

South Asia Diaspora Convention

Singapore 21-22 July

Remarks of Tarun Das

Singapore is just the right place to get South Asians together, to organize this convention.

My congratulations and appreciation to ISAS for this leadership and to President Nathan for the idea.

I am privileged to participate and speak today at this South Asia Diaspora Convention. Thank you, very much, Mr Gopinath Pillai for this opportunity. The agenda for these two days is very comprehensive with many distinguished speakers.

Its always great to be in Singapore and this Convention brings me back within a short time to reconnect with my favourite country and people- Singapore and Singaporeans. My association with Singapore started on 28 September 1993 with a 4 ½ hour session with then PM, now ESM, Goh Chok Tong. We were 18 CEOs from India. The relationship grew inspite of many ups and downs and matured into CECA. India's first real FTA. India's best friend in the East is Singapore.

My personal experience with Diaspora issues is essentially India-related so I want to share a few specific examples of the two way bridge between India

and its Diaspora, and vice versa. I hope these are relevant to everyone and over the next 2 days we will learn about what has worked for other countries. This sharing is crucial. I shall therefore focus on just 9 specific ideas which have worked well for India and the Diaspora.

Consciousness about the Diaspora has always been there but post-1991-Fall of our Berlin Wall and economic reforms, India appreciated the role of the Diaspora much more and the Diaspora's interest in India went far beyond sending remittances home, giving small donations to NGOs and connecting with family and friends. The economic reforms added a new breed of global Indians, working and living around the world. 25 million spread over 185 countries. Nearly 2.5 million in USA. Nearly half a million in Singapore. Heterogeneous in every possible way. Building new Bridges. It began with investment by leaders and pioneers like Gopinath Pillai and Satpal Khattar and others.

For India, the first key element was to put together a structure and organization which is still evolving. A dedicated Ministry; an Overseas Indians Facilitation Centre, public private partnership between Government and CII; a Global Council chaired by the PM; an annual Diaspora event organized by Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs and CII in India coinciding with the date of Mahatma Gandhi's return to India from South Africa; events around the world, the most recent in Trinidad, again by Government of India and CII; annual Awards for the Diaspora; a know your country program for young Diaspora; a Trace Your Roots Program; an OCI

card; a dedicated Fund for emergency help; Labour Agreements defining working conditions in select countries, etc etc. When you look at all this, you get a sense of the criticality, the vitality, the priority for the Diaspora. And, its a PPP model- Govt and CII. I am sure other countries have similar structure and these can connect across South Asia.

A structure, a system, a nodal agency-these are key to building the 2-way bridge. These serve as the base, the springboard, the focus of attention and action. The Diaspora knows where and whom to connect with.

This is the foundation Bridge.

Let me now turn to my real-life examples of India and the Diaspora, the 2-way bridge at work.

The 9 Bridges:

One, The Diaspora Alumni connect with schools and colleges in India, including IITs, through research, teaching, donations, sponsoring chairs and the like which have helped to strengthen India's educational institutions. For example, a R&D Centre in Life Sciences in IIT Mumbai is entirely funded and led by the Wadhvani Foundation in USA. This is only of 1 of many examples.

The Alumni Bridge.

Two, the successful Venture Capitalists of Silicon Valley who have brought their experience and knowledge of entrepreneurship building and business development to India. They have set up Funds. They have identified potential entrepreneurs. They have provided finance and mentorship. They have built entrepreneurs.

The Entrepreneurship Bridge

Three, Thoughtleaders such as CK Prahalad of the Michigan Business School who have given India a vision for the country, including agenda issues such as 500 million youth to be skilled by 2022. A vision endorsed by Govt and civil society and a roadmap framed to achieve these. He has also given us the roadmap to achieve 10% p.a. growth and reach out to markets at the grassroots level - the “Bottom of Pyramid” idea.

The Thoughtleadership Bridge

Four, Technology Leaders such as Sam Pitroda of Chicago who brought a revolution in Telecom to India and is now building a world class information infrastructure for the country. A transformational role which changed India completely.

The Technology Bridge.

Five, Researchers such as Prof Abhijit Banerjee of MIT who are working at the grassroots level on Poverty-collecting data, doing analysis, feeding in the findings and helping to find micro and macro solutions.

The Research Bridge.

Six, Teachers and policy makers such as Prof Raghuram Rajan of Chicago who are chairing key policy committees in India and volunteering time and energy to frame policies for the future.

The Policy Bridge.

Seven, Indians in USA organizing themselves to work with US Congress to strengthen Indo-US relations including the Nuclear Deal, as an example.

The Relationship Bridge.

Eight, National Leaders of other countries of Indian origin whose wise counsel is sought by India to enhance bilateral relations. President Nathan is one such leader who has also been the Guest of Honour at the Annual Diaspora event in Delhi.

The Mentorship Bridge.

Nine, Leadership in transforming different areas of development such as Health and Education, by providing Inputs and Ideas to India. Prof Amartya Sen, Nobel Laureate, is an example of leadership in these tough areas.

The Development Bridge.

There are many many more examples but the key message is that the Bridge helps to meet development challenges. Its beyond just about trade and investment however important these are. The Diaspora is often seen to

be engaged with the more difficult, basic complex concerns of India, of any country, helping in many ways.

All of it adds up to **The Diaspora Talent Bridge.**

For India, the Diaspora has become a Brain Bank not, as was said earlier, a Brain Drain. And, as the Diaspora gives back to India, the country also acknowledges their contribution through awards and other means of recognition. There is mutuality. It is a 2-way street. A 2-way Bridge.

The Talent Bridge

The unique aspect is that the Diaspora is integrated into the country where they live and work. They are fully part of the society in the country of their adoption and, yet connect to the country of their origin in a variety of ways. This is an amazing, unique phenomenon. No country symbolizes this more than Singapore where Indians live happily, call it “Perfect” and are fully integrated. If my children were to look for a ‘home’ away from ‘home’, I would ask Singapore to take them in. Singapore is the ultimate, secular, cosmopolitan, integrated, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural country.

There is another very important aspect which goes beyond economy, education, health, bilateral issues etc. It is Culture. The convergence of eastern influences on music and the arts. In fact, the West has been influenced by yoga, eastern music, religions, spirituality and more. This has led to a more personal “Connect” between countries and peoples. The Diaspora has been an important conduit to carry “culture” to the world and

bring global cultures to India. South Asian culture is rich. Cultural cooperation is quite strong. Can be more so.

The world is changing. Globalization has connected people through technology as never before. The future will see this connect becoming easier and deeper in the journey of countries and people. And, more and more, the innovative low cost products and services developed in India and South Asia , will go out to the world.

The Arvind Eye Centre is an example of low cost but world class eye surgery in India. There are many more such examples where Innovation has brought change and development. The Grameen Bank in Bangladesh.

For me, therefore, there is huge excitement about the Diaspora and the 2-way bridge. Thanks to the internet and social media, this could become a 3-way or 4-way, bridge. The possibilities are just limitless. And, Singapore is the right place for this convergence. No other country, no other city has the ability to bring people together like Singapore.

This Convention will surely give to all of us new ideas to build a strong, sustainable bridge to carry ever more traffic between the Diaspora and the country of their origin. The Diaspora is not easy to get hold of. Spread out. Diverse. Individualistic. Therefore, this Convention itself must have been a challenge for Gopi and his colleagues.

Thank you, ISAS. Thank you Gopi for taking on this challenge in such a highly competent and comprehensive way.

Two years from now the 2nd SADC will be stronger.

Four years hence the 3rd SADC will be even stronger.

Stay with it. You will make a massive contribution to South Asia integration.

Thank you very much.