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Building Bridges: A Case Study on The Role of the Indian Diaspora in Canada

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Executive Summary

India has emerged as an economic giant and a stable, vibrant democracy. Policies of active engagement with India were initiated and intensified by former Prime Ministers Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin, and the present Harper government is following suit. The growing population of Indo-Canadians now numbers 1 million, many of whom share the values and common interests of both countries. Indo-Canadians are a conduit between the two nations; this study is intended to explore the potential of this Diaspora to build partnerships between India and Canada.

The present study is largely a product of deliberations that took place in three roundtables held in Toronto, New Delhi and Chandigarh, against the backdrop of Dr. Salehi's literature review. Roundtable discussions in Toronto provided Canadian perspectives on the current role of the Indian Diaspora in building bridges of understanding within international business, knowledge networks, and epistemic communities between these two important democracies. Roundtable discussions in New Delhi provided useful insights and perspectives on the project from the Indian point of view, with considerable interest in India's economic and social development. The Roundtable in Chandigarh focused on the role of the Diaspora from the State of Punjab, which constitutes 50% of the Indian Diaspora in Canada.

The Roundtables explored cooperation in trade, investment and branding, but many participants noted that the Diaspora has potential to extend its power to social/ideological arenas. It became clear that Indo-Canadians are increasingly interested in social remittances, and the flow of ideas.

Conditions and policies in both countries favor the development of strengthening existing links and the creation of new ones. Apart from trade and education, the Roundtables pointed out that there is untapped value in Diaspora contribution to deepening partnerships in democracy, federalism and multiculturalism.

The case study provides a brief history of Indian immigration, and draws a current demographic profile of the Indian Diaspora (in both Canada and the US), its identity, dynamics, and place in the context of globalization. Following is a discussion of strengths and weaknesses, but the study's primary focus is on leveraging the role of Indo-Canadians as go-betweens, creating opportunities for Indians and Canadians to know one another better and to gain better understanding of each others' interests on global issues. The latter may also help remove the existing miasmas of misunderstanding on some divisive issues. The study refers to the need to build deeper partnerships on environmental issues, energy, security, and health care.

Finally, a preliminary Internet-based questionnaire and an analysis of its results brought valuable insights to the project team. Our research indicated that significantly onerous visa and emigration policies may have caused, and could continue to cause Indians to choose the US over Canada, and our questionnaire confirmed this. Almost half of respondents knew of cases where visa and immigration policies had prohibited or excessively complicated emigration Indians to Canada. Many respondents offered valuable comments on a range of issues, from the question of whether there is a unified, or unifiable Diasporic "voice," to how Canada can better foster bilateral partnership through its Indo-Canadian Diaspora. On

this point, respondents made clear that partnership would be better enabled through greater understanding and awareness by government, civil society, and the media, of the considerable skills and contributions of the Diaspora. Survey respondents were especially helpful in pointing out that future research must itself include broader Diasporic participation. If there is a flaw in the questionnaire's administration, it is in the sample; the majority responding demographic was male, between 45 and 64 years of age, and of a higher income bracket than Statistics Canada's figures for the Indo-Canadian Diaspora generally. However, data gathered provides a rich source for further questionnaire design and administration, to assess the Indo-Canadian Diaspora more comprehensively.

Recommendations

With changes in the policy domain by federal and provincial governments in Canada, by Central/State governments in India, combined with measures by the private sector and civil society in Canada and India, the Indian Diaspora in Canada can accelerate tangible progress in social and commercial exchange.

Recommendations in this study are informed by the three roundtables, and include suggestions to increase the civic engagement of Indo-Canadians, to see greater involvement by Indian origin Members of Parliament and Members of Provincial Parliaments for improvements in visa and immigration policies, as well as measures for greater recognition of credentials. Among our recommendations is a greater focus on future Indo-Canadian leaders to mobilize support for returning Indo-Canadians, and for better media coverage to facilitate public awareness of Indo-Canadians' contributions to Canadian society. Ultimately, our recommendations based on this bilateral research are as follows:

1. Changes to visa and immigration policies
2. Greater recognition of Indian credentials
3. The fostering of links between Canada and India in higher education
4. Investment in youth and second-generation Indo-Canadians
5. Increasing Diasporic civic engagement
6. Building better relationships between the Indo-Canadian Diaspora and Canadian media
7. Greater support for the Shastri Indo-Canadian institute, and support for Diaspora-related studies.
8. The forging of working relationships with key private sector organizations in India
9. The establishment of a Canada-India group to catalyze comprehensive partnerships
10. The promotion of Indo-Canadian engagement in political and social matters
11. Greater interaction between Canada-India Parliamentary Association, MPs and MPPs of Indian origin
12. The establishment of a national federation of Indo-Canadian institutions.

13. The convening of a roundtable of all Indo-Canadian institutions and a national convention of Canada's Indian Diaspora in Canada in 2010
14. Expedited development of teaching cases to enhance India-Canada exchange at all levels
15. Monitoring of the implementation of recommendations

The most important role of the Indian Diaspora in Canada is in the cultivation and flow of ideas and business networks. Such activity will have significant long-term benefits to the actual and potential content of partnership between two countries. When Canada helps the Indian Diaspora to build bridges with India, both nations win. The study suggests that the governments in Canada and India, civil societies of two countries, and the Indian Diaspora in Canada need to work collaboratively to develop links between the two countries.



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