Re-Engaging the Indian Diaspora and The Future of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD)

By Ashook Ramsaran (January 11, 2022)

My personal note for our collective remembrance of those who passed away from Covid-19 and other tragedies during the past 2 years. I experienced personal family losses and I urge everyone to recognize and remember those who passed away and the families who suffered as a result.

My gratitude to Prof. Dubey and organizers of forum on an important topic, and for inviting me along with esteemed colleagues to make this presentation, several of whom are known to me. Thanks to my many friends and associates in attendance, including Mehen, Shekhar, Dew, Sandew, Jean and others.

ODI

Organisation for Diaspora Initiatives

International Web-Conference
Celebrating the Pravasi Bhartiya Divas (PBD)
on
India and it's Diaspora Connect:
Challenges and Opportunities
organised by
Organisation for Diaspora Initiatives (ODI India)
in Collaboration with
Diaspora and International Migration Programme (DIMP), CAS-School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi
&
Sarnámihuis, the Netherlands

INTRODUCTION

I want to skip the anecdotes which are ably provided by other presenters at this forum and elsewhere. I want to go directly to the topic of *"Re-Engaging the Indian Diaspora and the Future of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD)"*

In order to engage in a fair and informed discussion, analysis and objective assessment, with a proposal on the subject of *"Re-Engaging the Indian Diaspora and The Future of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD)"*, it is necessary to present brief relevant backgrounds of both Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) and Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD). This would reveal the initial objectives, PBD's inception, its successes, and the consequences of its reduction in scope, outreach and intensity among the Indian Diaspora. It would also attempt to justify the proposal for a more robust and active re-engagement of the Indian Diaspora as originally envisioned by PBD when it was first formulated, and the resounding appeal to the Indian Diaspora in the first twelve (12) years of its annual convention.

It is my belief that I am uniquely qualified to present this perspective and proposal on *"Re-Engaging the Indian Diaspora and The Future of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD)"*in view of my experience, expertise and active involvement over a long period of time with the Indian Diaspora. I have been directly involved with the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) and Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) since the inception to 2016, closely collaborating on specific PBD conference sessions, chairing or being a presenter at each PBD, as well as providing much valued advice and recommendations and suggestions to MOIA on PBD. I have traveled extensively among Indian Diaspora and other countries, given lectures, organized and participated in diaspora conferences, written articles and collaborated on several notable publications.

PREAMBLE

The Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA): "Ministry was established in May 2004 as the Ministry of Non-Resident Indians' Affairs. It was renamed as the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) in September 2004. Positioned as a 'Services' Ministry, it provided information, partnerships and facilitations for all matters related to Overseas Indians: Non-Resident Indian and Person of Indian Origin. The Ministry was merged with the Ministry of External Affairs on 7 January 2016. The government said that the decision was taken in line with government's "overall objective of minimising government and maximising governance" and that it will help the government address duplication as well as unnecessary delays". https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ministry_of_Overseas_Indian_Affairs

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PBD

"Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) is celebrated on 9th January every year to mark the contribution of Overseas Indian community in the development of India. January 9 was chosen as the day to celebrate this occasion since it was on this day in 1915 that Mahatma Gandhi, the greatest Pravasi, returned to India from South Africa, led India's freedom struggle and changed the lives of Indians forever.

PBD conventions are being held every year since 2003. Since 2015, its format has been revised to celebrate the PBD once every two years and to hold theme-based PBD Conferences during the intervening period with participation from overseas diaspora experts, policy makers and stakeholders. These conventions provide a platform to the overseas Indian community to engage with the government and people of the land of their ancestors for mutually beneficial activities. These conventions are also very useful in networking among the overseas Indian community residing in various parts of the world and enable them to share their experiences in various fields.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PBD *(Cont'd.)*

Fifteen PBDs: To connect India to its vast overseas diaspora and bring their knowledge, expertise and skills on a common platform, the PBD Convention - the flagship event of MOIA is organized from 7th - 9th January every year since 2003. Fifteen PBDs have been held earlier in various places of India so far". https://www.mea.gov.in/pravasi-bharatiya-divas.htm

Besides the annual PBD held in India (rotated in major cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Kochi, Ahmedabad), MOIA held a series of 1-day regional PBDs (**RPDs**) to better outreach and accommodate those in regions/countries outside of India and addressing issues specific to those regions or countries. These countries included: Australia, Singapore, United Kingdom (London), Netherlands, Canada and USA. These were focused and highly successful events which were also attended by those who could not attend or did not attend the annual PBD held in India.

