

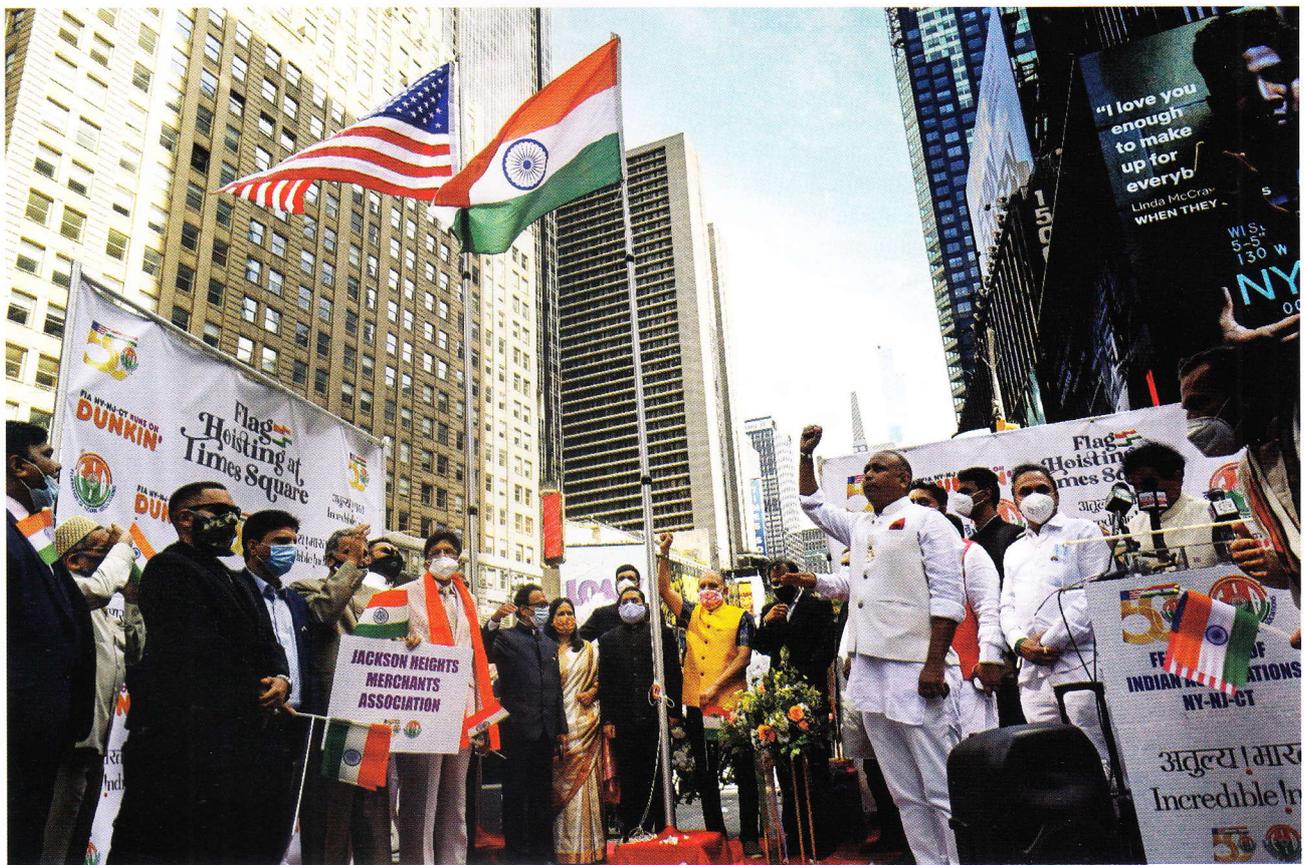
Indian Diaspora: Major Issues and Challenges

Prof S Manivasakan

The overseas community has grown into an energetic and confident diaspora over 25 million. The part played by the diaspora is very vital in the success of India and the foreign policy of India has a strong outreach to the Indian diaspora. However, challenges that lie overseas are real and obstacles for reaching goals are much higher for a foreigner. In this article, the author tries to breakdown these stereotypes.

