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***INDIA AND ITS PRAVASI: INDIFFERENCE
TO INDULGENCE***

The contemporary landscape of international relationship is undergoing tremendous changes. These changes have accelerated after the collapse of Soviet Union. Thereafter one by one the assumptions and priorities of the international relations began to unravel. This unravelling encompasses every spheres and impacts different spaces. As a result the number of players with significant global imprint is increasing rather than decreasing. There is shift away from the overlapping social, political and economic and more importantly the military hierarchies to a more complex mosaic of interconnections and engagements. Many States chose niche areas and create space and relevance rather than attempting to attain multi-sector global dominance.

Along with changes in the external sphere due to globalisation there is the parallel transformation of the internal spheres of states. Erstwhile values of self sufficiency and mono-cultural national identity are being replaced with integration of markets, multiculturalism and transnational identity and mobility. Identity is getting disconnected from rigid national values along with growth and relevance sub-national identities like ethnic, religious and regional identity. The growth in information communication technology has made exchange of massive quantities of information easy and cheap. As a consequence there has been a revival of Diaspora engagements by many countries. There is a change in the perception towards the Diaspora by many third world countries that are trying to use them as a possible resource for development. Hence the emphasis is on the economic potential of the Diaspora in ensuring mother countries development.

The proposed study will try to understand the implication of these changes in the context of emergence of India into the big league. India has historical been very indifferent towards its Diaspora, what prompted the

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change to indulgent engagement? What transformations took place within India and in the Diaspora that resulted in intensive engagements? The study initially provides a sketch of the evolution of the Indian Diaspora. Thereafter it discusses the internal transformation as well as those in the Diaspora. It will then discuss how the PBD was leveraged to network with the Diaspora and used for projecting Indian growth story.

History and Evolution of the Indian Diaspora

The contemporary Indian Diaspora is the culmination of a century of Diaspora emigration. One such major emigration was to South East Asia. It started along with military expedition by kings of South India. The Cholas, for example, used their naval power to conquer Sumatra and Malay Peninsula which later resulted in many sizeable settler communities that eventually amalgamated. Another Diaspora movement of Indian merchant was towards Persia in the mid-16th century and remained active for over four centuries. According to Levi,¹ large Diaspora of Indian merchants numbering as many as thirty five thousand persons existed in both urban and the rural areas of Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Russia. Most were agents of Indian firms based in the city of Multan and later from Shikarpur in Sind, while their families remained behind as surety.

The modern Diaspora² movement occurred during the British Raj. It was the coerced migration of poor peasants to other British colonies under the indenture labour system. The major destinations were Mauritius, Guyana, the Caribbean, Fiji and East Africa. This was accompanied by a small number of free emigration of skilled labourers, merchants and professionals. The main external reason was the Slavery Abolition Act passed by the British Parliament in 1834 that emancipated slave labour force throughout the British colonies. This created a severe shortage of plantations workers that was solved by mass forced transfers as indentured labour. Another movement involved recruitment of workers for the tea plantations of the neighbouring British colonies of Sri Lanka and Burma and the rubber plantations of British Malaya.

A majority of Indian emigrants were single males in the prime age group of between 20 and 30 years old. The internal push-factor was that the British colonial policies in India. These policies had resulted in agrarian economic crisis causing mass unemployment and displacement. Many hoped that migration would help them escape economic hardships. The imposition of social oppression through caste and feudal relations also contributed to migration.

The French started the colonization of Reunion around 1646 and had taken some labourers from South India which soon became a sizeable

community of about forty thousand people. In 1860 under an agreement with British, recruited 6000 Indian indenture labourers annually. Around 1850, voluntarily migration began from Gujarat consisting of merchants, traders and artisans.

Similarly in the Caribbean region³ as a consequence of the emancipation of slaves, the sugar planters substituted them with indentured labours. By 1868 there were already about 2500 free Indian labourers from former British Guyana in Suriname. At the time of Suriname's independence approximately 125,000 Indians left for Holland and form the bulk of its Indian Diaspora. Currently about 40% of Surinam's population is of Indian origin employed in professional services. Most of these immigrants came from the United Provinces along with a significant minority from Madras Presidency.

