

The Role of Indian Diaspora and Soft Power in the United States of America and its Effects on the India-USA Relations

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Abstract –

The paper attempts to explore how the Indian diaspora in the United States of America has emerged and shaped itself in the post-1965 Kennedy-Johnson immigration legislation. It seeks to look in to the role of soft-power of the third largest immigrant group, and its effects in the country which they are playing in the political and economic scenario in both the countries. The paper seeks to look in to the history of the Indian diaspora in the country which forms one of the most important political lobbies. Moreover, this population also comprised the ‘twice-migrant’ Indians who fled from there during the Idi Amin regime, in the seventies. The \$55 billion annual remittance sent to India aside, the Overseas Citizens of India Card scheme are all attempts by the Indian political sphere at being more inclusive towards the much valued community. However, in the event of the Pokhran-II testing of Indian nuclear device, the relationship among the two countries turned to sour, finally to be revived to as much as collaborating to come together on the 2008 India-US nuclear deal.

The paper is divided into four broad sections where in the first section, comprising the primary background discusses the definition of the term diaspora and the successive stages of immigration of Indians in to the country. The second section looks into the pre-1947 trends and especially the post-1965 trend in Indian immigration and the diaspora, in particular the academically qualified professional class that settled in there in the post-1965 Kennedy-Johnson immigration legislation era. The third section looks into the various cases of soft-power that the Indian diaspora draws in the socio-political and economic sphere among the two countries. The final section then evaluates how in the post-1998 Indian nuclear tests period the efforts of the both the Indian diaspora lobby and the Indian government went in to

reviving the mutual relationship between the two countries in to finally coming so close together to formulate the 2008 India-US Nuclear Agreement and the future implications for the relationship among the two countries in particular and the area of South Asia in general.

Keywords – Indian-American diaspora; Soft Power; Political lobbying; Indo-US relationship; Remittances; Nuclear Agreement.

Introduction –

The paper here attempts to investigate upon the Indian diaspora in the United States of America and their soft power in impacting the relationships between India-USA. The paper would look in to the different phases of this immigration of Indian in to the US in the light of the 1965 Kennedy-Johnson immigration legislation and seeks to study the soft power impact of the Indian diaspora in the relationship between the two countries, especially in the political and economic perspective. This became more particularly significant in the post-1998 Indian nuclear test period, when India faced a lot of negative sanctions¹ because of the nuclear tests and the international public opinions turned against India (United Nations, 1998). Consequently there has been a lot of effort diplomatically that was put in to altering this very negative attitude that was held against India which has resulted in the 2008 Indo-US Nuclear Deal.

Diaspora refers to those people of a specific nationality who are residing in areas that are different from their own places of origin. It is meant to designate the people who feel that their identity comprises of a duality between two nationalities. Here they are recognized by their hyphenated identities which portray the dualities of them identifying with their country of origin and the one that they are born in to, or are residing for a long period of time. (Mishra, 1996). Hyphenated identities depict the effort of people to comprehend their dual identity, one which is ethno-cultural, and the other, which is stipulated to the person as according the place of birth of the person. The term diaspora is used to evaluate and study “emigration and settlement of people beyond the boundaries of their homeland”. The study of diaspora also includes the continuation of the original cultural and ethnic practices in the new country of residence (Shyamala, 2012).

The expression “Indian diaspora” implies the people of Indian descent who have been residing outside India and who have been identifying themselves with the Indian ethno-cultural qualities. The Indian Diaspora in the United States of America is supposed to be the third largest immigrant and ethnic community of the country² (Migration Policy Institute, 2014). The community has also grown sizeably in the last five decades which along with being strong socio-economically and also politically, is able to cast a significant impact both in the country of origin and in the country of residence too (Kapur, 2010) (Rubinoff, 2005). The advent of Indians as immigrants in to the country which started back from 1895 (Naujoks, 2009), and has increased since the 1965 Kennedy Johnson immigration legislation (ibid.), has garnered immense academic attention in the recent years as a new ethnic group in the subject of diaspora studies.

