

Indian Diaspora's Growing Economic Shield in the World

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I. Abstract

The Indian diaspora, comprising Indian citizens living abroad, has become a significant global phenomenon. This growth has led to favorable economic policies and diplomatic negotiations between countries, benefiting the origin and host nations. As of May 2024, there are approximately 35.42 million overseas Indians.¹ The Indian diaspora's uniqueness in a globalized world includes their work culture, traditions, financial habits, resilience, adaptability, social ties, and patriotic identity. The paper suggests initiatives to improve their conditions abroad, such as enhancing social safety nets, emigration policies, citizenship, and economic systems for remittance exchange, leveraging the diaspora's economic strengths to reclaim India's title of 'Vishwaguru.'

Keywords: *Diaspora, Remittance, Assimilation, Migration, Citizenship, Diaspora diplomacy, Emigration*

II. Introduction

A. Indian Diaspora in the Contemporary World

In academic terms, Diaspora refers to individuals of Indian origin residing in foreign countries, whether voluntarily or due to circumstances, opportunities, calamities, wars, or personal choice. Officially, the Indian Diaspora is categorized into Non-resident Indians (NRIs), Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs), and Overseas Citizens of India (OCIs). In 2015, both PIO and OCI cardholders were consolidated under a single OCI category. Diaspora movement and emigration have persisted for centuries, dating back to the Ashokan reign and extending to the contemporary world, where the Indian Diaspora is globally distributed across more than 200 countries, comprising approximately 32 million² individuals occupying various positions on the professional spectrum, from global CEOs to IT professionals, skilled or semi-skilled laborers and workers. This phenomenon has evolved into one of the most complex yet influential forces, transforming economic, political, geographical, ethnic, and diplomatic power relations worldwide.

B. The growing visibility of the Indian Diaspora

Movement of the workforce is not a new phenomenon for India, however, the visibility of this Diaspora has increased multifold since the last two decades with the rise of leaders, CEOs, business tycoons of Indian origin, and holding top executive posts with significant lobbying power within the host countries like Sundar Pichai, Indra Nooyi, Kamala Harris, Rishi Sunak and many more. According to the Global Migration Report 2020, India continues to be the largest country of origin of international migrants with a 17.5 million-strong diaspora across the world, and it received the highest remittance of \$78.6 billion (this amounts to a whopping 3.4% of India's GDP) from Indians living abroad.³

This visibility not only provides a better platform for diplomatic negotiation on the international stage but also on the economic front as foreign direct investment & investment opportunities are blooming for the origin as well as host countries as they capitalize on a highly skilled workforce. The celebration of 'Pravasi Bhartiya

¹ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India

² Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India

³ Drishti IAS, November, 2019

Diwas' on 9th January every year by the government of India also sheds light on the importance of Diasporic soft power diplomacy.

III. Historical Background

A. History of the Diaspora Movement

The movement of people from one place to another for various purposes has always existed since time immemorial as a fundamental need for prosperous trade relations, as indentured laborers, etc. This phenomenon can be traced back to the ancient times since the first century AD, the reign of emperor Kanishka, the rule of the Cholas, Ashokan Reign, where emigration to the south East Asian regions like Thailand, Indonesia, and Bali was facilitated within communities under the terms 'Gypsies' (mainly in Europe) or 'Indian Shendu'. The diaspora movement in the modern sense could be traced back to the 16th century, the voluntary movement of Indian Merchants to South East Asia, East Asia, West Asia, and Central Africa in Pre-colonial times. This group was called the 'Indian Merchant Diaspora'.

The modern Diaspora movement is considered to have commenced in the 19th century after the colonization of India by the East India Company. After the Abolishment of slavery in 1833 by the British Empire, labor was scarce in the plantation fields of the other colonies located in Malaysia, Indonesia, Africa, Trinidad, and Mauritius, which led to the rise of the concept of 'the indentured labor migration' as labor was forced from India to work in these plantations without adequate sustenance facilities or rights.