British East African agents also imported indentured labour to replace slaves. After the end of indentured service many stayed back to work as 'dukawallas', artisans, traders and clerks. Excluded from government jobs and agricultural farming, they focused on commerce. It was the *dukawalla* who followed the Arab trading routes inland from the East African coast and penetrated new areas. These traders had taken over Zanzibar's lucrative trade in the 19th century by working as the Sultan's exclusive agents. The next wave of migrants to the region came during the building of the railways and by the end of World War II the Diaspora population had swelled to 320,000. By the 1940s, some colonial areas passed laws restricting the flow of Indian immigrants. However by then the Indians had firmly established complete control of East African commercial trade and making forays into industrial activity. For example in 1948 except 12 of Uganda's 195 cotton ginneries were owned by Indians.

In 1972, Idi Amin, gave about 75,000 descendants of the *dukawallas* 90 days to leave the country showing the vulnerability of Diaspora existence. They were forced to sell their assets scatter to other countries like Britain, Canada, US and some Asian countries. Many have returned following the 1992 law letting Asians reacquire their lost property. Two families, the Mehtas and Madhvanis, have built multimillion dollar empires in Uganda since the 1980s. In Kenya people of Indian origin are less than 1 % of total population handle about one third of the economy.

Indians in South Africa are descendants from indentured and traders. The city of Durban where Mahatma Gandhi worked as a lawyer in the early 1900s, has the largest Indian Diaspora population in sub-Saharan Africa. During the Apartheid era, Indians were forcibly moved into townships by legislations like the Group Areas Act. These ended after the historic negotiations in early 1990s. Indians had played an active role in the anti-apartheid struggle and a few rose to positions of power after the 1994 free

elections. A new wave has since started of Indian immigration with the immigrants moving into predominantly Indian areas.

In the immediate eastern neighbourhood, India and Myanmar had linkages from ancient times. During British rule, the Indian community flourished dominating the civil services, education and trade. However, after independence and land reforms policy of Prime minister U Nu that took back land, the Indian repatriation started. Currently despite being there for four generations about a quarter of million Indian Diaspora are still stateless due to requirements of the Burmese Citizenship Law of 1982.

Further towards the East, after the British acquisition of Penang, Melaka and Singapore⁴ from 1786 to 1824, a steady flow of Indian labourers, traders, sepoys started. The Indian population was predominantly of adult single males with families remaining back in India. Hence the population fluctuated frequently with large immigration and emigration of people. As early as 1901 the Indian population was approximately 120,000, which by 1931 had grown to 640,000 Indians. At the time of Independence in 1957 Indians accounted for approximately 8 to 12 % of the total population of Malaysia and 8 % in Singapore. Significant influx of Indians into Singapore and Malaysia has occurred in recent years to work both as labour and as professionals. Many have taken permanent residence in Singapore and constitute nearly a quarter of the population. Sindhi businessmen, for example, owned some important textile firms in Malaya and Singapore.

In the immediate western neighbourhood of the Persian Gulf, Indians are known to have come as early as 3000 BC for trade between Harappan settlements to Mesopotamia. In more recent times Indian merchants had established themselves towards the last quarter of the 19th century. In Bahrain, for example, initially they traded dates but gradually shifted to the exports of the famous Bahraini pearls. These merchant families came from the province of Sindh and Kathiawad region of Gujarat. By around 1925, around 2500 Indian families had settled in Bahrain mostly involved in small retailing business.

The discovery of oil in 1934-45, immigrants came to work in the oil industry. With the subsequent expansion of the economy, Indians started emigrating to start business or take up jobs. In addition to predominant blue-collar labour force, there are a sizeable number of professionals. The largest number of expatriates is from South India, particularly Kerala who constitute approximately 65 % of the Indian expatriate community. About two third of the Indian expatriate workforce is employed in the construction, contracting and maintenance and service sectors. Though they do not constitute classical Diaspora but current government policy considers all emigrants as a single Diaspora category.

