Citizen-Centric Diplomacy of India

Diplomacy had been traditionally understood as conduct of bilateral relations between the states focussing on the negotiations only in political, economic and security related drivers. However, the advent of the current century, having witnessed a sea change in the ground realities due to the globalisation, rapid scientific and technological development and increased mobility, transformed and expanded the scope of diplomacy focussing on the new dimensions. India also could not remain untouched by this transformation and adopted a foreign policy with the citizen- centric diplomacy at its heart. This policy places the welfare, security and interest of the country's citizen at its core making Indian citizens an important part of its external engagements which has made, in turn, the Ministry of External affairs more responsive to their needs.

How did it evolve?

Until the turn of the last century, the Indians living abroad (NRIs) and persons of Indian origin had no place in the policies of the government as they were considered to be the persons, migrated out of India for their own individual interest with no contribution towards the development of India. However, at the beginning of the current century, it was realised that these Indians not only contribute to the economy of their homeland by way of remittances and investments but also play a significant role in the governments of their residence. The importance of Indian diaspora can be understood by the fact that currently the Indian diaspora, with the population of more than 35.4 million (more than the combined population of Australia and New Zealand) has remitted US$ 135.46 billion in the last financial year! Moreover, many persons of Indian origin have risen to important positions in academic institutions and in their governments which underlines their importance in our foreign policy calculus. However, lately the Indian governments started paying more attention to this vast reservoir of talent and resources. The annual Pravasi Sammelan and Pravasi awards had given momentum to the outreach to the eminent personalities of Indian diaspora. The Ministry of External Affairs has taken many initiatives to ensure the welfare of Indian citizens visiting abroad for employment, business or educational purposes.

Key features of the Citizen -Centric Diplomacy

These initiatives cover the period from the application for passport to visa, travel, safe stay and return to India. In view of the growing number of Indians willing to visit abroad, the Government has opened new passport offices, passport application centres in all districts, digitised the procedure and opened

more international airports to facilitate international travel. PDOT (Prior to Departure Orientation and Training) programs are in place, a Pravasi Bhartiya Bima Yojna has been started to ensure the health insurance of Indians abroad, Migration and Mobility Partnership pacts have been signed with eight countries and Social Security agreements have been signed with nineteen countries to ensure the proper work environment for Indian workers. An e-migrate application has also been launched to educate such citizens about the rules and regulations. MADAD, a multi-lingual help portal, works round the clock to assist Indian citizens in need. It also examines the employment visas, the employer's status and the insurance cover provided by him to the prospective worker. The government has opened more embassies and consulates to cater to the needs of Indian citizens abroad. An Indian community wing, separate from the Consular wing, has been established to ensure well-being of the Indians living in that jurisdiction. Indian Community Welfare Fund has been established in all our diplomatic missions and posts abroad to assist our citizens in case of emergency through temporary shelters, legal assistance and air tickets to India for the destitutes/stranded Indians. Besides, open houses are being organised in India embassies at regular intervals to listen to and address the grievances of Indian community. Moreover, the government conducted a number of successful rescue operations for the Indian citizens stranded in violence -hit areas. Ukraine, South Sudan, Yemen have been some of such recent operations.

Challenges

The citizen -centric diplomacy also faces its own challenges. The growing number of Indians visiting abroad for various purposes has put a heavy pressure on our missions which already suffer from a shortage of manpower and resource-crunch. Effectively assisting the Indian community in a war-torn country also becomes a challenge in view of unstable situation. Misinformation by Indian touts and social media, and different local legal systems compound the problems.

The way forward

Allocation of sufficient staff and funds at the disposal of our missions abroad and their adequate training before posting there can mitigate the challenges. The pre- departure orientation should be made compulsory for every Indian going abroad for employment or education. A curb on touts misleading such Indians is imperative.

Conclusion

It is heartening that the importance of citizen in our diplomacy has finally been realised and the Government is addressing their issues with an objective and positive attitude. With allocation of more resources and strict action against the touts, our citizen-centric diplomacy will certainly bear more fruits.

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