



INTERVIEW: Brain Drain: What Nigeria can learn from India's diaspora engagement – Ambassador

India's High Commissioner to Nigeria, Gangadharan Balasubramanian, speaks on India's engagement with its diaspora population and how Nigeria can do the same with its own.

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India's diaspora has over the years grown to become one of the most admired and successful diaspora groups/populations in the world.

Members of the group have made giant strides, prominent amongst which is Rishi Sunak, the British prime minister, who is of Indian origin.

In this interview with PREMIUM TIMES, India's High Commissioner to Nigeria, Gangadharan Balasubramanian, shares lessons on India's engagement with its diaspora population and suggestions on how Nigeria can do the same with its promising diaspora population.

Like Nigeria, India once faced the issue of brain drain but Mr Balasubramanian said he would rather refer to the mass exit of citizens as brain circulation and not brain drain.

He shares India's experience of re-attracting these citizens who left the country.

Also, the diplomat spoke on India's G20 presidency, bilateral relations with Nigeria amongst others.

Excerpts

PT: The Indian diaspora is perhaps one of the most developed and admired. What lessons can Nigeria take from your engagement with your diaspora?

Mr Balasubramanian: India has got about 32 million diaspora spread around the world. You would almost find in every single country a few Indians. In Nigeria, we have about 60,000 Indians who have made Nigeria their home for the last three to four decades. Just to mention a little more about the Indian diaspora in Nigeria, there are more than 135 Indian companies which are manufacturing and working here in Nigeria for the past three to four decades.

Similarly, we have a diaspora spread out across the world and I would rather say instead of learning lessons, we should share experiences because the Nigerian diaspora is also one of the largest that you have outside Nigeria, which is but natural.

The one point that you have pointed out is about the brain drain that is happening and that used to happen in India. We now call it brain circulation, in terms of people leaving, gathering experience, gaining knowledge, improving themselves and then returning to the country to develop the country also.

The Indian government has been quite adaptive to recognising the role of diaspora around the world and we have been engaging the diaspora in a very effective manner in the past 15 to 20 years that has been a huge emphasis on engaging the diaspora.

There are more than 17 schemes that have been introduced, ranging from Study in India programme, Know India programme, Visit India and there is the Citizen of India card. We used to have the Person of Indian Origin card which has now been merged into the Citizen of India card.

This card gives an Indian diaspora, who is not a citizen, citizen's privileges just short of electoral and land ownership rights.

There has been a huge push in terms of engaging the diaspora, they have also come of age in their respective countries as you rightly pointed out. They have grown, there are more than three generations of Indians that migrated from India and settled in another country as their second home. But as they say, you can take an Indian out of India but you cannot take India out of them.

We just ended what we call the Diaspora Day which is held once every two years. We have been having what we call the Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas (PBD) which means Non-resident Indians day. From 8 to 10 January 2023, we organised the 17th edition of the diaspora in Indore which saw a large number of people of Indian origin travel back to attend, including about 17 Indians from Nigeria.



India's High Commissioner to Nigeria, Gangadharan Balasubramanian and Chiamaka Okafor PREMIUM TIMES diaspora reporter.

We have also been working with the Nigerians in Diaspora Commission (NIDCOM) and a team from NIDCOM attended this event and have engaged with the government of India in understanding how we deal with the diaspora and the schemes we have and we will be very happy to learn from your experience also.

I would rather say that it is, in terms of how other people go and establish themselves outside and over a period, they return to their homeland and also contribute to the development in their countries

PT: How do we incentivise returning to the country? People who leave their countries leave for several reasons including economic reasons, in Nigeria for instance.

Mr Balasubramanian: Opportunities! Creating opportunities within your own country is something that is a fundamental requirement for returning brain and attracting brain; of your own people and outsiders.

India has been growing very fast and we have now reached the position of the fifth largest economy in the world. We are here because successive governments have been concentrating on developing four core structures: education, healthcare, infrastructure, and medium and small enterprises. These are basically four areas where successive governments have been concentrating on and developing things.

Once you develop a set of people who are trained and ready for employment, once you have ensured that their health is taken care of – you know with healthcare there are opportunities that keep coming in with a large population like that of India and that of Nigeria – it will be possible for us to have a whole health sector work and create more employment.

