

# Understanding India's Internal Diasporas – society

The concept of being a 'foreigner or videshi' typically reserved for international migrants, is increasingly used by internal migrants in India to describe their experience of cultural displacement.

## Defining Diaspora

**Concept** – The term *diaspora* gained prominence in policy and academic discussions after the High-Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora (2001–02).

**Conventional Definition** – Diaspora is often defined in terms of national borders, referring to communities living abroad, e.g., Punjabis in Canada, Tamils in Malaysia, Gujaratis in East Africa.

**Population Estimates** – Initially estimated at over 20 million, India's international diaspora is now pegged at over 30 million.

**Local Terminology** – In India, terms like *pravasi* (migrant) and *videshi* (foreigner) are used for both international and internal migrants. Example: Odisha workers in Surat call their workplace *videsh*, reflecting cultural difference within India. Example: In Madurai, Tamil Nadu, over 60,000 people speak Gujarati, despite Census reporting virtually no Gujarati migrants, showing long-standing settlement and cultural retention.

## Scale of Internal Diasporas

**Population Size** – Indians living in culturally distinct zones within India exceed 100 million, more than triple the size of India's international diaspora.

**Most Dispersed Language Groups** – Punjabi, Malayalam, Tamil speakers (over 10% dispersed), followed by Telugu and Gujarati.

**Largest Group by Numbers** – Hindi speakers (including Bhojpuri and Marwari), though less dispersed proportionally.

**Least Dispersed** – Marathi, Kannada, and Bengali speakers.

**Urban Concentration** – About one-third of internal diasporas reside in India's ten largest cities.

## Distinguishing Internal Diasporas from Internal Migration

Aspect	Internal Diaspora	Internal Migration
Nature	Long-term settlement in distinct cultural zones	Temporary or cyclical movement
Identity	Maintains distinct language, customs, and associations	May assimilate or remain transient
Policy Status	Largely overlooked, not formally recognised	Addressed in labor laws, welfare schemes
Perception	Often feel like <i>videshi</i> in their own country	Seen as peripheral/seasonal migrants

## Why Recognise Internal Diasporas?

**Cultural Preservation & Identity** – Internal diasporas maintain languages, customs, and festivals, preserving cultural roots across generations.

**Community Building & Social Capital** – Diasporic groups often form associations (e.g., Bengali Associations, Gujarati Samaj), fostering solidarity, mutual aid, and cultural continuity. Such networks support education, entrepreneurship, and civic engagement.

**Policy Relevance** – Recognition enables tailored welfare schemes, urban planning, and language education policies.

**Economic Contributions** – Internal diasporas often engage in trade, commerce, and business migration, contributing to regional economies. Example: Odia workers in Surat's textile industry.

**Social Integration & Diversity** – Diasporas enrich host regions with culinary, artistic, and linguistic diversity, fostering multicultural urban spaces.

## Challenges Faced by Internal Diasporas

**Cultural Alienation** – Migrants often feel excluded due to linguistic and cultural barriers.

**Discrimination & Stereotypes** – Host communities may marginalise diasporic groups.

**Political Ambiguity** – Unlike international diaspora, internal diasporas lack formal recognition in policy.

**Data Gaps** – Census and PLFS capture recent migration but often miss long-settled diasporic communities.

**Identity Struggles** – Younger generations face assimilation pressures, risking loss of linguistic and cultural roots.

**Urban Strain** – Large clusters of internal diasporas in cities can create pressure on housing, infrastructure, and services.

## Conclusion & Way Forward

India's diaspora is not limited to 30 million abroad, but includes 100+ million within its borders. Limiting diaspora to national boundaries underestimates the cultural, economic, and social contributions of internal diasporas. Internal diasporas shape India's food, language, art, commerce, and festivals, enriching both host communities and national identity. Policy frameworks should adopt a borderless understanding of diaspora, recognising that being *videshi* can mean crossing state boundaries as much as international ones.

Source: <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/videshi-in-ones-own-country-understanding-indias-internal-diasporas-10210210/>

