

Re-vitalising Indian Diaspora

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A High Level Committee on Indian Diaspora was appointed by the Ministry of External Affairs in September, 2000 with the approval of the then Prime Minister to recommend a broad and flexible policy framework after reviewing the status, needs and role of the People of Indian Origin (PIOs) and Non-Resident Indians (NRIs). The Committee was formed under the Chairmanship of Dr. L. M. Singhvi, Member of Parliament (MP) and former High Commissioner of India to the UK.

The Committee submitted its Report to the Prime Minister of India in January 8, 2002 recommending measures to resolve the problems that faced by the NRIs and the PIOs and to evolve country specific plans for forging a mutually beneficial relationship and fore facilitating their interaction and participation in India's economic development. The High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora (HLCID) had extensively dealt with the contemporary context of Indian Diaspora in most of the countries where People of Indian Origin have their significant presence and has come out with several recommendations for the consideration of the government and their implementation.

Indeed, a three day meet was the beginning (on January 9, 2003) to mark Pravasi Bharatiya Divas or Indian Expatriates Day. January 9th was selected because Mahatma Gandhi had returned to India on this day after many years of stay in South Africa. This was the first ever event in which India officially interacted with its 20 million (now 25 million) strong Diaspora from all over the world to revitalise ethnic and cultural bonds.

Etymologically the term Diaspora is derived from Greek Word 'dia' (through) and 'speiro' (to scatter). Literally, the meaning of Diaspora is scattering or dispersion. It was originally mentioned in the context of Jews or Jewish communist scattered in exile outside Palestine. During the later

half of 20th century, it was being applied to dispersal to of any ethnic group or community outside country of their origin. Diaspora is a term that used today to describe practically any population that is considered 'deterritorialised' or 'transnational'- which has originated in a land other than in which it currently resides and whose social, economic and political networks cross the borders of nation-states. The Diaspora populations are growing in terms of their numbers and playing significant role in the life of the countries of their acceptance as well as their countries of their origin.

Indian emigration has been taking place for centuries but never before in history has India witnessed such massive movement of people to other parts of the world as in the 19th and 20th centuries. Demographically, Overseas Indians for the third largest Diaspora next only are the British and the Chinese. Today there are over 25 million People of Indian Origin (PIOs) including the Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) who still maintain their Indian passports settled in about 70 Countries.

The formation of Indian Diaspora is characterised by four broad patterns of overseas migration in terms of history and political economy, such as: (i) Emigration that began in 1830s to the British, French and Dutch Colonies, (ii) Emigration to the industrially developed countries during the post world war II period, (iii) Emigration to West Asia during 1970s and 1980s, and (iv) Emigration of Software Engineers and other professionals since mid 1980s towards developed countries.

The First Wave of Indian emigration comprised of mostly indentured labour to European Colonies to fill the gap created by emancipation African slaves in plantations, following the ban on the practice of slavery, indenture labour was a new concept of plantation work on contract for a period of three to five years. The system of indenture labour was a nifty invention of the British to keep their plantation economy flourishing on labour under captivity.

Indian labour emigration first started under the indenture system in 1834. Under the indenture system 1.5 million persons were migrated. On their arrival in the Colony the immigrants were assigned to the plantation in which they were 'bound' for five or more years where they had lived an isolated life. When their indentures were completed, some immigrants stayed on the plantation while others moved out into the rural communities. They combined subsistence farming with wage labour. However, most of these migrants and their descendants did not return home though the indentured system of labour was discontinued in 1917.

The Second Wave of Indian emigration began during the middle of 20th century towards the developed countries like Britain, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Those who migrated during this phase hailed from urban middle class families and were well educated and professionally trained. They form the New Diaspora and maintain close ties with the places of their origin. This migration is also called 'migration of talent' or more familiarly called as 'Brain Drain'.

The Third Wave of emigration of the Indians to the West Asian countries is basically oriented to labour and servicing occupations on a contract basis. Following the oil boom of the mid-1970s, the Middle East has witnessed a massive induction of the South Asian workers. Here the need for skilled South Asian workers during the 1960s and early 1970s has been eclipsed by the recruitment for skilled labour since 1980s. There are more than two million Indians in West Asia. The year 1973, experienced the beginning of the rapidly increasing demand for expatriate labour in oil exporting countries of the Gulf and North-Africa.

Migration of Software Engineers to the Western Countries, the USA in particular which occurred in a significant way during the last decade of the 20th century, forms the Fourth Wave of Indian emigration. They are considered to be the cream of India, trained in her premier educational institutions such as IITs, IIMs and Universities. They are highly mobile and keep very close contact with India in terms of socio-economic and political interests.