During the Second World War, the destruction of the Economy and established social structures saw large-scale refugee movements or shelter-seeking activities away from conflict zones or border areas, apart from the violence caused by to India Pakistan Partition in 1947 and the Bangladesh Liberation War, 1971 also forced people to migrate to peaceful areas or simply away from these zones. Indians were announced as unrestricted commonwealth members from 1947 to 1962, allowing them to settle in the United Kingdom.

The Gulf Migration was fuelled by the unprecedented rise in the oil industry in the Gulf Countries around the 1970s, leading migration to countries like Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE.

The era of Globalization, starting around the 1990s, saw the emigration of skilled laborers away from India in fields like medicine, IT, and engineering, with majorly blue or white-collar workers constituting the 'contemporary skilled migration' for better opportunities or a higher standard of living.

B. Factors Influencing Migration Movement

As per the World Migration Report, 2022, India has the largest emigrant population of around 18 million people living abroad, making it the top origin country globally, with the top three host countries for the Indian Diaspora being The United States Of America (4.4 million+), the United Arab Emirates (3.4 million+) and Malaysia (2.9 million+) migrants in contemporary times.⁴

Migration can be voluntary, involuntary, permanent, or temporary, legal or illegal, depending upon various factors. Migration towards or from a country is motivated by factors categorized under two headings: 'push' & 'pull' factors. The 'Push factors' are the unfavorable conditions that make the country of origin seem less attractive or satisfactory for the residents. It includes economic factors like inequality or lack of opportunities,

⁴ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India

unemployment, lack of an accessible and affordable healthcare system, stagnant wage growth rate, underpaid professions, etc. Social factors like religious intolerance, discrimination, alienation, regional disparity in development, corruption, instability, and war/ crisis also constitute push factors. In recent times, due to climate change and the impending natural crisis, unpredictable droughts, floods, famine, deforestation, pollution, and lack of natural resources, greenery has also forced people to look for available alternatives.

On the contrary, the 'Pull' factors are those attractive amenities or facilities that make the host country a favorable place of residence, including socio-economic stability, job prospects, better living standards, developed healthcare systems, political freedom, and active and empowered citizenry, better educational facilities, family reunification purposes, etc.

IV. Economic Implications

A. At the Domestic level

The economic benefits and implications of such a diversely located diaspora are many for the country of origin. The Indian Diaspora significantly contributes to the Indian economy in several key ways. They promote investment in India through Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and Portfolio Investment (FPI), contributing to the capital stock of established businesses and supporting new ventures. Additionally, members of the Indian Diaspora bring advanced technology and best business practices from their host countries, helping to bridge the technology gap between India and more developed nations. This transfer of knowledge and technology is vital for the growth of Indian industries. The diaspora has established collaborations with Indian educational institutions, such as IITs and NITs, leading to the creation of Centers of Excellence. These collaborations enhance skill formation and contribute to the development of human resources in India.

The Indian Diaspora is also one of the largest sources of remittances to India, which significantly supports the Indian economy. These remittances not only provide financial support to families but also contribute to the overall economic stability of the country. Furthermore, the Indian Diaspora promotes cultural exchanges and social initiatives that can lead to enhanced tourism and international goodwill towards India. Their involvement in philanthropic activities also helps address social issues within India. Finally, the Indian Diaspora holds influential positions in various countries, which can positively affect bilateral relations and trade agreements between India and those nations. Their status can help in lobbying for favorable policies that benefit India. Overall, the Indian Diaspora serves as a vital link between India and the global economy, facilitating trade, investment, and cultural exchange, which collectively bolster India's economic growth and development.

On the flip side, it leads to a Brain Drain of highly skilled workers from their home country and a significant loss of talent as people reside in these countries after acquiring permanent citizenship rather than coming back to their country of origin due to ample opportunities and better working conditions, among many other reasons.

