

# Contribution of Indian Diaspora's during the COVID-19 period: A Study

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## ABSTRACT

It is more serious and troubling, for the Indian Diaspora, to look at the Indian continent struggling due to the lack of PPE kit and Ventilators in hospitals and the exodus of thousands of unskilled rural workers. To begin with, the plurality of past experiences, geographies and histories of myriad of races, make it an extremely tempestuous task to narrow down and create an umbrella definition of Diaspora. With time, the term has evolved, and it now refers to any individual or community active outside their homeland territory. Diaspora, world over, has come to enjoy greater relevance due to the stature they have come to command as their social-cultural-religious identities have seeped out of their Harlem, on to the main streets of the host country along with being an indispensable economic and Trade Bridge between the homeland and the host country.

**Key Words:** Diaspora, Epicenter, Cultural Dislocation, Janta Curfew.

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## INTRODUCTION

While the novel *The Namesake* opens with the protagonist, Ashima Ganguly, a newly wedded, obedient Bengali wife, who has followed her husband to America, stands in the kitchen of a Central square apartment, wishing there were Mustard Oil to pour into the mix. But, today, it isn't just about missing the Indian condiments. It is more serious and troubling, for the Indian Diaspora, to look at the Indian continent struggling due to the lack of PPE kit and Ventilators in hospitals and the exodus of thousands of unskilled rural workers, jeopardising the containment measures. For the poor Indians, at home, both Mustard Oil and survival has become luxury.

As, the spread of COVID-19 is being mainly attributed to the mobility of people to and from the epicenter Wuhan and, it is the mobility of migrant community, that has led to the evolution of Diaspora, as a community, therefore, this paper attempts to link both these mobility to gauge the impact of Indian Diaspora's mobility on COVID-19, along with the changing social and economical state of the community that has been revered for sending highest remittances back home.

### Defining Diaspora:

To begin with, the plurality of past experiences, geographies and histories of myriad of races, make it an extremely tempestuous task to narrow down and create an umbrella definition of Diaspora. However, the initial usage of the term comes from the Jewish exodus that had led to scattering of Jews around the globe (Sideri, 2009).

Who comprises the Indian Diaspora? The term "Diaspora" is derived from the Greek word *diaspeirein*, which means "dispersion". With time, the term has evolved, and it now refers to any individual or community active outside their homeland territory. It may denote any person/s coming from a particular country with a common origin or culture, but residing outside their homeland for various reasons (Challagalla, 2018).

### Cultural Dislocation:

Diaspora, world over, has come to enjoy greater relevance due to the stature they have come to command as their social-cultural-religious identities have seeped out of their Harlem, on to the main streets of the host country along with being an indispensable economic and Trade Bridge between the homeland and the host country.

Despite all this, a brooding sense of “Cultural Dislocation” sits heavy on the minds of these immigrants who go to the “Promised Land” in search of better opportunities. Such opportunities come with the hefty price of unstable identities, restlessness, and cultural mutations.

However, Covid-19 has helped people to reorient their relationships with family, neighbors, community, government and the world. We, the people of the homeland, are now better prepared to empathies with the distrust and uprootedness being experienced by the displaced Diaspora since long. The feeling of remoteness, isolation, not being able to run and meet friends and family on whim, keeping mostly to the self and not venturing out too far from home lest you rub somebody the wrong way are being experienced first handily. The vision has been automatically reset. The lockdown or, we may say, the exile has focused the lens in such a manner that the entire world looks like a foreign land, no one fully belonging anywhere.

Major changes began for Indians and NRIs on 13th march 2020 when the nation decided to lock it down to flatten the curve of Corona spread. Prior to this, India didn't see it as a threat even when many countries were infested by it even before the start of 2020. Associational Identification, “It is the phenomenon in which the culture of origin remains strong, even into the second and third generation, though the places of origin are no longer the only source of identification”.

### **COVID-19's impact on Migration:**

India's first proactive response to Corona Virus Pandemic was “Janta Curfew” on 22<sup>nd</sup> March, 2020. It was a step to see people's response to staying indoors for an entire day. Two days later, a 21-day Lockdown was announced as the number of Corona positive cases had reached 500 by now. Prior to this, Indian government's announcement about shutting Indian borders to prevent seepage of the virus from 13<sup>th</sup> march Onwards led to anxiety among NRIs to rush back home. The panic worsened due to compulsory quarantines, expensive flight tickets along with many cancelled flights. A string of other measures like cancelling of most of the existing Visas, suspension of Visa free travel facility for OCIs till further notice deepened the panic. Then, when the 21-day lockdown was about to reach its end, it was further extended till 30th April. This, in turn, was first extended till 17th may and then to 31st May.