The current paper is comprises of four segments. In the first section, there is an effort to look in to the definition of the word “diaspora” and subsequently in to the consecutive stages of immigration of Indian into United States. In the second part, the paper analyses the pre-1947 and also the post-1965 trends of Indian immigration and the diaspora in the US, in particular the academically qualified professional class that settled in there in the post-1965 Kennedy-Johnson immigration legislation era. The third section studies the soft power of the Indian diaspora and how it impacts the relationship between the two states. The fourth and the final section looks in to the situation post-1998 Indian nuclear tests and how diplomacy and the soft power initiatives of the Indian government and the diaspora have contributed to the improving the relations between the two countries further, which finally led to the formulation of the 2008 India US Nuclear Agreement.

Background –

The Indian diaspora that is settled in the United States of America is distinct in being a largely educated and financially sound in its country of residence, while still sustaining strong relations with their country of origin. They are currently integrated well in to the American politics, economy, and industrial and more specifically in the I.T, academics and health sector. Additionally, the many groups and organisations of the Indian community in the US

are observed to be keen on preserving and protecting their native culture and heritage, through marriages being preferred within the community (Migration Policy Institute, 2014).

The Pre-1965 Indian Immigration Trends in the United States –

Indian immigration in to the US can be observed as early as from the 1820s, when mostly untrained and uneducated agricultural workers made their way in to California. During this time, it was illegal for Indian to buy land and were even denied citizenship (Naujoks, 2009). However, this trend slowed down when the Immigration Acts of 1917³ and 1924⁴ were passed, that efficiently halted immigration from Asia (Zong and Batalova, 2015). This amounted to there being only 12,000 Indian immigrants in the United States, which made around 0.5% of the 9.7 million immigrants during that period. However, post-World War II, the need for professionals in the fields of medicine, science and technology, business and academics facilitated immigration from India. The Luce-Celler Bill of 1946 was formulated by Congressmen Emmanuel Celler and Clare Booth Luce to facilitate legalised entry for Indian immigrants to acquire naturalisation, and India was approved to receive a token number of a hundred immigrants annually (Naujoks, 2009). The continuous pursuit of the Indian community resulted in the Luce-Celler Act of 1946 that permitted the hundred Indian and Filipino immigrants a year rule in to the United States. This further led the Indian and Filipino immigrants to avail the process of naturalisation to get United States citizenship. The likes of Dalip Singh Saund from California were a part of first flush of Indians who were granted American citizenship and went on to become serving members of the Congress and worked towards securing the rights of Asian and Indian immigrants (Lal, 1999).

The Post-1965 Immigration Act –

Subsequently, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act⁵, went on to eliminate the earlier process of country-wise quota “and created employment-based immigration channels, as well as subsequent legislation emphasizing highly skilled immigration provided an entry pathway for a growing number of professionals and students from India” (Zong and Batalova, 2015). This increased the entry of Indians, where in early 1960s there were only five thousand Indians residing in the country officially. Then again in the 1970s this population grew many folds to around three hundred and fifty thousand.

Later the Immigration Act of 1990 (ibid.),

“further refined temporary skilled worker categories and increased the number of permanent work-based visas, contributed to a rapid increase in the size of the Indian-born population. In contrast to the initial wave, the majority of post-1965 arrivals from India were young, educated urban dwellers, with strong English language skills. From 1980 to 2013, the Indian immigrant population increased ten-fold, from 206,000 to 2.04 million, roughly doubling every decade (see Figure 1).

Today, Indian citizens are the top recipients of temporary high-skilled worker H-1B visas, accounting for 70 percent of the 316,000 H-1B petitions (initial and continuing employment) approved by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) in fiscal year (FY) 2014. India is also the second-largest sending country of international students to the United States after China: Close to 103,000 Indian-born students were enrolled in U.S. educational institutions in the 2013-14 school year”.

The annual growth-rate of Indian Americans according to Census Reports had rose to 8.5 per cent from the 1980s to the 1990s (Hobbs and Stoops, 2002). The 1990 Census in the United States recorded around 815, 477 Indian Americans.

Indian-Americans have been subject to racial crimes from time to time and the Association of Indian Americans, which was formed in 1975, looked in to the matters of the community (Lal, 1999). Discrimination faced by this community on the basis of race and caste was not unheard of. In the professional sector also there were many hurdles that had to be encountered at various times for which certain professional organisations were formulated, like the highly esteemed American Association of Physicians from India (AAPI), to look in to the American medical regulations that stiffened the admission of doctors from abroad, where Indian doctors encompassed around 4 percent of the medical practitioners. Similarly, other such organisations that have been working on exercising the soft power skills at various times, for example in the year 1985, the National federation of Indian Americans (NFIA), along with the American Indian Forum for Political Education and AAPI, opposed a legislation that intended to slash the Medicare funding to hospitals which employ doctors with medical degrees from overseas. It was the very same organisation that worked on

convincing the Congress in 1987 to refrain from selling the high-end AWACS⁶ planes to Pakistan(ibid.).

