

Indian Diaspora and Its Role in Promoting India's National Interest- An Evaluation

Shekhar Choudhary,

Assistant Professor, School of Law, UPES.

shekharchoudharymzn@gmail.com.

Dr Parth Sharma,

Associate Professor, School of Law, UPES.

parth.anshu@gmail.com

Abstract

The present article traces historical evolution of Indian diaspora and traces its role in promoting India's national interest.

Keywords- Indian Diaspora, National interest, India.

Meaning of Diaspora

The English term diaspora can be traced to the Greek word diaspeirein, meaning 'scatter' or 'disperse.' In the classical context, the term diaspora used to refer to forced displacement, especially of Jews. (Ayokunle (2025). However, as social science has evolved, the conceptualisation of the term diaspora has changed significantly. Current definitions of diaspora encompass most forms of migration, including voluntary, labour, professional, and transnational or multinational migration.

It combines geographical movement across a variety of locations, a unified collective feeling of origin, collective memory, and the continuity of a relationship with the homeland. Even after generations, diaspora groups preserve cultural practices, social structures, and emotional ties to their origin (Tauseef et al., 2025, p. 1174). These ties may be cultural and social, such as the preservation of a language, the practice of religious rituals, and the celebration of cultural holidays, among others. Moreover, they may be informal, such as sending remittances and making business investments to the homeland.

A diaspora, in the broadest sense, is to be understood and defined as a social process rather than a population category. In the Indian diaspora, the intersections between the historical and the contemporary are evident, and the diaspora's adaptability is on display.

Indian Diaspora: An Overview

The Indian diaspora is a term that encompasses all Indian-origin migrants settled outside India. This means that it also encompasses Indian nationals living abroad, as well as foreign nationals of Indian origin. As per the report of the Indian Ministry for external affairs Indian diaspora numbers approximately 35.42 million consisting of 15.85 million Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and 19.57 million People of Indian Origin (PIOs) (Singh, 2025, pp. 120–122).

The Indian diaspora is also notable for its diversity, as far as socioeconomic status is concerned. The Indian population is also ethnically, religiously and linguistically diverse, all of which makes the Indian Diaspora a single community.

This multiplicity of experiences has analytical relevance. The outcomes of diaspora experiences differ based on migration routes, country of destination policies, and host-country legal frameworks. Within the Indian diaspora, some enjoy economic prosperity and political power, while others have poor and unstable employment, limited entitlements, and social isolation. The migration "gender" also determines diaspora experiences. Women migrants are often found in the care and domestic work sectors. Internal hierarchies, vulnerabilities, and inequities, rather than only successful narratives, must be recognised when explaining the Indian diaspora.

Indian diaspora formation has taken place in successive historical waves, with each shaped by specific structural determinants—whether trade, colonialism, state policies, and global economic shifts (Elo, Kothari, & Täube, 2025). These

waves have also differed by magnitude, geographic targeting, social class, and the social relations of production vis-à-vis the homeland. In terms of analytical framing, viewing migration in supply-demand waves of Indian diasporas provides the most clarity on contemporary diaspora formations and the varying nature of diaspora communities across countries.

While earlier phases of Indian migration exemplified largely externally driven phenomena such as imperial ventures and labour shortages, later phases reflect more individualised considerations, such as educational and professional mobility, as well as integrative participation in the global labour market (Agarwala, 2022). Most significantly, these phases are not mutually exclusive. The descendants of earlier migrants often engage in new forms of global mobility themselves, resulting in multi-layered, generationally complex diaspora relationships.

The wave-based approach also clarifies the evolution of state–diaspora relations. More established diaspora communities often developed in situations where India had little or no capacity or interest in engaging with these overseas populations. In contrast, today's migrants find themselves in a record-setting policy context that seeks to harness the diaspora for developmental and diplomatic ends. The subsequent subsections focus in detail on the most significant waves of formation of the Indian diaspora.