B. On a Global Level

Apart from the benefits for the country of origin, the host countries also benefit from this highly skilled workforce and utilize their skills for the development of their own country. The transfer of skills, knowledge, and technical expertise from members of the Indian Diaspora to their host countries can significantly enhance productivity and innovation in various sectors, such as technology, healthcare, and engineering. Furthermore, their entrepreneurial spirit often leads to the establishment of businesses that create jobs and stimulate economic

growth, contributing to the local economy by providing goods and services and increasing competition and consumer choice. Cultural diversity promoted by the Indian Diaspora can also enhance creativity and innovation in the workplace, leading to the development of new markets and consumer bases and benefiting various sectors such as food, entertainment, and tourism.

Additionally, Indian expatriates often invest in local businesses and real estate, contributing to economic development, infrastructure improvements, and increased economic activity in their communities. These investments can lead to the establishment of networks that promote the exchange of goods and services, which can lead to increased trade volumes and economic collaboration between their host and home countries. Members of the Indian Diaspora also engage in philanthropic activities that support social causes in their host countries, leading to improvements in education, healthcare, and community development, enhancing the overall quality of life and economic stability. Moreover, their involvement in politics and advocacy for policies that benefit both their host and home countries can lead to favorable economic policies and reforms that enhance the business environment.

C. Remittances & Investment Trends

India, the second most populous country with a developing economy, struggles with skill utilization and administrative capacity. A higher percentage of unemployed youths are skilled graduates compared to the unskilled workforce. Unemployment persists due to limited job opportunities in certain fields or inadequate skills among job seekers. Developed countries offer an appealing alternative with improved living conditions, higher wages, and better work-life balance, despite the drawback of being far from loved ones and one's homeland. A significant economic advantage of this migration is the remittances sent back to the home country. The exact distribution of economic benefit is difficult to determine given the subjective nature of each diaspora, however, the home country benefits from better foreign direct investments, the emergence of new opportunities, better exposure to world-level techniques, and improved foreign currency reserves. Remittances allow for a stable lifestyle and sustenance of the left-behind family members against inflation and economic adversities. Remittances contribute almost 3% of India's GDP. As per the World Bank, the total inward remittance of India stood at \$68.9 billion in 2015. By 2020, the number increased to \$83.2 billion. In 2023, India stood at the top in the remittance inflows at \$125 billion.⁵ The highest share of remittance is received by the southern states like Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu, among others, as they are the states that constitute most of the Indian Diaspora across the globe. This economic flow of capital and labor also helps in combating the issue of disguised unemployment in India, along with sharing information, technologies, ideas, business models, entrepreneurship opportunities, and Investment opportunities in host countries for profitable ventures and economic growth.

D. Legal safety nets

Indian diaspora in various countries can act as a powerful community to help propagate their interests within local government, organizations, NGOs, organizations, etc. People from Indian origin can be significantly traced as legislators in political systems across the globe, with their involvement in the US government as part of the Republicans or the Democrats, or the UK presidential candidate Rishi Sunak, allowing for better representation

⁵ Drishti IAS, July 2022

of their demands on a global level and their voice an unavoidable one being the building blocks of the countries economy and politics, intermingling with their societies and culture leading rise to multiculturalism or a culture of tolerance. It can also advocate for the disadvantaged groups in the origin country, having the platform, knowledge, and resources to do this while capturing the attention of human rights organizations working for human rights, equality, dignity, and social justice.

Indian diaspora constitutes a rich minority in many developed countries including the USA, as 2.8 million Indians in the USA constitute only 1% of the total population but are the most affluent and educated class in the country allowing them to utilize their lobbying power to negotiate on favorable terms on issues like India-US nuclear deal or strict migration policies or student visa policies within these countries.⁶

The Government of India also provides for initiatives and recognition to the migrants for their invaluable contributions in their respective fields, some examples being the Overseas Citizenship of India Scheme, the Know India Programme, or the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of External Affairs.

To protect the Indian Diaspora in European, American, and Gulf countries, the government also signed the Migration and Mobility Partnership Agreements (MMPAs) with various countries and Labour Manpower Agreements (LMA) with the Gulf countries to ensure the safety and prosperity of the Indian Diaspora in these countries for the upcoming decades.

