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Socio-cultural Integration and Community Organizations among Malayalee Diaspora in Canada

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Abstract

Marginalization and isolation of man from society are undesirable and unimaginable. Man depends on society for his survival. However, in the case of migrants, they are shifting their life from one society to another and try to cope with the social environment in the destination. Many migrants face the problem of stigma and isolation in the destination. This results in social and psychological problems for them. To cope with these problems in a new social environment, the community of migrants establishes different types of organizations and associations. These associations and organizations help them for internal socio-cultural integration. The present study aims to investigate the role of community organizations in preserving and integrating the socio-cultural life of the Malayalee diaspora in Canada through content analysis; for the study, data were collected from various online sources. The data is analyzed using content analysis from various online sources, including websites, social media, etc. The paper consists of two parts. The first part deals with different socio-cultural organizations of the Malayalee diaspora in Canada. The second part deals with how these organizations helping for socio-cultural integration of the Malayalee diaspora community. The socio-cultural associations of different kinds are analyzed based on their character and activities. From this study, it is found that different organizations help in the social integration of the Malayalee community in Canada through cultural activities, organizing cultural fests, gathering and conducting Picnic, celebrating significant Kerala festivals, undertake charity work. All these create strong bonds between members and enhance integration as a diaspora community.

Keywords: Community integration, Canada, Malayalee diaspora, Malayalee organizations.

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Socio-cultural Integration and Community Organizations among Malayalee Diaspora in Canada

Lijo Lal W

Introduction

In the past two decades studies in diaspora and transnationalism gained popularity among social scientists. Diaspora studies have become a very eminent area of research with diverse methodologies (Cohen, 2008). Researchers focus on specific aspects of diaspora such as social networks, political activism, ethnic identity, etc. (Butler, 2001). In recent years there is a massive increase in the number of diaspora organizations all around the globe. These organizations are meant for addressing the specific needs of the migrants (Zetter, R., Griffiths, D., and Sigona, N. 2005). Migrants created various organizations such as ethnic community organizations, socio-cultural associations, developmental organizations, charity associations, etc. All these organizations and associations directly help the immigrants for their betterment in transnational life (Wahlbeck, 1999). The Malayalee diaspora community, they are also created various kinds of diaspora organizations and associations.

Malayalee diaspora community consists of migrants, Non-resident Keralite's and international students. Malayalee or Keralite or otherwise known as Mallus, have a distinct way of life and traditions. They have a great history of migration during different periods. The historical development of migration from Kerala is evident from the ancient periods. The trade relationships with the Roman Empire, the Arabs and the Chinese were also strong, and all these contributed to the development of migration in the early centuries (Chopra, 1983). During the medieval period, trade relationships were further strengthened due to discovering the silk route and the sea route.

The modern history of migration in India started during colonial rule. The colonial government requires workers in the different parts of the world, which opened the routes for people of India to migrate to other countries. The majority of them were manual laborers who worked in the plantation sectors (Jain, 1989). After the independence of India, many countries welcomed migrants who qualified as professionals and office staff. Keralites used this opportunity and migrated to different countries such as UK, USA, Canada, etc. However, the number of migrants was nominal. During

the 1970s, with an oil boom, massive hikes in the migration rate to the Gulf region affected Kerala's entire spheres of life (Prakash, 1998). The development of the Kerala model of development is actually based on the foreign remittances sent by migrants from abroad. The second and third-generation migrants are more interested in migrating to other developed countries such as UK, Canada, the USA, etc. This flow of migration from Kerala formed Malayalee diasporas across the globe.

The problem

One of the significant characteristics of Malayalee is the spirit of association and organization through the formation of different groups such as political parties, labour organizations, socio-cultural organizations, professional groups, etc. The Malayalee diaspora community also has the spirit of association. There are numerous Malayalee diaspora organizations across the globe. The present article is about the Malayalee diaspora organizations in Canada and how it affects their life. Canada is one of the dream destinations for migration aspirants in Kerala. The number of Malayalee in Canada as compared to other diasporic groups is less (Pravasi Malayali census, 2013). Malayalee community spread to various regions in Canada.

