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## **Role of Indian Diaspora in India-USA Relations in 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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### **Abstract**

The relations between India and the USA have constantly fluctuated over some time. Both countries are significant for each other's geopolitical and strategic actions. Policy decisions in the fields of economic, political, or international relations have implications for both sides. Therefore, this paper analyzes the Diaspora factor in enhancing India-USA relations. It has played a huge role in bilateral relations in the last several decades. The influence of the Diasporas between the two nations on the economy, politics, society, and diplomacy is discussed in the paper. This would entail discussions on the latest policy measures and their critical evaluation. The period of the Modi and Trump and Modi and Biden regimes in both countries are important due to the serious leadership decisions. A sudden interest in diasporic studies also emerged during this time. Therefore, the paper deals with its many nuances from different angles. The research paper aims to highlight the positive impact that the Indian Diaspora has shown in enhancing the trust between India and the USA in the last decade. The paper covers it in detail as to how the trust-building process was done. The number of initiatives, agendas, and decisions undertaken by the Diaspora is also covered.

**Key Words:** Trust, Initiatives, Diaspora, Bilateral- Relations, Regime, India-USA.

### **Introduction**

The Indian Diaspora entered the USA through various channels, such as temporary workers' visa programs, H-1B visa programs, family-based preferences, or student admission programs. Young, highly educated, established individuals in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths (STEM) fields make up the majority of Indian immigrants. As a result, among foreign students enrolled in US universities, Indian students rank second in size. The Indian Diaspora's horizon has developed over time, beginning with their pursuit of education and work, then growing into a significant remittance source and becoming an influential player in the political, economic, and social spheres of the Indian- American ecosystem. This dynamism of the Diaspora has unfolded due to some of their characteristics, such as discipline, good working ethos, non-interference, and



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peaceful co-existence with the local Americans. Therefore, this paper aims to explain the influence of the Indian Diaspora on India-USA relationships. The approach of this paper is to cover many facets, such as economic, political, and diplomatic aspects of bilateral relations and the role of Diasporas in these areas. The methodology mainly involves content analysis, entailing secondary resources such as journal articles, book chapters, news reports, and government reports. It will help comprehend the impact of the Diaspora community in the last decade.

The major portion of the paper will emphasize the active decisions or actions taken by the diaspora community, which eventually impacted the bilateral relations in a major way. This will help in identifying such crucial actions for future reference as well. It would lead policymakers to take note of such important actions and academics to build further on diasporic studies.

## **Research Question**

The given paper investigates how diaspora has become a contributing factor in developing multidimensional bilateral relations between India and the USA in the last decade.

## **Research Methodology**

The paper adopts descriptive and analytical research methods. It provides an analysis of variables contributing to highlighting the role of diaspora in forging bilateral relations between India and the USA. It uses quantitative data to provide a case for the presence of France as an important power in the Indian Ocean and qualitative data such as policies, strategy papers, etc., to highlight its function and strategic utility on India's foreign policies in the region.

## **Background of the Indian-American Community (IAC)**

The Indo-USA community has grown rapidly and has been considered a model community (Gupta, 2004). It is now the fastest-growing Asian American community, with a population increase of about 1.7 million. The following traits have made the Indo-USA community stand out: the median income of \$60,093, which is twice what American households make on average. Approximately two lakhs of them are millionaires; 58% of them over 25 have earned degrees from various colleges; 43.6% of the Indian community has held a managerial or other professional position; 35,000 Indian-Americans are doctors there; and 3 lakh Indians are employed in high-tech industries.

The advent of the Indian community started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and most migrant people then were untrained or low-skilled workers. The number has increased continuously over some time. As per the latest data, around 5.4 million Indian-origin people are staying in the USA, which accounts for about 1.35% of the total population (Press Trust of India, 2024). Approximately 12,000 Indian migrants lived overall in the 1960s, making up less than 0.5 percent of the total 9.7 million immigrant population. However, between 1960 and 1990, there were abrupt shifts in the migration pattern (Varma, 2011). The US government implemented several legislative measures, including eliminating national origin quotas and starting programs to assist qualified workers.