Indians were brought to Australia from 1800 and initially worked as agricultural farms and gold mines and hawkers in country towns. The Indians were mainly Sikhs and Muslims from the Punjab region and the majority settled in Woolgoolga in New South Wales. Migration from India was curtailed after the Australian Government introduced the Immigration Restriction Act 1901. In 1966, the Government changed its policies to permit non-European to emigrate to Australia. The new Indian arrivals included many professionals and some from other countries like Fiji. Unlike the earlier settlers, those arriving after the 1950s came from different parts of India joined different professions.

The presence of Indians in U.K. is primarily the result linkages from the British Raj. Although this immigration was continuous process three distinct phases can be identified. Initial immigrants were manual workers to fill post-World War II labour shortage. This was followed by doctors when National Health Service was established. During the 1970s large numbers of East African Indians arrived following their eviction from Kenya and Uganda. The Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962 and Immigration Act 1971 largely restricted any further immigration to a few highly skilled professionals. Much of the subsequent growth in the British Indian community has come from new births. Per capita income of the community is higher than the national average.

In North America, at first Indians were mainly male Sikh Punjabis seeking work opportunities abroad. They began arriving in small numbers to British Columbia. Most returned to India as they were not permit bringing dependants until 1919. Quotas were adopted to prevent large influx of Indians into Canada. These allowed less than 100 people in a year until 1957. Migration took three different routes. First directly from India, next from East Africa in the early 1970s and lastly from Caribbean countries due to fear of repeat of Ugandan eviction. A major change came after 1967, when Canada introduced Point base immigration system, allowing large numbers of roughly 25000 migrants each year. Recently there has been an influx of investors and professionals due to easing of immigration laws. Indians are mainly entrepreneurs but many are in professional services. Despite initial difficulties Indian Diaspora as a group has an average income higher than Canadian average.

The Indian Diaspora in the United States is over a million due to an expansion of immigration in the last thirty years. The first Indian immigrant entered the United States in 1790 as a maritime worker. The next group of Indian agriculture workers came from Canada in early twentieth century. In the early 1920s roughly five thousand Indians resided in the US. At the time Indians were denied citizenship and the right to own land in many states. After World War II, the US need for more professionals, particularly

doctors, engineers, and skilled labourers, entrepreneurs facilitated the immigration of Indians. In 1946, the Indian Citizenship Bill legalised naturalisation of Indian immigrants and granted a quota of one hundred immigrants annually. The Immigration Act of 1965 lifted immigrant quotas the entry of Indians increased. By 1970, their population had grown to approximately a third of a million. Currently it is one of the most visible and high profile Diaspora especially to the Indian government due to its economic success rather than cultural. Recently it is trying to use them for lobbying political support for Indian polices.

The above discussion was essential to show the spread and depth of the Indian Diaspora. Certain characteristics emerge of the Diaspora. First is the geographic spread of the Diaspora spanning most parts of the world. Second is the retention of their India identity along with other linguistic, religious and regional sub identities. Third is their heterogeneity due to differences in departures histories, push and pull factors and skill profile and importantly destination where they are transplanted. Their numerical strength and treatment by the host government has a bearing on their vulnerability and success. Another trend is that the Diaspora has turned transnational undertaking further emigrations into non traditional regions, like in francophone Africa, usually by traders and qualified professionals. There are three distinct class layers of the Diaspora the blue collared labourers, traders and professionals each having different aspiration and expectation from India.

India's Engagement with the Diaspora

India's traditional Diaspora policy was that it was the remnant of colonial subjugation. British had forcibly uprooted poor peasants and transplanted them in far flung places and more importantly immensely profited by the hard work of indentured labourers. Hence they should shoulder the responsibility to resolve their problems. On the other hand, the advise to the Diaspora was that they should expect no substantial assistance from India. The first Prime Minister Nehru⁵ was very firm that they should integrate with their host nations. He said that "We have left it to the Indians abroad whether they continue to remain Indian nationals or to adopt the nationality of whichever country they live in. It is entirely for them to decide. If they remain Indian nationals, then all they can claim abroad is favourable alien treatment. If they adopt the nationality of the country they live in, they should associate themselves as closely as possible with the interest of the people of the country they have adopted and never ...become an exploiting agency there."

