

## **Indian Diaspora: An Instrument of 'Soft Power' in Global Politics**

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India's emergence as a major actor in the global arena has begun to garner more and more interest in the recent decade. While on one hand, scholars and analysts have attributed this growth to the material indices of 'hard power' such as its economic growth, military expansion, or demographic evolution; others have regarded its 'soft power' as a tremendous potential – its large diaspora, popular films, music, art, and historic and cultural links around the world – as a significant contributor to its present advantageous position vis-à-vis other emerging Asian powers.

The concept of 'soft power' is an artefact of the post cold-war world. The term, coined by Harvard University Professor, Joseph Nye, in 1990 refers to "dominant values, internal practices and policies, and the manner of conducting international relations of . . . the state" (Purushothaman 1). India's soft power and the Indian diaspora have grown in prominence at around the same period and observers have increasingly drawn a link between the two. The soft power credentials of the Indian diaspora have done more for the Indian influence abroad than the bureaucratic efforts of the government of India. Indian foreign policy analyst, C. Raja Mohan writes,

The spiritualism of India has attracted people from all over the world, and its gurus have travelled all around the world selling yoga and mysticism. From Bollywood to classical and popular music to its cuisine, from the growing impact of its writers and intellectuals, India has now begun to acquire several levers of soft power. (The Hindu)

With a humongous population of around thirty million spread across nearly 150 countries, the Indian diaspora is serving their host nations with distinction as entrepreneurs, workers, teachers, researchers, innovators, doctors, lawyers, engineers, managers, and even as political leaders. Every member of the Indian diaspora, while maintaining his *bhartiyata* or 'Indianness,' has made India proud. Every overseas Indian is an achiever in his own way and as he succeeds, India succeeds too. What gives a common identity to all members of India is their Indian origin, their consciousness of their cultural heritage and their deep attachment to India – its heritage, Bollywood, music, cuisine, handicraft, sports, literature, art, yoga, beauty pageantry, its anti-colonial history, its democratic institutions, free press, independent judiciary, vibrant civil society, multi-ethnic polity, secularism, pluralism, skilled English speaking workers, its rapid growth in the IT sector, and even its status as a responsible nuclear power.

The Indian diaspora, which is one of the most significant instruments of soft power itself, is actively engaged in promoting all soft power credentials of the nation around the globe. They cheer and welcome events when India shines. Since they constitute an important and unique force in world culture, and have succeeded spectacularly in their chosen professions in their host countries, they are looked upon as a hard working class, skilled and dependable. Their industry, enterprise, knowledge, economic strength, educational standards, and professional skills are highly acknowledged. Their progress has coincided with India's resurgence as a global player and a country of stature in the

comity of nations. Indian diplomat, Shashi Tharoor, one of the most enthusiastic soft power commentators, writes,

When India's cricket team triumphs or its tennis players claim Grand Slams, when a *bhangra* beat is infused into a western pop record, or an Indian choreographer invents an infusion of *kathak* and ballet, when Indian women sweep the Miss World and Miss Universe contests or when *Monsoon Wedding* vows the critics and *Lagaan* claims an Oscar nomination, when Indian writers win the Booker or Pulitzer prizes, India's soft power is enhanced. ("India as a Soft Power")

When the current third wave of Indian diaspora consisting of professionals and the educated elite sit back and cheer the multi-faceted achievements of the country of their origin, India; the world too sits back and takes notice. The global community has begun to reckon the growing influence of India and as such the elements of popular Indian culture have a wide following in many countries. The Indian diaspora has thus become an asset for the country with its long-lasting ability to influence their host nations unobtrusively and unconsciously, thereby, becoming the 'second face of power.' The Indian diaspora has so popularised the Indian way of life that it has almost become a fad to buy Indian, wear Indian, eat Indian, dance and sing Indian, pray and exercise Indian, so on and so forth! The Indian diaspora has made a highly enviable place for itself on account of its skills and intellect, too. In the US, for example, the stereotypical Indian is no longer a starving peasant, but a highly professional IT specialist who tells helpless Americans how to work with their computers. Indians constitute the epicentre of the Silicon Valley revolution and India have moved from being a job-seeking economy to one that is being driven by demand in developed nations for services and migrant workers from developing countries.

The Indian community in Canada, USA, Britain, Australia, Germany, and other nations in the west have contributed immensely to the countries they have settled in, and command influence and respect in these countries. In fact, the Indo-American community in the US has been found to be the most educated immigrant community in the US. The recent upturn in Indo-US relations has a lot to do with the lobbying, influence, and reputation of the Indo-American community. Countries like Fiji and Mauritius have large Indian communities with people of Indian origin holding important political positions. The Defence Minister in the Canadian Liberal Democratic Government is an Indian – S. Harjit Singh, who had a long stint serving the Canadian army, before occupying the premier position in the present government. Lord Swaraj Paul, Ex-Member of House of Commons in UK, the Chatwals in USA and their intimacy with Hillary Clinton, the steel magnate Mittal in France – all exercise immense power in the policy-making of their host countries, which have a direct bearing on the bilateral relations between India and the countries of their residence.

When David Cameron, British PM greeted the Indian community in Britain on Diwali, describing it as a "great moment" (*The Economic Times*, November 11, 2015), or Justin Trudeau, Canadian PM greeted the Indian diaspora on Diwali, describing it as a "global festival" (*The Economic Times*, November 12, 2015), or USA President Barack Obama celebrating Diwali at the White House, the soft power of the Indian diaspora got a major boost. When the 3mn strong Indian diaspora in US launched Mission 2022 in partnership with the CII to make US-India partnership a defining one (*The Economic Times*, September 22, 2015), it was an assertion of the power the Indian diaspora wielded in the foreign policies. When the Sikh diaspora ran a parallel red-cross aid camp at the Syrian-Iraq border for the refugees of the war-torn country, and received accolades of praise from President Obama, it was yet another assertion of the soft power wielded by our diaspora.

