

What Role Can the Global Indian Diaspora Play in the 'New India'?

Thursday 1 October 2020, by [AGRAWAL Sristy](#), [PAIN Bedabrata](#), [TARAFDER Rajashik](#) (Date first published: 11 September 2020).

When people in India are being steadily deprived of the right to dissent, it is necessary to use space where similar constraints do not exist. The Global Indian diaspora in “free-er” countries can provide one such space.

Prashant Bhushan's conviction by the Supreme Court [for contempt of court](#) has become a watershed moment [as far as popular faith in the judiciary](#) and its role in dispensing fair, impartial and equitable justice is concerned.

This erosion of faith wasn't sudden, and the alarm bells had already been sounding for a while. The complicity of the judiciary in allowing academics and activists to be kept in jail for what has now been over two years on the basis of the [flimsy Bhima Koregaon case](#), a [perverse judgment](#) in the Ayodhya case, its disingenuous silence on the executive arbitrariness concerning Jammu and Kashmir, its delaying tactics with respect to the [CAA-NRC petitions](#), and [callous attitude](#) towards the migrant labor crisis – none of these have gone unnoticed. To make matters worse, the Supreme Court even [transferred](#) the only judge who was proactively trying to address the Delhi pogroms while lives were being lost in the streets.

Despite their nature, none of these retrogressive steps carried out by the current regime appear to fall foul of the Indian constitution. If anything, they carry – as the government claims and the judiciary refuses to contradict – the full weight of the constitution. Similarly, draconian laws such as TADA and its modern renditions like UAPA and its recent amendments also carry the imprimatur of constitutionality. In this sense, the ongoing repression is only bringing in to sharp focus the very nature of the Indian state. The Supreme Court is not only complicit in the abbreviation of rights – especially the right to conscience – but central to the current structure of the state.

With Bhushan, however, the system has taken on a certain nakedness. Destroying dissent no longer requires invoking the insidious narrative of sedition or drumming up tortuous and baseless evidence to incarcerate activists, lawyers, and academics without trial; as the cases of [Dr. Teltumbde](#) or [Varavara Rao](#) or other reputed activists indicate. In Bhima Koregaon and the Delhi riots, we have instead entered an Orwellian phase where victims are hauled up as perpetrators, and perpetrators are allowed to go scot-free.

In such a situation, where people are being steadily deprived of the right to dissent, it is necessary to use space where similar constraints do not exist. The Global Indian diaspora in “free-er” countries can provide one such space.

Indians abroad have a proud history of progressive organising, starting from the freedom movement – be it in form of the [Ghadar party](#) or the Indian National Army (INA) – to movements against the Emergency or in support of progressive causes in India.

Of course, right-wing forces have also carried out their brand of organizing towards divisive and chauvinistic ends. In the last four or five decades, Hindutva forces supported by caste networks set up *shakhas* in countries like the USA UK, Canada, and other places. Under the pretext of practicing [“long-distance nationalism,”](#) they have primarily focused on promoting and educating Indians abroad in the ideology of Hindutva. Over time, these shakhas formed the bedrock for financial, political, and social support for the BJP/RSS in North America. The success of this organisation was on display when the [‘Howdy Modi’](#) event took place in Houston in 2019. Indeed, their role in the BJP’s rise to power in 2014 certainly cannot be under-estimated. For their part, the Modi government has used such events to bolster its legitimacy in India.

Today, diverse progressive groups are active outside India in dealing with one or the other crisis that Indians are confronted with and are trying to support diverse collectives. Be it in the social, political, or economic sphere, their activities derive legitimacy from the fact they are engaged in addressing grave problems that the Indian people face. It could not be otherwise, given that India continues to languish at [129 out of 177 countries in HDI](#), [102 out of 117 countries in the Global Hunger Index](#), [142 out of 180 countries in the press freedom index](#), [133 out of 167 countries in the Women, Peace and Security Index](#), not to speak of being beset by caste oppression and communalism.

