

Epistemic Diasporas: Indian Knowledge Systems, Crisis Governance, and the Transformation of Indian Diaspora Engagement in Global Knowledge Politics

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Abstract:

The Indian diaspora has long been studied from the perspectives of political lobbying, identity building, skilled migration, and remittances. However, this prevalent framework masks a developing shift in the relationship between diasporas and states: the emergence of diaspora actors as knowledge brokers in international crisis management. The article makes the case that the Indian diaspora is becoming a more important epistemic infrastructure that facilitates the translation, institutionalization, and negotiation of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), such as Ayurveda, Yoga, and dharmic ethical frameworks, in international scientific and policy spheres. There has been a lot of research on brain drain, brain circulation, and diaspora engagement policies, but not much systematic study has been done on the relationship between diaspora knowledge networks and Indian state knowledge diplomacy and more general decolonial epistemic politics. This study proposes the notion of "Epistemic Diaspora Governance" by drawing on the global institutionalization of Ayurveda and Yoga, the diaspora crisis infrastructures of Sikhs and Hindus, and qualitative multi-sited examination of diaspora scientific partnerships during COVID-19. It illustrates how diaspora involvement has evolved from economic exploitation to epistemic mediation, establishing diaspora players as go-betweens for the knowledge of Indian civilization and international governance systems. The results indicate that the politics of knowledge production in the twenty-first century are being reshaped in large part by Indian diaspora networks.

Keywords: Indian Diaspora; Indian Knowledge Systems; Knowledge Diplomacy; Epistemic Governance; Decoloniality

Introduction

The concept of diaspora studies arose from efforts to imagine scattered populations retaining material and symbolic connections to their original country. Cohen (2008) broadened the definition of diaspora to encompass labor, trade, and imperial diasporas, whereas Safran (1991) defined it in terms of communal memory, myth of return, and boundary maintenance. Subsequently, Clifford (1994) challenged essentialist interpretations by contending that diasporas are made up of both routes and roots. The focus of these pioneering initiatives was on identity, displacement, and belonging, creating diaspora as a socio-cultural and political concept ingrained in transnational dynamics.

The Indian diaspora has had a major analytical position in this larger field because of its historical depth and demographic extent. The Indian diaspora has been studied from a variety of angles, ranging from nineteenth-century indentured labor migrations to skilled mobility to North America and Europe after 1965. Particularly significant has been the economic-developmental paradigm. Kapur (2010) demonstrated how remittances and diaspora political influence reshaped domestic economic and democratic trajectories. Early worries about Indian migration were centered on the idea of "brain drain," which was first used to characterize the exodus of highly qualified professionals from emerging nations. Brain drain was defined by Bhagwati and Hamada (1974) as a loss of human capital that made inequality worse. However, ideas of brain circulation and brain gain contradicted this negative framing by the late 20th century. By redefining mobility as circulatory rather than extractive, Saxenian (2006) demonstrated how Indian engineers in Silicon Valley enabled technology transfer back to India. Similar to this, Meyer (2001) defined "scientific diasporas" as knowledge networks incorporated into transnational domains. Despite this theoretical shift from brain drain to brain circulation, economic productivity and technological innovation have continued to be the exclusive analytical focus. Most of the time, knowledge has been viewed more as technical capital than as epistemic substance. This article makes the case that this kind of framing is no longer adequate. Global governance has been restructured in the twenty-first century to deal with catastrophes like pandemics, climate change, and digital revolutions, where knowledge itself has emerged as the main source of power. At the same time, India has incorporated Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) into its diplomatic and educational systems, emphasizing Ayurveda, Yoga, traditional philosophy, and ecological ethics as elements of soft power for civilization. However, the ways in which Indian diaspora actors mediate these knowledge systems in international settings have not been thoroughly studied by academics.

In order to fill this gap, this paper advances the idea of Epistemic Diaspora Governance. In order to shift diaspora engagement from economic to epistemic, it contends that Indian diaspora networks are increasingly acting as middlemen that translate, legitimate, and institutionalize IKS inside international crisis governance frameworks.

Review of Literature

The study of the Indian diaspora has progressed beyond traditional theories of migration to intricate examinations of identity politics, transnationalism, state-diaspora connections, and epistemic circulation. While William Safran (1991) focused on the myth of return, homeland orientation, and communal memory, early diaspora theorists like Robin Cohen (2008) viewed diaspora as a category founded in victimhood, labor dispersal, imperial networks, and later trade diasporas. James Clifford (1994) advanced diaspora as a condition of paths rather than roots, emphasizing hybridity and positionality, complicating essentialist interpretations. Although these frameworks offered conceptual architecture, they were not unique to India and failed to adequately represent the aspect of civilizational continuity that sets apart the forms of Indian diasporas.

Works like Vertovec (2000) and Lal (2006), which examined diasporic public spheres and transnational social formations, helped to solidify Indian diaspora study in the 1990s. The seminal concept of ethnoscaping was first proposed by Appadurai (1996), who contended that international flows shift cultural production and undermine local sovereignty. However, rather than viewing the Indian diaspora as repositories of civilizational knowledge systems, a large portion of this literature viewed it through the prisms of political lobbying, remittance flows, and migratory economics.

