Indian Foreign Policy and the Diaspora: Continuity or Change?

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Abstract

The Indian government's engagement with the Indian diaspora has seen a major upswing since the early 2000s. However, very different political parties have steered the Indian government in the first quarter of the 21st century. Has the ideological preferences of the political parties in power shaped the Indian government's engagement with the diaspora? To answer this question, this article analyzes the government's rhetoric towards the diaspora from 2005–2025. The author uses both quantitative and qualitative content analysis on speeches by politicians at the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) to test the arguments. The main findings are that speeches contain more Hindutva themes after 2014 while they continue with economic themes but with a lesser frequency. The change indicates a stronger emphasis on Hindu ideology but continuity on engaging the diaspora for India's economic development. Using primary sources such as speeches, party manifestoes, annual reports of government ministries, and media articles, the author explains the shift based on BJP's civilizational foreign policy agenda, the effect of Modi's personalist leadership, and the desire to promote India's status on the global stage.

Keywords: Diaspora; Indian Foreign Policy; Modi; BJP; Congress

La política exterior india y la diáspora: ¿continuidad o cambio?

Resumen

El compromiso del gobierno indio con la diáspora india ha experimentado un importante auge desde principios de la década de 2000. Sin embargo, partidos políticos muy diferentes han dirigido el gobierno indio en el primer cuarto del siglo XXI. ¿Han moldeado las preferencias ideológicas de los partidos políticos en el poder

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el compromiso del gobierno indio con la diáspora? Para responder a esta pregunta, este documento analiza la retórica del gobierno hacia la diáspora entre 2005 y 2025. El autor utiliza análisis de contenido tanto cuantitativo como cualitativo en discursos de políticos en el Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) para probar argumentos. Los principales hallazgos son que los discursos contienen más temas de Hindutva después de 2014, mientras que continúan con temas económicos, pero con menor frecuencia. El cambio indica un mayor énfasis en la ideología hindú, pero una continuidad en la participación de la diáspora para el desarrollo económico de la India. Utilizando fuentes primarias como discursos, manifiestos de partidos, informes anuales de ministerios gubernamentales y artículos de medios, el autor explica el cambio basado en la agenda de política exterior civilizacional del BJP, el efecto del liderazgo personalista de Modi y el deseo de promover el estatus de la India en el escenario global.

Palabras clave: Diáspora; Política exterior india; Modi; BJP; Congreso

印度外交政策与海外侨民：延续还是变革？

摘要

自2000年代初以来，印度政府与印度侨民的互动显著增强。然而，在21世纪的第一个25年里，执政党几经更迭。执政党的意识形态偏好是否影响了印度政府与侨民的互动？为解答这一问题，本文分析了2005年至2025年间印度政府针对侨民的言论。作者运用定量和定性内容分析方法，对政治人物在印度侨民日（Pravasi Bharatiya Divas，简称PBD）上的演讲进行分析，以检验相关论点。主要研究结果表明，2014年后，演讲中印度教特性(Hindutva)主题有所增加，经济主题虽然仍然存在，但出现频率有所降低。这一变化表明，政府更加重视印度教意识形态，但同时仍致力于利用侨民的力量来促进印度的经济发展。作者运用演讲稿、政党宣言、政府部门年度报告和媒体文章等一手资料，从印度人民党(BJP)的文明外交政策议程、莫迪的个人主义领导风格以及提升印度国际地位的愿望等方面，阐释了这一转变。

关键词：侨民，印度外交政策，莫迪，印度人民党，印度国民大会党

Post-independence, overseas Indians have served as a bridge of friendship and cooperation between India and their adopted homes abroad.

—Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, 2013[1]

I have always considered the Indian diaspora as ambassadors of India.

—Prime Minister Narendra Modi, 2025[2]

Introduction

Diasporas can have political (Paarlberg 2019; Whitaker and Wellman 2024), economic (Burgess 2020; Naujoks 2022), and cultural (Dag 2022) impacts on their countries of origin. The Indian diaspora remains connected to India from around the world via multiple channels. Cultural connections exist from historical times with indentured labourers' descendants[3] holding on to aspects of Indian identity (Gowricharn 2024) to contemporary familial connections and consumption of Indian cultural products like Bollywood (Bandyopadhyay 2008). Economic linkages exist in the form of remittances, charitable donations, religious donations, investments, and property ownership. The Indian diaspora is also politically engaged with India. Political engagement has ranged from historical lobbying for Indian independence to contemporary lobbying in the US for procuring an exemption for India's civilian nuclear industry (Prasad and Savatic 2023).

Given the Indian diaspora's strong connections to India, does the ideological preferences of the political parties in power shape the Indian government's engagement with the diaspora? Ideological differences between political parties can impact foreign policy decision-making (Raunio and Wagner 2020; Hofmann and Martill 2021). However, a change in government does not necessarily mean a fundamental change in foreign policy. On the one hand, Modi's populist agenda and personalist leadership have resulted in a change in rhetoric in Indian foreign policy with themes rooted in Hindutva or Hindu nationalist ideology (Hall 2019). On the other hand, there are fundamental continuities in India's foreign policy despite Modi's active attempt to create his own doctrine (Prasad and Nooruddin 2019; Rajagopalan 2020). The question that arises then is whether the Modi government, based on its promotion of Hindutva ideology, has actively sought to highlight India and its diaspora's Hindu identity more so than a broader pluralist Indian identity.

In this article, I argue that while the Modi-led BJP government has strongly adopted the language of Hindutva ideology, it has not strayed from previous governments' aim to engage the diaspora economically. BJP leaders' speeches often invoke symbols of Hinduism such as the Kumbh mela and quote texts of ancient Hindu saints. In contrast, under the leadership of Manmohan Singh, the speeches make references to India's pluralism and diversi-

ty. However, I argue that there is also continuity across the Congress and BJP governments. Diaspora engagement consistently rests on economic incentives. Regardless of the party in power, the Indian government looks to invite diasporic economic and skills investment in India. While the Modi-led BJP government might invoke Hindutva rhetoric, they continue to engage the diaspora on economic investments.

