

Digital Routes Shaping Indian Diasporic Identity through Digital Diplomacy: A Case Study of Digital Coverage of Pravasi Bhartiya Divas

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ABSTRACT

Twenty first century Indian diasporic identity is shaped by networked state power where digital infrastructures mediate both inclusion and governance. This paper studies India's Digital Diplomacy platform mediated engagement of diasporic identity that how state-led digital practices cultivate new forms of belonging, identity and participation among the Indian diaspora. It employs a qualitative thematic analysis of official digital coverage of the 17th (2023) and 18th (2025) PBD Conventions dedicated mainly to Indian Diaspora. Using Anderson's imagined community, Castells' network society, Hall's theory of cultural identity, and Nye's soft power as its theoretical lenses, the paper finds that PBD's digital coverage has shifted the event from a bounded physical gathering toward a hybrid continuously mediated relationship between state and diaspora. This coverage constructs diasporic identity along two intertwined registers: an affective register of heritage, recognition and pride and a strategic register that explicitly links belonging to tourism, investment and skilled workforce mobility. The study contributes to emerging scholarship on digital diaspora studies by demonstrating that virtual homelands are not only socially imagined but also strategically produced through state-led digital diplomacy, with implications for how public diplomacy scholarship understands the relationship between digital communication, identity and soft power.

Keywords: Digital Diplomacy, Diasporic Identity, Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, Soft Power, Imagined Community, Digital Public Diplomacy.

INTRODUCTION:

Globalisation and digital transformation have fundamentally altered the ways in which nations engage with their citizens living beyond territorial borders. Although migration has historically created dispersed communities maintaining varying degrees of attachment to their countries of origin the rise of digital communication technologies has significantly strengthened these transnational connections. Governments increasingly utilise digital platforms not only to disseminate information but also to cultivate emotional, cultural, political and economic relationships with their diasporic populations. This strategic use of digital communication has become a defining characteristic of contemporary digital diplomacy. (Bjola & Manor, 2022) India possesses one of the largest and most influential diaspora communities in the world. According to the Ministry of External Affairs more than 32 million people of Indian origin reside across over 200 countries and territories contributing substantially to global economic development, cultural exchange, technological innovation and international relations. (*Population of Overseas Indians* | Ministry of

External Affairs, Government of India, n.d.) The Indian diaspora constitutes an important source of remittances, investment, knowledge transfer, political influence and soft power. Consequently successive Indian governments have prioritised diaspora engagement as an essential component of foreign policy and national development.

The emergence of digital diplomacy has significantly enhanced India's ability to communicate with overseas Indians. Unlike conventional diplomatic channels that primarily operate through embassies and formal state interactions digital diplomacy enables governments to engage directly with citizens through websites, social media platforms, virtual events, digital campaigns, livestreamed speeches and online communities. These technologies facilitate real-time communication while transcending geographical limitations enabling governments to project national narratives and encourage sustained engagement with global diasporic audiences.

Among India's most prominent diaspora engagement initiatives is the *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas Ministry of External Affairs* (Government of India, n.d.) established in 2003 to recognise the achievements of overseas Indians and strengthen their relationship with India. Celebrated annually around 9 January commemorating Mahatma Gandhi's return from South Africa in 1915 PBD has evolved into a major diplomatic platform connecting policymakers, business leaders, professionals, academics, entrepreneurs and members of the global Indian community. The increasing digitalisation of PBD through livestreaming, official social media campaigns, digital publications, virtual participation and multimedia storytelling provides a valuable case for examining how digital diplomacy shapes diasporic identity in the twenty first century.

Digital media do more than transmit information. They actively construct narratives and identities. Through carefully curated digital content, governments project images of national unity, cultural heritage, economic progress and democratic values. These narratives influence how overseas populations perceive both their homeland and their own identities. The concept of diasporic identity itself has become increasingly dynamic, evolving through continuous interaction among homeland institutions, host societies and digital communication networks.

Scholars such as Benedict Anderson (1983) argue that nations are "imagined communities" sustained through shared narratives rather than direct interpersonal interaction.(Anderson, 1991) Manuel Castells (2011) demonstrates that digital networks fundamentally reshape social relationships by enabling continuous communication across spatial boundaries. Similarly, Robin Cohen (2022) and Hall & Morley (2018) contend that diaspora identities are fluid, negotiated and continuously reconstructed through cultural practices, media and transnational exchanges. Digital diplomacy therefore represents a powerful mechanism through which states participate in this ongoing process of identity formation.