People leave their homeland, some to follow their dreams, some run from war and hunger and some lured by the sense of adventure. On any case, leaving homeland and going abroad is a huge step and a life-changing experience. Migrants just don't leave behind their possessions but also leave behind their friends, family, social circle and personal identity. It is often conveyed

that going abroad will improve one's lifestyle and their significant others. Overseas life is mostly considered easy to settle and prosper without any hardships in India. All luxury is invariably linked to those who have gone abroad. But this is far different from reality. However, there is no doubt that countries like Canada and the US are considered as the land of opportunities with a lot of promise. However,



The author is Director, UGC-Centre for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Madras. Email: smvasakan62@gmail.com



reality hits hard when a newcomer from India places a foot on foreign land. Language, education and common social behaviour that we took for granted are all up for recalibration.

Major Steps taken by the Indian Government to Handle the Issues of Diaspora

1. An online database of emigrants and comprehensive, Missions, Recruiting Agents, Foreign Employers, Insurance Agencies to make the whole emigration process faster and transparent, that allows online authentication/verification of credentials of all the stakeholders.
2. Indian Government has signed MoU with six Gulf countries, Jordan and Malaysia. The major intent is to enhance bilateral cooperation and employment opportunities in the protection and welfare of workers.
3. Government has also started 'Madad' portal for online lodging of the grievances of the emigrants, which are attended to on priority basis.
4. The government recently amended the rules of the PIO Card Scheme so that new recipients of PIO cards will receive cards that will be valid for the duration of their life.
5. New Embassies in Latin America and African country to help the Diaspora.
6. Bilateral engagement with US, UK to address the concern of skilled labour.
7. Programmes like "Bharat Ko Janiye" to help the Indians living abroad learn about India and also an

opportunity to visit India.

The Indian Diaspora is very varied and diverse and this rich diversity can help mutually both the countries, and hence a closer tie within is needed.

Significance and Contribution

- It helps the transfer of knowledge resources expertise and also bridges the markets for the development of the country of origin and the rest of the world.
- The soft diplomacy—a vital role played by the Indian Diaspora—is critical in the success of the Indo- US nuclear deal.
- The country of their residence also has developed due to this Diaspora. Silicon Valley, for example, represents the success of the Indians in the US.
- The development of Science and Technology is mostly due to the role played by the Indian Diaspora.
- The Diaspora is the major source of trade investment in India.
- The world bank predicts Indian diaspora to be the largest contributor and earner of inflows of remittances which is helping the balance of the Current accounts.

Government Initiatives

- The "Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas" is an initiative started by the Government in 2003 to mark the contribution of the Indian community overseas in the development of India

The Covid-19 pandemic has played havoc with the lives of Indians overseas. Some have lost their jobs while others are in fear of losing them. There is already a significant number of people who are seeking to return to India due to financial instability. All routine trips Indians have been taking back and forth has been disrupted and they are clueless when they will be able to visit their homeland.

- The Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs has been merged with that of the Ministry of External affairs and this merger is a huge initiative in the role of Government to encourage the Indians overseas.
- The Visa on arrival is a facility that India has approved and allowed. Now almost 43 countries have been permitted to have a Visa on arrival by the Indian Government. These countries include the United States, Australia and Fiji. This process has made travel and spread of the diaspora much easier.
- The economic engagement of Indians with India is facilitated by the Overseas India Felicitation centre which was set up by the Government of India with the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII). This partnership and felicitation have promoted the growth of economic engagement of Indians with India.
- The India Government has evacuated the Indian diaspora in Yemen in 2015 through Operation “Rahat” and also from South Sudan through Operation “Sankat Mochan”.
- The “Pravasi Kaushal Vikas Yojana is another important programme taken by the Indian Government which promotes the growth and engagement of youth who target employment overseas.
- The Indian Government now is very quick to respond to the challenges and problems faced by the Indian diaspora especially because the Government has become more digital and active in the social media. Thus, various problems of the Indians abroad have been solved faster and response time much quicker due to the use of this social media and digitalisation.