In order to test the changes and continuities in rhetoric, I will examine speeches given by representatives of the Indian government at the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) convention from 2005–2025. This event has been selected since this is one of the largest platforms that the Indian government has set-up to directly celebrate and addresses the diaspora. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the content of the speeches show that there is a shift from more secular themes to Hindu themes in the speeches. However, the economic agenda for the diaspora mostly remains the same even though the frequency of economic themes drops after 2014. Using primary sources such as speeches, party manifestoes, annual reports of government ministries, and media articles, I explain the shift based on BJP's civilizational foreign policy agenda, the effect of Modi's personalist leadership, and the desire to promote India's status on the global stage. Of the four transmissions belts that link domestic developments to international outcomes, my argument shows how a shift in the "worldview" from a secular Congress-led to a Hindutva BJP-led government and the "decision-making process" of individual leaders can change foreign policy rhetoric towards the diaspora. Overall, this article makes an empirical contribution to understanding how a change in government in India can lead to a change in rhetoric towards the Indian diaspora while not fundamentally changing the economic goals expected from the diaspora.

In the following section, I discuss how ideology can shape foreign policy, and therefore, diaspora policy. I then show how the Indian government has engaged the Indian diaspora between 2005–2025. I derive two hypotheses regarding potential change in the Indian government's engagement with the diaspora after the BJP came to power in 2014. Based on speeches given at PBD conventions, I quantitatively and qualitatively assess whether there has been a change in rhetoric in the messaging towards the diaspora. I explain how Modi's leadership and his government's civilizational based foreign policy are the primary drivers of the shift in rhetoric while the desire to promote India's status on the global stage is also a subsidiary motivating factor. I conclude with the implications of my findings regarding the role of Hindu ideology in the Indian government's communication strategy with the Indian diaspora.

Can Ideology Shape Foreign Policy?

Ideologies can shape foreign policy both at the party and the individual level in democracies. Cross-national analyses have found that genuine

ideological differences between political parties can impact foreign policy decision-making (Raunio and Wagner 2020; Hofmann and Martill 2021). For instance, right-leaning governments are more likely to promote free trade policies while left-leaning governments are more likely to support foreign aid and protectionism (Broz 2011; Raess et al. 2018). Even when it comes to security issues where consensus across parties is assumed to be more common (Prins and Marshall 2001; Raunio and Wagner 2018), right-leaning governments are more likely to be involved in militarized inter-state disputes (Palmer et al. 2004). Ideology is the most consistent factor that determines whether legislators propose and support spending limits on security-related bills (Bendix and Jeong 2024).

Given the recent rise in populism across democratic countries, studies have now found that populist ideologies also impact policy-making at the international level (Wajner et al. 2024; Löfflmann 2022b). Populism "is a political movement or party emphasizing a Manichean, us-versus-them worldview in which the "us" refers to the "people," defined often in ethnic or communal terms" if the movement in question is right-wing (Berman 2021, 72). Populist governments, especially in democracies, tend to disengage from international institutions and adopt protectionist policies (Pacciardi et al. 2024; Mansfield and Pevehouse 2022). Populist radical right-wing parties across Europe have broadly similar foreign policy agendas across a broad range of topics (Ostermann and Stahl 2022). While populism does not automatically mean a uniform type of foreign policy (Wehner and Thies 2021), populism when combined with nationalism results in foreign policies that are more destructive for the international system (Jenne 2021).

Individual leaders are also key in shaping foreign policy agendas. Their personal values, ideologies, and every-day decision-making can influence foreign policy outcomes (Rathbun et al. 2016; Thiers and Wehner 2022; O'Connor and Cooper 2021). Particular attention has been paid to leaders labeled populists. Populist leaders' foreign policies are characterized by centralization of power, personalization of decision-making, anti-elitism, and the invocation of their primary cultural identity (Wehner and Thies 2021; Özdamar and Yanik 2024). Even when populists do not explicitly espouse anti-elitism, their foreign policy tends to be people-centric (Wicaksana and Wardhana 2021). Populists tap into fear, anxiety, and resentment to enable "othering" at both the national and international levels (Löfflmann 2022a).

Thus, political ideologies, both at the party and individual level, can affect a state's international posturing. This leads to the following question: how has the transition from the Congress-led coalition government's secular ideology to the BJP-led government's Hindutva ideology affected India's diaspora policy? Particularly given the narratives around Modi's strong populist leadership, have his personal views changed India's engagement with the diaspora?

India's Diaspora Engagement

The Indian state's pre-independence, post-independence, and post-liberalization policies towards the diaspora can be broadly characterized as a pendulum swing. Pre-independence, the Indian elite had close ties with the Indian diaspora abroad in order to bolster support for Indian independence in countries like the US and the UK (Prasad and Savatic 2023). After independence from British colonial rule, India disengaged from its diaspora, which it thought should integrate into its various host societies (Sinha 2024). However, in the aftermath of economic liberalization in the early 1990s, India changed its attitude in order to attract more investments from its diaspora (Naujoks 2013). This even led to the creation of the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) in 2004 to deal with diaspora issues (later subsumed within the Ministry of External Affairs in 2016) and the celebration of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) or Indian Diaspora Day every 9th of January.

Governments around the world have tried to create favorable conditions to attract diaspora attachment to their homeland. Strategies include creating material incentives like events, sponsored trips, and ease of economic investment (Brinkerhoff 2012). Cultivating cultural proximity to the homeland through diaspora outreach events abroad and tourism incentives domestically are also part of the strategy of increasing diaspora attachment (Abramson 2017; Tripathi and Biswas 2024). Such cultural ties are also interwoven with political support wherein diasporas can influence their families in terms of election outcomes (Paarlberg 2017). In India's case, cultural identity does seem to matter for political support given evidence that Hindu Americans are much more likely to support Modi than non-Hindu Americans (Prasad et al. 2023).