The Government of India has increasingly integrated digital communication into its foreign policy through the Ministry of External Affairs, Indian missions abroad and dedicated diaspora initiatives. Social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and official government portals have become central instruments for communicating with overseas Indians. These platforms disseminate policy announcements, celebrate diasporic achievements, broadcast speeches, encourage cultural participation and reinforce narratives of collective belonging. Through these activities digital diplomacy functions as both a communication strategy and an instrument of nation branding and public diplomacy. Despite the growing significance of digital diplomacy relatively few qualitative studies have examined how official digital communication contributes to the construction of diasporic identity in the Indian context. Existing scholarship frequently focuses on public diplomacy, soft power or social media

communication separately while the intersection of digital diplomacy and identity formation during Pravasi Bharatiya Divas remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by analysing the digital representation of PBD and examining the ways in which official communication constructs narratives of belonging, national identity and transnational citizenship.

Rather than viewing diaspora engagement solely as a policy initiative this research conceptualises digital diplomacy as a process of symbolic interaction in which governments, institutions and overseas communities collectively negotiate meanings of identity and belonging. The study argues that digital communication does not simply connect dispersed populations but actively shapes how members of the diaspora imagine their relationship with India.

RESEARCH PROBLEM:

Digital technologies have transformed diplomatic communication but there remains limited qualitative understanding of how these technologies influence diasporic identity formation. While the Government of India has invested significantly in digital diplomacy through initiatives such as Pravasi Bharatiya Divas existing research has paid comparatively little attention to how official digital narratives shape emotional attachment, cultural identity and perceptions of national belonging among overseas Indians. Much of the available literature examines digital diplomacy from institutional or strategic perspectives focusing on policy communication, public diplomacy or international branding. Less attention has been devoted to understanding how these digital interactions contribute to identity construction among diaspora communities. Consequently, there exists a significant research gap concerning the symbolic and cultural dimensions of India's digital engagement with its diaspora.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

1. To examine the role of digital diplomacy in strengthening India's engagement with its global diaspora.
2. To analyse how the digital coverage of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas constructs narratives of Indian diasporic identity.
3. To assess the contribution of digital diplomacy to India's broader public diplomacy and soft power strategy.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

- How does digital diplomacy influence the construction of Indian diasporic identity?
- How do official digital communications promote belonging, cultural continuity, and emotional attachment among overseas Indians?
- In what ways does digital diplomacy contribute to India's public diplomacy and global soft power?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

This research contributes to the interdisciplinary fields of digital diplomacy, diaspora studies, communication studies, media studies and international relations. Digital communication shapes identity beyond national borders the study extends existing scholarship by integrating theories of diaspora, public diplomacy and digital communication into a unified analytical framework for understanding state-diaspora engagement.

The research also has practical relevance for policymakers within the Ministry of External Affairs and Indian diplomatic missions seeking to enhance digital engagement with overseas communities. The study

offers insights that may inform future digital diplomacy initiatives. As governments increasingly rely on digital platforms to engage transnational populations understanding the cultural and symbolic implications of these interactions becomes essential for both scholars and practitioners.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

1. Diasporic Identity:

The concept of diaspora has evolved considerably over the past three decades. Early scholarship associated diaspora primarily with forced migration and displacement. contemporary researchers recognise diaspora as a dynamic transnational community maintaining economic, cultural, political and emotional connections with its homeland.

Safran (1991) identifies six defining characteristics of diaspora dispersal from an original homeland, collective memory, commitment to homeland preservation and the aspiration to maintain enduring ties. Cohen (2008) expands this understanding by distinguishing between victim, labour, trade, imperial and cultural diasporas demonstrating that diaspora experiences differ across historical and social contexts. Brubaker (2005) argues that diaspora should be understood less as a fixed population and more as a flexible category of practice shaped by political mobilisation, identity formation, and institutional engagement. This perspective is particularly useful for analysing the Indian diaspora, whose diversity encompasses multiple languages, religions, migration histories, and socio-economic backgrounds. Hall (1990) similarly conceptualises cultural identity as an ongoing process of becoming rather than a stable condition. Identity is continuously reconstructed through representation, memory and social interaction. These theoretical perspectives provide the conceptual basis for understanding how official digital communication contributes to constructing and reinforcing diasporic identity.