Around the year 1972, around 7000 Indian refugees from the Uganda who were expelled by Idi Amin who belonged mostly from the business class, arrived at the United States and were admitted under special provision. They were referred to as the “twice migrants” as they migrated to the US from their non-native lands (Berger, 2004).

The Soft Power of the Indian Diaspora –

The political scientist, Joseph Nye held that the distinction that has arisen between the different varieties of power that has arisen in terms of state and national power are to be used in various manners. Hard power is the capacity to coerce the other party to act in a certain manner, which was initially unacceptable to them (Nye, 2011a). This coercion might come in the shape of threats and rewards or “carrots and sticks” (Nye, 2004). On the other hand, soft power means to have the ability to alter the opinion of the other party in favour of our favoured position (ibid.). Similarly, the other concept of smart power refers to maintaining the balance between hard and soft power (Nye, 2005). Nye championed soft power because in international politics it is the cause of cooperation and trust among states. The application and usage of hard power might be counter-productive and unsuitable at many a times and soft power being of relatively negligible cost. Soft power is a major tool in handling diplomatic exchanges and negotiating Track II meetings between states in the international arena. Then again soft power also plays its part in choreographing propaganda (Nye 2011: 81).

Indian soft power is a large part of its foreign policy practices. The influence that it holds in the global multicultural international arena has been far and wide. Shashi Tharoor has contended that the influence of India’s culture, cuisine and entertainment sector comprise the bulk of elements that shape the soft power potential of the country (Tharoor, 2013b). At the same time, the great legacy of a successful democracy of the country has also been greatly instrumental in putting India in a positive light in the global domain. The strength of Indian soft power is perceived to be much stronger, than its military and economic capabilities. Indian foreign policy has exercised these soft power instruments and utilised them to exert their influence in furthering international negotiations and diplomatic outreach (Blarel, 2012).

The PravasiBharatiya Divas was initiated after the L. M. Singhvi headed High-Level Committee (HLC) on the issue of the Indian Diaspora and the event began to be celebrated annually on the 9th of January since 2003. The day holds special significance as it marked the day that Mahatma Gandhi returned from South Africa to India (Tharoor, 2013a) (Mohan, 2003). The Indian diaspora is considered to be an important asset for Indian diplomacy. This class, which first emigrated across the globe as labourers first and then as professionals, business-men and academics, have now transformed into the extended Indian diaspora. In the case of Indian Americans, they have actively worked in the domestic politics of United States and have now formed an important part of the Indian diaspora. The economic prowess of the growing IT sector has contributed to showcasing India as the market of the future. In the year 2004, the Indian government established the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) to look in to the rights and welfare of Non-Resident Indians (NRIs). Such endeavours by the home country also encouraged the Indian community to develop India's image in America's opinion. The US India Political Action Committee (USINPAC) which was established in 2002 engages in political efforts to make pathways for the further inclusion of Indian in to the political process. Their lobbying efforts of this organisation in particular and the Indian-American diaspora in general, played a big part of getting the Indo-US Nuclear deal approved in the US Congress. Thus the current understanding and endeavour to combine Indian hard power policies along with soft power efforts, can be seen to contributing to the optimum utilisation to realise the Indian dream of becoming a global power (Blarel, 2012).

The Impact of the 1998 Indian Nuclear Tests –

India decided to go nuclear on May 18, 1998 right after the 1971 India-Pakistan war and was code-named as “Smiling Buddha”. The nuclear test was a reaction to the Chinese nuclear tests of 1964 nuclear explosions (Perkovich, 2001). It was this belligerent attitude of China, along with the seeming close role it played in assisting in the military modernisation of the Pakistani military, pushed India to undertake this risk (ibid.). This nuclear test was termed as a “peaceful nuclear explosion⁷” and was a signal to the world that India was now a nuclear capable nation. The Nuclear Suppliers Group was an outcome of these tests conducted by India, so as to deter any other endeavours to proliferate nuclear technology. This also saw India being coerced to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) which was not acceptable to

India, as it would lead to restrictions in the trade and technology transfers for the advancement of the nuclear industry of the country.