Within the Indian diaspora abroad, there has been strong mobilization along Hindu ideological lines. Such networks date back to the 1940s and spread in the subsequent decades. These were the very same networks that were activated by Hindu nationalist politicians in the Opposition during the Emergency era (1975–77) in India to successfully put pressure on Indira Gandhi's government to end the Emergency (Anderson and Clibbens 2018). The Sangh Parivar, a network of Hindu nationalist organizations, which the BJP is a part of, has successfully exported and replicated its institutions amongst the Hindu diaspora in many countries (Jaffrelot and Therwath 2007; Kurien 2004). The replicated Hindutva ideology perpetuate the othering of Indian minorities both in the diaspora and in India (Therwath 2007; Sabrang and South Asia Citizens Web 2002; Anderson 2015). Hindutva organizations have also proliferated online, further extending their reach (Rajagopal 2000). While we can see plenty of evidence that the Hindu diaspora has been engaged to support the political and cultural goals of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the BJP in India, does Hindutva ideology also enter the official messaging from the BJP-led In-

dian government when it addresses the broader Indian diaspora?

Modi's impact on foreign policy has been found to be especially evident in procedural and communication strategies and "Modi's interest in Indians abroad has been remarkable" (Plagemann and Destradi 2019, p. 294). However, the Indian diaspora also have varied preferences regarding politics in India and are divided regarding their support for the current Prime Minister of India (Badrinathan et al. 2021). Given Modi's active agenda to engage the Indian diaspora, it is worth asking whether his engagement is substantively different from that of prior governments. When it comes to Indian foreign policy, scholars agree that Modi has continued certain foreign policy strategies of prior governments while deviating on some others (Pant 2019). In the context of a mixed record on continuity and change in foreign policy, it is interesting to see whether Modi tries to win a broader coalition of support from the diaspora when he addresses them or taps into narratives of Hindu nationalist ideology to prop up his support base. The aim is to understand whether the Indian government's cultural and economic engagement of the Indian diaspora has remained consistent or not across the Manmohan Singh-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government and the Modi-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government. The cultural ideologies of the Congress and the BJP can be broadly articulated as secular and Hindutva, respectively. Thus, the first hypothesis can be articulated in two parts as follows:

Hypothesis 1a: Speeches after 2014 will be more likely to contain Hindutva themes as compared to speeches before 2014.

Hypothesis 1b: Speeches after 2014 will be more likely to contain fewer secular themes as compared to speeches before 2014.

In terms of economic engagement, diasporas play a key role in boosting homeland economies with financial transfers that range from remittances to foreign direct investment (FDI) (Azeez and Begum 2009; Bhagat et al. 2013; Ye 2014). The Indian diaspora has had a positive effect on Indian economic development with arguments showing that the diaspora can reverse India's "brain drain" (Agrawal et al. 2011; Sahay 2009). Studies have shown that Indian-Americans participate in the Indian economy through promoting the Information Technology (IT) sector and setting up avenues for innovation (Kapur 2001; 2004). They also enable institutionalized transnational networks for development in sectors like health and education (Agarwala 2015).

The economic embracing of the Indian diaspora has not gone hand in hand with a strong political embrace. The Indian political leadership, across party lines, perceive dual citizenship as a potential security threat (Naujoks 2015). Thus, there is no guarantee that the Indian government will always perceive the Indian diaspora as an asset. This begs the question of whether the Congress and BJP governments similarly viewed the diaspora as beneficial or not to the Indian economy. The second hypothesis, therefore, is as follows:

Hypothesis 2: Speeches after 2014 will be as likely to contain references to economic development as compared to speeches before 2014.

In the following sections, I analyze whether the Indian government's attitude to diasporas and role of diasporas has remained stable or changed in tone after the 2014 election of the Modi-led BJP government.[4]

Data and Analysis

The data being analyzed are all speeches given by the Prime Minister, External Affairs Minister, Minister of State for External Affairs, and the Minister of Overseas Indian Affairs at any PBD convention event from 2005 to 2015. The PBD is celebrated on 9th of January to mark the date that Mahatma Gandhi returned to India in 1915. Since 2003, a convention is held around this date to acknowledge the contribution of the Indian diaspora towards India's development. The convention has been held every 2 years since 2015. The Indian government's signaling at this event is worth noting since this is one of the largest platforms organized by the Indian government that directly celebrates and addresses the diaspora. PBD "signals the commitment of the Indian state to the welfare of diasporic populations" (Mani and Varadarajan 2005, 45–46). Additionally, the time period under consideration is almost equally distributed between Congress-led governments (2005–2014)[5] and BJP-led governments (2015–2025).[6] In total, there are 39 speeches that are publicly available from 2005–2025.[7]

In order to test whether there is a change in rhetoric between the Congress-led and BJP-led governments, I analyze the PBD speeches using a multi-method approach.[8] Quantitative text analysis allows us to spot trends in themes in the speeches while the qualitative analysis contextualizes these trends. Using both quantitative and qualitative data contributes to first establishing whether or not there is a change in rhetoric between the UPA and NDA governments.

Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative analysis tests whether there is a change in substance and tone after 2014 in the speeches given by ministers at PBD. First, I test the presence and change between three categories as outlined above—Secularism, Hindutva, and Economics—in speeches delivered before and after 2014. The goal of the tests is to determine whether the key words associated with these categories exist and if the proportion of the words attributed to each category changes in the speeches with a change in government. The analysis is supplemented with a word frequency calculation to check which words dropped out most from the vocabulary of the speech givers and which words increased most in usage.

The tests conducted are the comparisons of the average normalized frequency of the three key dimensions. The analysis employs a systematic approach to quantitatively examine the-

matic trends in speeches using a keyword-based dictionary method. First, since different words indicate different types of rhetoric, I created a custom dictionary to classify keywords into the three predefined thematic dimensions: Secularism, Hindutva, and Economics (see the Appendix for a dictionary of keywords for each category). Each speech was then tokenized into individual words using the "tokens" function from the "quanteda" package in R, which processes text by splitting it into tokens while removing punctuation to ensure clean and analyzable input. A document-feature matrix (DFM) was subsequently constructed to represent the frequency of each token across all speeches. The customised dictionary was then applied to the DFM, which mapped the tokens to their respective thematic categories and generated category-specific word counts for each speech. The speeches were also divided into pre- and post-2014 in order to compare any shifts in thematic focus across the Congress and BJP governments. Missing values in category counts were replaced with zero to ensure consistency. For normalization, category counts were divided by the total word count of each speech. The average normalized frequency represents the proportion of speech content devoted to each theme relative to the total content of the speech. The normalization process accounted for the total word count in each speech, ensuring that the relative weight of each dimension could be compared across time periods. A higher value indicates a greater focus on a particular dimension, while a lower value suggests less emphasis.

