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August 2019

Global Research Forum on Diaspora and Transnationalism

Diasporas and Constructivism: A Case Study of Indian Diasporas in the United States

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Diaspora and Transnationalism

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Abstract

As diaspora is emerging as a powerful non-state actor in the global space, the dynamic role of diasporic identity can be understood better through the International Relations (IR) theoretical framework. Specifically, the constructivist paradigm of IR opens up the possibility of examining multiple identities of the non-state actors, including the diaspora. The research paper examines the relevance of the social constructivist paradigm in understanding the role of diaspora in general and Indian diaspora in particular. To substantiate the observed characteristics from the constructivist paradigm, the case study of Indian Diaspora in the United States has been analysed critically. The case study provides crucial dimensions associated with the increasing assertiveness of Indian-Americans in the US, thereby revealing the traits associated with the emerging diasporic influence in the hostland.

Keywords: Constructivism, Identity, Indian Diaspora, United States

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Statement: All the views expressed in the paper are of the author(s).

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Introduction

The process of globalisation has made a tremendous impact on international relations resulting in the proliferation of non-state actors. Increasing recognition of non-state actors in international relations poses a stiff challenge to the traditional state-centric realist paradigm. In such a scenario, the importance of diaspora as a non-state actor is also getting acknowledged in the academic discipline of International Relations. However, it also needs to be seen that diaspora is not just a homogenous category. For Koinova, the “interest in the study of Diasporas grew after 9/11 because foreign-born nationals living in Western states were found behind the terrorist attacks” (Koinova, 2010, p. 149). It does not mean that diaspora is seen through a negative lens only as, on most occasions, the diaspora has played a positive role. Diaspora has to be seen within a particular context having historical and socio-economic dimensions. The concept of diaspora brings with it the insightful role of identity politics and its influence on the international arena. There is a need to explore new developments like increasing visibility and political power of diaspora in global politics.

The research paper analyses diaspora’s journey towards playing a prominent role in the world politics. The constructivist paradigm has been discussed to get a theoretical understanding of the role of the Diasporas. Moreover, the case study of the Indian diaspora’s influence in the foreign policy of the United States would also be discussed. Finally, the paper would suggest that how the constructivist paradigm can contribute in providing another insightful perspective for viewing the role of Diasporas in world politics.

Diasporas can be categorised amongst the non-state actors that interact with state actors, host state and their home state. Diasporas play a unique role in the international sphere as they share the space in two countries, share two cultures and preserve social connections as well as emotional investment in two nations (Karanou, 2015). Diasporas play a role of a different actor in international politics as they represent a fusion of the cultures, interests and identities of their old and new homelands. There is no consensus on the definition of the diaspora in the academic domain of international relations, which makes it difficult to analyse and theorise

the diaspora’s attitude, behaviour and role in the policy-making of the state. Therefore, in simple words, Diasporas can be defined as dispersed national or ethnic groups across different countries. In reality, diaspora is a broad term that includes a vast number of elements in it. It consists of students, preachers, asylum seekers, refugees, guest workers, expatriates, immigrants, exiles and victims of human trafficking and ethnic cleansing. Diaspora can be formed due to several reasons ranging from family unification, labour migration, trade networks, migration of population due to partitions and ethnic groups migrating to another country after break ups of empire like Soviet, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empire (Kapur, 2014, p. 484).

Constructivism and Diaspora: Theoretical Framework

Social Constructivism is a paradigm that is remarkably different and challenges the mainstream theory of Realism and Liberalism, which largely occupies the space of the International Relations discipline. The social constructivist paradigm provides insightful arguments to understand the behaviour of a person, states as well as non-state actors. “Constructivists are interested in the growing role of non-state actors in influencing political outcomes internationally, with regard to specific issues such as nuclear use, enshrining racial equality and humanitarian practices” (Mallavarapu, 2015, p. 13). The theory of constructivism focuses on the social construction of subjectivity. It emphasises the issues of identity and interest formation, which can be very helpful in understanding the role of the diaspora. Constructivists “share a cognitive, intersubjective conception of the process in which identities and interests are endogenous to interaction” (Wendt, 1992, p. 394). Interactions with the Diaspora may help in achieving the desired set of goals to bring cooperation between the homeland and the host land.

