

## DIASPORA AS A FOREIGN POLICY TOOL: A CASE STUDY OF INDIAN DIASPORA IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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### Abstract

*Human resource mobility is an essential feature of today's globalized world where integrated world markets, networks and technologies are all contributing to the increasing movement of labor, students, professionals, and families. Governments on both sides of the migration chain increasingly recognize the value of the diaspora's voluntary engagement with their countries of origin and are seeking ways to optimize this engagement. The question facing policy-makers is not so much whether the diaspora can benefit their countries of origin, but what kind of government policies and programmes' can foster and promote these relationships. Diasporas are not only key drivers in development efforts but also in strengthening bilateral relations between host and home nations. In the contemporary globalized world, the diasporas have emerged as a powerful factor in developing relations between the nation-states. Notably, the Indian diaspora has acted as a catalyst in strengthening bilateral relations between India and the host nations. The India-US Civil Nuclear Deal is a case in point, as Indian diasporas in the United States successfully lobbied for clinching of the nuclear deal. Indian Diaspora is one of the largest in the world and it has considerable soft power credentials for the Indian Foreign Policy effecting trade and business relations. The South East Asian region has a plethora of economic avenues for investors from across the globe. It has become vital for India to build a favorable rapport with this region. The Indian presence in Southeast Asia is set deep down in history. There are innumerable accounts of traders, preachers and adventures who ventured into the high seas and influenced the eastern part of the world, to the extent of 'Indianising' it socially, culturally, religiously, and in many other ways. However, it was during the colonial period that government sponsored migrations in the form of labourers, officials and service providers started, which later resulted into permanent settlements. The diasporic consciousness emerged as the settlers became integral part of economic and political lives of receiving societies, while continuing to be connected with the motherland. More recently, the migration of skilled and highly skilled professionals and entrepreneurs and India's opening towards Southeast Asia has given a new face and identity to the Indian communities in the region. Hence, this paper is an attempt to analyze the impact of India's diaspora policy with regard to Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia. It seeks to examine how effectively India can utilize its diaspora as a foreign policy tool to exert its influence in the South East Asia.*

**Keywords:** diaspora, Indian diaspora, foreign policy, south east asia

### Indian Diaspora and Development

The term 'diaspora' has a specific historical context. In recent times, it has emerged as a generic term to describe communities beyond the boundaries of their culture and nation-states. Just as the history of migration and the settlement of populations have changed, so has the concept of diaspora. With the impact of globalization there have been profound changes in the composition of local, regional and national cultural practices. Diaspora community groups, capable of maintaining and investing in social, economic and political networks that span the globe, are of increasing relevance and interest to policy-makers in home countries as well as host countries.

The Indian diaspora across the world ranks second after the Chinese. Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) and Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) are present in all parts of the world. It had been estimated that the overseas Indian community, numbering over 25

million, is spread over 189 countries (Dubey 2003). While the history of the Indian diaspora dates back to the pre-Christian era, large-scale emigration of Indians took place mainly in the 19th and 20th centuries. The colonial period witnessed unprecedented emigration of indentured and other labors, traders, professionals, and employees of the British government to the European (British, French and Dutch) colonies in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. However, it was only post-World War Second that the most far-reaching emigration of Indians took place, mainly of professionals, to the developed countries namely US, England, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. In today's globalized world, Indians in various sectors like Information Technology (IT), medicine and trade are finding opportunities abroad, which also include a large number of students seeking admission in developed countries, thereby adding to the numbers of diaspora.

### **Indian Diaspora as a soft power**

Diaspora as a soft power asset with a special focus on Indian Diaspora as a soft power it is important to understand first the concept of power and then the soft power. Joseph Nye proposed that the multilateral ways of cooperation among states, political actors and diaspora communities are more viable means to manage politics in an interdependent world. According to him, the foreign policy formulations of the countries in such an arrangement should emphasize more on the notion of soft power, rather than hard military force. It is a power of appeal and attraction, which has the ability to shape the preferences of others. It also refers to the conscious effort of countries to shape others' perceptions of them.

There are several instruments of soft power like culture, education, economy, and one of them is diaspora. Diaspora is an economic, cultural, political, emotional and social investment. Its significance is reflected in three areas-Political lobbying, economic development, and knowledge transfer (Mohan, 2003). Its role as a credibility enhancing agent for economic actors back home and its economic contribution to the host country gives enough space for political maneuvering to influence the policy decisions relating to their country of origin. The Cultural linkages based on people between two countries helps in opening several channels of communication between them. Today, a country like India cannot afford to neglect the interest of its diaspora which contributes massively in to the Indian economy through financial flows, in the form of remittances and Foreign Direct Investment.

The basis of India's soft power is its culture, secularism, spiritualism, music, dance, Bollywood, Yoga, Ayurveda, a tradition of good learning and most importantly the "Indian Diaspora". There are 25 million people of Indian origin living outside India. It has second largest population of Indian diaspora across the world as well. The overseas Indian community is a composition of diverse, heterogeneous and widespread global community representing different regions, languages, cultures and faiths and religions. They connected together due to their nostalgia about their mother land and its inherent values. These values very well represented by Indian Diasporic community in all the parts of the world. They know that they belong to a country having a very rich heritage and they do not have to bring a bad name to it. Overseas Indian Community is today amongst the best-educated and the most successful communities of the world. In every part of the world, the overseas Indian community

is recognized and respected for its work ethos, discipline, non-interference and for successfully living in harmony with the local community, which appeals others.

As, almost every nation is facing various security threats like, terrorism, external aggression, security threats from neighboring states, so it is very important for a country to enhance its power of attraction or cultural, ideological power. The hard power though is very important for any country but solely this power is not enough until and unless the soft power is not complimenting it. The soft power is equally important for India to enrich/improve its bilateral ties with different countries, to fulfill its national interests of becoming a global power and its quest for getting a permanent seat in the Security Council of the United Nations Organization. The Indian Diaspora is playing a crucial role in fulfilling India's national interests by promoting India's culture worldwide.