Scholars such as Bhagwati (1976) framed skilled emigration as a developmental loss for postcolonial governments, igniting the debate between brain gain and brain drain in the 1960s and 1970s. Subsequent therapies focused on circular mobility, technology networks, and return migration as they moved toward brain circulation (Saxenian, 2005). This was furthered by Kapur (2010), who contended that the diaspora of India is a type of diaspora capital, which includes political, social, and reputational capital that the state can mobilize. Even still, knowledge is primarily viewed as economic or technical capital rather than as epistemic or civilizational capital in these formulations.

Gamlen (2008) and Ragazzi (2014), two more contemporary works on diaspora diplomacy, conceptualize governments as practicing emigration statecraft and diaspora governance. Gamlen identifies tactics for coopting expatriate populations that involve rights expansion and capacity building. Nonetheless, rather than epistemic mediation, this scholarship continues to concentrate on institutional design. Without considering the more profound epistemic aspects, the Indian government's Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, Overseas Citizenship of India program, and knowledge networks have mostly been examined as soft power tools (Hall, 2012).

At the same time, there has been a growth in the literature on Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), especially in relation to decolonial critique. According to scholars like Kapil Kapoor (2005), Indian civilization is a knowledge-based society with roots in *pramāṇa* (means of knowledge) and *śāstric* traditions. In his critique of the so-called epistemic colonization and digestion theory, Rajiv Malhotra (2011) asserts that Indic categories are absorbed and distorted by Western frames. While decolonial scholars like Santos (2014) promote an ecology of knowledges in opposition to the monoculture of Western scientific rationality, Mignolo (2011) introduces the idea of epistemic disobedience. Although the politics of knowledge hierarchies are emphasized in these works, diaspora is rarely included in their analysis.

Additionally, there is new research on knowledge diplomacy, which is defined as cross-border knowledge sharing that fosters diplomatic ties (Knight, 2015). Studies on cultural diplomacy in India (Chacko, 2015) examine yoga and Ayurveda as tools of soft power, but they frequently stay within constructivist or realist frameworks for foreign policy. However, the COVID-19 pandemic brought to light new, as yet unexplored, forms of diasporic knowledge mediation, such as cross-border Ayurvedic consultations, diaspora medical networks, and philanthropic mobilization. The epistemic aspect of Sikh knowledge ethics in humanitarian diplomacy has not been theorized as part of Indian knowledge diplomacy, despite the fact that Tatla (1999) and Dusenbery (2011) highlight transnational religious institutions and *seva*-based philanthropy in Sikh diaspora studies. Similarly, research on the Hindu diaspora (Kurien, 2007) does not consider temple networks and identity consolidation to be epistemic infrastructures.

As a result, although there is a wealth of research on IKS, state involvement, diaspora, and decolonial theory separately, little is known about how these fields relate to one another. A framework that views the Indian diaspora as an epistemic governance actor that mediates between state-led knowledge diplomacy and civilizational knowledge systems in a global setting characterized by epistemic asymmetry is specifically lacking.

Research Questions

The following questions serve as the basis for this investigation:

1. What role does the Indian diaspora play as an epistemic bridge in mediating Indian Knowledge Systems in frameworks for global crisis governance?

2. What aspects of the brain drain/brain circulation debate are transformed into epistemic circulation by diaspora scientific and professional networks?
3. How does Indian state knowledge diplomacy intersect with diaspora-led knowledge networks?
4. Is diaspora-mediated IKS still enmeshed in Western validation frameworks or does it represent a type of epistemic decolonization?

Methodology

This study uses a multi-site, qualitative, interpretive case study approach based on transnational social field analysis (Glick Schiller et al., 1992, p. 1). The study makes use of academic literature on Sikh and Hindu diaspora mobilization, institutional reports of AYUSH diplomacy, public communications of diaspora professional networks, and document analysis of Indian state policy papers pertaining to diaspora participation and IKS institutionalization. The chosen cases—the global institutionalization of Ayurveda and Yoga, the diaspora scientific collaboration during COVID-19, and the Sikh/Hindu diaspora crisis infrastructures—were picked because they embody different epistemic modalities: traditional medical knowledge, biomedical science, and ethical-civilizational practice. The analytical approach maps relationships between diaspora actors, state institutions, and global governance systems by combining relational analysis and thematic coding. The study aims to explain structural shift in diaspora-state-knowledge interactions rather than quantifying impact.

Theoretical Consolidation: Toward Epistemic Diaspora Governance

The article makes a theoretical contribution by combining knowledge diplomacy, decolonial epistemology, and diaspora theory into a single framework of epistemic diaspora governance. The focus of traditional diaspora theory was on homeland orientation and dispersal. The focus of transnationalism was on networked belonging and simultaneity. The epistemic agency of diasporic actors in knowledge hierarchies shaped by colonial legacies is not entirely captured by either, though.

