

# Diasporic Indian, Assamese Diaspora and Networking

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The Indian Diaspora is spread over 110 countries. It was said that the sun never sets in the British Empire. It is also the case with Indian Diaspora. The sun never sets in the world of Indian Diaspora.

The Indian Diasporic community is active in all walks of life. They are doctors, engineers, entrepreneurs, innovators, lawyers, managers, researchers, scientists, teachers, workers, and in some cases also politicians. They are an asset to their host countries as they contribute towards the development of the country in which they live. Every person in his own way is an achiever. There are some twenty five million of them living outside India.

## **What is Indian Diaspora and when did it start?**

Indian Diaspora is not new. It started long time ago. It goes back to the time when during the period of Emperor Ashoka Buddhist preachers went to the spread Buddhism in the South Asian countries.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, under the British rule the so called indenture labourers who left India to seek their livelihood in a foreign country were the first batch that started the Indian Diaspora. Some of them did not come back and settled in the country where they were working.

The second group of Indian Diaspora went to the Asian and African countries as skilled and semi-skilled workers artisans, traders, factory workers, engineers etc. The Petro-dollars attracted them to Middle-East. A few jumped the ocean and arrived in the African countries.

The third group is of recent origin. They are the professionals and the educated and privileged young Indians who went abroad in search of a better life. They went abroad mainly to the countries like USA, Canada, UK, Germany, France, Netherlands, Italy, Portugal, Australia etc. They are the highly qualified professionals or entrepreneurs.

Previously NRI (Non-Resident Indian) equated to Never Returning Indians or Not Required Indians. Now all of a sudden India has discovered the potential of their sons and daughters living abroad and the economic reservoir of this group living in all the nooks and corners of this world. NRI now means Now Required Indians.

It was the late Nani Palkhiwala who first drew attention to the opportunities and potential for India opened up by the economic successes of Indians abroad. All of a sudden the Indian Diaspora was discovered. India recognised the contribution made by the Diasporic Indians towards improving India's image and relationship with the host countries. India discovered the economic potential of this group.

The NRI's of today is a strong force. In the USA they are referred as the 'model minority'. In Europe the main base of the Diasporic Indian is the UK followed by the Netherlands. Two third of the Indians living in the European Union live in the UK. The NRIs who have chosen a foreign country as their "home" are professionally trained and well-settled and have not only retained Indian identity but have also shown interest in the advancement of their kin back home in India. Many of them have retained Indian citizenship. They have gained considerable expertise in important spheres of economic and professional life. Diasporic peoples often experience the need to maintain their cultural and national identity through contact with family and friends and through consuming mass media products from their home countries and communities of origin.

If one speaks of an Indian Diaspora, it is because other forces have emerged to cement the widely different elements from India into an "Indian community". This is a combination of "nationalism" which can be translated as patriotism combined with love for the country, its heritage and its culture. They are proud to be Indian. For them '*Sare Jahan Se Accha Hindustan hamara*' - My India is better than the rest of the world. They may be the holders of Dutch, English or American passports, be first, second or third generation, but during the flag hoisting ceremony at the Indian Embassies and consulates all over the world they all very proudly sing the India's national anthem.

One speaks Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, Tamil, or any of the Indian languages or one follows one's own faith, but still they preserve their "Indianness" – their "Diasporic Identity". In their heart they are still Indian. They are the Indians in the Diaspora. They have moved from their *Janmabhumi* to their present *Karmabhumi*. To quote Mr Vayalar Ravi, Minister of Overseas Indian Affairs – For an Indian in Diaspora it is not only "*Dil hai Hindustani*" but "*demaag vee Hindustani*".

## **The Assamese Diaspora:**

Compared to other communities from India, very few Assamese move abroad. In the USA most of the Assamese are scattered over different parts of the country. The number may not be big, but there is global presence of Assamese Diaspora and most of them are doing well. The spread and presence of the Assamese Diaspora all over the globe, however small the numbers might be, is a matter of great pride for Assam.

