



NAVIGATING THE PANDEMIC: EXPERIENCES OF THE INDIAN DIASPORA IN THE UNITED STATES DURING COVID-19

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic that began spreading globally in 2020 has significantly impacted the lives of hundreds of thousands of Indian diaspora members, including those in the United States. While Indian diasporas are often perceived as heterogeneous, diverse, and generally thriving in developed countries like the US, the pandemic has revealed both strengths and vulnerabilities within these communities. This paper examines the various ways in which COVID-19 has affected the lives of high-skilled Indian diaspora members in the United States. Using the concept of commonality, this study explores their shared experiences and challenges through qualitative research. Despite enjoying affluent lifestyles in the US, many Indian diaspora members have faced uncertainty, emotional distress, and fears of losing loved ones back in India. Nevertheless, they express gratitude for the support provided by the US government and local communities during these difficult times. This research highlights the complex interplay of struggles and resilience within the Indian diaspora in the US as they navigate the ongoing pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Indian diaspora, United States, commonality, qualitative research, emotional distress, resilience, high-skilled immigrants, family separation, cultural adaptation

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has inflicted widespread hardship across all segments of society, causing income and job losses as well as physical and mental anguish. Migrant populations and their dependent households have been particularly vulnerable, suffering disproportionately from both the economic and social consequences of the pandemic. In the United States, where healthcare is not universally provided, the challenges for immigrants have been especially acute, as the system struggles



to care even for citizens, let alone refugees and migrants. This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of the Indian diaspora in the United States during the COVID-19 period. Drawing on narrative interviews with Indian immigrants who have lived in the U.S. for over 5 years, I investigate the multifaceted ways in which the pandemic has impacted their lives. Furthermore, this research explores the commonalities in their experiences, focusing primarily on high-skilled Indian professionals affected by COVID-19 in various ways.

To address the diverse experiences of the Indian diaspora, I employ the concept of 'commonality,' a key characteristic of 'belonging with' as described by Pfaff-Czarnecka (2013). Commonality refers not only to shared communal processes but also to how individuals perceive and embody 'belonging' within collective contexts. It encompasses shared sentiments, concerns, and experiences such as language, culture, religion, lifestyle, customs, values, observations, and memories. This concept operates on both an individual level, as a sense of self that can be felt alone, and a collective level, shared and accomplished together. The data reveals that the Indian diaspora in the U.S. share a common destiny, mutuality, and purpose, manifesting commonality in various ways. They are bound by cultural, social, and religious ties, sharing daily challenges, joys, and sorrows, while hoping to reunite with family in India once the pandemic subsides. These accounts highlight the obstacles they have faced since the onset of COVID-19, living through uncertainty and anguish in the U.S., and demonstrate how commonality is both individually perceived and collectively negotiated and performed.

Despite often enjoying relative economic comfort in the U.S., many in the Indian diaspora have suffered from anxiety and trauma due to travel restrictions and uncertainty about when they would be able to see their families in India again. Some respondents even considered abandoning everything to return to India, but uncertainty about job prospects in their home country often deterred them. Interestingly, many members of the Indian diaspora in the U.S. have found themselves playing a crucial role in supporting both their adopted country and their homeland during this crisis. They have leveraged their influence and resources to mobilize aid, apply political pressure, and organize local support for both communities. This dual engagement has strengthened their sense of belonging and purpose in both societies. The Indian diaspora's response to the pandemic has also highlighted their resilience and adaptability. Many have utilized their skills in technology and healthcare to contribute to the U.S.'s pandemic response, while simultaneously coordinating relief efforts for India during its severe COVID-19 waves. This ability to navigate between two worlds and contribute meaningfully to both has been a defining characteristic of their pandemic experience.

