

# Indian Diaspora in Canada: A Bridge Between Two Democracies

By

**Suheel Ahmad Parry**

Junior Research Fellow at the Department of Political Science, University of Kashmir  
(Email: [Suheelparry@gmail.com](mailto:Suheelparry@gmail.com))

**Aaqib Ahmad Bhat**

Research Fellow at the Department of Political Science, Jamia Millia Islamia University  
(Email: [Aaqib2009139@st.jmi.ac.in](mailto:Aaqib2009139@st.jmi.ac.in))

## Abstract

*The Indian diaspora in Canada significantly contributes to the improvement of ties between Canada and India. The purpose of this essay is to investigate how the Indian diaspora has improved ties between India and Canada. The article utilises a dyadic methodology proposed by Mirilovic (2018), who contends that the regime type in both the country of residency and the nation of origin concurrently shapes diaspora politics. Diaspora organisations can be heavily involved in the formalisation of foreign policy cooperation in the democracy/democracy dyad. This theory holds that when political activities of the diaspora living in another democracy aim to deepen political relations between the two nations, democracy in the country of origin promotes those efforts. The paper opens with a brief introduction to the topic, noting the many waves of Indian immigration to Canada and the factors that prompted them. Following that, it goes through the demographics, socioeconomic standing, and political outlook of the Indian diaspora in Canada today. The study concludes that the diaspora may serve as a bridge between two democracies, facilitating political collaboration, economic progress, and cultural interchange between their adopted nation and their place of origin.*

**Keywords:** Indian Diaspora, Democracy, Indo-Canadian, Immigrants, Foreign Policy

## Introduction

The concept of diaspora has been prevalent throughout history, describing communities that have been dispersed from their original homeland but still maintain a sense of collective identity and attachment to it. Diasporic communities are known for their ability to maintain connections with

their homeland and with other members of the diaspora, despite physical distance and the passage of time. In recent times, with the continuous flow of mass migration, globalization, and socio-economic conflict across the globe, the role of diasporas in international politics has increased tremendously, particularly among democratic countries. However, why do some diaspora groups play a more important role in the formalization of cooperative political ties between their country of origin and their country of residence, while others lack such influence? To answer this question, a novel dyadic approach has been suggested by Mirilovic (2018), which argues that diaspora politics are simultaneously structured by the regime type in the country of origin and the country of residence. In the democracy/democracy dyad, diaspora groups can play a prominent role in the formalization of foreign policy cooperation. In contrast, in authoritarian/authoritarian and other dyads, diaspora groups are more likely to have a limited economic rather than a political impact.

Democracy in the country of origin facilitates the political efforts of its diaspora residing in another democracy when those efforts aim to strengthen political ties between the two countries. Having an authoritarian country of origin may exacerbate the political vulnerabilities diasporans face when attempting to influence foreign policymaking in their country of residence. Thus, the diaspora in democratic countries can act as a conduit for cultural exchange, economic development, and political cooperation between their country of origin and their adopted country. To analyse the political and economic influence of diaspora between two democracies, we take the case of the Indian diaspora in Canada and analyse their role in political cooperation between their country of origin and their adopted country by lobbying for policies that benefit both countries and by mediating between conflicting interests. The Indian diaspora has played a crucial role in strengthening the ties between India and Canada, promoting democratic values and supporting grassroots organizations. While democracy is not the only factor influencing bilateral relations, the size, economic and political position of diaspora groups can further boost their influence in political cooperation.

### **Diaspora: A bridge between two democracies**

The word diaspora originates from the Greek term "diacerein," which means to scatter or disperse. According to Cohen (2008), a diaspora is a "transnational group that has been dispersed

from its original homeland but retains a sense of collective identity and allegiance to that birthplace" (Cohen, 2008, p. 3). For him, diasporic groups are defined by their capacity to retain links with their homeland and other diasporic members despite physical distance and the passage of time. Throughout history, the notion of diaspora has been used in several communities, including Jewish, African, Armenian, Indian, and Chinese populations, among others (Cohen, 2008). With the constant flow of mass migration, globalisation, and socioeconomic struggle throughout the world, the significance of diasporas in international politics has grown enormously, particularly among democratic nations.

