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India's Woeful Diaspora Policy

The lack of a diaspora policy hampers India's ability to help its migrants.

By Neeta Lal

A parliamentary panel recently slammed the Narendra Modi government for its failure to draft a “clear-cut” policy of engagement with the Indian diaspora, while also highlighting the lack of an authentic database on this important demographic, which plays a critical role in “the socio-economic development of their home country.”

According to the Committee on the Ministry of External Affairs's 15th report, tabled in Parliament last month, the Indian diaspora comprises over 18 million persons of Indian origin (PIO) and 13 million non-resident Indians (NRIs, meaning Indian citizens living abroad), making it the largest overseas community globally. Given these numbers, the committee has recommended that the government introduce a policy document that can serve as a “guiding principle for a deeper and wider connection with NRIs, while also playing a more proactive role in developing closer contact with them.”

Indian migrants settled in all corners of the globe not only contribute socially and culturally to India but are also a massive generator of foreign exchange remittances for the Indian economy. As per a WHO report in July this year, with remittances valued at \$87 billion, India was the top remittance recipient among low- and middle-income countries, as per 2021 estimates, way ahead of China and Mexico's \$53 billion, the Philippines (\$36 billion) and Egypt (\$33 billion).

Despite their contribution, however, not many privileges accrue to this community, as evidenced from recent episodes. For instance, starting in early 2020, a whopping 825,000 Indian workers returned from all over the world under the “Vande Bharat Mission,” the government's initiative to bring back Indians stranded in different countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, as per the parliamentary committee report. While some have gone back and resumed work in their host countries, thousands are still stuck in India due to bureaucratic hassles, non-availability of visas, and other regulatory bottlenecks.

Among those stuck in India are over 50,000 students who had been pursuing their studies in China, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and the United States. Many of these beleaguered students have been stranded in India for two and half years since the pandemic began in March 2020, resulting in a huge financial, academic, as well as professional loss for them, they say.

Nivedita Naik from Dharwad in Karnataka, a fourth year MBBS student at Jiangsu University in Zhenjiang, China, rues that she has had to complete two years of coursework online in India, hardly ideal for a medical student.

“I had to come back when China imposed the strictest zero COVID-19 policy to control the spread of the disease. So foreign students were barred from entering the country,” she explained.

“I'm very worried about my degree because medicine is not something you can do only online like MBA or other courses. You need practical experience with patients and at hospitals as

well as interactions with senior docs to learn your craft well. Until I go back to China, I can't get this experience," Naik complained.

A cloud of uncertainty also hangs over the future of over 20,000 Indian students who were forced to flee from war-torn Ukraine in March following Russia's invasion. Most of these students belong to the middle or lower middle classes; their parents have financed their education by mortgaging their homes, selling jewelry, and such like. Finding themselves in a financially precarious situation, these students have repeatedly petitioned ministers and officials but are yet to receive any clear answers from the authorities.

"My child is a second-year student in Ukraine. But his future is uncertain due to the crisis unfolding there," said Bhagwant Kumar, 53, the father of a medical student studying in Kharkiv University, Ukraine, who has been stuck in India since February. "We have requested the government to take care of our children's careers the same way they saved their lives by evacuating them from the ravaged country but we're receiving no clear answers,"

Urging the central government to immediately "resolve the crisis," the parliamentary committee said it was "deeply concerned" that thousands of students pursuing medical and other courses abroad have not been able to resume their studies, resulting in academic and monetary losses. The committee has now ordered that their return to their academic host countries be facilitated expeditiously, as the students had "been left in a quandary."

Many members of the Indian diaspora share that although they are quick to help their brethren back home whenever they need assistance, help from the Indian government isn't so forthcoming. "The NRI community had stepped in to bail the government out of many a crisis, including most recently during the COVID-19 crisis," said Kirthi Srinivasan, a California-based software engineer. "We dispatched medicines, donations, oxygen cylinders as well as amplified SOS messages and saved thousands of lives."

"Now, when we need help to get back to our host countries, and the U.S. embassy isn't granting us visas, the Indian government is nowhere to be found." Srinivasan has been stuck in India for two years due to difficulties in securing a visa to return to the United States.

Anup Bishnoi, 54, father of a fourth year medical student previously based in Kharkiv, Ukraine, said that he's been part of several protests against the government, but the needle hasn't moved on his son's future. "It's high time the government brought in a well-fleshed out diaspora policy to address such critical issues so that Indians living abroad don't suffer during crisis such as these," he averred.

A government official in the Ministry of External Affairs told this correspondent that the criticism is unwarranted as the government is "very much aware of the matter and exploring all diplomatic channels to resolve all issues including the return of stranded migrants to their second home."

Small consolation indeed for those whose lives and careers are dependent on timely help from the authorities.

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