The overseas contribution from the Indians from Kerala, Punjab, and Gujarat to name a few states has changed the economic contour of these states. India gets substantial foreign exchange deposits under various categories from the NRIs.

Bihar, Orissa, MP, Rajasthan and others are waking up to welcome the lost souls of the soil who are working and living in a far off land. A few of the Indian states are all organising a Pravashi Divas to show them the potentials in their own states. During the last Pravashi Bharatiya Divas Chief Ministers of 10 states were present to interact with the NRI's.

During the Pravashi Bharatiya Divas, out of curiosity I attended the presentation of Bihar. I was amazed at the quality of the presentation and the effort they are taking to give a new face to Bihar and attract new ventures to Bihar. The Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh informed that he keeps every Monday 17:00 to 18:00 hrs free to interact with the public. Anybody can approach him without an appointment.

And what is Assam doing? May be this seminar is a first step in that direction.

Assam has an "Image" problem. Within India the image of Assam most of the time is insurgent ridden, economically backward state, with poor infrastructure. On top of that the work force has an easy going work ethos. The negative stereotype of Assamese society or its work-ethic (something no one has yet defined as to what it might consist of) has been a product of ill-informed Indian media or perpetuated by self-loathing and insecure Assamese themselves. At the root of the low-expectations that has created the lax and lackadaisical work environment in public institutions is a governmental system that is unable to enforce any rule or standard of performance.

India is a country of young people, with 54 percent of its population under the age group of 25 years. What is Assam doing to absorb the potential of this young work force? There should be vision, there should be a plan to utilise this work force.

Time has come to take a different look at the attitude towards Assamese entrepreneurship and towards honest hard work. Entrepreneurship is more than being a PWD contractor employing a workforce consisting of workers from outside Assam and sometimes outside India. The Assam Tribune of 16<sup>th</sup> January 2007 carried an article about entrepreneurship and the course offered by the Assam Institute of Entrepreneurship, Guwahati. In the first batch of 16 students there are also students from Orissa and Tamilnadu. Is Assam not in a position to deliver even 16 local candidates for this course? Among the Assamese there is a general reluctance for hard work. Moreover the youth has to work in an environment with several impediments. But the same people when they go abroad they do well. The significant reasons why they excel once they leave India are (in random order):

1. Discipline
2. Motivation
3. Dignity of labour
4. Reasonable tax structure
5. Freedom from extortion from illegal tax collection agencies (*Goonda tax*).
6. Defendable property rights.
7. Reliable and timely conflict resolution processes.
8. Freedom from onerous governmental restrictions, meddling and corruption.
9. Enforceable and usually fair labour laws and regulations.
10. Reliable infrastructure and utilities
11. Good transportation, uninterrupted power, water and waste systems.
12. Societies with one set of rule of law for all citizens.

For development of Assam what is needed at the base is the stability, security and a futuristic approach. Assam has a duty to provide security to its citizens.

One can read short news items on issues like development of infrastructure, ecological problems created by industry, unplanned urban growth, tourism, unemployment, corruption, problem of the aged, healthcare, the foreigner issue, accountability and responsibility of the government, starting of multi million dollar projects with much fanfare but which are most of the time not completed, the Bandh mentality of Assam, ULFA etc. etc.

The above issues are not new. Over the issues the people of Assam have been crying hoarse over for decades. All the obstacles and impediments to 'development' are known. The patient is known-the disease is diagnosed-then why not cure it?

But no one seems to have any idea about how to overcome the obstacles. Will retelling of these issues make them go away? Certainly not! Why did ULFA happen? Was it not because of the 'democratically elected' government's unresponsiveness to glaring problems? And what has changed in the last two decades since ULFA's emergence? What have Indian government done? What have Assam government done to neutralize or even merely attempt to address the causes that gave rise to ULFA? Since then it is not only the ULFA but over thirty more insurgencies that arose throughout the Seven Sisters.