### **Soft Power Tools Used by Indian Diaspora for the Promotion of Bilateral Relations**

India is a global player in almost every sphere i.e. political, cultural and economic. The Indian Diaspora helps in identity creation, image projection, image cultivation, etc. Now the question, which arises, is how Indian Diaspora is projecting India's soft power. The most possible answer is that the Indian Diaspora, through the following tools and ways enhance or project the soft power of its country. The Indian Diaspora is not only a source of India's soft power but it is also an agent of India's soft power; the Indian expatriate community also disseminates i.e. the other soft power sources of India at world level. The Indian Diaspora is using India's other sources of soft power like culture, Ayurveda, Bollywood, Indian cuisine, knowledge, spirituality, etc. and luring the populace all over the world. A detail discussion on how the diaspora is acting as an agent of India's soft power, while using different sources of Indian soft power, can summarize, as follows:

**Culture:** The Indian Diaspora from the very beginning is conscious about their rich cultural heritage, knowing the fact that they are the inheritors of the world's oldest civilization. Therefore, they are naturally keen to maintain their cultural prestige as being part of such a rich legacy. This deep commitment to their cultural prestige has shown in numerous ways, and in every aspect of the Indian Diaspora. Probably there is no other diaspora across the globe, having such an extra-ordinary diversity. This diversity is visible in terms of linguistic, ethnic and religious groups. Therefore, the first generation diaspora always carries with them the rich traditions of harmonizing different values, beliefs, customs and practices.

**Knowledge:** The knowledge, which Indian Diaspora carries with them to the visiting countries especially, in case of professional migration or the post-colonial migration in the western developed countries, clearly indicates the claim of India to become a knowledge super power very soon in this twenty first century. India regarded, as a knowledge house and its engineers, doctors, scientists and software professionals have easy acceptability by the international community. Indian education boosted with high competitiveness, which shown in information technology sector where Indians like Sundar Pichai and Satya Nadella have made their major contribution. Due to the knowledge competitiveness of Indians, India's soft power has also increased. Now Americans in Silicon Valley have equated the IITs (Indian Institute of Technology) to MIT and the Indian engineers and software developers, taken as synonymous with

mathematical and scientific excellence of the western countries. India gains respect through such comparisons and compliments (Tharoor 2012).

**Yoga:** One of India's most important therapy of longevity i.e. yoga has now embraced by almost everyone in the world. It is no less than a cultural winning for India. It is also true that India not put much effort to propagate it at world level. It is through Indian Diaspora that people across the globe came to know about this Indian enchanted therapy. It has manifested by the fact that a large chunk of people of host countries practice yoga in Indian diasporic yoga centers. Purushothaman (2010) states that Yoga has reached at global sphere and is rapidly becoming part and parcel of life style of the people in the West. Though, much effort has not been put by previous governments for dissemination of Yoga at world level but it was only because of the efforts of present Indian government, the UN General Assembly adopted the Resolution, proclaiming June 21 as the International Day of Yoga. There are numerous yoga centers in the US where different types of Yoga and meditation styles practiced.

**Spiritualism:** Spirituality is in the top list of Indian soft power. It is the ultimate solace provider as the thrust of every human being is to reach to the ultimate truth. In other words, one can say that spirituality leads to completeness in human life. In India, many religions of the world took birth as well as it has always welcomed all the religions and provided space to all the religions to flourish on its soil and its tolerance towards all religions makes it attractive in the eyes of other countries of the world.

**Secularism:** India has also given a message to the western countries that secularism does not mean separation of religion and the state rather state should try to provide the environment where different religions can co-exist in harmony with each other. This is much needed condition as different countries and people are fighting wars on the name of religion only. Indians known for the values of love, peace and goodwill and its prime examples are Gautama Buddha, Mahavir, Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi. Indian Diaspora also known for the same values of love, peace and unity and due to these very qualities they are winning the hearts of the people of the host society and due to their humbleness and soberness, they have not considered as a security threat by the indigenous people or the other communities living with them in host society.

**Bollywood:** Indian films and TV daily soaps are popular in many countries Including the US. Bollywood became popular abroad also because of Indian Diaspora. Indian diasporic people whether it is first, second, third or fourth generation are always attached with India and this strong bond is shown when one sees that Bollywood stars have the same fan following among the Indian Diaspora as they have here in India. Their movies liked by every generation of Indian Diaspora. For Indian Diaspora, Bollywood films are the most popular means of entertainment. The popularity of Indian movies reached to such an extent, that Indian films dub in local languages of different countries and shown there. The Indian Diaspora living overseas enjoys Bollywood movies through DVDs and by movie shows at Cinema halls. The Indian diasporic filmmakers like Mira Nayar and Deepa Mehta for making the movies on diasporic issues are famous and they received praise by the critics worldwide.

**Indian Fusions:** The Indian fusions whatever it is in Indian music, food, apparels, dance, etc. have an immense soft power potential. The famous western dancers and

singers such as, Michael Jackson, Madonna, and Shakira have adopted elements of Indian dances or music in their performances. The efforts of Renowned figures like Pandit Ravi Shankar, the sitar player and composer is worth mentioning among those who have done much to popularize Indian instrumental music in the west.

