

Status Of Indian Diaspora And Its Soft Power Potential

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Abstract

The current study analyses the Diaspora as a phenomenon and its various parameters and in this context the Indian Diaspora is analysed. In recent times the Indian Diaspora has been greatly instrumental as a soft power tool for the country's socio cultural and economic interests. The study scrutinises the region specific Indian Diaspora and how the Indian Diaspora can be leveraged and factored in the national foreign policy as a soft power tool. The concept of 'Hyphenated Identities' also has been analysed in this context.

Introduction

World over trans migration of people of one region or country to other region or country is a phenomenon very frequently witnessed. The reasons attributed are inter alia, search of highly paying jobs, lack or shortage of opportunities in a particular region or country forcing people to migrate, livelihood issues etc. The term connoted the people of common origin separated by geographical boundaries.

Diasporas are a specific type of transnational communities marked by migrations, continuity, rupture, hybridity, and dual or multiple belongingness, which are manifested through economic, political and social interaction with the home and the host land simultaneously (Pande 2013). Rather than being lodged in either the home or the host land, the diasporas are embedded in both cultures, and in the process negotiate and create new hybridised cultures and identities that intersect nations, races, class and gender (see Bhabha 1994; Sheffer 1986; Clifford 1994; Safran 1991; Cohen 1997).)Diasporas can be conceptualised on the basis of four basic characteristics or core elements:

1. Cross-border migration or dispersion and settlement, which implies voluntary or involuntary cross-border movement leading to permanent or long-term settlement.
2. Host land participation, which signifies not only residence but also participation in the socio-economic and political processes of the receiving country.
3. Homeland consciousness, which can also be termed as continuity or the manifestation of 'roots'.

4. Creation and re-creation of a multi-locational ‘self’ or identity which involves re-creating an identity that draws from both home and host lands, and which is hybrid and distinct in itself. (Pande 2013: 59-65)

The ‘Indian diaspora’ is an overarching term which includes a wide variety of people who have emigrated from India over a long period of time. The diversity in the Indian diaspora is not only representative of the diverse Indian social set-up (in terms of region, religion, language, caste, creed, and so on) and heterogeneity in the phases and patterns of migration, but also emerges out of the host country variations (see Pande 2013). While the government definition puts the Indian diaspora into three categories — ‘Non-Resident Indians’ (NRIs), ‘People of Indian Origin’ (PIOs) and ‘Overseas Indian Citizens’ (OICs), on the basis of history and the nature of migration the Indian diaspora can be divided into the ‘old diaspora’ that emerged out of colonial migrations, and the ‘new diaspora’ that emerged out of post-colonial migrations. There are further diversities within these categories which have their own specific identities and relations with India. The old diaspora consists of: labourers under indentured and similar systems; government-sponsored junior officers and service providers; and the ‘free passage migrants’, which included traders and skilled professionals. The new diaspora mainly includes: highly skilled and skilled professionals who migrated to Western countries; semi-skilled and unskilled workers in the Gulf countries; student migrants; political diasporas; and the mixed races.

The story of the old diaspora starts with the abolition of slavery in British, French and Dutch colonies in 1834, 1846 and 1873, respectively. To meet the acute shortage of workers in the sugar, tea, coffee, cocoa, rice and rubber plantations the colonialists started to take indentured labour from India (Rath 2010, pp. 101-102). This notorious system, which Tinker (1974) calls ‘a new system of slavery’, was dehumanising and came under sharp criticism soon after it was introduced. The struggle against indenture became part of India’s struggle for independence. Ultimately, further recruitments to the colonies were stopped and by 1920 the indenture system officially came to an end. However, there are others who give a more complex and nuanced picture, which differed from one colony to another. While acknowledging the fact of exploitation and oppression, they maintain that many of the formerly indentured subsequently became quite successful and prosperous.

Around 3.5 million Indians were recruited under the system and went to countries and regions such as South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Madagascar, Zambia, Zanzibar, Uganda, Malawi, Seychelles, Réunion and Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Suriname, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia, Belize, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Grenada, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Jamaica. These labourers were recruited under an agreement which was abbreviated as ‘Girmit’, and thus the indentured labourers came to be known as ‘Girmitiyas’. The contract of indenture was for five years and extendable again for five years after which the labourers were free either to return or to settle down in the colonies. At the end of the period of indenture, the majority of the labourers opted to stay on in their respective colonies instead of returning to India. They settled down by taking land and engaging in agriculture. This was encouraged by the colonial powers as it augmented the workforce and also because the colonialists were reluctant to pay for their repatriation. In Mauritius the Indian immigrants bought marginal lands from the sugar barons

who faced financial difficulties after 1870, and emerged as affluent farmers (Vahed and Desai 2012, p.205). Apart from the government-sponsored migrations, there were also self-sponsored migrants called ‘free-passage Indians’. The majority of them belonged to the trading communities or were skilled and semi-skilled professionals from all over India. Indian traders and entrepreneurs established highly successful businesses across Asian and African countries. Such migrations were largely rotational, but permanent settlements followed the Second World War, especially in colonies where the indentured, kangani or maistry labourers were present.