After the cowardly killing of the innocent Bihari workers by ULFA there is a flurry of high level visitors not only from Assam but also from Bihar and Delhi. But when the same ULFA killed the innocent Assamese in Dhemaji the so called leaders were no where to be seen. The government has beefed up the security and sent 3.000 more troops. It is not only the troops which are required but the government should also beef up the intelligence. It seems the intelligence gathering is in very poor shape. If intelligence would have been good many of the killings would not have taken place. The government should introduce a system of paying money for usable information. This might lead to neutralising some of threats by the underground organisations.

The government should walk the extra mile and join hands with the opposition to solve this problem. And the opposition, instead of protesting against the government should support the government and together with the people try to solve this social menace which is one of the main reasons for unwillingness of investors to participate in local projects. The result of a recent poll showed that 95% of the people are against the demands of ULFA.

They are all critical issues and should be recognised and dealt properly. Outside India, India has also the same problem. But India is fighting back with different campaigns. The same applies to Assam. For the tourist we should make Assam 'Incredible Assam' but for the investors for the business community it should be 'credible Assam'.

## What has Assam to offer?

For example in the Internet site of Department of Industries and Commerce I came across a well outlined paper with the Title Vision 2020

<http://industryassam.nic.in/vision2020.html>

### Assam ... ..

- Will have one of the best infrastructure in Asia to facilitate the largest volume of trade between India, China, Bangladesh and the ASEAN countries
- Capital Guwahati will be the hub of all trade and commercial activities in South East Asia
- Will be the model for development of the states in India as well as the neighbouring countries like Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh
- Will contribute significantly to India's exports and will be one of her principal foreign exchange earners
- Will receive more tourists than Singapore

This vision may be construed as Utopia but when it is envisioned in a rapidly integrating global economic system, the fantasy assumes the shape of an imminent reality.

Assam has been endowed with:

- Rich mineral resources, many of which have not been exploited
- Abundant forest resources with many ethnic products which are unique to the region
- The largest perennial water system in India in the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, with immense potential in the areas of energy, irrigation and transportation
- One of the most fertile stretches of land in India along the Brahmaputra valley, which is suitable for the cultivation of a wide variety of cash and food crops on a commercial basis
- Attractive tourism potential in the area of nature tourism as well as cultural heritage
- Easy access to skilled labour at a reasonable cost

I did download the 23MB pdf file but I could not find the action plan – how Assam is going to realise the above? What are the checks and balances? How long it is going to take? What is the budget? If the action plan is already included then there should be an

easy reference to it. I could not find it. It was not there. This is a generic problem in Assam. Government ministers and officials very often make vision statements that are totally unrealistic which one can only believe if you smoke something illegal. This has to stop. Ministers and officials have to be held accountable for what they say. For this you don't need to interact with the NRA's. If and when the roadmap 2020 is known then an advisory council could be formed where if needed the NRA with the required qualifications and experience could participate.

There should be consistent, reliable easy to find information about Assam on the net. There are three different websites of Government of Assam:

- [www.assam.gov.in](http://www.assam.gov.in) - The Official Website of the Government of Assam
- <http://assamgov.org> - The Official Website of the Government of Assam
- <http://assam.nic.in> - Dynamic Portal from NIC Assam State

Some of the links within the web-site do not function. Is somebody held accountable for this? Certainly not! This is Assam - our beloved Assam of today.

My personal experience with government organisations from Assam is very negative. If you contact the government offices you don't get any reply or the promised information never arrives. On top of that sometimes the contact telephone numbers are outdated or the e-mail accounts do not function correctly.

A few years back, to promote Assamese culture, I made arrangements with well-known organisations in the Netherlands to invite Assamese Satriya and Bihu dance groups to the Netherlands. In my discussion at Guwahati lots of promises were made. But when I went back to the Netherlands, in spite of repeated request I did not get a single reply from them.

