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Labour and Elite Diasporas: The Narrative of Nation-Building in India

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Abstract

Migrant workers and diaspora share a unique relationship with their country of origin. They share a perennial sense of responsibility towards its development. While there is less skepticism about economic remittances, the political sphere is full of uncertainty to nation building process. This paper tries to understand the dynamics of diasporic engagement in the narratives of Nation-building in India. The paper examines the power of dominant diaspora group within the Indian diaspora in influencing narrative of nation building. The study is part of an ongoing research and is based on secondary data. The study finds that the Elite Diaspora is much influential in setting the narrative through their visibility in media and political clout. However, the labour diasporas in India are much more impactful in their contribution to rural transformation in a large scale.

Keywords: Labour, Elite Diaspora India and Nation Building

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Labour and Elite Diasporas: The Narrative of Nation-Building in India

Vijay Kumar Soni and Dr Sadananda Sahoo

Introduction

Nation building could be variously defined based on perspectives of politics, policy, economy, sociology and demographic migration. As traditionally understood, nation building in post-modern era does not refer to territorial acquisition or integration or even ethnic conglomeration. Rather, it refers to the process of strengthening political, social, economic and developmental fabric of a nation. Migrant workers and diaspora share a unique relationship with their country of origin. They share a perennial sense of responsibility towards its development. While there is less skepticism about economic remittances, the political sphere is full of uncertainty to nation building process. It has often been argued that it makes a sense to bolster a democratically elected government, but the same could not be said when a migrant's homeland is under tyrannical rule. There have been incidences of diaspora mobilization in legitimizing a tyrannical government and the possibility of its misuse by vested political interest.

There exists a marked difference between patriotism and parochialisms when we talk about nation building. It throws up a gambit of ethical and ideological questions for which there are no well-defined demarcation. Does nation building refer only to nation, which are in existence, or it also refers to the possibility of creating a new nation? If so, will a new nation cater to a particular dominant ethnic group, race or religion? The case of Israel, Ireland and Armenia completely fits into the former category. But a possible Tamil Eelam or Khalistan could be a nation building in the making? Given the contentious connotation of the prosperous region the term, a look at its diasporic aspect could help us differentiate between the two terms.

The recent case of Catalonia, which has been seeking independence from Spain, could offer some insight into hypothetical nation-building process. The secessionist demand of Catalans for a separate country is based on two premises. One, that the prosperous region of Catalonia has been paying enormous taxes and getting little in return in terms of allocation. And second, the region is historically and culturally different from the rest of Spain. Catalans also contest that they were kept in subjugation under the

dictatorship of General Francisco Franco during 1939-1975. Now, under the given circumstances, what should be the role of Catalonia Diaspora in the nation building? Having its diasporic presence in France, Mexico, Cuba, Chile and America, should Catalans go with Spain or with the group demanding secession from Spain? This is a dilemma for which there is no easy riddance. What does nation-building mean to a Catalans needs to be understood in proper perspective and in popular imagination.

The objective of the study is to understand the dynamics of diasporic engagement in the narratives of Nation-building in India. The paper examines the power of dominant diaspora group within the Indian diaspora in influencing narrative of nation building.

The study has collected both qualitative and quantitative data as part of its methodology from various secondary sources and has used analytical tools to describe the phenomenon of appropriation and diasporic characteristics. The study is part of an ongoing research and is based on secondary data. It attempts to compare and argue the social and economic realities of the two groups and the factors responsible for making labour diaspora a greater social and financial contributor in the nation building process.

Political Reality of Nation Building

Benedict Anderson has contested the very notion of nation and nation building when he defines a nation saying, "It is an imagined community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet him, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion... It is imagined as sovereign because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm" (Anderson, 1983).

The questions like does nation-building refer to strengthening the existing political reality? Or, could it mean a radical change and departure from the existing system? It seems it could best be answered only from individual perspective.

Paradoxically, the very existence of diaspora is antithetical to the concept of territorialisation, boundary-setting and geographical limitation and the concept of nation itself (Cohen, 2008). It has been appropriately contested that, with the creation of Israel, can Jews still be called a diaspora? Diaspora needs new territory, fertile grounds, uprooting and re-plantation, with concomitant challenges and opportunities to flourish and contribute its best to the host countries. In today's time, the question being raised is – How could the existing diaspora help its home country?

