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## INDIAN DIASPORA: PROJECTING INDIA'S IMAGE

*Fahmida Ashraf* \*

### Introduction

On January 7, 2005, Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, announced the Congress-led government's decision to allow dual citizenship to all overseas Indians who had left India after 1950 to settle abroad, if their home nations allowed dual citizenship. The announcement was made while inaugurating the third *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas* (Overseas Indian Day), which was attended by more than 1,900 Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) from seventy countries. Mr. Manmohan Singh said, 'India needs US \$150 billion in investment in its infrastructure and that investment by dual Indian citizens could help fulfil that need... We are committed to make it attractive for you to invest in India.'<sup>1</sup>

Earlier, in December 2003, the Indian Parliament, under the BJP-led government, passed the Citizenship Bill which allowed granting of dual citizenship, categorised as Overseas Citizens in the bill, to individuals of Indian origin in sixteen countries only – namely, United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Cyprus, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Netherlands, New Zealand, Portugal, Sweden and Switzerland.<sup>2</sup>

The BJP-led government believed that 'the option of dual citizenship will improve cooperation between India and these economically more advanced countries in terms of investments

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and the exchange of skills and expertise.’<sup>3</sup> The facility of dual citizenship to overseas Indians would be beneficial for them and for India because of the following reasons:

- For those who have taken foreign passports, the grant of dual citizenship would help remove the obstacles in travel to and from India, with no multiple visa requirements.
- Persons of Indian origin settled in economically more advanced countries of the world have skills and expertise in vital sectors. According to the official thinking, *there was no doubt, that investments that were induced principally by the logic of business considerations and the investment climate, with the facility of Dual Citizenship would foster better cooperation in needed sectors by way of investments and transfer of skills and resources.*
- On the other hand, the principal rationale of the demand of the Indian Diaspora for dual citizenship was sentimental and psychological. The desire of Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) to forge emotional and cultural bonds with their country of origin has been evident in the varied philanthropic activities done by them in India. *Dual Citizenship would strengthen this bond and facilitate the Diaspora's contribution in India's social development.*
- Dual Citizenship would also help to perpetuate and cement links of the younger generations of Indian origin with India, as they may be keen to keep in touch with their roots.<sup>4</sup>

The Indian Diaspora, now defining the overseas Indian community, has become very special to India. Whether it was the BJP-led government that took the initiative, or the present Congress-led government that is passing it, the Indian Diaspora

is being seen as an important element in pursuing Indian foreign policy goals of playing greater role in the international system, and of being recognised as an important global player.

This paper studies how the Indian Diaspora has acquired importance over the years and the role it has played in projecting India's image globally, or in their countries of adoption.

### **The Indian Diaspora**

Etymologically, the term Diaspora has been derived from Greek words *dia* (through) and *sperio* (to scatter). Literally, 'Diaspora' thus means 'scattering' or 'dispersion'. Initially the term was used to describe the Jewish communities in exile. As aptly defined by Indian scholars, C. S. Bhat, K. L. Narayan and S. Sahoo, presently the term is generally used 'to describe practically any population that is considered 'deterritorialised' or 'transnational' - that is, 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 or, indeed, span the globe.'<sup>5</sup>

The term Indian Diaspora is a generic term to describe the people who migrated from territories that are currently within the borders of the Republic of India. It also refers to their descendants.<sup>6</sup> The Indian Diaspora is further characterised as 'NRIs' (Non-Resident Indians – Indian residents not residing in India) and also 'PIOs' (Persons of Indian Origin – those Indians who have acquired the citizenship of another country). The NRIs include: (a) Indian citizens who stay abroad for employment, or for carrying on any business or vocation, or for any other purpose, in circumstances indicating an indefinite period of stay outside India; (b) Indian citizens working abroad on assignments with foreign Governments, Government agencies or

international/multinational agencies like United Nations Organisation (UNO), International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank (IBRD), etc; and (c) Officials of Central and State Governments and public sector undertakings deputed abroad on assignments with foreign Governments/agencies/ organisations or posted to their own offices (including Indian Diplomatic Missions) abroad.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the term PIOs is applied to those overseas Indian citizens (not being a citizen of Pakistan or Bangladesh) if : (a) he at any time held an Indian passport, or (b) he, or either of his parents, or any of his grand parents was a citizen of India by virtue of the Constitution of India or Citizenship Act, 1955.<sup>8</sup>