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Additionally, a permanent visa based on a job was made available. It's interesting to note that the Indian diaspora in the USA has highly educated skills and a strong command of English. Most diasporic communities are involved in various occupations, such as science and technology, engineering, and manufacturing. If we compare the foreign- and native-born populations of the overall population, the Indian diasporic communities are more skilled, trained, and well-educated (Mehta & Belk, 1991). Hence, most Indian immigrants are getting management jobs.

Till the 20th Century, the Indian community has remained an almost invisible community in the USA. The Indian community has maintained a low political profile, and apart from that, the cultural impact on the USA has remained almost negligible. Indian restaurants in the USA have remained low in popularity even though many Americans eat there. One of the most problematic parts of the Indian community in the USA is that Indians have a weak national identity and do not assert it aggressively. Instead of identifying with the national identity, they opted to identify themselves on the identities of region, linguistic, and religious associations. There are organizations based on the Hindu, Muslim, and Christian for ex- organizations named the Indian American Christian Association (IACA) and the Federation of Indian Muslim Associations (FIMA). Along similar lines, many ethnic and linguistic groups have established their national organizations, such as the Federation of Kerala Associations in North America (FKANA), the Federation of Gujarati Associations in North America (FGANA), etc. Some states have organizations based on regional identity, such as Tamil Brahmin, Sri Lankan Tamil, etc. (Gupta, 2004). Few organizations have been established based on caste, e.g., the Brahmin Society of New York, comprised of Gujarati Brahmins (Khandelwal, 2002). These religious and ethno-linguistic-based organizations tend to dissipate mobilization efforts as national groups (Gupta, 2004). The divided identity and lack of attention on the part of Indian polity became the major issues for the less assertive role of the Indian diaspora in India-USA bilateral relationships. Only at the advent of the 21<sup>st</sup> century did the diaspora factor become a major attribute in bilateral relations between these parties. Further, the philosophies of multiculturalism and Interculturalism (especially in Europe) also started to take shape and increase the scope of research on diverse yet united identities that the diaspora holds.

## **Emergence of the Diaspora: An Innovation of the Globalized World**

Diaspora formations are explained by post-nationalist research and intellectual discourse. It defines diaspora as phenomena that overlay or go beyond prevailing social, cultural, and political trends. It marked a paradigm shift in the nation-state-centric model of study in International Relations (Kearney, 2004, Clifford, 1994, Appadurai, 1996, Cohen, 2022). As opposed to this, some other scholars consider Diaspora formations as merely an extension of nation-states (Soysal, 2002). The recent surge of this factor in India's foreign policy has been analyzed by various scholars.



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The awareness of the Diaspora's significance was realized much earlier. Though, it was only during Modi's regime that the Diaspora became an extension of India's foreign policy. Sanjeev Joshipura stated in a news report that "in the election cycle in 2018, there were over 100 candidates of Indian origin running at all levels of government, whether it was federal, state, or local"(Mehta, 2020). Currently, in Presidential Elections in the USA, there are 3 Indian-origin candidates making history. Joshipura also added that "until eight years ago, Indian Americans had nothing to say for themselves in terms of political participation, having only contributed in areas such as technology, finance, medicine, entrepreneurship, and academics." Recently, it has been changing and advancing in many domains. The Indian diaspora in the US significantly impacts cultural and economic prosperity, bringing in over \$300 billion in tax money to the federal government each year.

Further, Rajesh Mehta commented, "The biggest failure of the Trump administration's engagement with India was that not even a mini trade deal was achieved despite Prime Minister Modi and President Trump having personal chemistry" (Ibid). He further stated that immigration issues, the removal of India's GSP, etc., were sources of disappointment. On the other hand, Mehta noted that "Joe Biden promised that he will be giving citizenship to Indians who do not have proper papers and also Biden's chances of sealing a trade deal or military deal are higher." Later, under the Biden regime- more than 130 Indian Americans had key administrative positions, the most prominent one being Kamala Harris as the Vice-President in the USA(The Hindu, 2022). He cherished the contribution of Indian- Americans to the US's ventures in science and economy and called it 'taking over the country (USA).' Thus, it can be concluded that his regime benefitted the Indian Diaspora much more than the previous regime. It will eventually impact the status of bilateral relations between the two countries.