Manuel Orozco (2003) has identified five areas in which Diasporas make contributions to the homeland, namely, tourism, transportation, telecommunication, trade, and transfer of remittances. The first generation of post-independence Indian migrants made use of their unique position as was seen in the case of Punjab.

“There were two distinct ways in which the Diaspora helped in the economic development of the region to which they belonged. The first was philanthropic activity in which they indulged. In the initial stages, their villages needed school building for which they happily contributed. And the second was the import of Massey Ferguson tractors. The Government of India provided for tariff-free import of tractors if the payment in England was made through foreign currency. A large number of tractors was bought and sent by the Punjabis in England to their families in Punjab, which laid the foundation for the Green Revolution in India. (Judge, 2011).

In the history of nation building vis-à-vis Diaspora, 1990s was perhaps a turning point. With globalization, transnationalism and deterritorialisation earmarking new ground of Diasporic studies, nation building had lost its steam by then. Leaders were talking about the world, as a global village, that the world as one family - vasundhaivakutumbakam. What led to this shift to territorialisation and parochialism? A provoking answer to this is given by Kalus and Janet Wilson (2018) when they state that the outdated concept of fixed belonging like ‘authentic origin’, divisive nationalism, economic protectionism and sovereignty are being revised in the US and some of the European countries based on the recent waves of protest against transnational movements. This has been more so in countries having permeable borders and those allowing migration and diasporic formation.

But given the conceptual limitation, let's see how Indian diaspora has been playing a role in nation building. In addition to politics, economic contribution is an important ingredient in nation building. Remittances by Indian diaspora have played a key role in sustaining, developing and nurturing their families and the nation alike. While overseas remittance accounts for 3% of India's GDP, for a state like Kerala, it contributes no less than 36% of its GDP and has nurtured the economy of the southern state for almost four decades.

The Economy of Nation Building

Remittance is just one part of nation building and perhaps the most prominent in bridging the link between various identities, which Diaspora assumes. “Conceptually speaking, over a period of time all diasporas retain and develop multi-layered home connections. These connections in most cases range from family, village and community ties to different forms of political, economic, religious, and socio-cultural exchanges. (Jain, 2010)

Not only directly benefiting friends and family, diasporic remittances also stimulate local national economies through increased income and consumer spending. Though some scholars believe that this influx of cash-capital may also stimulate inflation, though the evidence is, at this point “inconclusive”...Diasporic dollars, however, also flow toward infrastructural development projects: helping build roads, staff local schools, and generally contribute other “hometown projects” (Braziel, 2008)

Diasporic connections have led to “profound changes at points of origin. Failing agricultural pursuits were given a renewed lease of life; family and kin were supported in their old age and in poverty, and sometimes more dramatic and far-reaching changes ... (Cohen, 2008)

In case of India, Labour Diaspora in the GCC countries not only contributed in the form of remittances but also in various schemes launched by the government like Resurgent India Bonds, Indian Millennium Deposit Scheme in which they were the biggest investors. It's obvious that “Apart from remittances sent by the Gulf entrepreneurs, their contribution in manufacturing sector has not been (that) encouraging (Jain, 2010). But to say that, as Nair (1989) observes, “migration and the resultant receipts of remittances do not seem to have made any significant impact on economic growth rate of the state economies” is no longer true. This is diagonally opposite to what we are witnessing in Kerala, where remittances contribute 36% of the state's GDP (Menon, 2017)

Graph I: Emigration from India to GCC countries



(Source: Times of India)

In addition to remittances and investment in the government bonds, Gulf NRIs have also contributed to infrastructural development, educational, healthcare project. Cochin International Airport is one such project, which was initiated by the UAE-based entrepreneurs Yousaf Ali and 27 other Non-Resident Keralites. Although Yousaf Ali and others were not part of labour diaspora, their contribution to the nation building deserves some attention (Jain, 2010, 2016). It opens up a new vista of diaspora's contribution to nation-building offering clue to the fact that it's geography and proximity which plays a vital role in the national development of the home country, and not the class division of Labour and Elite.