As shown in Figure 1, there is a clear shift in the thematic emphasis between the two time periods. Before 2014, economics was more pronounced in the speeches, with an average normalized frequency of 0.021. Secularism's frequency was 0.003 while Hindutva had a lower representation with 0.001. In contrast, after 2014, the thematic focus shifted significantly. Hindutva as a theme spiked with an average normalized frequency of 0.009. Secularism dropped to 0.001, reflecting a much smaller presence in post-2014 speeches. Economics continues to be important after 2014 but has a lower frequency of 0.012. This change suggests a significant shift in the political and ideological focus of the speeches over time. While economics was a key theme before 2014, Hindutva increased in importance as a topic in the speeches delivered after 2014. While economics continues to maintain a presence post-2014, it is emphasized much less. Secularism as a theme drops substantially after 2014. The *t-tests* confirm that the shifts in Hindutva and Secularism are highly statistically significant. Interestingly, the drop in frequency for Economics as a theme is moderately statistically significant.[9]

The analysis upholds the hypothesis regarding a shift from secular themes towards more Hindutva themes in speeches delivered after 2014. The prominence of economics and higher mentions of secular themes before 2014 aligns with the political climate of the time. The post-2014 speeches show

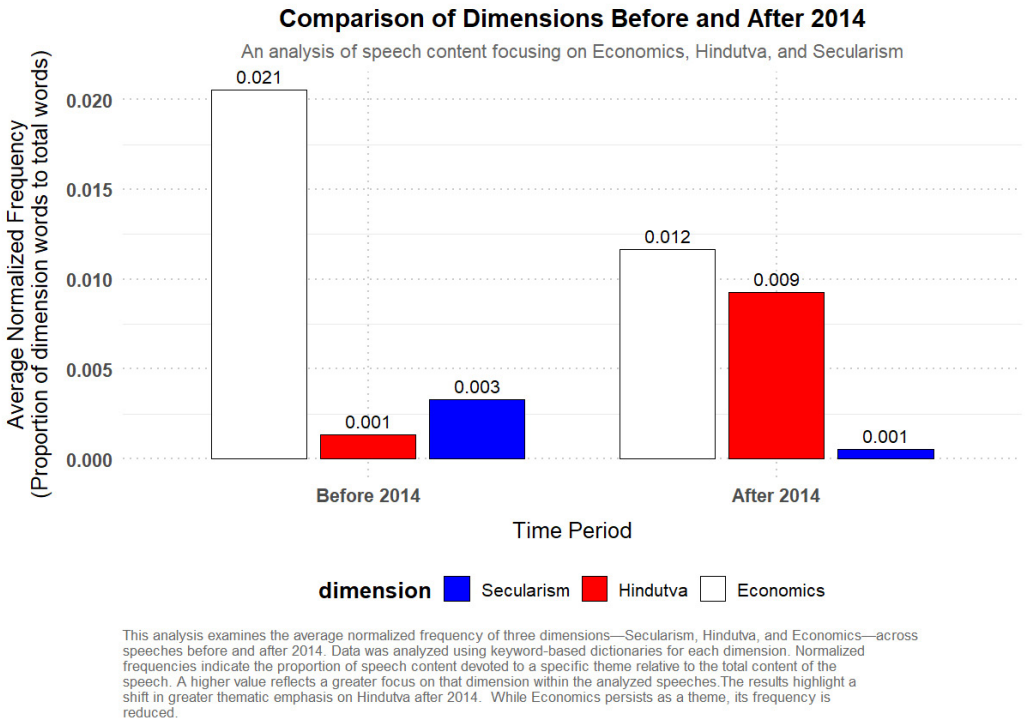

Figure 1: Average Normalized Frequency Graph of Themes Before and After 2014

a distinct rise in Hindutva discourse, reflecting Modi and the BJP's push towards highlighting Hindu ideology. The most interesting finding is the drop in the relative frequency of economics as a theme after 2014. While economics persists as a topic, it is less invoked.

Next, I examine shifts in focus on the three dimensions—Secularism, Hindutva, and Economics—based on word frequencies in speeches before and after 2014. The text of each speech was split into individual words (tokens), which are the basic units for analysis. Common, non-informative words (e.g., "the," "and," "it") were removed from the analysis to focus on content-specific terms. All the text was converted to lowercase and non-alphanumeric characters were removed to ensure uniformity in the analysis. After the cleaning, word frequencies were calculated for each period.

The word frequencies were compared between the two periods to identify which words had the most significant increases or decreases in frequency. Word clouds were generated for both the words with the most increase and decrease in frequency. The word cloud serves as a visual representation of word frequency: the larger a word appears, the more frequently it was used relative to other words. For the increase and decrease, two separate word clouds were created to highlight the top 10 words in each category.[10]

As seen in Figure 2, there is an increased frequency of words like

"friends,"[11] "ji," "diaspora," and "convention" after 2014. None of these indicate a significant rhetorical shift. Figure 3 shows a decreased frequency of words like "economic," "growth," and "education," which indicates less emphasis on traditional economic concerns after 2014. These trends help us understand how the discourse shifted after 2014. Most significantly, these changes in terms used indicate a relative decline in economic development-related discourse in the post-2014 period, which is surprising. The drop in frequency of these terms suggests that they were less emphasized in the speeches after 2014, potentially reflecting a shift in focus towards different political, economic, cultural, or social issues.

However, the word clouds do not indicate any substantial increase or decrease in terminology associated with secularism or Hindutva. The only significant change in terminology usage is the noticeable increase in frequency of the word "Bharat" in speeches after 2014. This aligns with the BJP's push to use the Sanskrit word for India. Thus, the change in word frequencies indicate minor changes in rhetoric but nothing substantial.

