# GRFDT Policy Brief 3 INDIAN DIASPORA DURING COVID-19: COPING STRATEGIES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS



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# **GRFDT Policy Brief 3**

# INDIAN DIASPORA DURING COVID-19: COPING STRATEGIES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

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# **Indian Diaspora During Covid-19: Coping Strategies and Future Prospects**

#### Nitesh Narnolia\*

## **Executive Summary**

Indian diaspora is the largest diaspora in the world and has spread across more than 100 countries. In many countries, People of Indian Origin (PIOs) are in majority while in others they, constitutes an ethnic minority. Amidst the COVID-19 crisis, the PIO diaspora has emerged as a strong pillar for the stranded Indians and NRIs who are facing several problems, ranging from healthcare to livelihood in foreign countries. When India suspended international travel and closed the borders in March 2020, it created a lot of anxiety and uncertainty among Indians stranded overseas, especially the economically marginalized; students and blue-collar workers. In such an adverse situations, the PIO diaspora has played a significant role for providing food to shelter.

In order to understand the role of PIO diaspora and how India can help its diaspora amidst COVID-19 pandemic, a concrete discussion on the present situation is the need of the hour. Keeping this background in mind, GRFDT organized a virtual panel discussion on the 14th of May 2020. It assessed the situations created by the pandemic and the role played by the Indian diaspora in dealing with it as well as in determining the post COVID -19 world of mutual cooperation. This policy brief is based upon the discussion took place in this webinar. It recommends that the existence in the post-COVID-19 world will be completely different from the present world in terms of social, cultural and political cooperation. In order to develop coexistence in the post-COVID-19 world, India needs to develop effective relations with its diaspora to attract the PIOs to invest more in business and health care system in India. Along with this, during this pandemic crisis, Indian embassies across world need to determine their credibility to support both the PIOs and NRIs in dealing with the extreme and unexpected situations created by COVID-19.

Key Words: Indian Diaspora, COVID-19, Role of PIOs, Economic Crisis, Post-COVID-19 World.

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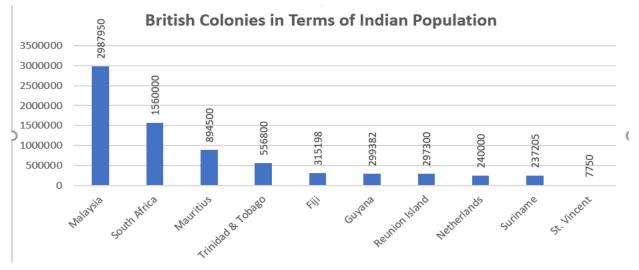
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#### Introduction

The U.N. Migration Report, 2019 estimates that there are 272 million migrants globally<sup>1</sup>. India constitutes the largest diaspora population in the world with a total number of 17.5 million Indian people living across the world. Together with the earlier settled Indian diaspora the number may touch around 30 million. It receives the highest remittances of 78.6 billion dollar from Indians living abroad. According to the report of the World Economic Forum (September 2019), the US is the most preferred destination for Indians to migrate. In 2017, 1.3% of the American population comprised of the people of Indian descent who are considered the most successful immigrants in the US<sup>2</sup>.

Prof. Chandrasekhar Bhat (Former Professor, Hyderabad Central University), introduced the theme of a virtual panel discussion organized by Global Research Forum of Diaspora and Transnationalism (GRFDT), New Delhi and moderated the session. According to him, the Indian diaspora is a highly diversified group. He highlighted two streams of Indian diaspora – the NRI Diaspora and the PIO Diaspora which are different from each other in their articulation, goals and interests. NRIs are a diaspora in making as they may transform from country of origin to the country of immigration, they become diaspora. A large number of Indians had already migrated across the world voluntarily or as indentured labourers, because of the hardships of life in India after entering into a contract with the British colonialists. They are also referred as *Girmitiyas* (a corruption of the word Agreement). The PIO diasporas are the descendants of the Indians born under tremendous atrocities and has bear difficulties under the British rules, has now turned these atrocities into opportunities.

Moreover, Prof. Bhat by turning the pages of history highlighted the role of the High Level Committee on Indian diaspora in establishing a connection between India and its diasporas. This committee was set up by the government of India in 2000s under the leadership of L.M. Sighvi. L.M. Singhvi was a jurist and diplomat who has served as the High Commissioner of India in UK from 1991-1997. The committee formulated a number of rules, regulations, policies and statements to connect the Indian diaspora with each other by 2002 and on 9 January 2003, first Prawasi Bhartiya Diwas (PBD) was celebrated. It was under this committee that first database of Indian diaspora was created and it was estimated that approximately 21 million Indians are living abroad in the form of PIOs and NRIs<sup>3</sup>.