Apart from these soft power sources, one cannot ignore the hard power sources like economic and political status of the Indo- Americans. Rather we can say that the hard power is essential to make soft power work. It is also true that without soft power, hard power cannot take long journey or exist for long. Soft power provides legitimacy to the hard power and hard power makes soft power practical. Both the powers are incomplete without each other. In this competitive world, possession of merely one kind of power would be very dangerous and it can never bring desired fruits for a country or a community like diaspora. The Indian diasporic community of the US holds a good political economic status in the US that is why, it has become able to bring some fruitful results to some extent for India's international aspirations, and it has many more to come through its combination of hard and soft power.

### **Indian Diaspora in India's Foreign Policy**

With the economic reforms of the 1990s and policy shift towards liberalization and with multiple levels of communication between the Indians in India and Indians overseas, the Indian Government's engagement with its diaspora deepened at a structural and institutional level.

Naujoks (2010: 270), argues that the change in India's diaspora policies was connected to a sea change in the reasons for interaction, the context, the content, and the vibrations. After India's economic development took off, a new topic for interaction between returning Indians, Indians living in India, and the Indian political system was now to discuss business opportunities and ways in which the Indian corporate sector and diasporic actors could collaborate.

The re-engagement with Indian diaspora, primarily for Indian citizens living abroad, started with an institutional set up of Non-Resident Indian (NRI) cell in the Ministry of External Affairs way back in 1977, which worked closely with the consular sections. In the Year 2000, the NRI/PIO Division was created, which in turn created the High Level Committee on Indian Diaspora. In 2004, a new Ministry of Non Resident Indians Affairs was formed and four months later it was renamed as Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA), which started dealing with all matters related to Overseas Indians comprising of both the Non-Resident Indians (NRI – Having Indian Citizenship) and Persons of Indian Origin (PIO – Ethnic Indians with Host Country citizenship). It had two primary tasks, firstly to engage the larger Indian diaspora with India and secondly, to deal with various issues faced by overseas Indians, which covered both developmental and security aspects of the Indian diaspora.

The Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) established a series of platforms and communication channels to foster stronger links between India and the diaspora. Some of the important initiatives are:

Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD): Since 2003, every January around the day Mahatma Gandhi returned to India from South Africa on 9th January 1915, this conference takes place in different cities in India. After organizing 13 editions on various themes, the PBD has evolved as one of the most prestigious and high profile annual events in

India. It is during this period that many diasporic members visit the country and network with local Indians. PBD's economies of scale led to a subsequent series of events involving diasporic communities at various parts of the country. Since 2007, there have also been Regional PBDs held outside India in places like New York, Singapore, The Hague, Durban, Toronto, Mauritius, Sydney, and London. It is often remarked that PBDs are a way for the Indian Government to advertise its needs, showcase its accomplishments, and cater to a small part of the wealthy diaspora; Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award, which is given every year during PBD to eminent diaspora personalities for their contribution towards India's causes abroad, the welfare of the diaspora, philanthropic activities, or scientific achievements; Scholarship programme for diasporic children – Under the scheme, 100 PIO/NRI students are awarded scholarships of up to US\$ 4,000 per annum for undergraduate courses in Engineering, Technology, Humanities, Liberal Arts, Commerce, Management, Journalism, Hotel Management, Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and some other courses. The scheme is open to NRIs/PIOs from over 40 countries having substantial Indian diaspora population; Other programmes are Know India Programme, which is modeled on the Birthright Israel Programme, Tracing the Roots Programme, Study India Programme, besides others; The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), under the auspices of the Ministry of External Relations, is India's primary agency to formulate and implement policies and programmes relating to India's external cultural relations.

In 2007, MOIA set up the Overseas Indian Facilitation Centre (OIFC) in a public-private partnership model, in association with Confederation of Indian Industry (CII). OIFC's main mandate is to promote and facilitate investment in India by catalyzing business to business partnerships and enabling exchange of knowledge. OIFC has a panel of knowledge experts, each specialized in different domains, to help Indians staying abroad make their investment with safety and profitability. Irrespective to the size of investment, OIFC is mandated to offer customized professional support. In past two decades, the investment laws underwent lot of changes. They were amended in order to ease foreign and diaspora investments and the RBI has granted special procedural facilitations for NRIs and PIOs who want to invest in Indian companies, such as investment under automatic route with or without repatriation benefits. The economic engagement of the Indian diaspora is not only towards its developmental activities in the home country but it also plays an important role in attracting investments from India to their host countries through their contacts and networks. Though research on Outward Foreign Direct Investment (OFDI) by Indians is limited, available trend shows that the leading recipients of Indian OFDI were mainly those countries having a large Indian Diaspora (Anwar & Mughal, 2011: 945).

The most important initiative of the Government of India to attract its diaspora is its amendments in citizenship policies and facilitating the concept of dual citizenship. Naujoks (2013: 57-65) analyses in detail India's membership policies, especially with respect to PIO Card and Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI), which the current BJP Government has plans to merge. In 1999, the Indian Government launched the PIO Card, and in late 2004, legislation on the OCI was adopted as another membership category. However, under the initial OCI scheme, which was limited to ethnic Indians who were citizens of 16 specified countries, not a single person obtained OCI status.

In 2005, the provision regarding OCI in the Citizenship Act, 1955, were amended, inter alia extending the scope of OCI to citizens of all countries except Pakistan and Bangladesh, after which the scheme was formally launched in January 2006. It must be noted that both PIO and OCI cards entitle members to facilities relating to visas and education and investment in India, while neither provides political rights. Both OCI and PIO card holders are, thus, excluded from voting and holding public office in India. While PIO cards issued after September 2002 have 15 year validity, OCI is a lifelong status. One of the most important reasons for existence of both the schemes is with regard to the eligibility criteria. The non-Indian origin foreign citizen can have PIO card but to have an OCI, the applicant has to be a foreign citizen with Indian origin.