The same is the case with promotion of tourism to Assam. The private sector is very alert and takes pride in their work and does their best to promote Assam. I wish I could say the same about the government organisations. I am happy to be able to come in contact with people like Mr. Ashish Phookan of Jungle Travels. Last November a well-known travel-writer from the Netherlands visited the North East. After arriving Kolkata, he realised that the promised permits to Nagaland and Manipur were not ready. He phoned to me requesting if I could help him to visit Assam. I contacted Mr Ashish Phookan of Jungle Travels and Brahmaputra Navigation Company. Although he was not in Assam, within a day he chalked out a plan to receive the travel-writer at Guwahati as his guest and show him the best part of Assam. Assam still has hope as we have people like

Ashish. My e-mail to the government tourism departments were either bounced back or not replied. I can only conclude from this that either they do not care, are not accountable for anything or they do not know how to use email.

Yesterday Prof. DeGregori informed about the Stillwell Road as a possible tourist destination for the American tourist. In my Internet site [www.indiawijzer.nl](http://www.indiawijzer.nl) I have included a special link with all possible information about the Stillwell or Ledo road. Now the question is do we have to forget the past and make fresh start? Yes we do!

It needs two to Tango – the two parties are Government of Assam and the Assamese Diaspora. Question is what has Assam to offer? Where can we find the information? Is there a databank with up-to-date information about the present situation in Assam?

In order to communicate with the Assamese Diaspora the Government of Assam should create a database with the contact details of the Assamese experts living outside India. There should be a NRA cell within the government of Assam.

In this regard may be it is worth mentioning that recently a group of resident and non-resident Assamese formed a Think Tank organisation under the banner-Friends of Assam and Seven Sisters (FASS). [www.friendsofassam.org](http://www.friendsofassam.org)

FASS offers a common platform for all friends and well-wishers of Northeast to respond and work for the common good of the peoples of the Northeast and make the Northeast shine in its own glory which is its due. It has contacts well wishers from different parts of the world. As FASS has an office at Guwahati Organisations like FASS can be approached for further contacts with the NRA's.

Assam society ([www.assamsociety.org](http://www.assamsociety.org)), Assam Association of North America ([www.aanaonline.org](http://www.aanaonline.org)), Assamnet ([www.assamnet.org](http://www.assamnet.org)), Assamese Society of Dubai ([www.assamdubai.org](http://www.assamdubai.org)) are some of the other forums for communication with the NRA's. In order to communicate with the expatriates and build a database somebody with IT background should be made responsible and accountable for this work. A web site with easy access possibility should be created for this information bank. This would be an ongoing process.

## **What can the NRA's offer? What has the NRA's to contribute?**

The Assamese Diaspora on an individual basis is active in supporting the folks back home. Be it by paying the tuition fees of brothers and sisters, medical bills of parents and regular financial support of the family. But the question is how the Assamese Diaspora as a group can participate in the development of Assam in some meaningful, achievable, measurable and sustainable ways?

Based on the engagement of NRI's with the development activities of their home states, from time to time the political establishment sends signals and expects the same type of response from the Non Resident Assamese. This particular expectation however, has been a definite discouragement. The handful of Assam expatriates, mostly wage-earners in private industry, or in academia, and a few professionals who have done relatively well, are hardly in a position to become investors and entrepreneurs in Assam. Moreover the environment of non-accountability that pervades every sphere of life is hardly going to entice anyone to risk the hard earned money. It is an unrealistic expectation. Had there been huge entrepreneurial successes amongst the NRA's , like those from elsewhere in India that made it big, like in the Silicon Valley gold-rush of the ninety's, or those with a legacy of business involvement that have done well in other arenas and thus had the luxury of taking risks; it could be different.

But in spite of these handicaps, the NRA's can contribute. To start with it should be small undertakings, like:

- those that are achievable without much capital,
- those that utilize the huge knowledge and experience pool,
- those that produce visible results and start producing benefits immediately,
- those that could be sustained without major efforts or undertakings,
- those that could be embarked upon without continuous ongoing involvement,
- those that can give a helping hand to locally generated efforts,

Before I embark on this subject I would like to point out that my observations are based on personal experience and interaction with other NRA's. I am no expert in this subject. According to me there are enough experts in Assam. There are enough brains available in Assam. The same brains when they are allowed to work under a different environment in the West create wonders.