This policy been consistently followed by subsequent governments. "The Indian official attitude towards the Diaspora continued to be one of

indifference, and non-interference with their countries of residence for forty years.”⁶ Though cultural and family linkages flourished autonomous of governmental efforts, however economic involvement remained minimal. Even in the cultural sphere the attitude of the Indians was to flaunt their cultural superiority over the Diaspora. According to them the “culture of the Diaspora has remained ‘frozen’ since the time of initial immigration...anachronistic- folksy and inferior. These negative attitudes of homeland Indians extend particularly to the perception of languages spoken in the Diaspora regarded as incongruous and absurd.”⁷

The feeling regarding the second wave of educated and skilled people in the 1960s was that they were escapist and mercenary. Though this feeling did not extend to the blue-collar workers due to large population and country needed foreign exchange remittances. The migration of highly educated professional utilising the highly subsidised education system was seen as big lose and drain on the countries merge resources.

The paradigm shift, according to Kadhria,⁸ occurred in phases. From the ‘brain drain’ of the 1960s and 1970s to the ‘brain bank’ of the 1980s and 1990s and subsequently to ‘brain gain’ in the twenty-first century. There has been a complete turnaround of perception in India and has resulted in the proactive engagement and indulgence. One of the factors for this change is the the occupational shift of the Indians in US between 1999 and 2001. The proportion of the highest-rung ‘professional and technical’ occupations rose from 12 to 21 to 28 % respectively, implying significant enhancement of Indians in the US workforce. Similarly, he says, their presence amongst the American faculties in 1997 was almost 7,000 teaching staff were of Indian origin. They constituted 3 % of the total faculty strength and about 15 % of all foreigners. The same situation is prevalent in the European Union (EU), the next largest economic entity and integrating labour market. About two-thirds of the entire Indian community of EU resides in the UK where it is one of the highest-earning and best educated groups, achieving eminence in business, information technology, the health sector, the media, and entertainment industries.

The government’s effort in engaging with the Diaspora was not a smooth process. The policy shift was preceded by the economic reforms of early 1990. These reforms included efforts to engage the Non Resident Indians (NRI). It included intention of policy review along with the establishment of a office of Chief Commissioner of Non-Resident Indians to coordinate interactions. Also efforts were made to attract NRI investments into the country. However devaluation of the rupee was largely precipitated by withdrawn large sums of money by NRIs from their Indian investments. In the aftermath of this economic crisis, the NRIs became the hate figures for Indian policy framers particularly during parliamentary

debates on the 1991 budget.^{ix} The failure of this policy was reflected in NRI contribution as a share of total investment barely rose to 7 % in 1994 and then to 8 % in 1995. It increased only when the interest rates were hiked.

The next effort at engaging the Diaspora got momentum when policy makers realised that India had lagged far behind China in wooing its Diaspora. Given the successful Chinese experience that about 70 % of all inward FDI came from the Diaspora. The government set up a High level Committee on Indian Diaspora to study and suggest policy reforms. The report suggested that apart from other initiatives a change in the bureaucratic approach was essential. In the committee “concluded that an overhaul of bureaucratic procedures and deep administrative and economic reforms are required to remove unnecessary obstacles standing in the way of optimal utilisation of these resources.”¹⁰ It also felt that India’s emergence as a modern vibrant economy with a strong presence in the knowledge-based industries has helped to change the image of the Indian and its Diaspora globally. The “emergence of a professional class of Indian immigrants in the United States, Canada, and United Kingdom has coincided with India’s resurgence as a global player and as a country of stature in the comity of nations.”¹¹

After the report, India has been pro-active by creating an enabling legal structure to leverage the Diaspora resources. This includes the setting of an full fledged Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs. The government also began to liberalise and provide single window and automatic clearance to FDI, joint ventures, and technical collaborations. It was the initial failure with the NRIs that made India turn towards the People of Indian Origin (PIO) with the offer of PIO card, a dual citizenship, the Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) to make them participate in the development process. Some of these initiatives have not had the anticipated success due reluctance from the Diaspora. Some other scheme student internship programme, Know India programme have met with different levels of success. However it is clear prospects of Diaspora can act as a multiplier or help in projecting India but it will not play a stewardship role in India’s resurgence.

