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Indian Political Diaspora: A Synoptic View

Ravindra K. Jain and Prakash C. Jain

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Abstract

Extant literature on Indian diaspora overwhelmingly underscores the economic aspects of this phenomenon. The Indian diaspora is often conceptualized and understood in terms of economic remittances, investment, technology and skill transfer, etc. So much so that other aspects, especially the political one is relegated to the background. Against this backdrop, this paper attempts to rectify this situation by proposing to define and delineate a new sub-field of the Indian Diaspora Studies, namely Indian Political Diaspora. Much of the discussion here is focused on the Indian political diaspora located in the metropolitan countries of Europe and North America, and that too in relation to the diaspora-homeland relationship since the late nineteenth century. It is argued that whereas during the colonial period the major political engagement of the Indian diaspora was to strive for India's independence, in the post-colonial era the engagement of the New Indian diaspora has shifted mainly to lobbying for the country and its socio-political development. In the 21st century, the social media has significantly enhanced the quantum and efficacy of the highly diversified and occasionally fractured political engagements of the Indian diaspora.

Keywords:

Diaspora Studies, Indian Political Diaspora, Homeland, Metropolitan countries, Indian independence movement, Lobbying, Hindutva.

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

Indian Political Diaspora: A Synoptic View

Ravindra K. Jain and Prakash C. Jain

Diasporas have emerged as important trans-national non-state entities in the contemporary world. They challenge the traditional concept of state and its citizenship, but at the same time claim a legitimate stake in it. Thus, diasporas defy the conventional meaning of the state. Diasporas also operate as ethnic lobbies in their country of settlement, if they have a liberal political set up. They have become a force in the global economy assisting economies of countries of origin. More generally, diasporas are increasingly able to promote transnational ties, transfer of knowledge and technology. They act as bridges or as mediators between countries of origin and countries of settlement. Diasporas influence international affairs in numerous ways, passive and active, constructive and destructive. In the 21st century, social media has enhanced all these activities to a great extent (Axford and Huggins 2001). Given their importance and status as a permanent feature in the international system, there is growing interest in diaspora studies around the world (Jain R. K. 2010; Sheffer 1986).

Against this general backdrop of the importance of diasporas in modern times, it can well be argued that an overwhelming amount of work on Indian emigration and diaspora directly or indirectly underscores the importance of economic aspects. Even the role and contribution of the Indian diaspora is often seen or conceptualised in terms of economic gains through remittances, investment, transfer of technology and skills. The political engagement and contribution of the diaspora with the homeland has not acquired its rightful place within the field of Indian diaspora which, in our understanding, would refer to a transnational category of ethnic/national origin comprising political processes of engagement and aspiration linking constituencies/ publics in the host country with a real or imagined homeland, based on assertions of identity, the sense of belonging and/or long-distance nationalism. More parsimoniously, a diaspora or a section thereof — a constituency, public, sub-group, class, group of ideological dissenters — that engages in manifest or latent political activities directed at the host land and/ or the homeland can be defined as a political diaspora.

Indian diaspora

Scholars have noted five major historical patterns of Indian economic emigration: (i) indentured, (ii) kangani/maistry, (iii) 'passage'/free, (iv) "Brain Drain" or "Brain Gain" and (v) emigration to the Persian Gulf region (Jain 1988; 1989; 2023; Jain, R. K. 1993). During the period 1834-1939, a large number of Indians emigrated mainly as indentured labourers to Guyana, Trinidad, Surinam (then a Dutch colony), South Africa, Fiji and Mauritius and as kangani or maistry labourers to Burma, Ceylon and Malaysia (Kondapi 1951; Mahajani 1960; Sandhu 1969; Tinker 1974). The small-scale emigration of Indian traders and professionals also took place, especially to Burma, Malaysia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, South Africa and Fiji under the 'passage' emigration pattern — the nomenclature being derived from the fact that the emigrants paid their own passage and were free in all respects. Since India's independence Indians have been emigrating to European, north American and many other countries of the world, mainly as professionals and entrepreneurs. Initially this pattern was known as "Brain Drain" but now since about 1990s it is considered as "Brain Gain" (bringing remittances, economic investment and