2. Digital Diplomacy:

Public diplomacy refers to communication strategies through which governments seek to influence foreign publics rather than solely engaging foreign governments (Cull, 2009). The emergence of digital technologies has transformed these practices into what Bjola and Holmes (2015) describe as digital diplomacy. Digital diplomacy incorporates social media, websites, livestreaming, online campaigns and virtual engagement into diplomatic practice. Manor (2019) argues that digital diplomacy enhances accessibility, immediacy and interactivity enabling governments to communicate directly with global audiences. Unlike traditional diplomacy digital diplomacy facilitates two-way communication in which audiences actively respond, share and reinterpret official messages. For diaspora engagement digital diplomacy offers particular advantages because it overcomes geographical barriers while creating continuous interaction between homeland institutions and overseas citizens. Official digital platforms enable governments to celebrate diaspora achievements, announce policy initiatives, broadcast national events, and encourage participation regardless of physical location.

3. Pravasi Bhartiya Divas:

Pravasi Bharatiya Divas was inaugurated in 2003 to strengthen relations between India and its overseas communities. Held annually on or around 9 January the event commemorates Mahatma Gandhi's return to India from South Africa and symbolises the continuing relationship between India and its global diaspora. Initially organised as a physical conference PBD has progressively integrated digital communication technologies. Livestreaming, official websites, YouTube broadcasts, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, digital newsletters and multimedia storytelling now enable worldwide participation. Recent analyses indicate that digital coverage of PBD performs several functions

simultaneously. It disseminates policy information, celebrates diaspora success stories, promotes investment opportunities, highlights cultural heritage, and reinforces national identity. Böcü & Panwar (2022) argue that diaspora engagement increasingly involves identity framing through official narratives that emphasise belonging, shared heritage and national unity. Similarly Gulati's (2017) discourse analysis of India's diaspora communication demonstrates how political messaging contributes to constructing collective national identity among overseas Indians. Emerging scholarship further suggests that digital diplomacy transforms diaspora engagement from occasional ceremonial interaction into continuous communication. Rather than limiting engagement to annual conferences governments now maintain year-round relationships through digital platforms that encourage dialogue, participation and symbolic inclusion.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

To explain the role of digital diplomacy in shaping diasporic identity through the coverage of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas three interconnected theories Imagined community, Networked identity and the concept of soft power constitute the structure of this study. The concept of nation as an "imagined community" provides the foundational lens for this study (Anderson, 1991). Anderson argues that national belonging is sustained not through direct interpersonal contact but through shared symbols, print media and collective narratives that allow dispersed individuals to imagine themselves as part of a single community. Applied to the diasporic context this framework suggests that overseas Indians do not require physical presence in India to feel a sense of national belonging rather that belonging is produced and reproduced through mediated communication. Castells (2011b) theory of the network society extends this idea into the digital age proposing that digital networks fundamentally reorganise social relationships by enabling continuous real-time interaction that transcends territorial boundaries. Anderson's imagined community relied on static print media but Castells' framework accounts for the interactive, continuous and participatory nature of digital platforms which is central to understanding how PBD's digital coverage sustains diasporic engagement not only during the annual event but also the year-round. The paper also situates digital diplomacy within Joseph Nye's concept of soft power. (Nye, 2004) Digital diplomacy as theorised by Bjola & Holmes (2015) and Manor (2019b) functions as a strategic instrument through which the state converts cultural and emotional connection with the diaspora into a soft power resource reinforcing national image, investment potential and global influence. Taken together these three theoretical strands generate a layered framework for this study. Digital diplomacy functions as the mechanism through which the state communicates with the diaspora, Imagined community describe the process through which diasporic belonging is continuously constructed through this communication and soft power represents the strategic outcome that the state seeks to derive from this identity building process. This framework guides the analysis of PBD's digital coverage allowing the paper to move between the symbolic, communicative and the strategic dimensions of India's diaspora engagement.

METHODOLOGY:

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to examine how the digital coverage of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas constructs narratives of Indian diasporic identity. Pravasi Bharatiya Divas was selected as the case for this study because it represents India's most institutionalised and symbolically significant diaspora engagement platform and because its digital transformation over the past two decades from a physical conference to a livestreamed multi-platform event makes it an ideal site for observing the shift from

territorial to digitally mediated diasporic engagement described in the Introduction. Data for this study is drawn from publicly available official digital content related to PBD including Official communications and press releases from the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and the PBD website, Posts and campaigns from official social media handles X/Twitter associated with MEA and PBD, Livestreamed speeches, ceremonies and multimedia storytelling content published during PBD events. Digital newsletters and publications associated with the event. The analysis focuses on the 17th and 18th PBD conventions (2023 and 2025) allowing the study to capture both the content of specific campaigns and the broader evolution of PBD's digital presence over time. A purposive sampling strategy is employed specifically posts, campaigns and broadcasts that foreground themes of belonging, cultural identity, emotional attachment or national narrative-building. The collected material is analysed using qualitative thematic content analysis using Braun & Clarke (2006) technique. As this study relies exclusively on publicly available official communications rather than private data or human subjects it does not raise significant ethical concerns regarding consent or confidentiality. However, care is taken to accurately represent and contextualise official content without distortion and all sources are appropriately cited.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY:

