



From Homelands to New Horizons: Exploring the Transnational Journey of the Indian Diaspora

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Abstract

The Indian diaspora, characterized by its vast geographical spread and cultural diversity, represents a dynamic and influential transnational community with deep-rooted ties to its ancestral homeland. From historical migrations to contemporary patterns of global mobility, the Indian diaspora's transnational connections have played a pivotal role in shaping individual identities, community formations, and global networks. By exploring the historical roots, socio-economic dimensions, and contemporary manifestations of diasporic transnationalism, this article provides insights into the multifaceted nature of the Indian diaspora's transnational ties and their implications for global socio-economic development.

Keywords: Indian diaspora, Transnationalism, Migration, Identity, Globalization

India's diaspora is one of the largest and most diverse in the world, with a significant global presence that spans various regions. The Indian diaspora refers to people of Indian origin or descent who reside outside India. Their migration has been driven by historical, economic, and social factors, resulting in a widespread and varied distribution across the globe. From historical migrations to contemporary patterns of global mobility, the Indian diaspora's transnational connections have



played a pivotal role in shaping individual identities, community formations, and global networks. This study is purely based on secondary data. Through a comprehensive analysis of literature and historical records, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the Indian diaspora's role in shaping global societies and its enduring connections to its ancestral homelands.

Defining Diaspora

The term Diaspora has its roots around the Jewish experience. Khaching Tololyan, the editor of *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, makes a study of the origins and the historical development of the term and discuss how the Jewish diaspora becomes the paradigm of the diasporic phenomenon. Some scholars recognize that the Jewish tradition is at the heart of any definition of the term diaspora. Over the past decade or so, however, Diaspora has become a term of self-identification among many diverse groups who themselves or whose for bearers migrated from one place to another or to multiple places. Many thinkers have considered the phenomenon in considerable profundity and projected several more encompassing definitions. The earliest definition is Armstrong's: "Any ethnic collectivity which lacks a territorial base within a given polity, i.e., is a relatively small community throughout all portions of the polity" (John Armstrong, (June 1976). From this definition three features can be identified, ethnic identity, lack of territorial base and as a minority. The second feature brings the wandering groups and gypsies also in the category of diaspora. In the introduction of the Book *Modern Diasporas in International Politics* (1986) Gabriel Sheffer proposed a simple definition: "modern diasporas are ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin- their home lands" (Gabriel Sheffer,1986). Through this definition he tried to uphold the link with the home land and subtract the element of nomadism as proposed by Armstrong. In his *Diaspora Politics At Home Abroad* published in 2003, Sheffer revisited at length the definition of what he now calls "ethno-national diasporas". He argues that Indians, Chinese, Japanese, Africans, African-Americans, Jews, Palestinians, Greeks, Romanians, Armenians, and numerous other groups permanently residing outside of their countries of origin, but maintaining contacts with their old homelands are members of ethno national diasporas (Gabriel Sheffer,2003).

Contemporary Discourse on Diaspora

In modern discourse, notions of diaspora are discussed in relation to ideas of



postmodern mobility- concepts of nation and the nation-states, identity, ethnicity, transnationalism and migrancy. Vertovec finds the term today "...used to describe practically any population that is considered 'deterritorialized' or 'transnational' – that is, which has originated in a land other than that in which it currently resides and whose social, economic and political networks cross the borders of nation-states or indeed span the globe" (Vertovec,1997). In recent years, intellectuals and activists from within these populations have increasingly begun to utilize the term 'diaspora' to describe them. It became a loose reference for categories such as immigrants, guest workers, ethnic and 'racial' minorities, refugees, expatriates and travelers.