The observation made by Wendt proves the theory of constructivism as an effective approach when he says:

Five Hundred British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the United States than five North Korean nuclear weapons because the British are friends of the United States and the North Koreans are not, and amity or enmity is a function of shared understandings

(Wendt, 1995, p. 73).

These lines describe that the role of perception is crucial in the formation of identity and relationship between states. The relations which are established between states depend on the shared understanding amongst them. Diaspora plays an active role as a pressure group to enhance the positive perception between the source country and the destination country. In the words of Alexander Wendt, "Identities are relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self" (Wendt, 1992, p. 397) seems to be the most appropriate definition for understanding the diasporic community and its activities. Participation of Diasporas in collective meanings ensures that actors are acquiring the identities which determine their interests. Therefore, actors construct their interests while the process of identifying situations goes on, and it leads to the premise that the diaspora's role towards their home state gets determined by their perception, which in turn decides the level and type of the influence. If a diasporic community has a positive perception towards the home state, it is more likely that they will positively contribute to the country through various means. Moreover, if a diasporic community has a negative perception of the home state, they may negatively influence the state. The diasporic community can raise the particular issue of their concern at the international forum and can use the politics of naming and shaming to expose the home state. Cohen aptly sums up the aforementioned perspective by arguing that "diasporas during conflict can be a force for stability (peacemakers) as well as a force that amplifies and even creates conflict (peace-wreckers)" (Cohen, 2008, p. 170). Therefore, the perception of diaspora matters a lot primarily to influence the decision-making apparatus of the state. According to the constructivist framework, the crucial point worth mentioning here is that the social threats are constructed and are not natural. Therefore, there remains immense scope for cooperation among different states, which can be leveraged or mediated with the help of Diasporas as actors. It is also worth mentioning that gradually, over time, the diaspora has become an influential actor rather than merely a passive observer of policies.

Wendt argues that "signalling, interpreting and responding completes a 'social act' and begins the process of creating inter-subjective meaning" (Wendt, 1992, p. 405). Diaspora plays a crucial role in all the process ranging from signalling, interpreting and the subsequent response as per the situation in the homeland. Therefore, it can be argued that diaspora works as a mediator between two states – homeland and hostland in creating signals that can be positive and negative according to the situations. Those who have migrated to the host state always has emotional bondage with their homeland. It is almost impossible for them to erase the good or bitter memories of their time spent in the homeland. There remains a possibility that diaspora will influence the decisions making of the state to serve their interest which can have both aspects- positive as well as negative ones. The

then Prime Minister of India, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, initiated the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas in 2003 to appreciate the success of the Indian diasporic community across the globe and also to leverage the strength of the Indian diaspora. His expectation from the Indian diasporic community can be understood through his words:

"I believe that the Pravasi Bharatiya can be a catalyst for rapid change in this direction. Each of you, through your network of friends, relatives and acquaintances can create a strong urge for change in India. Our collective attention needs to be rescued from the sterile controversies and trivial issues that dominate the headlines, and focused on the real tasks to be accomplished, so that India can catch up with the developed world. At the same time, you can project the truth about India to the world in a credible and effective manner. Misleading, one-sided and negative pictures are often put out due to bias, ignorance or design. Your familiarity with the Indian reality and with the perspectives of your adopted society equips you to correct such misrepresentations. You could project a positive image of India -- not as propaganda, but as a true reflection of the reality on the ground" (Vajpayee, 2003).

These words are indicative of a long-term vision of Vajpayee to build up the positive image of India with the help of the diasporic community.

