

GOPIO in 2012: Another Year of Continuing Progress

By Ashook Ramsaran

The year 2012 has seen a remarkable level of GOPIO's growth, expansion and progress at all levels. GOPIO's progress is evident at the international, regional, country and chapter levels; at the executive and council levels; with GOPIO addressing issues of interest and concern to the Indian Diaspora; GOPIO's close collaboration with governments (India and Diaspora countries), international agencies; GOPIO's planning and holding seminars and conferences in various parts of the Indian Diaspora; as well as GOPIO embarking on several significant and visionary projects of interest to our global Indian community.

The GOPIO team has grown and expanded to include newly appointed International Coordinators in Europe, Africa, South Asia, Caribbean and South America, Oceania (Fiji, Australia and New Zealand). We have made appointments of new treasurer, secretary and associate secretaries to provide valuable administrative support. In addition, GOPIO's councils have new and/or re-appointed chairpersons at GOPIO's academic, business, cultural, youth, women, science and technology, media and health councils. These councils have been greatly expanded with the addition of several co-chairpersons and additional members who are representative of the various diaspora regions.

We have also added several committees and task forces to manage specific missions as part of GOPIO's objectives. These include: Liaison to Government of India, Liaison to United States Indian Organizations; Liaison to United Nations; GOPIO By-Laws, Policies & Procedures Committee; South Africa Human Rights Task Force to evaluate and assess discrimination being perpetrated against PIOs in South Africa; Task Force on Conflicts of Culture to address situations such as Ireland, Norway and others where there are conflicts of culture and assimilation; GOPIO Gadar Centennial Global Organizing Committee, and others.

Regarding GOPIO's collaboration with agencies and other organizations, we have signed another Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) on science and technology; and an MoU with the Dnyaneshwar Mulay Education Society (DMES) on diaspora engagement with India and diaspora countries for rural development, education and youth services; GOPIO is collaborating with United Nation Women's Organization; GOPIO teaming with Indian Council for Cultural Affairs (ICCR) for GOPIO Gadar Centennial Commemoration globally; further strengthening GOPIO's partnership with the Overseas Indian Facilitation Centre (OIFC); collaboration with Indian Centre for Migration of Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA); planned collaboration for joint conference with National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Martin Luther King Foundation for Gandhi on October 2, 2013 in Atlanta, USA; continued collaboration and support of Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) and annual Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) events; applications and processes for affiliation with several other agencies, organizations and groups.

During the year 2012, GOPIO held a series of highly successful seminars, symposia, presentations, launches and conferences at the local chapter levels, regionally and at the international level. These are in addition to the many activities done at the local chapter level. Some of these include: GOPIO Convention 2012 preceding PBD2012 in Jaipur; hosting Trinidad & Tobago's Prime Minister Hon Kamla Persad Bissessar in Kolkata after visiting the Kolkata Memorial; Caribbean regional diaspora conference hosted by GOPIO of St. Vincent and the

Grenadines; several well attended health seminars conducted by GOPIO Health Council in collaboration with GOPIO chapters; held New York seminar on India-US Geo-Economic Strategies & Roles in 21st Century; presentations on GOPIO and Indian Diaspora in El Salvador at invitation of Organization of American States (OAS) and at the Commonwealth Symposium in Birmingham, UK; Shivaji University in Pune on diaspora engagement; collaboration with Overseas Indian Facilitation Centre (OIFC) on Diaspora Engagement Meet in East Africa in Nairobi, Kenya on 13 April 2012; collaboration with Gujarat University Study Abroad Program of Gujarat University, Ahmedabad, India on 12th-13th January, 2012 on “Indian Diaspora: Inter-Linkage and Synergy”; launch of GOPIO Gadar Centennial Commemoration in USA at Indian Embassy in Washington, DC; and several other notable events.

GOPIO commissioned its Global Indian Diaspora publication which provides a history of GOPIO from its inception, accomplishments and selected biographies. Published by Empire India, it discusses how the Indian diaspora is “connected by the proverbial umbilical cord with its motherland and in the 21st century, intensified its engagements with India. Spread over a 100 nations globally, and connecting regularly with its roots in one form or another, the Indian Diaspora, 28 million strong, is largely responsible for India’s growing clout in the world scene. In many ways, the men and women of the Indian diaspora are unofficial ambassadors of India, for what they showcase becomes a cornerstone for opinion building on India. This book provides insights how the diaspora has fared and the key issues it has raised, through the eyes of one of the most respected diaspora organizations in the world—the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO). The book also profiles some leading GOPIO members, and the chapters that the organization has established worldwide. Also featured are some Little India’s across the world”.

A few of GOPIO’s several major accomplishments in 2012 include:

US Tax Rules on Foreign Bank Accounts: GOPIO initiated an awareness campaign in the United States about Overseas Voluntary Disclosure Initiative (OVDI) and Foreign Bank Account Reporting (FBAR) requirements in collaboration with other national and community based organizations (including NFIA, AAPI, AAHOA). Letters of appeal for reduction of penalties were sent to the US President, Secretary of the Treasury and Internal Revenue Service (IRS) Commissioner. Community awareness was initiated for compliance before the IRS deadline and a delegation met with the officials of the Treasury department on this matter. GOPIO continues its efforts to seek relief from the stringent application of IRS rules which place an undue burden on law abiding taxpayers.

GOPIO Gadar Centennial Commemoration: The history of the Gadar movement is a testimony of the deep love that the Indian immigrants had for their motherland, India. The Gadarites wanted India freed from the British and did not hesitate to make any sacrifices for the cause of freedom, dignity and prosperity of their motherland. Over 6,000 went back to India to fight for their cause; several Gadarites were imprisoned, many for life, and some were hanged. They are heroes, deserving highest of admiration and deepest respect. The determination, courage and sacrifices of the Gadarites inspired many freedom fighters to continue their mission for India's independence. The Gadar Movement is an integral part of the rich heritage in the United States for the Indian Americans and of Indian history. The Gadarites left an extra-ordinary legacy for the future generations and a global centennial commemoration is a fitting and well deserved tribute.

