

# Firm opinions, infirm facts

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A MUCH repeated argument about the Indian diaspora (particularly in western countries) is that it is a supporter of Hindutva and is implicated in fuelling the rise of the RSS and anti-Muslim violence. A reading of this material appears to suggest that the Indian diaspora settled abroad has developed what in another context has been termed as a 'pathological identity' – 'a pervasive hostility projected onto other ethnic groups.'<sup>1</sup> Writing in this magazine nearly two decades ago, Romila Thapar cautioned against the diaspora's unhealthy yearning for Hindu nationalism.<sup>2</sup> Less than a decade later, Shashi Tharoor warned that 'Expatriates are no longer an organic part of the culture, but severed digits that, in their yearning for the hand, can only twist themselves into a clenched fist.'<sup>3</sup>

The violence in Gujarat led to an array of charges that diasporic philanthropy has been financing the groups responsible for the violence. Martha Nussbaum for instance has argued that, 'Highly significant in the funding of the Gujarat violence were private donations organized through the American VHP and various charities that it has organized.'<sup>4</sup> The most simple-minded of these arguments would run as follows: the Indian diaspora is largely pro-Hindutva which leads it to finance the Sangh Parivar in India and these resources in turn have empowered the Sangh Parivar and allowed it to engage in heinous acts of violence directed principally against Muslims but also at other minorities as well. But what is the analytical and empirical support for these arguments?

There are several claims embedded in these charges here. The first concerns the political mind-set or beliefs of the diaspora. More than a few individuals in the diaspora certainly strongly support the Sangh Parivar. But to draw generalized conclusions about a population based on a visible sample needs strong analytical and empirical foundations, not just assertions.

The second concerns the degree to which these beliefs are translated into actions. If actions speak louder than words, what is the evidence of the actions of the diaspora? Presumably a diaspora engages in a range of actions directed towards the country of origin from business to lobbying to financing civil society and political actors. Just how significant is the financing of the Sangh Parivar part of the portfolio of actions the Indian diaspora engages towards the country of origin? And finally, how significant are the causal or contributory effects of these actions on violence in India? Has external funding been marginal,

considerable, or significant basis of financial resources for the Sangh Parivar because on this rests the counterfactual: does ethnic violence take place in India due to, or despite, the diaspora? More generally, how dominant is the role of overseas Hindus in diaspora-supported violence in India?

In general, is the Indian diaspora in western countries (which is of relatively recent vintage) really any different from the pool from which it is drawn (namely relatively higher educated Indians), ranging from dedicated young men and women working with progressive NGOs to those who harbour rabid anti-minority sentiments to those preoccupied with striking business deals in the booming IT sector? Periodically Indian politicians and political commentators seek recourse to the 'foreign hand' argument to explain either their own or the country's failings. While there are certainly cases of the 'foreign hand' being active in Indian politics over the decades, it has served more often than not as a convenient bogey as well. Is this true in this case as well?

**T**he Indian diaspora's identities range from the cosmopolitan and anti-nationalist to those who espouse a virulent ethnic nationalism. The presumption that the latter is dominant (at least amongst the diaspora living in western countries), is puzzling. Academic writings on the issue, many by the diaspora itself, have a strong anti-Hindutva stance, which itself lays open to question the supposed dominance of Hindutva in the diaspora. But how would one analyze a diaspora's political disposition towards the country of origin?

The fact that diasporas are prone to long-distance nationalism is now well established and indeed nationalism as a modern phenomenon of imagined communities is one that often grew in the minds of diasporic elites. The creation of Italy did not create Italians – and when they migrated in large numbers to the Americas in the late 19th and early 20th centuries they did so as Sicilians, Neapolitans and the like. But it was in the Americas that the narrower identities fused to form a nascent 'Italian' identity.<sup>5</sup> The act of migration and living abroad affects identities, attenuating some and amplifying others – but which ones and why?

**C**onfining the analysis to the Indian diaspora in the United States and the UK, what characteristics of the diaspora are likely to impact on their politics? A broad set of factors that shapes a diaspora's views stems from who leaves – so called 'selection bias'. First, what are the regions and states of origin of the diaspora? If the migration has been much

greater from North India than from Southern India, or from Gujarat than from Bengal, it might result in greater anti-Muslim sentiment given the relative degrees of polarization in the different regions of India. For instance, Ashutosh Varshney has argued that ‘Gujarati Americans have been among the most, and South Indians among the least, anti-Muslim in their predispositions.’<sup>6</sup>

Of course non-resident Gujaratis (NRGs) do not necessarily buy this line, with some of them arguing that they ‘know the essence of Hinduism which has a broader perspective. In India, Hinduism seems to be mired in the slush of bigotry.’<sup>7</sup> Gujaratis indeed dominate Bengalis in the diaspora, but the large flows in the 1990s to the US of Indian IT workers (the so-called ‘knowledge diaspora’) has a significant (if not dominant) South Indian component, especially from Andhra Pradesh.