Post modern definitions of diaspora focus more on the symbolic use of the term "diaspora". Now the term 'diaspora' has expanded its frame of reference to represent 'exemplary cases of multiple and hybrid subjectivity for those whose identities have been disrupted by migration'(Ian Ang, 2001). This approach calls for an emphasis on the diversity and hybridity that diasporas can produce and with which they can confront societies. As such 'diaspora' has come to epitomize our contemporary transnational, intercultural experience. This expanded frame of reference does not mean that 'diaspora' has automatically moved beyond traditional associations with migrants, refugees and exiles but rather that it has collected a whole new set of connections to terms like identity, subjectivity, other, stranger, hybridity, diaspora, diasporisation, transnational belonging, travelling, nomadism, displacement, imagined community, contact zones and border crossing (Stuart Hall,1996)

The term diaspora refers today used not only to such classic groups as Jews, Greeks, and Armenians, but to much wider categories which reflect processes of politically motivated uprooting and moving of populations, voluntary migration, global communications and transport (Ajaya Kumar Sahoo, Brij Maharaj, 2007). The term has acquired a semantic realm and now encompasses a varied array of groups such as political refugees, alien residents, guest workers, immigrants, expellees, ethnic and racial minorities, and overseas communities. Indeed, the term diaspora has acquired metaphoric implication and is used more and more by displaced persons, who feel, maintain, invent or revive a connection with a prior home (William Safran. 1991). In all of these definitions it is important to highlight the affective expressive components. Diaspora discourse reflects a sense of being part of an ongoing transnational network that includes dispersed people who retain a sense of their uniqueness and an interest in their homeland. Diaspora is a social construct founded on feeling, consciousness, memory, mythology, history,



meaningful narratives, group identity, longings, dreams, symbolic and virtual elements, all of which play a role in establishing a diaspora reality.

Indian Diaspora: An Overview

Indian Diaspora today characterize a significant factor, and in some respect unique force in world culture. People of the Indian subcontinent have been known to have migrated to different countries for various reasons at various periods of its history. More than 5000 years ago saints and seers moved in different directions-not with a sword in their hand or an army for conquering new land but with deep knowledge of philosophy and the rich Indian cultural heritage. This was an early phase of migration from India though not in big numbers but competent persons who spread the message of Indian culture to the world. Another phase of Indian migration could be that of the traders. The Indian traders went to other countries with their commodities, sold the material and came back to their own country. Yet another wave of migration from India was noticed during the British period. A new system of labor contract, the indenture system, was introduced by the clever white plantation owners under which the worker went on contract of 5 to 10 years on a very meager salary (Hari Sharan Chhabra, March 2001). These indentured laborers were mostly illiterate and belonged to lower strata of society. A modern wave of migration occurred after the Second World War. Many highly educated professionals left India to find jobs as teachers, lawyers, doctors and nurses in Europe (especially the UK and Germany), US and Canada (Gijsbert Oonk (2007). Following the discovery of oil, heavy migration of semiskilled population to the Middle East began since 1970. The arrival of globalization witnessed the exodus of many IT professionals to western countries.

Although Indian migration has been taking place for centuries, but never before in history, India witnessed such massive movements of people from India to other parts of the world as in the 19th and 20th centuries. Large scale migration of Indians took place during this period to the developed countries like UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Apart from India, Indians from other parts of the world especially from the former British colonies also started flowing to these countries. Diverse streams of Indian population have migrated across national frontiers, many only temporarily yet nearly every migration flow leads to long term or permanent settlement. The long period of stay and settlement of immigrants in the host country will often give rise to the formation of distinct ethnic communities, which may in certain circumstances become ethnic minorities. In terms of sheer numbers, they perhaps make the largest group, next to the Chinese. The people of Indian



origin settled in 70 countries constitute more than 40% of the population in Fiji, Mauritius, Trinidad, Guyana and Surinam. They are smaller minorities in Malaysia, South Africa, Srilanka, Uganda, UK, USA, and Canada (Chandrasekhar Bhat, 2009). Among the immigrants of diverse nationalities, overseas Indians constitute a sizeable segment. The people of Indian origin form the single largest ethnic community in Fiji (49%), Guyana (53%), Mauritius (74%), Trinidad and Tobago (40%), Surinam (37%) (N. Jayaram, Yogesh Atal, 2004). They form substantial minority communities in Asian countries like Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Srilanka, and in South Africa and East Africa. They have a significant presence in United States, United Kingdom, Australia and Canada.