India conducted its second nuclear tests on May 11th and 13th, 1998 which was called Operation Shakti, which was soon retaliated from the Pakistani side on the 28th of May 1998 with five nuclear tests from their side at the Ras Koh Hills in Baluchistan and a second one followed by on the 30th of May (Khan, 2012). This move was met with strong condemnation the world over, and it led to the imposition of the UNSC Resolution 1172. Following this, extensive talks started in the time period between 1998 and September 2000 between the United States and India among the representatives from both countries, which were the Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott and the Indian Minister of External Affairs Jaswant Singh, who met around fourteen times at ten locations. These talks centred on the areas pertaining to the cooperation of the two countries in matters of defence, security, nuclear power and even non-proliferations goals. Moreover, these talks also lead to the overall warming of the relations between the two countries in the long term such as economic and strategic cooperation. This also played a hand in the United States taking a stand with India on the event of the 1999 Indo-Pak Kargil War. This laid the ground work for the crucial visit of Bill Clinton in early 2000 and made (Talbott, 2010). This also promoted good will that was to be continued even by the Bush administration along with the Indian Prime-Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The diplomatic relations made India agree to comply for inspection of its nuclear capacity, without agreeing to renounce its nuclear military prowess (Gupta, 2004).

In the year 2003, Vajpayee proposed the idea of issuing dual citizenship for people of Indian origin living abroad. Being a class of educated immigrants Indian-Americans with their vast numbers, there is an enormous capacity to influence American domestic and foreign policy both in favour of India and go on to account for the strong Indian political lobby. Additionally, the presence of a large number of Indian-origin people being elected in the Congress, both in to the Senate and the House of Representatives. Some of the examples are Kamala Harris, Dalip Singh Saund, Bobby Jindal and Ami Bera.

The US India Political Action Committee (USINPAC) was established as a political body which seeks to represent the Indian American community and look in to their matters and policies concerning the community in the United States, and works in close coordination with

the US Congress and other Indo-American groups. This was set in lines of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC)⁸. One of the objectives of the USINPAC is to “provide a national platform for local leaders and organizations and give them the ability to leverage their activities and coordinate their efforts with like-minded people in our community and country” (Gupta 2004).

This growing influence of the Indian American community is reflected in the strength of the Caucus of India and Indian Americans in the House of Representatives, which claims 163 members, making it the largest country caucus on the Hill in the 108th Congress (2003–05). The caucus was founded by Frank Pallone (D-NJ), whose district had a significant population of Indian Americans and Bill McCollum (R-FL), who was critical of Pakistan’s record on narcotics and terrorism after India’s champion Stephen Solarz (D-NY) left Congress in 1993 (Rubinoff, 2005).

The New Beginnings in the Close Relations between India-US Relations –

On the 1st of October in 2008, India and the United States signed the 123 Nuclear Agreement which marked the beginning of a special relation between the two countries, what with the United States agreeing on making an exception of doing civilian nuclear trade with a country outside the NPT and having nuclear defence capacity. It was more special because after the 1998 Indian Nuclear tests, the United States had also supported the sanctions that were imposed as a penalty for the nuclear tests. The new Hyde Act made an exception for India from certain requirements of the 1954 Atomic Energy Act and it was provided a clearance even by the Nuclear Suppliers Group. The Act facilitated India to receive help to develop its civilian nuclear technology and agreeing to separate out of 22, the defence and the 14 civilian facilities, so as that there can be regular international inspection of the civilian facilities to monitor them for use in the defence sector as is required by the 123 Agreement and the also being a non-NPT and non-CTBT country. This has been decided in exchange for American companies getting contracts for the construction of the reactors in these nuclear plants.

However, a violation by India by conducting any nuclear tests would amount to withdrawal of the civilian nuclear trade. A point that has been contended by the Indian government and has also been not explicitly mentioned by the US Senate, even though it has been considered

a necessity by the original Hyde Act that gave the primary approval for the agreement (Hosur, 2010).

The affect of the deal on the global nuclear regime is high especially on Iran, North Korea and Pakistan. India is said to be a “responsible nuclear country” according to US, so the deal was successfully implemented, but US could never stop the nuclear weapons program of Iran and North Korea even after the deal with India. This deal, framed up by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Bush, made a remark for India stepping out of the premises of South Asia, changing the security architecture of Asia, and emerging as a global power (Bajoria and Pan, 2010).

