



# India's tryst with its diaspora: From estrangement to re-engagement

Event Summary

Thursday, October 24, 2024

- CSEP hosted its 28th Foreign Policy and Security Tiffin Talk on “India’s tryst with its diaspora: From estrangement to re-engagement” with **Nicolas Blarel**, Associate Professor at Leiden University, the Netherlands.
- The discussion explored the Government of India’s policies towards Indian nationals abroad and diaspora, how these policies have evolved over the recent decades, and the existing gaps that still need to be addressed.
- The discussants were **Namrata Raju**, independent labour and public policy researcher, and **Sanjay Bhattacharya** former Secretary (CPV & OIA), Ministry of External Affairs. The discussion was moderated by **Constantino Xavier**, Senior Fellow, CSEP.
- This series of closed-door research seminars is curated by **Constantino Xavier**, and **Shivshankar Menon**, Distinguished Fellow, CSEP. It focuses on contemporary, evidence-based research with policy relevance to bridge Delhi’s scholar-practitioner divide.

## Changing approaches of the Indian state

The discussion involved the policies adopted by India towards its extra territorial population which has contributed remittances amounting to 3.4 percent of the country’s national Gross Domestic Product (GDP). With an estimated 32 million Indians overseas in many different contexts, the history of emigration from India is dense and complex. The author explained the different waves of migration since the 19<sup>th</sup> century: a) that of low skilled indentured labour in the British empire, b) the post-independence migration to the United Kingdom (UK) that met the needs of the labour shortage in Britain, and c) migration to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and of high skilled workers to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries since the 1970s.

The author argued that in the initial years after independence, due its political prudence and limited capacity, the Nehru government did not provide active diplomatic support to the migrants, and rather encouraged them

to integrate into the countries they had migrated to. However, in the recent decades, there has been central as well as sub national efforts towards economic and social engagement with the emigrant Indians as they came to be seen as a vital resource to facilitate investment and receive remittances. Since 2014, the Indian government has made concerted public diplomacy efforts to reconnect links with overseas Indians. This includes online portals like e-Migrant and MADAD, as well as welfare programs and evacuation of Indian citizens from crisis situations. However, the author noted that there is a lack of clear doctrine and standard operating procedures for such security related provisions, particularly on the issue of funding and dealing with returnees and security concerns raised by separatist political agenda pursued by overseas Indians, like the Khalistan movement.

The presentation concluded with the author arguing that the Indian diplomatic and consular system had adopted a differentiated approach that has prioritised co-optation of Non-Resident Indians (NRI) in OECD countries and support to low skilled migrants in GCCs.

Further, while new policies had been partially successful but there is a need for reforms in migration governance as there is a gap between public rhetoric and legal and material tools and mechanisms for nationals abroad.

## Need for nuanced categorisation

In agreement with the speaker about the need for further reforms, the discussant argued that it is necessary to have definitional clarity as there are multiple categories of emigrants from India, necessitating varied and granular governance models. For instance, amongst the Person of Indian Origin (PIO), there are those who went as indentured labour and those who migrated out of their own volition. Similarly, in the NRI category, there are low skilled workers as well the highly skilled labour. The vulnerable low skilled segment needs protection from issues like low wages, uncertain working conditions, etc. and hence the government opted for a segmented approach where the Emigration Check Required (EMCR) category workers are provided information about their rights, portal matching and other services. The discussant also argued for upgrading the old labour agreements which will allow greater mobility for workers as well as more formalisation and regularisation of the migration process.

The second discussant called for humanising the study of migration and brought in the perspective of the low wage labourers. They argued that literature and cinema were important creative mediums that depict human experiences and plight of unskilled workers. In their view, the author had presented the Indian consulate abroad as a lifeline for the emigrants and highlighted the contested notions of citizenship for workers, who often cannot afford to come back to vote. The discussant also raised the issue of the contributions that low wage workers make to the national economy via remittances and that provision of services to them must be seen as an investment. They also noted the difficulties caused by the COVID pandemic and the difference in treat-

ment meted out to low wage workers versus the higher income NRI groups. They supported the author's recommendations about formal routes and facilitation of safe migration for workers.

## Existing complexities and avenues of research

There were a wide variety of issues raised by the participants. Participants probed the role of the private sector, particularly student bodies, working in coordination with the government as they have larger outreach and funding. They also highlighted the role of state governments and individual leaders like Sushma Swaraj in bringing about a transformative change, for instance in how Indian embassies respond to nationals in distress. Some participants positively assessed the recent initiatives by the government, whereas others took a more critical approach on migration and raised issues like demands of dual citizenship, political divides amongst NRI communities and social tensions between NRIs and Indians. Participants also noted the rising politicisation of the Indian diaspora and its impact on India's long-term interests.

While there was agreement over the shift in Indian state's engagement with the diaspora, there were differing opinions on the factors behind this shift. For instance, some participants alluded it to India's rising economic power and global engagement while others highlighted the role of political parties and sub-nationalism. They also called for greater emphasis on migration to India's neighbourhood and research on patterns of engagement in countries like Sri Lanka and Myanmar. The discussion closed with remarks from the discussants and the author about the need for policies to account for fluidity and complexities of identities. The diversity of migrants' experiences, their networks and the approaches of the Indian and the host governments were identified as areas of future research.

*All content reflects the individual views of the participants. The Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) does not hold an institutional view on any subject.*

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