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BOOK REVIEW

INDIA AND AFRICA: LEGACY OF EXCHANGES AND CULTURAL AFFINITIES

By
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contemporary reality of this relationship is marked by both promise and instability. The India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS) process demonstrates this: despite the 2015 Delhi Declaration's promise to build on "long-standing development" ties, it stalled for nearly a decade, highlighting the complex challenges facing India-Africa relations today. In this context, an edited volume titled *India and Africa: Legacy of Exchanges and Cultural Affinities*, published by the India International Centre under the theme of understanding Africa, is a timely intervention.

Faiza Rizwan*



In an era of debates about India-Africa relations, the book's central thesis argues that the connection between the two regions is not a new geopolitical issue but rather a continuation of a much longer history shaped by trade, migration, cultural exchange, anti-colonial solidarity, and shared experiences of modernity. While the volume emphasises historical continuity, the

The authors collectively challenge the limited, frequently Eurocentric viewpoints on Africa's past and its place in world history and international relations, in chapters on historical ties, development cooperation, and indigenous knowledge systems. The growth of political solidarity in the twentieth century is seen not just as a diplomatic alignment but as a result of shared struggles against imperial rule and racial hierarchies. M. Olabiyi Babalola Yai critiques what he calls "epistemological arrogance" of

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international scholarship and argues for a decolonisation of knowledge. Throughout the book, the relationship between India and Africa is framed as one rooted in a shared desire for political freedom, economic growth, and international recognition. Okpeh's chapter on Historical Linkages also demonstrates that the network between the two regions predated colonialism. This view allows the contributors to link historical interactions with post-colonial cooperation, suggesting that today's engagements draw part of their legitimacy from these past experiences of solidarity and resistance.

One of the most unique features of this collection is its deep exploration of knowledge production. By emphasising local knowledge, oral traditions, local innovations, and community practices, the volume joins broader conversations about decolonising knowledge. The book suggests that development, sustainability, and social change cannot be fully understood through Western theories and that alternative knowledge deserves more attention.

The book's interdisciplinary nature makes it a useful addition to the current body of knowledge on South-South cooperation and decolonial knowledge production. The volume

effectively highlights understudied aspects of India-Africa relations and offers detailed historical and cultural analysis, but it also has some limitations in theoretical consistency and responsiveness to current issues.

While the book draws attention to the neglected aspects of India-Africa relations, its major limitation is the absence of an analytical framework, which is expected since it is a product of an international conference organised by IIC. Yet, as the contributors repeatedly refer to ideas such as affinity, history, and South-South cooperation, not much attention is paid to examining these concepts. This makes it read more like a descriptive detail rather than an analytical intervention.

This problem is illustrated throughout the volume whenever authors detail "cultural affinity". For instance, while it is successfully established that trade, religion and migration facilitated centuries of exchange, the contributors assume that there are natural ties between societies resulting from this exchange. But the interconnections between past interactions and current cooperation are not as clear as the book implies. Yet, while the emphasis is on commonalities and linkages, it does not explain why the relations have not progressed at a pace and

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scale that could leverage those commonalities. As such, the largely positive assessment of India–Africa relations downplays the tensions, competing interests and national priorities that characterise modern statecraft.

This outlook is evident in the notion of South–South cooperation. The book often portrays cooperation between India and Africa as a new model of development, an alternative to the North–South models. Rajen Harshe correctly identifies high solidarity, such as India's 1986 chairmanship of the AFRICA Fund to assist frontline states against apartheid. As Okpeh acknowledges in discussions of the "new scramble" for Africa, the contemporary landscape promotes competition for resources (such as oil in Sudan or minerals in South Africa), which is similar to traditional extractivist models. Nevertheless, this volume provides a necessary counterpoint to Eurocentric 'development' approaches even as it also runs the risk of overlooking inequalities within the Global South. More critical engagement with India's corporate presence and conflicting commercial interests in Africa would certainly have yielded a fairer and more balanced reflection on the opportunities and constraints of South–South cooperation.

One of the important contributions of the book is its dealing with the indigenous knowledge systems of India and Africa. The authors, such as Soumonni, argue for "endogenous innovation" as a path to restoring civilisational diversity and call for greater visibility of local traditions and alternative forms of knowledge in academic and policy discourse throughout the book. But the implications for practice have yet to be fleshed out. Yai's critique is particularly relevant, as he notes that rather than developing systems grounded in *sui generis* African political thought, elites have often imposed the "democracy of the other," leading to a disconnect between governance and local tradition. While the preface notes the dangers of Western appropriation and patenting of traditional knowledge, little discussion is given on navigating these intellectual property rights. There is a tendency to treat Africa as a monolith by failing to account for the differing experiences of countries such as Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Ghana, thereby reproducing the very simplifications the volume seeks to challenge. Consequently, the argument is sometimes carried at the level of principle rather than showing the relevance of what is being discussed.

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Nevertheless, *India and Africa* volume offers a valuable contribution to the study of India-Africa relations by drawing attention to overlooked dimensions in conventional texts. The volume sheds light on a diverse range of historical interactions, cultural

exchanges, intellectual traditions, music, art, cinema, trade, and diaspora experiences, rather than focusing solely on diplomacy, trade, or strategic interests. It broadens the scope of study on India-Africa relations and encourages a more multidimensional view. ■

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