Nevertheless, the significance of diaspora in bilateral ties between home and host nations is restricted due to variables such as economic position, organisation, and motivation, as well as regime type in host and home countries. It is also true that certain diaspora communities play a vital role in the formalisation of cooperative political relationships between their countries of origin and residency, whilst other diaspora groups do not. According to Mirilovic, diaspora politics are structured in both the nation of origin and the place of a resident by regime type. In democracy-democracy dyads, diaspora communities can play a significant role in formalising cooperative foreign policy links between their nation of origin and their place of residence (i.e., when the country of origin and the country of residence are both democratic) (Mirilovic, 2018, pp.3-4). When both the nation of origin and the country of residency are democratic, the diaspora can play a significant role in the formalisation of foreign policy cooperation. Diaspora groups are more likely to have an economic rather than a political influence on the three other dyads, including the authoritarian/authoritarian one (Mirilovic,2018). This is because diaspora groups may appeal to shared democratic principles and benefit from favourable branding effects, as well as the fact that democracy leads to improved openness, which can alleviate worries about diaspora influence. Power shifts (i.e., the governing party peacefully relinquishes power after losing an election) and enhanced transparency as a result of free speech safeguards and the presence of independent media are fundamental characteristics of democratic regimes (Maoz & Russett, 1993).

Democracy in the country of origin aids the political efforts of the diaspora residing in another democracy when such efforts aim to deepen the political relations between the two nations. In other words, if both the nation of origin and the country of residency are democracies,

the diaspora's attempts to develop and formalise political relations between the two countries will be aided. This is true for two reasons. Secondly, democracy has a favourable branding effect, particularly in political circumstances. Politicians and businesspeople who work in such contexts, such as the legislature, election campaigns, or political influence organisations, prefer to be connected with a democracy (which shares political standards with the democratic nation of residency) rather than an authoritarian state. All other things being equal, they will want to collaborate with organisations and organisations that advocate links to another democracy rather than those that encourage ties to an authoritarian regime. Members of a diaspora from a democratic nation benefit from being able to invoke such common standards. According to Shain (1994), diasporas in the United States strive to legitimise their political conduct in terms of American democratic norms (Shain, 1994)

Second, having an authoritarian home country may heighten diasporans' political vulnerabilities while seeking to influence foreign policies in their nation of residence. Concerns may include the apparent trade-off between national interest and interest group influence, claimed dual allegiance, including infiltration and espionage (Baron 2009). Because of the relative lack of openness in authoritarian governments, the kind of regime in the place of origin might compound these problems. Authoritarian nations, on the other hand, have a weaker or non-existent affinity. In other words, even if their nation of residency is authoritarian, diasporans whose country of origin is authoritarian will not gain politically from this fact. This is due, in part, to the fact that authoritarian nations tend to offer fewer rights to their immigrant populations than democracies. Migrant populations in authoritarian nations, regardless of their country of origin's political system, have difficulty influencing decisions in their place of residency (Mirilovic, 2010). Authoritarian regimes may aim to limit the transnational political linkages of their diaspora or minority groups that they perceive to be a political danger.

Thus, the diaspora in democratic nations may serve as a conduit for cultural interaction, economic growth, and political collaboration between their home country and their chosen nation. Diasporic populations, for example, might assist commerce and investment between their home nation and their adopted country by acting as middlemen, offering knowledge of local business practices, and building contact networks. Yet, democracy, according to Esman, is not the only element that influences bilateral relations; a good size and a well-developed economic

and political position may also strengthen their impact on bilateral relations. To examine the political and economic influence of the diaspora between two democracies, we examine the role of the Indian diaspora in Canada in political cooperation between their country of origin and their adopted country, by lobbying for policies that benefit both countries and mediating conflicting interests. They can also contribute to the development of civil society in their own country by supporting grassroots groups and advocating democratic ideas.

