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Premium

Indians abroad: History, spread, remittances

From indentured labourers in the mid-1800s to highly qualified professionals now, the Pravasi Bhartiyas have come a long way, sending back massive remittances and gaining increasing political significance, at home and abroad.

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PM Modi flanked by Presidents Mohamed Irfaan Ali of Guyana (left), and Chandrikapersad Santokhi of Suriname, with Madhya Pradesh Governor Mangubhai C. Patel (far left) and CM Shivraj Singh Chouhan in Indore. (PTI)

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Inaugurating the 17th **Pravasi Bharatiya Divas** convention on Monday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said Indians living overseas are “brand ambassadors” of the country on foreign soil.

Over the years, the convention, which began under the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government in 2003, has grown in size and scope, particularly since 2015, when the Ministry of External Affairs turned the event into a biennial affair.

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The ongoing Pravasi Bharatiya Divas Convention in Indore is the 17th edition of the event, which commemorates the return of Mahatma Gandhi to India on January 9, 1915 from South Africa. But the story of the Indian expat goes back further.



Union Ministers S. Jaishankar, Anurag Thakur and Nisith Pramanik with Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan during the 17th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas Convention, in Indore. (PTI Photo)

History of the Indian expat

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Indians abroad:
History, spread,
remittances

The term diaspora traces its roots to the **Greek diaspeiro, which means dispersion.** The Indian diaspora has grown manifold since the first batch of Indians were taken to counties in the east pacific and the Caribbean islands under the **‘Girmitiya’ arrangement as indentured labourers.**

Read | PM Modi: Indian diaspora is country’s ‘brand ambassador, should amplify its message

The 19th and early 20th centuries saw thousands of Indians shipped to those countries to work on plantations in British colonies, which were reeling under a labour crisis due to the abolition of slavery in 1833-34. Surinamese President Chandrikapersad Santokhi, who addressed the convention as a special guest, referred to this migration, saying 2023 marks the 150th year of the first such journey of Indians to Surinam.

As part of the **second wave of migration**, nearly 20 lakh Indians went to Singapore and Malaysia to work in farms. **The third and fourth wave** saw professionals heading to western countries and workers going to the Gulf and west Asian countries in the wake of the oil boom.



Guyana President Mohamed Irfaan Ali arrives in Indore on Sunday to attend the 17th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas Convention 2023 as Chief Guest. (PTI)

Various classifications

Overseas Indians are classified into three categories: Non-Resident Indians (NRI), Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs), Overseas Citizens of India (OCIs).

NRIs are Indians who are residents of foreign countries. The PIO category was abolished in 2015 and merged with the OCI category. However, existing PIO cards

are valid till December 31, 2023, by which the holders of these cards have to obtain OCI cards.

According to the MEA, PIO refers to a foreign citizen (except a national of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, Iran, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Nepal) who at any time held an Indian passport, or who or either of their parents/ grandparents/great grandparents was born and permanently resided in India as defined in Government of India Act, 1935, or who is a spouse of a citizen of India or a PIO.