Qualitative Analysis

While the quantitative analysis gives us a picture of how the Indian government changed its messaging to the Indian diaspora to some degree after 2014, I also qualitatively assess whether these changes were not merely numerical but also substantive in content. I assess whether secular themes decreased while Hindutva themes increased after 2014 and whether the role of the diaspora for India's economic development was as emphasized after 2014. I also check if there are any other themes that the quantitative analysis was unable to process. Overall, the qualitative assessment backs the quantitative findings to show that there is a switch from secular to more Hindutva themes after 2014 and a drop in emphasizing economic development but continued appeals to the diaspora for economic investment.

The speeches given between 2005–2014 primarily refer to Indian identity in secular terms. As PM Manmohan Singh said in his 2011 PBD speech to the Indian diaspora "Each one of you—living in different countries, different faiths, different languages, different beliefs—are a symbol of that great idea of 'unity in diversity'

Figure 2: Increased word frequency cloud

Figure 3: Decreased word frequency cloud

that India represents." The emphasis on India's diversity and pluralism is present throughout the speeches of this era. India is described as "a vibrant whole of many cultures, religions, languages and regions. It is this plurality that gives us strength … This plurality is true as much of the Indian diaspora."[12]

Additionally, the plight of the marginalized in India is highlighted to talk about strategies to improve their economic, social, and political welfare. Success is highlighted as "more and more people from the disadvantaged sections of our society"[13] entering the economic and political system. References to the marginalized are absent in speeches after 2014.

It should be noted that speeches prior to 2014 are not devoid of references to India's ancient cultural heritage. For instance, the image of Indians traveling the world in ancient times runs across both time periods. At the PBD in 2013, references were made to the "earliest Indians who travelled abroad were the emissaries of Emperor Ashoka to disseminate the tenets of Buddhism in the third century B.C."[14] However, references to classical texts, especially Hindu figures, increases after 2014. The links between ancient culture and modern processes are more explicitly made through observations like: "Our classical texts describe the long journeys that saints and monks undertook for the spread of knowledge, peace and love … The present-day travel of Indians as professionals, labourers, traders and entrepreneurs to the rest of the world is a continuing saga of Indian Migration."[15]

The use of the Sanskrit term "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" (the world is one family), taken from ancient Hindu texts, is not unique to the BJP government and has been used by prior governments as well. However, it is much more frequently invoked in the speeches after 2014 to indicate India's relationship with its diaspora. Similarly, the Sanskrit term for India, "Bharat," is used much more frequently after 2014. Its usage often juxtaposes India's modernizing drive with its cultural history to highlight "a Bharat that is more confident, modernizing and inclusive. Where tradition and technology go hand in hand."[16] Furthermore, the speeches are littered with references to Hindu cultural heritage sites and events (like the Kumbh mela) and more recent explicit references to Hindu gods. For example, Modi welcomed the Indian diaspora at the 2025 PBD event in Odisha with: "On this holy land of Lord Jagannath and Lord Lingaraj, I welcome my Indian diaspora family from all over the world."[17] Thus, the trend from secular to more explicit Hindutva themes is substantively present in the speeches as well.

When it comes to economic themes, the shift in content is more subtle after 2014. Prior to 2014, the speeches centered on India's development goals and the role the Indian diaspora could play in helping achieve this agenda. As the External Affairs Minister in 2013 put it, "ultimately as the Americans say – 'It is the economy stupid that really finally decides relationships.'"[18] The diaspora is seen as the "catalyst for development and contribute in na-

tion-building activities back home"[19] since they can bring "the resources, talents, expertise and experience"[20] to promote Indian development. The Indian government's appeal to the Indian diaspora is rather bluntly expressed. As the Minister for Overseas Indian Affairs said in 2009, "We wish to provide the vast majority of you the opportunity to contribute—each in your own way—to India's development story."[21] There is little doubt that the Indian government viewed the Indian diaspora as an economic resource.

After 2014, the economic appeals to the Indian diaspora do not disappear from the speeches but they substantially reduce in frequency. India is highlighted as a growing economy that attracts investments. However, the appeals to the diaspora are tinged with cultural import. For instance, the Minister of Overseas Indian Affairs said, "[we] welcome entrepreneurs, investors and professionals from the diaspora to partake in our endeavor to develop the motherland and restore it to its past glory,"[22] harkening back to an implied golden age of India that is linked to its Hindu heritage. Furthermore, the shift in the messaging around India's economic development is seen in the emphasis on India's ability to be "self-reliant" with many references across speeches to "Aatmanirbhar Bharat." The shift seems to be a move away from actively engaging the diaspora as partners in India's development to showcasing India as a thriving economy that can now benefit the diaspora if they so choose.

What Explains the Shift?

The shift towards more Hindutva language shows that ideology matters and is markedly present in the change in how the diaspora is addressed. In this section, I assess how ideology shapes this change in discourse. As outlined earlier, both at the party and individual level, ideology can shape foreign policy. In the case of India, I argue that the shift to more explicit Hindutva messaging towards the diaspora is primarily due to the BJP-led government's emphasis on a Hindu civilization based foreign policy and Modi's personalist leadership. I also assess an alternative argument that this shift is due to India's desire for greater status on the world stage, which requires mobilizing its diaspora by any means. I examine PBD speeches, PBD agendas, election manifestoes, ministerial reports, and media reports as primary sources to support the explanations.

Civilizational based Foreign Policy

The BJP's Hindutva worldview shapes how its government approaches foreign policy (Michael 2018; Gupta et al. 2018). This Hindutva lens presents India's civilizational legacy as being synonymous with India's Hindu traditions. Indian foreign policy, therefore, is increasingly imbued with a Hindu civilizational ethos. For instance, the MEA celebrates the "growing impact of India's civilizational values on international cooperation, underpinned by the enduring conceptual framework of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam,'"[23] by highlighting how artists from 124 countries came togeth-

er to sing Mahatma Gandhi's favourite Hindu *bhajan* (prayer).

