

## **OVERSEAS INDIANS — A RESOURCE REVOLORIZED**

Kishan S Rana

Strong emotional attachment, blended with frequent uncaring neglect, is the self-contradictory attitude with which India has viewed and treated its diaspora. Many in India and abroad hope that this may change with the Conference on the 'Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas' that meets in New Delhi from January 9 to 11, 2003. As the first such event sponsored by the Government of India, jointly with the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), it marks a logical progression in a series of developments that have taken place in the past couple of years, demarcating more clearly than before the reshaped official policy towards Indians Overseas. Prominent among these has been the LM Singhvi Committee appointed in September 2000 that had submitted its report to the government just about a year back, recommending a series of prescriptions and measures. One of these is the declaration of January 9 each year as the 'Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas'. Optimists will believe that this coming conference, and the new high strategy announcements expected there, may mark the start of a new process of resolving past contradictions.

The movement out of India commenced several centuries back, propelled by trade, an urge for economic betterment and an extraordinary spirit of adventure. Colonialism, with its need for disciplined labor to work on sugar plantations and build railway lines in inhospitable terrain, took the Pravasi to far-flung corners, stretching from Fiji to the West Indies. And the 1973 oil boom in the Gulf region, plus the unrelenting globalization process, has added new dimensions to this huge human wave. India proudly proclaims that its diaspora numbers over 20 million. There is today no corner of the globe where the Overseas Indian is not to be found, be it Albuquerque and Burkina Faso, to Yokohama and Zurich. Even more striking than the numbers is the fact that in each country the Indian has moved up the ladder of personal achievement and wealth-creation, gaining in respect as a significant contributor to the adopted land.

From its inception, the national independence movement showed concern for Indians living abroad — it could not have been otherwise, given Mahatma Gandhi's long years in South Africa before he returned home in 1907 to lead the nation. On several occasions delegates and representatives were dispatched abroad by these national leaders, to probe difficulties facing Indian migrants in Africa, and to consult with them. In a message to the Indian National Congress in 1939 Jawaharlal Nehru summed up the feelings of natural affinity:

‘India is weak today and cannot do much for her children abroad. But we do not forget them and every insult to them is humiliation and sorrow for her. A day will come when her long arm will protect them, and her strength will compel justice for them.’

Despite this, over the years, there are few of these communities that have not felt neglected by the motherland. Some may argue that at the time of the 1972 crisis in Uganda, when Idi Amin's regime threw out several tens of thousands of Indians from that country, India should have done more to help them, not merely through discreet diplomacy that was indeed deployed at the time, but also through overt gestures of solidarity and support. At the time of the crisis in Fiji in 1987, when an Indian-led elected government was ousted in a military coup, it was clear that the lessons of Uganda had been learnt, and India spear-headed diplomatic initiatives, at the Commonwealth and elsewhere, to isolate the illegal regime of Col. Rabuka, and played a role in the eventual restoration of the democratic process. These and other events affecting Overseas Indians in different regions have also shown that in today's environment, it is the international system and its established institutions, plus astute diplomacy, that are the real guarantee for the safety and well-being of such ethnic communities. The French model of direct military intervention (e.g. in Africa) is not one that India can emulate.

We need to distinguish between several segments of Overseas Indians, and apply policy prescriptions — many of which are found in the Singhvi Report — that are attuned to the ground circumstances that affect each of them.

- Neighboring Communities: The diaspora in Nepal or Sri Lanka is the result of historical movements of peoples. Few of the practical formulas of ‘NRI facilities’ apply to them, but they represent visible symbols of our linkages with these states.
- Old Migrants: They are the legacy of movements of indentured labor of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to Africa, the West Indies and Fiji. Their attachment to India is one of culture and emotion, and very few among them seek any privileges in India.
- Contract Workers: Found principally in the Gulf region, they are the skilled workers and technicians who have little prospect of local citizenship. They are the principal contributors to the flow of remittances that total over \$12 billion today, a major contributor to the health of our economy. They deserve much improved treatment on return home, on visits and at the end of their sojourn overseas.
- New Migrants: These are the NRI locomotives — the 1.7 million in the US, some 1.2 million in UK, 800,000 in Canada and the smaller but no less influential communities in other Western countries. For the most part they are professionals, earning high incomes and with many among them in the second and third generation of migration, they are both our eco-political resource in their homelands, and the prime articulators of NRI demands.

We should add to the above list two other categories of Overseas Indians that dominate the scene, and will surely be even more prominent in the future, in completely different ways. First, there are the tens of thousands of ‘illegal migrants’, those who are lured abroad each year in search of economic opportunity. Behind the harsh exploitation and suffering that they undergo at the hands of agents and intermediaries who smuggle them to their favored destinations in the West, lies the reality of demographic shortages in the target countries. With their ageing populations and birth rates below the replacement level, the rich countries need labor for their burgeoning service sectors. India has an obligation to become much more articulate at WTO and elsewhere, in support of international movement of peoples that is both better regulated and more free at the same time. Let us not forget that a portion of today’s high achievers among the Overseas Indians were also illegal migrants in their day. Second, there is the ‘global Indian’, the

highly trained professional who is increasingly the target of recruitment by transnational corporations for jobs the world over, who also demonstrates his excellence by rising to the top of his profession, be it Jagdish Bhagwati on international trade doctrine or Vinod Khosla as a venture capitalist. India needs to devise ways to harness such talent to serve its own needs, especially through creative bridge-building with home-based talent.

We need to celebrate the achievements of Overseas Indians, and this will be done in part through the newly instituted awards that are to be announced on January 9. We also need to devise stronger interconnections between the diaspora and ourselves, be it in business, academia or other fields. Economic reforms and our plans to take the economy on a high 8% annual GDP growth path mandates and will hinge on much stronger involvement of the NRIs. No less vital is their contribution in the social and voluntary sectors.

The Pravasi Bharatiya Conference will see many ringing declarations and announcements. High on the wish list should be the creation of a permanent mechanism for sustained policy implementation on all the issues that affect Overseas Indians in their diversity of situations and needs. Several years back Kerala showed the way by creating a department for overseas residents. This is one measure that is worthy of emulation by New Delhi, through the creation of a ministry or a department that would unify all the actions that should be undertaken by the union government in support of Overseas Indians. The conference should mark the start of a new chapter in the India-diaspora linkages.

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