIOs) settled in different parts of the world and non-resident Indians (NRIs). The latter consist of Indian citizens who have emigrated overseas, as well as non-emigrants who have traveled abroad for temporary durations on professional or personal grounds. The overseas Indian community has acquired increasingly influential strategic capacities over time. An obvious outcome of such acquisition has been a vast improvement in India's image abroad. The community has been actively promoting 'brand India'³ by harnessing its extensive network and reach in the international order.

The diaspora has undergone far-reaching changes over time. The earliest Indian-origin people moving overseas were forcibly deported indentured labourers during the nineteenth century. Economic forces of colonialism were responsible for triggering significant migrations.⁴ The current Indian diaspora, however, consists mostly of skilled professionals who began migrating from the latter half of the twentieth

* Dr Parama Sinha Palit is a specialist in international relations based in Singapore. Dr Amitendu Palit is a Visiting Research Fellow in the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) in the National University of Singapore (NUS).

¹ The term *diaspora* has been derived from the Greek word *dia* (through) and *speiro* (to scatter). Initially mentioned in the context of Jews scattered all over in Palestine, the term is now applied to a population that has migrated or 'dispersed' outside the 'home' country. It "describes practically any population that is considered 'deterritorialized' or 'transnational'—that is, which has originated in a land other than in which it currently resides, and whose social, economic, and political networks cross the borders of nation-states or, indeed, span the globe." For details see Sanjay Chaturvedi, "Diaspora in India's Geopolitical Visions: Linkages, Categories, and Contestations", *Asian Survey*, 32 (3), Fall 2005, p. 144

² Faizal Yahya, "Brand India and East Asia" In K. Kesavapany, A. Mani, P. Ramasamy (eds), *Rising India and Indian Communities in East Asia*, (Singapore: ISEAS, 2008), p. 141

³ Ibid

⁴ Chaturvedi, p. 146

century. Indeed, this steady outflow of human resource has entailed an economic cost. India's current overtures to tap the political and economic potential of its overseas population are a conscious attempt to minimize costs of skilled labour outflow.

The High Level Committee (HLC) set up by India's Ministry of External Affairs in September 2000 paved the way for the design of a broad and flexible policy framework for building enduring linkages between India and its overseas population.⁵ A notable measure in this regard has been the institutionalization of the Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas (PBD)⁶. The HLC's report – probably the first official treatise on India's large and diverse diaspora – clearly acknowledged the significant contribution of the diaspora in altering overseas perceptions on India in a virtuous manner.⁷

The Indian diaspora has transformed the economies and has come to occupy a pride of place in the life of these countries. Its members are found as entrepreneurs, workers, traders, teachers, researchers, inventors, doctors, lawyers, engineers, managers and administrators. ... By playing a leading role in the global technological revolution, it has transformed India's image abroad...

An official reiteration of the strategic significance of the diaspora was voiced on the occasion of the first PBD by India's erstwhile External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha: "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."⁸ The thought clearly reflects the desire to actively engage an already proactive diaspora for not only influencing domestic politics in host countries in a manner beneficial for India, but also for obtaining long-term economic gains and enhancing India's image abroad. The economic and political significance of the diaspora and the need for engaging it is a natural

⁵ C. Bhat, "India and the Indian Diaspora: Inter-linkages and expectations", In *The Indian diaspora: Dynamics of Migration*, ed. N. Narayan (New Delhi: Sage, 2004), pp. 11-22

⁶ The first PBD was flagged off in 2003. The latest and the seventh PBD was held at Chennai in January 2009.

⁷ Chaturvedi, p. 149

⁸ C. Raja Mohan, "Indian Diaspora and 'Soft Power'", *The Hindu*, January 6, 2003 at <http://meaindia.nic.in/opinion/2003/01/06o01.htm> [Accessed on March 6, 2009]

corollary of India's rising strategic significance and its intentions of consolidating it. While India's diaspora is most politically active in North America, particularly the US, the economic dimension is stronger with respect to Eastern Asia.

This paper attempts to examine the key facets of the strategic influence exerted by the Indian diaspora. In doing so, it follows a comparative analysis of the roles of the diaspora in two regions: North America and South-East Asia. The comparative experiences reveal interesting insights into the contrasting influences exerted by the diaspora from the two regions.

The paper is divided into five sections. Section I examines the Indian diaspora in North America while Section II looks at some leading countries of South East and East Asia. Section III reviews the economic influence of the Indian diaspora particularly in terms of inward remittances. Section IV probes into the relationship between India's cultural diplomacy and its diaspora and looks at the official initiatives in cultivating the diaspora 'as a resource for Indian development'.⁹ Section V summarizes and concludes.

Diaspora and Strategic Influence: The North American Experience

There is practically no country in the world that does not have an Indian community. As argued by Thomas Friedman, Indians as a force are responsible for 'flattening the world'.¹⁰ The gradual change in the occupational profile of Indians is significantly transforming India's perceptions overseas. The changing occupational profile is essentially attributable to greater movement of skilled Indians including academics as well as technically qualified professionals.

North America and Europe have traditionally been the preferred destinations for best Indian minds. With the end of the Cold War and launching of India's 'Look East Policy', trained and qualified Indians begun travelling to Southeast Asian countries as well, particularly Hong Kong, Korea, Japan and Singapore. The movement of Indians to these countries has not only been influenced by domestic demand for quality

⁹ N. Jayaram (ed), *The Indian Diaspora: Dynamics of Migration* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004)

¹⁰ Z. H. Anjum, "An Ode to the Indian Diaspora". See <http://www.littleindia.com/news/134/ARTICLE/1388/2006-11-12.html> [Accessed on February 16, 2009]