As of 2020, India boasts the world's largest diaspora population, comprising a staggering 18 million individuals residing outside their native land, as reported by the United Nations. The UN's 'International Migration 2020 Highlights' publication, compiled by the Population Division of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), underscores that the United Arab Emirates, the United States, and Saudi Arabia are among the primary host countries for migrants originating from India. The report delineates the diverse spatial distribution of transnational populations, noting that India's diaspora, renowned as the largest globally, spans numerous prominent destination countries.

In 2020, 18 million persons from India were living outside their country of birth. Other countries with a large diaspora population included Mexico and Russia (11 million each), China (10 million) and Syria (8 million). India's large diaspora is distributed across the United Arab Emirates (3.5 million), the United States of America (2.7 million) and Saudi Arabia (2.5 million). Other countries hosting large numbers of Indian migrants included Australia, Canada, Kuwait, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar and the United Kingdom.

In this circumstance, an important question arises as to who belongs to Indian diaspora? The High-Level Committee of Indian Diaspora under the Chairmanship of Dr. L.M Singhvi, studied about Indian diaspora and in its report stated that "the term Indian Diaspora includes, in its ambit both NRIs and PIOs. NRIs or Non-Resident Indians are Indian citizens, holding Indian passports, and residing abroad for an indefinite period, whether for employment, or for carrying on any business or vocation, or for any other purpose. On the other hand, the PIO or Persons of Indian Origin is applied to a foreign citizen of Indian origin or descent. Technically, he/she would belong to one of the following three categories, namely:

- A person who, at any time, has held an Indian passport.



- Any one, either of whose parents or any of whose grand parents or great grand parents, was born in and was permanently residing in India as defined by the Government of India Act, 1935 and other territories, that become part of India, thereafter, provided he/ she was not at any time a citizen of the countries referred to in Para 2 (b) of MHA notification No. 26011/4/98-IC.1 dated 30th March 1999.
- The spouse of a citizen of India or a person of Indian origin covered in the above two categories of PIOs.”

The term Diaspora originally used to describe the dispersed Jews, now used in a more generic sense for communities of migrants living or settled permanently in other countries, who are aware of its origin and identities and maintain home land linkages. The identity and home land linkages are the most important common factor that various theorists of diaspora had agreed.

The High-Level Committee on Indian Diaspora set up by the Government of India estimated in 2000 that there are over 20 million Indian diaspora in 136 countries. During this century emigration from India has been mainly to the North America, Oceania, Europe and West Asia. This was mainly a post- Second World War phenomenon. Phenomenal changes in the political and economic scenario of the receiving and sending countries led to the new wave of international migration. Bringing these various migration patterns together under the unifying label of Indian diaspora is not an easy task. There was a shift during this period in the direction and magnitude of international migration and composition of the migrants. Furthermore, there is a wide variety of religious, regional and ethnic backgrounds of the migrants. Generally speaking, the immigrants in various countries are truly presented as mirror of India itself. India is diverse, and so too are its migrants.

In emerging diaspora nations, Indians constitute a minority, yet their presence resonates with prosperity and success across various spheres, including economics, academia, media, film, and information technology. Notably, the accomplishments of Indian professionals, entrepreneurs, CEOs, scientists, and artists have garnered international recognition, fostering trust in India’s intellectual prowess and work ethic. This success has played a pivotal role in shaping India’s global image as a hub of skilled and industrious professionals. Moreover, the Indian diaspora has emerged as a formidable advocate for India’s interests in their host countries. For instance, during pivotal events such as the Kargil war and India’s nuclear tests, as well as in lobbying efforts to block the Burton amendment and facilitating agreements like the civil nuclear cooperation pact between India and the US, the Indian diaspora



in the US mobilized as a pressure group to promote Indian interests. Additionally, many diaspora members are first-generation immigrants with close ties to India, leading them to actively contribute through remittances sent back to their families and relatives.