In early 2012, GOPIO took the initiative for a global Gadar Centennial Commemoration of the upcoming 100th anniversary of the Gadar movement in 2013 involving various agencies, organizations and institutions. GOPIO plans a series of commemoration events throughout 2013 in collaboration with several NRI/PIO organizations, government and international agencies, individuals and institutions. It is a fitting tribute to patriots and heroes of the Gadar Movement and deserving of their sacrifices to free India. GOPIO successfully appealed to the Hon Prime Minister of India, the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) and Ministry of External Affairs for recognition and support of GOPIO's efforts for Gadar Centennial Commemoration. Those efforts resulted in Gadar becoming an important part of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD 2013) events: An Oration at the plenary session, release of a Gadar Centennial postage stamp, a Gadar Exhibit and Hon. Prime Minister's speech on 8th January to make favorable mention of Gadar.

The launch event on November 3, 2012 at the Indian Embassy in Washington DC, with chief guest Hon Amb Nirupama Roa, included a lecture/discussion on "The Role of Gadar Movement for India's Independence" by prominent Gadar researchers and historians, a release of the GOPIO publication on "Global Indian Diaspora". As GOPIO has done for the Kolkata Memorial unveiled on January 11, 2011 in recognition and remembrance of Indian indentured laborers who left India from 1834-1920, the Centennial Commemoration of Gadar Movement is another GOPIO initiative in our continuing efforts to preserve and promote Indian history, heritage and culture. GOPIO has submitted a formal request to Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) for the regional Pbd2013 be held in San Francisco, USA to coincide with the GOPIO Gadar Centennial finale on November 1, 2013.

GOPIO consistently provides timely responses to critical issues affecting people NRIs and PIOs, with press statements, voicing and sharing concern, in collaboration with other organizations and groups, seeking redress for common good. GOPIO's newsletter has been enhanced with added members of the editorial team to accumulate, edit and produce the newsletter that has become the source of valuable information for PIOs and NRIs. GOPIO has set up 2 task forces to address issues affecting NRIs and PIOs : The South Africa Human Rights Task Force on discrimination being perpetrated against PIOs in South Africa; The Task Force on Conflicts of Culture to address situations such as Ireland, Norway and others where there are conflicts and clash of culture and assimilation. GOPIO responds in timely manner with statements of concern and support to incidents and occurrences that have a direct impact on the lives NRIs and PIOs: Shootings and killings at Gurdwara in Milwaukee, USA on August 5, 2012; Mourning the passing of former Indian Prime Minister Shri Inder Kumar Gujral, a member of GOPIO's Honor Roll, November 2012; Condemning the wave of violent protests in Africa and the Middle East directed against foreign persons in September 2012; and several others.

GOPIO has embarked on an active program, completed in November 2012, to enhance and upgrade its chapter and council policies, procedures and guidelines in order to provide more consistency, uniformity and standardization within the GOPIO family while strengthening the spirit, objectives and goals as a global diaspora organization. This process will enable more responsive actions, more vibrancy as chapters and councils of GOPIO and to function as cohesive units of GOPIO. This effort also strengthens GOPIO's chapters and councils to be better organized and to be of needed service to the rapidly increasing NRI and PIO communities in USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. This effort also provides essential organizational structure and tools to serve second migration communities of PIOs from Caribbean in USA,

Canada and Netherlands, as well as of PIOs from Mauritius and Francophone countries in France.

Major symposia, seminars and conferences planned for 2013 include: Women's Conference - May 2013 in New Zealand; Regional Diaspora Conference - June 2013 in Suriname; GOPIO Gadar Global Centennial seminars throughout 2013 in major cities in USA, Canada, Europe, Australia, South Africa and India – with a finale in San Francisco, USA on November 2013; 175th Anniversary of Indian Arrival in Guyana – May 2013; 2-day Conference on Contributions of Indians and PIO Women of Africa - August 2013 in South Africa; GOPIO Biennial Convention - September 2013; Conference on Gandhi's Contributions to US Civil Rights – October 2013 in Atlanta, USA; and others being planned.

GOPIO is looking ahead with a very pro-active agenda and prospects for more active engagement on issues and interests to the global NRI and PIO community as the Indian Diaspora increases in population, living in more countries than before. These include deliberation, discussions and debate on: Women's issues; inter-generational issues; assimilation and adaption in new countries; peaceful co-existence in multi-ethnic societies; the productive role of NRIs and PIOs in new host countries; increased academic and political empowerment; awareness, education and better understanding on Indian heritage and culture to non-Indians; more inter-ethnic and multi-cultural engagement and collaboration. High on the agenda is GOPIO's planned project on the inculcation and preservation of Indianness among the newer generation of PIOs, the youth of today and tomorrow.

My statement in summary is that, “while we follow the footsteps of those who came before us and we stand tall on the shoulders of those who pioneered GOPIO, we work diligently to enhance, grow and expand GOPIO to make it more responsive and vibrant as a global organization serving the needs of the NRI and PIO community worldwide. PIOs and NRIs living in different countries may feel far away but are not alone”.

GOPIO continues to take up issues, advancing the interests of the global NRI/PIO communities and lobbying for their resolutions. GOPIO is a non-partisan, not-for-profit, secular organization. GOPIO's volunteers are committed to building bonds, friendships, alliances, and the camaraderie of NRIs and PIOs alike. GOPIO volunteers believe that when they help network the global Indian community, they facilitate making tomorrow a better world for the Indian Diaspora.

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