This is amply clear from that the trend of reverse migration, according to Chacko, is due to the dynamism of the global cities and the opportunities they offer that is bringing skilled immigrants homeward. “Well-educated and affluent first generation Indian expatriates are returning to India to take advantage of new job opportunities and to strengthen their connections.”¹² Transnational migrants with professional expertise honed in American universities and by work experience in different parts of the world are a growing presence in cities like Bangalore and Hyderabad. It was not

primarily to do something for India rather it is similar or better opportunities that is bringing back the professionals. The implication is that given better opportunities elsewhere these professional would promptly migrate again as truly transnational professionals. Hence these professional are as volatile as hot money. However one of the initiatives that was launched and has met with success is the hosting of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas annually since 2003 in different cities.

Pravasi Bharatiya Divas

Amongst the initiative that were suggested by the committee was holding of an annual conference. The first such conference called *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas*¹³ was held in New Delhi on 9 January 2003. It was attended by more than 2,000 delegates and projected as the 'largest gathering of the global Indian family'. Also *Pravasi Samman* awards for outstanding achievements by Diaspora was constituted as part of this policy of engagement. It marked a distinct shift necessitated by the Indian government's ambitions to redefine its place on the world stage. It asserted India's prominence in the twenty-first century as a leading free-market destination within a global capitalist economy.

The *Divas* consolidated two categories of Diaspora to produce a single history of cultural, economic and political affiliation to India and differences of regional origin were eliminated for a common Indian identity. Similarly the two definitions of Diaspora the anti-colonial activism of Gandhi and the professional eminence of migrants in Europe and North America were invoked simultaneously.

The economic policies formed the foundation of the conference agenda and panels. It enabled professional migrants settled in Europe and North America to articulate their expectation from India, including a demand for dual citizenship, investment incentives and rights to property. Yet the claims to Indian citizenship of delegates who came from the Caribbean, South East Asia, and Africa were marginalized. The relationship between descendants of indentured labourers and the India was primarily cultural rather than economic through the profuse display of Indo-Caribbean music and dance during the cultural show.

Amitav Ghosh on the other hand aptly considers this relationship as a historical anomaly. Pointing that Indians abroad and within do not share similarity of language, religion, caste, or kinship. He contends that "the intimate relationship assumed between India and its various Diasporas is bereft of systems of social and cultural reproduction. Then the links between India and her Diaspora are lived within the sphere of imagination. It is therefore an epic relationship: an epic without a text, which is all for

the better perhaps, for if that text were ever written it would be a shabby, bedraggled, melancholy kind of epic.”¹⁴

Similarly Kapur argues the impact of the Diaspora on India has been modest. The recent emigrants’ are from the middle class that received preferential treatment in India. Ultimately India’s problems need to be resolved internally and not externally. “There has rarely been a nation that has been as blasé about losing its best and brightest as has been India...to try and change internal conditions sufficiently so that this is no longer the case. Expecting outsiders, even those originally from the country, to do much in this regard will be a chimera.”¹⁵

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As is clear from the above discussion the role of Diaspora in India’s resurgence has been ambivalent. The Indian Diaspora is not a monolith but fragmented and heterogeneous category divided by history, location, experience, skills and more essentially their desire to engage with India. Depending these factors, they have varying capacity to participate in India’s resurgence. The government policy, hence, has been nuanced and caters to different segments within the Diaspora community. The deep familial and cultural engagements are attempted with old Diaspora of dependants of indentured workers. Their concerns and difficulties in their host countries are addressed though calibrated lip service and diplomatic back channels. Recent issue of Hindu’s in Malaysia is example of this approach.