The acceleration of India's economic reform process has created a favourable climate for generating investments. Assam should ride the wave of attracting the attention of the

NRI's with the help of the NRA's.

- There is a large reservoir of highly trained experts and scientists especially in the areas of Science, Technology and Knowledge based industries. They can play an important part in Assam's economic development and in boosting Assam's knowledge pool.
- Foreign investments from NRI's generally remain in IT, Biotech, manufacturing or similar sunrise industries where the returns can be quick. This should not be the lone reason for investment in Assam. The investment needed should be focused on projects like fighting unemployment, offering vocational training, better healthcare services etc. However, as mentioned above, there is a reluctance to invest in such as the Assam government has no credibility with the NRAs as they know that a part of the money invested will be utilised for other activities and may disappear. A few examples of NRI's investments in India where profit is not the main motive:
  - U.S. based ex-IIT students have committed to raise substantial amounts to improve the working of their old institution of education.
  - Opening of educational institutions or hospitals in their places of origin in India.
  - Set up their back offices in India.
  - Promotion of Indian products outside India.
  - Facilitating the interaction of foreign companies with their Indian counterparts.

Investment can take many forms. If the NRA's can make the investment or promote NRI's to invest in Assam it can take the form of investments in business for profit as well as investment for social needs.

- As an individual the NRA's might not be able to contribute much. But as a group they are certainly in a position to contribute. For example by supporting a village or supporting a school which is run by NGO's without governments support.
- The NRA's can create a centre of information where all information relating to job and educational opportunities abroad could be concentrated and made available to the youth of Assam free of charge.
- In the field of medicine and healthcare in the countries of their residence the Overseas Assamese have also distinguished themselves. They can play an important role in secondary and tertiary healthcare in Assam. APPI-The American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin is active in India.

This organisation can contribute knowledge, skills and experience. NRA's can try to involve organisations like APPI in healthcare development and setting up pilot projects in Assam.

- There are NRA hotel owners and others active in tourism, tourism related education and in promotion of culture. In these areas the linkage with the NRA's can be broadened.
- Assam should initiate constructive measures to ensure that NRA's pride and an atmosphere should be created where the NRA's can have faith in the state government and its decision making process. The decisions like changing the name of Assam to Asom without giving any reason, without proper debate does not create faith for investment in Assam. It creates an atmosphere that laws can be amended easily to suit the whims of the political parties in power without any respect for democracy and understanding of the enormous cost implications of such actions. It is said that the politicians make policies to win elections and not win elections to make policies. The government of Assam should first solve the problems facing the population like providing running water, clean sewage, electricity, roads where one can walk safely without running the risk of being run over by a car or motor cycle and a dependable, reliable, motivated police force to enforce law and order instead of changing its name. There should be transparency in all actions of the government.
- There are examples that a few from the Diaspora donate for worthy developmental causes in India. I am sure with friendly policy regulations and associations, philanthropy can act as a catalyst in Assam's development. But this is an option which is only open with the correct exposure to such institutions.
- As the Indian economy is growing and different opportunities are opening up more and more NRI's are coming back to their roots and exploring new opportunities for mutually beneficial relationships. They are bringing their expertise and experience with them. How many of them have returned to Assam? This is another area to tap. It is a two-way traffic in which both the Diaspora and the Government of Assam can be mutual beneficiaries.
- Some of our fellow countryman of the younger generation is currently running and joining the ULFA movement and being thoroughly exploited by the ULFA leadership. The kids are doing this out of sheer desperation, lack of opportunities and belief that this will help them economically.  
A way forward to tackle this could be education programs run by local people but financed by the Assamese Diaspora whereby the boys and girls would get good education, boarding and living free until they finish their high school. Special

attention should be given to girl's education as it is the best way of getting changes in the society. It is a big project but feasible if necessary in steps. In Titabor Pragalaya (*Prajnalaya*) organisation ([www.prajnalaya.org](http://www.prajnalaya.org)) is doing it. Another example is Parijat Academy of Pamohi, Guwahati ([www.parijatacademy.org](http://www.parijatacademy.org))

This should be carried out without government's interference. If the project plan is prepared well and is realistic, I am sure even local Assamese businessmen etc. would be happy to share some of the financial costs. After all, the terribly slow growth in Assam is directly attributable to terrorism and governance without accountability. NGO's like Pragalaya and Paraijat academy should be encouraged and supported.