As Amba Pande comments- "Since the subject of Diaspora spans across various ministries and government agencies- such as health, education, science, and technology industry and regions of India with cross-cutting agendas, there is a need for better coordination and credible mechanism to enhance the capabilities and maximize the potential of Diaspora engagement" (Pande, 2017). Diaspora engagement depends on two factors. First, how much effort is the country of origin putting into an ensemble and channeling diasporic links with the country of origin? Second is – efforts recognized and reverted by the diaspora to strengthen links with the country of origin. Together, these two can lead to a larger picture where nations' levels of relationships can be forged, with diaspora being one major attribute. This is evident in popular events like Howdy Modi, where the Indian Prime Minister has become a force to reckon with in the internal elections of the USA.

## **Diaspora's Economic Contribution**

According to Nirvikar Singh, Sanjoy Chakravorthy, and Devesh Kapur, one-third of Silicon Valley start-ups are owned by Indian Americans, who comprise 1% of the USA population.



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Approximately 8% of all high-tech startups were created by Indian Americans (The Indian Express, 2020). As a result, the most striking distinction between Indian Americans and other immigrants is the income level. The Indian-American households have the single highest income levels, even more than twice as high as the general native population. According to one report, “the Indian students enrolled at US colleges and universities contributed over \$8 billion to the US economy in 2019” (Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet (2021)). It is stated in the same report that “the total number of Indian students in the United States has more than doubled over the last decade from 81,000 in 2008 to a record high of 202,000 in 2019” (ibid).

The economic contribution of the Indian community in the USA has influenced the status of bilateral relations as well. For example, Indian Americans do not lose hold of their roots, whether through investments, philanthropy, or personal involvement. Adding to this, the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) reported that “the Indian Diaspora community is noted for being very well organized and having a deep and multifaceted engagement with the homeland, and they consider giving back an obligation and a welcome responsibility.” As far as the impact on bilateral relations is concerned, the ‘Government of India’s High-level Committee Report’ on the Indian Diaspora has made some significant observations. According to this report, “a section of financially powerful and politically well-connected Indo-Americans has emerged during the last decade.” The Kargil conflict, the 1998 nuclear tests, the defeat of anti-Indian legislation in the US Congress, and successful lobbying on matters of importance to the Indian community were the leading causes of their mobilization.

Over the past ten years, the diaspora has demonstrated a readiness to donate money to Indian causes, including funding for higher technical education, relief efforts for the Orissa cyclone, the Latur and Gujarat earthquakes, and other charity endeavors. One of the reports also observed that “for the first time, India has a real influence and status in the USA” (High-Level Committee Report on the Indian Diaspora, 2002). As a result, the Indian American community plays a crucial role in enhancing India's ties with the mightiest superpower in the world. As a result, the Indian American community’s strong ties to their ancestral homeland have resulted in economic growth for the homeland in multiple ways, like remittances, startups, etc. As per the INDIASPORA, The American Indian Diaspora Acknowledging Impact and Honoring Contributions: The Indian Diaspora in the United States has a significant and widespread impact and influence. In the economy, Fortune 500 corporations are led by about 16 CEOs of Indian descent. In 2024, around 72 out of 648 unicorns in the USA were cofounded by individuals of Indian descent. About 60% of all hotels in the United States are owned by Indian Americans, and the Indian diaspora makes a significant tax base in the USA. Despite making up only 1.5% of the population, they pay between 5% and 6% of total income taxes (approximately \$250-300B) (Oak et.al.). Currently, the government of India has come up with schemes and acts to engage the diaspora, such as



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the Know India Program, Pravasi Bhartiya Samman Award, Overseas Citizen of India Card, etc. They will ensure that the strengths of the diaspora are channeled to boost the economy of the country of origin as well as the host country.