When yoga, India's most enduring and successful cultural asset, becomes a global phenomenon, rapidly adopted into the mainstream western culture, and when June 21 came to be observed as the

International Day of Yoga, after India moved a resolution in United Nations General Assembly to this effect, which was co-sponsored by 170 countries, it becomes a singular example of the mighty soft power of the nation spread globally via its diaspora. When Indian cuisine with its subtle use of herbs and spices grown across the Indian subcontinent, becomes popular in the west, particularly in the UK, which is home to a large Indian diaspora, it speaks volumes of the unspeakable power of the Indian community settled there. Shashi Tharoor claims, "In the UK today, Indian curry houses employ more people than the iron and steel, coal and shipbuilding industries combined" ("India as a Soft Power").

Bollywood films and Indian music (popular and classic) again have a wide following in many countries. Not only the Indian diaspora, but people of non-Indian origin too show exemplary taste in Indian movies and music. Asia, Europe, Africa, and West Asia have a particularly expanding demand for the same. Indian movies have an international market in countries such as Russia, Syria, Senegal, as well as in all neighbouring countries of India. Wax statues of several Bollywood celebrities in Madame Tussaud's in London bear a testimony to the influence of Indian cinema and India's soft power. The overwhelming success of *Slumdog Millionaire*, when India becomes Guest of Honour at book fairs like the Frankfurt Book Fair, when Indian movies are screened at Film Festivals like Cannes, when Bollywood divas sweep the Red Carpet, when Indians win the Nobel and Magsasay Awards, when the IPL attracts foreign players of repute who wish to earn a handsome booty in India, when space astronauts like Kalpana Chawla and Sunita Williams carve a new history, when Priyanka Chopra is chosen to present the Oscars, when Bollywood stars move to Hollywood by the scores, when the Indian community worldwide celebrates India and 'Indianness', India's soft power shines through.

Throughout its history, India has received migrants from various parts of the world and has absorbed them instinctively with their culture, language, social, and economic status. This has equipped Indians to interact with cultures and ethnicities abroad. Indians have carried this very rich legacy of adaptability with them to their host countries. This unique feature of the Indian diaspora is the most important factor in the success of the evolution of the Indian diaspora across almost 150 countries of the globe. This diaspora has taken the Indian philosophy of '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' (The world is my family) and '*Loka Samastha Sukhino Bhavantu*' (Let there be peace in the whole world) to all corners of the world. India's spirituality, its tolerance for different religions, its message of secularism and spiritual lessons enshrined in the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*, its *Karma* philosophy and the *Upadeshas* of the *Gita* have travelled along with its diaspora; providing the much needed succour and harmony in today's times of conflict and strife. Steve Jobs, owner of Apple Inc. and Mark Zuckerberg, owner of Facebook, visited a remote temple near Nainital, believing the profound spiritual powers of the place could rejuvenate their failing business, which it did! Such is the Indian soft power reality in the global scenario.

It is no trivial fact then that the Indian diaspora plays an important role in development, both in their host countries as well as back home. In foreign policies, it plays a positive role in enhancing India's bilateral relations with countries of their residence. In areas of economic development and commerce, the Indian diaspora helps to increase bilateral trade and commercial relationships with their host countries, especially because the liberalisation of the Indian economy has opened up opportunities for investments in India. In science and technology, highly trained experts and scientists can enhance India's knowledge pool. Overseas Indians who have distinguished themselves in the field of medicine and healthcare can play a crucial role in secondary and tertiary healthcare in India. Education, Tourism, and Culture are other areas for widening linkages with Indian diaspora.

Recognising the immensely beneficial role of the diaspora in its own sustainable development, India should initiate constructive measures to ensure that the diaspora's faith in its heritage is strengthened

which would, inter-alia, revitalize its interest in India's development. The Indian diaspora has been eager to donate generously for worthy developmental causes in India. With friendly policy regulations and associations, philanthropy can act as a major catalyst in India's development. At the same time, the GOI has an obligation to safeguard the welfare of Indians living abroad and to put in place rules and procedures conducive to facilitating their links with India – be it the status of PIOs and NRIs in the context of constitutional provisions, laws, and rules, or a review of the aspirations, attitudes, and requirements of the Indian diaspora and their expectations from India. It is thus, a two-way role in which both the diaspora and the government are mutual beneficiaries. The Pravasi Bhartiya Divas initiative by the Indian government is a laudable attempt to tap into the economic and political resources of the Indian diaspora all over the world. However, more needs to be done so as to make the diaspora feel welcome and wanted in India. They are the ones who propagate a favourable image of India in their host countries. It is by virtue of their hearsay that a favourable image of the country is projected through public relations exercises.

It is by their sheer propaganda and advertisement that more tourists flock to India, driven by the urge to explore the mystic, the enigmatic, and the exotic. The academic acumen of the Indian diaspora motivates large numbers of foreign students to enter the portals of Indian universities for higher education under scholarships and student exchange programmes. The Indian diaspora is at the helm of affairs, doing commendable service to their country of origin – in promoting India to an enviable position in global politics. Sundar Pinchai, CEO, Google, an Indian by origin, exercised his powers to strengthen India by way of providing free wifi hotspots on 500 Indian railway stations. Such is the manner in which the Indian diaspora has paid rich returns to their motherland. In its diaspora, India has a substantial amount of soft power and also the potential to augment it.

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