Source: Ministry of External Affairs, 2018.

According to the latest figures of the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, published in 2018, the number of Indians living abroad has increased up to 3,21,00,340 of which 1,34,59,195 are NRIs and 1,86,83,645 are PIOs. They are found in almost every country of the world, which supports Prof. Bhat's statement about the diversification of Indian diaspora. The highest number of Indian diaspora resides in USA i.e. 44,60,000 out of which 12,80,000 are NRIs and 31,80,000 are PIOs. As PIO diaspora mainly constitutes of the Indians migrated to British colonies during colonial period, so in order to get a clear understanding of the proportion of Indian population in such colonies, the data has been extracted from the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs.

These diaspora groups are always vulnerable to the crisis situations both in host countries and home countries because they need to look at the policies of both the governments in order to come out of the situation. This is applicable in current crisis of COVID-19 pandemic too. From health to economy, security to social protection, the impacts of COVID-19 become worse for the people in diaspora. COVID-19 is not only a challenge to global health system, but also a test of humanity. According to Prof. Bhat, the people of PIO diaspora who can be found in every corner of the world are more dynamic and in efficient position to transform the conditions that they and other Indian diasporas are going through under COVID-19 in due course of time. As per the details provided by the Reserve Bank of India, the remittances by Indian diaspora helped to finance 43% of the country's trade discrepancy in 2017-18. These remittances also fulfil the needs of the poor by covering the cost of daily living expenses and allowing people to invest in business and education<sup>4</sup>.

As many countries all over the world are under lockdown, national/international travel and public gatherings have been suspended for a time being, Global Research Forum of Diaspora and Transnationalism (GRFDT), New Delhi has come up with a Virtual Panel Discussion Series on the topics related to migration and diaspora and its relevance in the current scenario of COVID-19. For its third virtual panel discussion, GRFDT kept the theme "Indian Diaspora during COVID-19: Coping Strategies and Future Prospects". This policy brief has been prepared on the basis of the discussion took place during the above mentioned session. The purpose of this policy brief is:

- To comprehend the effects of COVID-19 on Indian Diaspora especially the PIOs. Indian diaspora is a diverse and spread across the globe and comparative perspectives from the different countries will provide better insights to understand the complexities of the issues that cut across the various class, gender, ethic categories.
- To understand the coping strategies of PIOs in dealing with the crisis of COVID-19
- To discuss the ways in which mutual cooperation between Indian and its diaspora can help in post-COVID-19 world.

To achieve these objectives, the panelist Mohan K. Gautam (Former Professor, European University of West & East, Netherlands), Deo Gosine (Entrepreneur, Trinidad/New York), Arnold Thomas (St. Vincent), Satish Rai (Filmmaker, Australia), Vishnu Bisram (Journalist, Guyana), and Mehen Poinoosawmy (Global Organization for People of Indian Origin, France) have provided relevant details about role of Indian diaspora during COVID-19 and the coping strategies they follow to come out of this crisis.

#### **KEY CONSIDERATIONS**

The Non-Resident Indian (NRI) and People of Indian Origin (PIO) population across world is playing a significant role in dealing with the COVID-19 crisis. In view of their role and the treatment they receive in hostland, the discussion highlighted many such ways of mutual cooperation that will help in post-COVID-19 world. Some of the key considerations of the discussion are as follows:

#### Learn efficiency and social management from PIOs in Netherlands - Prof. M. K. Gautam

Prof. Mohan K. Gautam, European University of West & East, Netherlands highlighted how Indian diaspora in Netherlands are managing under COVID-19 and the role of the Indian embassy in coping up with these conditions. M. K. Gautam discussed the problems the Prawashis had when they migrated from India such as economic problems, famines, draughts and epidemic. There was a big famine in India which caused death of 7 million people and many people went outside to secure their lives. Further, he talked about Hindustanis or PIOs in Netherlands. In 1974-75, a majority of Indians migrated to Netherlands due to their particular reasons; many of them were twice migrated. These Indians in Netherland call themselves Hindustani. They have been a part of Dutch culture and have completely integrated in Netherlands by becoming part of Dutch politics, social welfare, professional occupations, health and education.

