

American Diaspora Debate in India: Between Influence, Identity and Interests

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Summary

After a decade of high-profile engagement with the diaspora under the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, questions have arisen about the nature of the relationship between India and its communities abroad. Triggered by the current tensions in India's relationship with the United States, these have broad relevance for India's approach to the large concentrations of Indian diaspora elsewhere in the world, especially the English-speaking world.

India's diaspora in the United States (US) has become the centre of a national discussion this year on its political role, agency and connection to India's strategic interests. Long celebrated as a successful and influential community, the Indian-American diaspora is now under scrutiny: should it actively promote Delhi's diplomatic objectives in Washington, particularly during moments of strain in bilateral ties?

For nearly 25 years, India-US relations have been on an upward trajectory. The growth of the Indian diaspora – now about five million strong, including naturalised citizens and Indian passport holders – and its extraordinary success in American society made it a *cause célèbre* in bilateral discourse. Today, however, some in Delhi are anxious that the American diaspora (the Indian origin citizens of the US) is not doing enough to counter what it sees as unfair targeting of India by the Donald Trump administration. At the same time, Indian Americans themselves face unexpected pressures in the US' domestic context.

Recent American actions have shocked Indian elites who have cheered on the deepening partnership with Washington. These include the imposition of 50 per cent tariffs on Indian exports, pressure over imports of Russian oil, opposition to Indian tech workers on H1-B visas, Trump's claim of ending the four-day conflict between India and Pakistan, and repeated disparaging remarks about India by senior US officials.

Against this backdrop, Shashi Tharoor, Congress Member of Parliament and Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs, has lamented [the diaspora's silence](#). He urged Indian-Americans to speak up in defence of India's interests and advocate policies favourable to Delhi's concerns. His call for activism has ignited debate on the diaspora's political role.

Yet, there is no escaping the tension between the idea of utilising the community's political salience in the US and the risks of demanding fealty to the 'motherland'. On one hand, diaspora advocacy could bolster India's voice in Washington. On the other hand, it must be remembered that Indian-origin Americans' primary obligation is to the US. All immigrant communities in the US grapple with the problem of dual identity.

Suhag Shukla of the Hindu American Foundation stresses that diaspora members act within the US' legal and political framework and reject the notion of being "proxies" for Indian government interests. As [Shukla puts it](#), the diaspora is "in a unique position to provide nuance to often one-dimensional narratives about India and Indians. We can help the American public and elected leaders understand ground realities in India and dispel disinformation – not as mouthpieces for any Indian government or political party, but as Americans who straddle both cultures and are engaged in the democratic processes of our own country."

This framing underscores the diaspora's agency as autonomous actors: emotionally connected to India but primarily American citizens with their own priorities. Within that framework, they have historically supported India's causes. Since the 1990s, Indian-Americans have helped advance Delhi's interests in Washington, most notably in mobilising Congressional support for the US-India Civil Nuclear Initiative (2005-08), which required significant changes to US non-proliferation laws in India's favour.

Some critics suggest that today's setbacks have less to do with the diaspora's lack of activism and more with Delhi's own diplomatic shortcomings. As the technology entrepreneur [Vivek Wadhwa argues](#), "the US political system does not listen to immigrants alone. It listens to allies who show up with coordinated campaigns and a clear message. That is where India has consistently failed. The diaspora can amplify, but it cannot replace statecraft." This perspective shifts the burden back to Delhi, emphasising that diaspora mobilisation is no substitute for effective diplomacy.

India's engagement with its diaspora has evolved significantly. In the decades after independence, successive governments emphasised cultural and symbolic ties but avoided its political mobilisation. At the turn of the millennium, [the BJP governments adopted](#) a more active strategy. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee launched the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas in 2000, which has since become the flagship event celebrating overseas Indians. Since 2014, under Narendra Modi, diaspora engagement has moved to the centre of India's foreign policy. Large-scale diaspora rallies have become staples of his foreign visits, and Indian-Americans enthusiastically embraced the assertive nationalism projected by Delhi.

Yet, this period has also exposed deepening divisions within the diaspora that mirror India's domestic polarisation. More troubling still is the growing intersection between the internal politics of the diaspora's adopted homelands and India's own political battles.

Several factors now inhibit active diaspora engagement. The US' political climate is marked by resurgent nationalism, anti-immigrant rhetoric and xenophobia. Indian-Americans are compelled to navigate identity politics carefully – asserting pride in their heritage while affirming their loyalty as American citizens.

For Delhi, this means recalibrating its strategy. Instead of relying on high-profile displays of diaspora support to the current Indian leadership, Delhi may need to adopt a quieter, more low-key approach of functional cooperation to promote the long-term shared interests of both India and the US.

The current debate about the role of the diaspora in the US is also relevant to India's engagement with diasporic communities in the English-speaking world, especially Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom, where they are large in numbers and increasingly weighty in the politics of the host country. As the domestic politics of the home and adopted countries intersect and create new problems, Delhi needs to [strike a delicate balance](#).

The diaspora's success and influence in the Anglo-Saxon world remains a valuable asset for India. Still, it cannot be treated as a rough-and-ready instrument of India's policies of the moment. The diaspora's primary obligations lie with their adopted homelands, even as they maintain cultural and emotional ties to India. Looking ahead, the Indian diaspora will inevitably be mobilised in future elections in the US and the Anglo-Saxon world. A careful, nuanced and more politically sensitive engagement with the diaspora in the English-speaking world by Delhi is critical for advancing non-partisan strategic goals of India with the partner nations.

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