Demographically, the Indian Diaspora is the third largest in the world – after the British and Chinese Diaspora. Currently, according to the 2001 estimates by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, the total number of overseas Indian residents is more than twenty million, who are settled in more than seventy countries, including US, Canada, UK, European countries, Australia, Middle East, Southeast and Far Eastern countries. According to Dr. Thomas Abraham, President, Global Organisation of People of Indian Origin, approximate estimates<sup>9</sup> of the people of Indian origin in various countries is as follows:

1. North America (Mostly US and Canada)	2.8 Million
2. South America (Trinidad & Tobago, Surinam, Jamaica, etc.)	2.0 Million
3. Europe (UK, Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, etc.)	2.5 Million
4. Africa (South Africa, Mauritius, East African countries, etc.)	2.5 Million
5. Middle East (UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, etc)	2.5 Million
6. Pacific Island (Fiji, Australia, New Zealand)	0.7 Million
7. Sri Lanka and Nepal	4.5 Million

The Indian emigration goes back for centuries. Broadly speaking it can be characterised in four phases:

- Emigration to the British, French and Dutch colonies in the 1830s.
- Emigration to the industrially developed countries in the post-World War II period.
- Emigration to West Asia in 1970s and 1980s.
- Emigration to developed countries since 1980s of software engineers and professionals.

The first Indian emigration began in 1834 to Mauritius, Uganda and Nigeria; Guyana, 1838; Sri Lanka, 1834; New Zealand, 1840; Hong Kong, 1841; Trinidad and Tobago, 1845; Malay, 1845; Martinique and Guadeloupe, 1854; Grenada, St. Lucia and St. Vincent, 1856; Natal, 1860; Malaya, 1860; St. Kitts, 1861; Japan and Surinam, 1872; Jamaica, 1873; Fiji, 1879; Burma, 1885; Canada, 1904; Thailand, 1910; Britain, US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and West Asian countries by the nineteenth and middle of twentieth century.<sup>10</sup>

The Indian Diaspora, which constitute, broadly of labourers, bankers, traders, artisans, entrepreneurs, software engineers, and professionals in various fields, has currently developed as an important factor in the countries where they are settled in large number. The overseas Indian has over the years played an important role in improving the image of India in their respective countries. As assessed by Dr. Thomas Araham, 'Whenever India had a crisis, earthquake, or Kargil war, NRIs/PIOs mobilised support for these causes. NRIs have also been working behind the scene to create interest among multinational companies to take

interest in India. Therefore, NRIs would like to be a partner in country's development, whether through state and central government agencies or community groups.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, these overseas Indians have played an important role in the development of their communities in India mostly in Indian Punjab, Gujarat, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka. As observed by Indian scholar, C. S. Bhat, the Indian Diaspora 'has a large number of professionals in the areas of Information technology, Medicine, Law, Engineering, etc. Their contributions are not only through foreign currency remittances but also serve as visiting scholars, creating virtual networks and shaping the direction of scholarly environment and capacity building in various fields of science, technology, cultural exchange, business, etc. Indians who have immigrated to countries like the USA and Britain have been active in the growing software industry, medical and other professional fields.'<sup>12</sup>

More importantly, the overseas Indian community has also been active on the political front in their respective countries, be it developing countries, such as Gutana, Uganda and Fiji, or developed countries like US, UK, and Canada. As mentioned in *India Today* of January 2004, the Indian Diaspora has become an important constituency in the US. The current Bush administration has been trying hard to influence the Indian constituency 'effecting a raft of political and civil appointments.' For example, in 1996, an Indian, Satveer Chaudhary, became the first Asian-American member of the Minnesota legislature, also the fourth Indian to be elected to a US state legislature seat.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in UK, an Indian, Parmjit Dhanda, represented Gloucester in UK parliament.<sup>14</sup>

## **The Hindutva Factor**

Another important role the overseas Indians have played and are playing is that they have set up organisations, which have financial and ideological links with organisations in India supporting and propagating a Hindutva policy. In this respect, organisations in the US and UK have greater influence and links with similar organisations in India promoting the Hindutva ideology.

