

Leveraging the Bangladeshi diaspora

A generational opportunity for national development

Each diaspora segment has distinct needs and motivations, requiring unique outreach approaches. For instance, hosting large gatherings at biryani halls in Jackson Heights might attract individuals already connected to Bangladesh but disillusioned by past experiences, making them hesitant to re-engage. Their skill sets, while valuable, may not align with Bangladesh's current developmental needs. Conversely, Bangladeshi professionals in sectors like investment banking and technology possess critical skills, networks, and capital.

RAHAT AHMED

In the weeks following August 5, interest from non-resident Bangladeshis (NRBs) in the professional sector surged. Messages poured in: "Tell me how I can help; I'll move back," and "I don't need to make money—I'll work for free." Others sought ways to contribute remotely, balancing personal and professional commitments. Some, unable to return, asked how they could support Bangladesh from abroad. One thing is clear: we have a window of opportunity to harness the vast potential of the Bangladeshi diaspora to accelerate the nation's development and strengthen the bonds within this global community.

To engage effectively with the diaspora, we must first acknowledge that it is not a monolithic entity. Historically, outreach efforts have been narrow, focusing predominantly on immigrant enclaves in cities like London and New York. This approach overlooks professionals and young people who are often more eager to connect with their heritage. The lack of tailored engagement strategies has deepened divisions within diaspora groups, limiting the value they could have contributed to Bangladesh over the past decade.

Each diaspora segment has distinct needs and motivations, requiring unique outreach approaches. For instance, hosting large gatherings at biryani halls in Jackson Heights might attract individuals already connected to Bangladesh but disillusioned by past experiences, making them hesitant to re-engage. Their skill sets, while valuable, may not align with Bangladesh's current developmental needs. Conversely, Bangladeshi professionals in sectors like investment banking and technology possess critical skills, networks, and capital. However, they often lack the time, resources, or trusted channels to engage effectively.

Based on experience and data, the diaspora can be broadly categorised into six groups, each requiring distinct strategies. The first group consists of the older generation who emigrated before 1995. Their memories of Bangladesh are mixed at best, but they possess both capital and skills that could contribute significantly. They are predominantly based in the United Kingdom and



ILLUSTRATION:
ZARIF FAIAZ

eager to reconnect with their cultural roots. Others have established themselves professionally in key sectors such as finance and technology, with a strong presence in the US, Canada, and the UK. Finally, the sixth group consists of migrant workers whose primary focus is to earn income for their families, often with the hope of returning home someday. They are predominantly based in the Middle East, as well as countries like Malaysia, Singapore, and Italy.

To date, engagement efforts have primarily focused on the first and second groups, largely because these communities have established organisations like the well-known Federation of Bangladeshi Associations in North America (FOBANA) in the US. The Bangladeshi government and related institutions have maintained strong ties

from companies like Apple, Intel, or Nvidia collaborated to develop Bangladesh's hardware technology sector. Their influence extends beyond individual expertise; they have access to extensive global networks across various industries, enabling them to forge partnerships and identify opportunities that might otherwise be inaccessible. Additionally, they can bridge Bangladesh's historical reliance on development aid and low-quality capital by attracting high-quality global investments.

To unlock this potential, we must first recognise that the diaspora is diverse and requires tailored engagement strategies. Building meaningful, long-term relationships with each group involves offering clear, accessible pathways for contribution. Professionalism matters—high-calibre individuals are unlikely to respond to poorly designed emails or participate in events that lack polish and credibility. Good design and thoughtful branding signal progress and competence. We must also be discerning about which diaspora organisations receive official recognition. Not every group with a grand name deserves government endorsement. It's essential to assess their track records and contributions before involving senior officials in their activities. Moreover, we need to redefine the diaspora's value proposition. NRBs aren't inherently superior to local talent; the key difference often lies in access to resources and opportunities. Facilitating connections between NRBs and local professionals can help bridge this gap, fostering mutual growth and learning. Another critical step is to streamline the process for NRBs who wish to return to Bangladesh. This includes addressing practical concerns such as education options for their children, legal paperwork, and overall quality of life—factors that significantly influence relocation decisions.