PBD AS ENGAGEMENT WITH INDIAN DIASPORA

The annual PBD (until 2016) was a welcome engagement event by the Indian Diaspora as a "Diaspora meeting" with attendees from most countries, small and large, where people of Indian origin reside. These include persons of Indian origin (PIOs), citizens of other countries by birth or naturalization, as well as non-resident Indians (NRIs). Attendees welcomed the opportunity to meet, participate in the conference sessions and engage in discussions in meaningful and substantive ways. They felt a sense of jubilation and belonging, and expressed the feeling that the Government of India cared for the Indian Diaspora in a substantive way.

Conference sessions included region specific updates and issues, presented by notable speakers from those regions. Information from these sessions provided information, education, awareness and opportunities for cultural, commerce and academic exchanges.

Min. Jagdish Tytler

Min. Vayalar Ravi

Min. Oscar Fernandes

In addition, it was exciting to witness the Prime Minister of India inaugurate every PBD and welcome the Chief Guest selected among notable PIOs. It was more exciting to witness the President of India bestow the coveted annual Pravasi Bharatiya Saman Awards (PBSA) to a several higher achievers and outstanding PIOs and NRIs of the Indian Diaspora.

THE DEMISE OF MOIA & CURTAILMENT OF PBD

MOIA was established in May 2004 and initiated the annual PBD as its flagship event, a global convention held from 7th – 9th January every year since 2003. The Ministry was merged with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) on 7 January 2016. There was no longer a "Diaspora Minister" as MOIA minister was often called. The "Diaspora Minister" visits to near and far reaches of the Indian Diaspora ended in 2016 and the India Diaspora lost its high level representation within the Government of India.

It should be stated that over the years, PBD gradually became a showcase of the Government of India and the bureaucracy rather than an annual convention of the Indian Diaspora. Although there were several important schemes and policies implemented, they were done at the bureaucratic level, sometimes without relevant input or consultation with the Indian Diaspora.

In addition, the annual PBD was changed to a biennial event, thereby depriving the Indian Diaspora of the engagement, excitement, anticipation and enormous benefits of the annual PBD. The changes by MEA to make the widely accepted PIO card become the OCI (Overseas Citizen of India) card caused a lot of confusion at first and was not welcome by many PIOs born and living in multi-ethnic societies where national loyalties remain a thorny issue. These changes further alienated many in the Indian Diaspora who feel that the once respected engagement and outreach have diminished in scope and intensity.

DIASPORA AFFAIRS WITHIN MEA

MOIA was established in May 2004 as a full central government ministry of the Government of India. With that portfolio and supporting staff, MOIA made significant and continuing outreach and visited the far corners of the Indian Diaspora and responded fairly efficiently to queries, input and suggestions from Indian Diaspora organizations, groups and individuals.

The Ministry was merged with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) on 7 January 2016 as Overseas Indian Affairs (OIA) with a Secretary of OIA and reduced supporting staff. The Secretary of OIA was also assigned other portfolio duties not directly related to the Indian Diaspora. As such, the once vibrant level of Indian Diaspora outreach and engagement were relegated primarily to the consular offices in the various countries. This was a tremendous change and had consequences of its reduction in scope, outreach and intensity among the Indian Diaspora.

PBD CHANGES

The goal of the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) was to connect and engage the Indian Diaspora in all corners of the globe, and it was a tremendously exciting convention of NRIs and PIOs when it was launched in 2003. With the establishment of India's Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA), the Indian Diaspora felt and embraced a real high level connection to India knowing the serious intent by the Government of India to actively engage the Indian Diaspora.