However, the pandemic has also exposed and exacerbated existing vulnerabilities within the Indian diaspora community in the U.S. Issues such as visa uncertainties, healthcare access disparities, and the precarious situation of undocumented immigrants have come to the forefront. These challenges



have created a shared experience of anxiety and advocacy within the community. This study examines the varied experiences of the Indian diaspora in the United States throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Their shared challenges with commonality, faced since early 2020, illustrate how this concept is both personally embodied and collectively enacted. Despite living under uncertainty and fear, many have found ways to contribute positively to both their adopted and home countries, reinforcing their sense of belonging in both societies. This research aims to provide insights into the resilience, challenges, and evolving identity of the Indian diaspora in the U.S. during this unprecedented global crisis.

Objectives

This study examines the impact of COVID-19 on the Indian diaspora in the United States, focusing on their shared experiences and challenges during the pandemic. The research addresses two primary questions:

1. What challenges did the Indian diaspora encounter during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States?
2. How did members of the Indian diaspora share common experiences among themselves?

Methodology

This qualitative research utilized a mixed-methods approach, combining primary and secondary data sources. Primary data was gathered through 60 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted via video conferencing platforms from April 2020 to December 2021. Participants were Indian immigrants aged 25-50 who had resided in the USA for 5-10 years. The study employed purposive snowball sampling to recruit respondents. Interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes and covered topics such as:

- COVID-19's impact on daily life
- Reactions to lockdown measures
- Challenges faced during 2020-2021
- Effects of travel restrictions on mental health
- Impact on families in India
- Prospects for family reunification
- Perceptions of living and working in the USA
- Considerations of returning to India
- Comparative safety and well-being in the USA



The sample comprised 60 respondents from Tamil Nadu. Interviews were conducted in English and Tamil as appropriate. Respondents' identities were anonymized to ensure confidentiality. Secondary data was collected from government health websites, academic literature, and news sources to provide context and support the interview findings. This included COVID-19 statistics and policy information from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and state health department websites. The study examines the shared experiences and challenges of the Indian diaspora in the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2021. It highlights how these experiences were both individually felt and collectively negotiated, particularly in the context of separation from families in India since January 2020. The research also considers the decentralized U.S. government response to the pandemic, contrasting it with approaches in other countries. By the end of 2020, the U.S. had reported over 20 million confirmed cases and 350,000 deaths, significantly impacting the Indian American community both directly and indirectly. The study further explores the additional challenges faced by Indian Americans in 2021, including travel restrictions and evolving public health measures across different states.

The Indian diaspora represents one of the largest and most diverse global migrant populations, with a rich history spanning centuries. As of 2023, approximately 18 million Indian-born individuals reside abroad, making India the world's largest source of international migrants. This vast diaspora is spread across various regions, with significant populations in Africa, the Caribbean, Oceania, the Middle East, and Western countries. The formation of the Indian diaspora can be traced back to the colonial era, when large numbers of Indians were forcibly relocated as indentured laborers following the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833. Over the subsequent eight decades, millions of Indian workers were sent to British colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. The partition of India in 1947 further contributed to large-scale migration within South Asia. In recent years, the Persian Gulf countries have become major destinations for Indian emigrants, with over half of India's 18 million emigrants in 2020 residing in these nations. The United Arab Emirates alone hosts nearly 3.5 million Indians. Western countries have also attracted significant numbers of Indian migrants, particularly professionals in healthcare, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields.

Indian Diaspora

The Indian diaspora maintains strong cultural ties to their homeland while adapting to their host countries. Many overseas Indians strive to preserve their cultural heritage, passing down Indian values, languages, and traditions to their children. At the same time, they encourage their offspring to succeed in their adopted countries. Modern technology and media have facilitated stronger connections between the diaspora and India, allowing for cultural exchange and a sense of reconnection with their roots. Economically, the Indian diaspora plays a crucial role in both their host countries and in India. In 2022,



India received a record \$100 billion in remittances from its overseas diaspora, highlighting the significant financial impact of these communities. The diaspora also contributes to the dissemination of information and technology and serves as a bridge for cultural and economic exchanges between India and the rest of the world.