V. Altering Demographics & Contemporary Challenges

A. Cultural: Assimilation & Integration

Human societies are complex communities with cultural practices, social rules, and rituals embedded in their history, shared experiences, and understanding. Language, culture, and festivals. Practices differ from region to region all across the globe.

Due to the prevalence of Globalization and the Indian Diaspora, the cuisine, art, music, customs, and festivals of our country have garnered worldwide recognition and familiarity. It also paved the way for soft power diplomacy in the arena of foreign relations. When people from various ethnicities migrate to other countries, it leads to intermingling or assimilation of cultures and a multicultural or plural society. It leads to sharing new perspectives, ideas, traditions, and a sense of belongingness in a foreign land. It creates an enriching environment of heterogeneous surroundings in the host countries, accommodating people from multiple backgrounds and races.

However, apart from the mutual respect and idea of tolerance, this overlapping tapestry also leads to certain threats and pitfalls, like social alienation of the minority community and cultural homogenization due to the dominance of a particular culture and its influence on administrative mechanisms. The youth or the working professionals within the host country might also feel threatened and insecure about their own sustenance or job security due to increasing competition from outside, leading to the display of this resentment through hate crimes on particular communities, xenophobia, for eg, hate crimes against Asians in North American and European countries.

⁶ [Global Migration Report 2020](#)

The large-scale migration of a specific community has led to the establishment of familial networks in foreign nations, such as migrants from Punjab in Canada and migrants from Kerala in the Middle East. This phenomenon facilitates subsequent generations' movement into these countries, perpetuating the celebration of native festivals, the use of native languages, and other cultural practices.

B. Political: Issues of Identity, citizenship, and diplomacy

Diaspora also impacts the political arena and environment within a country. Issues of migration, citizenship, social integration, visa politics, and Identity politics capture center stage in election campaigns and national political debates on all levels. The formulation of laws and public policy also needs to be inclusive, catering to the demands of these powerful communities and their needs in terms of public service distribution, protection, or development concerns.

Issues of Politics and diplomacy extend beyond Geographical borders now, as the country of origin also ensures that its diaspora is protected and represented within these countries at all times. India's diplomatic stance regarding diaspora evolved from a non-interference approach or out-of-jurisdiction approach during Prime Minister Shri Jawaharlal Nehru's time to a more vigilant and interfering and, providing protection when necessary in recent times.

Debates of nationalism, secession, and country revive the questions of citizenship and voting rights for these diaspora communities, involving countries with lax regulations and eligibility for citizenship and others with a comparative resistance towards the same.

Given the sheer contribution of these diasporic communities in the Political arena as top executives and leaders, often translates into it becoming a race of appeasement of these communities and representation of their demands to bridge the diplomatic gap and advocacy for rights against discrimination for eg: the unwavering support of the Indian diaspora in America during PM Shri Narendra Modi's speech at Madison Square or the extravagant welcome for him in Australia. The political arena also consists of efforts towards strengthening the bilateral relations between the home and the host nations, representing 'Brand India' to the world. It leads to the formation of a global civil society propagating cosmopolitanism or influence beyond geographical borders for rights, justice, and equality.

C. Social: Intermingling values, societies, and multiculturalism

They act as the 'agents of change' for the societies they come from and go to, with ways of life, practices, and educational and healthcare practices. Spreading and exponential growth of social movements beyond the country of Origin to all the countries of the residing diaspora leads to a faster change, mutual understanding, lobbying of resources, and advocacy on a global level, like feminist movements, black lives matter, Me Too movement, etc.

The settling of different communities in various countries also paves the way for further foreign migration to the same place due to familiarity and citizenship benefits.

These multicultural societies lead to an exchange of values and a broadening of perspectives, outlooks, and stakes for different communities and their ways of navigating through this life. It however leads to radicalization and polarization among people in certain cases leading to attacks on vulnerable communities or funding for

illegal activities and extremist movements from outside of the country of origin, for example, the Khalistani movement in India. Clashes between cultures become prevalent and threaten the stability of the society, and often lead to the exploitation of the diaspora in forms of scams like illegal recruitment and scamming into fighting for their military, but also in terms of employment scams with the Indian Diaspora in Dubai and the Middle East.