Issues Faced by Indian Diaspora

- **West Asia**
 - a) Low oil prices owing to Shale gas boom and slower global growth is resulting in job cuts for Indians.
 - b) One of the most direct threats to the security of Indians is the rising conflicts and instability due to the Shia-Sunni conflicts and the radical Islamism.
 - c) Fierce competition from skilled labour from the Philippines and cheap labour from Nepal.
 - d) Regressive and medieval policies like employer seizing the travel documents upon arrival known as “Kafala” labour system are exploitative.

Most NRIs get trapped into the vicious circle of work-life that professional priorities overtake family relationships while others get trapped into the immigration issues so deeply that their life becomes a series of sacrifices. Mere video calls and sharing pictures with parents and family back in India is not a substitution for maintaining real family relationships.

- **US, Canada & UK**
 - a) Discriminative practices owing to a racist, colonial mindset persists.
 - b) Stricter H-1B visa norms in the US Congress.
 - c) President-elect Donald Trump’s call to channel more jobs to Americans.
 - d) Revision of visa norms in UK post-Brexit might hit the Indian diaspora hard, especially the IT professionals.
 - e) The disparity in jobs and racial abuse due to terrorist branding.
 - f) Cultural integration due to various eating preferences, consumerism and nuclear society.
- **Dual Citizenship**

Majority of Indian diaspora want to retain their Indian citizenship along with the citizenship of the country of their residence.

Indian Diaspora: During Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has played havoc with the lives of Indians overseas. Some have lost their jobs while others are in fear of losing them. There is already a significant number of people who are seeking to return to India due to financial instability. All routine trips Indians have been taking back and forth has been disrupted and they are clueless when they will be able to visit their homeland.





There is a question of belonging that arises on diaspora Indians who have not got permanent resident status if they can stay on in their countries after losing jobs; while the ones who have switched their citizenship have a fear that they could be stopped from travelling to India at any point. We have taken our vast overseas community and global migrations as being an unshakeable part of our world.

Most of the companies that Indians work are either owned by the locals or by the big shots of other countries. The workload is burdensome. If a regular working hour is around 8 am to 5 pm, they often end up working till 9 pm. To get what you call a “comfortable position” abroad spare no effort. The years of struggle may vary from person-to-person. The cultural differences can tickle your ego and pride. But you need to be emotionally strong and self-confident to sustain which can be quite a challenge during initial years as you have just left behind what you called “normal”. Migrants always have a pressure on meeting financial expectations of their family staying in native places. Only a trivial part of the population lives a lifestyle that natives stereotypically think of.

Many people have reported on homesickness, loss of friends, inability to stay besides family during good and bad times, living independently, less availability of authentic Indian food, psychological issues due to smaller social circle, the office environment is different, much lesser number of holidays and high cost of living. Most NRIs get trapped into the vicious circle of work-life that professional priorities overtake family relationships while

Despite their struggles, the overseas community has grown into an energetic and confident diaspora of over 25 million. The part played by the diaspora is very vital in the success of India and the foreign policy of India has a strong outreach to the Indian diaspora. The many contributions to knowledge transfer and investment cannot be underestimated.

others get trapped into the immigration issues so deeply that their life becomes a series of sacrifices. Mere video calls and sharing pictures with parents and family back in India is not a substitution for maintaining real family relationships.

On the other end of the spectrum, first-generation NRI's do face challenges on coming back to India after naturally acclimatised in their new countries for many years. They are scared on falling sick due to hygiene issues, power outages, security issues, fitting with the crowd, inhalation of heavy airs in big cities, drinking only bottled water, the noise of honking cars, the frustration of moving in chaotic traffic, taxis on strike and travelling on crowded buses.

Despite their struggles, the overseas community has grown into an energetic and confident diaspora of over 25 million. The part played by the diaspora is very vital in the success of India and the foreign policy of India has a strong outreach to the Indian diaspora. The many contributions to knowledge transfer and investment cannot be underestimated. The restrictions on social distancing imposed due to Covid-19 has resulted in large scale moving back of migrant workers and many of these migrants were stuck not just at international borders but at national and state borders as well.