India continues to actively engage the Indian Diaspora on many fronts with schemes and policies which contribute to more investments in India, increased bi-lateral trade, cultural exchanges and improved working conditions for NRIs in the Gulf State. This effort continues to be quite beneficial for the development of India. However, similar outreach and exchanges are not evident in other countries and regions where investments in India are not readily forthcoming.

The sentiments shared by many is that the engagement with the Indian Diaspora, in particular those born outside of India 2 generations and more, diminished in dramatic ways when MOIA was merged to a department within the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), the annual PBD was held every 2 years with a different format, and the PIO card was merged with and replaced with the OCI card.
While the concept should remain consistent and should be preserved, PBD seems to have lost its ideals, focus, direction and management. In my view, it has become more bureaucratic than diasporic.

PROPOSAL - PARTNERSHIP FOR ROBUST RE-ENGAGEMENT

For an increasing Indian Diaspora now residing or working at all levels on society in almost every country, with rapid advances in technology and PIO mobility globally, the PBD every 2 years would be missing many important matters which can make it more engaging and pro-active. Simultaneously, regional PBDs would be more relevant especially for those who cannot attend PBDs in India, while addressing matters of interest to the respective countries and region.

Clearly, there is urgent need for active and continuing re-engagement with the Indian Diaspora at the level that made MOIA the diaspora engagement ministry and the PBD the flagship event, along with RPDs to revive outreach, engagement and addressing global and country specific Indian Diaspora issues related to connectivity, culture, history, academia, commerce and NRI/PIO issues.

Clearly, PBD with associated RPDs, need to be urgently invigorated and reorganized for renewed relevance and increased global participation. This can be more efficiently achieved with a committed team of Indian Diaspora experts, as well as event planning and management, working in collaboration with MEA/OIA.

MY PROPOSED CHANGES would be:

- PBD to be revert to an annual event, to be held in India on 7-9 January, with planning, coordination and management by a global non-profit Indian Diaspora organization which can be a federation of several notable Indian Diaspora organizations and institutions such as academia. This effort would be in collaboration with MEA/OIA which is important for policy changes resulting issues and concerns raised at PBD and RPD events. Hosting by the global non-profit Indian Diaspora organization with support of MEA/OIA. Funding would be from int'l and government sources.
- RPD to be held 4 times annually in countries/regions with significant NRI/PIO population, rotated and scheduled around notable dates and events. It is to be coordinated and managed by the same global non-profit Indian Diaspora organization, in collaboration with MEA/OIA. Hosting by Indian Diaspora organizations in the country/region. Funding would be from national private and government sources. Recommendations: Africa, Far East, Oceania, Caribbean, Europe, North America. Dates: April, June, August, October – spaced 2 months apart and 3 months after the annual PBD.
- Focus on issues of relevance, concern and interest to the global Indian Diaspora of NRIs & PIOs and addressed by experts and diaspora participants, selected objectively on the basis of merit. Issues include: Human rights, gender equality, next-generation and social justice, inter-ethnic relations and establishment of "sister" cities, villages and colleges in India with countries of the Indian Diaspora Proposals, recommendations and resolutions to be distributed to various governments, international agencies & institutions with continuing follow-up by assigned personnel.
- PBSA should be more efficiently organized, based strictly on merit, geography and NRI/PIO representation, transparent and managed by the organizing global non-profit Indian Diaspora organization, in collaboration with MEA/OIA.
- Uniformity of PIO/OCI cards and accessibility for past generations without full documentation due to no records available, such as Reunion Island.

Thank you for your attention.
I am available to answer questions later.

