

Plenary Session 2 – “Heritage and Diaspora”
Pravasi Bharatiya Divas 2013 (PBD2013) on 8th January, 2013
Presentation by Ashook Ramsaran, *President of GOPIO International*

*Hon. Chairman Dr. Shashi Tharoor;
Sir Anand Satyanand; Hon. Dato Sumbramaniam; Baroness Sandip Verma; Ambassador
Gopinath Pillai; Ambassador Varma; Hon. Min Kenny of Canada; Hon. Erewa of
Nigeria; Other esteemed panelists.*

Ladies and gentlemen:

Good afternoon.

It seems that we have exploited the full duration of this plenary session with many worthy speakers and near to lunch time with the remaining audience being mostly PIOs and NRIs – in effect, we are educating ourselves and fewer others.

The theme of this plenary session is: **Heritage & Diaspora**

That is: Our heritage - the legacy of culture and civilization that binds people of Indian origin across various geographies. And, exploring the diverse elements of Indian heritage and values, including traditional knowledge, and their cultural relevance.

My presentation focuses on our heritage, our values and our cultural relevance in the Indian diaspora.

To begin with, I want to explore the make-up and nuances of our Indian diaspora.

I quote from the Indian High Level Commission Report of August 2000:

People of Indian Origin began to migrate overseas in significant numbers only in the 19th century driven by economic compulsions generated by colonialism. In a unique diverse pattern, Indians spread initially to countries of Africa, South East Asia, Fiji and the Caribbean – and the enormous demand for cheap labor after the abolition of slavery. In the second half of the 20th century, a steady flow of professionals to developed countries of the west and India’s skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labor in West Asia and Gulf States.

Today there are over 28 million in the diaspora, from recent emigrants to several generations in the so-called older (legacy) diaspora, speaking many languages and residing in numerous countries. In addition, there is a significant number working on temporary visas in both skilled and unskilled jobs. The fact that there are 160 Indian high commissions and consulates confirms the widespread domiciles and increasing numbers of Indians outside of India.

This is indeed a unique phenomenon of migration where the culture, heritage and values bind and bond like an overwhelming dose of hereditary jewels, traits and attributes that reside within us whenever and wherever we go. Indian heritage is like a huge banyan tree, strong and vibrant, with many branches and extremely deep roots of shared values of Indianness that cannot be easily discarded or denied. Indian heritage is undeniably an invaluable source of inspiration and pride.

The fact that we are here at this diaspora event confirms its very existence even while we try to fathom the depths of heritage and how it sustains the diaspora.

Other than the Jewish Diaspora, our diaspora is unique that adds to our legacy, a priceless treasure envied by others, intrinsic in so many ways.

Indian heritage is the cornerstone of the diaspora, transcending time and place, surviving obstacles and severe situations, remoteness and influences. Despite speaking different languages, living in different and sometimes remote places, sustaining and improving our lives, we share heartfelt feelings of Indianness and the urge and yearning to connect and belong. Meanwhile, we have inherited and taken a lot from India and transformed our lives and the new countries of our birth or adoption.

The Indian diaspora is a continuing phenomenon and can be likened to “the export of people seeking better lives for themselves and their families” which we achieve, and subsequently we flourish after assimilation and adaption with each succeeding generation, while adding to economic progress of our respective countries of domicile. Indian heritage, culture and values are the driving elements for sustenance, survival, achievement, pride and progress at all levels.

The older diaspora, which I refer to as the legacy diaspora, of the Caribbean, Africa, Mauritius and Oceania, have retained more of the Indian culture and heritage intact and in its original form for the many reasons associated with remoteness, harsh living conditions, sense of belonging and togetherness, sustenance and bonding – while some adaptation was necessary, such as with foods and clothing, some conversion to Christianity, and break down of the caste system. Later, some Indian music and songs witnessed a fusion combination such as “Caribbean Chutney”.

It seems that wherever we Indians go, we take certain staples that sustain us:

- Mantra; Music; Massala; Memories; Mentoring; Marriage; the importance of Mataji; the value of Money ..and so on.

This identity of Indianness and preservation of culture are often cited by other ethnic groups and used as valuable lessons in consideration of their own expatriates. The Organization of American States and the Commonwealth Symposium in UK recently invited me as one knowledgeable in the Indian diaspora for discussions in El Salvador and Birmingham, UK for recommendations to harness the strength, expertise and assets of their respective groups of expatriates: Latin America; Jamaica; Nigeria and others.

From Durban to Detroit, we have strived to do better for ourselves and have contributed to the new country's progress in significant ways. We have put a woman in space; cell phones in the hands of working people; wiped out polio; excelled in tennis, cricket, chess; earned Nobel prizes for writing and economics, science and technology, etc.

However, we have a knack for reconciling our two (2) identities – our inherent Indianness and birth or newly adopted citizenship. We learn very easily to adapt and co-exist and progress in other countries with multi-ethnic societies far away from India.