When these things are in place, then the country and the people are bound to grow in leaps and bound and this is what we have been seeing over the past few years as to how fast our economy has been growing, as to how big our market has become and which has started attracting more influence as well as Indian investment from abroad. These are some of the suggestions we have seen working.

PT: You mentioned the citizens card which allows a non-resident all rights but for voting and land ownership. That is similar to the diaspora voting concern for Nigeria and I would like to understand why India, like Nigeria, says people in the diaspora cannot vote yet welcome their investments.

Mr Balasubramanian: Democracy works in its own way and democracy is for the people, by the people, of the people as it has been defined. So if somebody were to elect that person they have to be invested in that particular person or place.

Throughout the world, it is only the citizens who are allowed to vote, people who have a stake in that particular country. I am not denying the fact that our diaspora has a stake, it does. But what we are trying to say is that democracy, by its traditional definition, is said by the people and those are the citizens. That is the basic reason for it.

And further, India is a very large democracy and we are the mother of democracy. As a large democracy, it will be very difficult for us to maintain the statistics of people who are very mobile (moving in and out of the country) so citizenship is the basis on which voting rights are granted.

PT: Is India like Nigeria looking to allow the diaspora to vote?

Mr Balasubramanian: As for now, we are still working on allowing the non-resident Indians who are leaving the country for work but still maintain the Indian passport. It has been a problem for them to vote also because unlike Nigeria, we operate a parliamentary system, we elect members of parliament and how to manage an individual voting for different people has been a complex mechanism. We are now working to extend voting rights to non-residents Indians.

PT: You mentioned that India is now the fifth largest economy in the world, yet India is still being referred to as a developing country.

Mr Balasubramanian: India has the second largest population in the world. When we got independence in 1947 our population was about 330 million. Today we are 1.34 billion, which means we have grown about four times. At the same time, we have also improved our economy to take people above the poverty line, educate the people. It is an ongoing process, as you have a larger population, the fact that you will have to bring the standard of living of everyone to a desired level is an enormous task and we are still doing that.

In spite of the fact that we are the fifth largest economy, we still have a lot of miles to run so I would rather say, it is a work in progress.

PT: India's judiciary is one of the most reputable around the world, and your press one of the freest. How has India's specific system of caste and class affected the traditions of liberty and freedom?

Mr Balasubramanian: There are issues that come with civilisation. India is a very old civilisation and as I mentioned to you, we are the mother of democracy in which for thousands of years we simply started this concept of people coming together and deciding for the general good of the public.

There are various systems which have been part of it and as soon as we got independence, our constitution was framed with everybody in mind; the right to equality, right to liberty, right to freedom. These are some of the fundamental rights, we have six fundamental right within our own constitution and each of them are well preserved and maintained by the independent judiciary. And whenever there is any problem, the independent media is very well prepared so much so to the extent that it is a little chaotic but they do their job in a professional manner.

The concept of checks and balances where the executive, legislature and judiciary perform their independent functions and the press is the watchdog which takes care of everyone of them doing their own. The chaotic media in India takes care of their duty in terms of questioning when something goes wrong and there has been a lot of respect for these systems operating separately.

For the class and caste system, through the constitution, there are various mechanisms that have been put in place, whether it is positive discrimination, or regulatory bodies that make sure that those constitutions under positive discrimination are taken care of and there is no negative discrimination. There are institutional and constitutional mechanisms and there are procedures through which these are addressed.

PT: When you say positive discrimination, what do you mean by that oxymoron?

Mr Balasubramanian: It is a good oxymoron I would say. It is what we call reservation. For example, there are 10 jobs available in the government. A certain portion of the jobs are reserved for a particular set of people which are constitutionally mandated and legislatively done, so that is what I call positive discrimination.

So that opportunities exist for people who are not, according to some of them, in the mainstream. So to bring them into the mainstream, the government has put in certain legislations which we call positive discrimination.

PT: G20 summits have over time been largely a developed economies affair. What will India do differently during its tenure as president?