### **Evolving Approach of Indian Government Towards the Indian Diaspora**

The changes that took place in the attitude and policies of Indian government toward the Indian Diaspora can be divided into three phases- Colonial Era, Nehruvian Era, and the Liberalization Era. The current government also marks another era as it has taken up the question of Indian Diaspora more seriously. During the colonial period, the British government of India provided no aid or security to the Indian subjects who travelled to different countries. Rather, the British themselves were the perpetrators who tortured Indians overseas. The indentured labor migration led by the British created a different class of diaspora and it was only after the conscious efforts of several Nationalists like Gandhi and Gokhle that the Indenture-ship ended in 1920. The attitude of the Indian government in the early years after independence was also not very favorable for Indian Diaspora. Latha Varadarajan, an eminent diaspora scholar, refers to the Indian policy towards Indian Diaspora of this period as the Nehruvian model of engagement with the Indian Diaspora. PM Nehru demanded that 'either they [Indian Diaspora] should accept Indian citizenship and expect nothing other than favorable alien treatment abroad, or accept nationality of those countries and avoid coming to Indian government for preservation of their position'. During this period, Indian Diaspora could not expect Indian Government to fight for their rights. The Indian Foreign Policy was structured as a model of non-interference in their matters in other countries. This generated a feeling of distrust towards the Indian Government within the Indian Diaspora.

Rajiv Gandhi was the first Prime Minister of India to invite Indians abroad to take part in Nation Building and in return promised them opportunities to work within India. It was during this period when several sectors of Indian economy were undergoing modernization in partnership with affluent NRIs. This includes the case of Sam Pitroda who modernized the Indian Telecommunication sector. This engagement between the Indian Government and the Indian Diaspora also highlighted the problems in developing a full relationship, which are red-tapism and issue of distrust as mentioned above. The Rajiv Gandhi government came up with the New diaspora policy of 1987 to address these concerns. This government was visibly more vocal and active in supporting the Indian Diaspora.

The biggest boost to this relationship came in 1990s. The relationship between the Indian Government and the Indian Diaspora changed radically after the introduction of Economic reforms. The Indian Government came to realize the importance of the Indian Diaspora as it was only through the remittances received from them that India

could survive the Balance of Payment crisis. The subsequent governments became more vocal on their policies on the Indian Diaspora. Yashwant Sinha, the External Affairs minister under the Vajpayee Government, learnt a good lesson from his previous term as a finance minister and spoke of the importance of the diaspora in several forums and conferences.

The current government is even more serious about harnessing Diaspora as a source of soft power. According to the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, Indian Diaspora is the second largest in the world, consisting of roughly 25 Million individuals. The unique thing about this government is that it is using another tool of soft power- i.e., the social media- to cultivate this one. PM Modi clearly reflected the attitude and policy of his Government towards the Indian Diaspora in his speech at SAP Centre in California, where he said, "Brain Drain has become Brain Gain"(Keynote Address by External Affairs Minister on ASEAN-India Partnership, 2017). 10 Leaders from ASEAN nations were also invited as guests on Republic Day 26th January 2018 to promote healthy and friendly relations.

### **Indian Diaspora in Southeast Asian Countries**

#### **Historical Background**

The politico-economic and sociocultural ties between India and Southeast Asia go back to the pre-Christian era. That era dominated by the mercantile links also brought Hinduism and Buddhism to the region. The Indian influence is quite visible even in today's Southeast Asia, especially in their language, customs and the rituals of the royalty. Hindu concepts of kingship and Hindu administrative institutions and ceremonies became so deeply embedded in the royal culture of Southeast Asian nations that even after the Islamization of some states these practices remain till date. The Indian migration during this period was relatively small in scale and limited in geographic scope (Farling 1992)

There has been a civilizational impact of India and China in the South East Asia. This can be seen in the culture, art, architecture, religion, language, and several other aspects of the South East Asian societies. The impact of Indian civilization has been so considerable that this region was referred to as 'Further India' or 'East Indies' by the Europeans. Many of the states in this region had been Indianized in the past-like Vietnam was referred to as Champa, Indonesia as Majapahit, Myanmar as Pagan and many more. The history of interaction between these two regions has been peaceful and largely economic and cultural in nature.

The historical economic linkage between these regions included the voyages to South East Asia by Indian Traders via the 'Spice and Silk Routes'. In terms of the socio-cultural linkages, the Brahmins were called from India by the regional elites of this region to serve at King's court as priest, astrologist and advisors. The societies of South East Asia remained politically independent, the only exception to this being the Malaya's conquest by Chola Empire in the 11th century. Though, during the pre-colonial times, Indians were not seen as outsiders, things changed dramatically after the advent of colonialism (Oak, 2017).

Colonialism and Rise of Modern nation states after the treaty of Westphalia (1648) disrupted this natural movement of people between India and South East Asia. The boundaries formed by colonizers from administrative point of view were imposed upon the people of this region. The only kind of movement of people that took place

during the colonial time was that by the plantation labour, traders, clerks, bureaucrats, professionals, Indian Slave diaspora and Indian convict Diaspora. India and South East Asia also share a connected colonial and Nationalist struggle history. Subhash Chandra Bose's Indian National Army (INA) marched through several South Asian Countries including Malaya, Thailand, and Burma. A knowledge of this shared, largely peaceful and cooperative, past can help in establishing the foundation for a successful relationship between the region (Oak, 2017).

### **The Cold War Era**

India's interaction with the Southeast Asian region during the Cold War was more visible in bilateral relations with individual countries namely Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia rather than with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) . Nehru's experience of Non-Alignment influenced the entire Southeast Asian block. During the hour of crisis, New Delhi received support from some of the Southeast Asian nations, especially Malaysia during the 1962 Sino-India War and the 1965 India-Pakistan War and some of them supported India's stand on Kashmir. They also came out openly to extend help and cooperation to India during the 1971 Bangladesh crisis and were among the first few countries to recognize Bangladesh. Despite having historical linkages with region and support from the ASEAN countries on these critical issues, the India-Southeast relations can be summarized as a "missed opportunity". This is primarily because India and ASEAN did not resolve their differences in their bilateral relations, especially in the Cold War period.

