

Is the Diaspora Done With PBDs?

On eve of 14th convention, Pravasi Bharatiya Divas draws mixed reviews



Above from left, Prem Bhandari, P. Somasundaran, Mihir Meghani, Adapa Prasad and Ashook Ramsaran. Below, Bharat Barai and wife with Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

By George Joseph

To Ashook Ramsaran, the upcoming Pravasi Bharatiya Divas convention is a return home that satisfies his need, as a New Yorker, to reconnect with his Indian roots.

To George Abraham, chairman of the Indian National Overseas Congress, PBDs are disappointing events, worth neither the investment of time nor money.

But when the 14th such convention is held from Jan. 7 to Jan. 9 in Bengaluru, Karnataka, about 3,500 delegates will attend, representing 60 nations. Ramsaran will be there - Abraham will not.

A focal point for brainstorming on key issues facing the Indian Diaspora, this convention will pay particular attention to youth. Many attendees will also be assessing the PBD's future.

For Ashook Ramsaran, president of the Indian Diaspora Council and former president of the Global Organization of Persons of Indian Origin, the PBD is a homecoming. His forefathers had moved to Guyana in the 19th century. His great-grandfather, Pooriya, arrived there in 1853 aboard the ship Adelaide from Uttar Pradesh and great-grandmother Radhah arrived from Bihar in 1860 aboard the Colgrain.

Ramsaran himself moved to the U.S. in 1968 and earned engineering degrees at Polytechnic University in New York, where he now lives. He will attend the PBD in Bangalore and at the plenary session on Jan. 8, he will present a paper on consular services. It will be a critique of the various services provided by the consulates, the problems people face and some suggested improvements.

He also plans to attend the Uttar Pradesh Divas on Jan. 4 and 5 in Lucknow.

Ramsaran has participated in all PBDs since 2004 either as a



presenter or as a panelist, except for 2006 and believes the PBDs are useful for the Diaspora. "Specific sessions are of interest to impacted groups of NRIs and PIOs. Overall, PBD tries to address those issues which represent the government of India's active engagement of the Indian Diaspora while presenters from various countries and sectors address issues of interest to the Diaspora."

He said the PBDs bring the

Diaspora closer together. "Secondly," he said "it shows the deep and abiding interest of the government of India in the well-being of the Diaspora and its active engagement at various levels. Thirdly, it has encouraged the government to develop schemes and policies such as PIO card, OCI cards, etc. for further engagement with the Diaspora and strengthen the bonds to India. Fourthly, it reminds host countries of the Diaspora that

India cares about its Diaspora."

He said he did not agree with critics who have said Gulf countries get more attention at the PBDs because of their larger participation. "PBD 2017 sessions have been selected with the global Indian community in mind, not one specific group or region," he said. "The topics of discussion comprise the issues of interest and concern of NRIs and PIOs alike. The selection of the venue is done as a matter of rotation

within India and to give the PBD delegates another slice of India."

He also noted the new format of the PBD 2017 with a focus on in-depth pre-discussions culminating in the plenary sessions providing more time for interaction and for more active engagement. He said, however, there is some disappointment that there is no Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, which was merged in the Ministry of External Affairs.

P. Somasundaran, professor at Columbia University in New York agreed. He said NRIs felt like they were needed. He has no plans to attend the 2017 PBD but did attend the third one in 2005 in Mumbai.

"That meeting was very useful to know what the India government and state governments were planning and where NRIs could help to make India great again on the international stage," he said. "If nothing else, it was inspiring to listen to President Abdul Kalam who gave a unique futuristic talk. This was one place where one could feel how beautiful India is, as a rainbow model for unity in diversity. Chief ministers made us feel like we were wanted. Food and other items made us feel like we have not left home.

"President Kalam's tea outside with us was marred by many business folks crashing and crushing the gates which caused the security people to shorten it and take him inside. It was charming to see how Kalam was nevertheless smiling and shaking hands all the way through. Indeed there are no more Kalams, who did make India great and strong in the global arena with efficient and inexpensive satellites and missiles," Somasundaran said.

Ambassador T.P. Sreenivasan, who served in the Indian Embassy and United Nations Permanent Mission for several years before moving to Vienna as ambassador and governor of the International Atomic Energy

Young Indians Get Their Day at PBD

Dr. António Costa, prime minister of the Republic of Portugal, will be the chief guest and Michael Ashwin Satyandre Adhin, vice president of the Republic of Suriname will be the special guest at the Youth Pravasi Bharatiya Divas.

On Jan. 7, the day is reserved for Yuva Bharatiya Divas and speakers from across the world to will address problems faced by students abroad and NRI students. It will conclude with a showcase of dance and music.

PBD 2017 will focus on the

theme, "Redefining Engagement with the Indian Diaspora."

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will deliver the keynote address on Jan. 8, when the event will be formally inaugurated.

The sessions include: "Indian Diaspora: Catalysts for realizing India's Development Vision;" "Development Foundation of Overseas Indians;" "Consular Services to Overseas Indians: Ensuring Effective & Efficient Delivery;" "Partnering with the Diaspora to Accelerate Tourism in

India;" and "India as Global Health and Wellness Hub."

On Jan. 9, President Pranab Mukherjee will present the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Awards.

Dnyaneshwar Mulay, secretary of the Overseas Indian Affairs at the Ministry of External Affairs - and former Consul General in New York - is coordinating the event.

PBD is celebrated on Jan. 9, the day in 1915 that Mahatma Gandhi, the greatest Pravasi, returned from South Africa to lead India's struggle for freedom.