**H**owever, the effect of the state of origin is qualified by a second factor: how migrants (even from these regions) select themselves. Are the more cosmopolitan ones more likely to leave (e.g. those inclined to cultural studies) or those dripping in Hindutva (e.g. members of the Bajrang Dal)? Three other factors come into play as well – the caste, education and gender profile of the diaspora. It has been argued that international migrants from lower caste groups and women are less likely to support hard-line groups. If so, since both of these groups are relatively underrepresented, the diaspora could be more prone to ethno-nationalism. The case has also been made that the dominance of science and technology in the educational profiles of Indian migrants (especially to the US), makes them more susceptible to the pro-Hindutva ideology due to their lack of exposure to the humanities and social sciences. But whether this is the case, or indeed it is the post-modern narratives that create a more fertile ground for Hindutva, is another story.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to the effects stemming from the selection bias on who leaves India, the diaspora’s own characteristics as well as ‘host country’ effects, further shape the political views of the diaspora. First, a diaspora’s sense of identity and resulting political views stems from a cohort effect, i.e. the period in which the diaspora left India. Thus migrants from India to the United States who came in the 1970s did so at a time of economic stasis and political turmoil in India. They might tend to put the blame on the Congress party and to that extent could be stronger supporters of an ideology that is anti-Congress and by default (if not by design) may be more pro-BJP.

**I**n contrast, those who came in the 1990s left India at a time when there was greater self-confidence (at least amongst groups that form the potential pool of international migrants from India) but the country had also turned more right. How would this affect their political views? If a sense of insecurity and anxiety were the wellspring of prejudice, the earlier cohort would be more pro-Hindutva since the more recent arrivals come from a country where levels of self-confidence are higher than in the 1970s. On the other hand, if a diaspora's political views are 'locked in' at the time it leaves the country, the opposite might be true.

Second, political views could reflect an age-effect. A diaspora that is younger is likely to be much more engaged in economic activities whereas retirees are supposedly searching for meaning beyond the empty six bedroom home in New Jersey after their children have flown the coop. If the adage of 'an empty mind is the devil's workshop' is correct, the latter might find some meaning to their lives in supporting hard-line groups. Third, views could also reflect a generation effect. The second (and later) generations are more likely to be influenced by the values of the countries in which they grew up and harbour the resentments of their parents to a lesser degree. For them India is an experience of relatives and gatherings, food and family rituals, and visits to temples. While it may be felt intensely, it is unlikely to be political in any significant sense because this generation is not just well educated and well off, but has also not encountered racism.

Finally, the diaspora's views are also likely to be shaped if they have come via a third country. The East African Gujaratis in the UK and the US are a case in point. Speculations apart, we simply do not have a firm sense if there are systematic differences between those who came to the US or UK via East Africa (or the Middle East) versus those who have come directly.

**I**t is one thing to have beliefs about something; it is quite another to act upon them. Furthermore, the actions themselves can be variegated. Long-distance nationalism can take many forms, be it lobbying in the country of residence, raising funds for philanthropy in the country of origin or to support extremist groups. Generalizable claims regarding which activities dominate have little empirical basis. With regard to the last, the many claims notwithstanding, the only well documented evidence has focused on three organizations: one in the US, (the India Development and Relief Fund – IDRF) and two that are UK-based (Hindu Sewa Sangh – HSS – and Sewa International).<sup>9</sup> Of the \$18 billion that flowed into India in 2003 as remittances, the combined flows from these organizations would be less than 0.05 per cent.

The other sources of official data are also not supportive. The only source of reliable data on foreign inflows to NGOs in India is that

maintained by the home ministry under the statutory Foreign Contributions Regulation Act (FCRA). An analysis of this data also does not provide support for diaspora flows to Hindu religious groups, but again that could be due to the coverage and classification of the data. This data excludes contributions by NRIs, but includes data from naturalized citizens and Persons of Indian Origin (PIO). However, it is impossible from this data to desegregate that fraction of FCRA funds originating from the diaspora, from that emanating from other sources – namely international NGOs and non-diaspora foreign citizens.

**T**he data maintained by the home ministry on its website gives a break-down of the FCRA organizations by purpose, classifying them into five principal purposes (i) Cultural, (ii) Economic (iii) Education, (iv) Religious, (v) Social. Slightly more than one quarter of FCRA organizations have a religious purpose. There is a further breakdown by religious denomination. The majority of FCRA organizations that have ‘religion’ as one of their purposes are Christian (84%), while Hindu and Muslim organizations are roughly similar in number (six and five per cent respectively).

The stark difference between the number of Christian and Hindu organizations – virtually in inverse proportion to their share in the population – is puzzling and may be due to three factors. Hindu organizations either raise their money domestically and very little from the diaspora. Alternatively, they get their money from the diaspora through informal channels and since NRI flows are not covered by FCRA requirements they are largely undocumented. Or alternatively, organizations that are ostensibly ‘social’ and ‘cultural’ might be more sectarian while those that impart education might be much less so even though they might be religiously motivated. Again, we simply do not have the basis to draw firm conclusions.