The Government of India was lukewarm to the issues of overseas Indians until it realized the potential of the New Diaspora or NRIs who immigrated after independence to the advanced Countries. They came from the middle class elite families who are highly skilled groups of Professionals, Scientists, Doctors and Engineers. The NRIs were encouraged to invest in India through certain attractive schemes such as Resurgent Indian Bond (RIB) and they were welcomed to launch industrial enterprises along with Transfer of Technology.

The People of Indian Origin Card was launched by Ministry of Home Affairs in March 1999 to reinforce the emotional bonds of Indians who have made other countries their home but who now have a yearning to renew their ties with the land of their origin. According to this scheme the Peoples of Indian Origin upto the Fourth Generation settled anywhere in the world (except for a few specified countries) are eligible to avail themselves this facility. The foreign spouse of a citizen of India or PIO would also be covered under this scheme. This scheme entails a

host of facilities to the PIOs which were generally open to Non-Resident Indians (NRIs).

The PIO card holders get facilities for acquisition, holding, transfer and disposal of immovable properties in India, except agricultural, plantation properties, admission of children in educational institutions in India under the general category quota for NRIs, various housing schemes to life Insurance Corporation of India, state governments and other government agencies. Under the PIO card scheme there is no need for getting a Visa to visit India and for registering with the foreigner's registration office if continuous stay less not exceed 180 days. The card would also enable the journey of people of Indian origin back to their roots much simpler, easier, flexible and hassle-free. They are also allowed to acquire property, encouraged to invest on industries and have access to the educational facilities.

The Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) is an excellent occasion for organising one or more seminars and on various socio-political and cultural issues pertaining Diaspora. The ICSSR, IGNCA, India International Centre, Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University as well as the Centre for Diaspora Studies at the University of Hyderabad and various academic institutions are associated with the preparations for the seminars. The NRI-PIO division in the Ministry of External Affairs coordinate in identifying and inviting potential participants both from within India and from abroad.

The HLCID recommended the Government of India to a scheme of awards to be known as 'Pravasi Bharatiya Samman' awards which would be reserved exclusively for the Non-Resident of Indian Citizens and Peoples of Indian Origin. Till date several eminent personalities of Indian Diaspora Community have received the 'Pravasi Bharatiya Samman' award in the previous conferences from the hands of the President of India.

Several years ago, the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India had accepted in principle the idea of 'Pravasi Bharatiya Bhavan' for the Overseas Indians. The Bhavan become a focal point for interactions between Indians and the Diaspora Community.

On December 23, 2003 Parliament of India had passed the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2003. Those eligible to become the citizens of India as on January 26, 1950 could now apply for dual Indian citizenship. Rules giving effect to this were notified in March 2004. Dual citizenship allows the person to live in India indefinitely, unlike the Peoples of Indian Origin Card which permitted a single stay for a

period of six months. Dual Citizenship does not refer voting rights. As per the amended law, Persons of Indian Origin who were Indian citizens of Australia, Canada, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Portugal, Cyprus, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK and the USA are eligible to apply for dual citizenship. The announcement by the then Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh extends dual citizenship to all PIOs who migrated from India after January 26, 1950. It addresses a major anomaly that restricted dual citizenship to principally developed Western Nations. The citizenship (Amendment) Act now needs to amend further because the previous list specified 16 Nations only. Taxation laws applying to dual citizens are similar to those applicable to the Non-Resident Indians. Dual taxation avoidance agreements signed by India with other countries are also applicable. However, any persons who has been at any time a citizen of Pakistan, Bangladesh or any other country that the Union Government may notify in future is not entitled to dual citizenship.

It is a path breaking initiative that the Government of India has undertaken to recognise the presence of 25 million strong Indian Diaspora and to formulate new policies for building enduring linkages between India and the Indian Diaspora. The High Level Committee on Indian Diaspora had done a monumental task in arriving at detailed recommendations.

Indian Diaspora Community has a significant role in guiding affairs and bi-lateral relations of Government of India. Due to the effective presence in the US business, space and other activities persuade healthy relation, favourable trade, defence tie ups, military and economic joint ventures. The concept of 'Na Raha Indian' has also transformed.

The route of globalization and density of time and space, following the phenomenal advancement in the technologies of transport and communication has given rise to closer interaction between communities displaced across the world in different countries. These developments have accelerated already existing networks between the new Diaspora and their kith and kin in the places of the origin. The old Indian Diaspora, which has lost its roots, is yet to realise closer interaction with the mother land. The new policy initiative taken by the Government of India provides a new shape to establish and promote linkages between India and her Diaspora for mutual advancement.