Sometimes, restrictive immigration practices of diaspora have also contributed to nation-building process. Unlike their predecessors who migrated to various British colonies before India's independence and 'brain drain' type émigrés who went to live and work in metropolitan countries of Europe and North America after independence, the Gulf migrants were the transitory migrants as stringent residency and citizenship laws as well as the contractual nature of the work barred them from permanent settlement in these predominantly Muslim countries (Jain, 2016).

In 2016, global remittances declined for the second consecutive year but India continued to rank number one, with \$65.4 billion in remittances in 2017. But who among the Indian diasporas are the one sending money to their home country? Is it the well-educated, economically well-off, white-collared Elite Diaspora largely living in the developed economies or the Labour Diaspora, the one doing 3Ds - dirty, dangerous and demeaning jobs in the Gulf countries?

To answer the above question, we calculated Indian migrants' average global per capita remittance to India with that of the six GCC countries. The study took into account, 2017 UN International Migration Report and the World Bank report on remittances. While the average global per capita remittances from Indian migrants came out at US\$ 4,000 per annum, that of the GCC countries was at US\$ 6,703 per annum (US\$ 65.4 billion / 16 million Indian migrants; US\$ 56.3 / 8.4 million).

The per capita difference in the remittance between Labour Diaspora and Elite Diaspora was found to be \$ 2,703. A large part of Labour Diaspora in the GCC is employed as semi-skilled or unskilled manual workers in contrast to the skilled IT, medical, engineering and educational professionals in the US, Canada, Australia and Europe. There emerges a definite picture of their economic contribution in India's nation building process.

These figures could best be considered indicative of the new emerging trend. The study did not take into account permanent overseas settlers who are non-active economic contributors, far-removed from homeland socially, economically and

politically. Had this factor also been accounted, the average global per capita remittance by Indians migrants would have further shown a southward trend.

The data shows that Indians living in the GCC have been the biggest bread-earners for India. The Gulf remittance to India was \$56.30 billion in 2017, accounting for staggering 86% of the total remittances sent to India. It also emerged that Labour Diaspora, as they are often called, are the one playing active role in nation building, both in their home and the host countries. While their 'labour' is used to build the host nation, their 'money' helps in nurturing their home country.

Remittances from the Gulf have played an important role in increasing foreign exchange reserve, alleviating poverty, improving education and speeding up development, increasing per capita income, acquiring real estate and improving quality of life in Kerala. As Rita Ramalho, Acting Director of the World Bank's Global Indicators Group was quoted in the World Bank report saying, "Remittances are an important source of income for millions of families in developing countries. As such, a weakening of remittance flows can have a serious impact on the ability of families to get health care, education or proper nutrition."

An important aspect of remittances in nation building is how they are used, invested and circulated in the home country's economy. China's remittances have declined over the years, but they have been making better use of remittances and in the process expanding their economic power.

Transnationalism and Nation

The process of globalization heralded in 1990s was a major transition in Diasporas' long-distance nationalism. Studies of transnationalism frame the relationship with the homeland more ambivalently, focusing on how migrants 'build transnational social fields that cut across geographic, cultural and political borders' (Quayson and Daswani 2013, 12).

It has been observed that transnational social network of Chinese Diaspora is relatively more enterprising and has a long history of entrepreneurial culture. Old Chinese Diasporas are mostly spread across neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia. Whereas the old Indian Diasporas in the same region are culturally more active but their economic contribution to the home country has been dismal because of their identification and integration with the host country. The old Chinese Diaspora on the other hand is economically vibrant and has been one of the leading investors in China. Besides, they also play a larger role in promoting China's economic interest in these regions. China has experienced one of the most remarkable investment booms over the past three decades and has become a model for many emerging countries in engaging their diasporas. While the Old Chinese Diaspora was mainly Labour-oriented, the New Chinese

Diaspora is more Elitist and entrepreneurial.

