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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

India's 3.2 Crore Abroad — Making Diaspora Policy as Sophisticated as the Diaspora

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GS2



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MAINS RELEVANCE:

GS Paper 2



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"India has the world's largest diaspora. How should India's diaspora policy evolve beyond the annual Pravasi Bharatiya Divas convention? What are the tensions in managing a diverse diaspora?"

WHY IN NEWS

The 18th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas Convention was held in Bhubaneswar, Odisha from January 8–10, 2026, with the theme “Diaspora’s Contribution to Viksit Bharat.” India’s diaspora of ~3.2 crore people sent approximately \$125 billion in remittances in 2024 — retaining India’s position as the world’s largest remittance recipient.

A DIASPORA OF CONTRADICTIONS

India’s overseas community is not a single community. It is a set of largely disconnected communities — separated by generation, geography, legal status, economic class, and historical migration path — that share only an ancestral connection to the Indian subcontinent.

The Indo-Trinidadian community in the Caribbean descends from 19th-century indentured labourers, arrived under conditions of near-slavery, has been separated from India for 150 years, and identifies primarily as Trinidadian. The Indian software engineer in Sunnyvale arrived last decade, maintains a dual life between Bengaluru and Silicon Valley, sends remittances, and plans to return. The NRI businessman in Dubai runs a logistics company, holds an Indian passport, and is deeply embedded in Gulf commercial networks. The second-generation British-Indian in Leicester votes Labour, speaks Punjabi at home, and has never visited their grandparents’ village.

India’s diaspora policy tends to flatten these distinctions into a single emotional category — “our overseas brothers and sisters” — and respond with events, awards, and OCI cards. This is insufficient for a diaspora that has become a strategic national asset.

THE REMITTANCES FACT — REAL AND OVERSTATED

The \$125 billion remittances figure is striking — it equals approximately 3% of India’s GDP — and is rightfully celebrated as a demonstration of diaspora attachment to India. But the figure demands context.

Most remittances come from **unskilled and semi-skilled migrant workers** in the Gulf — not from the high-profile Indian-Americans whose cultural visibility dominates the narrative. An Indian construction worker in Riyadh sending ₹30,000 home every month is a more representative remittance source than a Google executive with a five-bedroom house in Los Altos. The Gulf remittances — approximately \$40 billion of the total — represent income from some of India’s most economically vulnerable citizens, working under kafala (sponsorship) systems with limited labour rights.

India’s diaspora policy has been better at celebrating the successful than at protecting the vulnerable. The Pravasi Bharatiya Bima Yojana (PBBY) and eMigrate registration system are steps toward worker protection, but enforcement gaps remain real.

THE SOFT POWER ARGUMENT — PARTIALLY VALID

The argument that Indian-origin individuals in high positions in the US, UK, and Canada represent soft power for India is partially valid but regularly overstated. Rishi Sunak’s tenure as UK Prime Minister generated enormous emotional satisfaction in India. But British-Indians are British citizens with British political interests — Sunak consistently prioritised British foreign policy objectives when they diverged from India’s. Similarly, Indo-Americans vote American political interests; Kamala Harris’s brief VP tenure did not translate into any specific policy benefit for India-US relations that a non-Indian VP would not have provided.

The more durable soft power argument is indirect: the visibility of Indian-origin professionals normalises India as a source of talent and intellectual capital, creating favourable social conditions for India-related investment, technology transfer, and bilateral goodwill. This is real but diffuse and difficult to monetise.

WHAT A SOPHISTICATED DIASPORA POLICY LOOKS LIKE

Moving beyond PBD conventions and OCI cards requires India to build diaspora policy infrastructure comparable to China’s United Front Work Department (though without its coercive elements) or Israel’s diaspora engagement model. Several elements are missing from India’s current approach.

1. Diaspora investment channels. India currently relies on FDI and FPI flows but has no systematic mechanism for mobilising diaspora-specific investment — analogous to Israel Bonds or the UK’s NatWest diaspora investment products. Indian diaspora wealth (estimated at \$2–3 trillion globally) is largely held in assets in their countries of residence. Creating regulatory incentives for diaspora investment in Indian infrastructure would be transformative.

