

## FROM THE RINGSIDE

Coming home to the village

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This year's Pravasi Bhartiya Diwas concluded about a week ago. The prime minister outlined the broad agenda to engage Non Resident Indians (NRIs) by including economic, financial, intellectual and emotional participation. The finance minister is separately contemplating a Special Purpose Vehicle for an infrastructure fund that will be mutually beneficial, yielding both high returns and partly meeting our infrastructure financing needs.

Traditionally, NRIs have been a complaining — if not a demanding — lot. This has now changed greatly in at least two ways.

First, the new growth momentum and opportunities in India give them enough scope to participate in the development process. Second, both in the US and Europe, their new affluence and prosperity has made them valued partners and their contribution is being increasingly recognised. This new confidence, coupled with financial muscle, has made them a relevant player in political decision-making. The significant contribution of the Indo-American community in galvanising support for the enactment of the recent legislation on civil nuclear energy is a case in point.

While engagement at the national level will remain significant, a large number of non-residents relate more easily to their states of origin — their village, district, schools and colleges in which they spent their initial years. There are others who relate to the places from which their ancestors migrated, and generally there is a desire to make a contribution, to renew their bond, or to pay back in some form or the other.

Both nostalgia and search for identity are also important drivers, and state-level engagement of NRIs will always remain meaningful. The initiatives of Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, and Maharashtra to engage NRIs at state-level has proved quite purposive.

Bihar, which has a significant and flourishing non-resident community in the US and UK, not to speak of Mauritius and the Caribbean, had so far lagged behind. From this point of view, the Global Meet for a Resurgent Bihar held in Patna this week marks a new beginning. President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, while inaugurating the conference, dwelt on the multiple opportunities that Bihar has to offer.

The participation of Meghnad Desai, C. Rangarajan, Kirit Parikh, Y.C. Deveshwar and other representatives of international institutions and the state bureaucracy lend content and credence to the deliberations on the "New challenges and opportunities for Bihar's development." Alakh Sharma, director, Institute for Human Development, coordinated the meet and acted imaginatively in securing the participation of large number of non-resident Biharis in prominent positions — an impressive list that shows that while Biharis are doing well everywhere, Bihar languishes.

Micro-level efforts to engage non-residents may not garner significant financial resources but will certainly reinforce emotional ties. Most non-residents are hesitant to make contributions to any omnibus fund lest its identity is lost and the money goes into something they don't particularly care about. That is why concepts like contribution to a Shiksha Kosh carried little attraction. Sometimes policies make this difficult. We need to devise guidelines that will facilitate their engagement, like:

- The creation of a financial corpus or a special development bond for a project that gives them satisfaction. This would also be useful to those who want to make a general contribution.
- Allowing schools in village or district and primary health centres to accept contribution and give suitable recognition.
- Allow infrastructure investment at village- or district-level, perhaps by creating a single-window system for such contributions.
- Some states have now set up foundations or trusts facilitating continuous interaction with NRIs.
- Remittances, through inter-state and inter-country transfers, constitute a growing and substantial financial flow. While these are private funds designed to raise consumption and support expenditure in the housing and social sector our ability to catalyse them in capital creating assets remains a challenge.

Micro-engagement of NRIs is the way forward.

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