Indian heritage is such a powerful asset in the diaspora that some other colonial powers marginalized persons of Indian origin curbing cultural observances and by making it difficult to maintain cultural traditions; despite such efforts, those Indians persevered and sought more to preserve and protect Indian by culture, heritage and values, and survived and remained vibrant.

Note that adherence to Indian heritage and cultural origin should not – and must not – diminish national loyalty. In fact, assimilation and adaption are key attributes to progressive lives in other birth or newly adopted countries.

Our heritage includes “blessings as well as yokes of burdens” – such as caste; centuries of traditions that contribute to social injustices; perceptions of differences among us while others (non-Indians) do not; inter-generational issues; “don't worry”; not my fault; “I am not the concerned person”; there's always an explanation; “no” is not necessarily the last word; restraint; flexibility and looking for another entrance; knowing everything; not helping the cutlery industry; clash of culture” difficulties; recycled leadership in politics, religious and social organizations; etc, etc.

Our diaspora is molded by culture, heritage and values while it also adds to and sometimes influences those traits in both subtle and visible ways: language, clothing, lifestyle, technology and social values.

With innovation, modern communications, advanced transportation and increased levels of mobility, as well as increased opportunities in management, professions, business and entrepreneurship in a growing India, there is re-migration (second journeys). There also some repatriation to India and other diaspora countries after retirement.

Especially among older (legacy) diaspora, there is the yearning to find one's roots with research and regular trips by PIOs from Caribbean, South Africa and Mauritius to find's family and "roots". The "Tracing our Roots" was first discussed at a session I organized at PBD20005 in Mumbai because of the need. The Kolkata Memorial, a diaspora initiative that I worked closely with Government of India to dedicate, is as so symbolic as a beacon of acknowledgement of those who left India as indentured laborers from 1834-1920; the Gadar Centennial movement was also a diaspora initiative event and will be celebrated as such; Mahatma Gandhi's return to India to fight for freedom is well known.

One must acknowledge and be grateful for the indisputable and invaluable role of civic, cultural, religious and advocacy organizations in preservation of inherent culture and values – such as GOPIO of which I am privileged to be the current president. These have helped promote assimilation with ease, generally peaceful co-existence among multi-ethnic societies. GOPIO is a global Indian diaspora advocacy organization addressing the concerns and interests of the global Indian community and was successful in its petition to the Government of India to establish the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs.

Indian heritage has undoubtedly influenced our lives and in time, we have also influenced the lives of others (non-Indians) in our midst. Visible examples include: Gadar movement spawned and encouraged others in diaspora countries in their struggle for their independence; Gandhi as model of tolerance and perseverance for those seeking peace, civil rights and equality in USA, South Africa and other countries; celebration and general acceptance of Holi and Diwali by non-Indians.

Courage, reliance, determination, thrift and hard work, competitiveness, faith reverence and respect – hallmarks of Indianness derived from culture, heritage and values that are maintained, nurtured and remain with us beyond the shores of India. The Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs has provided a tremendous boost to the Indian diaspora with many programs, policies, plans and schemes to embrace and engagement to make it more connected and meaningful. "Embrace and Engage" – sounds like a love affair and that's what it is !!

As a precaution: It behooves us to take all necessary steps to promote and preserve Indian culture, heritage and values among the younger generation in the diaspora with the influences of technology, mobility and inter-marriage -- lest the diaspora wanes in these attributes that are serving it well.

Living outside of India, we can teach a lot to others while we learn a lot as well. Living outside of India, we have improved and transformed our lives and the countries where we live.

The Indian diaspora is fortunate that nowadays there is freedom to migrate with many available countries which readily accept Indians and persons of Indian origin to settle and become citizens, to make progress at all levels, to bring their extended families, to continue religious and cultural observances, and to live in safety.

I will conclude by saying:

This is an important plenary session and I am hopeful that this leads to a bigger, more in-depth discourse that this topic truly deserves – the why, where, when, who, what, influences, shape and form of the past, present and future – and the effects in a rapidly changing, dynamic and changing diaspora.

Thank you.



Ashook Ramsaran was born in Guyana, third generation of Indian indentured laborers who came to Guyana in 1853 and 1860 respectively. He is founder and president of Ramex, an electronics manufacturing company based in New York, USA. He is president of the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO International) and resides in New York USA with his family.

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Photo above (l-r): Plenary Session 2 – “Heritage and Diaspora” at PBD2013 on 8th Jan, 2013 in Kochi, India: Ashook Ramsaran, President of GOPIO International, USA; Gopinath Pillai, Ambassador-at-Large, Singapore; Shri Pavan K Varma, author and former Ambassador of India to Bhutan; Sir Anand Satyanand, former Governor General, New Zealand; Dr. Shashi Tharoor, Minister of State for Human Resource Development, Gov't of India; Baroness Sandeep Verma, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, U K; Dato Seri Dr S. Subramaniam, Minister of Human Resources, Malaysia; Ms Abike Dabiri Erewa, Chairperson of the Nigerian House of Representatives Committee; Shri Yanktesh Permal Reddy, Chairman of Reddy group of Companies.