While discussing India's diaspora policy one observes that after independence, India followed the policy of dissociation with regard to its diaspora. The basic principles of India's foreign policy were laid during the independence under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. In 1957, Nehru stated:

"Indians abroad should always give primary consideration to the interest of the people of those countries; they should never allow themselves to be placed in a position of exploiting the people of those countries; in fact, we have gone thus far and said, if you cannot be, and if you are not, friendly to the people of that country, come back to India and do not spoil the fair name of India" (Nehru et al.1972:353-68)

This quote reflects the importance that he attached to the positive role Indians could play overseas by assimilating themselves in the host countries. Nehru did not want the presence of Indians to have a negative impact on India's relations with the host countries. Subsequently, there was noticeable continuity and change in India's diaspora policy but most of the successive governments followed Nehru's path blindly. Therefore, the conditions of the overseas Indian community deteriorated in most of the host nations especially Myanmar, Malaysia, Fiji, and some of the African and Caribbean countries (Singh 2011: 85-105)

In 1977, when a non-Congress government led by the Janata Party assumed power, the first signs of an official rethink vis-à-vis the diaspora appeared. Although, the Janata government did not remain in power for very long, the debate on expatriate Asians has restarted within the Indian government.

### **Status of Indian Diaspora in South East Asian Countries**

The size of Indian Diaspora is highly numerically varied in the specific countries of South-east Asia. About 9-8% of the population in Malaysia and Singapore is of Indian

origin, in Myanmar-4% and Indonesia-about 0.5% (Oak, 2017). The socio-economic status of Indian Diaspora is also different in different countries depending upon their historical context. In Indonesia, the Indian Diaspora got established as the Sikh, Sindhi and Tamil communities migrated for small businesses. However, today the Indian community is well respected in Indonesia as a substantial majority of them is holding senior positions in MNCs.

Malaysia occupies an important position as it houses the largest number of Indian expatriates in the South East Asia. However, the political, social and economic status of Indians is not satisfactory. About 80 percent of the Indian diaspora here is involved in manual work, both skilled and unskilled, and only 6 percent is in the administrative, professional and managerial categories. The New Economic policy of 1970 adversely affected the Indian Diaspora in the country. Today, a very small group of Indians have flourishing business in Malaysia (Singh A., 2007).

In terms of Political representation of the Indian Diaspora, the Malaysian Indian Congress which is a part of the larger Barisan National Coalition Government is very important. However, many Indians are not happy with the MIC now and are shifting to other political parties, like the Democratic Action Party and the Hindu Rights Action Force. The incidences of ethnic violence are another problem due to which the Indian Diaspora in Malaysia is unable to provide smooth ground on which a bilateral relationship can be established between India and Malaysia (India-Malaysia Relations, 2017).

In Myanmar too, Indians have no social, political or economic clout. The nationalization policies of Myanmar led to an exodus of Indians at large scale. Only a section of poor and trading community was left behind in the country. The conditions are better for Indians in Singapore as most of them are represented in the judiciary, civil services, and armed forces. The reason such a great representation is the state ideology of meritocracy. But the very same ideology also denies any sort of ethnic privileges to any of the communities.

The South East Asia's Indian Diaspora does not enjoy economic clout because of the small size. Foreign Direct Investment from this region is also meagre. Even though Singapore has considerable political representation of the Indian community, it has no utility for lobbying on the behalf of the home government due to the lack of a genuine democracy. Therefore, it is important for the Indian Government to keep the varied circumstances of its Diaspora in these countries before arriving at any major foreign policy decision.

### **India's Policy towards Indian Diaspora in Southeast Asia**

Southeast Asia did not play a major part in India's foreign policy calculations during the 1960s, a period when India was facing major security threats from Pakistan and China. The exigencies of the Cold War, as well as political and economic considerations at home had a hand in the shaping of India's policy towards the region. This preoccupation with its immediate neighborhood held back India from formulating a policy towards Indian Diaspora. The Indians in Southeast Asia do not evoke the suspicion and hatred of the indigenous peoples. They are small in number, most of them belonging to the weaker economical stratum of the society of the host nations, and politically they do not have much influence (Singh 2010:443-47).

V. Suryanarayan (2003) briefly illustrates two examples that are given here to examine India's policy towards overseas Indians in Southeast Asia. The first relates to the status of Indians in Myanmar, where, unfortunately New Delhi attached greater importance to the improvement of state-to-state relations rather than protecting the legitimate interests of the Indian community. Soon after independence, the Burmese government initiated radical land reforms, which hit the interests of the Indian Chettiar Community. A total of 2,700,000 acres of land including 14 percent of the total cultivable land in Burma was nationalized. The market value of the land was estimated at K700 million. Despite the excellent equations between New Delhi and Rangoon, India could not persuade Burma to pay adequate compensation to the landlords. According to informed estimates, by the end of 1961, only K17, 500, 000 had been paid as compensation. During the second wave of nationalization in the 1960s under General Ne Win, in furtherance of the Burmese Way to socialism, Rangoon nationalized the pretty retail shops owned by the Indians---12,000 shops with assets worth K150 million were taken over by the government. An even greater setback was that the Indians were not even allowed to repatriate their savings. The repatriates complained of demonetization of currency notes, expropriation of properties, confiscation of valuables and other unimaginable humiliations. According to a policy note issued by the Government of Tamil Nadu, from June 1963 onwards, 144,353 repatriates from Burma have returned to India. Even after a lapse of 40years, the compensation due to these people has not been settled. New Delhi's official stance had been that nationalization was strictly a matter of domestic jurisdiction (ibid: 80-81).

