

## India Honors NRIs in the Pink City

BY A STAFF WRITER



Resplendent palaces and colorful cultural motifs formed the backdrop for India's annual celebration of its diaspora. And for the thousands of attendees from across the world, there could not have been a more poignant reminder of home than Jaipur, the city of palaces, set at the cusp of tradition and modernity.

More than 1,900 delegates – the highest number so far – from 65 countries registered for the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, held Jan. 7-9. The 10th annual event, titled “Global Indian: Inclusive Growth,” included meetings, seminars and outings.

Delegates also got a taste of Rajasthani hospitality. Playing typical tourists, they sampled the traditional dal-bati-choorma, checked out lac jewelry and bandhej textiles, and explored the magnificent palaces and monuments Jaipur is famous for.

The highlight of the gathering, however, was an announcement by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh that a long-standing demand of the diaspora had been met: NRIs can vote in future elections. The government, he said, has sent the order to overseas outposts for registering NRIs.

“This constitutes the first major step to enable Indian residents abroad to participate in our election process,” Singh said.

This right to vote could have an immediate impact as NRIs who have registered with the embassies in the countries where they live would be eligible to vote in upcoming Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Goa and Manipur. Polls will take place between Jan. 28 and March 3.

On the final day of the Jaipur gathering, Indian President Pratibha Patil presented the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman to 15 NRIs and one organization. Honorees included two Indian-Americans and the Indo-Canada Chamber of Commerce. So far, three institutions and 133 people, including News India Times publisher Dr. Sudhir Parikh, have received the award.

### Many Topics Explored

Top Indian government officials and prominent NRIs participated in panel discussions on solar energy and water resources; health and wellness; enhancing rural energy access; and harnessing the energy of youth.

Several Indian-American physicians, including Parikh, a New Jersey-based allergy specialist, spoke on providing equitable access to health by the poor and rural populations. Preeta Bansal, a senior Obama administration official until recently, was listed on the youth panel.

“We consider NRIs as National Reserve of India and this is the reason we invite you to come and invest in India, which holds tremendous investment opportunities in the sectors of education, health care and infrastructure,” member of Parliament Shashi Tharoor said at a Jan. 8 panel discussion on “Partnering for Prosperity.”

“There could be some operational challenges, but these are the areas we look forward to for your vision, technology and innovation, and way of doing things that can help build better India,” he added.

There were two interactive sessions for young pravasis, one on the first day and the other on the concluding day of the diaspora summit.

At the “Town Hall on Youth Connectivity,” Social Justice and Empowerment Minister Mukul Wasnik said overseas Indians have fresh ideas and immense knowledge that has made them extremely successful in various fields. Their expertise can help accelerate the development process of India significantly, he added.

Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot announced a plan to bring NRI youth annually to his state to familiarize them with India’s culture and development needs.

“We welcome with open hearts whatever support or contribution you may wish to extend,” he was quoted saying in news reports.

Health and Family Welfare Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad urged NRIs to help develop health care infrastructure in the country.

“Indian diaspora of over 30 million people has acquired an enviable reputation for innovative start-ups, successful businesses, ground-breaking research leading to Nobel prizes and countless distinguished contributions in diverse fields such as education, energy, environment, research, literature, business and industry,” Azad said.

Minister for Overseas Indian Affairs Vayalar Ravi urged overseas Indians to play a role in the development of infrastructure and energy security in the country. Farooq Abdullah, the minister for new and renewable energy, also joined in the pitch.

“Come back and give something that is important for the development of your motherland,” Abdullah is quoted as saying in an IANS report.

Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi said his state was a model of development and overseas Indians should play a role and benefit from it, IANS reported.

Modi got repeated applause and a standing ovation during his address, in which he said Gujarat is concerned about the well-being of overseas Indians.

#### NRIs Complain

Some NRIs articulated longtime complaints about India’s prohibitive regulatory system and red tape. Britain’s Lord Diljit Singh told IANS that getting a visa for India was very difficult.

“It is time-consuming and cumbersome. Plus, people have complained to me the attitude at some of the embassies and high commissions is not appropriate, not polite,” he said.

Kamal Singh, a real estate specialist from Vancouver, Canada, said that Indian systems have not improved.

“We want to come to India, but the government does not support us much. I wanted to provide help to the government on road safety, came out with a project which was completely free, but no one helped me. All they did was ask me why do I want to do it free. It is just pathetic,” Singh told IANS.

Kishore Mahbubani, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, said in a Jan. 8 speech that India “has to go from being a traditional opponent of globalization, to becoming a champion of globalization,” because it stands to gain tremendously.

Using data to support his thesis, Mahbubani pointed to India’s slow growth in the decades after independence when it had a largely closed-door policy, to one of leaps and bounds since it opened up in the 1990s.

#### The Way Forward

“The lesson here is therefore clear. If we want the Indian GDP to grow in size (and therefore have a much larger cake to share with India’s poor), the way forward is to expose the 1.2 billion Indians in India to the same competition that the 30 million Indians residing overseas have been exposed to,” Mahbubani asserted.

The next regional annual diaspora meet, the mini-Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, will be held in Dubai later this year, Ravi announced on the concluding day.