This study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. First, it is based on a single case Pravasi Bharatiya Divas and only two of its editions which limits the generalisability of its findings to India's broader digital diplomacy apparatus or to other states' diaspora engagement strategies. Second, the analysis relies on publicly available official digital content primarily in English and does not include vernacular-language coverage diaspora audience reception or comments and engagement data from social media platforms. It therefore captures how identity is officially narrated rather than how it is actually received or negotiated by diaspora audiences themselves. Third, the study does not have access to platform analytics such as reach, shares or sentiment data and its thematic claims are accordingly based on qualitative interpretation of content not on quantified engagement patterns. Future research could address these limitations through audience reception studies, multilingual content analysis or longitudinal analysis across a larger number of PBD editions.

FINDINGS:

Thematic analysis of the sampled official digital coverage of the 17th (2023) and 18th (2025) Pravasi Bharatiya Divas Conventions following the coding procedure outlined in the Methodology, generated five interrelated themes. These themes are discussed below with illustrative examples drawn from official communications, press releases and social media coverage associated with the two conventions.

1. From Physical Assembly to Hybrid Digital Participation:

The sampled data shows a clear oscillation between physical and digital modes of participation that has gradually normalised hybrid engagement as a legitimate form of presence at PBD. The 16th PBD Convention in 2021 was held entirely in virtual mode owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 17th Convention in Indore in January 2023 was explicitly framed in official coverage as the first PBD “in physical mode” since 2019(Sharma, 2023) This framing itself signals that digital participation had by 2023 become a recognised baseline against which physical gathering was measured. This pattern continued at the 18th Convention in Bhubaneswar in January 2025 where the Chief Guest President Christine Carla Kangaloo of Trinidad and Tobago addressed the Convention virtually even though the event itself was conducted in physical mode (*Akashvani News*, 2025). The presence of a virtually-addressing Head of

State within an otherwise physical ceremonial event illustrates that digital connectivity is no longer treated merely as a substitute for physical assembly during periods of restriction but has become an accepted and expected layer of the event's format. The shift is better understood as a move toward a hybrid mode in which digital and physical participation coexist rather than one simply replacing the other.

2. Continuity And Change In State Narratives: From “Amrit Kaal” To “Viksit Bharat”:

Both Conventions in the sample were organised around explicit thematic slogans disseminated across official digital platforms. The 17th PBD 2023 carried the theme “Diaspora: Reliable Partners for India's Progress in Amrit Kaal” (*17th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas Convention*, 2023) while the 18th PBD 2025 carried the theme “Diaspora's Contribution to a Viksit Bharat” (Ministry of External affairs, 2025). Both slogans position the diaspora not as a passive recipient of homeland affection but as an active partner in a shared forward-looking national project oriented toward the centenary of India's independence in 2047. The recurrence of this developmental time horizon across successive PBD editions functions in digital coverage as a unifying narrative thread that binds the dispersed diaspora to a common national future rather than only a common national past. Anderson (1991) concept of imagined community represents an extension of the traditional emphasis on shared historical memory (commemorating Gandhi's 1915 return) toward a shared imagined future digitally rehearsed and repeated across events, campaigns and speeches.

3. Digital Curation of Heritage, Recognition and Emotional Registers:

Proportion of the sampled content was oriented toward affective and symbolic content. At the 17th PBD the Prime Minister inaugurated the “first-ever digital PBD Exhibition” on the theme “Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav - Contribution of Diaspora in Indian Freedom Struggle” which used digital media specifically to weave the diaspora into the official narrative of India's independence movement (2023). This is a clear example of digital diplomacy being used not merely to inform but to actively construct historical belonging. Similarly, the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Awards conferred on 27 individuals from 24 countries at the 18th PBD (DD news, 2025) were digitally covered as individual profiles and citations rather than only as an aggregate ceremony personalising the diaspora's contribution and shifting its digital representation from an abstract collective toward a set of named, celebrated individuals. Cultural elements such as the closing santoor recital at the 18th PBD and associated cultural programming were likewise digitally disseminated functioning as sensory and affective branding of Indian heritage for a globally dispersed audience. Together, these practices illustrate Hall's (1990) argument that identity is continuously reconstructed through representation and memory with the state acting as an active curator of that representation.

