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SREERAM CHAULIA (/COLUMNIST/SREERAM-CHAULIA-1)

Sreeram Chaulia is a professor and Dean of the Jindal School of International Affairs.

[\(/columnist/sreeram-chaulia-1\)](#)

Tap the resources of our diaspora

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi releasing the Coffee Table book "20 Mission Driven Social Impact Innovations" at the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD-2017) Exhibition Center in Bengaluru, Karnataka. (Photo: PTI)

The 14th convention of the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas in Bengaluru on January 7-9 marked a maturation of India's diaspora diplomacy. The scale of the biennial event, with 8,000 delegates from over 70 countries, and the degree of integration between various stakeholders in India and the visiting Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and Persons of Indian Origin (PIO), were unprecedented. A grand manifestation of India's tryst with its diaspora, PBD 2017 was proof that gigantic transnational endeavours need not be pointless jamborees.

Much of the credit for galvanising the 30 million-strong Indian diaspora to trust in India and its potential goes to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's no-holds-barred charm offensive. The long list of countries he has visited to interact intimately with different classes and categories of our diaspora is mindboggling. His enormous charisma and ability to emote with NRIs and PIOs have brought them back to India not just physically for celebratory moments like the PBD but in myriad substantial ways.



The proverbial prodigal sons and daughters are returning to India with faith, hope and a twinkle in their eyes because Mr Modi reaches out to them, infuses cultural pride and patriotism in them and literally holds their hands as they take in India's ascent. The Prime Minister's proclamation at the PBD that NRIs and PIOs are "co-travellers in India's developmental journey" is not rhetoric.



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Buoyed by India's rapid GDP growth in the last two-and-a-half years, Mr Modi's governance reforms and proactive foreign policy, our diaspora is looking at India as more than just a sentimental ancestral home. The remittance inflows of an average of \$70 billion per annum that overseas Indians have been sending despite economic slowdowns in parts of the world where they are heavily concentrated, such as the Persian Gulf region, North America and Europe, is a testament to the high confidence they have in Mr Modi's India.

There is also an upswing in our diaspora investing in India's stock markets, mutual funds and fixed deposits, thanks to attractive interest rates, apart from the traditional favourite of real estate. This influx of money is both a cause and an effect of the economic transformation that India is currently undergoing.

The Modi government's significant reform of easing foreign direct investment norms in 2015, wherein diaspora investments are now considered equivalent to those by Indian citizens, should spur far greater contributions from NRIs and PIOs to our ambitious industrialisation and skill development initiatives in years to come.

Mr Modi's emphasis on empathetically resolving consular and travel-related grievances of our diaspora has also enthused overseas Indians. His analogy of India being as accessible and near to NRIs and PIOs as the "maternal uncle's house in one's neighbourhood" is a refreshing welcome sign to the diaspora,



which has historically held a grudge that India is an impossible and ungrateful place for those who chose or were forced by circumstances to leave its shores.

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One of Mr Modi's aspirations is to enhance NRI and PIO engagement with India's social sectors. To tap the scientific acumen of the most educated segment of our diaspora for India's quality-starved universities and academic institutions, he is launching the Visiting Adjunct Joint Research Faculty (VAJRA) scheme that would incentivise top diaspora scholars and researchers to spend a few months in India and share their advanced knowledge. Record numbers of group visits of diaspora youth are also being organised under the banner of a "Know India" programme.

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The 2017 PBD convention's effort to act as a bridge between young social innovators of India and startup entrepreneurs among the diaspora reflects Mr Modi's belief that the next generation holds the key for complete fusion of NRIs and PIOs with mother India. A worldwide revival of diaspora youth wanting to reconnect and rediscover their cultural heritage and roots offers a perfect backdrop to spur this phenomenon.

The icing on the cake is the Modi government's undertaking to simplify rules and procedures and set up "single window" clearances to diaspora youth desirous of implementing socially relevant projects in India. Mr Modi is also investing in a new training plan for low-skilled Indian youth seeking blue collar jobs abroad so that they are better prepared and less likely to be exploited or abused. This is a futuristic idea because those who will eventually become NRIs are already being lent a helping hand before they depart India. It is a far cry from earlier eras when both the Indian government and people used to look askance at our people heading for the exit gates.

The 2017 PBD convention was noteworthy for the extended interface between the diaspora and state governments of India that actively wooed NRIs and PIOs. The sight of as many as eight chief ministers from across the country addressing and pitching their respective advantages to the diaspora was a reification of Mr Modi's vision of giving maximum



international autonomy and exposure to India's provincial governments. No matter which political party rules a particular state of India, he wants it to shine on the global stage and is promoting it before for an eye on India's overall national interests.



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With so much positive energy and enthusiasm generated by PBD 2017, the sky is the limit for harnessing the talents and resources of our diaspora. Yet, one crucial problem remains. Mr Modi must leverage his extraordinary popularity with NRIs and PIOs to clean up and revamp some of their associations that unfortunately still suffer from groupism, petty politicking and jostling for positions among entrenched elites.

As a supreme unifier of our diverse diaspora communities, he alone can intervene and reform these quarrelsome formal bodies that reek of nepotism and rent-seeking. The youth, who Mr Modi champions, must be admitted into the ranks of decisionmakers among our diaspora institutions. One distinguished diaspora thinker and innovator, Mike Singh of Guyana, has suggested the establishment of a "World Indian Congress" on the lines of the "World Jewish Congress" to streamline the cacophonous and conflicting motives of our scattered NRI and PIO entities.

The sooner these structural changes are effected, the more successful Mr Modi will be in realising his mission of amalgamating the vast "global family" of Indians into a force multiplier for India's rise.

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