At times the role of homeland nation is crucial in defining the entrepreneurial abilities of its diaspora. With Chinese government easing restrictions and simplifying procedures for foreign direct investment, the FDI by Chinese Diaspora rose to 7.9 per cent to US \$ 135 billion - an all-time high. In fact, its diasporic members have provided 70% of China's recent foreign investment. Similarly, its Diaspora tremendously facilitated the outward investment. On the other hand, India's engagement with her neighbouring countries and its diaspora is not business oriented as it remains entangled in issues related to social and ethnic problems. Even the efforts of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) have not been very successful in engaging the countries and its people in a cooperative manner. Most of the enterprising communities in the region have lost their network (including diasporic network) over the period.

Barring few enterprising communities of India like Sindhis, Gujaratis, Chettiars, the large-scale enterprising culture of the Indian diaspora emerged only during the last 30 years especially in the USA, the UK and partly in Gulf countries. While the FDI in India hit an all-time high to US \$60.1 billion in 2016-17, the Diaspora investment was almost negligible. It is a big question on why India has failed to attract FDI in general and diaspora's investment in particular for nation building. With exception in few areas such as software, healthcare, the Indian Diaspora investment and entrepreneurial activities remain very limited. Though India has been the largest receiver of remittances in the world, yet most of these remittances are not invested optimally and does not result in nation building. Large sums of such remittances are received by families and friends that are invested in personal asset building instead of nation building. This is quite contrast to China, where remittances are channelized in business and entrepreneurship.

The Labour and Elite Diasporas

Unlike the colonial indentured labourers, the post-independence Indian Labour Diaspora is economic and class-conscious. In absence of a better defining term and to avoid confusion, we have used the term to highlight their 'labour' as the main attribute in employability. There are some 8.4 million Indian expatriates in the six GCC countries, accounting for 31 per cent of the total expatriate population in the region. A large number of them are semi-skilled or unskilled. In the 1970s, the demand of nurses, paramedics, technicians and teachers tilted the scale in favour of skilled professional. According to a survey in UAE, only 20 per cent Indian migrants are engaged in skilled profession (Zachariah, et. al., 2004).

It was the oil price boom of 1973-74 and the demand of large-scale infrastructural projects in the GCC that led to heavy demand of skilled and unskilled workforce in the region. India provided easy supply of workforce to fill the gap and

in the process was able to cash in the opportunity. Another opportunity turned up soon in 1990 when Iraq attacked Kuwait. Countries like Yemen and Palestine, who had huge manpower presence in the Gulf, supported Iraq. As a result, other GCC countries took offence and asked their nationals to leave the country. The deportation of Yemen and Palestine workers created a huge vacuum, which was soon filled in by the Indian Labour Diaspora.

It has been observed that unlike Labour Diaspora, Elite Diaspora migrates with their families with limited familial compulsion to remit back home. Their larger interest is served in obtaining citizenship of the host country to perpetuate their professional growth. The money they earned is invariably invested back in the host country in the form of buying a house, starting a business or investing in bonds. The Labour Diaspora in the Gulf, on the other hand, neither enjoys citizenship rights nor has any hope of it, or the rights to buy landed property in the host country. As a result, whatever they earn, which is tax-free, is sent back to India and invested either in land or buying gold. But unfortunately, the boon of tax-free in the Gulf seems limited. According to a World Bank report, several Gulf countries including Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are thinking to impose tax on outward remittances, which is likely to hit Indian Labour Diaspora's contribution in the nation building.

In contrast to indentured laborers to Fiji, Mauritius, British Guiana, Trinidad, Surinam and Kanganilabour migrants to Burma, Malaya, Singapore and passage migrants to Kenya, Uganda and South Africa, it is the labour migrants to the Gulf, who have contributed majorly to nation-building in terms of remittances. A systematic and organized engagement with Indian Diaspora for nation building is a recent phenomenon, although its precedence dates back to pre-independence. Mahatma Gandhi, an Indian Diasporic migrant to South Africa, came back to play a leading role in India's freedom struggle. Dadabhai Naroji, Shyam Krishna Verma, Madam Kama, who while being in diasporic existence, continued to play a vital role in India's nation building process.

Post-independence, India maintained a studied silence and neutral distancing from its Diaspora and migrants in terms of political contribution in nation building. The first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru emphatically exhorted the Indian Diaspora to be loyal to their host country as India was in the process of building its own country. Nehru was of the opinion that dividing the loyalties of Diaspora would invite the ire of Diaspora's host countries, which India was least prepared to handle. Moreover, Indian Diaspora at this stage was at its nascent stage and economically and politically vulnerable to support the process of nation building. But the ground was being prepared for the first milestone of India's diasporic engagement, which was to take place some 45 years later. The litmus test was getting ready to show the result.