The study aims to investigate the role of community organizations in preserving and integrating the socio-cultural life of the Malayalee diaspora in Canada. The present article contains two sections; the first part aims to provide a brief literature review about the Malayalee diaspora, which concludes with profiles of various Malayalee organizations in Canada. The second part tries to analyze the influence of these organizations on their socio-cultural life.

For the study, both qualitative and quantitative data were used. The data relating to Malayalee community organizations were collected from online resources such as websites and social media. The data analyzed through content analysis and interpreted. The lack of utilizing primary data is one of the significant limitations of the present paper. Besides, this paper intends to provide an overview of organizations and their role in integrating the socio-cultural life of the Malayalee diaspora in Canada.

Review of Literature

Diaspora

The word 'diaspora' is derived from the Greek preposition 'dia', which means across or over, and the verb 'speiro' means to scatter or dispersion. The word diaspora relates to the Jews who were exiled from their homeland, Palestine. However, the term is now used to describe practically any population, "Deterritorialized or transnational." It describes the people who originated in a land other than the nation in which they currently reside and whose social, economic, and political networks across the borders of nation-states or indeed span the globe. To be sure, such populations are growing in prevalence, number, and self-awareness. Several are emerging as (or have historically long been) significant players in the construction of national narratives, regional alliances, or global political economies (Stevenvertovec, 1999).

International Organization for Migration (IOM), The UN Migration Agency, World Migration Report 2018 says that "the term Diaspora has been extensively discussed and defined in various ways across several academic disciplines, although there is no single agreed-upon destination. In general, it refers to a country's nationals or citizens abroad and their descendants.

The displacement of people can lead to the formation of diaspora. Generally speaking, the idea of diaspora refers to a group of people who have left or have been forced out of their usual habitat (Ali, 2007).

Any migrant, displaced, or dispersed population cannot automatically be identified as a diaspora. The existence of diaspora requires community members to continue to identify with their homeland and cultivate ties both between themselves and the homeland. The critical element that makes the concept meaningful is their awareness of themselves as a diaspora. This term has been modified over a while, adjusting and accommodating various aspects of migrant life. However, the core of the term has remained the same (Tiwari, 2014).

The concept of Diaspora has undergone a significant transformation over the years from the imagery of tragic and victimized existence; they have emerged as a vibrant community capable of participating in the economic, political, and cultural process of both home and host countries through transnational orientation. As diasporas simultaneously participate in the developmental process of two or more countries, maintaining the networks between these countries is inevitable (Pande, 2014).

Malayalee Diaspora

Malayalee is people of Indian origin from the state of Kerala. They speak Malayalam. They are also called Malayali or Malayalee. They are very rich in culture and religious

traditions, mainly from Hindu, Muslim and Christian backgrounds (George, 2013).

The Kerala community is recognized as one of the most audacious, successful, and established Diaspora communities of Indian origin. In a recent estimate, over thirty million Indians are living abroad in the status of NRIs and POIs. This number continues to grow as more and more people migrate to foreign countries for education, employment, and business opportunities (Kulanjiyil, 2013)

The Kerala diaspora forms a more significant part of the worldwide Non-resident Indian community and widely spread in West Asia, the Middle East, U. S. A, New Zealand, Australia, and other world regions. The number of Kerala emigrants living abroad in 2011 was estimated to be 2.28 million, up from 2.19 million in 2008, 1.84 million in 2003, and 1.36 million in 1998 (Mansy, 2012).

Remittances to Kerala from abroad estimated as Rs. 18, 46,000 crores in 2004. It was seven times more than what the state received from the government of India as budget support. The importance of remittance is not only confined to income alone but economic activity as well. The regular remittance of the Keralites working abroad to their relatives has successfully reduced the gap between the rich and the poor. To some extent, it affected the sustainable changes in the poverty, Distribution, Patterns of consumption, Savings, and investments in Kerala (Mansy, 2012).