Mr Balasubramanian: We have taken over the presidency of G20 from December 2022. The summit of G20 will be held in New Delhi on 9 and 10 September, 2023 and I am also happy to state, which I am sure you are aware of, that India as part of its presidency can invite a few countries as guest countries and because of the special relationship that we have with Nigeria, India has invited Nigeria as a guest country and Nigeria has accepted to be part of the G20 process.

What will India do separately? We have basically four priorities and they are inclusive, equitable and sustainable growth; lifestyle for environment and climate change; technology enabled transformation; and multilateral reforms. These are the four areas in which we will be working and I can assure you that India and Nigeria are on the same page as far as any of the issues is concerned.

Our prime minister (Narendra Modi), knowing full well that there is a need for the developing world to have its voice heard in the G20, organised a virtual “Voice of the Global South Summit ” on 12 and 13 January, 2023.



India's High Commissioner to Nigeria, Gangadharan Balasubramanian

The summit was an occasion through which the priorities and imperatives of developing countries will be understood, how they view the global commons and how they will like to be positioned within the global commons. This is useful for India as it will bring all these together to the forefront of the summit.

Indonesia was the previous president, we are the current president and the next president is going to be Brazil. It is a unique opportunity that these three developing countries are having consecutive presidents and I am sure this will certainly help in terms of bringing other viewpoints to the table.

PT: What ecumenical spirit is India trying to achieve by inviting 'medium powers'? Are we at the dawn of a new era in international relations?

Mr Balasubramanian: I would not call them medium powers, I would call them important and crucial powers whose presence and ambitions have a major role to play in deciding the whole concept of global commons. And as I told you earlier, India has a special relationship with Nigeria and the potential and strength of Nigeria is visible. And with such a large population, it is but natural that your viewpoint will certainly have advantage, which is important for everybody to understand and that this is an opportunity for both India and Nigeria and other countries who have been invited to present their view point in a combined manner which will certainly be good for the G20.

PT: Is India's equivocation on Ukraine not in conflict with its historical non-alignment position and vision for G20 - 'One Earth, One Family, One Future'?

Mr Balasubramanian: Certainly not! I would say that non-alignment means independent foreign policy, it does not mean anything else but an opportunity for every country to decide for itself. So, I do not see any change in the policy per se. India continues to be in the non-aligned movement and the leader of non-aligned movement and it continues to be so but at the same time we have been having an independent foreign policy. There are a huge number of Indians who were there when Ukraine came under attack.

We have a separate relationship with Russia also but that does not mean that we are in the camp of anybody. Our prime minister had very clearly said that this is not an era of war and we have never left the concept of diplomacy to be on the table; talks and negotiations are the only way, violence is not the way. This is what we have continued to do and we do not see any change or violation of the principles and the ethics that we had.

PT: If PM Modi is saying this is not the time for war, is it out of place for Ukraine to want to be its own country without interference?

Mr Balasubramanian: We do agree that there has to be supremacy of international law and the rules and regulations of the global commons will have to be there. And that is what we have continued to say, that diplomacy has to be there, negotiated settlement has to come in and we have been supporting these kinds of system throughout.

PT: The notion that India is somewhat supporting Russia by continued purchase of Russian oil, how does India interpret this?

Mr Balasubramanian: My foreign minister very unequivocally said this in Europe also; that the total amount of oil that India purchased from Russia in a month is equivalent to the total amount of oil that Europe purchases in half a day.

There cannot be two standards. India is a large economy, and what India is doing is much less than what Europe has been doing, what other countries have been doing. This kind of accusation that India is supporting Russia by purchase of oil is not found correct on ground as I told you. Half a day to one month comparison is sufficient to understand that.

PT: Nigeria and India are good trade partners. However, the trade figures are low when compared with others like your very next door neighbour, China. How are the two governments looking to increase trade?

Mr Balasubramanian: The trade figures between India and Nigeria have been actually good. They have been improving, developing; we are presently at \$14.95 billion of which we get a large amount of oil from Nigeria also.

There are more than 135 Indian industries with \$19.3 billion investment in various manufacturing sectors starting from oil and gas to steel to pharmaceuticals to plastics to textiles, almost in every sector.