By Ashook Ramsaran (January 11, 2022)

Brief Bio:

Ashook K. Ramsaran – Guyanese born of Indian parents, Ramsaran was educated in the USA and resides in New York, USA. He is President of Indian Diaspora Council, past president of GOPIO. He is actively engaged in several community organizations: Executive Vice President of Queens Civic Congress, Chair of NY Presbyterian Hospital Advisory Council, a board member of St. John's University Center for Caribbean & Latin American Studies, co-chair of Queens Borough President Civic Engagement Committee, secretary of Caribbean American Coalition, and several others. He is the recipient of numerous national and international awards including India's Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award (PBSA) in recognition of outstanding community service. Contact: AshookRamsaran@gmail.com

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

ON

India and its Diaspora Connect: Challenges and Opportunities

on 11th JANUARY 2022

From 8:00 PM to 10:15 PM (Indian Standard Time)

ORGANISED BY

Organisation for Diaspora Initiatives (ODI India),

IN COLLABORATION WITH

Diaspora and International Migration Programme (DIMP), CAS- School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

&

Sarnámihuis, The Netherlands

on WebEx Platform, Hosted at JNU

CONCEPT NOTE : https://bit.ly/3ee2lCg

Registration QR Code

To Register: shorturl.at/oprQ6

Registration closes by 5:00 PM (IST), on 10 January 2022

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(Registration closes on 10 January 2022, by 5:00 PM Indian Standard Time)

Conference Coordinators: Dr. Sushmita Rajwar, Assistant Professor, University of Delhi &

Ms. Aarshi Dua, Doctoral Fellow, CAS-School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Media Coordinators: Mr. Samir Bhattacharya, CAS-School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University & Ms. Sarita Nandmehar, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Documentation & Certification Support: Ms. Ivy Handique, Doctoral Fellow, CAS-School of International Studies, JNU &

Ms. Chandani Tiwari, Doctoral Fellow, CAS-School of International Studies, JNU

CONCEPT NOTE:

Diasporas engagement with their countries of origin is not new. Long before researchers, the international community and the policymakers took notice, emigrants and their descendants have taken part in development efforts at home, working with both the public and the private sphere. Now, more than ever before governments at both ends of the migration cycle recognize the value of these engagements and are seeking ways to cooperate with them.

Countries of origin wish to attract Diasporas talents and resources, while countries of destination hope to increase the effectiveness of their development assistance and immigration and integration policies.
India is one of the pioneers in recognising the importance of its overseas population and establishing an institutional framework for sustainable and mutually beneficial engagement with its Diaspora. India has given mainstream attention to its very large overseas Indian community. Estimated as the largest Diaspora at over 32 million and spread across 189 countries, overseas Indians are today recognised as the 'Knowledge Diaspora'.

Their 'virtual presence' across sectors and in most parts of the globe makes them a strategic resource. India recognises the need, therefore, to bring a strategic dimension to its engagement with its overseas community. It has taken a medium to long term view and is attempting to forge a partnership that will best serve India as a rapidly growing knowledge economy – to drive innovation and entrepreneurship - and meet the aspirations of the overseas Indian community as a significant constituency across the world. However, as India diaspora is very diverse in the ethnic, religious, linguistic category; located in diverse regions, Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone, Arabic, and Dutch speaking countries; with different strengths and potentials- from high and super skilled persons to low skilled and unskilled workers; the diaspora engagement of India cannot be of uniform pattern. They are, therefore, many challenges and opportunities.

The Organisation of Diaspora Studies is organizing an International Web-Conference on 11th January 2022 to examine the possible road maps, best global practices, roles and impacts of different stakeholders and to identify the existing gaps in diaspora engagement practices of India in a comparative and global context.

The subthemes of the Web-Conference are:

1. The historical pattern of the Indian diaspora connect
2. Indian diaspora connect under globalization: policy and practice
3. The Indian diaspora connect: economic opportunities and experiences
4. The Indian diaspora connect: political, diplomatic and lobbying experiences

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Re-Engaging the Indian Diaspora – January 11, 2022

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Re-Engaging the Indian Diaspora
and
The Future of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD)

Ashook K. Ramsaran
Indian Diaspora Council Int'l
www.IndianDiasporaCouncil.org

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PROPOSED IMPROVEMENTS

- PBD to be revert to an annual event
- RPD to be held 4 times annually
- Focus on issues of relevance, concern and interest
- PBSA should be more efficiently organized