Diaspora mediation can be viewed as a place of epistemic contestation by drawing on Santos' ecology of knowledges and Foucault's concept of power/knowledge. The Indian diaspora maintains access to Indian epistemologies while operating within Western institutions. What Mignolo refers to as "border thinking"—knowledge generation from the periphery of modernity—is made possible by this dual embeddedness.

Attempts at epistemic repositioning are seen in the Indian state's knowledge diplomacy programs, which include digital knowledge platforms, International Yoga Day, and AYUSH globalization. These efforts run the risk of being interpreted as nationalist soft power, though, if diaspora mediation is not used. By integrating knowledge into the institutional norms of their host country, diaspora players lend legitimacy. This results in a conceptual change from diaspora involvement to diaspora epistemic governance, in which the state and the diaspora jointly create global knowledge norms. Epistemic governance is centered on normative influence and knowledge co-creation, as opposed to traditional diaspora governance (Gamlen, 2008), which emphasizes loyalty extraction.

Thus, the framework incorporates three axes: diasporic mediation, state-led diplomacy, and civilizational knowledge (IKS). A new form of transnational governance is created by their intersection, one in which epistemic authority is negotiated as opposed to imposed. This rethink pushes diaspora studies away from the paradigms of soft power and economic determinism.

Findings

The Indian diaspora functions as a distributed epistemic community in addition to being an economic and political constituency, as demonstrated by the empirical analysis of COVID-19 knowledge networks, Ayurvedic globalization, and diaspora-led climate collaborations. Diaspora medical experts in the United Nations, United Kingdom, and Gulf nations mobilized research collaborations, telemedicine networks, and oxygen logistics during the COVID-19 pandemic. This movement went beyond conventional remittance models and represented what is known as epistemic solidarity, a type of reciprocity based on knowledge that connects institutions in the home and host countries.

Simultaneously, the transnationalization of Ayurveda demonstrates how ancient knowledge can be transformed into globally circulating epistemic capital. Ayurveda has been institutionalized by diaspora practitioners in North America and Europe through clinics, integrative medicine partnerships, and certification programs. This process reflects the translation of knowledge, but when it is separated from its philosophical underpinnings in Prakṛti ontology and Triḍoṣa theory, it also runs the risk of diluting information. The Ministry of AYUSH of the Indian government makes an effort to standardize and control this flow of knowledge, but diaspora networks frequently function independently, exposing conflicts between community-based legitimacy and state-led certification.

Climate networks offer an additional perspective. Indian-origin scientists work alongside Indian research organizations in global climate institutions, helping to develop policy frameworks that support ideas like Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, the civilizational ethos of planetary interconnectivity. Here, indigenous ecological ideologies and diaspora expertise collide to create a hybrid knowledge diplomacy that combines contemporary climate research with ethical principles from civilization.

The transition from brain drain to cerebral circulation is apparent in all of these cases. Skilled migration creates transnational epistemic loops instead of irreversible loss. Brain connection, or long-lasting collaborative infrastructures that are not dependent on physical return, is what emerges beyond circulation. This adds digital and civilizational mediation to Saxenian's (2005) argument. The results also show that diaspora actors frequently engage in epistemic brokerage, which is the process of converting indigenous knowledge into frameworks that are understandable to people around the world while maintaining cultural authenticity. Nonetheless, Western epistemic authority dominates the asymmetrical power systems in which this trade takes place. As a result, diaspora mediation becomes both liberating and susceptible to appropriation. In the end, it seems that the Indian government's diaspora engagement strategies are moving away from frameworks that are centered on remittances and toward knowledge diplomacy ecosystems. Institutional acknowledgement of diaspora as epistemic agents is still inconsistent and incomplete, nevertheless. State, diaspora, and IKS continue to engage in relational triangulation in an emergent rather than consolidated manner.

Conclusion

This article shows that remittances, lobbying, and soft power are not sufficient to completely understand the engagement of the Indian diaspora. The diaspora increasingly operates as an epistemic community with roots in civilizational traditions and ingrained in global knowledge systems. A hybridized but strategic knowledge diplomacy is created by diaspora actors mediating between Indic knowledge systems and international institutions through COVID-19 cooperation, Ayurvedic globalization, and climate networks.

Without acknowledging the rise of epistemic brokerage and diaspora epistemic governance, the theoretical

transition from brain drain to brain circulation is insufficient. These ideas emphasize knowledge as a resource and a platform for political discourse. By including decolonial theory, it becomes clear how diaspora mediation navigates appropriation risks while challenging epistemic asymmetries. Policymakers should improve India's standing in the world of knowledge by acknowledging the diaspora as epistemic stakeholders rather than symbolic ambassadors. The paradigm encourages researchers to conduct more empirical research on sector-specific epistemic networks. Finally, a shift in the way postcolonial governments negotiate power in a knowledge-driven global system is indicated by the relationality among Indian Knowledge Systems, diaspora mediation, and state diplomacy.

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