## **Social and Political Contributions of the Diaspora Community**

The Indian-American community has been actively engaging in socio-political activities in the USA. Which, in turn, has affected bilateral relations from time to time. As Robert Hathaway observed, “The Indian community had by the 1990s grown in size and started to make its influence felt among congressional members and their staff” (Hathaway, 2000). Eventually, the Indian caucus in Congress had the largest membership (186). Adding to this, “the lobbying efforts of the Indian-American community were significant in bringing about the shift in congressional attitude although other factors also played a role in revoking of the sanctions” (ibid). At times, the Diaspora sometimes assists in issues that are confrontationist to the Indian Government. This showed its effects in “United Nations Agenda and the International Conference of Dalit groups wherein Caste was put as a form of racial oppression.” However, the Indian Diaspora has to survive many challenges, including generational change, while working in leadership and policy domains.

The cultural impact of the Indian Diaspora on the USA has also increased. Indian food, festivals, and practices have gained attention and jubilation in the USA. Indian festivals like Diwali and Holi are now widely celebrated in the USA, even by influential US political figures like the president and Senate members. There are over 6,000 Indian restaurants in the country. Shows like ‘Never Have I Ever’ bring Indian-American narratives to mainstream television. Yoga has become a new healthy activity combining physical and mental health exercises. There are roughly around 36,000 yoga studios across the country. Thus, it can be stated here that once a Diaspora community becomes confident about its role in that society, it starts its active social and political participation. Its involvement in the US foreign policy is an indication that an ethnic community has demonstrated its assertion of the values of democracy and pluralism inside America as well as abroad. The cultural relations regarding food, clothing, festivals, and artists performing across borders and genres reflect the level of trust in bilateral relations. Such trust can become a cardinal factor in navigating the turbulences of International Relations.

## **Diaspora’s Contribution at the Diplomatic Level**

In the realm of International relations, it has been argued that “by their very nature, Diasporas are particularly well placed to exercise ‘network power’- the tendency for social networks to grow as time progresses, which is a driving force of globalization” (Grewal, 2008). Nye also argues that “in today’s world, power is not just about economic and military strength but also comes from a contest of complete credibility.” This signifies the reputation, credibility, and significance of persuasion in a hyper-information age. There have been many instances when the Indian American community has used these skills to improve relations between India and the USA. These



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incidents have proved the capabilities of the Diaspora community to impact foreign policy decisions of both countries.

Two major events in the history of international relations have affected the political consciousness as well as the mobilization of the Diaspora. The first incident was tensions between India and Pakistan, the other one being India's nuclear test. This resulted in the imposition of sanctions by the USA government. Here, the Diaspora played a significant role in rolling back the sanctions. Amit Gupta explains in his paper that "the Indian American groups have been active in attempting to increase USA-India cooperation while simultaneously forging a strategic partnership with Jewish groups in the United States and in working to counter Pakistani lobbying efforts in the United States." Similarly, Peter Slevin also noted that "the link with Jewish groups is most interesting since it is an attempt to piggyback on the lobbying skills of these groups to achieve certain political ends- most notably the sale of defense technologies like Israel's Phalcon airborne warning system and the arrow anti-ballistic missile both of which have American components and therefore, require the permission of the state department" (Nye, 2004). This implies the active involvement of the Diaspora community with other significant groups while simultaneously making assertions in their interests.

## **Soft Power and Diaspora**

The Indian Diaspora can advocate for India's national interest, disseminate India's soft power, and support the Indian economy in many ways. It is now widely acknowledged. India's political influence in multilateral organizations like the United Nations has also been made possible by the Indian-origin individuals occupying prominent authoritative posts in the United States. In addition, members of the Diaspora community from the "Country of Origin and the Country of Residence" are part of a variety of social networks. Additionally, the community is flourishing in the area of research. About 11% of all National Institutes of Health funds and 13% of scientific publications in 2023 were attributed to Indian experts. Approximately 22,000 faculty personnel of Indian descent, or 2.6% of all full-time faculty, are currently employed by USA colleges and universities. In the above context, it can be stated that such a well-connected community of citizens in both countries not only influences many foreign policy decisions but also helps construct new ones. The facilitation of trade and investment by these social networks works as a confidence-building measure that is very significant in the uncertain realm of international politics. In various research studies, it has been observed that the Indian Americans who maintained extensive contacts in India were more likely to operate a business between their country of origin and residence. The benefit of extensive social networks is that they provide more opportunities and a better ability to communicate with their friends and professional associates. Phone Pe is one such example of a billion-dollar company where an Indian who graduated in the USA built up a company in India. The new regime has made the Diaspora more confident in pursuing national



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interests in a foreign land. This has come out clearly on many occasions in the high-profile visits of political leaders to the USA.