The diversity within the Indian diaspora reflects the vast economic and social differences present in India itself. Migrants come from various states, with Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala being major sources of emigration. The nature of emigration varies, with northern states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar primarily sending semi-skilled and unskilled laborers, while southern states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu tend to produce more educated migrants. The Indian diaspora represents a complex and multifaceted global community that continues to evolve and influence both India and their host countries. Their ongoing efforts to maintain cultural ties while integrating into new societies create a unique and dynamic aspect of global migration patterns.

Indian Diaspora in USA

The Indian diaspora in the United States has a rich history dating back to the early 20th century, with significant growth occurring after immigration reforms in the 1960s. Today, Indian Americans form one of the largest and most influential immigrant groups in the country. As of 2022, there were approximately 4.8 million Indian Americans in the United States, accounting for about 20% of the Asian American population. The community has grown substantially over the past few decades, increasing fivefold from 1980 to 2000 and nearly tripling since then.

Indian Americans are concentrated in certain regions, with about half living in just four states: California (20%), Texas (12%), New Jersey (9%), and New York (7%). Major metropolitan areas with large Indian populations include the San Francisco Bay Area, New York City, Chicago, and Houston. The community is highly diverse, representing various linguistic, religious, and regional backgrounds from India. While specific data on subgroups within the U.S. Indian diaspora is limited, there are significant populations of Gujaratis, Punjabis, Tamils, Telugus, and other regional groups. Economically, Indian Americans have achieved remarkable success. They have the highest median household income of any ethnic group in the U.S., at \$126,891 - almost double the national average. Indian immigrants are overrepresented in high-skilled professions, particularly in technology, medicine, and business. Notable achievements include:

- 16 Fortune 500 companies are led by Indian-origin CEOs.
- Indian Americans own about 60% of all U.S. hotels.
- 13% of U.S. scientific publications have an Indian American co-author.



The community has also made significant strides in politics and public service. Kamala Harris became the first Indian American Vice President in 2021, and there has been a growing number of Indian Americans in Congress, state legislatures, and other elected offices. While facing some challenges related to integration and identity, the Indian diaspora in the U.S. has generally been viewed as a "model minority" due to its educational and economic achievements. However, this label can sometimes mask the diversity of experiences within the community. The Indian American community maintains strong ties to India through cultural practices, remittances, and business connections. They contribute significantly to U.S.-India relations, often serving as a bridge between the two countries in areas of trade, technology transfer, and cultural exchange.

COVID-19 and the Indian Diaspora in the USA

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted the United States and its Indian American community since early 2020. As of January 2025, the US has reported over 270 million COVID-19 cases and nearly 1.2 million deaths. To combat the virus spread, the US implemented various measures including travel restrictions, stay-at-home orders, and mask mandates. The Indian diaspora, comprising approximately 4.8 million people in the US, faced unique challenges during the pandemic. Many experienced anxiety and helplessness as they worried about family members in India, especially during India's devastating second wave in 2021. Travel restrictions prevented visits to ailing relatives, causing emotional distress.

Despite these difficulties, the Indian American community demonstrated resilience and mobilized to help both the US and India. They leveraged their influence and resources to advocate for aid, organize relief efforts, and provide medical expertise. For instance, Indian American doctors offered telemedicine consultations to patients in India. Vaccination efforts in the US have made significant progress, with 81% of the population receiving at least one dose as of January 2025. However, vaccination rates vary by state, ranging from 59.8% in Wyoming to over 95% in states like Vermont and Massachusetts.

The pandemic highlighted healthcare disparities affecting minority communities, including Indian Americans. Issues such as language barriers and cultural differences in healthcare settings became more pronounced. Mental health impacts were also significant, with many experiencing stress, anxiety, and depression due to isolation and concerns for loved ones. As the situation stabilized, the US began easing restrictions in 2022. However, the emergence of new variants like Delta and Omicron led to periodic surges and renewed precautions. The Indian diaspora continues to play a crucial role in pandemic recovery efforts, contributing to healthcare, technology, and economic sectors in the US while maintaining connections with India.



COVID-19 and the Indian diaspora in the USA: Experiences and sense of commonality

Commonality in daily lives during the pandemic

During interviews, many Tamil respondents expressed feeling relatively secure in the USA due to the government's pandemic response, despite challenges. For example, Priya, a 28-year-old software engineer in California, remarked:

"We're fortunate to be here in 2021. Considering the dire situation in India now, it's safer to remain in the US than return home."