Coming to the situations created by COVID-19, Prof. Gautam states the reports that suggest that in UK and USA most of the people who are dying are colored people. At the same time, he clarifies that there is no such discrimination in Netherlands in the treatment of COVID-19 patients, because Hindustanis are involved in majority in health care system of Netherlands. Another reason he cited for no discrimination is the medical insurance. In India, medical insurance is not so popular, while in Netherlands medical insurance is required to move further. The unemployed people in Netherlands would also be given 900 Euro per month for medical insurance by the government, so, in the words of Prof. Gautam, not a single person in Netherlands is hand to mouth, and even the people of Indian diaspora receive the same treatment in the hands of the government. Despite equal treatment the Indians in Netherlands are mentally depressed for the families are distributed in various places, including India. The social welfare organisations cannot work openly there. As a result, there have been a lot of suicide cases in youngsters because they don't want to join Indian diaspora organizations, so they move out and when stopped by parents, they commit suicide.

Another thing, Prof. Gautam highlighted was the role of PIOs in India and what India can do for its diaspora in Netherlands.

Prof. Gautam suggested that the PIOs or Hindustanis can give efficiency and social management to India which they have learnt in Netherlands. Prof. Gautam also suggested that medical insurance should also be promoted in India so that no person is left hand to mouth.

Netherlands is a small and rich country, there are no daily wage earners because they were given money by the government, but from Indian government no communication has been established with its diaspora in Netherlands, hence the new generation of Indian diaspora in Netherlands feel forgotten.

Prof. Gautam suggested that the Indian embassy need to decide its credibility, they should come out because without them there is no India there in Netherlands. Participation in politics should also be promoted because it will create the lobby of India which can help India as well as its diaspora in Netherlands. In Prof. Gautam's words – "India should feel that they (Indian diaspora in Netherlands) are our people, like here we feel that India is ours."

#### PIOs in St. Vincent are stuck amidst COVID-19 crisis – Arnold Thomas

Arnold Thomas from St. Vincent discussed the history of Indian diaspora in St. Vincent and stated that between 1861 and 1880, there were eight ships that brought around 2475 Indians in St. Vincent and many of them did not tend to go back to India. However, conditions changed drastically because of the laws of the industry and the work conditions for the Indians deteriorated to such extent that in 1882 approximately 50 Indians marched to Kingstown to protest their conditions. This march triggered the end of indenture labor system in St. Vincent. Between 1882 and 1885, around half of the Indians brought to St. Vincent from 1861-1880 returned to India. Except the protest march, there were two other events highlighted by Prof. Thomas that affected the Indian population in St. Vincent - first was the Hurricane of 1898 and a volcanic eruption in 1902. By the time of Second World War, a lot of Indians joined the Windrush (The Windrush refers to the people who, between 1948 to 1971, were invited by the successive governments to relocate to Britain from Commonwealth countries in the Caribbean to address labor shortage) and most of the Indian villages in St. Vincent became depopulated which was the another reason of decline of Indian population in St. Vincent. So, today less than 10% of the total population of St. Vincent are Indians, limited to 110 thousand in numbers. However, these Indians are totally integrated, so much so that most of the Indians in St. Vincent has forgotten about Hinduism and Islam and have adopted Christianity. Here, Prof. Thomas added that it was only meant for the survival, not because of their liking to Christianity and disliking to Hinduism or Islam.

Further, Prof. Thomas underlined the formation of Indian diaspora in St. Vincent and stated that since 2006, they have formed the St. Vincent Indian Heritage Foundation, to which he is a founding member. As a result, they have managed to regain the Indian culture and linked up not only with the Indian government but also with the Indian diaspora throughout the world. Coming to the effect of COVID-19 on people of Indian descendants there in St. Vincent, Prof. Thomas told that a lot of Indian people are working on cru ships and as a result of COVID-19, they are stuck and facing all kind of problems to get back in St. Vincent. Briefing about the situation of COVID-19, Prof. Thomas stated that there are 17 cases of COVID-19 there and no deaths have been recorded till now.

