

Understanding India's Internal Diasporas: Cultural, Linguistic, and Migration Patterns

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India's Internal Diasporas

India's Internal Diasporas Latest News

- Since the **High-Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora report (2001-02)**, the term 'diaspora' has gained traction in policy debates.
- India's international diaspora, now estimated at **over 30 million**, has been widely studied on its various aspects. However, the concept of diaspora need not be confined to crossing national borders.
- In India, terms like *pravasi* and *videshi* often apply to long-distance **internal migrants** as well. For example, Odia workers in Surat describe their relocation as going "abroad."
- A **diasporic experience arises from crossing significant cultural zones**, whether within or outside national boundaries. Yet, compared to the extensive literature on international migration, research on **internal diasporas remains limited**.

Internal Diasporas in India

- Internal diasporas differ from simple migration as they reflect both **historical and recent population movements** that have established enduring cultural and linguistic communities.
- For example, while Census data in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, records few Gujarati ‘migrants’, the **language Census identifies over 60,000 Gujarati speakers**—a number larger than India’s diaspora in many countries.
- Like the Indian diaspora in Mauritius, which originated from 19th-century migration, such communities emerge from layers of past and present movements.
- A recent study in *Sociological Bulletin* estimated internal and international diasporas through language data.
- Strikingly, while India’s international diaspora is about **30 million**, the internal diaspora—measured by dispersed language groups across states—totals **over 100 million**, highlighting a far more significant domestic diasporic experience.

Patterns of India’s Internal Diasporas

- Among Indian language groups, **Punjabi, Malayalam, and Tamil** are the most dispersed (over 10% relative to their size), followed by **Telugu and Gujarati**.
- **Hindi speakers** (including Bhojpuri and Marwari) form the largest diaspora overall but are less dispersed proportionally, while **Marathi, Kannada, and Bengali** are the least dispersed.
- Internal diasporas also show a distinction between **‘old’ communities**, such as Gujarati traders and weavers in Tamil Nadu for centuries, and **‘new’ communities** linked to more recent business migrations in Karnataka and Maharashtra.
- Significant clusters include the Telugu diaspora in West Bengal and Maharashtra, complementing the well-known Telugu presence in the US.
- Notably, except for Malayalam and Tamil, **all major Indian languages have larger internal than international diasporas**, with nearly **one-third of the internal diaspora concentrated in India’s ten largest cities**.
- This highlights the enduring and evolving role of internal migration in shaping India’s cultural and linguistic landscapes.

Cultivation of Diasporic Identities

- Diasporic identities are often sustained through **community associations**, such as Bengali groups organising Durga Puja, Marathi Mandals promoting Ganapati festivals, and Gujarati Samaj bodies in India and abroad.
 - The Gujarat State Non-Resident Gujaratis Foundation once recorded 176 Gujarati associations within India and 120 overseas, underscoring their scale.
- A **key marker of diasporic identity is the preservation of language**, though this tends to weaken over generations.
- While some communities balance their native and local languages, in highly cosmopolitan settings, learning local languages is sometimes deemed unnecessary, reflecting varied patterns of cultural adaptation.

Rethinking Diaspora: Beyond Borders

- The challenges of **integration and intergenerational conflicts** between first- and second-generation migrants, evident in cases of international migration, are equally visible within India's internal diasporas.
- Yet, despite being nearly **three times larger than international diasporas**, they remain understudied.
- Viewing diasporas through the lens of **linguistic dispersion** highlights their interlinkages — for instance, Antwerp's diamond trade with Surat or West Asia's oil sector links with Kerala were enabled by Gujarati and Malayalam diasporas in Mumbai.
- Internal migration often precedes international migration, and sometimes the reverse.
- Limiting diaspora to national borders is misleading; India's true diasporic experience is closer to **100 million people**, shaping the spread of **customs, cuisines, and cultures** both abroad and within India.
- Recognising the **subnational as part of the transnational** is essential to fully understand what it means to be *videshi* — outside one's homeland, whether abroad or within the country itself.

Source: IE

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