It was in 1992 when the world was rolling under the wave of

globalization and India had opened its economy. Under the acute shortage of foreign exchange, she was reeling under economic duress. India appealed to Non-Resident Indians for help and extended its arms in open embrace to Indians living overseas. The Indian diaspora responded enthusiastically. They came closer to their homeland after having drifted away during the last three decades because of lack of any positive engagement. These NRIs had migrated to the US, the UK, Australia and Canada during 1960s and 1970s when these countries had lifted the race-based ban on Asian migrants. By 1990s, they had emerged influential and powerful, both politically and economically, to extend helping help to India. As “elites from many different ethnicities and social groups in India are deeply invested in the Unites States through familial networks(Chakravorty, Kapur, Singh, 2017).

A large number of these Elite Diaspora was the product of new age economy. “Diasporic workers in the ‘New Global Economy,’ as it has been called, are part of this defining moment of late capitalism: its transnationalization of finance, its international division of production, its ‘outsourcing’ (of labour and services), its “‘offspring’ (of banking and informational technologies), its commoditization of exported (and exploited) labour, its global trade in goods and services, and its capital-monetary flows...” (Braziel, 2008).

The post-globalization and liberalization period provided the much vigour and impetus in strengthening India’s Elite Diaspora and its role in nation building. To overcome the economic crisis and to meet the need of hard currency, India tapped its ‘strategic asset’ of diaspora. The emergence of Indian IT industry and the offshore site for Business Processing Outsourcing (BPO) further accelerated the process of skilled manpower dispersion and the consequent engagement in India’s economic impetus by the Elite Diaspora. Countries like the US, the UK, Australia, Canada who had sizable number of affluent Non-Resident Indians, played an active role in bilateral business association that were mutually beneficial to each other.

Another milestone of the Elite Diaspora’s growing clout in the US came during the Indo-US Nuclear Deal in 2005. The deal was signed by the then, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and U.S. President George W. Bush in which Indian Diaspora played a critical role by creating public opinion within the US Congress and the Senate. The term ‘NRI (Non Resident Indians) lobby’ became popular as a pressure group within the US politics. The influence of Indian-Americans to India’s cause became so central that the US House of Representative founded the Congressional Caucus on India. Subsequently, Hillary Clinton founded the Senate Friends of India to espouse India’s cause. The strong lobbying in the US in favour of Indo-US Nuclear deal was an example of Diaspora Diplomacy by the Elite Diaspora in India’s nation building process. Indian Diaspora also played a critical role in the success of Indo-US Nuclear deal by creating public opinion within the US Congress and the Senate. In fact, it’s now preferred to use the terms ‘policy advocate’ instead

of ‘lobbyist’ after the Jack Abramoff scandal in 2006 that linked lobbying with political corruption. (Kennedy 2010).

Despite the hostility towards the Indo-U.S. Nuclear Deal, the elite Diaspora of Indian Americans worked in ensuring that they are able to generate enough clout in its support.

“The Indo-U.S. Nuclear Deal became a cause of célèbre for the Indian-American Elite Diaspora, which saw it as a pivotal moment with the possibility of fundamentally transforming U.S.-India relations, as indeed did its Indian and U.S. progenitors. To ensure passage of the agreement, they organized a major campaign urging community members to petition their individual representatives. Working with the executive branch, leading congressmen, who were part of India Caucus were nudged to issue supportive statement (Chakravorty, Kapur, Singh, 2017).