## **The Indian Diaspora in Canada**

The Indo-Canadian community began around the turn of the century. The pioneers were largely Sikhs from Punjab who had served in the British Indian Army. Several of them had travelled to Vancouver as part of the Imperial party for Edward VII's coronation ceremonies in 1902, and on their return to India, they carried back accounts of the rich soil and favourable climate of B.C., which was comparable to Punjab. Between 1903 and 1908, about 5,000 Indians, predominantly male Punjabi Sikhs, migrated to British Columbia to work on the railway, in timber mills, or forestry (Naidoo & Leslie, 2006). Being subjects of the British Empire, they anticipated equal treatment inside all of its borders, following Queen Victoria's 1858 statement that the people of India would enjoy equal privileges with white people throughout the empire, without regard to colour, creed, or race (Singh, 1991). But, upon arriving, mostly in British Columbia, the early Sikh immigrants encountered rampant hostility from local white Canadians. The Canadian government increasingly tightened restrictions on Indians, and regulations were put in place in 1907 to prohibit Indians with voting rights from voting in future general elections (Sikh-Canadian History, 2006).<sup>1</sup>

The Canadian government enacted the 'continuous voyage' criterion in 1908, barring the immigration of anyone who did not arrive in Canada by continuous transit from their country of origin (Naidoo & Leslie, 2006). Because all steamships sailing from India, China, or Japan had to refuel at Hawaii at the time, there were no direct journeys from India to Canada that met the continuous route criteria. This was done primarily to discourage additional Indian immigration into Canada; because both India and Canada were portions of the British Empire, Canada could not directly overrule British Imperial policy. The Komagata Maru, a steamship transporting 376 immigrants from India's Punjab area, landed in Vancouver in 1914. Of the continuous trip

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<sup>1</sup> [www.asian.ca/history](http://www.asian.ca/history) The site related to the Asian Canada history.

regulation, most passengers were denied entry into Canada and were deported to India at gunpoint. This was one of the most infamous occurrences in the history of Canadian exclusion rules aimed to keep Asian immigrants out (Sikh-Canadian History, 2006). Throughout the second part of the twentieth century, policies shifted quickly. In 1947, the Canadian government granted the Indo-Canadian community the right to vote. All immigration quotas based on specific ethnic groupings were abolished in 1967. Canada implemented a point-based immigration strategy, with each candidate evaluated based on their trade abilities and the need for these talents in Canada. This enabled a huge number of Indians to immigrate (Sikh Canadian History, 2006). In 2001, the Indo-Canadian population was 713,000 (Statistics Canada, 2001), and by 2006, it had grown to 962,670. (Statistics Canada, 2006). The bulk of Indo-Canadians live in the Greater Toronto Area (484,655 Indo-Canadians) and the Greater Vancouver Area (181,895 Indo-Canadians) (Statistics Canada, 2006). Although the great majority of Indo-Canadians are recent Indian immigrants or second and third-generation Indo-Canadians, there are groups of Indo-Canadians who have moved from other regions of the world. In the 1970s, the dictator Idi Amin expelled 50,000 Indian Ugandans, most of whom were Ismaili Muslims, and the Indian government refused to allow them to resettle in India. As a result, the majority of them chose to settle in the United Kingdom (approximately 30,000) or Canada (about 7,000). (Rangaswamy, 2005). The average Indo-Canadian household income is approximately 16% more than the national median household income of \$ 35,996. (Naidoo & Leslie, 2006). In comparison to Indian Americans, Indo-Canadians are more politically active at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels.