Malayalee Diaspora in Canada

Malayalee migrated to different destinations, and this formed Malayalee diaspora in different parts of the world. Different destinations such as the Gulf region, the USA, and Australia have a good number of Malayalee population which created a strong network among them. Compared to the Malayalee diaspora in other countries, the Canadian Malayalee diaspora was absent from the literature and scientific investigations. Canada is comparatively a new destination, and the Malayalee population also not so much. The population statistics show that immigration to Canada is the primary source of the increase in population. Moreover, the Indians constitute the highest number of immigrants in Canada.

The major groups of Indian diasporic groups in Canada include the Sikhs, Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalee. Malayalee population in Canada as per the estimate of ILO in 1983 was 3000. In 1999 it was 1800 as per the department of economics and statistics of Kerala. The primary reason for the reduction in number is the omission of non-citizen Malayalee from the official data of the census. The number of Keralites in Canada as per the Pravasi Malayali Census of 2013 was 6,350. As per the official census of Canada, in 2016, there were 13,800 Malayalee in Canada. The Malayalee population in Canada increases year by year, leading to the strengthening of Malayalee as a diasporic community.

Malayalee Diaspora organizations in Canada

Malayalee diaspora organizations are focused on various aspects of the life of the migrants. There are different types of diaspora organizations by Malayalee in Canada. They are formed with specific goals and act according to them, and there are secular socio-cultural organizations, caste, community, and religion-based organizations. These organizations act as an integrating force in the transnational space. These associations provide support and integrate the people as a diaspora community in Canada. The major diaspora organizations and their activities are as follows

Canadian Malayalee Association

One of the leading Malayalee Diaspora organizations in Canada, the Canadian Malayalee Association (CMA), was formed in 2001 on the special day of 'Kerala Piravi' on the first day of November. CMA was established for the objective of the development and enhancement of the Malayalam language and culture. The association coordinates and provides facilities for the development of Malayalam literature, music, and drama. CMA celebrates all special days related to national importance, such as republic day, independence day, etc. It also celebrates the festivals of Kerala and won many prizes for it.

Canadian Malayalee Association organizes and coordinates different activities in recent years. The significant events are CMA culfest, Picnic, CMA Onam, and other activities. CMA culfest is an event that they organize every year, facilitating a platform to showcase their talents in different fields. The fest provides an opportunity to engage in different games and cultural events. The purpose of these events is to promote Kerala culture and traditions. The majority of the events include the traditional performing arts and other cultural activities. They also organize Picnic regularly in July each year which is the vacation time for the school students. So that almost every member can participate in it. The major attraction of this event is the 'Thattukada Food Fest'. Thattukada is a small hotel that offers traditional Kerala-style food such as Dosa, Idiyappam, Palappam, Kappa-Meen, and different types of stews. This event is an opportunity to taste traditional Kerala food. The event also coordinates different games that target the whole community irrespective of their age.

Onam¹ is a significant Kerala festival and one of Kerala's traditional festivals that, irrespective of religion, caste,

¹ Onam is celebrated during Chingam (Malayalam calendar), which falls in August and September. Significant attractions include Ona Sadya (a variety of traditional vegetarian dishes of food traditionally served in banana leaf), Pookalam (an intricate and colorful flower arrangement laid on the floor). It is a festival of brotherhood, happiness, contentment, devotion, sharing, and sacrifice. This will bring sweet childhood memories of time with family. Besides this, Mahabali, Chendamelam, and traditional dress are all part of the celebration that brings awareness of Kerala culture and tradition.

community, all Malayalees celebrate in Kerala or anywhere else in the world. Onam is the opportunity to meet family and friends and celebrate.

Toronto Malayalee Samajam

Toronto Malayalee Samajam (TMS) is one of the oldest Malayalee diaspora associations in Canada. TMS was established in the year 1968. TMS is a secular, non-political, non-profit organization. The primary goal of TMS is the socio-cultural integration of Malayalee in Canada. The association works for a quality socio-cultural life of Malayalee through socio-cultural activities. Besides these activities, TMS assists and renders relief activities for the needy. In addition, TMS encourages educational and cultural activities of its members through scholarships and cultural programs. Over 400 Malayalee families are lifetime members of TMS.