The contributions of the Indian diaspora extend beyond remittances, encompassing investment, foreign trade, technology transfer, and cultural exchange, which have significantly contributed to India's development. Leveraging their strength and potential, the diaspora could serve as a strategic asset in enhancing India's bilateral relations with host countries, further strengthening economic ties and cultural diplomacy. In essence, the Indian diaspora represents not only a source of economic prosperity but also a valuable asset in advancing India's global engagement and fostering mutual understanding and cooperation between nations. Their continued involvement and contributions are vital in shaping India's trajectory as a global leader in the 21st century.

Socio-Economic Dimensions of Transnationalism

The transnational ties of the Indian diaspora are deeply intertwined with socio-economic processes, including remittances, investment flows, and knowledge transfer. Remittances, or financial transfers sent by diaspora members to their families in India, constitute a significant source of income for many households and play a crucial role in poverty alleviation and economic development. Additionally, diaspora entrepreneurs and professionals contribute to economic growth and innovation through investment ventures, technology transfer, and skills exchange. In 2017, India received \$69 billion in global remittances, with approximately 56% coming from Gulf states. The seven million-strong Indian community in the Gulf/West Asian region is equivalent to a thirtieth state of India, with a population comparable to states like Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh (Haider, 2016).

India emerged as the global leader in remittance receipts in 2016, amassing a substantial sum of US\$ 62.7 billion, according to Challagalla (2018). Remarkably, data from the Reserve Bank of India for the fiscal year 2016-17 indicates that the majority of remittances to India were channeled through private sector banks, accounting for 74.2 percent of the total, followed by public sector banks at 17.3 percent and foreign banks at 8.5 percent. Notably, the primary sources of these remittances were the United Arab Emirates, contributing 26.9 percent, followed closely by the United States at 22.9 percent, Saudi Arabia at 11.6 percent, Qatar at 6.5 percent, Kuwait at 5.5 percent, and Oman at 3.0 percent. The remaining remittances



originate from various other countries. The remittances from the diaspora especially from the gulf countries have contributed immensely in the nation's development. India for more than a decade now has been the top most remittance receiving country in the world. As per World Bank Report of 2020, India was the recipient of approximately \$83.332 billion dollar in 2019. These remittances play a major role in the economy of the country and to maintain a foreign exchange reserve as well as essential financial source for the respective family receiving those remittances.

Furthermore, the distribution of remittances within India reveals interesting trends. Kerala emerged as the top recipient state, capturing a significant share of 19.0 percent, followed by Maharashtra at 16.7 percent, Karnataka at 15.0 percent, and Tamil Nadu at 8.0 percent. These statistics underscore the critical role of remittances in bolstering the economies of both states and individuals across India, facilitating economic development, livelihood sustenance, and household welfare. The Indian diaspora's significant presence and contributions in these regions further enhance India's soft power and diplomatic influence on the global stage. The Indian diaspora's transnational networks also facilitate the circulation of ideas, expertise, and business opportunities, fostering entrepreneurship and cross-border collaborations.

Cultural and Social Dimensions of Transnationalism

Beyond economic interactions, the transnational ties of the Indian diaspora encompass cultural, social, and political dimensions that shape diasporic identities and community formations. Cultural practices, including language, cuisine, music, and religious rituals, serve as markers of diasporic identity and facilitate cultural exchange between diaspora members and their homeland. Social networks, both offline and online, provide avenues for diaspora members to maintain connections, share experiences, and mobilize resources for collective action. Furthermore, transnational political engagement enables diaspora communities to advocate for issues of importance to their homeland, including human rights, environmental sustainability, and social justice.

