

Formal Structure and Institution needed for Diaspora Engagement

by **Dr. Vishnu Bisram** May 17, 2021



PM Vajpayee & Ashook Ramsaran

Diaspora is an asset – economic, political, and otherwise. Every developing country has diaspora especially in North America and Europe. Since the time of President Cheddi Jagan from 1992, I have been goading succeeding governments to develop a formal policy (establishment of an office) of continuously engaging the diaspora which since then has grown larger than the population of Guyana and perhaps developed a greater interest in homeland affairs than pre-1992 (period of dictatorship when diaspora shunned Guyana). Presidents toyed with a diaspora policy but their hearts were not in it. The President Irfaan government announces a conference with the diaspora for May 22. It is long overdue, and it is hoped it would not be a one-off engagement like happened under previous governments. Some formal network and structure should be established to engage the diaspora – whose presence in America alone is bigger than the population of Guyana – and whose investment (financially and skills) in Guyana would be key to rapid development.

I have studied and written extensively on diasporas – **Guyana**, Trinidad, Jamaica, India, Mexico, Fiji, El Salvador, among others. I traveled to virtually every Indian diaspora country multiple times and also engaged their diasporas in North America, Australia, New Zealand, Europe, and elsewhere. I don't think anyone has traveled to more Indian diaspora countries (and multiple times) to study and investigate the role of diasporas in development. I don't think any Indo-Caribbean has done more for India than us. We worked very closely with the government of India from Atal Behari Vajpayee to Narendra Modi, albeit there has been less engagement with Modi over the last few years although I worked closely with the Indian government through its support political affiliates in Delhi and New York. Ashook Ramsaran and myself are perhaps the only Guyanese and only persons from the Indian diaspora who have consistently engaged and worked closely with governments in India from Vajpayee (1998) to Modi to harness the resources of the Indian diaspora for India's development and to lobby Washington for India on varied issues of concern. We lobbied Washington on behalf of the government of India. We did same for Guyana. We also lobbied the governments in India for greater assistance for Guyana. We were politically neutral and as such were taken into confidence by alternating governments in India. Ramsaran also advised the government of El Salvador on how to engage her diaspora; El Salvador has an effective diaspora engagement network in America as do Mexicans and several Central American governments.

From my studies and practical experience of working with Indian diaspora groups, mounting evidence confirm that diasporas play a significant important role in development in countries of origin. They are key to development of poor developing countries. Aside from sending remittances, they have helped home countries with promoting trade and investment, transferring knowledge and skills, spurring entrepreneurship, creating businesses, forming civic groups, funding charities, and building schools, among other contributions to development. Politicians from every developing country have been coming to the diaspora (in North America and Europe) since the 1980s for funding for election campaigns and selected development projects of a self-interest nature. Politicians looked to see what they could get out of it the diaspora rather than have their hearts in a diaspora policy for sustainable benefits.



MOIA Min Vayalar Ravi & Ashook Ramsaran

There has not been a formal policy per se on the diaspora by the Guyana government. For the last three decades, Guyanese politicians ‘talked’ to the diaspora in their visits telling them to return home and invest but they offered no specific or concrete projects. There was no formal policy. Succeeding Guyanese governments worked with some members of the diaspora on discrete projects that benefited a few or that were self-serving. Missing is an engagement policy of mutual interest for the entire diaspora or practical collaboration as equal partners. They did not engage the diaspora as active equal partners in development; they did not seek the advice of the diaspora as the governments of India or El Salvador did. During the 1990s, Atal Beharri Vajpayee met with the Indian diaspora in Manhattan during which Guyanese Dharamdatt Sukhai Durjan broached the subjects of the role of the Indian diaspora in India’s development and the conditions of the Indian diaspora in developing countries overseas. Vajpayee committed that should his BJP were to come into government, he would commission a study on the diaspora and establish a formal institution to engage them. Vajpayee’s deputy, Lal Krishna Advani Vajpayee, made a similar commitment when he engaged the diaspora, including Guyanese, in New York.

Vajpayee and Advani honored both promises after they became PM and deputy PM respectively. An Overseas Indian Ambassador was set up in Manhattan and he engaged the diaspora regularly. Ramsaran, myself and other Guyanese met with him regularly on diaspora policy. We also engaged PM Vajpayee in his every visit to NY on policies beneficial to the Caribbean. Manmohan Singh replaced Vajpayee as PM in May 2004. He deepened engagement with the diaspora establishing a Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs headed by Minister Vayalar Ravi who never gave up an opportunity to meet with Indo-Caribbeans to listen to their concerns and recommendations on improving relations between India and the Caribbean. He met Ramsaran regularly in NY and India. Modi replaced Manmohan Singh as PM in May 2014 replacing the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs with an Office for Diaspora within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that has been actively engaging the diaspora; a Senior and a junior Minister took charge of diaspora affair with who I engaged in NY and Delhi. India has attracted annually tens of billions in American dollars of investment from her diaspora over the last fifteen years because of her engagement. The diaspora has championed investment and charitable and philanthropic activities in India; Indo-Caribbeans assisted in those endeavors. The government cheered the diaspora and honored several who contributed to development of India. Guyana should consider emulating the Indian model as indeed several other countries have done or some other workable model. There is need for a formal policy to link diverse communities of Guyanese Diaspora, strengthen the bonds and explore the benefits of collaboration.

Just like how India formally engages her diaspora with a structure and an office established specifically for that purpose, holding regular meetings with community leaders and consulting diaspora experts, Guyana government should examine that or a similar model. The government must recruit people with expertise in the field to assist it. It is not a task for amateurs or those who will learn on the job. This is a skilled task. Government needs specialists in the field. Staff has to have a love for, an interest in, and background in the field. Guyanese like Ramsaran and myself, with experience in the field, would be willing to lend a helping hand. I don’t think anyone has more experience than Ashook Ramsaran and myself in practical engagement of diaspora with a government.

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