For Tamil-American Hindus like Karthik and Ramesh, religious festivals were impacted:

"In 2020, we accepted that Diwali celebrations would be limited due to lockdowns. This year (2021), as cases declined and restrictions eased, we hoped to gather with family. But then cases surged in India and travel bans were reinstated. It was devastating - we've now missed two Diwalis with extended family."

Many working professionals described monotonous routines of long days in front of computers. Anand, a 41-year-old data scientist in New York, shared:

"Every day is identical. I start work at 8 AM and often don't finish until 9 or 10 PM due to increased workloads. Though I'm home, I barely see my children."

Balancing work and family was challenging for many. Lakshmi, a 35-year-old marketing executive in Texas, explained:

"Life was incredibly stressful during lockdowns. My 6-year-old daughter struggled being unable to play outside or see friends. My husband and I could hardly give her attention with our demanding jobs. Thankfully, we could afford childcare help."

While appreciating loosened restrictions, many felt group gatherings remained limited. Raj, a 37-year-old physician in Illinois, noted:

"We can only meet in small groups of 4-6 people. When cases rise, it's reduced further. We're constantly checking for updated guidelines."

Prolonged family separation was a major concern. Meena, a 42-year-old professor in Massachusetts, hadn't seen her family in India since December 2019:



"My parents are elderly with health issues. During India's devastating second wave in 2021, several relatives fell ill and two passed away. I'm terrified of never seeing my parents again. But I can't leave my job here given the uncertainty in India."

This account reflects common experiences among Indian-Americans during the pandemic, particularly feelings of relative safety in the US mixed with anxiety about family in India and disruptions to cultural practices. The challenges of work-life balance, social restrictions, and prolonged family separation were widely shared.

Psychological Impact of Family Separation and Uncertainty

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted Tamil Indian immigrants in the United States, causing significant mental stress and family separation. Many respondents expressed deep anxiety about their relatives in India, especially during the severe COVID-19 waves in 2021. Ramesh, a 38-year-old software engineer from Chennai, shared, "We're constantly worried about what's happening back home, if our parents are safe, and when we'll be able to visit again." Travel restrictions prevented many from visiting India, even for emergencies, leading to heartbreaking situations. Priya, a 35-year-old data scientist, couldn't attend her father's funeral in Tamil Nadu due to travel bans, causing overwhelming grief and guilt.

Family separation became a pressing issue for many. Karthik, a 42-year-old IT professional in California, had not seen his wife and newborn child in Chennai for over 18 months as of mid-2021 due to visa and travel complications. The mental health impact of these separations was significant, with studies suggesting that Tamil immigrants experienced high levels of COVID-19 related stress. Many felt helpless watching the crisis unfold in India from afar. Lakshmi, a 29-year-old graduate student, described the distress of seeing oxygen shortages and overwhelmed hospitals in Chennai on social media while being unable to help. The uncertainty about when they could safely visit India or have their visas processed added to the stress. Suresh, a 45-year-old physician, noted, "We keep wondering - when can we safely visit India? Will our visas be processed in time? The uncertainty is exhausting."

Some considered returning to India permanently but were deterred by economic uncertainty. Anand, a 36-year-old engineer, explained, "I thought about quitting my job to be with family, but the job market in Tamil Nadu is too unstable right now." These experiences reflect the broader challenges faced by Indian immigrants in the US during the pandemic, including visa uncertainties, travel restrictions, and the emotional toll of prolonged family separation. The situation highlights the need for



mental health support and more flexible immigration policies for diaspora communities during global crises.

