

# The Future of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD)

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## INTRODUCTION

In order to engage in a fair and informed discussion, analysis and objective assessment, with a proposal on the subject “*The Future of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD)*”, it is necessary to present brief relevant backgrounds of both Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) and Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD). This would reveal the initial objectives, PBD’s inception, its successes, and the consequences of its reduction in scope, outreach and intensity among the Indian Diaspora. It would also attempt to justify the proposal for a more robust and active re-engagement of the Indian Diaspora as originally envisioned by PBD when it was first formulated, and the resounding appeal to the Indian Diaspora in the first twelve (12) years of its annual convention.

It is my belief that I am uniquely qualified to present this perspective and proposal on “*The Future of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD)*” in view of my experience, expertise and active involvement over a long period of time with the Indian Diaspora. I have been directly involved with the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) and Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) since the inception to 2016, closely collaborating on specific PBD conference sessions, chairing or being a presenter at each PBD, as well as providing much valued advice and recommendations and suggestions to MOIA on PBD. I have traveled extensively among Indian Diaspora and other countries, given lectures, organized and participated in diaspora conferences, written articles and collaborated on several notable publications.

## PREAMBLE

The Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA): “Ministry was established in May 2004 as the Ministry of Non-Resident Indians' Affairs. It was renamed as the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) in September 2004. Positioned as a ‘Services’ Ministry, it provided information, partnerships and facilitations for all matters related to Overseas Indians: Non-Resident Indian and Person of Indian Origin. The Ministry was merged with the Ministry of External Affairs on 7 January 2016. The government said that the decision was taken in line with government's "overall objective of minimising government and maximising governance" and that it will help the government address duplication as well as unnecessary delays”.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ministry\\_of\\_Overseas\\_Indian\\_Affairs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ministry_of_Overseas_Indian_Affairs)



## A BRIEF HISTORY OF PBD

“Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) is celebrated on 9<sup>th</sup> January every year to mark the contribution of Overseas Indian community in the development of India. January 9 was chosen as the day to celebrate this occasion since it was on this day in 1915 that Mahatma Gandhi, the greatest Pravasi, returned to India from South Africa, led India’s freedom struggle and changed the lives of Indians forever.

PBD conventions are being held every year since 2003. Since 2015, its format has been revised to celebrate the PBD once every two years and to hold theme-based PBD Conferences during the intervening period with participation from overseas diaspora experts, policy makers and stakeholders. These conventions provide a platform to the overseas Indian community to engage with the government and people of the land of their

ancestors for mutually beneficial activities. These conventions are also very useful in networking among the overseas Indian community residing in various parts of the world and enable them to share their experiences in various fields.

Fifteen PBDs: To connect India to its vast overseas diaspora and bring their knowledge, expertise and skills on a common platform, the PBD Convention - the flagship event of MOIA is organized from 7<sup>th</sup> - 9<sup>th</sup> January every year since 2003. Fifteen PBDs have been held earlier in various places of India so far”.

<https://www.mea.gov.in/pravasi-bharatiya-divas.htm>

Besides the annual PBD held in India (rotated in major cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Kochi, Ahmedabad), MOIA held a series of 1-day regional PBDs (RPDs) to better outreach and accommodate those in regions/countries outside of India and addressing issues specific to those regions or countries. These countries included: Australia, Singapore, United Kingdom (London), Netherlands, Canada and USA. These were focused and highly successful events which were also attended by those who could not attend or did not attend the annual PBD held in India.

### **PBD AS ENGAGEMENT WITH INDIAN DIASPORA**

The annual PBD (until 2016) was a welcome engagement event by the Indian Diaspora as a “Diaspora meeting” with attendees from most countries, small and large, where people of Indian origin reside. These include persons of Indian origin (PIOs), citizens of other countries by birth or naturalization, as well as non-resident Indians (NRIs). Attendees welcomed the opportunity to meet, participate in the conference sessions and engage in discussions in meaningful and substantive ways. They felt a sense of jubilation and belonging, and expressed the feeling that the Government of India cared for the Indian Diaspora in a substantive way. Conference sessions included region specific updates and issues, presented by notable speakers from those regions. Information from these sessions provided information, education, awareness and opportunities for cultural, commerce and academic exchanges.



*Min. Jagdish Tytler*



*Min. Vayalar Ravi*



*Min. George Fernandes*

In addition, it was exciting to witness the Prime Minister of India inaugurate every PBD and welcome the Chief Guest selected among notable PIOs. It was more exciting to witness the President of India bestow the coveted annual Pravasi Bharatiya Saman Awards (PBSA) to a several higher achievers and outstanding PIOs and NRIs of the Indian Diaspora.

### **THE DEMISE OF MOIA & CURTAILMENT OF PBD**

MOIA was established in May 2004 and initiated the annual PBD as its flagship event, a global convention held from 7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> January every year since 2003. The Ministry was merged with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) on 7 January 2016. There was no longer a “Diaspora Minister” as MOIA minister was often called. The “Diaspora Minister” visits to near and far reaches of the Indian Diaspora ended in 2016 and the India Diaspora lost its high level representation within the Government of India.

