



CHAPTER – 7

DIASPORA AS CULTURAL AMBASSADORS: REIMAGINING BHARAT GLOBALLY

BULBUL ROY CHOWDHURY (GHOSH)

Assistant Professor, Department of Law, Brainware University, blrc.law@brainwareuniversity.ac.in

KRISHNA GHOSH

Assistant Professor, Department of Law, Brainware University, kg.law@brainwareuniversity.ac.in

1. Introduction

The word 'Diaspora' derives from the work of Greek historian Thucydides (B.C. 4th), who typically applied it to the dispersal of the Greeks (Ashok, 2024). In recent contemporary history (20th century), though, it was extensively applied to reveal the dispersal of the Jews in the post 1940s (Ashok, 2024). Subsequently, towards the close of the 20th century, the word diaspora was generalized further to explain the phenomenon of all types of people's movement in the entire world (Grossman, et.al, 2018). Then, around the 1970s, in academia, a distinct/independent field appeared to examine theoretically (systematically) such movements of the people and is called the 'Diaspora Studies' (Grossman, et.al, 2018). After then, a vast body of scholarly literature has evolved on the topics (Grossman, et.al, 2018). There is no shortage of the scholarly definitions of diaspora, at times giving rise to some ambiguities (Brubaker, et.al, 2005). For instance, it is claimed by Brubaker that the term diaspora has been used for nearly any population or group of individuals dwelling outside its place of origin (Brubaker, et.al, 2005). Oxford bibliographies describe the term diaspora as, often involuntary, spreading of the population from a motherland to various regions, thus forming communities and identities in terms of the histories and outcomes of dispersal (Kenny, 2013). The Indian diaspora is "one of the largest and most influential in the world" comprising more than 35 million individuals of "Indian origin" distributed on almost every continent (Fernandes, 2014). Historically, as a global community, the diaspora has been a key generator of India's growth through remittances, investment, and economic linkages with trade. It has also enhanced India's international position by serving as a key cultural bridge (Fernandes, 2014). Nonetheless, India-diaspora relations have evolved since "Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ascension to power," with increased emphasis placed upon political outreach, economic integration, and cultural diplomacy. (Fernandes, 2014). Prime Minister Modi has since taken a deliberate effort to present the diaspora as ambassadors not only of India's rich cultural heritage but also of its advancement (Chaubey, 2024). Initiatives like the "Global Pravasi Rishta Portal," which strengthens the connection between the diaspora and Indian missions abroad, and the expansion of consular services, have facilitated smoother interactions and improved the diaspora's sense of belonging (Chaubey, 2024). Additionally, Modi's government has placed significant emphasis on fostering pride among Indian expatriates, making them an integral part of India's global identity (Chaubey, 2024). High-profile events such as the Madison Square Garden rally in the United States, "Howdy Modi" in Houston, and similar programs in Australia and the United Kingdom have elevated the diaspora's status, transforming them into strategic stakeholders in India's foreign

policy. (Deb, 2016). These rallies not only showcased Modi's charismatic leadership but also underlined the diaspora's role as a force multiplier in strengthening bilateral ties with host countries (Deb, 2016). This essay explores the ways that Modi has altered diaspora relations, focusing on diplomatic initiatives and policy steps that have enhanced their role in India's economic and soft power narrative (Deb, 2016). It also considers the wider implications of the engagement, reflecting on how the diaspora is an important asset for India's geopolitical and cultural ambitions (Chaubey, 2024). This research will provide illumination on how a global community can be utilized in order to achieve mutual growth and influence by examining the development of diaspora interactions (Chaubey, 2024).

2. Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy is a structured form of diplomacy that encourages a deliberate attempt of cultural exchange (Khalid,2014). It enables the understanding of foreign cultural forces. It is exchange of ideas, information, art, way of life, value system, customs, belief and other things about cultures (Khalid,2014). Cultural Diplomacy has been pursued as a tradition for centuries. Expeditionists, travelers, educators and artists are all be able to be represented as examples of informal ambassadors or pioneers of cultural diplomacy (Khalid,2014). Such exchange may take place in such fields as art, sports, literature, music, science and economy. Communication and mutual respect among participating cultures that is based upon improved comprehension of respective values and decreased exposure to stereotypes is what exchange in these fields entails (Isar,2020). Cultural diplomacy plays a significant role in the integration of nations like between the African Union, League of Arab States, and European Union to others. It helps to improve international relations and acquire agreements that touch on issues like trade, investment, tourism, and security (Isar,2020). Private and public corporations and non-governmental agencies (NGOs) use cultural diplomacy as an instrument for steering government policies to suit their interest or for a specific cause. Individuals also use cultural diplomacy to befriend others or during arguments to form opinions about a given issue (Isar,2020). India is the cultural hub of South Asia and the oldest civilization on the Indian Ocean coast. Owing to its past, ancient religions, size, diversity and population, India has the pride of possession of an ancient civilisation (Isar,2020). Its religious and cultural sites, temples, monuments such as Taj Mahal and the Ganges of Varanasi are a marker of the Indian culture. A fascinating blend of ancient culture, India is blessed with vast contrasts and architectural grandeur (Isar,2020). The Indian culture has managed to endure over the centuries for the sole reasons of antiquity, oneness, continuity and universality of its nature. India has been sending out its culture in all directions (Khalid,2014). Its cultural impacts are present in Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asian republics and are experienced in nearly every country on the coast of Indian Ocean (Khalid,2014). Spread of Indian culture has been a two-way process. The pilgrims and the travellers travelled to India at various times during history and told the world outside about Indian culture. However, the best vehicle of dissemination of Indian Culture has been the Indians who migrated to the nook and corners of the Indian Ocean during the last millennia (Isar,2020).

3. Historical Evolution of Indian Diaspora Policy

Indian policy towards its diaspora itself has seen a sea change since the time India attained its independence. India's foreign policy in the early years after 1947 was predominantly spent on nation-building and dealing with the ailments of post-colonial development (Chaubey, 2024). After Jawaharlal Nehru's leaders, the Indian government pursued an aversion policy towards the diaspora, were cautious of double allegiance and a lack of resources to engage in significant interaction with the international Indian community (Chaubey, 2024). Most diplomatic engagement was focused on addressing political, social, and economic challenges faced by People of Indian Origin (PIOs) in countries like Burma, Fiji, and Sri Lanka. With the onset of globalisation and economic liberalisation during the 1990s, the diaspora policy of India underwent a basic shift (Shreya, 2017). Indian officials actively pursued Indian citizens abroad to realise the economic and political potential of the diaspora (Shreya, 2017). The transformation of the government to more formal involvement was characterized by attempts like creating Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) and the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) in 2004. (Ministry of External Affairs, 2011). These were an initial attempt to promote remittances, investments, and knowledge transfer. However, the relationship was mostly transactional, viewing the diaspora as primarily an economic good and not as India's partners in its broader development goals (Chaubey, 2024).

4. Leveraging The Indian Diaspora for National Development

Indian Prime Minister recognized that mere speeches would not be enough to secure the Indian Diaspora's support in the nation's development strategy (Srinivas, 2019). He acknowledged their vital role not only in India's domestic progress but also in enhancing the country's global image (Srinivas, 2019). The Indian Diaspora contributes significantly through remittances, investments, lobbying for India on international platforms, preserving Indian culture abroad, and showcasing the nation's values through their intellect and hard work (Srinivas, 2019). In

2014, Indian Diaspora remittances reached \$70.39 billion—surpassing the \$64.14 billion sent by the Chinese Diaspora to their homeland (Srinivas, 2019). These private remittances account for around 3.5% of India's GDP and even exceeded the country's foreign direct investment in 2015, which stood at just \$44.9 billion (Srinivas, 2019). Additionally, the spending habits of the Diaspora while visiting India stimulate local economic activity (Ganguly, 2018). They can also be encouraged to contribute to charitable trusts, NGOs, and various sectors, including adopting villages to directly uplift communities (Ganguly, 2018). Their engagement in science and technology can create employment opportunities for youth in rural and other regions (Ganguly, 2018). Given the looming challenges India faces, particularly with a growing unemployed youth population and an increasing number of senior citizens, the financially empowered Diaspora can also support the construction of senior citizen homes and invest in employment-generating initiatives as part of their philanthropic contributions (Ganguly, 2018).



Map- 1 – Indian Diaspora. Source: (Ashok, 2024).

5. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations

The Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) was established in 1950—the year India adopted its Constitution—under the illustrious leadership of Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad, with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru serving as its first President (Mark, 2008) (Isar, 2020). Its founding embodied India's ethos of cultural relations with every country, consistent with Nehru's vision of "peaceful co-existence" and non-alignment, demonstrating India's civilizational receptivity and ability to integrate and assimilate foreign cultures (Nehru 1985, 509). Nehru and Azad saw ICCR as an institution to promote international understanding and peace through interculturalism (Jaffrelot 2011; Mark 2008, 186). The ICCR was established with four goals: to influence India's external cultural relations policy, promote mutual understanding, facilitate cultural exchange, and reach out to international cultural organizations. Yet, in spite of the lofty vision, its budget each year is small at about USD 47 million, consistent with an international trend of underinvestment in arts and culture (Mundy, 2000). ICCR's operations widened but remained consistent with its original objectives such as scholarships, Indian Cultural Centres overseas, chairs of distinction, fellowships, delegations, and festivals (ICCR, 2017).

The scholarship scheme specifically for developing countries sought to cultivate goodwill among the future world elite (Mark, 2008). Cultural delegations and eminent visitors, such as Joseph Stiglitz, had the purposes of presentation of India and introducing Indian audiences to international thinking (Mark, 2008). Indian Cultural Centres and Chairs of Indian Studies serve both diaspora communities and global academic interest (Mark, 2008). Centres focus either on preserving traditions for Indian diasporas or on promoting intellectual understanding of India in countries with scholarly interest (Thussu, 2016). There are 36 Centres and 70 academic Chairs globally, 20 dedicated to Hindi. In spite of its wide ambit, ICCR is criticized for its conservative cultural representation, lack of contemporary outreach, and limited incorporation of popular culture like Bollywood (Thussu, 2016).

The craft industry and Bollywood, though influential internationally, are not adequately tapped by ICCR. Other criticisms are accusations of favoritism and regional non-inclusiveness (Thussu, 2016). Expert review panels and 20 regional offices were put in place as a response. Still, significant activity is New Delhi-centric, frequently addressing domestic presentations instead of genuine international interaction (Thussu, 2016). After 1970, ICCR became part of the Ministry of External Affairs but never developed a dynamic cultural diplomacy policy (Rana, 2009). Indian Foreign Service dominated leadership, and the funding is ministerial. The 1997 Standing Committee recommended ICCR's increased autonomy to enhance credibility and diminish propagandist images, recognizing the strategic value

of cultural diplomacy (Rana, 2009). Essentially, ICCR, with all its affluent vision and diplomatic prowess, is hampered by meagre budgets, conventional methods, and official inefficiencies, and is failing to capitalize fully on India's cultural assets in the international sphere (Rana, 2009).

6. Significant Programs and Schemes Empowering The Indian Diaspora

Since Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has revamped its interaction with the Indian diaspora and identifies them as ambassadors of crucial cultural, economic, and political significance (Singh, 2024). Modi calls the diaspora "Rashtradoots" (country ambassadors), indicating the importance placed on their contribution to India's soft power abroad (Singh, 2024). His government has rolled out a range of significant programs to deepen relations and facilitate active diaspora involvement in India's development through political, economic, and cultural channels (Singh, 2024).

1. Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD): Rebirth and Enlargement

PBD was introduced in 2003 but has been rejuvenated under Modi as a leading forum for diaspora interaction. It now encompasses a wider variety of fields such as academia, healthcare, and technology, providing scope for diaspora to interact with policymakers and help shape India's progress (Chaubey, 2024).

2. Strengthening Diaspora Bonds through the Global Pravasi Rishta Portal

This online portal was launched to enhance India's linkage with its international diaspora (Chaubey, 2024). It provides consular services, employment notices, business networking, and cultural activities, enhancing communication and facilitating diaspora inputs to India's development (Chaubey, 2024).

3. Strengthening Overseas Support: The Growth of Consular Services

Consular services have also been enhanced, such as introducing new consulates and easier access to OCI cards and online visa application (Pandit, 2024). These initiatives are intended to provide smooth and effective assistance to diaspora communities, facilitating closer interaction (Pandit, 2024).

