

The Hindu right, DfID and diasporas in development (Part 1)

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In this two-part blog, Dr Kalpana Wilson argues that growing interest in the role of diasporas in development is related to specific strategies of capital and the consolidation of neoliberal policies.

One of the themes I explore in my recent book “[Race, Racism and Development: Interrogating History, Discourse and Practice](#)”, is the British state’s initiatives to promote diaspora participation in development. I look at this in the context of enduring racism and shifting constructions of ‘race’ and ‘belonging’ in Britain and their relationship with changing patterns of imperialism. Can the ‘whiteness’ of development be challenged, as some have argued, through greater engagement by development institutions with black and minority ethnic communities in the global North? This approach, I suggest, has proved amenable to appropriation and incorporation within neoliberal discourses of development. In particular, initiatives of the British and Indian governments which have taken place under the rubric of engaging with Indian diaspora organisations have been related to specific strategies of capital, the consolidation and extension of neoliberal policies, and the activities of the Hindu right as well as the reconfiguration of racism in Britain since the 1990s.

The Department for International Development (DfID)’s policy of engaging with diaspora communities can be traced back to New Labour’s 1997 White Paper on International Development, which emphasised ‘building support for development...to increase public understanding of our mutual dependence’, an approach which was consistent with the consolidation of the development/security paradigm under Tony Blair. But it was after the events of 11 September, 2001 that engagement with Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups became a specific focus. After 2006, there has been a further shift in DfID’s approach to BME engagement: the term ‘diaspora’ became more established in development discourse with the emphasis on the contribution BME groups could make to economic and political development in their ‘countries of origin or heritage’.

This is consistent with a wider rise in interest in the role of ‘diasporas’ in development. Whereas earlier diasporas were identified in development discourse with brain drain, and remittances with increased inequality between households, and in some contexts with supporting and financing conflict, with the advent of neoliberal policies, the shift to market-led development strategies, and the near collapse of state provision in many regions, migrants’ remittances came to be increasingly viewed as an important safety net. More recently, the emphasis on the diaspora’s role in development has gone beyond remittances to focus on their potential for investment, entrepreneurship, and deployment of skills in countries of origin, and on diaspora organisations as a new channel for development initiatives. This can be linked to the emphasis on NGOs as the most suitable vehicle for both service provision and building a consensus around neoliberal ideas.

For donor governments and NGOs, working through diaspora groups is seen as a way of promoting ‘ownership’ of development interventions. The dominant development discourse on diasporas has incorporated postcolonial



notions of hybridity and transnationalism which are increasingly seen as assets which can be instrumentally mobilised for the project of development. But this approach both assumes that diaspora communities are homogenous, failing to recognise the class, gender and multiple other identifications which shape their members' interaction with countries of origin, and ignores the fact that in the countries where they live, racism and 'hierarchies of belonging' structure their experiences in a variety of ways, and condition their ability to engage in 'homeland' development. In fact, the increased interest in diasporas in development has coincided with policies in the global North which have led to escalating insecurity, precarity, and exclusion for many people in these communities.

The enthusiasm for diasporas in development has strong undertones of civilisational discourse, particularly in the context of the 'war on terror'. The diaspora involvement in Pakistan currently promoted by the British government is explicitly related to so-called 'deradicalisation'. Both Britain and the US are increasingly seeking to incorporate diaspora organisations into the pursuit of broader strategic military, economic, and political objectives. As US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently told a gathering 'aimed to bring diaspora communities across America into the fold of US foreign policy and development:

Because of your familiarity with cultural norms, your own motivations, your own special skills and leadership, you are frankly our Peace Corps, our USAID, our State Department all rolled into one. Yes, we have a very strong force in our organised diplomatic efforts, our development professionals and certainly our defence establishment. But I think building these coalitions, spurring initiative and innovation around the world, using people-to-people exchanges is actually the core of Smart Power. And that's where all of you come in." (International Diaspora Engagement Alliance, 2011)

DfID, Faith Communities and the Hindu Right

In July 2006, DfID announced that it had awarded substantial grants from its Development Awareness Fund to 'three ethnic minority organisations' – Minorities of Europe, The Muslim Council of Britain, and Hindu Aid – to "teach schoolchildren, young people, and community groups about the lives of people in Africa and Asia." This reflects the extent to which 'ethnic minority communities' came by this point to be reconfigured as 'faith communities'. The ascription of religion as the primary marker of identity for 'ethnic minority' subjects here is particularly heavy-handed since clearly the rationale for such initiatives is in fact the existence of country-of-origin-based rather than faith-based links.

However, we also need to consider the significance of the particular emphasis placed on the 'Hindu community' in DfID's initiative. The fact that the self-styled representatives of the 'Hindu community' in Britain (including those who run Hindu Aid) are almost exclusively aligned to the far-right Hindu supremacist family of organisations in India, the *Sangh Parivar*, is not, I suggest, in any way in contradiction with this assumption of shared developmental objectives. To explain this, I consider in the second part of this post how support for the Hindu far-right in Britain has been related to diasporic material and symbolic investment in particular forms of neoliberal, corporate-led development taking place in India since the early 1990s. Further, I explore how the reconfiguration of constructions of 'race' in Britain and in globalised discourses associated with the 'war on terror', in which the racialised and gendered figure(s) of the Muslim 'other' has become central, have intersected with changing structures and discourses of power, exclusion, and belonging within India.

[Part 2 of this post](#) explores the symbiotic relationship between Hindu supremacist groups and their activities in Britain, particular forms of development taking place in India, and the evolving currents of British racism.

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