



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks to the Indian migrant community in Sydney

Rising ethnic lobby blocs could weigh on foreign, trade policies

Modi's reception in Sydney reveals the growing power of the diaspora in Western countries

TANVEER AHMED



THE Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen wrote in his book *Identity and Violence* of the dangers of what he called a "miniaturisation" of our identities, by which he meant viewing ourselves narrowly through the prism of one category, be it race, religion or class.

His views were shaped in part by his childhood experiences of Indian partition, of seeing the rage of religion-based violence erupt within peoples who had lived together for centuries.

Religion was notable by its absence in Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speech in Sydney this week to thousands of the Australia-based Indian community, an event that underlined the growing importance of diaspora politics.

Rory Medcalf, the Lowy Institute's south Asia expert, says diasporas have the potential to reinforce and complicate our relationships with Asia.

Modi stoked the hearts of the diaspora with references to the rising connections between India and Australia and the Indian rebellion of 1857, which is often referred to as the First War of Indian Independence, a time when sections of the Indian army rose up against British authorities, sparking significant civilian unrest through territories controlled by the East India Company.

Modi embodied the power of possibility, as the son of a tea-seller who rose to become leader of the world's largest democracy.

"He makes us proud to be Indian like no other leader has made us proud," says Yadu Singh, a cardiologist and Indian community leader.

Singh says local Indians have a much greater hope that their country, so often portrayed negatively in stories about corruption, poverty and gender-based violence, could finally reach its potential. He also alludes to the diaspora's growing political influence. "There are almost half a million Indians and our votes can sway seats in western Sydney and outer Melbourne," says Singh. "We have more clout to go for policy changes to suit India."

Lawyer, academic and Indian community activist Pallavi Sinha

says there was a real sense of optimism and possibility at the event. "Modi has mobilised the Indian diaspora towards common goals, largely about promoting the goal of India becoming a more prosperous, significant nation on the world stage."

She says Modi is particularly modern, even using social media to great effect, underlined by a selfie at the MCG with Tony Abbott. Modi commands several million Twitter followers and has six million Facebook friends. Sinha also notes that while the

organisers of the event were primarily Hindu-based, there was broad-based representation from Muslims, Christians and Indians of all backgrounds. This is despite the fact that Modi's past as the leader of Gujarat in 2002, when hundreds of Muslims were killed in communal violence, still haunts him and led him to having his US visa rejected a decade ago.

Like his performance in New York's Madison Square Garden in September, Modi was treated to chants of "Modi, Modi" in Sydney as he energised his fans. It is part of an active policy on the part of the Indian government to encourage the diaspora towards promoting the development of their ancestral lands, from the easier to and fro of technology professionals between Silicon Valley and Bangalore to the raising of campaign funds from the wealthy diaspora.

In the US, Indians are only 1 per cent of the population, but are the most successful immigrant group in terms of average income and education levels.

The trend is likely to be similar in Australia, but perhaps a decade or so behind. According to the most recent Census figures, the number of Indian-born Australians has trebled in the past decade and the number of Australians who identify themselves as of Indian origin is now more than 400,000. Most arrive as skilled migrants or international students.

Hinduism has become the country's fastest-growing religion and more than 100,000 Australians speak Hindi at home.

India is perhaps the most active nation in the world in terms of using the talents and resources of its diaspora: it has a government department to focus on non-resident Indians (NRIs), a term first coined to connote Indians living abroad. Remittance payments from the diaspora totalled \$70 billion in 2013, five times the trade between Australia and India.

It is mirrored in India's cultural heart, that of Bollywood. For decades, the expatriate Indian was depicted as crass and uncultured, unaware of roots. In recent years this has changed and NRIs have become the epitome of Indian-ness, combining a capitalist and consumerist modernity with Hindu traditionalism.

In the US, NRIs have modelled themselves on the Jewish community, which is revered for its organisational nous at lobbying governments. But in doing so, they have attracted a degree of criticism in pandering to Islamophobic elements in the Indian community. In this respect, Islamic terrorism has provided an opportunity for Indian Muslims to differentiate themselves from other Muslim migrant groups.

This is further entrenched by a growing military alliance between Israel and India: Israel is now the second biggest arms supplier to Delhi after Russia.

Terrorism has worked much like a symbolic partition for south Asians and religion-based identities are once more in focus. For example, whereas I as a Bangladeshi-Australian was once viewed as primarily part of the subcontinental melange, terrorism has recast my identity, as it did with Pakistanis, primarily through the lens of being Muslim.

Transnational identities are of paramount importance in the modern world as unprecedented flows of migration and money are magnified by new communications technologies. It is most pronounced in homegrown terrorism, given extremist Muslims are forthright about their membership of the global community of Muslims known as the "ummah" and that this takes precedence over their national ties.

Yadu Singh is emphatic about his and the Indian community's priorities. "We are Australian first, no doubt about it. But when there is no conflict or tension between policies, we are eager to promote India's interests," says Singh.

Former foreign minister Bob Carr agrees there is a growing influence from what he calls "active, lively communities" such as those from China and India, but feels they are not yet significant and established enough to carry strategic influence on Australia's foreign policy.

He cites the Australian Tamil community as an example of a local community that organised itself efficiently in response to what it considered were human rights threats in Sri Lanka from the Sinhalese majority. "Leaders will take note of such communities, but our strategic interests for the community at large will always take precedence," Carr told Inquirer this week. He says political parties are taking greater note of foreign policies when campaigning within ethnic communities, citing Chris Bowen's pamphlets titled "Labor for Palestine" during last year's federal election campaign aimed at the large Arab presence in his western Sydney seat.

Diasporas have growing importance in helping to facilitate business and cultural ties internationally and in projecting Australia's reality as a cohesive, confident multicultural nation. The Chinese and Indians living abroad have long been commercially important but were previously faced with the closed economies of their ancestral lands.

While globalisation is often regarded as a force diluting former ethnic and cultural bonds, there are trends they can reawaken or reinvent ancestral ties. But the emerging reality of influential ethnic lobby blocs may become a greater feature of how foreign and trade policies are set, particularly with regards to countries such as China or India.