technology transfer) (High Level Committee 2001; Jain and Prasad 2023; Khadria 1999). The final pattern is the massive Indians manpower emigrating to the Persian Gulf region countries since the 1970s which differs from the previous one in that all the emigrants are sponsored and rarely allowed to become the citizens of these countries (Jain 2026). Indian diasporas formed on the basis of the first three patterns are often known as the "Old" Indian diaspora and the post-independence ones as the "New" diaspora. The Indian diaspora, estimated at about 37 million in 2025, is spread in over 200 countries (MEA 2025). Of these, about 40 countries each have the Indian population of 60,000 or more.

This configuration has important political implications. Building on work that conceptualises diasporas as transnational political actors situated within overlapping State-Diaspora-Host state fields (Adamson & Demetriou, 2007; Shain & Barth, 2003), the new diaspora can be seen as occupying positions that afford both access and leverage. Professional migrants and their descendants who obtain citizenship or permanent residence in powerful host states are well placed to participate in party politics, contribute to campaign finance, shape media narratives and influence policy debates. By contrast, temporary labour migrants in the Gulf and elsewhere confront restrictive legal regimes, limited political rights and dependence on employers and consular protection, which constrain overt mobilisation (Jain 2026). Any discussion of ideological change therefore needs to take seriously the internal stratification of the new diaspora and the unequal opportunities and vulnerabilities that result.

Indian Political Diaspora

Diaspora-generated political aspirations, mobilisations, movements, lobbying and leadership happen to be important political structures and processes that have been directed towards homelands as well as the host countries in different parts of the world since at least the late 19th century.

It would be seen that for a number of reasons, the homeland directed effective Indian political diaspora could emerge in only metropolitan countries of Europe and North America. Conversely, the political concerns of the Indian communities in colonial societies initially remained confined to economic exploitation, unequal status, racial discrimination and local grievances and issues only (Jain 1990; 1999; Jain R. K. 1970; Tinker 1976, 1977). These were the diaspora communities which were formed during the 19th and the early 20th centuries on account of indentured, *kangani/maistry* and/or passage/free immigration patterns and could get themselves organised and "consolidated" only after the Soviet Revolution and the spread of communist movement. Based on agricultural, plantation/mining resources owned by the colonizers, all these countries were under-developed peripheral capitalist economies. Undoubtedly, the state in such societies tended to be an instrument of the ruling classes and thereby repressive and authoritarian in nature.

In most of these countries, the Indians were in a minority, and were in ethnic/racial competition and conflict with the native or earlier immigrant communities. Moreover, since at least the 1920s these countries were themselves struggling with their own independence movements with the British, French or Dutch imperial powers. Although a section of Indian diaspora in each country did participate in, or provided leadership to, the national movement; eventually in most places they were sidelined by the majority native communities (Jain 1990, 1999; Tinker 1977). In most colonial countries the Indian political diaspora tended to integrate vertically only. Besides the preoccupation with their own situations as mentioned above, they had neither the resources nor the means of communication to get horizontally integrated with each other or with their homeland. In fact, since the late colonial phase of their country, quite a significant number of them began to look for job opportunities in Europe and north America. The so-called "twice migration" has been as much a voluntary process as involuntary in the context of the overseas Indians.

In contrast to the social composition of the Indian diaspora in colonial societies, the social composition of the Indian diaspora differed sharply in metropolitan countries of Europe and north America where with the exception of the initial immigration of Sikh farmers and lumber industry workers in the USA and Canada respectively, vast majority of immigrants had been

college/university students, itinerant nationalists and/or revolutionaries, army personnel, professionals, traders and entrepreneurs. They constituted a relatively resourceful, educated and well-informed political diaspora which, besides the vertical integration, could also plan and carry out the horizontal integration across Europe and north America as well as the Indian sub-continent.