4. Diaspora as Strategic and Economic Partner:

Alongside its affective register the sampled coverage consistently framed the diaspora in strategic and economic terms. The 18th PBD featured five thematic plenary sessions on innovation and new technology, sustainable development, workforce mobility, entrepreneurship and the propagation of India's cultural heritage (Ministry of External affairs, 2025) positioning the diaspora as a resource for national development rather than solely an object of sentimental outreach. This was reinforced by tangible initiatives such as the remote flag-off of the Pravasi Bharatiya Express a dedicated tourist train for diaspora visitors under the Pravasi Teertha Darshan Yojana and the Prime Minister's reiteration of the “Chalo India” campaign encouraging each diaspora member to bring five foreign friends to visit India (PM India, 2025). Host-state coverage in Odisha similarly emphasised the economic benefits of hosting the Convention including increased tourism bookings in destinations such as Puri and Konark (New India Abroad, 2025). These findings indicate that digital diplomacy constructs diasporic identity along a dual

register. An affective register of belonging and pride and a transactional register in which that belonging is explicitly linked to tourism, investment and economic participation.

5. Digital Diplomacy as Continuous, Anticipatory Engagement:

Finally, the sampled data suggests that digital coverage of PBD is not confined to the three-day event window but produces a continuous communicative arc. Official and affiliated accounts used dedicated hashtags such as #PBD2025 and #18PBD in the days preceding the Convention to build anticipation while government bodies such as the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology used the same hashtag to showcase citizen-centric digital governance initiatives during the event itself (NeGD, 2025). This pattern of pre-event anticipation building, real-time coverage and post-event dissemination through a consistent hashtag ecosystem illustrates that digital networks sustain continuous, real-time interaction across spatial and temporal boundaries (Castells, 2011b) Rather than treating PBD purely as a bounded annual or biennial ceremony, digital diplomacy extends it into an ongoing communicative relationship between the Indian state and its diaspora.

6. Discussion and Conclusion:

The findings suggest that digital diplomacy influences the construction of Indian diasporic identity by translating a territorially dispersed population into a digitally reachable, continuously addressed public: the shift from bounded physical assembly toward hybrid participation. First theme demonstrates that identity-affirming interaction with the homeland no longer depends on geographical presence in India. Second, official digital communications promote belonging, cultural continuity and emotional attachment through repeated developmental narratives. Theme second continuity and Change in State Narratives curated heritage content and personalised recognition of individual diaspora members. Third theme which together operationalise Anderson's imagined community and Hall's processual view of identity within a specifically digital and state-directed context. Third, digital diplomacy contributes to India's public diplomacy and soft power strategy by explicitly linking affective belonging to strategic and economic outcomes such as tourism, investment and skilled workforce mobility. consistent with Nye, (2004) fourth theme conceptualises soft power as the conversion of attraction into influence and by sustaining this influence through continuous anticipatory digital engagement rather than isolated annual messaging. Bjola & Manor (2022) account of digital diplomacy as ongoing strategic communication.

The findings nuanced with theoretical framework by treating digital diplomacy as a mechanism, imagined community as a process and soft power as an outcome. The findings suggest these three elements are not sequential but mutually reinforcing. The same digital exhibition or hashtag campaign simultaneously performs communicative, identity constructing and strategic functions. This supports the study's broader argument that digital diplomacy does not simply connect India to its diaspora but actively produces the terms on which that connection and the identity it sustains is imagined.

This study set out to examine how India's digital diplomacy through the case of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas shapes the construction of Indian diasporic identity. Drawing on a qualitative thematic analysis of official digital coverage of the 17th (2023) and 18th (2025) PBD Conventions the study finds that digital platforms have transformed PBD from a bounded, physically located ceremonial event into a hybrid continuously mediated relationship between the Indian state and its global diaspora. Official digital narratives construct diasporic identity along both affective lines heritage, recognition, pride and belonging and strategic lines investment, tourism and skilled mobility and sustain this construction through anticipatory and ongoing digital communication. The study lastly demonstrates that virtual homelands are not only imagined but also strategically produced through state-led digital diplomacy.

The study offers the few recommendations for policymakers within the Ministry of External Affairs and Indian diplomatic missions. First, digital campaigns around PBD could incorporate more interactive and two-way formats such as live audience participation, diaspora-generated content or regional-language livestreams to move beyond one-directional broadcast communication. Second, sustained digital engagement with diaspora youth beyond the single-day Youth PBD segment could help build longer-term identification among second and third generation diaspora members. Lastly, publishing aggregated data on the digital reach and engagement of PBD content would allow both policymakers and researchers to assess the actual effectiveness of these digital diplomacy strategies rather than relying solely on qualitative impressions.

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