Ancient and Pre-Colonial Migration

The main forms of pre-colonial Indian migration were trade, religious, and cultural exchange. Indian merchants, sailors, and scholars extensively travelled and worked across the Indian Ocean, establishing and developing cultural and trade relations with the regions of Southeast Asia, East Africa, and Central Asia. These movements enabled the transmission of Indian religions, languages, arts, and knowledge systems.(Mukherjee, 2022)

In contrast with contemporary diaspora formation, early migrations were not associated with self-conscious, diasporic identities permeated with a nationalist ideology, as the idea of modern nationalism had not yet come into existence. Indian migrants often melted into the local societies on the receiving end of the migrant flux, while also enriching the local cultures, creating a syncretic new cultural whole. The influence of Indian civilisation on the local cultures of Indonesia, Cambodia, and even Thailand attests to the significance of cultural syncretism.(Mishra, 2021, p. 4)

This phase in Indian mobility history exemplifies the myth-busting potential of a non-Indian, non-colonial diaspora. It provides evidence against the tendency of the formation of a non-Indian diasporic community resulting from a lack of conceptualisation of the Indian subcontinent, alongside a myriad of distinct geo-political constructs, during the colonial period and in the peripheries of the then dominant global politico-economies.

Migration in the Colonial Era

The Indian diaspora, as a result of colonial rule, was the first large-scale and systematic formation of the Indian diaspora. After the abolition of slavery in the British colonies, European colonial powers began transporting Indian migrants, now known as Indentured Labourers, to the plantations of the Caribbean, African and Pacific Islands. The migrations, from the point of view of the migrants, were harsh, with constrained, oppressive work conditions and a complete loss of their human rights(Dowlah, 2024, p. 185).

Despite the oppressive nature of the system, many of the Indentured Labourers, after the completion of their contract, decided to settle down in the new abode and established self-sustaining diasporic communities. These communities became the repository of the cultures, religions, and languages of the migrant Indians and were able to provide an Indian cultural identity.

Diaspora communities from colonial-era India have critically engaged with the political and socio-cultural life of the host nations, including colonial resistance movements, and such experiences continue to resonate with present-day diaspora politics and identity formation.

Post-Independence Skilled Migration

Soon after India gained independence, a further optimistic, mostly educationally based, professionally motivated emigration took place. Post-independence, qualified Indian professionals moved to nations such as the USA, UK, and Canada, and some professionals entered fields such as medicine, engineering, and the sciences (Varghese, 2021, pp. 110–112). This was considered a "brain drain" discourse as the loss of such a human resource was deemed a calamity.

It subsequently became appreciated that this emigration created highly skilled, international professional networks that facilitated the exchange of ideas, investments, and innovations. Numerous emigrants kept in touch with India, and their communications made contributions to the socioeconomic progress and technological advancement of the motherland. This shift towards voluntary migration was unprecedented.

Gulf Migration

After the 1970s, there was also considerable geographic mobility towards the Gulf region as Indian emigration to the Gulf and the Middle East became more pronounced. This was further exacerbated after the oil boom, as the economic growth of the Gulf countries was more pronounced, and many Indian professionals who emigrated to West Asia were to serve the growing demand in the fields of construction, services, and domestic labour. West Asian migration is rudimentarily contract-based, wherein the emigrants have a limited scope to settle permanently. Barring some of the legal and social challenges that one can encounter in the Gulf region, the economic impact of the migration of the region's workers has been pronounced due to the volume of remittances sent back to India. These remittances have helped support household incomes and promoted regional development in several Indian states, notably in Kerala and Uttar Pradesh.

Contemporary Global Migration

The most recent wave of formation of the Indian diaspora has a combination of factors that include the process of globalisation, advancements in digital technologies, and the availability of international education. There is a growing presence of students, professionals, and entrepreneurs from India in several countries, with many of them establishing and operating businesses in more than one country within a given region. This diaspora phenomenon is characterised by high connectivity with flexible identities and transnational lifestyles.