Kangani or Maistry systems developed in southern India and were based on a network of headmen or middlemen who recruited and supervised the labourers. These labourers were not bound by a contract but were brought under a debt net by advance payment. Under this system 1.7 million labourers were sent to Malaya, 1.6 million to Burma and 1 million to Ceylon. These systems ceased to operate by 1940. Thus began the formation of the Indian diaspora which is now classified as the old diaspora. Other than the indenture migrations, highly skilled migrations to the Western countries also started during the colonial period and became frequent after India’s independence. Marked by what has been termed the ‘brain drain’, this process came under severe criticism because this elite, highly affluent diaspora mostly obtained their degrees from the publicly subsidised institutions in India. Another group in the new diaspora is the skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labour migration to the Gulf and the South-East Asian countries. The oil boom in West Asia during the 1980s saw an upsurge in infrastructure building activities, which attracted a large number of migrant workers from India. Although such migrations did not result in permanent settlements, they form a significant section under the category of NRIs and are sending a major share of the remittance received by India. Other than this, student migration has also become one of the major pathways to permanent or long-term settlement leading to the formation of the diaspora. Among the G20 countries, India has the largest number of highly educated emigrants. Their number more than doubled in ten years reaching 2.2 million-in 2010/11, which is much ahead of China’s 1.7 million (OECD 2017). Indian women, who have been part of almost all the sections and streams of people moving beyond Indian borders, are an important part of the Indian diaspora. Initially, Indian women migrated mostly as part of family migrations but now they also migrate independently as semi-skilled, skilled and highly skilled professionals.

According to a United Nations report on migration trends, India has the largest diaspora population in the world. In 2015 there were 16 million people from India who were living outside of their country, compared to 12 million from Mexico. "The report said that the worldwide number of international migrants, defined as ‘persons living in a country other than where they were born”, reached 244 million in 2015, which is a 41 per cent increase compared to 2000 (the figure includes almost 20 million refugees).’ However it is very difficult to give an exact figure for the Indian diaspora because there are Various categories of Indians who migrated (or were taken abroad) during different periods. For example, the above estimate does not include the descendants of the Indians who were taken as indentured labour during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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According to the figures released by the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, in 2016 there were more than 30 million overseas Indians.[®] There are countries (we are referring mainly to former British colonies) where people of Indian origin constitute a significant proportion of the population, for example, 68.3 per cent (885000) in Mauritius, 43.5 per cent (327000) in Guyana, 40 per cent (525000) in Guyana, 40 per cent (340000) in Fiji, and 27.4 per cent (135000) in Suriname. There are other countries where the percentage may not be very high, but people of Indian origin are considerable in terms of absolute numbers, for example, 1.3 million (2.7 per cent) in South Africa. Indians have also done very well and are an important part of the developed countries of North America and Europe. There are more than 3.1 million Indian diaspora (1 per cent of the population of the United States), 1.2 million in Canada (3.5 per cent), nearly 1.5 million in the United Kingdom (2.3 per cent), more than 300894 in Australia (2 per cent), and 105000 in New Zealand (2.6 per cent). Overall the Indian diaspora numbers about 2.2 million in Europe, nearly 5.2 million in Asia (omitting Nepal and the Gulf countries), 6.5 million Indian workers in the Gulf, and more than 2.8 million in Africa.?

This clearly shows the widespread presence of the Indian diaspora. India ‘not only has the largest diaspora, but it is also the country which receives maximum remittances, at \$70 billion (followed by China at \$62 billion).?’

Each of these groups manifests a dual belonging or a consciousness that originates from diverse Indian roots but has developed its own unique features influenced by a wide variety of conditions and locations.

These ‘hyphenated’, hybrid identities are very often more prominent and defined than the Indian identity, and provide immense spaces for creative expressions. Prea Persaud (2015) believes that, ‘A hyphenated identity is the characteristic of the diaspora which forces migrants to choose their loyalties. It is not a state but a process in which the migrant continually tries to bring together his or her history with his or her present.’ Vijay Mishra (2005) maintains that diasporas do not feel comfortable with their non-hyphenated identities on their passports, and want to explore the meaning of the hyphen. He makes a very profound statement: ‘All diasporas are unhappy but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way’ (Mishra 1996, p. 189).

Modern-day technology and the cyberspace have made the diasporic spaces even ‘more real and effective. The Indian diaspora, despite its diverse framework and distance from the mother country, derive a commonality from their Indian origin, and the consciousness of their cultural heritage. The growing connectivity with India, and New Delhi’s efforts to engage the diaspora with the idea of a united yet diverse India, has further boosted the process. It has led to a kind of ‘cultural renaissance’ (Jayaram 2004) or reinvention and reassertion of Indian identity among the diasporic Indians. However, the Indian identity is not homogeneous and is manifested in different forms, and hence the soft power roles of the different categories of the Indian diaspora are also different.

Conclusion

In general there is a strong Indian Diaspora and it has contributed immensely not only to the country’s economy in terms of remittances but also as a soft power tool for India’s geopolitical socio cultural and economic interests. In fact they are our cultural ambassadors. The Government

of India policy is also in sink with this concept and during recent times distinct efforts have been envisaged on the part of the government to make inclusive efforts to leverage Indian Diaspora for India's development and growth.

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