In the US, the Indian Development Relief Fund (IDRF) was set up in 1989, with the stated purpose 'to raise money for the organisations in India assisting in rural development, tribal welfare and urban poor.'<sup>15</sup> IDRF officials have denied that the organisation has some links with the Sangh Parivar in India. 'Sangh Parivar' is the umbrella organisation including groups, which propagate Hindu nationalism at political, social and educational level in India – including Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Bajrang Dal (BD), the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). While rejecting the allegations of IDRF's connection with Sangh Parivar, the Vice President of IDRF wrote in his statement on *Suekha.com* 'There is no relation between VHP/RSS and IDRF.'<sup>16</sup> However, an in depth scrutiny of IDRF's projects and other projects which IDRF funds; and affiliations of its officials and organisations that provide fund for IDRF reveal that 'the IDRF is fully linked with the Sangh Parivar, and the Hindutva movement in India.'<sup>17</sup>

When the IDRF was established in 1989, the Form 1023 – filed for recognition as a tax-exempt charity organisation - duly filled by IDRF, submitted to the Internal Revenue Service of the United States identified nine organisations, which IDRF supports in India. The organisations were: Vikas Bharati (Bihar); Swami



Vivelananda Rural Development Society (Tamil Nadu); Sewa Bharati (Delhi); Jana Seva Vidya Kendra (Karnataka); Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (Madhya Pradesh); Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (Gujarat); Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (Nagar Haveli); Girivasi Vanasi Sewa Prakalp (Uttar Pradesh); and G. Deshpande Vanvasi Vastigrah (Maharashtra).<sup>18</sup> Though the IDRF has been in operation for over a decade in the US, it is only since around the year 2000 that adequate documentation of its activities has come up about its support to Hindu organisations involved in violence in India. IDRF-funded organisations were directly involved in the violence in Gujarat in 2002 but their involvement has not been restricted to Gujarat only. 'Documentation exists also for a similar role played by the IDRF in supporting organisations such as Sewa Bharati, Ekal Vidyalays and the VKA implicated in violence against Christians in Madhya Pradesh,' and that the local State government of Madhya Pradesh, took the 'extreme step of revoking the license of Sewa Bharati, the IDRF-funded organisation, because of its part in spreading anti-minority violence. Similarly, activists with the Vanavasi Kalyan Parishad in Kotda (also supported by the IDRF) led a campaign of terror against the Muslim families in the Juda village, leading to their large-scale migration to neighbouring villages.'<sup>19</sup>

There is also evidence of IDRF's links to Hindutva's US operations. '*Hindutva* in the United States has grown systematically ever since the 1980s, experiencing exponential growth in the 90s corresponding with the boom in professional Hindu-Indian migration from India to the United States...*Hindutva* organisations in the US do extensive publicity and fundraising for the IDRF. Often the IDRF and the VHP-America are the only 'service organisations' recognised by these groups, completely neglecting non-sectarian development and relief organisations, such as Association for India's Development (AID), Asha for Education, Pratham-USA, Child Relief and

Youth (CRY), India development Service (IDS) and Indians for Collective Action (ICA).'<sup>20</sup>

In UK also the overseas Indians have established organisations with hidden agendas of supporting India-based organisations promoting the Hindutva policy. In UK the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which is the main Hindutva organisation in India, formed the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS) in 1966 with its headquarters in Leicester. The RSS/HSS is a 'militant, undemocratic, paramilitary organisation ... and is based on the recruitment and training of young, ideally pre-pubescent boys for service to "Hindutva".<sup>21</sup> The HSS is supporting various organisations in UK, including the Overseas Friends of the BJP (OFBJP), Sewa International (the UK branch of the RSS's International "charity"), Friends of India Society International (FISI), the Rashtra Sevika Samiti (the RSS's women's organisation) the National Hindu Students' Federation (NHSF), the main Hindu students' body in the UK, the Rashtriya Singh Sangat (its Sikh offshoot).<sup>22</sup>