What unites progressive diasporic organisations is our common concern for Indians and their destiny. What we observe is that successive governments of India, far from taking the country forward, have used the full might of the state as well as means of disinformation and demagoguery to divert, divide and disorient the Indian people. Every old wound is being raked up, every old division (along caste, class, gender, religion, regional lines) is being stoked. At the same time, the polity is maintained through naked corruption, graft, nepotism, arbitrariness at the top echelons, the open use of force often sanctioned by retrogressive laws, and by allowing the police and military to act without accountability. Of late, three new weapons have been added to this arsenal – a certain subjugation of the judiciary to the executive, the slavish and partisan role played by many sections of the mainstream media, and the spread of naked disinformation and provocation via social media.

The effect of this retrogression is being felt at every layer of society – from students to women, Dalit-Bahujans to Muslims and Adivasis, from the youth to the army of the unemployed, from peasants to casual labor, from factory workers to professionals in the public sector, from Assam to Bastar, Kerala to Kashmir.

Therefore, at this time, when the BJP government led by Modi has embarked on an attack on peoples’ rights and is clamping down on dissent, it becomes imperative that all of us fighting for change present a united front against such attacks. None of the collectives fighting for change can effectively do so if their right to speech – in the form of right to dissent, right to conscience, and freedom of expression – is taken away. It must be remembered that even though the BJP and its government speak in the name of “Hindus”, no section of the people – including ordinary Hindus – are immune from attacks on their economic, social and political rights.

We recognise that given the breadth of activities by progressive groups addressing the above challenges, it is clear that every group will have different – often conflicting – ideas and approaches to the nature and solution of the problems. A division based on diverging ideas only assists those who are in power to deepen the status quo. Instead, the need of the hour is to create safe spaces where ideas of change and renewal can be discussed, critiqued, and advanced, without diverting us from actions in the common interest, without breaking our unity.

We need to unite in defence of rights and justice for all Indians, to make sure rights and justice are not denied to any Indian, no matter what pretext is used to justify it. In this regard, the right to

dissent and the right to conscience have arisen as particularly critical. No meaningful proposal for change is ever possible if the right to dissent and the right to conscience are denied. That is precisely why the powers-that-be attack the right to conscience. Because they know a meaningful change today will eradicate the privilege of the status quo – i.e. the elite who are in political power and their financial backers/promoters. This is why they feel threatened to even entertain a discussion about change or about what is needed for India to come out of this economic, social, and political morass.

The ruling dispensation and its mouthpieces are trying hard to divide, divert, and isolate us. At this time, all organisations seeking and thirsting for change must come together – and uphold the banner: an injury to one is an injury to all.

One needs to only see the aftermath of the recent Delhi violence to understand the depth of the attack on the progressive forces. For the first time, the perpetrators (who openly gave the call for violence and were seen carrying out death and destruction) have been portrayed as victims, and the real victims, including those who have been rendered homeless, have been turned into perpetrators.

Standing in defence of rights and justice for all, standing against the politics of chauvinism, division, diversion, authoritarianism, disinformation, corruption, and nepotism – and above all, against the use of force and violence in solving political problems, and being steadfast on the question of right to dissent and right to conscience – a broad and united front is the call of the times.

The foundations for such a coalition already began taking shape in response to the passage of the CAA by the Indian parliament last December. Since then, progressive, Dalit, communist, Muslim, Sikh and Hindu groups have joined together across the diaspora in unified action to raise a challenge to the violation of peoples' rights by the Indian state. [The protests](#) across the world in front of Indian consulates on January 26, 2020 stand testimony to the long-fought efforts of coalition building that have succeeded. These groups have further collaborated in passing resolutions in several city councils condemning the CAA-NRC. Steps towards the next goal – seeking political unity in action, were further on display at a recent [press conference](#) by the Indian American diaspora where organisations of varying political ideologies got together to express solidarity with Prashant Bhushan. Significant progress has been achieved with several groups challenging the practice of caste in the US and banding together in support of [Prop 16](#). Another decisive victory was achieved on August 5 at Times Square in New York City, where the Indian American diaspora responded together to address the [gross celebration of fascism](#) by Hindutva forces.

The members of the diaspora must now strive for the creation of this space of conscience and dialogue among the broadest spectrum of progressive organisations. It is through this process that we can best assist the people of India.

Sristy Agrawal is pursuing her PhD in Quantum Computing at NIST, Boulder.

Rajashik Tarafder is a doctoral student in Physics at Caltech.

Bedabrata Pain is an ex-NASA scientist, inventor and an award-winning film-maker.

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