**O**n the sending-country side, I have surveyed more than 100 Indian-American diaspora organizations. They reveal a range of activities and engagement with India – but religion (and especially support for Hindu organizations) is marginal, if at all. Is it because it is indeed low or because those who support extremist organizations are unlikely to give information on the same? I want to emphasize that all of this *does not* necessarily mean that the Indian diaspora is not a significant financier of the Sangh parivar – it could be, but we simply do not have the evidence to hang it on.

Indeed, the most damning evidence against the diaspora could be about

not what it has done with regard to financing groups with an anti-minority agenda, but what it has *not* – namely, lend its voice in being much more critical of the (in)actions of the Indian state with regard to ethnic violence. Its conundrum (in not appearing anti-national) is easier to understand, but the resulting moral ambiguity is not easy to defend. But here again, if one examines the letters to the mainstream media in the US, there were numerous strong critics from members of the diaspora and diasporic organizations.

Finally, how important is the role of the Indian diaspora in ethnic violence in India? The diaspora's role *is* important but paradoxically (and unappetizing) as it may appear, not as much in the principal focus, namely its support for hard line Hindu organizations. There have been many excellent analyses of Hindu-Muslim violence be it a decline of social capital, electoral competition or the (in)actions of state organs.<sup>10</sup> Given the socio- economic bases of the Sangh parivar in India, its access to domestic resources – both economic and political power – is expansive. It is *weaker groups* who (for whatever reason) want to challenge the Indian state, that rely to a relatively greater extent on support from diasporas. While this argument depends on what constitutes 'Indian', in so far as violence in India from overseas groups with origins within India's territorial boundaries is concerned, the ethno-nationalism of overseas Hindus is just one.

**A**n array of diaspora groups has – and continues to be – involved in a range of insurgencies in India. In the North-East the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) have operated from Bhutan (until the government of that country mounted a major military operation in late 2003). The All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) and the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT), operate out of Bangladesh, the Naga leadership has been based in Thailand, and sundry groups have long operated out of Mynmar. Sikh groups in the 1980s, overseas Kashmiri groups and even Indian Muslims overseas have all been involved to varying degrees.<sup>11</sup>

The critical difference of course between overseas Hindus who are party to violence and many other groups is that the former is not directed against the Indian state, while the latter is. The reason is obvious. State oppression and egregious miscarriages of justice in India are not directed against the majority community. (The majority community also suffers from the infirmities of the Indian state but that is out of indifference and venality rather than active organized violence). The 1984 anti-Sikh and 2002 anti-Muslim riots are the most blatant examples of state connivance in organized violence, forcing the communities to seek recourse from overseas. But once violence becomes a spiral, the direction of causality becomes blurred.

**D**oes the diaspora cause or react to events in India? Does increasing communalism and violence in India make the diaspora more prone to directly or indirectly instigate violence in India? Are Hindus or ethnic minorities more militant in India or outside the country? While in all of these questions we can make informed guesses, in the absence of stronger empirical foundations, they will remain just that.

There can be no doubt that intolerance and zealotry today pose a singular challenge to Indian society, its many pluralisms and indeed its future. India's many diasporas are likely to play an important role in influencing this trajectory – for better and worse. However, facile condemnation with little empirical moorings does little to help us understand this complex phenomenon.

#### Footnotes:

1. Alexander Broth and Donald Rothschild, 'Pathological Dimensions of Domestic and International Ethnicity,' *Political Science Quarterly* 110(1), 1995, p. 15.
2. Romila Thapar, 'Syndicated Moksha', *Seminar* 313, September 1985.
3. Shashi Tharoor, 'Growing Up Extreme: On the Peculiarly Vicious Fanaticism of [Indian] Expatriates', *Washington Post*, 15 July 1993, p. C5.
4. Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Genocide in Gujarat: The International Community Looks Away', *Dissent*, Fall 2003.
5. Donna R. Gabaccia, *Italy's Many Diasporas*. University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2000.
6. <http://www.rediff.com/news/2002/apr/23inter.htm>
7. 'Proud Hindu, Not a Proud Indian', *Times of India*, 10 April 2004.
8. Meera Nanda, *Prophets Facing Backward: Postmodern Critiques of Science and Hindu Nationalism*. Rutgers University Press, 2003.
9. See 'The Foreign Exchange of Hate: IDRF and the American Funding of Hindutva' at <http://stopfundinghate.org/sacw/> and from Awaaz: South Asia Watch (2004), 'In Bad Faith? British Charity & Hindu Extremism', available at <http://www.awaazsaw.org/ibf/ibflores.pdf> as well as the report of the International Initiative for Gujarat (IIG) at <http://www.onlinevolunteers.org/gujarat/reports/iijg/>
10. See for instance, Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*. Yale University Press, 2002; Steven Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India*. Cambridge University Press, New York, 2004.
11. According to news reports, in the wake of the communal pogrom in Gujarat,

Lashkar- e-Taiba stepped up recruitment among Indian expatriates in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia who appear to have been 'central to a welter of terrorist attacks that took place in India through 2003.' Praveen Swami, 'Lethal Remittance', *Frontline* 21(01), 3-16 January 2004.