The Sewa International is the fund-raising organisation of RSS/HSS. Over the years it has collected millions of pounds in UK and sent them to India for organisations which are part of the Indian Sangh Parivar, such as Sewa Bharati, the Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram (which works against Christians), the Kalyan Ashram Trust (KAT) and the Hindu Vivek Kendra (HVK).<sup>23</sup> The activities of Sewa International in India are a cause of concern for other organisations and NGOs in UK because 'of being sectarian in its aid distribution programmes and in essentially providing funding for the RSS, and other Sangh Parivar organisations, to strengthen their political position.'<sup>24</sup>

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) – World Council of Hindus – formed the VHP (UK) organisation in 1972. The main

focus of the VHP (UK) has been '(1) to present itself as the sole representative voice of all Hindus in official structures (local and national government) and to advise on Hinduism in the context of multicultural and inter-faith matters; (2) to provide educational and cultural activities for Hindu young people (in particular dance classes) and (3) to raise money and mobilise support for VHP activities in India, such as the demolition of the Babri Masjid (mosque) in Ayodhya in order to construct a new Ram temple on the same site.'<sup>25</sup>

The Hindutva organisations are also sponsoring communal feelings in UK within the Indian community. For example, as mentioned by Paul Crofts and Anojna Roy in Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, 'During the Hindu Navratri festival in September 2001 a letter was circulated quite extensively within the Hindu community which appeared to come from an extreme Muslim group threatening to target Hindu and Sikh girls for conversion to Islam. On closer inspection, however, it was clear that this letter was not from any Muslim group, but was intended to stir up anti-Muslim feelings within the Hindu and Sikh communities... This easy acceptance of anti-Muslim propaganda reflects a wider set of concerns - the growth of Hindu fundamentalist, nationalist and anti-Muslim ideas within the Hindu community of Wellingborough, and indeed wider afield, where such ideas have become almost 'common sense'.<sup>26</sup>

Thus the overseas Indian organisations, set up as charity organisations, have a hidden agenda of promoting Hindutva policy by supporting similar groups in India and also creating a communal divide in their home country.

### **Indian Diaspora and the Indian Government**

Initially, the Indian government was not conscious of the

potential of the NRIs. It was by the 1970s that the NRIs' contribution in the development of India was realised and Indian government began adopting policies and introducing schemes for increased NRIs involvement in India. As stated by C. S. Bhat, 'Liberalisation and the new industrial policy in 1970s sought involvement of overseas Indians in investing both in terms of capital and technology. The decade saw the new nomenclature of NRIs to refer to the Indian immigrants in the developed world. NRIs were encouraged to invest in India through certain attractive schemes such as *Resurgent India Bond* (RIB) and they were welcomed to launch industrial enterprises along with transfer of technology. There is hardly any evidence of reaching the majority of the People of Indian Origin, the *Old Diaspora*, till the announcement of the new scheme of *PIO Card* was announced during the early 1999.'<sup>27</sup>

The BJP government gave more importance to the potential role played by NRIs in enhancing the Indian image abroad and thereby also enhancing development funds for projects in India. In September 2000 the BJP government appointed a 'High Level Committee (HLC) on Indian Diaspora', under the chairmanship of Dr. L. M. Singhvi, Member of Parliament and former High commissioner of India to UK. The HLC was to recommend a broad and flexible policy for promoting the role of NRIs and PIOs. The committee submitted its report to Prime Minister Vajpayee in January 2002. The HLC recommendations included the following:

1. A very large cross-section of the Diaspora suggested that the fee for a PIO card is not commensurate with its benefits, therefore, it recommended a reduction in the fee structure of the PIO Card to be made. The PIO card scheme was introduced in 1999. The overseas Indian holders of the card could visit India without a visa, and also had other facilities

in India regarding acquisition of properties etc.