2. Knowledge transfer networks. Indian-origin scientists, academics, and technologists in leading global institutions represent enormous intellectual capital. India's current mechanisms for knowledge transfer — diaspora advisory committees, visiting faculty programmes — are scattered and underfunded. A systematic programme to leverage diaspora expertise in specific technology sectors (semiconductors, biotech, AI) would yield returns far exceeding PBD budgets.

3. Worker protection infrastructure. Gulf migrant workers — India's largest remittance source — need effective consular protection. India has improved this but is still reactive rather than proactive. Bilateral labour agreements with all ECR countries need to include mandatory worker registration, minimum wage protections, and grievance mechanisms that are actually enforced.

4. Diaspora as foreign policy asset — carefully. Diaspora communities can serve as lobbying assets in bilateral relationships. The Indo-American community's political contributions in US elections and its advocacy on India-related issues (H-1B visas, immigration policy) can be channelled constructively. But mobilising diaspora communities as political pressure groups in their adopted countries must be done carefully to avoid backlash and allegations of foreign interference.

THE PBD CONVENTION ITSELF

The convention is symbolically valuable. Bringing diaspora leaders together every two years, honouring contributions, and connecting them to India's developmental agenda serves real purposes of community building and brand projection. But its impact is limited by the biennial frequency, the predominance of already-connected high-visibility diaspora members, and the gap between convention rhetoric and policy follow-through.

A truly strategic PBD would be a working policy forum — not primarily a cultural celebration — where specific diaspora investment pledges are tracked, worker protection improvements are announced, and knowledge transfer partnerships are signed.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims: PBD 18th edition; Bhubaneswar 2026; theme; date significance (Jan 9 / Gandhi); first PBD 2003; biennial since 2015; India remittances ~\$125 billion 2024; diaspora ~3.2 crore; OCI card; PBBY; eMigrate.

Mains GS-2: India's diaspora policy — strengths (remittances, soft power, talent) and gaps (worker protection, investment channels, knowledge transfer); PBD convention — symbolic vs. strategic value; kafala system and Gulf migrant workers; diaspora soft power — valid and overstated aspects; comparison with China/Israel diaspora engagement models.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGE PEDIA
18TH PBD 2026:

January 8–10, 2026; Bhubaneswar, Odisha; Theme: “Diaspora’s Contribution to Viksit Bharat”

Chief Guest: Christine Kangaloo, President, Trinidad and Tobago

Ministry of External Affairs; first PBD: 2003; biennial since 2015

INDIA DIASPORA:

~3.2 crore overseas Indians (world’s largest diaspora by absolute numbers)

Remittances 2024: ~\$125 billion (world’s largest recipient; ~3% of GDP)

Gulf: ~9 million Indians; Gulf remittances: ~\$40 billion/year

DIASPORA POLICY INSTRUMENTS:

OCI Card: lifelong multiple-entry visa; work rights; not dual citizenship (no voting, no agricultural land)

PBBY: Pravasi Bharatiya Bima Yojana; insurance for ECR country workers

eMigrate: online emigration clearance system for workers to ECR countries

ECR countries: 18 countries where Indian workers need emigration clearance (Gulf + SE Asia)

Know India Programme (KIP): 21-day programme for diaspora youth (18–30 years)

PBD Samman Award: highest honour for overseas Indians; presented by President at PBD

NOTABLE INDIAN-ORIGIN GLOBAL LEADERS:

Sundar Pichai: CEO, Google/Alphabet; Satya Nadella: CEO, Microsoft; Arvind Krishna: CEO, IBM

Kamala Harris: 49th Vice President of USA; Rishi Sunak: former UK PM

Usha Vance: Second Lady of the USA (wife of VP JD Vance)

GULF MIGRANT CONTEXT:

Kafala (sponsorship) system: ties migrant worker’s legal status to employer in Gulf countries

India signed bilateral labour agreements with several Gulf countries

Top remittance source: UAE (~\$13B), USA (~\$10B), Saudi Arabia (~\$9B) annually

Sources: Indian Express, Ministry of External Affairs, World Bank

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