D. Demographic: Population, resources, and scarcity

The receiving countries also suffer as the resources are limited, and the ever-growing immigration leads to higher competition for existing resources and pressure on land area to sustain the population growth. All these factors, if not accommodated, might also lead to a scarcity of resources and conflicts based on the accessibility to these resources.

Age, occupation, and sex demographics of a particular country rapidly change and become abnormal, leading to disturbances in opportunities, social service distribution, and data collection. The host community might also feel threatened by this intrusion and act in a hostile manner or through legislation restricting movement or facilities for these groups of migrants.

VI. Why Indian Diaspora?

A. Work Culture & Adaptability

The Indian Diaspora is a diverse and heterogeneous group of individuals, encompassing a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. In the realm of management, diversity is recognized as an essential tool for identifying innovative solutions and alternative approaches. The diversity within the Indian Diaspora makes its members strong contenders for leadership or facilitator positions due to their competitive nature and ability to adapt to various situations. The Indian job market and work culture are known for their intense competition and high pressure, requiring consistent effort and academic excellence. These qualities enable members of the Indian Diaspora to quickly adapt to changing circumstances and meet tight deadlines, ultimately contributing to their respective fields on both an academic and professional level. To remain relevant in the Indian context, where there is a surplus of talented individuals and potential replacements, it is necessary to continuously develop and hone one's skills. The cultural and community values of the Indian Diaspora further set them apart by fostering a sense of belonging in foreign lands while preserving familial and cultural ties. Additionally, their exceptional social skills and perseverance enable them to navigate challenging situations and modify their approach when necessary. The aforementioned qualities make the Indian Diaspora a formidable force in professional fields, as their expertise and demand are highly sought after to fulfill various roles.

B. Financial Mantras

Financial habits and discipline embedded in culture and conventions also allow the Indian Diaspora to successfully navigate the instability challenges with calmness and perseverance. The 'living under the means' mentality and culture for the longest time discourages the activity of loans or spending more than earning or attracting a debt trap. This practice encouraged the habit of understanding one's financial position and spending based only on that.

The ‘habit of saving’ inculcated in Indians also allows them to maintain financial discipline and save for contingencies. This habit ensures financial stability during inevitable circumstances such as wars, calamities, bilateral conflict, and recessions, enough to sustain oneself in a foreign country with significant ease and techniques.

The long-term periodic savings in comparison to sporadic or overspending on leisure activities is also a testament to this diaspora’s financial resilience and self-control when it comes to finances. It not only provides for contingency but also leaves a share of their spending to be utilized in philanthropic activities, NGOs, or in establishing new startups to support and promote further migration of skilled labor in these countries.

C. Comparative Analysis

India, as the world’s most populous country, is home to a diverse, skilled diaspora. The heterogeneity, along with unique financial habits and extraordinary academic and working potential, separates them from the other existing diasporas. It stands apart in comparison to the Chinese or Jewish diasporas⁷ in terms of its size, distribution, social and cultural ties, waves of migration (voluntary, forced, indentured labor migration, semi-skilled and skilled migration), emerging as a significant contributor in the field of Information Technology, healthcare, education, management, law, engineering, etc all across the world.

India, on a comparative scale, is on top in receiving a share of remittances and diaspora of about 32 million⁸ all across the world, with many holding top posts in corporate, legislative, and leadership roles.

VII. Recommendations

Indian diaspora movement is an ever-evolving ongoing process, however, it also highlights the scope of improvement on this part.