The significance of this civilizational agenda is clear in the BJP's election manifestoes. Foreign policy is geared towards making India a "Vishwaguru" (world leader) that draws on its "ancient wisdom and heritage."[24] The goal is to "deepen the relationship of culture and heritage with people of Indian origin."[25] The BJP also shifts to calling India Bharat in its 2024 manifesto and promises to "fortify our connection with the Bharatiya diaspora"[26] and ensure cultural and economic ties with them. The diaspora is encouraged to take pride in and highlight this history of Hindu heritage with appeals like, "[i]n the countries where you live, you must also take the lead in spreading India's true history"[27] of prosperity and culture.

The civilizational approach also shapes who in the diaspora gets recognized. While Bharatiya Samman awards for members of the diaspora were a feature of the PBD across both Congress and BJP governments, who received those awards is also interesting to examine. Modi's government has felicitated prominent members of the diaspora who have actively promoted Hindu culture and traditions. For instance, Mahesh Mehta, the organizer of the first chapter of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) in the US, was given an award in 2017. Vaikuntam Iyer Lakshmanan, the co-founder for the Sringeri Vidya Bharati Foundation in Canada, was recognized in 2023 amongst other things for his work in "promoting India's spiritual and cultural traditions."[28] In the same year, Dewendrachandra-bose Sharman was honored for his participation in various Arya Samaj organizations and his support for the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS) in Suriname. The Guyana Hindu Dharmic Sabha (GHDS) was also recognized in 2019 for its contribution to the Indian community. Thus, the BJP government has selected awardees from around the world that have promoted Hindu culture and traditions. This shows that there is a tangible shift towards embracing a Hindutva ideology in India's diaspora policy under the BJP government since 2014.

Modi's Personalist Leadership

While the BJP's Hindutva ideology serves as the background for the shift in the rhetoric towards the diaspora, the manner in which this shift has occurred can also be attributed to Prime Minister Modi's personalist style of leadership. Modi has been successful in centralizing power within the BJP and garnering in-party loyalty (Leake and Chhibber 2024). Modi's personalist style of leadership is evident in his party's political campaigns. Modi has projected himself as synonymous with the BJP. The BJP's national election campaigns of 2014, 2019, and 2024 all refer to Modi individually and not to the party in general. "*Ab ki baar, Modi sarkar*" (This time, Modi's government) and "*Phir ek baar, Modi sarkar*" (Once more, Modi's government) were election slogans for 2014 and 2019, respectively. By 2024, the BJP's election manifesto itself was called "*Modi ki guarantee*" (Modi's guarantee).

The Indian diaspora seems to have caught Modi's particular attention (Plagemann and Destradi 2019). He has worked with the diaspora in the past as a member of the RSS (Anderson and Clibbens 2018) and during his tenure as Chief Minister of Gujarat (Sinha 2024), so knows how to navigate both Hindu cultural narratives and economic policy to connect with the diaspora. For instance, Modi seamlessly links the religious importance of the river Ganga in Hinduism to development goals in his PBD 2015 speech by asserting that "the cleaning of the Ganga is an environmental issue, a matter of devotion as well as a matter of cultural legacy. Similarly cleaning of the Ganges can become a symbol of progress,"[29] which he goes on to describe as economic investments in the states that the river runs through. Modi appeals to the diaspora based on cultural ties rooted in Hinduism. However, he also emphasizes the importance of the diaspora's economic role, for instance, constantly highlighting that India is the number one country for remittances.[30]

The personalist approach in foreign policy has meant that public engagement with the diaspora has focused on Modi's role as central to that engagement. A noticeable shift in visible engagement with the diaspora is that what used to be delegated to the Minister of Overseas Indian Affairs under the Congress-led government has been taken on by Prime Minister Modi himself.[31] This personal handling of the diaspora is highlighted by the numerous official social media posts depicting Modi's interactions with the diaspora.[32] Modi makes it a point to do personal outreach with the Indian diaspora on each of his international visits. In 2025 alone, until June, the Press Information Bureau of India has reported on Modi's meeting with local Indian communities in all of his six state visits.[33] The symbolic significance of Modi's personal engagement with the diaspora is further underscored with the usage of Modi's photo at a packed stadium in Houston, Texas, for the "Howdy Modi" event organized by the Indian-American community as the cover photo of the MEA's Annual Report for 2019–20. The diaspora events focus both on culture and economics. This explains why there has been a rhetorical shift towards more Hindutva themes but a strong continuation of focusing on the economic role the diaspora can play.

There is also a noticeable change in the style and content of non-Prime Ministerial speeches at the PBD after 2014. A substantial change after 2014 is the sharp spike in references to Modi's leadership. Every single minister's speech after 2014 explicitly mentions Modi at least once, and more often than not, attributes India's success on the international stage to Modi. For example, Sushma Swaraj, the External Affairs Minister addressed the Indian diaspora in her 2019 PBD speech by saying that "today India's prestige that has increased abroad due to the effective leadership of the Prime Minister in India, has also increased your dignity and respect." This lends credence to the argument that a personalist style of governance characterizes the BJP government under Modi even when addressing the diaspora.

Desire for Greater Status

An alternative explanation for the shift to more Hindutva symbolism but a reliance on economic messaging when addressing the diaspora is neither about the party's ideology nor the individual leader's disposition. It is based on India's desire for greater status on the world stage and recognizing its diaspora's importance for this cause (Hall 2019). After 2014, India has increasingly sought to advertise itself as a country with status and importance in the world order. This explanation contextualizes why even with a change in rhetoric, the BJP-led government still primarily engages the diaspora for economic issues (Verma 2018).