4. Vande Bharat Mission: A Lifeline for the Indian Diaspora in Crisis

During the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 1.8 million Indians were repatriated by the Vande Bharat Mission (Ashok, 2024). It highlighted the government's dedication to the well-being of people living abroad and its ability to act effectively in international crises (Mathew, et.al.2025).

5. Leveraging Diaspora for Economic Growth: Key Initiatives and Strategies

The Modi administration actively engaged the diaspora in Indian campaigns including Make in India, Digital India, and Start-up India (Chauhdry, 2024). Its outreach to Indian technologists overseas, particularly Silicon Valley, has encouraged innovation and industrial collaborations in strategic areas such as AI and renewable energy (Chauhdry, 2024).

6. Economic Footprints of the Diaspora: From Remittances to Investments

In 2023, India received \$111 billion in remittances, the highest in the world (Iqbal, et. al, 2024). Apart from remittances, members of the diaspora have contributed to India's technology, education, and start-up systems, integrating themselves further into India's economic scene (Iqbal, et. al, 2024).

7. Indian Diaspora as a Keystone of Soft Power

Modi has used the diaspora to increase India's soft power. International Yoga Day and opening Indian Cultural Centres across the globe popularize Indian culture and cement global linkages (Mazumdar, 2018). The political voice of diaspora groups, particularly in nations such as the US and UK, has contributed to India's global reputation (Mazumdar, 2018).

8. Empowering Indian Diaspora Leaders: Strategic Support in Host Nations

The government has prioritized supporting Indian-origin leaders in politics, business, and civil society (Chaubey, 2024). Their contributions have advanced India's interests and strengthened bilateral ties with their respective host nations (Chaubey, 2024).

9. Promoting Bharatiya Bhasha and Culture: Global Outreach Initiatives

Indian Cultural Centres around the globe now provide important platforms for the promotion of Indian arts,

language, and heritage (Pandya, 2025). The government has also increased the promotion of Indian languages, especially Hindi, through events and online media, fostering cultural pride in the diaspora (Pandya, 2025).

10. Education and Ability Progress Strategies

Intrigued by the diaspora's potential in innovation and education, the Modi government has promoted partnership with international educational institutions (Chaubey, 2024). Initiatives such as Skill India welcome diaspora engagement to equip Indian youth. Return Indian students pursuing higher studies abroad are also being actively brought back to India (Pandya, 2025).

11. Collaborative Diplomacy: Diaspora Influence

The Modi administration has strategically used the diaspora's global presence to enhance India's diplomacy (Chaubey, 2024). Whether through advocacy in Washington or professional achievements abroad, the diaspora has helped promote India's foreign policy goals and strengthen international relationships (Chaubey, 2024).

7. Conclusion

There has been a tremendous transformation in Bharat's foreign policy regarding diaspora concerns, especially during Prime Minister Modi's regime. PM Modi activated all modes of diplomacy to connect the diaspora with their homeland and contribute to Bharat's cultural, economic, and political development—an energetic diplomacy that was missing before him. In the post-independence period, however, PM Nehru, due to specific political reasons, excluded the diaspora from the foreign policy framework by referring to them as the "Guest Community." It was only after the 1976 Emergency that the then-leadership began to consider including the diaspora in foreign policymaking. The economic reforms under the 1990s LPG (Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization) policy compelled the government to recognize the diaspora's economic significance to Bharat's development.

In 1994, a department was created to address diaspora concerns and initiate policy-level interaction with the Bhartiya diaspora community globally. Yet, despite this institutional development, there was no major change in bureaucratic functioning, as it continued in a conventional manner. At times, bureaucracy seemed to follow the Nehruvian attitude of "active dissociation." However, with PM Modi taking charge, he emphasized administrative and policy reforms to effectively engage the diaspora with the homeland. Aware of the diaspora's capital and knowledge potential for Bharat's political, cultural, and economic progress, PM Modi often asserts, "The world's desire to interact with Bharat has increased. Our diaspora can play a crucial role in promoting Bharat's interaction with the world." Through his governance philosophy of "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikaas" (taking everyone along and working for everyone's welfare), PM Modi has inspired the diaspora to contribute their capital, skills, and knowledge for Bharat's growth. His 'Diaspora Diplomacy' continues to evolve, positioning the Bhartiya diaspora as a global bridge that connects the world with Bharat for economic development.

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