TMS celebrates all special days such as Onam and Vishu other essential festivals and provides a platform for togetherness. Two significant programs coordinated by TMS include Keralolsavam and Hridayapoorvam. Keralolsavam begins in 2006, which provides an opportunity for all its members to participate and compete in various performing arts and other traditional arts. Hridayapoorvam is a covid19 helpline that helps most affected groups such as senior citizens, international students, and new emigrants by providing essential goods and services, medicines, reliable information, and other supports.

Ontario Regional Malayalee Association (ORMA)

ORMA is a regional Malayalee association based in Ontario, which coordinates the social and cultural activities of Malayalee groups in the Ontario region in Canada. ORMA is a cultural association formed in 2011 by a group of on the same wavelength professionals representing the traditional and rich heritage of God's own country, Kerala-India. The association is a secular, non-profit, and non-political organization that aims to better the Malayalee community in Ontario, Canada.

ORMA has broken down the barriers of divisions such as caste, class, religion, etc., and has adapted to the needs of the Malayalee community in Ontario. It urges its members to participate and take leadership in various events that are coordinated throughout the year to accommodate the aspirations of the whole community. ORMA acts as a friendly forum for the Ontario Malayalees to meet and exchange their views to foster a spirit of friendship, goodwill, and understanding. The primary and distinguishing purpose of ORMA is to bind the community together by promoting and preserving its identity, traditions, and values, followed by Malayalee culture.

By conducting various socio-cultural programs through which the culture and heritage of the Malayalee community can be

transformed to the upcoming generation. As a multicultural society that constitutes various cultural and social groups, ORMA builds a bridge between various cultural groups and the larger community in the multicultural society of Canada. ORMA is committed to aiding the community through its far-reaching programs and endeavors that socially integrate Malayalee community people in the region.

Over the years, ORMA has continuously grown through time and talent from individuals who served as members of ORMA. The association has always been very nimble in adapting its activities to the changing times and needs of the Malayalee community. ORMA has a vibrant administrative setup. ORMA is led by a team of Executive Committee comprising the President, Vice President, Secretary, Joint Secretary, Trustee, Program Coordinator, Food Committee, and the Public Relations Office (PRO). The Executive Committee has the power to appoint sub-committees with the powers necessary to fix the quorum and regulate such committees' proceedings. Through these activities, the organization tries to integrate and enrich the culture Malayalee community with the support of all its members

Nair Social Society of Canada

Nair Social Society of Canada (NSS²) is registered as a non-profit organization and established in 2003. The primary goal of NSS is the enrichment of Malayalee culture, language, and the community. NSS Canada works for the betterment of the Nair community in Canada. The membership in this organization is restricted to the members of the Nair community. The principal activities include Religious and spiritual support by organizing bhajans and spiritual talks by spiritual leaders from India and other countries. They are also celebrating significant special days such as Onam, Vishu, Mandalapooja, etc. Another important activity is charity within and outside Canada. NSS Canada organizes many charity works for the needy in Canada and Kerala. Supporting the students for professional and higher education, financial support for marriage are some of them. The organization also provides articles about the origin, development, and activities. They are providing information and reliable news for the community members during the pandemic.

Sree Narayana Association Toronto

Sree Narayana Association (SNA) is an organization that came to exist with social and educational objectives. The association works based on the principles of Sree Narayana Guru- the great social reformer of Kerala. The mission of SNA Toronto is to unite all those respectful of Sree Narayana Guru's philosophy and strive to learn, understand, practice, preserve and perpetuate the Guru's Upanishadic wisdom and its doctrines of universal brotherhood and multicultural co-existence in Canadian society.

² NSS is one of the significant community organizations in Kerala that works for the Nair community's empowerment.

Major Integrating Aspects of Malayalee Community Organisations

There is a significant role played by Malayalee diaspora organizations in the socio-cultural life of immigrants in Canada. They are the prominent means of support and social inclusion. Malayalee community organizations facilitate immigrant's adaptation in the host country. Various organizations and associations function in different ways that enhance the integration of the Malayalee diaspora in Canada. The significant aspects of organizations that integrate Malayalee diaspora as follows.