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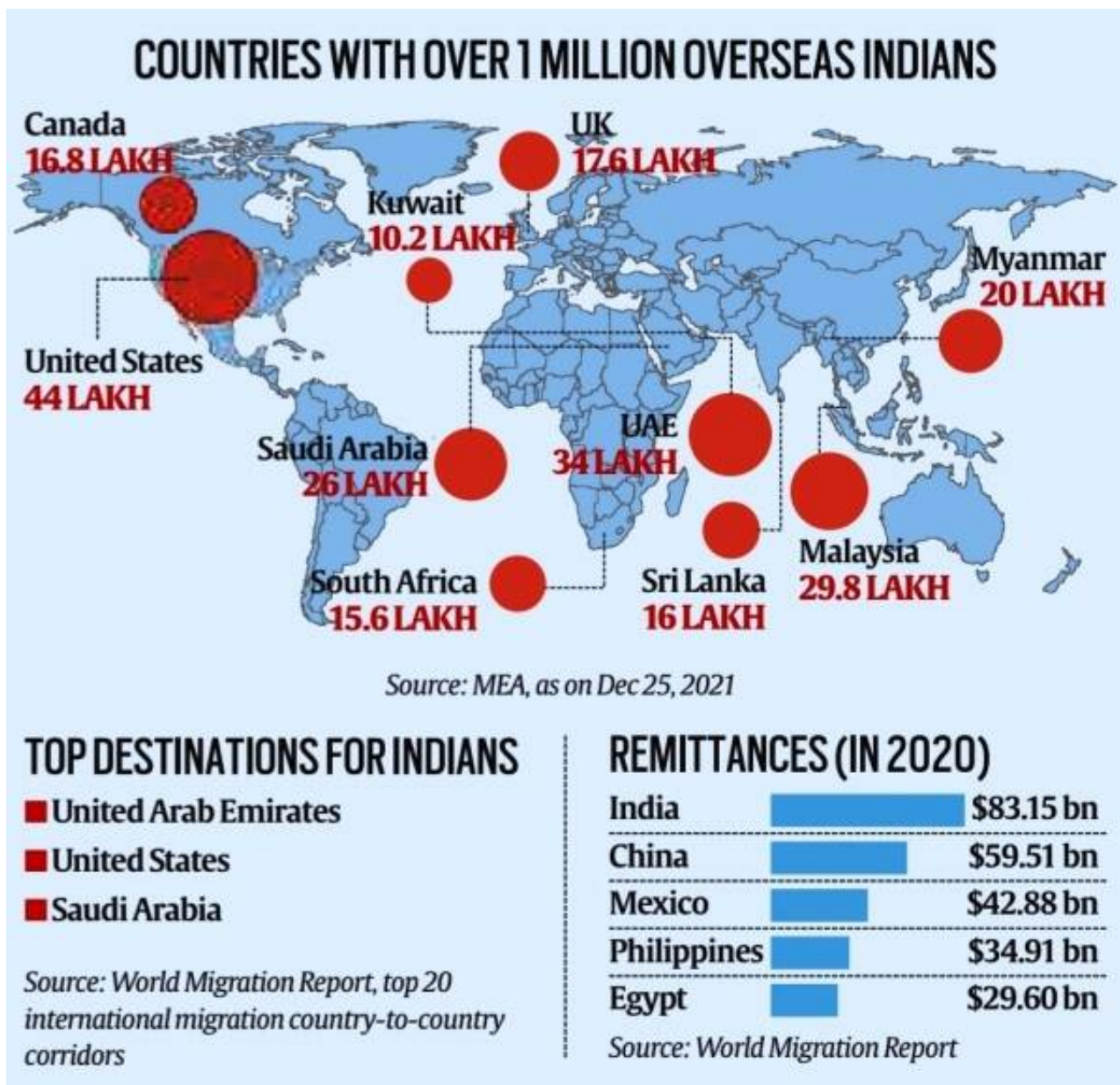
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A separate category of OCI was carved out in 2006. An OCI card was given to a foreign national who was eligible to be a citizen of India on January 26, 1950, was a citizen of India on or at any time after January 26, 1950, or belonged to a territory that became part of India after August 15, 1947. Minor children of such individuals, except those who were a citizen of Pakistan or Bangladesh, were also eligible for OCI cards.

Numbers and geographical spread

According to an August 22, 2022 report of the Parliamentary committee on external affairs, as on December 31, 2021, there were 4.7 crore Indians living overseas. The number includes NRIs, PIOs, OCIs, and students. Excluding students, the number stands at 3.22 crore, including 1.87 crore PIOs and 1.35 crore NRIs.

According to the World Migration Report, prepared by the International Organisation for Migration under the United Nations, India has the largest emigrant population in the world, making it the top origin country globally, followed by Mexico, Russian and China.



Map of countries with over 1 mn overseas Indians.

Numbers shared by the government in Parliament in 2022 show that the geographical spread of the Indian diaspora is vast. The countries with over 10 lakh overseas Indians include United States of America (44 lakh), United Kingdom (17.6 lakh), United Arab Emirates (34 lakh), Sri Lanka (16 lakh), South Africa (15.6 lakh), Saudi Arabia (26 lakh), Myanmar (20 lakh), Malaysia (29.8 lakh), Kuwait (10.2 lakh) and Canada (16.8 lakh).

Remittances

Remittances, according to the World Bank, are a vital source of household income for low- and middle-income countries like India. The latest World Bank Migration

and Development Brief, released in November 2022, said, “For the first time a single country, India, is on track to receive more than \$100 billion in yearly remittances.”

The World Migration Report notes that India, China, Mexico, the Philippines and Egypt are (in descending order) among the top five remittance recipient countries, “although India and China were well above the rest”. In 2020, the two neighbours received the largest amounts of international remittances in Asia, with a combined total of more than \$140 billion, it added.

Involvement in politics

The vocal political positions taken by a section of the Indian diaspora, particularly in the US and the UK, is a fairly recent phenomenon. For instance, the Hindu American Foundation, a Hindu advocacy group based in the US, was set up in 2003, the same year the Pravasi Bharatiya Convention was launched. At the launch, then PM Vajpayee had said overseas Indians can “project the truth about India to the world in a credible and effective manner” and counter “propaganda”.

In his speech on Monday, PM Modi echoed similar sentiments, urging Pravasi Bharatiyas to amplify India’s “development story”. Modi also makes it a point to address large gatherings of the diaspora community when visiting foreign countries. Many prominent overseas Indians play an active role in organising such meetings.

Charges of bias

The August 22 report of the house panel, which was chaired by BJP MP PP Chaudhary, pointed out that conventions such as the Pravasi Bharatiya Sammelan appear to be leaving out a large section of the diaspora that is not wealthy.

It expressed apprehension that “low/semi-skilled and blue collar workers may not find place or feel comfortable to participate in the said celebration as the general profile of participants is seen to be of very high level. The Committee have a strong view that the participation and involvement should be more broad-based accommodating the vulnerable sections of the diaspora community too.”