

# Giving back to the roots

India needs to address the concerns of ethnic Indians anywhere in the world, without jeopardising its relations with host countries. A more proactive diaspora policy is required



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The then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee had conceptualised the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas to acknowledge the existence of overseas Indians in the national narrative, give them a connective tissue to their country of origin and make them stakeholders in the country's development. Significantly, he inaugurated the first conclave on January 9, 2003, to commemorate the "expatriate" Mahatma Gandhi's return to India from South Africa after 20 years. On that date in 1915, Gandhiji set foot on home soil and drew on his experiences to rejuvenate India's freedom struggle. Historically, the overseas Indians funded the activities of the Indian National Congress and the Indian National Army in gaining Independence. They also led the Ghadar Movement against the British Raj. Fifteen editions down the line, the Divas, currently being held in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, has even solidified their role in the country of their birth with the theme being the "Role of the Indian Diaspora in Building a New India."

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is faced with an uphill task of redefining India as well as global politics, is poised to give equal opportunities to overseas communities. The large presence (more than 25 million) of the diaspora across the world has compelled New Delhi to positively engage its untapped asset in fulfilling its internal as well as external dreams. Indians abroad have the potential to advance the country's profile through their intellect, finance, expertise and enterprise. They played a critical role during the 1990s, when our economy opened up for the first time, and in 1998, when we were faced with Western economic sanctions following the Pokhran II nuclear tests.

Moreover, in the contemporary globalised world, the diaspora has emerged as a powerful factor in developing workable relations between nation states and been a catalyst in strengthening bilateral relations between India and host nations. It is also playing a pivotal role in India's 'soft power' diplomacy, which is one of the major components of New Delhi's foreign policy strategy. The India-US Civil Nuclear Deal would not have happened if ethnic Indians in the US had not lobbied successfully. Our lobby groups, in fact, have done a lot to change the perception of India on Capitol Hill despite regime changes. And at a time when the world talks about how overseas Chinese plough back resources into their home country, it is significant that India retained its position as the world's top recipient of remittances in 2018, too, with \$80 billion. Interestingly, the total remittances are estimated to be equivalent to 2.8 per cent of India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). According to an Indian Economic Review survey, using National Sample Survey Organisation data, these remittances helped in poverty reduction and changing consumption behaviour in rural areas. Researchers found that receiver families progressed very well in spending on healthcare and amenities that pushed up their ease-of-living index.

Therefore, knowing the potential of the Indian diaspora, Modi deliberately interacted with the overseas community during his trips to the US, Australia, Myanmar, Fiji, Saudi Arabia and UK among others. He even liberalised visa services for them and encouraged them to be partners in new projects.

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necting diaspora communities across generations, particularly trying to revive ties with original settlers, whom we call People of Indian Origin (PIOs). This is a good step as NRIs, also known as the 'new' diaspora and being more affluent, tend to top the headline acts and seem to project themselves as better influencers.

The push for an inclusive approach can be traced as far back as 2000, when the Government set up a high-level committee on Indian diaspora for assessing issues concerning Indians overseas, suggesting new policy and organisational frameworks and recommending a country-specific agenda to intensify India's diplomatic engagement. On the recommendation of that committee, the government implemented numerous policy initiatives, including the decision to celebrate the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas and institute the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman awards. The most significant initiative announced by Vajpayee at the inaugural edition was that PIOs in certain countries would get dual citizenship. However, his party lost the next general elections.

In 2004, the Manmohan Singh Government adopted two significant measures: Establishing a separate Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs and introducing the Overseas Citizenship of India Scheme in August 2005 in response to "dual citizenship." During the 10th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas in 2012, the government announced voting rights to NRIs and some of them exercised their franchise for the first time in the 2014 general election.

However, many in the PIO community now believe that the government totally ignored the Indian diaspora, except when it occasionally addressed certain issues as per its own convenience. They were upset by the government's

handling of racial attacks on Indians in Australia, when New Delhi watched the whole episode as a mute spectator and engaged only in lip service to pressurise Canberra. Another example of the government's apathy was in 2007 when the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) internationalised the wretched condition of ethnic Indians in Malaysia. The government's initial response was tight-lipped. This came as a shocker considering it had given a stern response in 2003, when nearly 300 Indians, mostly IT professionals in Kuala Lumpur, were "maltreated" and "interrogated" by Malaysian authorities. It had warned that any repeat of such incidents would affect bilateral ties.

Nonetheless, one can also argue that the victims of ill-treatment on March 9, 2003 were Indian citizens/NRIs. On the other hand, the protest of November 2007 concerned Malaysian citizens of Indian descent and, therefore, the government refrained from interfering in what could be interpreted as interference in the internal matters of Malaysia. However, the fact of the matter is that most PIOs still consider themselves as Indians and, whenever they are in trouble in the host countries, look at their motherland in protecting their interests. Interestingly, New Delhi also wants to engage the PIOs but without any liabilities. The reason is quite clear — the PIOs, at present, do not create an economic constituency for the Indian government compared to NRIs. Therefore, one must engage in some form of meaningful reciprocal links with PIOs.

This apathy has led to a lesser participation of overseas Indians in successive celebrations of the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas. Nowadays, the diaspora has realised that the event is more about

"Bharat" rather than the "Pravasi." The Modi Government has realised this predicament and, therefore, has made it a biennial instead of an annual event.

Now, it is high time for the government to revise its almost two-decade-old report and chalk out a proactive diaspora policy. In fact, the ruling BJP should not forget its election manifesto of 2014, where it made it clear that it would work with Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) by adopting a proactive diplomacy strategy, to develop what it referred to as "Brand India." It stated that "the NRIs, PIOs and professionals settled abroad are a vast reservoir to articulate the national interests and affairs globally. This resource will be harnessed for strengthening Brand India."

India should be obligated to address the concerns of ethnic Indians anywhere in the world, without jeopardising their relations with the host countries. Only then, the condition of PIOs as well as India will improve globally, as PIOs constitute more than 75 per cent of the Indian diaspora. This is, therefore, an opportune time for New Delhi to substantially, rather than symbolically, recalibrate its diaspora policy that will redefine its terms of engagement. This recalibration can pay rich dividends to its foreign policy objectives and will also help them be a valuable human resource for developing a new India. As the Prime Minister himself acknowledged, while addressing the first PIO Parliamentarians' Conference in New Delhi, law makers from countries ranging from the US and the UK to Reunion Islands in the Indian Ocean could boost India's economic growth.

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