

“Diasporic Gandhi” and “Gandhi’s Diaspora”

Exploring the relevance of Gandhi in Diaspora through the prism of International Relations

Aneedrisha Hazarika

Doctoral Fellow, Centre for Indo-Pacific, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University

ABSTRACT

Indian diaspora is so widespread that it is casually exclaimed that the sun never sets on it! What started as mass migration of indentured labourers to serve in the colonial plantation economies has now given way to the free migration of the “new diasporas” in the allure of better opportunities. It will not be wrong to proclaim that the Indian diaspora today has come of age. From existing at the fringes of the societies of their host countries, they are now veritable voices of economic and political might in their host countries. Starting from 1892, when Dadabhai Naroji became a Member Parliament in Britain to the current Prime Minister of Mauritius, Pravind Jugnauth, Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) have claimed considerable political clout.

But at the very core of this transition, from a disadvantaged community to a voice of reckoning, is the creation of the “homeland consciousness” forging an identity of the otherwise heterogenic diaspora scattered all around the globe. Needless to say, Mahatma Gandhi played the most crucial role in evoking this sense of belongingness to their motherland. It was his relentless battle in India and abroad that brought an end to the indentured system of recruitment and the year 1916 saw the last tranche of these labourers moving out of India.

This paper seeks to explore the contribution of Gandhi in the construction of the diapsoric consciousness of the scattered migrants. In doing so, it will also gloss over the formation of “Diapsoric Gandhi” before becoming a “Nationalist Gandhi”. Lastly, it will try and decipher if the image and principles of Gandhi are still relevant to the study of international relations in general and the shaping and casting of “Indian-ness” in the new diasporas in particular.

Keyword: Gandhi, Diaspora, International Relations, Diasporic Gandhi, Gandhi’s Diaspora

1. CONCEPTUALISING THE INDIAN DIASPORA

Indian diaspora is so widespread that it is casually exclaimed that the sun never sets on it. Much away from being a monolithic entity, the Indian diaspora is an embodiment of the diversities in India itself. It mirrors the diversities in terms of the class and caste complexities of the home nation and at times emerges out of host country variations (Pande 2018). Jayaram (2004) terms the “Indian Diaspora” as an overarching concept which is “theoretically” a relativistic construct, and “empirically” it is heterogeneous in manifestation.

Indians living outside India constitutes the Indian diaspora. The High Level Committee (HLC) formed by the Government of India in 2001 defined Indian diasporas as “as a generic term used for addressing people who have migrated from the territories that are currently within the borders of the Republic of India” (GOI 2002). These Overseas Indians are divided into Non Resident Indians,

who own an Indian passport and are full-fledged Indian citizens and People of Indian Origin (PIO) who are of Indian origin but have acquired the citizenship of their host countries.

Starting from the great Indus-Valley Civilisation, Indians have been crossing the seas and reaching far off lands. But such travels have only been rotational movement by traders, sailors and religious preachers. The nature of this movement was brief, rotational and did not result in any considerable form of diaspora. However these movements did result in dissemination of Indian culture and religions.

Much later, in the 19th century, with the advent of colonialism and the promotion of plantation economy, the state-sponsored displacements became widespread. Indentured and related systems such as kangani and maistry (headmen led network of labourers who migrated along with their recruited family members) in the

Southern part of the country, led to widespread migration of around 1.5 million labourers to various British colonies such as Fiji, Myanmar, Mauritius, Trinidad and Tobago, Surinam, Guyana amongst others.

Until abolished in the mid-20th century, the British penal settlements or convict labour migration led to Indians settling in Southeast Asian nation, as Singapore and Mauritius. British colonies in Southeast Asia received large number of semi-skilled and skilled labour force, recruited directly by the government as service providers and junior officers who later got into business and moneylending (Pande 2013)

The unsponsored settlements include the free migration or passage Indians who belonged to the trading communities from all over India and established highly successful business across Asian and African countries. These also included some “returnees” who migrated back to resettle in to their countries of origin.

After the end of Second World War, the older diaspora gave way to the new diaspora, which mostly comprised of skilled and highly skilled professionals migrating into the liberal and developed economies in the allure of better jobs. The oil boom in the West Asia of 1980s was another watershed event that attracted skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labour migrations from India. The new diaspora, mostly NRIs, became a source of remittance and gave a positive boost to the economy. In 2020, the World Migration Report 2020 states that India is the leading recipient of remittances. International remittances in 2018 (2020 report) reached \$689 billion, out of which India received \$78.6 billion from the 17.5 million living abroad. Remittances received by India have consistently increased between the 2005 and 2020. Pande (2013) also mentions of secondary migrants/twice migrants as people of Indian descent who have migrated from their original host countries to another land owing to discriminatory policies, persecution or more simply in search of better opportunities, as in the case of post-coup Fiji.