The PIOs who had to flee Burma were very disappointed with the government's policy. The hard reality was that India was hardly in a position to provide any relief to them in the wake of the 1962 conflict with China. India also needed Burma's help to tackle the Naga insurgency. Military intervention was not an option and the isolationist General Ne Win was not concerned about international opinion (Sharma 2008: 1-12).

A.Mani argues in *Rising India and Indian Communities in East Asia* (Mani et al.2008) that in Thailand and the Philippines the Indian migration was mostly from Punjab and Sindh. As non-Muslims from these areas were extremely conscious of their ethnicity vis-à-vis Islam, they preserved their religious identity as Hindus and Sikhs after migration by maintaining close kinship ties. But Tamil in Thailand have been assimilated into Thai society through inter-ethnic marriage as they were small in number and felt no compulsion to zealously protect their Indian or Hindu identity.

A crisis in Malaysia on the issue of work permits was averted by New Delhi, due to behind-the-scenes diplomacy by the Indian government. In order to solve the acute problem of unemployment, the Malaysian government in 1968 introduced the system of work permits for non-citizens in specialized categories. In 1969, Kuala Lumpur announced that the work permits would not be renewed, which, for all practical purposes was a warning to non-citizens to quit their jobs. If the government had strictly enforced the rules, 55,000 Indian labourers would have lost their jobs. The government of India and the representatives of Malaysian Indians were able to persuade the government to modify the regulations. Kuala Lumpur agreed to speedily dispose-off the applications for citizenship; those who were eligible for citizenship could also apply for it during the work permit period. If the citizens were not

forthcoming, non-citizens could continue in their jobs. The last concession was a boon for the Indians, because Malays at that time were unwilling to work in the plantations. A few months later, the Malaysian government extended the work permits of all those who had applied for citizenship. However, the communal violence, which took place in Malaysia in May 1969, had a traumatic impact on the minority groups. Nearly 60,000 Indians voluntarily returned to India during this period (Suryanarayan 2003:80-81).

Therefore, India's diaspora policy during the Cold War period or after the few decades of the Indian independence can easily be identified as a policy of dissociation with regard to their diaspora residing not only in Southeast Asia but any part of the world.

### **Diaspora in India's Look East Policy**

The presence of the 'new Indian Diaspora', which consists of highly-skilled people, has enhanced India's image in Southeast Asia especially in the field of IT and medicine. The government of India is taking great interest in the Indian diaspora, which is evident from the Report of the High Level Committee and establishment of the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA). Increased growth in trade and investment between India and ASEAN has had a positive effect with a surge of migration of skilled workers, professionals and business people to almost all the countries of ASEAN. There is a great demand and respect for these Indian professionals who are so different from the Indian immigrants who went to Southeast Asia in the 19th century, especially under the indentured system.

The proactive Diaspora Policy, or from 'active-dissociation' to 'active-association', started especially after 1991, when the Indian economy faced severe crisis arising from the bankruptcy of its foreign exchange reserves. The crisis triggered a process of economic reforms as India prepared itself to exploit the opportunities to counter the threats arising from globalization and liberalization. There was a deep realization that India needed to restructure itself economically and needed investment for infrastructure restructuring, and neither the Indian state nor private sector had the capacity to counter the drastic situation. If India intended to develop economically and remain competitive in a swiftly globalizing world, it had to aggressively pull Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) and the infusion of new technologies. In this context, the larger policy shifts appears in the re-engagement of India with its diaspora in the 1990s because only affluent section of the overseas Indians, i.e., NRIs, could have become safeguards for the Indian economy in the 1990s (Dubey 2003:141).

This was the same time when India also initiated its 'Look East Policy' under Prime Minister P.V.Narsimha Rao's Congress government. The Prime Minister's proposal had instant and successful results, with India becoming a sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN in January 1992 and full dialogue partner in December 1995. In July 1996, India became a member of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). As a result, it interacts with ASEAN in various bodies and meetings, which now includes 10 countries of Southeast Asia (Kaul 2001:41-66).

When India initiated its Look East Policy towards the Southeast Asian Countries, the large presence of the Indian Diaspora in the region was unquestionably in the minds of the foreign policy-makers but unfortunately India could not explore this aspect in strengthening the bilateral as well as multilateral relations with the ASEAN countries despite having historical linkages and geographical proximity. India also missed the

opportunity to constructively engage its diaspora and gratify the aspirations of the diasporic community.

In the March 2003 incident, when nearly 300 Indian citizens, mostly IT professionals in Kuala Lumpur, were 'maltreated' and 'interrogated' by the Malaysian authorities, the Indian government reacted sharply and warned that any repetition of such incidents would affect bilateral ties. The government of India indicated that it would re-examine bilateral agreements and other trade related concessions given to Malaysia. Foreign Regional Registration Offices (FRROs), including the one in Bangalore, were ordered to verify the credentials of Malaysian nationals registered here. India also expresses its inability to host the Malaysian Health Minister towards the end of the Malaysian Entrepreneur Development Minister, his talks with Indian ministers were confined to the harassment of Indian IT professionals, instead of the proposed agenda. Similarly, the Ministry of Sports in consultation with the External Affairs Ministry ordered a last minute pull-out of the Indian hockey team from the prestigious Azlan Shah Cup hockey tournament that year (Singh 2007). Another example of government apathy towards the Indian diaspora is during Malaysia's recent unrest, in November 2007, when the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) internationalized the wretched condition of the Indian diaspora in Malaysia; the government of India's initial response was reticent.