# Develop new paradigms in business, communication and health care system in post-COVID-19 world – Deo Gosine

Deo Gosine is an entrepreneur who came from New York to Trinidad after COVID-19 created the critical situations in New York. In Trinidad, there are only 116 confirm cases of COVID-19 and 8 death, as stated by Deo Gosine. In Trinidad, the government is handling the situations created by the pandemic more efficiently than in New York or USA. The government recognized the difficulties long before the USA government and acted in the direction to prevent its spread by closing the borders, suspending the international travel and making mask compulsory at public places etc. There are many hardships on the working class in Trinidad such as lack of proper food, but the things have been managed very well. Deo

Gosine, along with the difficulties, talked about the opportunities the world will have post-COVID-19. He stated that there would be new paradigms in business, communication, health care system etc. Further, Deo Gosine compared the 9/11 attacks in New York to the present pandemic COVID-19 and stated that COVID-19 will have greater impact as 9/11 only attacked the down town of New York city

There is a need to start a new paradigm in engineering as well as in academia to think how the society will co-exist in post-COVID-19 world.

– Mr. Deo Gosine

while this pandemic has attacked the economic aspects as well. So, there is a need to start a new paradigm in engineering as well as in academia to think how the society will co-exist in post-COVID-19 world.

#### COVID-19 has caused massive job loss for NRIs and PIOs in Fiji – Satish Rai

Satish Rai who is a filmmaker of Indian descent situated in Fiji/Australia. He stated that 14 May is a historic day for Indo-Fijians as it is commemorated as Girmit Day in Fiji. On this day in 1879, the first group of Indians, around 400 Indian men and women were transported to Fiji which started the neoslavery of Indians in Fiji and total 60500 Indians were transported to Fiji. He also highlighted that 14 May is also the day when formal colonel Rabuka led the first coup in Fiji in 1987 and dispossessed the first Indian prime minister of Fiji. As a result, half of the Indo-Fijians are living away from Fiji. At that time, Satish Rai was living in London and as soon as he witnessed the coup in television, the home which Fiji was for him, was no longer a home. This event triggered his identity and he set to find his new identity and today he finds himself more connected to India than to Fiji.

Coming to the COVID-19 situations, he outlined that Fiji has less than 100 deaths so far and most of the states in Australia has not witnessed any new positive cases in last 3-4 days. The restrictions are being slowly lifted, still people are in isolation. This situation has caused massive job losses for both NRIs and PIOs. Earlier the Girmitayas were more in number than NRIs in Australia, but now NRIs are more than PIOs because of the student migration. Today, these student NRIs are facing a lot of problems because most of them work part-time to bear their expanses at shopping centers, restaurants, as taxi drivers and so on. Now, because of the nation-wide lockdown, these students have no source of income. Other problem Indian diaspora is facing there other than unemployment is housing prices will go down drastically and the Indians who own their houses will be adversely affected. Coming to Fiji, he stated that Fiji has also been affected by COVID-19 because a large part of GDP is generated by tourism and as tourism has stand still during this pandemic, it will affect the Fijian economy to a large extent. Another problem, Satish Rai highlighted was the loss of remittances from Fiji to India because remittances from Fiji didn't come in the form of bank transfers, rather in the form of cash and investment whenever the Indo-Fijians would travel to India, so as the international travel has been suspended it will have a huge impact on remittances.

# India and USA will have the opportunities of partnering in the medical field post-COVID-19 – Vishnu Bisram

Vishnu Bisram, a journalist in Guyana stated that the COVID has affected public life tremendously in Guyana as there have been no weddings and no public worships since March till now. There are two aspects which have not been mentioned in context of Guyana are political aspects and future opportunities. From political aspect, there were elections in Guyana in March and the situations created by COVID-19 has affected the results of elections to a large extent. The Indian descents in Guyana were about to win elections, but because of the stealing of ballets, now there need to have a recounting. Overall, it has affected the Indian diaspora there in Guyana. With regards to the opportunities, he emphasized that it will affect the immigration in developed countries in the West where unemployment is increasing and many people of Indian descents are unemployed. It will be more difficult for the illegal

There may be opportunities for India and USA of partnering in the medical field which will affect the Indian diaspora too. It provides opportunities for India to become engage in business tie-ups with USA to get out of this severe crisis that has affected the economy of the world.

— Mr. Vishnu Bisram

immigrants because the job opportunities have eliminated. He pointed out that the legal Girmitiyas or PIOs will have opportunities of health insurance, but these illegal migrants will have to face many challenges.

