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## Modi and the Indian Diaspora

*By Parama Sinha Palit*

### SYNOPSIS

*The Indian diaspora, having an enormous strategic value, has been drawing a lot of attention – from both policymakers and academics alike. What are the leading factors fashioning India's diasporic engagement over the last couple of years and what are the challenges ahead?*

### COMMENTARY

THE DIASPORA has been challenging traditional approaches to foreign policy which emphasised bilateral state-to-state relations. The diaspora is increasingly being regarded as an instrument of soft power with immense strategic value. The Indian diaspora has been no different.

The Indian leadership has been strengthening its links with the diaspora while engaging them. For example, in 2003, [External Affairs Minister](#) Yashwant Sinha said “people of Indian origin are extremely important sources of support for the Indian Government in the execution of its policies through the influence and respect they command in the countries in which they live”.

### Diaspora in Independent India

In fact, their cultivation during recent times established the diaspora as probably the most effective mechanism of India's soft power. Historically, efforts to engage the Indian diaspora for influencing overseas public opinion was underway even before India attained its independence in 1947.

During the early years after independence, India encouraged assimilation of migrants in their respective host countries. Over time, the government changed its position

towards the diaspora, realising that communicating with the overseas Indians was crucial in shaping India's contemporary foreign policy.

The Atal Bihari Vajpayee's tenure (1998-2004) was significantly responsible for altering perceptions towards the diaspora with the government engaging the group for developing mutually beneficial linkages. By setting up a high-level committee on the Indian diaspora in 2000, Vajpayee laid the foundation of a structured policy, thus spearheading diasporic engagement.

### **New Media and the Indian Diaspora**

While the engagement of the diaspora has picked up over the years, it has intensified under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The BJP has been carefully shaping a new political sphere of power. The effort has been equally to encourage them to invest in India's economic and social growth on the one hand and consolidating their political commitment to the saffron party on the other.

The wealthy segments of the overseas Indian and the People of Indian Origin (PIOs) – many of whom identify with BJP's *Hindutva* ideology – are sources of large remittances into India. While the effort to 'make the diaspora an integral part of our development journey' was adequately manifested during Modi's visits to the United States, Canada, Australia and Fiji, the attempt has also been to reap electoral benefits for the party.

Dubbed the 'social media' PM by the *BBC* in 2015, Modi has been utilising Web 2.0 actively and aggressively for communicating with the overseas Indians. As public opinion has gained more voice and a new leverage in the digital media landscape, the diaspora was skillfully cultivated for creating a social media buzz around Modi's election in 2014 and then his re-election in 2019 to resonate their affluence 'with India's own aspirational youth, making them powerful social media influencers'.

Tweeted as India's 'permanent ambassadors' by Modi, these strong members of the Indian diaspora have also been regarded critical in flagship initiatives like 'Make in India', *Swachh Bharat!* (Clean India!) and the Digital India campaign – all of which are public diplomacy tools communicating India's competitive identity to the world.

### **Consolidating Political Power**

In an attempt to further consolidate political power, the Modi government is also noted for organising mega events overseas when Modi travels abroad, which are unique and goes beyond being just public relations events. The recent Howdy Modi! gathering organised in Houston in September 2019 aimed just that and more. With India's secular democracy at crossroads, communicating the right message has become critical in nation-branding exercise across the world.

His Twitter feed, which included a video showing Modi meeting the representatives of particular communities, such as the Shia Muslim Dawoodi Bohras, the Kashmiri Pandits and local Sikhs during his trip to the US in 2019, was carefully calibrated to communicate Modi's secular image in spite of the BJP's well-known identity as a right-wing Hindu nationalist party. By choosing these diverse events, Modi's strategy has

been to reach out to the diaspora with the right message deploying his Twitter handle and Facebook posts.

Similarly, his emphasis on *change*, *development* and *progress* – three of his major catchwords for engaging the diaspora employing the new media platforms – indicate Modi's new public diplomacy approach which has been without a precedence. By emphasising *change* and rejecting the old narrative, Modi has been making efforts to re-brand India, targeting the diaspora and the global audience.

### **Challenges Ahead**

The diaspora engagement has indeed emerged as a critical component of contemporary Indian foreign policy. Unfortunately, Modi's diaspora engagement is yet to produce desired results in the form of large investments and economic participation of the diaspora in India's economic flagship initiatives like 'Make in India'.

The policy is also probably slanted in a relatively more high-profile fashion, particularly engaging the diaspora in the West, more specifically the US.

The challenge of the policy also remains in deeper engagement of the Indian diaspora, heterogeneous in social, economic and demographic characteristics, across the world. Specific challenges are expected to arise in the Middle East where a large section of the Indian diaspora is often under stressful and difficult working conditions. The treatment of these overseas Indian workers needs to be integrated carefully within a broad diaspora policy, particularly in handling difficulties like sudden lay-offs and retrenchment of workers.

It is also evident that the diaspora is being engaged with certain political objectives that include mobilisation of financial resources as well as their greater participation in Indian political and economic affairs. However, it might be noted that the Indian diaspora is very different from its counterpart Chinese diaspora in terms of its economic heterogeneity, ethnic variety as well as the effort to maintain a relatively low profile in host country affairs.

It is indeed a complex feature and whether its engagement of the diaspora will serve India's long-term strategic and economic interests and augment its brand globally is difficult to say. In fact, social media-friendly leaders like Modi must be careful of the digital public sphere which has equally been responsible for unleashing hate culture as power shifted from "hierarchies to citizens and networks of citizens", as pointed out by the US social media expert Alec Ross.

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