2. EVOKING DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS: ROLE OF GANDHI

With the passage of time, Indian diaspora has come of age. With an increased voice in their soil, Luthra Sinha (2017) feels that diaspora: big or small, historical or contemporary are increasingly shaping national and international priorities in fields that matter to them. Hence, they have emerged to claim more economic and political spaces in their host societies. Starting from 1892, when Dadabhai Naroji became a Member of Parliament in

Britain to the current Prime Minister of Mauritius, Pravind Jugnauth elected to office in 2019, the PIOs have claimed considerable political clout. Notwithstanding the fact that the elected leadership themselves form a part of the old diasporas and are citizen of the countries, the leadership serve as the veritable point of contact between the state and the Indian origin migrants.

But how did this evolution come about? The Indian diaspora of those times that lay scattered in varied proportions in and around the African continent, the far flung Caribbean islands, the Southeast Asian nations as well as the Pacific island nations, was much away from being a monolithic entity. It was an embodiment of the diversities in India itself, in terms of the class and caste complexities. Although free migration had taken place in the form of some traders from the Western part of India settling in trading posts in East and South Africa, starting from the fifteenth century, the bulk of the diaspora of the 19th century were conscripted indentured labourers working on plantation farms or convict settlers.

Notwithstanding the fact that the evolution of this sense of “belongingness” was a gradual one, nonetheless, the arrival of Gandhi did hasten the pace. Gandhi has been one of the key figures in the making of Indian diaspora and so also the diaspora in the making of Gandhi. (Sharma). Gandhi’s 20 year stay outside India, first in the UK and then in South Africa, let him evolve into the “Diasporic Gandhi”. As such, he helped define and evoke what constitutes “Indian-ness” through his interactions with the indentured populations existing on the margins. Before Gandhi, Dadabhai Naroji helped sprout the diasporic consciousness through his persistent advocacy against the colonial rule through London India Society, East India Association as well as his seminal treatise, “Poverty and Unbritish Rule in India” (1901). Before we move on to understand the effect of Gandhi on the diaspora, it merits looking at Gandhi’s experiences on the foreign soil.

3. MAKING OF THE DIASPORIC GANDHI IN SOUTH AFRICA

Gandhi spent about 20 years in South Africa, from May 1893 till 1914. He initially came there at the invitation of an Indian Company to defend them in a law suit. However, he was appalled to face the racially divisive policies of the colonial rulers which evoked an increasing sense of humiliation in him (Addo-Feening 1972). Since slave trade was abolished in 1830s, other sources of cheap labour led to the evolution of the indentured system of “contract slavery” (Rodriguez 2011) called *girmitya*. Although

portrayed to be a benevolent system it was far from that. Under this, illiterate Indians convinced of a better life away from the debt-ridden and plague-infested poverty in India, began pouring into the colonies, crossing the tabooed kala-pani, to work on the sugar plantations for a fixed contract period of 5 years. After the completion of the contract period, they were allowed to return to India at their own expenses or stay abroad for another 5 years. As attested by Lal (2012) and Voigt-Graf (2008) majority stayed back, on account of having grown increasingly distant from their ancestral homeland and its culture.

To begin with, Gandhi founded the Natal Indian Congress in 1894 and was the first to solicit Indian public opinion at home for the cause of Indian living abroad (Heuberger). He waged a steadfast revolt against the Asiatic Regulation Act of 1907 that required people of Indian, Arab and Turkish origin to carry with them the Certificate of Registration issued by the Registrar of Asiatics and produce it on demand by any official. It also gave overriding powers to police officers to enter homes in demand of the same and refusal to produce was made a punishable offence.

His long campaign of resistance against this Act gave birth to the philosophy of Satyagraha, which, according to some scholars was only evolved for attainment of "limited objective". The next eight years Gandhi helped instil the precepts and techniques of non-violence or the traditional Hindu belief of Ahimsa (Addo-Feening 1972). Going forward, this same philosophy of Satyagraha helped transform the character of the Indian National Movement and catapulted the reach of Indian National Congress to the masses.