Strict restrictions were put in place to limit people's mobility and to ensure minimum spread of the Virus, inter and intra country transportation was stopped. This led to the curtailing of flights, both, from and to India. People were requested to stay put wherever they were. This began the woes for international travellers and NRIs who wanted to cross over and were caught in dire straits. According to the Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India, 28.19 million Indians are currently living abroad. This estimate includes Non-Resident Indians (NRI), which are 12.49 million and People of Indian Origin (PIO), which are 15.59 million. With the unfolding of early phase of Lockdown, international migrants, mostly from the Gulf countries, returned back until travel restrictions stopped these inflows. Before the onset of corona virus crisis, low skilled migrants' outflows were robust from the Indian sub-continent. Migrants stuck in China and Iran were evacuated or air lifted with government's aid leading to heavy criticism of the Government for having acted partially towards the remittance sending Diaspora enjoying free air rides back home, while the internal migrants walked back home thousands of miles empty stomach, under sweltering heat. Even now, many migrants are stranded due to the suspension of transport services. Many host countries granted visa extensions and temporary amnesty to migrant workers.

### **Contribution in fight against COVID-19:**

Migration is a strategy of securing better livelihood. According to a Ministry of External Affairs report, there are 31 million Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) residing outside India as of December 2018. (Kawoosa, 2020). And, it is this very NRI Community that steps in whenever it sees the Motherland seething in pain.

India is touted to have received the highest remittance of \$79 billion, followed by China (\$67 billion), Mexico (\$36 billion), the Philippines (\$34 billion), and Egypt (\$29 billion) among other countries. Not only are Migrants hailed as heroes for the large remittances and gifts they send back home but are also valued in the host country for their contribution in the form of cheap labour and creative contribution through transmission of ideas. Various Diaspora groups have mushroomed in foreign lands to put up a united fight against poverty and sudden calamities like Covid-19.

Against this backdrop, grassroots Diaspora groups associated with the feeling of common Motherland have stepped in as a foil. These Diaspora organizations range from high profile formal groups to informal social clubs to institutionalized business associations, and are defined by having a common connection to a homeland or base culture cutting across borders. Their structured operations give them the advantage of running well-poised and properly networked transnational channels of mutual aid. These communities are solely bound by their passion for their

motherland and the desire to reach out to significant amount of people left destitute during Covid-19. They know how it feels to fend for the self during unfavorable circumstances; they know how to connect with people who live miles away, physically, and how to strike a bond with people that they don't know personally.

Hence, high profile groups like Chalo Give for Covid-19 by Indiaspora are getting international applause and support. This group, spearheaded by CEOs of Indian descent placed in different countries, recognises that along with this disease comes a multitude of problems like food scarcity, unemployment, and rise in petty crimes (Anand, 2020).

Moreover, Indian origin doctors, known for their acumen and hard work, have become even more indispensable as news of them conducting lifesaving surgeries, working round the clock, attempting multiple transplants come from different corners of the globe. Surgeons led by Indian-origin doctor perform double lung transplant on second COVID-19 patient, 2020 (The tribune, 2020).

Looking on the bright side of the Corona scare, the glimpses of humanity and philanthropy through various reports about the wealthy NRI community, especially Punjabi NRIs sending money back home and also donating ration, essential supplies and even money to fellow villagers, poor migrant workers, social groups, NGO's, Village panchayat etc. have surely come as a huge relief to the natives already reeling under Virus attack during the lockdown phase due to the reduced availability of economic activities to fend for themselves (Majeed, 2020).

### **CONCLUSION**

The selfless and benevolent contribution from the Indian Diaspora, choosing to overlook generations of alienation, discrimination and apathy, puts to action Stuart Hall's idea, elaborated in his essay thinking the Diaspora, in which he says, "In the Diaspora situation, identities become multiple. Alongside an associative connection with a particular island 'home' there are other centripetal forces." The land that fulfilled their aspirations, gave them the luxury and life of their dreams and a sense of community sprouting from helpful gestures of strangers are some of the elements of the aforesaid "Centripetal Forces".

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