### **Political Position of Indian Diaspora in Canada**

The Indian diaspora in Canada has a strong economic position. Indian Canadians are one of the country's fastest-growing populations and have made substantial contributions to the Canadian economy. According to the 2016 Census, there were about 1.4 million Indians in Canada, accounting for 4% of the total population. Around 45% of Indo-Canadians have a university degree, compared to 26% of the general population. The employment rate of Indo-Canadians is greater than that of the general population. More than 75% of Indian migrants to Canada are highly educated professionals, skilled workers, company owners, and entrepreneurs.<sup>2</sup> Several Indian Canadians have built prosperous enterprises and work in lucrative fields including

medicine, engineering, law, and finance (Sing, 2014). In reality, a sizable portion of Indian Canadians is employed in the tech sector, notably in Toronto and Vancouver. Indian Canadians have also succeeded in establishing themselves in a variety of sectors, including retail, hospitality, and real estate. They have helped Canada's economy thrive and have produced jobs for Canadians.<sup>3</sup>

In Canadian society, the Indian Diaspora has an impact not only on the cultural and economic spheres but also on the public and political spheres. Also, it is believed that the ethnicity of Indians has a significant role in deciding who is elected to public office in Canadian politics. Five of the 301 members of the federal parliament, including the Minister of Natural Resources Harbance (Herb) S. Dhaliwal, were of Indian descent in 2002. In the provincial legislatures of Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia, there are elected legislators from the Indian community in Canada. Indian Canadians gained a record nineteen seats in the Canadian Parliament in the 2015 elections. They now possessed twice as many seats as they had during the previous administration. Eighteen of the nineteen members of parliament have roots in the Indian state of Punjab. The majority of these members are from Ontario, which, as was already mentioned, has a sizable proportion of residents who were born abroad. Amarjeet Sohi, the minister of infrastructure and communities, Harjit Sajjan, the minister of national defence, MP Navdeep Bains, the minister of innovation, science, and economic development, and MP Bardish Chagger, who was sworn in as minister of small business and tourism, are some of the prominent members of parliament and the cabinet of Indian descent (Sing, 2014).

The Liberal Party's Anju Dhillon is not only the first South Asian to ever be elected to one of the three levels of Québec's government but also the first Sikh. She beat the New Democratic Party (NDP) incumbent Ms Isabelle Morin, who is led by a Sikh Canadian. As one of Canada's three major parties, the New Democratic Party (NDP), Mr Jagmeet Singh became its first Sikh leader in 2018. He is a devout Sikh and the son of Indian immigrants. If his party wins the federal elections in 2018, he would become Canada's first Sikh prime minister. Despite not

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/trade-and-investment/india-economic-strategy/ies/chapter-18.html>.

having enough seats to form the federal government, the NDP is nevertheless quite influential in the provinces. Now, it is in charge in Alberta and British Columbia.

There is a perception that the NDP leader may present Prime Minister Trudeau with a challenge, particularly for votes from the Indian diaspora. Mr Singh has the same advantages as Prime Minister Trudeau did in 2015 as a youthful, charismatic leader who wants to bring about change in Canada while collaborating with all cultures and genders. The social democratic measures that Mr Singh supports are targeted at eliminating inequality and poverty. He is running for office in 2018 with the slogan "Create a Canada with Love and Courage, together." His campaign platform continues to be carried out, and he is aiming to ensure that no one in Canada is stopped by the police because of the colour of their skin. These concerns include electoral reform, climate change, and reconciliation (Sugimoto, 1972). These are topics that have previously been on the liberal party's agenda but are currently under scrutiny. He has criticised the government's record on economic matters as a member of the opposition. He has demanded an investigation and the resignation of Prime Minister Trudeau in his most recent debates over claims that the latter improperly pressured his Minister of Justice and Attorney General to decide not to bring charges against SNC-Lavalin, a Quebec construction company, for allegedly bribing Libyan officials. The authorities demanded an agreement wherein the company would pay a fine for its conduct. Mr Singh has also expressed his concerns about the increase in violence against minorities in India. He has defended pro-Khalistan activists in his capacity as a lawyer and has endorsed the right to "self-determination." Prime Minister Trudeau issued a public apology for the Komagata Maru event, in which a ship carrying Indian immigrants was turned back from Vancouver in 1914, in the House of Commons in 2016 to maintain his support among the Indian diaspora and particularly the Sikh diaspora. His trip to India in February 2018 has drawn criticism in Canada for being seen as a pre-election attempt to sway Sikh votes there.