Role of Diaspora in the Decision-Making of the State

The world understands the reality that in the age of globalisation, Diasporas cannot be considered merely as the migrants for the host states. Diasporas link themselves with the political scenario through the means of communications and networks of transportation. Diasporas play their role as political actors whose agendas start from the local and reach the transnational level (Koinova, 2010, p. 149). The global flow of labour is resulting in the formation of the diaspora. The role played by Diasporas, particularly as political and social actors, is getting scholarly attention in recent times. Their involvement in various political processes can include lobbying, participation in elections, or supporting particular factions in civil wars (Varadarajan, 2010, p. 6). Varadarajan argues that Diasporas are playing a critical role in reinforcing the nation-state structure. This process is produced by a host of state policies and initiatives that seek to institutionalise the relationship between the nation-state and the Diaspora (Raghavan, 2012, p. 66) (Varadarajan, 2010).

Diaspora possesses the potential to play a dual role, making it a critical non-state actor with increasing visibility and political activeness in the home state and a host state and thereby possess inherent ability to play a crucial role in transformative influence to the decision making process. Kapur underlines the importance of the diaspora primarily as a channel that helps explicitly in the flowing of ideas

that affect the politics of its country of origin. Ideas can be considered as intangible cognitive remittances which are less visible and are nonquantifiable. Sometimes ideas can play a more effective role than monetary remittances (Kapur, 2014, p. 484). The high significance of the generation of transformative ideas for diasporas creates the space where the social constructivist paradigm provides the proper framework from the conceptualisation of ideas to the stage of the implementation. There is a remarkable shift in the nature of the role of the diaspora. As already mentioned at the beginning of the research paper that diaspora is not a homogenous category and hence can play a dual role. There are several associations that are specially made by the Diasporas to lobby in the hostland so that the policies of the homeland can be supported as well as get challenged when the situation arises. These associations can support or oppose the governments of the homeland; provide financial and ideational support to political parties, civil society organisations and social movements. It can also sponsor terrorism or help in perpetuating the violent conflict in the homeland (Vertovec, 2005). These examples hint at the heterogeneity of the diaspora. Former Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee also mentions about the distinct identities of Indian diasporic communities as following:

“The Indian community abroad often reflects the diversity, which is the hallmark of our society here. We are proud of this diversity - whether it is linguistic, religious or regional. Groupings like the Telugu, Tamil, Punjabi and Marathi associations serve a useful purpose in preserving linguistic skills and regional cultures” (Vajpayee, 2003).

However, Vajpayee also highlights that the collective identity of the Indian diaspora in the host land is imperative to build the required strength. He mentions that “when you are united as Indians, your voice carries greater weight: both for highlighting issues of your concern in your host country, and for promoting Indian causes. This is a truth of great long-term significance for Indian communities everywhere” (Vajpayee, 2003).

Describing the positive dimensions of the diasporic influence, Baser and Swain assert that “there is an increasing belief that through lobbying governments, particularly of the host nations, and international organisations and aiding the process of transition and reconstruction, Diasporas are increasingly playing an important role in achieving political compromise and peaceful conflict resolution in their homelands” (Baser & Swain, 2008, p. 12). However, it is also pertinent to understand what factors compel the diasporic community to decide and then start lobbying for a particular cause to get it implemented through various means. On these lines, Kapur argues that one of the most crucial factors that explain the outcome changes is the degree of psychological distance between diaspora and the governing regime. The reason behind the emigration of the

diaspora, in the beginning, will determine many aspects of the outcome (Kapur, 2014, p. 485). This conception seems largely true as push factors of the homeland determine how the diasporic community will perceive the situation of the homeland.

Case Study of Indian Diaspora in the United States: Constructivist Framework

The role of the Indian diaspora’s contribution in influencing the politics of homeland and hostland has been understudied. The Indian Diaspora is working as an interest constellation that has enhanced the image of India all over the world. In general, the Indian Diaspora is not considered a threat to the peace and stability of countries across the globe. Indian diaspora has helped in elevating the positive and inclusive image of India at the global level. If the colonial period of indentured labour is kept aside, Singh has categorised the Indian Diaspora into three phases. The first phase accounts for the diaspora in search of education and employment, while the second phase can be considered as the Diasporas increasingly becoming the source of remittances to India. The third phase can be categorised as the Diasporas playing a very active role in influencing and shaping the policies of the host countries (Singh, 2017). This research paper has primarily focused on the third phase, where diaspora has shown an assertive position in influencing the countries’ decision-making process.