Historically, until about the 1990s, the Indian diaspora population in Europe and north America, due to legal restrictions, remained quite small numbering a few thousands. It was only since then that it progressively swelled running into several millions. Early industrialisation and the exploitation of the colonial resources tended to keep the metropolitan countries at the core or centre of the global capitalist economy. Developed educational, legal, medical and other infrastructural facilities were the great attraction for the aspiring middle and upper classes of the colonies to take advantage of them and help fulfil their personal as well as political objectives in their homelands. This class-nexus continued to remain active not only through the colonial but also the post-colonial phase of the global socio-economic order.

Engagement with the Homeland

It can be argued that against this backdrop the new Indian diasporas' political engagements with their homeland reveal two distinct modes that correspond to the colonial and post-colonial phases of the contemporary Indian history. During the colonial period, diasporic political activism was perhaps more pronounced and its singular objective was to help gain India's independence either through peaceful means or violent engagements. Among the leaders who advocated to use the peaceful means, the name of Dadabhai Nauroji, Lala Lajpat Rai, and M K Gandhi and their respective colleagues in India and abroad figure prominently (Bhana and Vahed 2025; Gandhi 1940; Masani 1939; Naoroji 1988; Rai 1978). Although Gandh's Satyagraha movement in South Africa was not directed towards India, in subsequent years he himself found it useful in the Indian context as well (Gandhi 1928). Initially considered a passive resistance, satyagraha transformed into a disciplined, non-violent strategy involving peaceful protest, imprisonment and civil disobedience. This framework was later adapted in India for the national freedom via the milestone movements such as the Non-Cooperation (1920-22), Salt/Dandi March (1930) and the Quit India (1942).

The India House activism, Ghadar Movement, Komagata Maru incident, Indian Independence Association ("Berlin Committee"), Russian Revolution-inspired activism and the foundation of the Azad Hind Fauj by Subhash Chandra Bose can be considered as the prominent examples of political organisations and engagements by the Indian diasporic groups during the colonial phase which tended to advocate the use of non-peaceful means for achieving India's independence (Puri 1983; Josh 1975; Persits 1983). A large number of nationalist and revolutionaries including Sohan Singh Bhakhna, Kartar Singh Sarabha, Lala Har Dayal, Syamji Krishna Varma, V. D. Savarkar, Tarak Nath Das, A. C. K. Nambiar, Virendra Nath Chattopadhyay, M. P. T. Acharya, M. N. Roy, Ras Bihari Bose and Subash C. Bose, to name only a few, were involved in these engagements (Bharatiya 1984; Brown 2023; Dayal 1920). One immediate outcome of the Ghadar movement and the Komagata Maru incident was the return of about 10,000 Indian immigrants from the USA to India. In the next few years, the Soviet Socialist Revolution of 1917 as well as the Ghadar and other movements generated an unprecedented revolutionary fervour among the youth in the country that included well-known revolutionaries such as Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev, Rajguru, Chandrashekhar Azad, Subash Chandra Bose and many more (Puri 2007).

New Indian Diaspora

Independent India saw the progressive growth and consolidation of the peripheral capitalism within, and the rise of its representative class and constituency in the form of the "New" Indian diaspora in the metropolitan countries. With the post-colonial state serving as a residual category of global capitalism, Indian political diaspora's engagements and aspirations with the homeland, depending on the composition of their political constituencies, resulted in a variety of activities including lobbying and fund raising, demands for citizenship and political representation, identity/

caste/communal and reservation politics, nation-building, etc. At the same time, post-colonial India has also seen diaspora-generated political mobilisation and dissent movements as evident in the "Khalistan", the Tamil Eelam and the Kashmiri secessionist movements (Bose 1994; Dhillon 2007; Satchi 1983; Tatla 1999). In the Indian context, these movements underline the regional-linguistic dimensions of the Indian political diaspora. Indian states with significant number of emigrants in diaspora such as Punjab and Kerala are more likely to face diaspora-generated political impact than other states. Thus, the Indian diaspora – general or regional – is likely to remain vocal in seeking their due political space in Indian society and the state.