Preservation of socio-cultural identity

Identity is one of the critical factors that play a crucial role in every individual's life—the social environment shapes the individual's identity he was born and brought up. The social environment changes through migration, which led to anomie in the life of migrants. So it is crucial to maintain and adapt to the new social environment. The diaspora organizations provide the opportunities to maintain the social identity of the group. In the Malayalee diaspora, the critical factors of socio-cultural identity are Language, Festivals, Artforms, Appearance, and other cultural elements.

- **Language:** Language is the soul of Malayalee identity. Malayalam is one of the languages from south India, which is included in the Dravidian language family. Malayalam has long historical roots in the Tamil and Sanskrit languages. Malayalam is the integrating factor that leads to the creation of the state of Kerala in 1956. There are more than three crore people who use this language. As a language used by the Keralite, it acts as an integrating force in the destination countries. Malayalee organizations mainly adopt the name, which is reflecting the identity of the people. In Canada also the diaspora organizations adopted the name of organizations related to the language. The Malayalee samajam, Canadian Malayalee associations etc. are some examples.
- **Festivals:** Malayalee celebrate numerous festivals that integrate the Malayalee diaspora community in Canada. They celebrate Onam, the national festival of Kerala, celebrated in August or September of the year. This brings unity within the group because it is based on the concept of brotherhood. Irrespective of caste, religion and any other differences, all the members of the Malayalee celebrate it. It is the opportunity to cooperate to share the cultural unity of the diaspora. Regardless of its nature, all the diaspora organizations celebrate this festival with Pookkalam, Mahabali, Chendamelam, Traditional dressing, and most importantly, Ona Sadya.

Other critical cultural festivals include Kerala Piravi Day, which is on the first day of November. This is a very special day for all Malayalee. In this day of 1956, the state of Kerala came to exist officially in the Indian union. This day is

celebrated with joy by honoring the people who work for the unity of Malayalee. In addition, there are various other festivals such as Vishu, Christmas, and many other days.

- **Art forms:** Kathakali, Kalaripayattu, Mohiniyattom, are the major performing arts of the Malayalee. Kathakali is the world-renowned traditional art form in Kerala, performed by professionally trained persons. The diaspora group encourages to include this during the cultural festivals. Kalaripayattu is the traditional martial art of Kerala, which is for human physical and mental health. Mohiniyattom is the classical form of dance performed during the festivals.
- **Appearance:** Appearance plays a crucial role in the Malayalee identity. The traditional Kerala saree (Set Mundu or Kasavu) and Kurtha and Mundu, and other traditional dress reflect the Malayalee identity. Diaspora group gets the opportunity to wear all these traditional dresses only in the group events of Malayalee diaspora organizations. The social events and cultural fests provide the opportunity to reflect their identity.
- **Other elements:** other elements consisted of the life experiences of the early migrants. The story of their existence in the new region encourages and inspires young migrants to stay and adapt to the new social environment.

Networking

Networks play a significant role in the life of diaspora. The Canadian Malayalee organizations provide the situations for networking. Networks provide social capital, which is essential for the adaptation and adjustment of new migrants. Membership in different organizations provides strength to survive to new migrants. There are various diaspora organizations based on professional, socio-cultural, caste, and religious bases in Canada. These groups integrate the individuals into their community. They provide vital information regarding the events, opportunities, etc. In addition, there were professional groups of the Malayalee diaspora community which provide essential information about legal assistance, social justice, and new opportunities.

Socialization

The process of socialization begins with the birth and continues to the whole stages in life. The socialization of the children is one of the vital functions performed by the diaspora organizations. The child gets the opportunity to learn the values, customs, and traditions from the group. The Malayalee organizations intendedly provide an opportunity to learn the language of Malayalam. The social events and festivals give due importance to tradition and values and reflect the life of the Malayalee. This makes the transmission of Malayalee culture from one generation to another. As a multicultural society, the influence on the child to learn alien cultural elements is high, so that these facilities provide

opportunities to learn own culture and tradition.

Matrimony

Marriage is one of the significant events in life. As a social institution, marriage plays a very vital role in life. The Kerala culture gives due importance to marriage relations. As a diasporic group, there is a lack of opportunities to find partners—their preference for finding mates from the same community with similar cultural backgrounds is also dominant in the diaspora community. The major problem with the diaspora community is the absence of information regarding the bride and bridegroom from their community. The diaspora organizations provide information and opportunity to find life partners within the community.