A. Fostering partnership and collaboration initiatives: It is imperative to acknowledge the diverse avenues through which the Indian diaspora can contribute to national development while simultaneously benefiting from reciprocal exchange opportunities. In several domains, including Innovation and Technology, Business, Startups, and Networking, the Indian government and the Indian diaspora can engage in collaborative efforts to generate novel growth prospects. For instance, partnerships between Indian diaspora experts for research and development and various Indian institutions can facilitate the exploration of new research areas. Technological advancements can mitigate geographical barriers, and seamless engagement between Overseas Citizens of India (OCIs) and the government can enhance bilateral relations. To achieve this objective, consistent emphasis must be placed on regular networking, relationship building, and promoting collaboration through initiatives such as Pravasi Teerth Darshan Yojana, India Development Foundation of Overseas Indians (IDF-OI), Pravasi Bhartiya Kendra, KnowIndia Programme, Chalo India, Overseas Indian Citizenship Scheme (OCI), Pravasi Bharatiya Divas Conferences, and numerous others.

B. Formulating schemes for special investments for NRIs: The Indian diaspora has the potential to provide the necessary strategic impetus, making it imperative to capitalize on India’s potential. Consequently, the government should develop schemes for specialized retirement investments for the Indian diasporic

⁷ Indian Diaspora: Ethnicity and Identity, India Centre for Migration Report

⁸ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India

community, analogous to the National Pension Scheme for NRIs under the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. This approach is justified, as these countries have not invested in the development of this talent pool but derive immediate benefits when immigrants contribute to their tax systems. An NRI donation fund can be set up, and that fund can be further utilized to fund startups in the home country. Additionally, a mentorship programme can be launched where these seasoned professionals can mentor budding entrepreneurs at these incubation centres.

C. Formulating a strategic evacuation policy: In an era characterized by unpredictable crises and limited governmental response time, there exists a necessity for a strategic diaspora evacuation policy from conflict zones through inter-country transportation and diplomatic bilateral negotiations via Embassies and the External Affairs Ministry. India's foreign policy aims to translate partnerships into benefits for key initiatives such as Swachh Bharat, Clean Ganga, Make in India, Digital India, and Skill India. The diaspora presents numerous opportunities for contribution, exemplified by the VAJRA (Visiting Advanced Joint Research Faculty) scheme, which seeks to formalize a rotation program wherein highly skilled non-resident Indian professionals serve Indian public sector organizations for a limited duration, thereby contributing their expertise to the nation.

D. Resourcing Expatriates: Assisted Return programs should be designed to leverage the expertise of the Indian diaspora abroad. Such programs have been implemented in the Republic of Korea, Turkey, and the Taiwan Province of China since the 1970s. The International Organization of Migration and other international agencies have been involved in such programs for an extended period, such as the UNDP TOKTEN program (Transfer of Knowledge through Expatriate Nationals). In Africa, the Return of Qualified African Nationals Program proved beneficial as it facilitated the reintegration of 1,500 highly skilled African nationals into critical sectors of their economies across 10 African countries. In the case of the Taiwan Province of China, the development of a parallel Silicon Valley named Hsinchu Industrial Park in Taipei, along with the establishment of research and development facilities, proved effective in incentivizing migrated youth to return and contribute to their country of origin after becoming seasoned experts in their respective fields. Policies that encourage the participation of Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) holding senior positions in policymaking in their home countries can be highly advantageous, facilitated through the creation of ad hoc positions in various institutions based on a Memorandum of Understanding.

VIII. Conclusion

Diaspora groups support their native countries while contributing to their host nations, which requires a network of trusted global contacts among members, supported by policymakers, interest groups, and international organizations. Diaspora members bolster a country's soft power, and a comprehensive strategy can convert this influence into tangible outcomes through mechanisms like philanthropy, volunteer corps, investment, capital markets, tourism, nostalgic trade, advocacy, and diplomacy. Raising global awareness about Diaspora engagement and providing capacity building is essential, along with continuous research to understand the Diaspora-development relationship. India is increasingly attractive to foreign countries, offering a favorable environment for Diaspora members, prompting the government to engage more closely with them despite legal and

administrative challenges. The Indian Diaspora is a significant source of soft power diplomacy and an indicator of the country's global profile, providing lessons for other nations to integrate global communities into a unified Diaspora identity and force.

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