The Indian diaspora serves as an influential cultural emissary, disseminating the multifaceted essence of Indian heritage across borders. By championing classical arts such as Bharatanatyam and Kathak, commemorating vibrant festivals like Diwali, and propelling the global allure of Bollywood cinema, diaspora members actively contribute to the global dissemination and perpetuation of Indian cultural traditions. Indian gastronomy, renowned for its diverse array of flavors, has garnered



worldwide acclaim, owing much to the influence of diaspora communities. Moreover, the diaspora assumes a pivotal role in popularizing traditional disciplines like yoga and Ayurveda on the global stage. Through platforms such as literary festivals, technological innovations, and philanthropic initiatives, the Indian diaspora acts as a cultural conduit, fostering mutual appreciation across diverse societies and ensuring the enduring vitality of India's cultural ethos on a global scale.

Contemporary Manifestations of Transnationalism

In the era of globalization, the transnational ties of the Indian diaspora have evolved in response to technological advancements, geopolitical shifts, and changing patterns of migration. Digital technologies, such as social media platforms and communication apps, have facilitated virtual connectivity and transnational activism, enabling diaspora members to engage with their homeland and global issues in real-time. Geopolitical developments, including the rise of India as a global economic powerhouse and the increasing influence of Indian diaspora communities in host countries, have reshaped the dynamics of diasporic transnationalism. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the resilience and adaptability of diaspora networks, as diaspora members mobilized resources and expertise to support relief efforts in India and other affected regions.

Indian Diaspora as a Soft power instrument

Diaspora is an economic, cultural, political, emotional and social investment. Its significance is reflected in three areas-Political lobbying, economic development, and knowledge transfer (Mohan, 2003). Its role as a credibility enhancing agent for economic actors back home and its economic contribution to the host country gives enough space for political maneuvering to influence the policy decisions relating to their country of origin. The Cultural linkages based on people between two countries helps in opening several channels of communication between them. Today, a country like India cannot afford to neglect the interest of its diaspora which contributes massively in to the Indian economy through financial flows, in the form of remittances and Foreign Direct Investment.

The Indian diaspora serves as a potent soft power instrument for India by projecting the nation's influence globally. Spread across diverse fields, the diaspora contributes significantly to cultural exchange, economic growth, and diplomatic influence. Bollywood's global appeal, financial remittances, and successful professionals showcase India's cultural richness and intellectual prowess. The diaspora's representation in foreign governments enhances India's diplomatic



leverage, while their cultural diplomacy fosters understanding and goodwill. Within the spectrum of soft power, different categories of the Indian diaspora play distinct roles. The highly skilled elite Indian diaspora residing in Western countries, for instance, contributes significantly to India's soft power by showcasing their scientific and professional prowess. This group has been instrumental in reshaping the perception of India and its people, adding a new dimension to the country's global image. Through economic contributions, educational achievements, and the promotion of Indian values, the diaspora acts as a bridge, strengthening India's global reputation and forging connections that extend beyond geographical boundaries. These diaspora communities, culturally distinct and deeply rooted in their ancestral land, have maintained strong cultural connections with India, contributing significantly to India's soft power.

In contemporary times, economic development has emerged as a central pillar of India's foreign policy. The nation's pursuit of national interest now hinges significantly on the recognition that its stature in the global arena will be determined by its economic and military strength. India has adopted a pragmatic approach, backing its political and economic diplomacy with soft power initiatives in international relations. Notably, India stands out as one of the few nations wielding substantial soft power assets.

India's rich spiritual heritage has drawn admirers from around the world, with its spiritual leaders traversing the globe to propagate practices such as yoga and mysticism. Additionally, Bollywood's global reach has played a pivotal role in enhancing India's influence abroad, often surpassing the impact of governmental efforts. Beyond entertainment, India's cultural exports, including classical and popular music, cuisine, and the growing influence of its writers and intellectuals, have bolstered its soft power credentials.

