

The political economy of Indian Diaspora

Professor Nitasha Kaul (PhD) talks about the plight and pride of the Indian Diaspora around the world. She says the concept of Indian Diaspora will most likely be increasingly deployed by official Indian discourse as a means of delivering its soft power.



What role has the Indian Diaspora played in building the modern Indian economy?

More than just the economy - and in a much bigger way than just the remittances or investment - the Indian Diaspora has shaped the politics of economic policies and economic expectations. As business people, they have forged economic links with entities in the West and sought to capitalize on their position of being non resident Indians abroad. Also, particular regional communities have been more active than others - Gujaratis for example.

The image of 'India Shining' and 'India Rising', however, has concealed a vast majority of those Indians abroad who do not fit the stereotype of the Diaspora Indians (the stereotype is of rich businessmen and women who holiday and invest in India, and attend Indian cultural functions, especially Bollywood ones, overseas) - such as the migrant workers from India who work in the Gulf states in appalling conditions and suffer great misery.

How has the Diaspora helped in spreading or promoting the sense of Indianness across the world?

Indianness cannot, and should not, be seen as a unified unchanging label. The Diaspora often have a more romanticized notion of their homeland and while the Indians abroad are happy to gather and celebrate mainstream festivals (especially the mainstream Hindu festivals) and watch Hindi movies, they are much less keen to recognize the repressive political realities of present day India (killings and occupation in Kashmir, brutal suppression in the Naxal areas) and ignore the growing disparity and inequality in India.

The vision of India personified by the Diaspora is shaped by upwardly mobile middle classes who are economically liberal but often politically illiberal (much of the support for right-wing parties such as the BJP and RSS has Diaspora links).

India's Diaspora has, in addition, been a recurring theme in Bollywood movies which shape popular perceptions of India in the west. These are not entirely incorrect, but they are certainly not reflective of the realities of the vast majority of ordinary Indians.

In an era of rapid global integration, will the concept of Indian Diaspora be relevant in another 50 years?

I dispute the 'rapid global integration'. There is a rapid global integration for a certain minority section of the world's population, but large processes of segregation, disenfranchisement, and national isolation for a huge chunk of the world. The rich and educated can and do move, the others are experiencing greater difficulties within their national boundaries, and have no hope of beneficial migration.

The concept of Indian Diaspora may retain currency in the coming years because it will most likely be increasingly deployed by official Indian discourse as a means of delivering its 'soft power', as a conduit of India's mainstream hegemonic cultural values. New Delhi now has high profile yearly gatherings (such as 'Pravasi Bharatiya Divas' held in January) of Diasporic Indians especially

of the 'business leaders' in order to maintain and benefit from these channels.

How is the Indian Diaspora providing India the necessary steps in economic development to overtake China?

The nature and tenor of capitalism in India and China is different. Indians - in India and abroad - have an unhealthy fetish (often indulged by the West) for the 'India versus China' framing. This is not helpful. Both India and China face serious economic and political challenges in the coming century - employment, development, infrastructure, lessening inequality, rural versus urban disparities, fair political representation etc. Countries much less 'overtake' each other than are overtaken by circumstances which are only partly of their own making. Co-operation is always preferable to conflictual and zero-sum thinking.

The Indian Diaspora is heavily staked in perpetuating the image of a secular, democratic, free-spirited entrepreneurial country, even when the ground realities contradict these descriptors. The task of Indian government in recent years has been to translate this commitment into monetary investment by attracting FDI in the rapidly expanding Indian economy.

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