The fact that about 3.2 million Indian Americans are residing in the United States, and “they are among the most educated racial or ethnic groups in the United States” (Desilver, 2014) indicates that it forms the influential intelligentsia group. According to the Migration Policy Institute Report on Diaspora, “Forty-four percent over the age of 25 reported having a master’s degree, a PhD, or an advanced professional degree. This share was much higher than the U.S. population overall (11 percent)” (Migration Policy Institute, 2014, p. 3). The demography of the Indian diasporic community in the US also plays a crucial role. “The majority of Indian immigrants are young and highly educated, and have strong English skills. Many work in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields” (Zong & Batalova, 2017). The distinct qualification of Indian-Americans in the US provides them with an edge and capability to influence decision-making through pressure tactics. “The distinctively elite character of Indian emigration to the United States has amplified these ‘social remittance’ effects, both because of the reputational effects of this diaspora’s overseas success and its access to influential institutional channels to transmit these ideas (Chakravorty, Kapur, & Singh, 2017, p. 273).” The highly skilled and intelligentsia group is better able to lobby effectively to alter the outcomes in favour of the homeland. The active role of the Indian diaspora to leverage the ideas and norms in favour of India opens up the possibility to alter the foreign policy outcome of the United States. The constructivist paradigm helps in understanding the inception

of these ideational interests among the diasporic community through a more comprehensive framework.

Baser and Swain argue that “Diaspora’s empathy for economic development of the homeland, and support to the other members of their group living in other parts of the world, originate from their emotional connection. Because of the sentimental attachment, Diasporas are gradually becoming crucial links between immigrant-receiving countries and political developments in countries of origin” (Baser & Swain, 2008, p. 8). Indian Diaspora in the United States has already proved their mantle, especially in the Information Technology sector. Kapur argues that Diasporas have access to the various mechanisms in the present era of globalisation, and therefore they can gain the attention of the home countries (Kapur, 2014, pp. 485-486). The Information and Communication Technology (ICT) revolution has provided the platform for the non-state actors to exert pressures on the government in host states, to launch international campaigns as well as fundraising programmes (ibid). Provisions of global banking have become much cheaper, faster and easier than ever before. Whether one accepts or denies it does not affect the increasing importance of the non-state actors in the international system (ibid).

The diasporic community can play a crucial role in domestic and international politics if it mobilises itself with a strong sense of identity. It may influence both the internal politics of diaspora’s homelands and of their hostlands regarding issues that are of vital interests to them. In the sphere of international relations, Diasporas have the power to influence both decisions in national foreign policy and in the functioning of international organisations (Karanou, 2015). They may also influence the foreign policy decisions of the home state and host state if they consider the issue of utmost importance. Diasporas play multiple roles by benefiting the homeland as well as the hostland. Their crucial role in image-building can be considered as the main element of soft power, which needs scholarly attention. Material benefits are evident in the form of remittances, but their influence on soft power requires evaluation (Rittberger, 2012). “Social Constructivism focuses on the role of individuals and social groups that function as norm entrepreneurs seeking to persuade states to agree on and adhere to specific norms” (ibid, p. 28). Indian Diaspora in the United States is performing its due role as norm entrepreneurs to shift the balance in favour of India. There is a logical process of the norm cycle. A norm goes through a three-stage lifecycle to achieve its maturity. It starts from norm emergence (first stage) to reach the second stage, which is norm acceptance, to the final stage termed as norm internalisation (Theys, 2017, p. 40). Indian diaspora seems to have attained the third and final stage of norm internalisation to leverage their influence in favour of India when it comes to the foreign policy decisions of the United States.

