

India's Diaspora Diplomacy: Pride, Power, and the Need for Restraint Abroad

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Diaspora Diplomacy Latest News

- In recent weeks, the Indian diaspora has drawn global attention for religious and cultural displays that, in some cases, have crossed local norms in developed countries.
- Incidents such as Ganapati idol immersion in public water bodies and Deepavali fireworks in residential areas have sparked controversy. In Edmonton, Canada, fireworks set two houses on fire, leading police to warn, "Light up your home, not your neighbour's roof."
- Meanwhile, in Australia, anti-immigrant protesters have targeted Indians, while in the U.S. and Canada, nationalist groups have increasingly focused on the Indian community, reflecting a rising tension between **cultural expression and local sensitivities abroad.**

Diaspora Diplomacy and Soft Power

- India has become the world's fourth-largest economy with a GDP of USD 4.19 trillion, supported significantly by its 35 million-strong diaspora.
- Comprising NRIs and OCIs, the diaspora contributes through remittances exceeding USD 100 billion annually, investments, and social initiatives like village development.
- From **ancient traders** and **indentured labourers** to today's **skilled professionals**, Indian migration has evolved over centuries.
- Once criticized as a **brain drain**, it is now viewed as "**brain gain**," symbolizing India's global strength.
- India's diaspora enhances **soft power** through **culture, technology, and advocacy**, influencing major outcomes like the **U.S.-India nuclear deal**.
- However, lobbying successes vary with host-country politics and diaspora unity.

Cultural Assertion and the Evolution of India's Diaspora Policy

- A growing section of the Indian diaspora is displaying **assertive cultural nationalism**, promoting practices like Deepavali firecrackers abroad as symbols of community pride and identity.
- Simultaneously, some groups are urging the diaspora to advocate India's political positions, especially in the United States.
- Historically, however, Jawaharlal Nehru maintained a clear distinction between India and its overseas communities.
- While the freedom movement had global links, Nehru insisted that post-Independence India stay out of PIO politics.
- He urged persons of Indian origin (PIOs) to remain loyal to their adopted countries, avoiding any perception of Indian interference in foreign domestic affairs.

From Territorial to Cultural Nationalism

- In the early decades after Independence, India's foreign policy and diaspora engagement were guided by **territorial nationalism, not cultural identity**.
- Issues like **discrimination and racism** were framed as universal human rights concerns, reflecting India's commitment to global justice rather than ethnic solidarity.

Rise of Global Cultural Nationalism

- From the 1990s onward, the increasing Indian migration created a global network of cultural nationalists.
- This trend gained strong momentum after Narendra Modi became Prime Minister in 2014, marked by large-scale diaspora rallies abroad, particularly in the United States.

Growing Western Sensitivity to Foreign Influence

- At the same time, Western nations — notably the U.S., Canada, Australia, and parts of Europe — became increasingly wary of foreign interference in domestic politics.
- Allegations of **Chinese and Russian influence sharpened this sensitivity**, even as Israel's lobbying began facing bipartisan criticism in the U.S.

- Although foreign influence operations are legal in the U.S. if transparently registered, the state-backed mobilisation of the Indian diaspora has drawn quiet scrutiny.

India's Position in the Changing Landscape

- Historically seen as a benign and diverse immigrant community, Indian Americans now face growing attention as India's outreach to its diaspora becomes more overtly strategic.
- While India has avoided the hostility directed at Russia or China, there are increasing signs of Western unease over efforts to align diaspora networks with New Delhi's political and cultural agenda.

India's Approach to Overseas Citizenship

- India does not permit dual citizenship, but in 2003, it introduced **Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI)** status through amendments to the Citizenship Act, 1955.
- This provided Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) with lifetime visa-free entry, exemption from police registration, and rights similar to NRIs in education, property, and business.
- In 2015, the government merged the PIO and OCI categories, describing the arrangement as "dual citizenship in spirit, but not in law."
- In contrast, **the United States allows dual citizenship**, but growing concerns about **foreign political influence** have prompted calls for stricter scrutiny.
- Analysts have voiced concerns about divided loyalties and potential foreign interference.

Navigating Nationalist Tensions Abroad

- As Western nations experience heightened nationalism, diaspora communities face pressure to demonstrate loyalty to host countries.
- For Indians abroad, expectations to promote India's interests must be balanced with these realities.
- In an era of **rising protectionism and political suspicion**, "multi-alignment" diplomacy — being loyal to both India and the host nation — is increasingly difficult.
- Ultimately, nationalist fervour is not unique to India, and diaspora members must operate within the nationalist sensitivities of their adopted countries.

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