

Panel Briefing

The Elephant Moves: #TheIndiaDialog 2024 Institute for Competitiveness | US-Asia Technology Management Center, Stanford University

"Identity in the Digital Age"

Introduction

The panel discussion on 'Identity in the Digital Age' examined the complex scenarios of stereotypes, cultural assumptions and misconceptions in professional environments, gender dynamics, community and connection, and generational differences in the Indian diaspora. The panel was moderated by **MR Rangaswami**, Founder & CEO, Indiaspora, with esteemed speakers including **Rohini Chakravarthy**, Managing Partner, NewBuild VC, Board Member, MIT Club of NorCal, **Deepa Prahalad Abhyankar**, Design strategist, Social Innovator, Author, Speaker, and **Beena Ammanath**, Technology Trust Ethics and AI leader, Deloitte. MR Rangaswami, founder and CEO of Indiaspora, opened this panel discussion by exploring the complex concept of identity for members of the global Indian diaspora. He highlighted the Indian diaspora's growth, diversity, and significant contributions to the US and beyond. He introduced the panellists, each bringing a unique perspective from their personal and professional experiences.

Navigating Stereotypes, Cultural Assumptions and Misconceptions in Professional Environments

The panellists offered insights into the challenges of navigating stereotypes, cultural assumptions, and misconceptions in professional environments, drawing from their own experiences and observations. They described encountering stereotypes based on their names, appearance, or career choices, and discussed strategies for overcoming these preconceptions. The discussion pointed out the evolving perceptions of the Indian diaspora in professional settings, with some stereotypes, like the 'tech-savvy Indian,' showing signs of breaking down while others, particularly regarding gender roles, persists. Despite these challenges, panellists recognised the diversity within the diaspora, shaped by factors such as immigration timing, regional or religious backgrounds within India, and individual personalities.

The speakers shared their journeys of breaking through stereotypes associated with being of Indian origin, especially regarding traditional career paths like medicine or engineering. They highlighted the diversity of professional achievements within the diaspora and the importance of challenging assumptions about Indians' career choices and capabilities. Moreover, the speakers discussed how

their identities, including their Indian heritage and gender, influence how others perceive them in professional environments. They recounted instances where cultural assumptions led to misconceptions about their dietary preferences or professional roles, such as assuming all Indians are vegetarian or work in the technology industry.

Navigating predominantly white professional environments, where they may be the only person of colour or woman of colour, was also a point of discussion. Despite facing stereotypes and biases, the panellists expressed a strong sense of pride in their Indian heritage and identity. They discussed how their upbringing instilled in them a sense of excellence and pride, which influences their responses to stereotypes and misconceptions, empowering them to navigate professional environments with confidence and resilience.

Community and Connection

The panellists examined the vital role of community and connection within the Indian diaspora, talking about its significance in shaping their personal and professional trajectories. Family and community ties were portrayed as foundational elements that instilled values of excellence, service, and collective responsibility. They highlighted the unique blend of individual achievement and community focus ingrained in Indian families, shaping their approach to success. The panellists also discussed the distinctive strengths derived from their groundedness in Indian culture. This perspective instilled a pragmatic outlook, driving a desire for societal impact alongside professional success. They noted how this trait transcends generations, influencing younger diaspora members to prioritise broader societal issues and explore diverse career paths.

Panellists highlighted the grounded nature of individuals within the Indian diaspora. This grounded perspective provides a realistic outlook when navigating both personal and professional challenges. They presented examples of this trait being evident in younger generations of the diaspora as well. Improved travel and communication facilitated greater engagement with Indian culture and society, bridging the gap between diaspora members and their counterparts in India. These connections served as catalysts for collaboration, innovation, and mutual understanding, enriching both personal and professional spheres. Exposure to India and an awareness of societal issues foster a desire to drive positive change. While parents sought to impart traditional values, they also recognised the importance of allowing their children the freedom to pursue their passions and carve their own paths. This balance reflected an evolving mindset geared towards nurturing individuality while honouring cultural heritage.

A recurring theme is the strength of community and the importance of connection, both within the Indian diaspora and beyond. Overall, the discussion highlights the support networks and shared values that contribute to the success of Indian ventures and individuals in the US. This sense of community encourages collaboration, resilience, and the exchange of ideas, ultimately driving progress and prosperity. Additionally, the panellists stress the significance of maintaining connections with India,

whether through frequent visits or engagement with Indian culture and traditions, as a means of preserving cultural heritage and fostering mutual understanding between the two countries.

Generational Difference in the Indian Diaspora

The panellists delved into the topic of the next generation within the Indian diaspora, shedding light on the intergenerational differences in perspectives and challenges. They observed that the next generation, born or raised in the United States, is characterised by a blend of Indian cultural heritage and American upbringing. This blending of cultures has resulted in a generation that is more connected to both Indian and American identities, allowing them to navigate diverse cultural landscapes with ease.

One key aspect discussed was the openness of the next generation towards exploring various career paths beyond traditional fields like engineering and medicine. They noted that the younger generation is more inclined towards entrepreneurship and innovation, reflecting a shift in mindset towards carving out their own paths rather than conforming to societal expectations. This entrepreneurial spirit is seen as a driving force for societal change and progress, with the next generation eager to make a meaningful impact on the world. However, the panellists also highlighted some challenges faced by the next generation, including the pressure to balance conflicting cultural expectations and the difficulty in choosing from the multitude of career options available. Another dimension that adds to the difficulty whilst making that choice is the interplay of evolving technology with the career options available. For instance, how the field of arts and humanities will evolve with the advent of artificial intelligence-generated art.

Immigrant parents, who may have followed more traditional career paths, often struggle to understand and guide their children through these new and diverse career choices. Despite these challenges, the panellists expressed optimism about the opportunities available to the next generation. They emphasised the importance of maintaining connections within the diaspora and broader society to foster mutual support and growth. Overall, the discussion revolved around the evolving identity of the next generation within the Indian diaspora, characterised by a blend of cultural values, entrepreneurial spirit, and a commitment to positive change in both Indian and American societies.

Gender Dynamics and Perceptions

The panellists discussed the nuanced experiences of gender within the Indian diaspora, emphasising both challenges and progress. They acknowledged persistent stereotypes and biases, particularly surrounding traditional gender roles, but also acknowledged the resilience and determination of Indian women in navigating these obstacles. The panellists shared personal anecdotes of defying expectations and pursuing their aspirations despite societal pressures, illustrating the complex interplay between cultural norms and individual agency. Moreover, they underscored the importance of empowering women to challenge gender norms, advocate for themselves, and pursue diverse career paths. The

discussion on gender reflected a recognition of both the barriers faced by women within the Indian diaspora and the potential for cultural shifts and empowerment to drive positive change. Their

experiences showed the importance of embracing one's identity while striving for individual and collective success in diverse cultural contexts.

The notion of identity in the digital age is both nuanced and dynamic. It is shaped by cultural heritage, family values, globalisation, and a sense of belonging in multiple communities. The Indian diaspora offers a unique perspective and provides critical bridges across cultures, generations, and countries.