On the issue of nuclear disarmament, the Indian government has stated that nuclear disarmament cannot be achieved as long as some powerful countries hold on to nuclear weapons and expect other countries to give up theirs. While an exception has been made for India, the difference between the behaviour of India and that of other countries like Iran, North Korea, and Pakistan must be noted. India has been more straightforward in its dealings with the international community than Iran, North Korea, or Pakistan. The chance of the international community considering these three countries for a similar nuclear deal is bleak, given their records on non-proliferation and the nature of their polities. The democratic framework of India and its good record on non-proliferation, in spite of being a non-signatory to the non-proliferation treaty, has made it easier for the US to sell the nuclear deal at the Nuclear Suppliers Group and not only enables India to engage in nuclear trade with the US, but other members of the group as well (Muhammad, 2006).

In India, the Indian-American community is now viewed as helping further Indian foreign policy and security goals as well as contributing towards its economic development. The Indian Diaspora’s role as a facilitator of foreign policy will require a greater commitment from the Indian government in developing stronger ties with the Indian-American community as well as providing greater incentives to it. Further, the best lobbying efforts cannot work if there is a fundamental divergence of political views between the United States and India, as was the case when the Indian Parliament unanimously condemned the 2003 American led war in Iraq.

It is important to note, however, that on matters of importance to India, be it signing Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), Outsourcing of jobs to India, Sale of sophisticated offensive weapon systems to Pakistan that could be used against India, a proactive role for India on the Afghanistan issue, negotiations on climate change and global warming, civilian nuclear deal, etc, Indian Diaspora have courted support on both sides of the political aisle for promoting and enhancing India's national interest (Alam, 2011).

Conclusion –

Finally, we can conclude that the net result of these diverse developments has been a remarkable turnaround in congressional attitudes toward India and U.S.-India ties. The 2005 123 agreement was a greatly significant watershed moment for Indian foreign and security policy, but still there is a great amount of distance yet to be travelled on both the sides. On the one hand the opportunity for India to develop clean environment-friendly energy, but at the same time the issue of the cost of maintaining and running it cannot be ignored. However, in the light of the limited options for other sources of energy and pressures of the international community to follow the safeguards against global warming, there is hardly any alternative for India but to go forward with this deal.

The image of Indians in the United States has been dramatically and positively transformed through the combination of the use of both soft power of the diaspora and also with the use of hard power and diplomacy by the state, the delicate nature of bilateral relations remains inhibited from achieving partnership by their residual pattern of ambiguity and mistrust. This wariness is evidenced by India's unhappiness with America's renewed commitment to Pakistan as a frontline state, and American anxiety over outsourcing service jobs to highly-educated, but lower-paid Indians. This opinion is also more voiced by the election-campaign of the now President-Elect of the United States, Donald Trump. Howsoever, despite these minor hiccups, the Indian Diaspora has played a significant and pivotal role in the further development of the bilateral relationship between the two countries.

END NOTES –

¹The UNSC Resolution No. 1172 was adopted as a reaction to the nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan in May 1998.

² India is considered to be the third largest source of immigration to the United States of America after Mexico and China.

³ The Immigration Act of 1917 or the Literary Act barred the entry of illiterates along with Asians in to the country. For this reason, it was also known as the Asiatic Barred Zone Act.

⁴ The 1924 Immigration Act also maintained a continuation of the 1917 policy of denying Asian immigrants entry in to the country.

⁵ The Act was also known as the Hart-Cellar Act which brought an end to the quota-based which was replaced with the preference-based system which considered immigrant skills and familial connections. The bill set a stipulated amount of 170,000 immigrants as per country of origin allowance.

⁶ AWACS refers to Airborne Early Warning and Control System, which inherently is an airborne long range radar picket system that is built to detect aircrafts, sea and land vehicles. They perform Command and Control (C & C) operations in battle fields and surveillance.

⁷ Peaceful Nuclear Cooperation is a generic term often used by almost all countries before going for nuclear tests though India's case was somewhat different in the sense, that it was not directed towards any country.

⁸ The AIPAC is an Israeli lobbying group which works on advocating pro-Israel ideas and policies to the US Congress.

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