However, the most significant instrument of India's soft power lies in its vast diaspora spread across the globe. Indian diaspora communities serve as crucial sources of support for the Indian government, wielding influence and commanding respect in their countries of residence. Their contributions have elevated India's standing abroad and expanded its sphere of influence. Recognizing this potential, Indian foreign policy has embarked on a new initiative to harness the strength of its diaspora to bolster its external relations worldwide.

The Indian diaspora offers several avenues for strengthening India's global engagement. Firstly, diaspora communities constitute lucrative markets for trade and investment opportunities, potentially bolstering India's economy and fostering



innovation and knowledge transfer. Secondly, the diaspora serves as a formidable lobbying and pressure group, advocating for Indian interests and mobilizing support on key issues. Furthermore, diaspora engagement can facilitate the development of cultural linkages between India and host countries, enriching bilateral relations and promoting mutual understanding. In essence, the Indian diaspora represents a significant asset in advancing India's foreign policy objectives. By leveraging the influence and resources of its diaspora communities, India can enhance its economic, political, and cultural ties with the world, fostering cooperation and goodwill on the global stage. The diaspora serves as a bridge between nations, strengthening bonds and paving the way for collaborative endeavors in the pursuit of shared prosperity and progress.

Conclusion

From historical migrations driven by economic, social, and political factors to contemporary patterns of global mobility, the Indian diaspora's journey has been marked by resilience, adaptability, and enduring connections to its ancestral homelands. This academic study, based on a comprehensive analysis of literature and historical records, sheds light on the multifaceted dimensions of the Indian diaspora's transnational engagement and its profound impact on global societies. The concept of diaspora has evolved over time, rooted initially in the experiences of the Jewish community but now encompassing a broad spectrum of migrant populations dispersed across the globe. The Indian diaspora, comprising both Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs), spans diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds, yet maintains strong sentimental and material ties with their homeland. As a result, the term diaspora has become emblematic of our contemporary transnational experience, reflecting a sense of belonging, consciousness, and shared identity among dispersed communities.

The socio-economic dimensions of transnationalism within the Indian diaspora are profound, manifesting through remittances, investment flows, and knowledge transfer. Remittances, in particular, serve as a vital lifeline for many households in India, contributing to poverty alleviation and economic development. The distribution of remittances within India underscores their role in regional development, with states like Kerala, Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu emerging as major recipients. Moreover, diaspora entrepreneurs and professionals play a pivotal role in driving economic growth, innovation, and entrepreneurship, both in host countries and India. Culturally, the Indian diaspora serves as a dynamic cultural extension, promoting Indian heritage and traditions on a global scale.



From classical arts like Bharatanatyam and Kathak to vibrant festivals like Diwali, diaspora communities actively contribute to the preservation and dissemination of Indian culture. Additionally, the diaspora's influence extends to areas such as cuisine, music, cinema, yoga, and Ayurveda, enriching global cultural landscapes and fostering cross-cultural understanding.

Politically, the Indian diaspora wields significant influence, acting as a credible advocate for India's interests in host countries. Through lobbying efforts, advocacy campaigns, and grassroots activism, diaspora communities have played a pivotal role in shaping policy decisions and advancing India's diplomatic agenda. Moreover, the diaspora serves as a bridge between nations, facilitating economic cooperation, cultural exchange, and people-to-people connections.

Looking ahead, the Indian diaspora holds immense potential as a soft power instrument for India, projecting the nation's influence and values on the global stage. By leveraging the strength and resources of its diaspora communities, India can enhance its economic, political, and cultural ties with the world, fostering mutual understanding and cooperation. The diaspora's continued engagement and contributions will be instrumental in shaping India's trajectory as a global leader in the 21st century, embodying the spirit of unity in diversity and resilience in adversity.

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