2. The constructive role played by the Diaspora, its achievements and goodwill towards India should be celebrated and recognised in an appropriate manner. The Committee recommended the observance of the 'Pravasi Bharatiya Divas' each year on January 9, the day Mahatma Gandhi returned to India from South Africa.
3. The Bharat Samman Awards Scheme, first instituted as part of India's 50th Independence anniversary celebrations in 1998 but was not operationalised. The Committee recommended the establishment of the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Awards.
4. Special measures should be devised to facilitate the involvement of the Indian Diaspora in the investment sector in India.
5. The Indian Government should also consider setting up Special Economic Zones, exclusively for projects to-be set up by NRIs/PIOs. The Diaspora could be involved in the development of such zones.
6. The dual citizenship should be permitted within the rubric of Citizenship Act, 1955. Sections 9, 10 and 12 of the Citizenship Act, 1955 should be suitably amended for that purpose.<sup>28</sup>

Highlighting the role played by Indian Diaspora in enhancing India's image abroad, The Singhvi Report stated: 'It is no coincidence that the last two decades have seen the emergence of members of the Indian Diaspora as elected leaders, politicians, and eminent professors and other professionals, managers and

entrepreneurs, in their adoptive homelands. This period has coincided with India's resurgence as a global player and a country of stature in the comity of nations. Members of the Indian diaspora are also playing an important role in mobilising political support for issues of vital concern to India in their new countries.'<sup>29</sup>

It was in this context that the first *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas* was held in January 2003 with the purpose of :

- Engaging all NRIs/PIOs to understand their sentiments about India, their expectations from India, and to formulate a policy framework accordingly.
- Familiarising the people of India with the depth, variety and achievements of the Indian Diaspora.
- Providing opportunities to Indian Diaspora to network and build relationships that criss-cross 110 countries of the world.
- Developing closer synergies with the host countries through the Indian Diaspora in view of the pre-eminent role played by Indian Diaspora in India's relations with various countries.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, the second *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas* was held in January 2004. More than 1000 delegates from over 60 countries participated. Then Indian Prime Minister, A. B. Vajpayee announced two major economic initiatives: (a) Indian companies were allowed to invest up to 100 per cent of their net worth in foreign companies; and (b) Indian agricultural companies were allowed to go global. While inaugurating the meeting Mr. Vajpayee encouraged overseas Indian to play an important role in building India and proclaimed the 'arrival on the world stage of a Shining India, an India that has resolved to regain her past glory

and indeed surpass it, an India that will both be an economic powerhouse and a major contributor to humanity's all-sided evolution to a higher level'.<sup>31</sup>

The third *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas* held in January 2005 was attended by 1,900 delegates from the Indian Diaspora in 70 countries. The Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, while paying rich tributes to the 2.5 million Indians settled abroad, offered the dual citizenship to all those who migrated from the country after it became a Republic on January 26, 1950. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh described the 'Idea of India' and 'Indianness' as 'the empire of minds of the children of Mother India spread over all continents including the icy reaches of Antarctica, on which the sun truly cannot set.'<sup>32</sup> In other words he projected the global image of India being pursued as the foreign policy goal. Praising the achievements of the Indian Diaspora, Mr. Manmohan Singh said, 'It used to be said of the British Empire, from whose yoke Gandhiji freed us that the sun would never set on it. If there is an empire today on which the sun truly cannot set, it is the empire of our minds, that of the children of Mother India, who live today in Asia, Africa, Australia, Europe, and the Americas and indeed, on the icy reaches of Antarctica.'<sup>33</sup>

## **Conclusion**

India, because of its size, population and strategic location is ambitious to establish itself as a global player. In this context the role played by Indian Diaspora has, over the period of time, become important and is emerging as an important factor in promoting certain foreign policy goals. The third *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas*, held in January 2005, has given strong signals of the Indian government's intentions to continue to engage the Indian Diaspora giving it a vanguard role in India's quest to emerge as a regional and global power.

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