Anecdotally speaking, we say we are the largest employers in Nigeria after the Nigerian government. I would not compare India as apple to orange to any other country because every country has its own strengths and weaknesses. Our strength is in terms of manufacturing here within Nigeria and the trade between our countries are in two important products which are essential for both sides; pharmaceuticals and engineering goods.

There are various means through which I would say manufacturing in Nigeria by Indian companies has been one of our strongest points of relationship and I am sure that it will continue further.

PT: Like most African countries, India has a colonial past but no history of coups or counter coups. How has India with its population almost the size of Africa been able to maintain a democratically compliant society?

Mr Balasubramanian: Currently, India as you see is 75 years old. But as I told you, India is the mother of democracy. The traditions and values of democracy have been actually ingrained.

Democracy is something which has been quite strong, imbibed. We have been colonised by different powers from time to time, the last one being the British but there have been other waves of attack on India because of the wealth and strength we had at that point in time.

In spite of various people coming and ruling India from time to time, with most of them being absorbed into the melting pot of India and have become Indians as such. The tradition continued to evolve and when independence came, the whole concept of democracy continued to be there.

This is the philosophical understanding of democracy. Constitutionally also, we have a very strong constitutional power and the country has also been divided into structures and the responsibilities of the different structures.

Constitutionally, we have ensured that the decision of power is very strong and that it is being followed. You talked about judicial independence, we obviously have a large country with a large population and there is bound to be conflict from time to time which is but natural. Conflict resolution is a strong mechanism that has been put in place by the judiciary and the press also helps. The concept of democracy in India has been strengthened through various modern mechanisms.

PT: Like Nigeria, India has a youthful and burgeoning population. What is India doing in terms of leveraging the population size for development, market and political influence?

Mr Balasubramanian: As we discussed earlier in one of your questions, creating opportunities within the country is an important aspect, whether it is through education, or adapting new technologies. For instance, climate change, our country has adapted to the realities of the present and today we have one of the largest solar panels spread in India.

We also plan to expand our production of renewable energy and each of these innovations have created huge employment opportunities.

We are educating and providing opportunities to our youth. More than 65 percent of India's population is less than 35 years, yours (Nigeria) is much less, around 19 years. That is a huge opportunity and the lessons we have learnt can be easily replicated or emulated by Nigeria.

PT: What other areas of collaboration between India and Nigeria are possible? Including security.

Mr Balasubramanian: I spoke to you about the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme (ITEC) where we provide about 150 scholarships every year on the military side where people are trained on counter insurgency, counter terrorism and normal military techniques and concepts.

We even set up trainers who had come from India to Jaji in Nigeria to train people because it was not possible to send everyone to India for training. The trainers from India were in Nigeria for about six months training hundreds of personnel.

Training is the way through which we are collaborating effectively in capacity and concept building in terms of addressing the issues of the security requirements of Nigeria.

PT: What is the contract between NNPC and IOCL about? Can you provide details on how that contract will benefit both countries?

Mr Balasubramanian: The NNPC and India Oil Corporation Limited (IOCL) thing started sometime in 2017 where a contract was signed for the supply of a certain number of barrels for the equivalent of oil that is to be purchased. Unfortunately, the government-to-government has not been quite successful for various reasons. But

India is one of the largest buyers of Nigerian oil. Spain only took over from India in this quarter, otherwise, we have been the largest export partner for Nigeria's oil.



NNPC Towers

Recently, we had a delegation from **Indian Oil Corporation and Oil India Limited** which had meetings with the **NNPC** and I am sure we will be looking at further strengthening this cooperation between our countries.

PT: What are India's expectations from the upcoming Nigeria elections?

Mr Balasubramanian: We certainly wish Nigeria well and we hope that Nigeria will be in a position to elect its leader through a democratic process in the usual course. You have been doing that since 1999 and we will expect that you would continue to do that now also and we would be certainly supportive of whichever government comes into power.

The relationship between India and Nigeria is not based on politics, it is based on people to people relationship and mutual understanding and recognition and benefit. So, irrespective of which political party comes in, I can assure you of the commitment of the government of India in further strengthening the relations between India and Nigeria.

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