- The government of Assam should play a more active role in interacting and collaborating with the Assamese Diaspora. In order to engage the Assamese Diaspora, the Government of Assam has to make realistic plans that are executable. In its execution the models like Demming circle should be utilised – plan-do-check and act.
- The interaction with and the input from the NRA's is very important. While visiting a foreign country government officials should make it a point to meet the local NRA's. The embassies can organise such meeting.
- Efforts should be made for exchange programmes between educational institutions of higher studies with educational institutions abroad. The NRA's working with foreign educational institutions should be approached to stimulate such bilateral relationship.
- In Europe it is very common that the students before the completion of their studies, if possible go for an internship in a foreign country. Our institutions of higher education should be stimulated to open up for this type of short term practical internship.
- Another area is a dedicated special interest section in a public library. There are different educational institutions in USA which support this type of projects. NRA's can explore the possibilities of engaging such institutions including the assistance from Goethe Institute, India Foundation, US Information Services, the British Council and the like. The sponsors could pay for a few computers, Internet hook-ups, public copying facilities and link-up with libraries and reference sources in the US and Britain and other countries. Such an undertaking can immediately begin to be extremely beneficial for students, researchers, educators and even business and industry, while accessible for all segments of society.

- The different Internet forums like the FASS should create a special section dedicated to the promotion of interaction between the NRA's and the people of Assam.
- The Assamese Diaspora with their knowledge and experience is in a position to start discussions on issues which are important to the Government of Assam and the people of Assam. Some of the ideas presented by the NRA's are:
  - Sounding board for organisations from Assam.
  - Introduction of Computer Club House.  
The Computer Clubhouses are like a more advanced version of the Community Information centres in the North East India.  
<http://www.efooting.org/clubhouses.shtml>
  - To make the government and the public aware that the name of Assam existed before the British came to India.

There is need for planned study of Assamese Diaspora, their expectations, their contributions and scope of collaboration in various sectors of economy. There is no need to re-invent the wheel. The state government of Gujarat, Kerala Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka etc. have realized the potential of development through association with their Diasporic citizens. They have made considerable efforts to draw upon the resources of the NRIs. The potentials of Assamese NRI's are limited. But the Government can contact their fellow state Governments which have already a successful engagement with their Diaspora.

It is important that Assam need the purse of the NRA's. But for the development of Assam, Assam also needs more. It is the heart and minds of the NRA's. It is the commitment of the NRA's.

In the coming period NRA's involvement should meet the social challenges to change the face of Assam. India is going to be the third largest economy of the world. But still out of eleven children one dies before the age of five. Assam is no exception. In one hand there is prosperity and on the other hand poverty and widening inequality. NRA's contribution will be judged not only by the mega projects they might help to realise, but more so by the contribution in uplifting the lives of the poor millions who are deprived of the basic needs.

Seminars like this and other related events are much needed to find out ways to endure the partnerships between the Assamese Diaspora and the Government of India. I congratulate the organisers for this event and wish many more seminars like

this in future. May be the AIM can introduce a management course on interaction with the Assamese Diaspora and using their potentials.

But the big question remains: Whether the NRA's really want to do something for Assam without self interest?

Thank you.

Tuesday, 30th January 2007

**Note:**

1. My thanks to Mr. Arup Phukan of Brussels, Belgium and Mr Chandan Mahanta of St. Louis, USA for their assistance and contribution.
2. This paper was presented in the international conference EPIGENESIS Assam held at Guwahati on 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> January 2007.