Gandhi carefully evoked cultural symbols that emphasised the idea of "Indian-ness" through various modes; the most potent being articles published via the print media in newspapers such as Indian Opinion (1903) which he also edited. These symbolisms were seeped in history and religion, but also brought forth the pride in ancient Indian tradition and at the same time evoked nationalism and political consciousness. This heightened sense of awareness also gave way to the masses being aware of their identity of "coolitude": sense of belonging to a wider transnational network of identification for the displaced diasporic Indians (Mehta 2010)

His struggle for South African Indians also found support in India, and rallied Indian opinion in their favour. This helped Indians at home to connect to their overseas counterparts and see themselves as one unit (Heuberger).

This brought forth a strong connection between Indian at home and abroad.

Gandhi's diasporic nationalism campaigns in South Africa, evoked support not only from all the cross sections of the diasporic community there but also permeated to several Indian diasporic countries across the globe. His influence is clearly evoked in the literature of the times. One prominent example is that of Mauritian work named "Gandhi Ji Bole Thay" by Abhimanyu Anat. It talks about how Gandhiji's short visit to Mauritius in 1901 helped induce a positive vigour amongst the community. It also talks about Gandhi's stressing on the importance of education and sending Dr. Manilal to the country in a bid to strengthen the Arya Samaj there. This clearly testifies of the leader's success in shaping diasporic identities and making inroads into helping evoke the diasporic consciousness. Gandhi's vociferous fight against the indentured system as well as the mal treatment meted out to them, culminating at its end in 1917, echoed strongly amongst the Fijian Indians and in the process strengthening their diasporic consciousness.

In 1915, when he arrived back in India, the "Diasporic Gandhi" gave way to the "Nationalist Gandhi". But it was only because of the former that he began to appreciate linguistic and religious heterogeneity, and evolved into the later.

4. GANDHI AS A SYMBOL FOR THE "NEW DIASPORA"

As mentioned earlier, the "new diaspora" include the descendants of these original settlers, termed as PIOs, who are now citizens of their host country. There are also the ever increasing NRIs that have come to settle in many countries, but still hold the Indian citizenship. For this heterogeneous group of "new diaspora", Gandhi as a symbolic image of "Indian-ness" still hold strong. This is corroborated by the efforts on the Government's part to keep alive the legacy of Gandhi, both in symbol and spirit. There are research institutions, cultural centres, and social organizations in the name of Mahatma Gandhi in almost all the countries having diaspora presence (Sharma). These include the Mahatma Gandhi Institute for Cultural Co-operation, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, The Gandhi Centre Hague, Netherlands, Mahatma Gandhi Institute Moka, Mauritius. Furthermore Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) and the Ministry of External Affairs have extended travel grants for specific Mahatma Gandhi lectures in Moka and Rabat. There was a special exhibition named "Kanu's Gandhi"

that toured Morocco, Egypt and Tanzania. Also Gandhiji's bust has been put up in many places such as Mexico, Vietnam, Germany, Iraq, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Croatia and Qatar. (MEA 2019)

The appointment of a High Level Committee on Indian Diaspora under Shri L.M. Shingvi, in the year 2001 also institutionalised the Paravasi Bharatiya Divas. It was decided to celebrate it on 9th January, the day Mahatma Gandhi returned back to the Indian soil from South Africa. This celebration, a two day extravaganza, also honours Overseas Indians for their exceptional contributions, through the Pravasiya Bharatiya Samman. This is another instance of the strong connect, between Gandhi and the diaspora.

5. CONCLUSION

As elaborated above, in a multipolar and globalised world order, global diasporas have increasingly become a crucial factor in analysing international relations. The distinctive syncretic culture and the transnational space they inhabit make them important stakeholders. In view of the same, states have evolved their niche diaspora strategies to forge powerful attachments. Ho and Boyle (2015) defines this very concept as

“..initiatives by migrant-sending states seeking to capitalise upon the potential benefit represented by their diaspora populations. These might include strategies that foster remittance flows, harness the voluntary labour provided by diaspora corps, foster diaspora investment, attract diaspora tourists, and encourage diaspora philanthropy. But more often than not they focus upon the role of diaspora knowledge networks as a source of global competitive advantage and a mechanism for brokering integration into the global economy.”

In this context, India's official discourse and acceptance of diaspora as a strategic tool, has been a gradual process. The acknowledgement of the geo-economic and geo-political potential of this diaspora has resulted in forging meaningful and substantial relations with the host countries.

