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# Speech Underscores Importance of Diaspora in Reinforcing Brand Modi



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Halfway into his prime ministerial campaign in 2013-14, Narendra Modi claimed India was blessed with three 'Ds' — democracy, demographic dividend and demand for goods. Shortly after he became prime minister, Modi began championing another 'D', the Indian Diaspora. An integral fixture of most of his overseas visits in the past three years have been interaction with the PIOs. Even during his ongoing visit to the US, despite political transition underway in Washington and with uncertainty prevailing over the outcome of the bilateral interaction, Modi decided to address an invitation-only group of Indian-Americans and Indians in America. Another similar interaction is being planned in Israel next month.

While this event was relatively staid and did not match the cinematic character of Madison Square Garden in September 2014 in terms of audience size and energy the PM exuded, his speech in Washington depicted the importance Modi accorded to the diaspora. He took pains to convey that he valued their attempts to stay connected. Significantly, Modi sought their assistance in ensuring that the next generation retained the current levels of connect. In contrast to the MSG speech which was essentially about announcing his arrival on the international scene and erasing hurt over past refusal of the American visa, his speech in the early hours of Sunday indicated Modi's

ability to use every available platform to make points that suited him.

Equally important, the Washington gig underscored the importance of the diaspora in reinforcing Brand Modi. Indisputably, the applause will resonate among his supporters in India as another instance of elevating 'izzat (prestige)' of the country. Modi's assertion that no nation — barring Pakistan to which he referred snidely without naming it — opposed India's offensive foray last September (surgical strikes) will be cheered as an unprecedented bravado on foreign soil. Like previous oc-

of impelling reasons, he has no willingness to advocate for PIOs. Simultaneously, he made it evident that his foreign policy follows the 'India first' approach in place of 'Indians first' tactic that many may expect from a person with his political orientation. While Modi courts the diaspora actively, he has also demonstrated his unwillingness to allow anyone else to leverage his stance.

For the past three years India has witnessed a PM engaging with the diaspora like no predecessor has done. The Rajiv Gandhi regime put together a diaspora policy following

Burma and Kathmandu in the 1960s. Previously, Golwalkar interacted with a Trinidadian member of its Legislative Council of Indian origin, Simboonath Capildeo — also uncle of VS Naipaul — and the idea of establishing Vishwa Hindu Parishad emerged at this meeting. Capildeo's representative attended the first conference of VHP in 1964.

As prime minister, Modi can ill afford to selectively reach out to a sections of PIOs. Like other Indian communities, this too is not a monolithic group and many do not respond as warmly to him as those who throng Modi's events. Yet, giv-



MAKING CONNECT: PM Modi addressing the US Community Reception in Washington on Sunday — PTI

casions when he spoke to an audience beyond those at the venue, Modi addressed his domestic constituency as much as the PIOs. Moreover, the pitch he struck on issues of terrorism and surgical strikes enabled him to head into his bilateral tête-à-tête with Donald Trump with a stated position.

Significantly in this address, as at other venues in different countries he visited, Modi took care to communicate that in the absence

of the military coup in Fiji in 1987. Thereafter, a consensus emerged among political parties that governments must not ignore the interests of Indian communities in other countries. Yet, within a few years, the engagement with PIOs was limited to the annual Pravasi Diwas bash. Modi has pursued the RSS policy of connecting with Hindu PIOs. It needs recollection that the second sarsanghchalak MS Golwalkar addressed Hindus in

en that an estimated 3.3% of global population lives in countries other than their place of birth or origin and that with nearly 16 million Indians scattered globally (they constitute the largest diaspora), Modi has tapped into a truly global constituency. Like several Modi initiatives, this too shall have to be closely tracked if only for the bearing it may have on foreign policy and international response to his forays on their soil.