The Indian Elite Diaspora in the US formed many organizations and associations during the period in creating the right environment, wielding support to India’s cause and espousing the interest of Indian Americans in the US. Ramesh Kapur, a politically well-connected NRI founded the Indian-American Security Leadership Council, Swadesh Chatterjee founded the US-India Friendship Council, Sanjay Puri, formed the United States India Political Action Committee (USINPAC). Other influential organizations like US-India Business Council (USIBC), the Indian-American Leadership Initiative (IALI); the Indian-American Republican Council (IARC) and National Federation of Indian-American Associations (NFIA) also acted as pressure groups to India’s cause. (Kjølseth, 2009)

Prominent people of Indian Elite Diaspora like Anurag Varma, an Indian-American lobbyist and Robert Blackwill, the US Ambassador to India from 2001 to 2003, played significant role in giving support to Indo-US Nuclear deal. Others like Indra Nooyi, PepsiCo CEO and chairman, hotelier Sant Singh Chatwal and author Deepak Chopra’s influence provided indirect support to India’s cause. The successes of Indian Elite Diaspora have been noteworthy in their host countries, especially in the US and the UK, but their involvement in the nation building has been quite marginal. In the US alone, there are almost three dozens Indian-Americans serving in the Obama administration. The US President Donald Trump included people of Indian origin like Nikki Haley, Indra Nooyi and Seema Verma in his team to run the country. (PTI, 2016)

India however, has been utilizing its Elite Diaspora, as in the case of Sam Pitroda for telecommunication and Raghuram Rajan, the former governor of Reserve Bank of India, for macro and fiscal reforms. Shashi Tharoor, the Congress Member of Parliament and some regional Elite leaders like Thomas Chandy of Kerala and Mike Mallappa of Karnataka could only be some of the exceptions in Indian politics. It should be noted that according to the new Registration of Electors (Amendment) Rules,

2011, NRIs can now vote in elections in India, and by extension can also stand to be elected (Chhibber, 2011).

This opened new avenues of nation building through political engagement. However, there have not been many examples of Elite Diaspora exercising this privilege. This goes to show that while they prefer to stay in their host countries for professional and monetary benefits, they prefer to provide ideological support to India's cause from the outside. They prefer to use their influence to have a voice in India without directly participating in the nation building process.

The next and the final phase of India's nation-building process began after Narendra Modi came to power in May 2014. He heralded a strategic engagement with Indian Diaspora by enrolling their direct support, which was well responded by NRIs living in the US, the UK, Australia and other developed countries. The huge gathering at Madison Square in New York and Wembley Stadium in London and Howdy Modi event Houston were testimonies of Elite Diaspora's power and their enthusiastic support in creating a clout at the global level for India.

To sum up, it can be said that the contribution of Elite Diaspora is much lower than that of the Labour Diaspora in terms of remittances. The former had been playing a limited role in nation-building apart from lobbying and acting as pressure groups. As elite diaspora reside mostly in developed countries, they are influential and make best use of political lobbying and in creating a greater perception of their contribution to India's development. The labour diaspora, on the other hand, are silent workers who have been contributing economically, but have been marginalized and relegated to the background.

Nonetheless, the above findings do not belittle the contribution of Elite Diaspora, but at the same time, emphasizes the contribution of Labour migrants in the Gulf who find least recognition in the home country's politics and policies. The Elite Diaspora continues to dominate political discourse. There is a need for more inclusive approach to engage all segments of diaspora and make them a willing partner in India's nation building process. With the available technological advancement, engaging diaspora in India's all-round development is not a difficult proposition. With its growing diaspora and concomitant challenges, India needs to think beyond national boundaries in engaging the strength of its Labour and Elite Diaspora in the nation building.

(Note: This paper was presented at the two day international conference on 'Migration, Diaspora and Nation Building: Opportunities and Challenges' organized by the UGC-Human Resource Development Centre, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, March 7-8, 2018)

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Global Research Forum on Diaspora and Transnationalism (GRFDT) is a consortium of researchers and policy makers drawn from national and international universities, institutes and organizations. GRFDT is presently based in India and is shaping as the largest such group focusing specifically on the issues related to diaspora and transnationalism.

The GRFDT works as an academic and policy think tank by engaging national and international experts from academics, practitioners and policy makers in a broad range of areas such as migration policies, transnational linkages of development, human rights, culture, gender to mention a few. In the changing global environment of academic research and policy making, the role of GRFDT will be of immense help to the various stakeholders. Many developing countries cannot afford to miss the opportunity to harness the knowledge revolution of the present era. The engagement of diaspora with various platform need to be reassessed in the present context to engage them in the best possible manner for the development human societies by providing policy in-put at the national and global context.