The “Vande Bharat” was yet another initiative of our Government to organise repatriation flights to bring back the migrant India diaspora especially from Doha, Kuwait, Dammam and Riyadh where more Indians have migrated and wanted to come back home due to this crisis. Almost 900 flights have been operated by this mission so far (as of August 31, 2020) and more than 12 lakh Indians from over 22 countries have been brought back home safely and all the required medical clearance is done for them before they are sent to their respective states and homes.

The basic needs of migrant workers such as food, shelter, healthcare, fear of procuring disease or spreading it, loss of wages, concerns about the family and anxiety are more concerning issues. Some also face harassment and negative response of the local community. Crucial measures to be taken should include; ensuring shelters and kitchens, making other relief material available, emphasising on the need for social distancing, tracking their health and adherence to protocols for management of such cases enable them to reach to the family members through telephone, video calls etc. and ensuring their safety.

As part of psychological safety for a migrant worker, the following steps can be adopted for their well-being:

1. All the migrant workers must be treated with dignity, respect, empathy and compassion. It is important to

listen to their concerns patiently and understand their problems to fulfil their needs for each person/family. There is no generalisation. Normal life is going to resume soon.

2. Make them realise their importance in the community and appreciate their contributions to the society and make them aware of the government policies.
3. Reassure that even if their employer fails them, local administration and charitable institutions would extend all possible help.
4. Out of desperation, many may react in a manner which may appear insulting. Try to understand their issues and be patient. Instead of reflecting any mercy, seek their support in the spirit of winning over the situation together.

Way Forward

- The already affected migrants and diaspora need to be ensured to feel welcomed back home on arrival and there needs to be an easier process of immigration and customs clearances.
- The Government needs to address the problems of blue-collar workers working overseas like:
 - a) Negotiating a Standard Labour Export Agreements with the host countries.
 - b) Monitoring and supervision of our overseas workers by our Missions.
 - c) Compulsory insurance schemes covering the risks faced by our overseas workers.
- There should be a greater focus on promoting tourism among 2nd generation PIOs and frequency of these PIO's to make frequent visits to their home state and visit relatives and family.
- The welfare of Indian Women married to NRIs/PIOs.
- Economic Development.



The “Vande Bharat” was yet another initiative of our Government to organise repatriation flights to bring back the migrant India diaspora especially from Doha, Kuwait, Dammam and Riyadh where more Indians have migrated and wanted to come back home due to this crisis.

- a) Diasporic professionals working in senior positions in the manufacturing industry can help promote India as an important destination for outsourcing.
 - b) The government should also consider setting up of Special Economic Zones, exclusively for projects to be set up by NRIs/PIOs.
 - c) The Government should consider issuing special infrastructure bonds for attracting NRI/PIO investments on the lines of the Israel Bonds.
- The diaspora's financial and intellectual capital must be cashed by India and the major challenge before India is how it can tap this for mutual benefit.

Conclusion

The Indian diaspora has been a pride of India. As all of us are aware, this unprecedented crisis has threatened economic, social and the health of Indians working abroad. India still has a gigantic burden until there is a cure for this virus and the spread is paused. India has taken this responsibility positively and has responded well and the Indian diaspora has been united with their families both for social and economic reasons. The pandemic has affected movements globally. The university students studying in different parts of the world are stranded and if all these students want to come back, it is a major challenge to India.

The world which was friendly to Indians is slowly turning hostile and certainly, lives will be disturbed and disrupted. If there is a mad rush and panic coming home by the Indian diaspora then the problem may become more complex for India. New contingency plans must be set up to avert this crisis. Not just negotiating with the Governments to retain the Indians abroad but also arrange a livelihood for Indians coming home if the doors are shut in their migrant countries.

The Vande Bharat Mission began their Phase 6 programme on September 1, 2020 to further bring the Indians abroad to India and the next phase of migrants workers and students to come back to India. The Indian nationals living abroad have every right to come back home and India has every obligation to bring them back safely and also welcome them back. □