However, the desire for greater status is not unique to the BJP-led government when it comes to India's foreign policy. When comparing the Congress-led and BJP-led governments from 2005–2025, a common line across both parties is an emphasis on diaspora investment in the Indian economy in order to strengthen India's role globally. Thinking of the diaspora as representatives of India internationally is common across both the Congress and BJP governments. The election manifestoes of both parties for 2019 and 2024 highlight deepening India's relationship with its diaspora and strengthening economic ties.[34]

Under the Congress, the PBD in 2008 was highlighted as having a "special 'Marketplace' to showcase Indian companies and their products."[35] Recommendations were made for Indian diaspora to have a special status and incentives for partnering with the government on development projects.[36] Despite the BJP's move towards signaling India's greater autonomy economically, the BJP government still clearly highlighted that the diaspora has an economic role to play in "Aatmanirbhar Bharat" with a whole session dedicated to this topic at PBD in 2022. The BJP-led government continued the economic policy of mobilizing the diaspora for capacity building in India regarding a variety of topics like waste management, artificial intelligence,[37] agriculture,[38] healthcare, tourism,[39] and sustainable development.[40] Even state Governments were encouraged to connect with their respective diasporas and showcase their states' investment and business potential.[41]

One noticeable difference on the economic agenda between the Congress and BJP governments' is that the former encouraged diaspora philanthropy for poverty alleviation while the latter has dropped this topic from its messaging towards the diaspora.[42] This aligns with the expectation of Modi's government showcasing the Indian economy as strong and warranting recognition globally.

This explanation shows how even with a change in rhetoric, the BJP-led government still engages the diaspora on economic issues. However, it fails to adequately capture on its own why the economic mobilization is now tinged with more Hindutva themes. If a desire to claim greater status in the world is motivating the rhetoric directed at the diaspora, then we should also see ap-

peals directed at non-Hindu Indian diaspora to mobilize them as ambassadors of India and investors in India. However, this is not the case. Based on my analysis of the PBD speeches, while "Indian" values are highlighted and generic appeals to the Indian diaspora for investment are common, there is no emphasis on non-Hindu identities in those appeals.

Overall, while India does seek greater status on the world stage, the primary drivers of the Hindutva shift in India's diaspora policy is based on the BJP's centering of Hindu civilization in its foreign policy and Modi's personalist leadership.

Conclusion: Implication for India's Diaspora Policy

In this article, I sought to answer the question of whether the ideological preferences of the political parties in power shape the Indian government's engagement with the diaspora. In addition, I also analyzed whether the Indian government would find the diaspora's potential economic power appealing independent of their ideological leaning. In order to compare the differences between a Congress-led and a BJP-led Indian government, I analyzed the speeches delivered by ministers at the PBD convention from 2005 to 2025. The convention is the biggest official platform organized by the Indian government for addressing the Indian diaspora. To test the differences between the speeches given before and after 2014, I created three thematic categories—Secular, Hindutva, and Economic. I evaluated the presence of these themes in the speeches both quantitatively and qualitatively.

The analyses show that speeches after 2014 are more likely to contain Hindutva themes and fewer secular themes as compared to speeches before 2014, which align with my first hypothesis. The evidence shows that while the Sangh Parivar is known to have a strong influence amongst the Indian diaspora, the Indian government is also explicitly addressing the diaspora on official platforms with Hindutva content. Furthermore, speeches after 2014 continue to mention economic themes but contain fewer references to economic development as compared to speeches before 2014. Thus, my second hypothesis finds weaker evidence. While economic development as a topic continues to be present in speeches after 2014, the drop in frequency is noticeable. There are three probable reasons that can be attributed to this drop. The speeches before 2014 included the effects of the 2009 financial crisis, which might have led to a greater urgency in focusing on India's economic growth. Also, as the years have progressed, the Indian diaspora's role in India's economic development might also be increasingly taken for granted, so the Indian government may not feel as much pressure to appeal to the diaspora on this front. Finally, after 2014, the BJP government has also tried to project India as a self-reliant economy, which might have resulted in signaling a changed interest in the diaspora's role.

I explain the shift towards more Hindutva content as based on BJP's civ-

ilizational foreign policy agenda and the effect of Modi's personalist leadership. The desire to promote India's status on the global stage explains the continued reliance on the diaspora for economic support. My analysis shows how a shift in the "worldview" from a secular Congress-led to a Hindutva BJP-led government and the "decision-making process" of individual leaders like Modi can change foreign policy rhetoric towards the diaspora. The worldview of both the political party and its leaders is an important transmission belt for articulating India's self-perception in foreign policy. Additionally, the decision-making process transmission belt is evident in Modi's personalist leadership style.

Overall, this article offers evidence that after 2014 the Indian government engages the diaspora with more Hindutva themes and a relatively smaller economic agenda. There are two main implications of these findings. First, the Indian government will potentially ramp up its cultural signaling to the diaspora. India will be more explicitly linked to Hindu identity. PBD events will be increasingly tied to Hindu cultural festivals and sites. Such ties have already begun with the 2019 PBD event facilitating trips to the Kumbh mela and the 2025 PBD event promoting trips to Hindu temples like the Konark Sun temple. Future research should examine whether Modi's more targeted speeches to the diaspora in different countries follow the same pattern of increasingly promoting a Hindutva narrative. Second, the strategy to draw increasingly on Hindu themes could alienate non-Hindu Indian diaspora. The negative ramifications of alienating India's diasporic minorities range from fueling sympathy for separatist movements like Khalistan to creating a sense of abandonment, especially for India's unskilled diaspora workers who migrate for work to mainly the Gulf countries. Given existing evidence that homeland minorities in the diaspora often have different priorities and interests (Kurien 2017; Mishra 2021), further studies could explore the impact of minority alienation amongst the Indian diaspora and how it affects their economic, political, cultural ties with India. This can also contribute to contemporary research on counter Hindutva narratives and activism in the diaspora (Biswas 2023). Thus, future research should unpack the diverse diaspora responses to the Indian government's rhetoric.

