

INDIAN DIASPORA: HISTORIES AND PRESENT

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ABSTRACT

The NRI and PIO population across the world is estimated at over 30 million. As per a UNDP's 2010 report, after China, India has the largest diaspora in the world, estimated at 25 million, besides being one of the largest "sending" nations in Asia, with an emigration rate of 0.8%. Out of which, 72% work in other Asian countries. Also, as per UNESCO Institute for Statistics the number of Indian students abroad tripled from 51,000 in 1999 to over 153,000 in 2007, making India second after China among the world's largest sending countries for tertiary students. Since 2003, the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (Non-resident India Day) sponsored by Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, is being celebrated on January 9 each year in India, to "mark the contribution of Overseas Indian community in the development of India". The day commemorates the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi in India from South Africa, and during three-day convention held around the day, a forum for issues concerning the Indian Diaspora is held and the annual Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Awards are given away. As of January 2006, The Indian government has introduced the "Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI)" scheme to allow a limited form of dual citizenship to Indians, NRIs and PIOs for the first time since independence in 1947. The PIO Card scheme is expected to be phased out in coming years in favour of OCI.

INTRODUCTION

Diaspora is a word of Greek origin that means scattering or sowing of seeds. It is used to refer to people who leave their native lands to live in other parts of the world for employment, business or any other purpose.

Indian Diaspora is a generic term used for addressing people who have migrated from the territories that are currently within the borders of the Republic of India. It constitutes NRIs (Non-resident Indians) and PIOs (Persons of Indian origins). The Indian Diaspora is estimated to be

over 30 million. The Government of India recognises the importance of Indian Diaspora as it has brought economic, financial, and global benefits to India.

The Indian Diaspora today constitutes an important, and in some respects unique, force in world culture. The section caters to the cognitive needs of the Indian Diaspora by providing an in-depth knowledge of the various schemes and incentives offered by the Government of India to them.

CURRENT SCENARIO

The Indian Diaspora today constitutes an important, and in some respects unique, force in world culture. The origins of the modern Indian Diaspora lie mainly in the subjugation of India by the British and its incorporation into the British Empire. Indians were taken over as indentured labor to far-flung parts of the empire in the nineteenth-century, a circumstance to which the modern Indian populations of Fiji, Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, Surinam, Malaysia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and other places attest in their own peculiar ways. Over two million Indian men fought on behalf of the empire in numerous wars, including the Boer War and the two World Wars, and some remained behind to claim the land on which they had fought as their own. As if in emulation of their ancestors, many Gujarati traders once again left for East Africa in large numbers in the early part of the twentieth century. Finally, in the post-World War II period, the dispersal of Indian labor and professionals has been a nearly world-wide phenomenon. Indians, and other South Asians, provided the labor that helped in the reconstruction of war-torn Europe, particularly the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, and in more recent years unskilled labor from South Asia has been the main force in the transformation of the physical landscape of much of the Middle East. Meanwhile, in countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, Indians have made their presence visibly felt in the professions.

FUTURE OF INDIAN DIASPORA

The future of Indians in the Diaspora, then, revolves upon two modalities of thought and action. First, diasporic Indians must, without necessarily offering their allegiance to the idea of the nation-state, attempt a coalition-style politics with other communities and groups of those who are not only marginalized, peripheral, and disenfranchised, but whose knowledge systems have, through the processes of colonialism and management, and with the aid of Enlightenment notions of science, rationality, and progress, been rendered powerless and superfluous. For instance, Indians must not, as they most regrettably do, consider the so-called demise of the black family in the U.S. (and elsewhere) as indicative of the moral degradation of black people, and smugly contrast this with the loving adherence to family life said to be ingrained in all Indians. The retreat into the family home, the concerted refusal to engage with a wider notion of the 'public', and the mindless replication of 'timeless' traditions have been among the more distressing characteristics of Indian existence abroad, particularly in the affluent West. We cannot but fail to recognize, when we consider the story of Indian indentured labor, that in the mockery of black people or in the

constant humiliation of Hispanics in the U.S., there is also the humiliation of Indians and all those who have been victimized by dominant categories of knowledge as much as by brute force.

EMIGRATION FROM THE REPUBLIC OF INDIA

After the 1970s oil boom in the Middle East, numerous Indians emigrated to work in the Gulf countries. With modern transportation and expectations, this was on a contractual basis rather than permanent as in the 19th century cases. These Gulf countries have a common policy of not naturalizing non-Arabs, even if they are born there.

The 1990s software boom and rising economy in the USA attracted numerous Indians who emigrated to the United States of America. Today, the USA has the third largest number of Indians.

INDIA'S DIASPORA POLICIES

Within the last decade, the Indian government has shown significant interest in the diaspora and established a number of diaspora policies. India's increasing interest in its diaspora has three major factors.

First, India once had a closed economy that did not encourage foreign contributions, businesses, or investment. When the government liberalized the economy in 1991, diasporic Indians became more useful as agents of trade, investment, and technology.

Second, Indian foreign policy began to recognize the value of the diaspora in industrialized countries, especially the United States, for public diplomacy.

And third, only from the mid-1990s, ethnic Indians started surfacing as high-level executives of multinational corporations. The general success of the community, especially in the United States and Canada, and the community's positive influence on the overall idea of Indian qualities led successive Indian governments to take a more proactive approach.

Since 2003, the government has hosted an annual diaspora conference, the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, that is designed to serve as a platform for interaction between overseas Indians, the Indian government, and interested segments of the Indian society, such as businessmen and cultural and charity organizations.

High-level political leaders, including the prime minister, the president, and union ministers, address 1,000 to 1,500 overseas Indians on topics such as investment and philanthropic activities in India as well as concerns of the diaspora communities the world over.

Established in 2004, the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs coordinates activities aimed at reaching out to the diaspora. These include the "Know India Program" for diaspora youth and annual awards for eminent diaspora personalities.

The government also set up a Global Advisory Council to the Prime Minister, consisting of diasporic scholars, scientists, politicians, and businessmen, in 2009.

In 1999, India introduced the Person of Indian Origin Card (PIO card) and in 2005 Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI). Both grant practical parity with Indian citizens but do not permit voting, standing for election, or government employment.

PIO cards are available to former Indian citizens and their non-Indian-born descendants (up to four generations) while OCI is limited to those whose parents or grandparents once had or were eligible for Indian citizenship on January 26, 1950. Also, OCI grants a lifelong visa and does not require reporting to the police for stays longer than 180 days.

As of March 2009, the Indian government had granted almost 400,000 OCI cards, 43 percent of them through Indian consulates in the United States and 13 percent in the United Kingdom.

With the financial resources of the diaspora in mind, the government amended investment laws and established the Overseas Indian Facilitation Centre in 2007 to make it easier for Indians abroad to invest. In addition, the Reserve Bank of India has procedures in place so that NRIs and PIOs can invest in Indian companies.

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