If the incidents of March 2003 and November 2007 are compared, in the latter, the Indian government acted as a mute spectator and merely paid lip-service. However, one can also argue that all those who became the victim of ill-treatment in Kuala Lumpur on 9 March 2003 were Indian Citizens or NRIs; hence, New Delhi reacted sharply. But, on the other hand, those involved in the November 2007 incident were Malaysian citizens of Indian descent. Therefore, the Indian government did not act swiftly as they refrained from the interfering in the internal matters of Malaysia. Nonetheless, the fact of the matter is that even long after their migration, the people of Indian origin still consider themselves as Indians and whenever they are in trouble in the host countries they look forwards India to protect their interests. On Indian diaspora policy per se, New Delhi wants to engage the PIOs but without any liabilities. The reason is quite clear as the PIOs at present do not create economic clout for the Indian government as compared to the NRIs. And, 'after all it is all about the money'; therefore, New Delhi had been biased in its approach with regard to the people of Indian origin.

Thus, once again this bias or the policy of 'dissociation' towards the PIOs was witnessed. It has also been witnessed that during the 'pro-diaspora' years, the Indian government never uttered a single word regarding the plight of the Indian diaspora residing in Myanmar at the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas or with the military junta of Myanmar. The same 'passive' attitude of the Indian policy-makers regarding the Indian diaspora applies not only to the ASEAN countries, but to most countries where India has sizeable expatriates.

The Indian community is divided on the Indian government's current policy of developing links with wealthy and successful overseas Indian communities and its celebration of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas. In 2003, Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) President Datuk Seri Samy Vellu was awarded the Indian Diaspora Award, but some Malaysian Indians feel that poorer overseas Indian communities have been neglected.

Likewise, the Indian government's dual citizenship policy for NRIs is sometimes seen as restrictive and confines largely to Indians residing in affluent Western countries. The economic and technological rise of India brings benefits to the Indian diaspora, especially those who have been neglected for a long time. The rise of India has provided powerful linkages for selected groups of Indians situated outside India but it remains to be seen how this new global diasporic exchange will benefit the whole Indian community (Lal 2003:167). The time has changed; hence, a more proactive diaspora policy is required. India has the moral duty to address the concerns of Indian Diaspora anywhere in the world, without jeopardizing the relations with host countries. Only then will the condition of PIOs as well as that of India improve globally, as PIOs constitute more than 75 percent of the Indian diaspora.

On India's 'Look East' Policy per se, C.Raja Mohan (2003) pointed out that there was skepticism within the country and the Southeast Asian nations about it. During the Cold War, India and ASEAN drifted apart, and the Look East Policy sought to reconnect the two economically. As India's economic reforms unfolded, there was no let-up in the pace of diplomacy towards the region, which saw steady gains. Neither the controversial Indian nuclear tests of 1998, nor the economic crisis in East Asia in the late 1990s, came in the way of rapid expansion of India's relations with the region. Trade between India and ASEAN has multiplied fourfold---US\$3.1 billion to about US\$12 billion in 2002.

Yashwant Sinha, the Indian foreign minister during the Vajpayee government, pointed out at Harvard that India had quietly moved into the second phase of its Look East Policy. Phase-1 of the policy was characterized by trade and investment linkages. Phase-II, according to Sinha, is marked by 'arrangements for FTAs and establishing of institutional economic linkages with the ASEAN countries (ibid.). India's Look East Policy, which was initially directed towards Southeast Asian countries, also included China, Japan, South Korea, and other Asian-Pacific nations during the second phase. Sudhir Devare (2006) pointed out that the Indian diaspora is substantial in number and influential in Southeast Asian countries but not in the case of East Asia.

The second phase of India's Look East Policy is over and now the time has come for India to lay the ground work for the third phase in which they have to concentrate on the strategic aspects of the bilateral as well as multilateral relations in which the presence of the Indian diaspora in ASEAN as well as in East Asia and the Pacific can play a pivotal in strengthening India's profile in the region as they are carrying huge potential.

It has been witnessed that India's Look East Policy does not explore the potential of the Indian diaspora, and therefore maybe summarized as a missed opportunity. If Indian policy-makers concentrated on the diaspora in the Look East Policy then the results of the policy maybe more fruitful. Notwithstanding certain inaction and apathy by the Indian government, the diaspora emerged as a powerful factor in developing relations between nation-states. Now, Singapore is using the Indian diaspora as an asset by wooing the cash-rich Indian diaspora in the US for investments, technology and other expertise. This could be an eye-opener for India as well as the host countries having a sizeable number of Indian diaspora.

The growing influence of China in the Indian Ocean region and in Southeast Asia is a critical reason for both the countries to engage strategically in the region. China has strengthened its naval presence in the South China Sea and is endeavoring to do the

same in the Indian Ocean. China is also derecognizing the possession of Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, and others in the South China Sea. From the ASEAN perspectives, India is seen as a possible counterweight against China in the region and they could rely on New Delhi to balance Beijing's growing clout.

At present, the China is using its soft power especially the large presence of its diaspora in the ASEAN region strategically. As a result, the ASEAN countries are not able to firmly oppose Beijing's overarching behavior in the South China Sea. Currently, 30-40 million Chinese diaspora reside in Southeast Asia and Beijing is also deriving considerable amounts from its diasporic communities.

### **Guidelines for Actualization of the Soft Power Credentials of the Indian Diaspora in the South East Asia**

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that diaspora is not a very powerful tool with the Indian Foreign Policy makers in respect to Southeast Asia. That is why India needs to cultivate a relationship with this diaspora to actualize its potential in acting as a source of soft power (Singh N. 2017). The potential of the Indian Diaspora lies in the fact that the overall public opinion about Indians in this region is positive. These countries are slowly inching towards democracy so it is only a matter of time when public opinion will begin to hold greater significance. Therefore, it is very important for the Indian Government to keep this resource by its side.