Spiritual support

Spiritual and religious support offered by many organizations. Especially during the time of religious importance. Various religious associations provide support in the form of organizing Bhajanas and prayers. This helps the individual to integrate into the mainstream community.

Entertainment and Refreshment

The activities of the majority of the organizations included entertainment and refreshment activities regularly like Keralolsam, Culfest, etc. The busy life of the people led to individual isolation from the productive social life. Diaspora organizations serve opportunities for refreshment and entertainment, which make them united and encourage group life with happiness.

Charity

Charity activities are one of the primary concerns of many of the diaspora organizations. They actively engaged in charity both in Canada as well as Kerala. The significant activities include supporting the students from economically backward by providing scholarships and other facilities for learning, financial support for those in financial crisis and poor, supporting the financially weaker sections for the marriage, etc. These are organized in Kerala as well as Canada. In Canada, they specifically focused on the needy such as international students, new migrants, and the elderly, by supporting them socially, economically, and emotionally.

Preserving Caste and Community sentiments

There are secular and democratic organizations that allow membership without any restrictions. However, some specific groups still restricted the membership to members of a particular community, caste, and religion. These organizations were highly interested in the empowerment of those groups. Traditionally, caste is considered a force of domination, but during the modern history of Kerala, caste-based groups emerged as a force of liberation by themselves. The movements like SNDP, NSS are some of the examples of

this. Today even these movements are organizing themselves and fight for their rights. As a reflection in Canada, we can see these organizations and some adaptable differences to the host region. There are also groups with religious sentiments which functions as a provider of spiritual support.

Crisis response

During the covid19 pandemic majority of the Malayalee diaspora organizations provide support for the needy. As a part of pandemic crisis response, they created a network of Volunteers for providing support for the needy. They coordinated activities that target the Elderly by providing medicine and other supports, New emigrants who are very vulnerable to the crisis, and international students. The network of volunteers acts according to the needs of the targeted group, which provides them some relief.

Conclusion

The study investigates and understands the role of Malayalee community organizations in the socio-cultural integration of the Malayalee diaspora in Canada. The study finds that community organizations play an essential role in the life of the Malayalee diaspora in Canada. In addition, Malayalee organizations are critical in immigrant social relations in the host region.

Some community organizations are inclusive and progressive, which focuses on the socio-cultural integration and preservation of Malayalee culture in Canada. At the same time, there are organizations that restrict memberships based on caste and religion. These organizations work for the betterment of each of their members. Through their activities, a feeling of community sentiment emerges. This helps them to socialize their children by inculcating Malayalee values and culture. From the study, the following factors were found which integrate the community as a whole

- **Identification with the community:** one vital aspect of every community organization is that immigrants tend to identify them to their organization. Members tend to develop an attachment or sentiment of identification with the organization. This will give rise to 'we feeling.' The majority of the Malayalee ethnic organizations facilitate this through their celebration of socio-cultural festivals. It makes the young children experience the food, dance, and music, think about their cultural backgrounds and develop oneness.
- **Role-playing:** Malayalee organizations give the opportunity to play different roles in socio-cultural integration. Every individual in the community has a role to play in the organization. This increases the spirit of teamwork and integrates the community under one banner. One of the major advantages of these organizations is that they socialize their

children to live according to the value system of the Malayalee community. It is evident from the increased participation of children in socio-cultural events. They prepare the youngsters to take the roles played by them now.

- **Dependence:** The majority of the immigrant community members depend on their community and community organization in the host region. This involves both social and psychological dependence. In addition, community organizations increase the cooperation of their members. This is evident from the study, especially during the pandemic.

Malayalee diaspora organizations significantly impacted social integration through their activities. Enrichment of the Malayalee tradition and values are the focal objectives of these groups. They raise their hand to support the needy in the time of crisis with several activities. The social life of Malayalee in Canada depends significantly on these organizations. The diaspora organizations perform the social functions that facilitate the smooth running of the social life of Malayalee in Canada. Thus, different organizations help the immigrants to avoid stigma and isolation and integrate them into the community.

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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.