But at the same time, this situation will provide opportunity to India as well as its diaspora communities to become engage in business especially in health sector. There may be opportunities for India and USA of partnering in the medical field which will affect the Indian diaspora too. It provides opportunities for India to become engage in business tie-ups with USA to get out of this severe crisis that has affected the economy of the world. While highlighting the COVID-19 situations in Guyana, he pointed out that the lack of testing has triggered the problem in Guyana. The people of Indian descent are not being tested widely and they are not receiving any primary health care.

#### Global Organization for People of Indian Origin (GOPIO) is helping NRIs in France - Mehen Poinoosawmy

Mehen Poinoosawmy, the international coordinator of Global Organization for People of Indian Origin (GOPIO), France compared the situation of COVID-19 in different countries including Germany, France, UK, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway based on the population and lockdown period. In France, they are following social distancing and no public gatherings are allowed. In the last week of March, the Indian diaspora communities there in France had scheduled a holy festival, but it was eventually cancelled due to lockdown. He pointed out that Germany entered in the lockdown early and tested all the people and people with symptoms of corona virus were isolated. In this way Germany was able to reduce deaths to 7792, lowest rate among the countries chosen by Mehen for comparison if we look at the population that is highest among these countries. The strategies in Sweden, Denmark and Norway were different. In Sweden there was no lockdown and this resulted into high death rate in Sweden compared to Denmark and Norway.

Coming to Indian diaspora in France, he highlighted that many stranded Indian visitors are there in France who could not go back, but as now India is starting the Vande Bharat mission on 26 & 27 May, the Indians from France can be evacuated. Indian students in France are also having difficulties in surviving because their internships have been stopped and they are running out of money. GOPIO is working in the direction to help these Indian people by distributing ration bags with groceries, they are also collecting funds to distribute rations in Chennai and Delhi as well. In France, many Indian people are working in health system.

Talking about the European Union, he highlighted how European Union is handling the COVID-19 situations and pointed out that they are taking sanitary measures, increasing the production of protective equipment including masks, controlling the border and mobility, repatriating the Europeans nationals, taking economic measures such as flexibility in the Europeans budgetary framework, filtering of foreign investments, supporting research in diagnosis and vaccines by raising up to 140 million to develop a new vaccine treatment for Corona Virus as well as they are also working in the direction to remove any misleading information from social media platforms.

#### **Outcomes and Suggestion**

All the speakers have depicted the situations COVID-19 has created for Indian diaspora in different countries including Netherlands, Trinidad, St. Vincent, Australia, Fiji, Guyana and France and have suggested the ways in which this crisis can be handled by adopting different strategies. Almost all the speakers have supported the idea of a collective effort by Indian government and its diaspora in various countries to come out of the post-COVID economic crisis. Some of the recommendations/suggestions of this policy brief are as follows:

- Providing medical insurance to every citizen as well as developing effective policies for diaspora can help in fighting such crisis in future.
- Generating more employment and helping citizens financially might help in coping with such situations.
- Emotional and psychological support to people in diaspora is needed to deal with such extreme situations created by pandemic.
- The government or the people in general can learn efficiency and social management from Indian diaspora, especially from PIOs.
- By creating Indian lobbies, Indian embassies need to establish effective contacts with its diaspora to deal with COVID-19 situations and its aftermath.
- Investment in business, communication and health care system by PIOs in India and vice versa will help in developing a co-existing society in post-COVID-19 world.
- Developing effective ways to receive remittances will help in strengthening economic aspects of individual families as well as the government as a whole.
- Effective plans to evacuate the stranded Indians from abroad will build trust among diasporas towards homeland which will strengthen India economically, socially and politically on world front.

Thus, policies based upon social dialogue with the diaspora, both NRIs and PIOs can foster India in post -COVID-19 world. During the initial phase of the COVID-19 outbreak, India has implemented significant measures to combat the spread of the disease, while alleviating its malicious effects on the economy. Therefore, in post-COVID-19 world India needs to kick start their economic activities and interlinking with their diasporas across world will nurture the economic ties of India with other countries.

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#### **Speaker Profile**

**EndNote** 

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Former Professor, Hyderabad Central University, India

#### Mohan K Gautam

Former professor, European University of West & East, Netherlands

#### Deo Gosine

Entrepreneur, Trinidad/New York

#### **Arnold Thomas**

Community Leader, St. Vincent

#### Satish Rai

Film Maker, Australia

#### Vishnu Bisram

Journalist, Guyana

#### Vikash Ramkisson

Historian, Guyana

#### Mehen Poinoosawmy

Global Organization for People of Indian Origin, France



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