The highly professional and visible Indian Diaspora left the country for a better life and opportunities and settled wherever they could attained them. This group having disconnected once has transformed into transnational or global citizens or professional with high mobility for personal aggrandisement. They have gravitated to those societies where they can maximise returns at minimal risks. The government policy has been very indulgent and patronising with offer of good opportunities. These opportunities whether for investment or to work are being pushed as being at par with the best in the world. Though the government from experience knows that they will come only if offer is better than their current position. It has also sweetened the policy with promise of offer of dual citizenship without voting rights, two nationalities with one passport and special privileges etc. It remains to be seen how much and in what manner of these initiatives are implemented. The prospects for substantive concession though are limited.

The government, however, is using this highly profile and successful Diaspora to show case the transformation that is occurring within India. Their personal success is leveraged to attract others to participate in the resurgence and growth of India and announce the arrival of India in the

global stage. The holding of the *Divas* and giving of *Saman* are planned in such a manner to project the cultural aspects of India with the economic networking forming the underling foundation. Thus successful acquisition of Accelor by Mithal's or Tetly and Jaguar by Tata's irrespective of having any bearing directly on the country or its economy are used for media hyping of the country's success story. They are also used to sell India to others and invite investments. Similarly achievements in other fields like winning of Nobel prizes or becoming CEOs of big MNCs by the Diaspora is used to hyperbole Indian genius and its potential. This projection is used both externally as well as internally to overcome self doubt and inhibition. Thus the role of the Diaspora in the resurgence of India is to give the nation a sense of confidence that it can aspire and achieve the very best in the world.

Notes:

- ¹ Levi, S., *The Indian Diaspora in Central Asia and Its Trade 1550-1900*, Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002.
- ² For a detailed discussion see The Report of High level Committee on the Indian Diaspora, Government of India, 2002.
- ³ Sinha, Kathinka and Bal Kerkhoff, Ellen “‘Eternal Call of the Ganga’: Reconnecting with People of Indian Origin in Surinam.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 38.38 (20-26 Sept. 2003): 4008-4021.
- ⁴ Rai, Rajesh “Sepoys, Convicts and the ‘Bazaar’ Contingent: The Emergence and Exclusion of ‘Hindustani’ Pioneers at the Singapore Frontier.” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35.1 (Feb., 2004): 1-19.
- ⁵ Quoted in Mani, Bakirathi and Varadarajan, Latha, “The Largest Gathering of the Global Indian Family: Neoliberalism, Nationalism, and Diaspora at Pravasi Bharatiya Divas.” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, 14.1 (Spring 2005): 45-74. p. 60.
- ⁶ Khadria, Binod, *Conceptualising the Typologies of Indian Diaspora in International Economic Relations: ‘Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy’, or a ‘Great off-white Hope’ of the New Century?* ISAS Working Paper no. 19, (26 January 2007).
- ⁷ Jain, Ravindra K., “Culture and Class in Indian Diaspora: India vs Bharat.” *Economic and Political Weekly*. 36.17 (28 April – 4 May 2001): 1380-1381.
- ⁸ Khadria, op. cit., pp. 5-8.
- ⁹ Mani and Varadarajan, op. cit., p. 63.
- ¹⁰ The Report, op. cit. p. xii.
- ¹¹ The Report, op. cit. p. vii.
- ¹² Chacko, Elizabeth, “From Brain Drain to Brain Gain: Reverse Migration to Bangalore and Hyderabad, India’s Globalizing High Tech Cities.” *GeoJournal* 68 (2007): 131–140. p. 134.
- ¹³ For a detailed analysis see Mani and Varadarajan, op. cit., p. 49.
- ¹⁴ Ghosh, Amitav. “The Diaspora in Indian Culture.” in *The Imam and the Indian: Prose Pieces*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002. pp.1-12.
- ¹⁵ Kapur, Devesh, “Indian Diaspora as a Strategic Asset.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 38.5 (1-7 Feb. 2003): 445-448. p. 448.

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