## **Influence on Indo-Canada Relations**

India and Canada have had periods of strong collaboration and alienation in their ties. Particularly in the area of nuclear technology, this was true throughout the Cold War. The decade following the Cold War did not witness significant development in relationships. Canada denounced India's nuclear tests in 1998 and imposed sanctions on it. Yet, the relationship



between India and Canada has improved recently. High-level visits, trade agreements, defence collaborations, clean energy partnerships, nuclear cooperation, and expanding people-to-people connections are all contributing to the strengthening of bilateral ties. Also, India and Canada have similar perspectives on many crucial global problems, including terrorism, free trade, and climate change. The partnership has been crucial for India's economic growth as well as for deepening ties with the politically engaged and financially secure Indian diaspora in Canada. As heads of government, Prime Ministers Trudeau and Modi were able to meet four times: in February 2018 during Prime Minister Trudeau's visit to India; in November 2017 at the East Asia Summit in Manila, Philippines; in July 2017 at the G20 in Hamburg, Germany; and in September 2017 at the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington (in April 2016). On Prime Minister Modi's visit to Canada in April 2015, Prime Minister Trudeau also met him in Toronto while serving as the Liberal Party's leader.

Even while the economic ties between the two nations are growing, more has to be done to ensure that they can overcome their differences and establish strong ties on the political and security fronts. The Indian diaspora's expanding influence in Canada has given them the ability to have a favourable or bad impact on ties between India and Canada. Nevertheless, a survey of the relevant literature reveals that while many academics have voiced worry about the unfavourable effects of the "brain drain" from India to Canada, the process' beneficial effects have only lately come to light (Jain,1989). The latter group of academics has examined the issue from the standpoint of contemporary diaspora formations and their function in global affairs. They contend that via different types of networking, business, financial investment, remittance, and political interests, ethnic diasporas have a significant impact on contemporary world politics.

When seen in this light, both good and bad influences on India-Canada relations may be attributed to Canadians of Indian descent. India can search for their abilities in addition to their remittances and investments to first play a constructive influence. Their involvement in charitable development initiatives is also crucial. They can serve as political lobbyists to influence Canadian policy towards India in a positive way (Jain, 1989) Early Indian immigrants to Canada saved, on average, nearly 50% of their income, which they remitted to their family members back home despite having lesser incomes. They are a significant source of remittances to India now that there is a sizable Indian community in Canada. These remittances are used to

raise status, earn charitable prestige, retain izzat (prestige), increase the likelihood that eligible family members will marry, obtain political power or influence, exhibit religious fervour, boost the possibility that siblings or more distant kinsmen would be able to attend school, and, of course, to fund further immigration, according to a scholar who researched the Sikhs in California (La Brack, 1990) The Indian community in Canada has therefore evolved as a component force in determining the future policies of their adopted country as a result of being a member of the Canadian population. They contribute to the articulation of Canada's developing identity under their presence. They used to influence Canadian immigration policy from the outside, but today they function from the inside as a vital component of the multicultural country of Canada.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, diaspora communities—particularly those in democracies—play a significant influence in world politics. As they may appeal to shared democratic standards and gain from good branding effects, diaspora groups that live in or are originally from democratic nations are more likely to have an impact on politics. The Indian diaspora in Canada is an excellent illustration of how diaspora populations may serve as a bridge between two democracies and promote political collaboration, economic growth, and cultural interchange. They can advocate for laws that are advantageous to both nations, mediate disputes between competing interests, and advance democratic principles. While democracy is a crucial aspect, other elements like economic and political standing may also significantly increase the impact of expatriate populations in cross-border connections. Ultimately, through supporting local groups, the diaspora may contribute to the development of civil society and closer relationships across nations.

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