Appendix

Keyword Dictionary

Secularism

- Secular
- Diversity
- Religions
- Marginalized
- Minority
- Minorities
- Federal
- Harmony
- Unity
- Multi-cultural
- Multicultural
- Pluralistic
- Pluralism
- Tolerance
- Rights
- Justice

Hindutva and Hindu culture

- Yoga
- Kumbh
- Varanasi
- Kashi
- Ganga
- Ganges
- Vasudaiva Kutumbakam
- Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam
- Indian values
- Bharat
- Spiritual
- Ram
- Temples
- Temple
- Heritage
- Lord
- Sita
- Ayodhya
- Holy
- Saint
- Saints
- Bhagwan
- God
- Prayagraj

Economics

- Boom
- Booming
- Growth rate
- Growing
- Business
- Economic
- Economy
- Skills
- Investment
- Investments
- Remittances
- Progress
- Development
- GDP
- Employment
- Technology
- FDI
- Foreign direct investment
- Industry
- Industrialization
- Industrialisation

Word Cloud Frequency – top 10

Table 1. Words With the Largest Increase After 2014

Word	Before 2014	After 2014	Difference	Absolute Difference
ji	0.000149	0.00662	0.00647	0.00647
friends	0.00126	0.00700	0.00574	0.00574
diaspora	0.00684	0.01170	0.00486	0.00486
convention	0.000297	0.00441	0.00412	0.00412
event	0.00119	0.00441	0.00322	0.00322
abroad	0.00335	0.00652	0.00318	0.00318
bharat	0.000372	0.00355	0.00318	0.00318
time	0.00364	0.00652	0.00288	0.00288
odisha	0.00000	0.00269	0.00269	0.00269
pandemic	0.00000	0.00259	0.00259	0.00259

Table 2. Words With the Largest Decrease After 2014

Word	Before 2014	After 2014	Difference	Absolute Difference
overseas	0.01480	0.00614	-0.00865	0.00865
growth	0.00610	0.000767	-0.00533	0.00533
economic	0.00595	0.00153	-0.00441	0.00441
workers	0.00468	0.000863	-0.00382	0.00382
development	0.00624	0.00278	-0.00346	0.00346
ministry	0.00431	0.00125	-0.00306	0.00306
home	0.00424	0.00125	-0.00299	0.00299
education	0.00349	0.000672	-0.00282	0.00282
origin	0.00439	0.00201	-0.00237	0.00237
gulf	0.00268	0.000384	-0.00229	0.00229

Notes

1 Prime Minister's speech at the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, 2013.

2 Prime Minister's speech at the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, 2025.

3 Also known as the Girmityas.

4 In the limited space of a research article, also testing the material implications of this change in rhetoric is not feasible. Future research should take on the next step of analyzing the material implications of this change.

5 A technical point to note is that the Congress-led UPA was still in power in 2014 for the PBD celebration in January.

6 The Pravasi Bharatiya Divas published theme papers between 2008–2013 but not after, so comparisons cannot be made regarding the topics of each year across the Congress-led and BJP-led governments.

7 Unfortunately, Annual Reports of the MEA cannot be compared quantitatively in a similar fashion across these periods because the content on diasporas is minimal.

8 The Indian government's diaspora policy rhetoric is one dimension of many to test India's changing views on the diaspora. The aim of this analysis is to complement other methods and studies that are also exploring various facets of India's diaspora policy changes.

9 The p-values are 0.000673 for change in Hindutva rhetoric, 0.000313 for change in Secularism rhetoric, and 0.0163 for Economics.

10 Please see the Appendix for the values of the change in frequency for the top 10 words after 2014.

11 Explained by Modi's speech style of addressing his audience as "friends."

12 Minister for Overseas Indian Affairs, Oscar Fernandes, 2006 PBD speech.

13 PM Manmohan Singh, 2012 PBD speech.

14 Minister of State for External Affairs, E Ahamed, 2013 PBD speech.

15 Minister of Overseas Indian Affairs, 2015 PBD speech.

16 Minister of External Affairs, S. Jaishanker, 2025 PBD speech.

17 PM Narendra Modi, 2025 PBD speech.

18 Minister of External Affairs, Salman Khurshid, 2013 PBD speech.

19 Minister of External Affairs, Pranab Mukherjee, 2007 PBD speech.

20 Minister of External Affairs, Pranab Mukherjee, 2008 PBD speech.

21 Minister of Overseas Indian Affairs, Vayalar Ravi, 2009 PBD speech.

22 Minister of External and Overseas Indian Affairs, Sushma Swaraj, 2015 PBD speech.

23 Annual Report of the Ministry of External Affairs (2018-19), p. 7.

24 BJP (2014), "Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat," p. 40.

25 BJP (2019), "Sankalp Patra," p. 38.

26 BJP (2024), "Modi ki Guarantee," p. 36.

27 PM Narendra Modi, 2025 PBD speech.

28 PBSA Awardees, 2023: https://www.pbdindia.gov.in/pbsa-awardees (accessed on 20 May 2025).

29 PM Narendra Modi, 2015 PBD speech.

30 See PM Narendra Modi's 2017, 2021, and 2025 PBD speeches.

31 See the Annual Reports of the Ministry of External Affairs from 2005-2024 for reports on public diaspora engagement.

32 See Modi's X (formerly Twitter) handle @narendramodi for posts like this one his meeting with the Indian diaspora in Kuwait: https://x.com/narendramodi/status/1870443948768141435?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1870443948768141435%7Ctwgr%5Efc9646b11943402bf5d0c480233b0d8db8a451f8%7Ctwcon%5Es1_c10&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.pmindia.gov.in%2Fen%2Fnews_updates%2Fpm-expresses-happiness-on-a-heartwarming-welcome-from-the-indian-diaspora-in-kuwait%2F (accessed on 20 April 2025).

33 See 'Prime Minister Visits Abroad' for full coverage at https://www.pib.gov.in/PMContents/PMContents.aspx?menuid=5&Lang=1&RegionId=3&reg=3 (accessed on 3 June 2025).

34 For BJP, see 'Sankalp Patra' (2019) and 'Modi ki Guarantee' (2024); for Congress, see 'Congress will Deliver' (2019) and 'Nyay Patra' (2024).

35 "Pravasi Bharatiya Divas: Theme Paper" (2008), p. 4.

36 "Pravasi Bharatiya Divas: Theme Paper" (2012), p.10.

37 15th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas Convention Programme (2019).

38 Youth Pravasi Bharatiya Divas Programme (2023).

39 17th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas Convention Programme (2023).

40 18th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas Convention Programme (2025).

41 Annual Report of the Ministry of External Affairs 2016–17, p. 230.

42 Comparing agendas for the PBD from 2005–2025 and reading the PBD theme papers (2008–2013) highlight this difference.

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