Gandhian ideology permeates our foreign policy, be it the stance of non-alignment, emphasis on social harmony or interstate relations based on domestic values and institutions. Needless to say, it finds the central position in our diaspora policy and is of vital relevance even today. The fullness of Gandhi's life, from a reformist, editor to a skilful political strategist has highly influenced different

diaspora communities worldwide. As such, it will not be wrong to claim that his efforts integrated the scattered Indians in all corners. Pande (2018) rightly says that it was Mahatma Gandhi and Subhas Chandra Bose (through his INA movement) who always considered overseas Indians as an integral part of the national belongingness. In doing so, he was able to make the diaspora a prominent part of the public discourse in India. For the present times, diaspora's emergence as an important asset in the foreign policy of the country can be traced to this legacy.

The evolution of the “Diasporic Gandhi” not only facilitated the arousal of the “diapsoric consciousness” of the dispersed lot but it also held in it the signs of the later “Mahatma”. Gandhi's ideas of passive resistance, non-violence and Satyagraha had been shaped by his remarkable career as a crusading lawyer in South Africa. His experiences as a diaspora and with the diaspora, both personal and political, shaped him immensely, and had an indelible mark not only in India but world-wide. From the above discussion it is clear that the relevance of Gandhi in the diaspora strategy of India is paramount and will remain to be so in the future.

REFERENCES

1. Addo-Fening, Robert (1972). Gandhi and Nkrumah: A study of non-violence and non-co-operation campaigns in India and Ghana as an anti-colonial strategy, *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, 13(1), 65-85
2. Chaturvedi, Sanjay (2005). Diaspora in India's Geopolitical Visions: Linkages, Categories, and Contestations, *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 32(3), 141-168
3. Government of India (GOI) (2002). Report of the high level committee on Indian Diaspora. [Online: web] Accessed 24 Feb. 2020 URL: <http://indiandiaspora.nic.in>
4. Heuberger, Gretchen. “Transnational Belonging: The Effects of the Independence and Partition of India on Indo African Diaspora, ” [Online: web] Accessed 26 Feb. 2020 URL: <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/cujas/Volume%20/Issue%20II/Gretchen%20Heuberger%20-%20Transnational%20Belonging.pdf>,
5. Ho, Elaine Lynn-Eo and Boyle, Mark (2015). Migration as development repackaged? The globalising imperative of the Singaporean state's diaspora strategies, *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 36(2), 164-182

6. Hu-DeHart (2015). The Future of “Diaspora” in Diaspora Studies: Has the Word Run Its Course?, *Verge: Studies in Global Asia*, 1(1), 38-44
7. International Organisation for Migration (IOM) 2020, *World Migration Report 2020*, [Online: web] Accessed 15 Feb. 2020, URL: <https://www.iom.int/wmr>.
8. Jayaram, N. (2004). Introduction: The study of Indian diaspora, *The Indian diaspora: Dynamics of migration*, ed. N. Jayaram, New Dehi: Sage
9. Lal, Brij V (2012) . *Chalo Jahaji*, ANU Press
10. Luthra Sinha, Bobby (2017). Indian Diaspora Policy and the ‘International Triad’- Of Voices and Visions beyond Pragmatism, *Alternation Journal*, 24(1), 50-75
11. Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) (2019), *Indian Council for Cultural Relations Annual Report 2018-2019*, New Delhi
12. Mehta, Brinda J (2010). Indianites francophones: Kala Pani Narratives, *L’Esprit Createur*, 50 (2), pp. 1-11
13. Pande, Amba (2013). Conceptualising Indian Diaspora: Diversities within a Common Identity, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 48(49), 59-65
14. Pande, Amba (2018). India and its Diaspora: Charting New Avenues for Engagement. *International Studies*, 54(1-4), 180-195
15. Rodriguez, Junius P. (2011). *Slavery in the modern world: a history of political, social, and economic Oppression*, Vol.2
16. Singh, Amit and Sarwal, Amit (2017). *Paraspara, Encounters, and Confluences: India’s Soft Power Objective in the Indo-Pacific Region*, *Politics and Policy*, 45(5), 733-761
17. Sharma, J.C., “Gandhi and Indian Diaspora”, [Online: web] Accessed 26 Feb. 2020 URL: <https://grfdt.com/PublicationDetails.aspx?Type=Articles&TabId=11>
18. Vertovec, S.(1993). Indo-Caribbean experience in Britain: overlooked, miscategorised, misunderstood, *Inside Babylon*. Eds W. James & C.Hans. London: Verso: 165-78
19. Voigt-Graf, Carmen (2008). Transnationalism and the Indo-Fijian Diaspora: The Relationship of Indo-Fijians to India and its People, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 29(1),81-109.