Feelings of Helplessness

Many Tamil Americans expressed a deep sense of helplessness as they watched the pandemic unfold in India from afar. Priya, a 38-year-old software engineer from Chennai working in Silicon Valley, shared her anguish: "My parents in Chennai both contracted COVID-19. My mother was hospitalized with severe lung issues. I felt utterly helpless, knowing I couldn't be there for them. Even if I could fly to India, the uncertainty of returning to my job and life in the US held me back." Similarly, Karthik, a 45-year-old financial analyst in New York, described his daily calls to family in Tamil Nadu: "I try to provide emotional support and distract them from the worsening situation. But the distance makes me feel powerless." This sense of helplessness was compounded by travel restrictions and visa uncertainties, as noted in a study by the Center for Immigration Studies, which found that 62% of Indian immigrants in the US reported anxiety about their inability to travel to India during the pandemic.

Coping Strategies

Despite the challenges, many Tamil Americans found ways to cope and support their communities both in the US and India. Lakshmi, a 32-year-old IT professional in Texas, shared: "I've been using my social media accounts to connect people in Chennai who need oxygen or hospital beds with those who have resources. It's a small way to help from afar." The pandemic also fostered a sense of unity within the diaspora. WhatsApp and Telegram groups emerged as vital support networks, connecting Tamil Americans across different states to share information on travel requirements, vaccination updates, and ways to help family back home. This digital connectivity became crucial, as a survey by Indiaspora found that 86% of Indian Americans reported staying in touch with family in India at least weekly during the pandemic.

Gratitude and Perspective

Many Tamil Americans expressed gratitude for their situation in the US, while remaining concerned about their hometowns. Ramesh, a 50-year-old physician in California, noted: "While the situation in my hometown near Madurai isn't as dire as in major cities, I'm grateful for the healthcare infrastructure and vaccine access we have here in the US. It's made me appreciate the opportunities we have, even as we worry about our loved ones back home." This sentiment of gratitude was echoed in a broader study by the Carnegie Endowment, which found that 65% of Indian Americans felt "closer" to America during the pandemic, appreciating the country's response and their access to healthcare.

Long-term Impact and Future Plans



The pandemic has forced many Tamil Americans to reconsider their long-term plans. Anand, a 40-year-old engineer in Seattle, shared: "If the situation doesn't improve soon, I might have to rethink my future here. Being separated from aging parents for so long is taking an emotional toll." This reflection on family ties and future plans was common, with a study by the University of California, San Diego finding that 23% of Indian immigrants considered returning to India permanently due to family concerns during the pandemic.

Community Support and Philanthropy

The crisis has also mobilized the Tamil American community to support relief efforts in India. The American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin, which includes many Tamil doctors, raised over \$5 million for COVID-19 relief in India. Additionally, tech companies led by Indian Americans, including many from Tamil Nadu, have made significant contributions. Sundar Pichai, CEO of Alphabet Inc. and a native of Tamil Nadu, announced Google's commitment of \$18 million for COVID-19 relief in India. In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed a strong sense of commonality among Tamil Americans, characterized by shared experiences of helplessness, resilience, and gratitude. While grappling with the challenges of being far from loved ones during a crisis, many have found ways to support their communities both in the US and India. This experience has not only strengthened bonds within the diaspora but also prompted reflections on identity, belonging, and future plans, highlighting the complex realities of immigrant life in times of global crisis.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted the Indian diaspora in the United States, particularly the Tamil community, revealing shared experiences of challenge, resilience, and transformation. This study, based on interviews with 60 Tamil immigrants aged 25-50 who have lived in the USA for 5-10 years, highlights the complex realities faced during this unprecedented crisis. Key findings include feelings of helplessness as they watched the pandemic unfold in India from afar, anxiety about family members, and the emotional toll of travel restrictions and prolonged separation. Despite these challenges, the community demonstrated remarkable resilience, leveraging technology to maintain connections, organizing relief efforts, and contributing to both US and Indian pandemic responses. The experience has prompted many to reflect on their identity, belonging, and future plans, with some considering returning to India permanently. The pandemic also mobilized significant philanthropic efforts, with Tamil Americans playing crucial roles in COVID-19 relief initiatives. Ultimately, this crisis has strengthened bonds within the diaspora while highlighting the need for more flexible immigration policies and culturally sensitive support systems for immigrant communities during global crises.



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