The current government has pitched very highly for soft power diplomacy in the USA. The Ministry of External Affairs started the Indian Council of Cultural Relations center as part of its track two diplomacies. These centers in different parts of the USA worked as cultural and educational centers to disseminate knowledge about India and current trends of its society, specifically among the Diaspora youth. Many India-oriented studies chairs were established in many universities around the US. The functioning of these chairs takes place with the help of donations made by the Indian Diaspora. However, the issue of the Indian diaspora not contributing significantly to the Indian economy is persistent. Most of their contributions are in the form of remittances, as the USA is one the largest contributors to Indian remittances, and Indians are the biggest receptors. It lacks a transformative approach to generate scale and jobs in the Indian economy. This is possible through developing a brand of unicorns based in India. This is a new field sprouting to become the talking point of bilateral relations between India and the USA. Further, Amit Gupta also points out that “an Indian International Voluntary Service should be established permitting the members of Diaspora to come and contribute to national developmental efforts which act as an Indian could style Peace Corps” (Gupta, 2004).

## Conclusion

The existential crises of states/nation-states and territoriality as a feeling of identity, power, or belonging are a reality of the contemporary globalized world. The nation-state model's shortcomings have been revealed in the modern, network-connected world. The biggest challenge to the supremacy of the nation-state model has come from various factors. The most dominant one is the transnational existence of Diasporas.

The paper overall describes the Indian American Diaspora as an extension of India's national, social, political, and diplomatic objectives in the foreign land. The bilateral relations between the two countries have been affected by the Diaspora influence now and then. From the nuclear deal to the latest soft power diplomacy efforts such as Yoga Day and many other cultural activities in the USA, the influence of the Diaspora community has only increased manifold. The role of the diaspora in the bilateral relationship between the two countries is very much connected to their role in various spheres, such as local American politics, trade and finance-related activities, cultural collaborations, and strategic matters. It can be comprehended from the various examples that the type of regime also affects the level of confidence of the Diaspora community. The political leadership's attitude towards the Diaspora defines their capacity for different kinds of engagements. The Indian American people could not have asserted the Yoga diplomacy with as much vigor as they have if the leadership was not strong enough to support the country of origin. Other than this, their strength also arises from their networking capacities. Such networking



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capacities have led to continuous visits of Indian-origin CEOs of mega-companies like Sunder Pichai and Satya Nadela to India and provided tips on building and sustaining unicorns for youths. It has also led to the establishment of manufacturing capacity in India (Apple opened a manufacturing facility in Karnataka).

Therefore, the paper also suggests that the Diaspora should enhance its capabilities irrespective of which regime is elected. They will be able to assert their interests in the United States only if they leverage the power of democratic values. A comprehensive Indo-USA Diaspora mechanism should be made in association with active ad-hoc civil society organizations units abroad. This will help in collectivizing the Diaspora and train them in the issues of national and international significance. This would ultimately make the ground for enhanced, trustworthy bilateral relations as well since both countries are the biggest proponents of Democracy in the world. The divided identities of the Indian diaspora are still a cause for worry as most of the states of the USA are intrigued to pass laws on casteism. Yet, it can be said currently, most of the aspects of these identities are converging and are willing to contribute to both the countries and the globe. Even global politics is shaped by the diaspora, as evident in the Israel- Palestine war, where the Israeli diaspora has lobbied in the USA and provided funding. Hence, the power of people would decide the significant matters of international politics rather than other non-democratic means prevalent in the world.

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