The government must create a conducive environment for the Indian Diaspora and provide them with timely support so that the persisting feeling of distrust fades away. This way, the diaspora would be better able to relate with the homeland. One way of showing this support can be in terms of giving proper consideration to the interest of the diaspora during negotiations. The other way calls for visible acknowledgement of the diaspora's contribution in the form of remittances, investment, lobbying, and cultural promotion. Such acknowledgement can be in the form of awards, like the existing Pravasi Bhartiya Samman which comes under the Ministry of External Affairs.

One visible problem in Indian government's approach towards the Indian diaspora is that it has always been biased in favour of the affluent sections of overseas Indians (Sreenivasan, 2016). The relatively poorer section of the Indian diaspora feels neglected. The majority of the Indian Diaspora in the South East Asia is not very rich in terms of wealth. But this does not mean that it holds no utility for the Indian Government. In such a situation, a symbiotic relationship between the ID and the Indian government can help in looking after each other's interest.

The other way in which such a Diaspora can be utilized by the homeland country is by upholding the cultural and historical linkages (Devare, 2006). At the 25th year of multifaceted ASEAN-India Partnership Summit, Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj said in her speech that 'Indian Diaspora in ASEAN recognizes the importance of fostering deep historical, cultural linkages'. However, the current government's emphasis has been more on hinduization of the South East Asia. Though, it did not face any objection in Indonesia, such an approach can prove to be disastrous in a country like Malaysia where instances of ethnic violence against the Indian Diaspora have taken place in the past.

But the current government has got one thing right for sure and that is its new approach towards the South East Asia. PM Modi formally enunciated the 'Act East Policy' at the ASEAN-India and the East Asia Summits in Nay Pyi Taw in Myanmar,

2014. He personally visited five ASEAN countries- Myanmar, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam and Laos- to address their Indian Diaspora. This in itself is reflective of the salience of this region and that of the Indian diaspora present there which is acting as a bridge between the two regions (Keynote Address by External Affairs Minister on ASEAN-India Partnership, 2017).

However, it is also important to realize the fact that Indian Diaspora can prove to be a 'double-edged sword'(Aiyar, 2017). Extending 'too much' support to the diaspora can prove to be problematic domestically as it can provoke the domestic population against the Government. Assuring help to the diaspora in all circumstances can create a problem of high expectations. This can later intensify the feeling of distrust between the diaspora and the homeland. A balanced strategy is required to cater to the needs of both, domestic and foreign population, to maintain good relations with both of them. This further strengthens a State's capacity to manage its Foreign affairs.

### **Conclusion**

Indian migrations to Southeast Asia till the early parts of the 20th century were mostly of ephemeral. However, Indian diaspora established important networks throughout the region and played an extremely important role in the commercial and economic life of Southeast Asia. Various developments during the colonial period lead to permanent settlement, giving rise to diasporic modes of consciousness and identity formations among the Indian diaspora. In Southeast Asia, Indian diaspora have been one of the most diverse communities, highly segmented and segregated on the basis of caste, creed, region, economic status, and period and history of migration. Although large sections of Indian diaspora in the region have managed to carve out a niche for them, some are still deprived and continue living hard lives. With the growing number of new migrations from India, there has been a significant upsurge in the Indian consciousness among the people of Indian origin in Southeast Asia.

General expectations of any country from a diaspora are "diaspora's overseas network; their role as credibility-enhancing agents for economic actors back home; and their impact through financial flows, especially foreign direct investment and remittances are important for home country." In the world, India has an image of comparatively non-violent, tolerant and pluralistic democracy with a non-threatening international influence. Its foreign policy also has the same traits as soft power like non-violence, democratic set up, cooperation, peaceful resolution of the disputes, friendly relations with other countries, no first use of the weapons or weapons used only to retaliate, not to attack another country, not try to interrupt in others sovereignty, etc. The Indian Diaspora has also carried these traits and disseminated them in the foreign land. The Indian Diaspora is also peace loving, democratic, do not fight with others, and easily integrate with the host society, etc. These values of the Indian diasporic community further enhance the soft power of India. Diaspora is a significant player who can very well play the game of soft power for foreign policy outcomes. If diasporic community of a country has a strong position in terms of wealth, knowledge and political participation or influence in the host country, it can play a very proactive role in influencing various issues concerning the interest of the home country.

According to this paper, it can be concluded that diaspora is not a powerful 'soft power' tool in the hands of Indian policy makers with respect to Southeast Asia. The

potential of South east Asian Indian diaspora may not appear to be that significant at a simple glance because of the socio-economic status of the community in that region. But a detailed look would provide a better picture of the scene where several areas of cooperation still remain vacant, waiting to get utilized. The emphasis upon the historical and cultural linkages is helping India in putting an affable image in the region to counter balance the giants like China. Therefore, India needs to cultivate its relationship with the Indian diaspora in these countries. The Indian community is neither looked down upon nor loathed like some of the other communities in Southeast Asia which is a big positive for India. Overall, public opinion towards Indians is positive. As Southeast Asia is inching towards democracy, public opinion is becoming more important in government decision making.

On the government of India's part, it is important to create a conducive environment to ensure that the diasporic community always remembers its relationship with the homeland. Government initiatives such as Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas, Pravasi Bharatiya Sammelan, and Trade Facilitation Centres for overseas Indians are all steps in the right direction. The government must also see to it that interests of the Indian community are preserved while negotiating mega trade agreements such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Given the economic potential of the region, the flow of Indian professionals in the region and general goodwill towards the Indian community, a diaspora has the potential to play an important role in the future.

The facts provided in this paper can lead to the conclusion that use of Indian Diaspora in the South East Asia as India's foreign policy tool can prove to be a smart strategy for the Indian Government.

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