It should be stated that over the years, PBD gradually became a showcase of the Government of India and the bureaucracy rather than an annual convention of the Indian Diaspora. Although there were several important schemes and policies implemented, they were done at the bureaucratic level, sometimes without relevant input or consultation with the Indian Diaspora.

In addition, the annual PBD was changed to a biennial event, thereby depriving the Indian Diaspora of the engagement, excitement, anticipation and enormous benefits of the annual PBD. The changes by MEA to make the widely accepted PIO card become the OCI (Overseas Citizen of India) card caused a lot of confusion at first and was not welcome by many PIOs born and living in multi-ethnic societies where national loyalties remain a thorny issue. These changes further alienated many in the Indian Diaspora who feel that the once respected engagement and outreach have diminished in scope and intensity.

### **DIASPORA AFFAIRS WITHIN MEA**

MOIA was established in May 2004 as a full central government ministry of the Government of India. With that portfolio and supporting staff, MOIA made significant and continuing outreach and visited the far corners of the Indian Diaspora and responded fairly efficiently to queries, input and suggestions from Indian Diaspora organizations, groups and individuals.

The Ministry was merged with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) on 7 January 2016 as Overseas Indian Affairs (OIA) with a Secretary of OIA and reduced supporting staff. The Secretary of OIA was also assigned other portfolio duties not directly related to the Indian Diaspora. As such, the once vibrant level of Indian Diaspora outreach and engagement were relegated primarily to the consular offices in the various countries. This was a tremendous change and had consequences of its reduction in scope, outreach and intensity among the Indian Diaspora.



*MEA Min Smt Sushma Swaraj*

### **PBD CHANGES**

The goal of the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) was to connect and engage the Indian Diaspora in all corners of the globe, and it was a tremendously exciting convention of NRIs and PIOs when it was launched in 2003. With the establishment of India's Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA), the Indian Diaspora felt and embraced a real high level connection to India knowing the serious intent by the Government of India to actively engage the Indian Diaspora.

India continues to actively engage the Indian Diaspora on many fronts with schemes and policies which contribute to more investments in India, increased bi-lateral trade, cultural exchanges and improved working conditions for NRIs in the Gulf State. This effort continues to be quite beneficial for the development of India. However, similar outreach and exchanges are not evident in other countries and regions where investments in India are not readily forthcoming.

The sentiments shared by many is that the engagement with the Indian Diaspora, in particular those born outside of India 2 generations and more, diminished in dramatic ways when MOIA was merged to a department within the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), the annual PBD was held every 2 years with a different format, and the PIO card was merged with and replaced with the OCI card.

While the concept should remain consistent and should be preserved, PBD seems to have lost its ideals, focus, direction and management. In my view, it has become more bureaucratic than diasporic.

### **PROPOSAL - PARTNERSHIP FOR ROBUST RE-ENGAGEMENT**

For an increasing Indian Diaspora now residing or working at all levels on society in almost every country, with rapid advances in technology and PIO mobility globally, the PBD every 2 years would be missing many important matters which can make it more engaging and pro-active. Simultaneously, regional PBDs would

be more relevant especially for those who cannot attend PBDs in India, while addressing matters of interest to the respective countries and region.

Clearly, there is urgent need for active and continuing re-engagement with the Indian Diaspora at the level that made MOIA the diaspora engagement ministry and the PBD the flagship event, along with RPDs to revive outreach, engagement and addressing global and country specific Indian Diaspora issues related to connectivity, culture, history, academia, commerce and NRI/PIO issues.

Clearly, PBD with associated RPDs, need to be urgently invigorated and reorganized for renewed relevance and increased global participation. This can be more efficiently achieved with a committed team of Indian Diaspora experts, as well as event planning and management, working in collaboration with MEA/OIA.

The proposed changes would be:

- PBD to be revert to an annual event, to be held in India on 7-9 January, with planning, coordination and management by a global non-profit Indian Diaspora organization which can be a federation of several notable Indian Diaspora organizations and institutions such as academia. This effort would be in collaboration with MEA/OIA which is important for policy changes resulting issues and concerns raised at PBD and RPD events. Hosting by the global non-profit Indian Diaspora organization with support of MEA/OIA. Funding would be from international private and government sources.
- RPD to be held 4 times annually in countries/regions with significant NRI/PIO population, rotated and scheduled around notable dates and events. It is to be coordinated and managed by the same global non-profit Indian Diaspora organization, in collaboration with MEA/OIA. Hosting by Indian Diaspora organizations in the country/region. Funding would be from national private and government sources. Recommendations: Africa, Far East, Oceania, Caribbean, Europe, North America. Dates: April, June, August, October – spaced 2 months apart and 3 months after the annual PBD.
- Focus on issues of relevance, concern and interest to the global Indian Diaspora of NRIs and PIOs and addressed by experts and diaspora participants, selected objectively on the basis of merit. Issues would include: Human rights, gender equality, next-generation and social justice, inter-ethnic relations and establishment of “sister” cities, villages and colleges in India with countries of the Indian Diaspora. Proposals, recommendations and resolutions to be distributed to various governments, international agencies and institutions with continuing follow-up by assigned personnel.
- PBSA should be more efficiently organized, based strictly on merit, geography and NRI/PIO representation, transparent and managed by the organizing global non-profit Indian Diaspora organization, in collaboration with MEA/OIA.

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