Despite the clear benefits, several barriers have hindered effective diaspora engagement. One major obstacle is gatekeeping. Certain individuals within Bangladesh benefit from maintaining the status quo, fearing that the influx of highly qualified NRBs could challenge their positions. Ironically, this shortsightedness harms everyone, including the gatekeepers themselves, as it stifles progress in an increasingly competitive global landscape. Countries like Vietnam, Indonesia, and Pakistan are actively engaging their diaspora communities, even appointing them to senior government and corporate roles. Another barrier is limited access. Bangladesh lacks

efficient mechanisms to identify and connect with its global talent pool. This is compounded by a historical lack of curiosity about whether experts in various fields exist within the diaspora. Even when such individuals are identified, there is often uncertainty about how to approach them respectfully and effectively. Policy gaps also play a role. Government entities like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs tend to focus on traditional diaspora groups, neglecting the unique needs and potential contributions of professionals who could attract foreign direct investment. Additionally, there's a storytelling deficit. Many diaspora Bangladeshis have limited knowledge of the country's current developments. Negative news often dominates, overshadowing positive stories that could inspire greater engagement.

If we address these challenges effectively, the rewards could be transformative. We could see a surge in foreign direct investment, reducing our dependence on development aid and remittances from migrant workers. Accessing high-quality global capital would open new avenues for economic growth. This, in turn, could lead to the creation of new industries. Whether in semiconductors, biotechnology, or other emerging sectors, combining capital with diaspora talent could catalyse innovation, generate jobs, and elevate Bangladesh's position in the global economy. A stronger national brand would also emerge. While neighbouring countries have successfully cultivated their global images, Bangladesh remains underrepresented. Leveraging the achievements of our diaspora could reshape international perceptions, moving beyond outdated stereotypes associated with garments or natural disasters. Most importantly, this process would foster a sense of unity. A shared identity strengthens the social fabric, creating networks of trust and support that transcend borders.

Bangladesh stands at a pivotal crossroads. The decisions we make in the coming years will shape the nation's trajectory for decades. Now is the time to mobilise our people and resources—at home and abroad—to build a brighter, more prosperous future.

Rahat Ahmed is the co-founder of B'deshi, a global diaspora network connecting Bangladeshi professionals. He is also the Founder & Managing Partner of Anchorless Bangladesh, a New York-based investment firm bringing global capital to Bangladesh.

- » The Bangladeshi diaspora presents a significant opportunity for national development, with rising interest from NRBs to contribute both locally and remotely.
- » The diaspora is diverse, requiring tailored engagement strategies to connect effectively with professionals, youth, and migrant workers.
- » NRBs, especially professionals in sectors like tech and finance, can drive innovation, attract global investments, and elevate Bangladesh's industries.
- » Barriers such as gatekeeping, policy gaps, and poor outreach have hindered diaspora engagement, limiting their potential contributions.
- » Addressing these challenges can unlock transformative benefits, including increased foreign investment, new industries, and a stronger global image for Bangladesh.

the United States. The second group comprises working-class immigrants, many of whom emigrated through lottery visa programmes or similar channels. These individuals often believe that the opportunities they have abroad are better than anything they could have accessed in Bangladesh. Historically present in large numbers in the UK and US, they are now also found in smaller communities across countries like Italy. The third group includes Bangladeshi professionals who have emigrated in the past decade, benefiting from friendlier visa policies while maintaining strong ties to Bangladesh through family, friends, or education. They are particularly active in Canada, Australia, and to a lesser extent, the United States. The fourth and fifth groups consist of the children of the first two groups. Some of them, now in their late teens or early adulthood, are

with these organisations, making them easier to engage with. Meanwhile, migrant workers in the sixth group have distinct needs that require different approaches, such as streamlining and legitimising their employment processes.

While all six groups have valuable contributions to offer, this discussion focuses on the third, fourth, and fifth groups—Bangladeshi professionals and second-generation youth. They share key traits that can drive Bangladesh's development. Unlike older generations, they are free from the psychological remnants of colonialism. Growing up abroad, they view themselves as equals on the global stage, unbound by outdated deference to the West. Many have worked in leading firms like Google or Goldman Sachs, equipped with best practices and the potential to elevate Bangladesh's industries. Imagine the impact if NRBs