The recent phenomenon of increased restrictions on the movement of people and the volatility of the global economy continue to be a challenge and are a testament to the continuing transformation of global mobility.

Classification of Indian Diaspora (NRI, PIO, OCI)

In the Indian diaspora, the Indian government makes a further classification of the diaspora into Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs), and Overseas Citizens of India (OCI). This serves to manage the various facets of citizenship, entitlements, rights and diaspora participation while attempting to keep the sovereignty considerations in focus (Chandramalla, 2022).

NRIs are Indian passport holders who have relocated to other countries, while PIOs and OCI passport holders are foreign nationals who have Indian ancestry. An OCI passport grants an individual the right to stay indefinitely in India and the entitlement to engage in economic activities in the country; however, one does not have the right to vote (Agnihotri, 2021). Such differences have a pronounced impact on the diaspora's access to economic opportunities and other social and civic opportunities and engender a sense of exclusion and a lack of belonging to the country.

Second-Generation Diaspora and Identity

Members of the Indian diaspora's second generation navigate complicated identity issues as a result of socialisation, cultural inheritance, and the socio-culture of the host country. Although they may not have been to India, family values, traditions, language, and cultural practices continue to influence their identification.

Identity among second-generation diasporas is often hybrid, combining facets of Indian culture and the culture of the host country. This hybrid identity is a cultural asset, yet it elicits diverse issues and challenges, such as those of assimilation, discrimination, and belonging.

Diaspora and Development

India diaspora happens to be one of the most powerful diasporas of the world. It has presence in close to 200 countries. It has become one of the most important strategic assets. "The analogy of sun never sets in the British Empire (The Guardian 2014) can be applied to the Indian diaspora for its spectacular spread around the globe and stretches across the oceans" (Pradhan & Mohapatra, 2020). Indian diaspora and its importance can be seen from three distinct perspectives. First as an important pillar for fostering India's economic growth. Second, from the vantage point of propelling India's diplomatic and political interests around the globe. Third from the cultural perspective, enhancing India's image abroad.

Indian diaspora receives massive remittances from abroad which is critical for its macroeconomic stability. “The overseas Indian community transferred \$135.46 billion to India during the previous fiscal year setting a new record” (Times of India, 2025). This inflow have contributed 47 percent of India’s merchandise trade deficit (Angel one 2025). Indian diaspora happens to be one of the major sources of Foreign Direct Investment. In context of the total FDI inflow of \$81 billion in the period of 2024-25, one-third of that investment was channelled through the Indian communities alone in Singapore, the USA, UAE, and UK along with Mauritius (PTI, 2024). It is this diaspora which is responsible for nurturing startup ecosystem in India. These big shot diasporas and venture capitalist not only provide money but also their policy level advice, expertise in global market etc. Hence are instrumental in propelling India’s economic development and financial stability.

Indian diaspora happens to be one of the most influential diasporas of the world. In most of the countries people of Indian Origin hold high offices and thus they have natural access to foreign policy circles. Many a times they lobby for promoting India’s interest. For example “Indian Americans attempt at lobbying local politicians has been partially aimed at the long-term interest of bridging the gap in perceptions in the US about India” (Janardhanan, 2013). In the gulf region presence of strong Indian community is instrumental in ensuring India’s energy security. The presence of this community is critical to protect labour rights and ensuring a stable supply of crude oil to India (Charan, 2023).

Indian diaspora plays a critical role as in popularising a good image of their respective country. They act as cultural ambassadors. For example, in case of India through Yoga, Ayurveda, Bollywood, Indian cuisines they create a positive image of “Brand India” (Parida, 2015).

Indian leadership for long haven’t utilized fully India diaspora. The current government have realised their role in promoting India’s interest. They are critical to India’s interest. This is evident from BJP’s national interest “The NRIs, PIOs and professionals settled abroad are a vast reservoir to articulate the national interests and affairs globally. This resource will be harnessed for strengthening Brand India” (Mohan & Chauhan, 2015). Thus, Indian diaspora has a major role to play in propelling India’s economic development.

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