In this phase characterised by post-coloniality (Ahmed 2000), how the various diaspora demands and issues are responded and negotiated by the homeland state is the crux of the matter which tends to define the diaspora-homeland relationship. It can easily be seen that India's response to diaspora demands and concerns are clearly reflected in the changed diaspora policy since the turn of this century (High Level Committee 2001; Lall 2001; Soni 2021). These include celebrating Indian Diaspora Day and honouring diaspora eminent personalities with Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Awards, granting Overseas Citizens of India (OCI) Card to PIOs, exercising diplomacy and counter-diplomacy for resolving certain sensitive diaspora issues, besides promoting economic investments and business networking, tourism, education and cultural relationships (Prasad and Jain 2024).

Among other developments about diaspora-homeland relationship since about 2014, the most significant one has been the state-articulated nationalism based mainly on Hindutva ideology and values in India which is now widely popular in sections of the Indian diaspora and whose perfect reverberations were found in 2019 "Howdy Modi" Indian diaspora event in Houston (de Souza and Hussain 2023: 138-61). The promotion of this ideology has been undermining the traditional Indian socio-cultural diversity on the one hand and the functioning of the democratic institutions in the country on the other hand which suffered from the double deficit, namely authoritarianism and dented citizenship (Jain, R. K. 2026). In the political functioning of the government, the structure and spirit of federalism is being undermined with the concentration of power in the hands of the central government. At the same time, instead of strengthening the notion of citizenship among the people, they are being reduced to being mere "*labharthis*" (beneficiaries). Transnationally, "the Modi government engages the Indian diaspora in Africa in projects of Hindu nationalism and religious hatred of Muslims and other religious minorities despite histories of religious pluralism in East Africa" (Hundle 2025).

Beyond 'methodological nationalism': transnationalism today

This is an apt point at which to look at the homeland-diaspora relations from a refurbished transnational perspective. From a structural viewpoint, the transition of Indian political diaspora from a narrowly homeland-host societies (or nations) framework to a trans nationalist configuration is the most striking development. Chronologically this transition can roughly be traced back to the post-World War II spurt of globalization with the opening of global markets, global communications and global networks. Analytically this meant the disavowal of 'methodological nationalism' and a critique of "how the concept of the nation-state has and still does influence past and current thinking in the social sciences, including our thinking about transnational migration" (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2002: 30). This bias refers to those analyses which fall into the trap of a 'container model' of the nation-state, hence reducing transnational phenomena to a literal relationship between and among nation-states. In the extant literature on Indian diaspora there are salutary examples where an awareness of such a trap and the side-stepping of literal internationalism are in evidence (See for example, Axel 2001, Eisenlohr 2007, Hansen 2012, Willford 2006). A number of case studies of post-coloniality of Indian political diaspora attempt presently or potentially to array the transnational horizon *sui generis*. (Jain, R.K. 2018).

Concluding Remarks

Ideas presented in this article have all the potential to develop a new field of study, Indian Political Diaspora. The definition of a political diaspora suggested above

is comprehensive enough not only to cover the major manifest and latent political events, processes and strategies but all kinds of political and ideological groupings and associations that engage themselves in such activities. The dynamics of economic and political development and the tactics for negotiating their ethnic/race relations situations which the Indian diaspora communities adopt in their respective host country provide rich resources for the development of this discipline. In fact, significant amount of work on the relevant themes already exists across the Indian diaspora countries. The major task that remains to be done is to conceptually integrate this material into the proposed discipline.

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