Wendt refers to the collective identity as “positive identification with the welfare of another, such that the

other is seen as a cognitive extension of the self, rather than independent” (Wendt, 1994, p. 386). Therefore, collective identity generates the “feelings of solidarity, community, and loyalty and thus for collective definition of interest”, which means that “actors calculate costs and benefits on a higher level of social aggregation” (ibid). Indian diaspora has attained the collective identity in the United States, which eventually can be seen in their assertiveness in the form of lobbying whenever Indian interests are compromised at a higher level. The Indian diaspora is increasingly showing involvement in the political affairs of the United States. India conducted the nuclear test in 1998, which led to the protest worldwide, and the United States imposed sanctions on India. During such high-tension time, Indian-Americans played a very influential role in contributing to the passage of an amendment to the Arms Control Act that encouraged the Clinton administration to waive sanctions (Talbot, 2006, p. 127).

The Indian Diaspora is increasingly becoming politically active and influential in the United States, which can be considered as the new cultural ambassadors for the homeland and a valuable asset for the Indian foreign policy. US- Indian nuclear deal was drafted and passed by the House and the Senate comfortably just because of the immense efforts made by the Indian Diaspora in the United States. Because of the image of the working Indian-American community in the US, the positive and favourable climate has developed, which has helped in political lobbying as well as in improving the relations between the two countries (Gottschlich, 2007, p. 128). To pressurise the United States government to condemn the Kargil incursion and bring the resolution against Pakistan, Indian Americans sent a lot of e-mails to the Congress office, which was acknowledged by the then US President Clinton. It compelled the US to pressurise then Pakistan PM Nawaj Sharif to withdraw the Pakistan army from Kargil (Lancaster, 1999). Such examples indicate the Indian diaspora’s active involvement in influencing the foreign policy decisions of the United States whenever the need arises. Diasporic solidarity in various forms provides the much-needed leverage to incline the decisions of the United States government in favour of India.

Ashok Sharma suggests that there is remarkable progress in the lobbying capability of the Indian diaspora since the 1980s when merely five per cent of the United States legislators showed a keen and active interest in India [Cited in (Desai, 2017)]. “The formation of Indian Caucus in the US Congress in 1993 and in the US Senate in 2004” shows the positive signs of political activism of Indian diaspora in the United States (ibid). Nikki Haley became the first Indian-American official in the United States and had achieved the cabinet-rank position in the administration of President Donald Trump in the year 2017. She has become the US Ambassador to the United Nations (Hindustan Times, 2017). It shows the increasing influence of the Indian Diaspora in the United States’s decision-making process.

Indian diaspora's active involvement can also be apparently witnessed through the report, which mentions the names of groups that are involved in raising the issues of the Indian diaspora:

“These groups include the Indian American Forum for Political Education, the U.S.-India Political Action Committee, South Asian Americans Leading Together, the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund, and the Republican Indian Committee” (Migration Policy Institute, 2014, p. 14).

These examples, as mentioned above, are indicative of the assertive diasporic influence of the Indian diaspora in the United States over time.

Conclusion

An attempt has been made to analyse the role of the diaspora through a constructivist paradigm. The constructivist paradigm provides the alternative viewpoint to understand the shared normative values constructed by the diaspora about their homeland. The influence of the Indian diaspora in the United States on the foreign-policy decision-making process has been explored further through the case study. Multiple dimensions of diasporic political impact on the decision-making apparatus of the state have been examined by citing several examples. Therefore it has been observed that Diasporic involvement in the process of interaction between states produces tangible outcomes. The diasporic community possesses the potential to promote the image of their home country as well as a host country by bringing mutual benefits to both sides by achieving a win-win outcome. The increasing assertiveness of the Indian Diaspora in domestic as well as foreign affairs of the state has been explored further. It has been found that essential elements of the constructivist paradigm may assist the academicians and policy-makers to understand the complexities involved in the dynamic role of the diaspora. It may help in understanding the process by which diaspora promotes homeland interests in the host society. It will contribute to tapping the expertise, knowledge and experience of the diaspora, which is beneficial for the homelands as well as the hostlands.

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