

India and Africa: Relations Beyond Rhetorics

(Amb Anil Trigunayat, Former Ambassador of India to Jordan, Libya and Malta)

India and Africa have a historic and umbilical relationship. It makes a good talking point during speeches but will need an objective assessment of the extent and depth of our engagement to stand scrutiny for devising better policy choices. It is also a fact that India has consistently, even if occasionally in ad hoc manner, engaged with the African countries. It emerged as a strong voice for their emancipation from the colonial yoke and from then on through Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) and has stood for and advocated the core concerns of the African countries especially the Least developed Countries (LDCs) in the international fora be it GATT/WTO, UN/CHOGM or the Climate Change negotiations and now in the reformed UNSC. In her G20 presidency in 2023 India made sure that African Union (AU) becomes a permanent member of the of G20. This has been widely appreciated and earned India an immeasurable affection quotient across Africa.

Besides India through its extensive capacity building assistance and “share and Care” approach helped the continent a great deal in creating skilled manpower, modern institutions and infrastructure both in the field of education and defence. Indian teachers and professors were widely respected especially by those who studied during 1960s to 1980s. Unfortunately, this very effective mode of engagement dried out and needs to be revived. Several African leaders fondly recall their Indian teachers even after 40-50 years. Dozens of military officers trained in India rose to become Heads of government and Heads of State in their countries.

Thousands of Africans have been trained under the fully funded ITEC programme and have risen to responsible positions. Another important capacity building effort is to train about 80 women every year to work on solar panels who are fondly called as “Solar Mamas” as they, on return, electrify the communities and at least 50 houses each. Now technological competency initiatives in sunrise sectors through Centers of excellence and bilateral, regional and sub regional and trilateral formats with likeminded countries like France, Japan and UAE have been mooted across the economic spectrum.

One of the most important connectivity and capacity building programme launched by India pursuant to the vision of former President APJ Abdul Kalam was the Pan-Africa e-network initiative that focused on tele -medicine, tele-education and e-governance or connectivity among Heads of State across 48 countries. It entailed five Indian ace universities offering courses and 12 super specialty hospitals providing consultations and medical education and was fully funded by Indian government under NEPAD. The programme has been further upgraded and expanded under the Modi government under the rubric of e-Vidya Bharti and e-Arogya Bharti. Reportedly over 7000 students completed their studies. Since the 1950s India has been encouraging African students through scholarships for higher education, training and capacity building in Indian Institutions. According to estimates currently there are more than 55,000 students from various African countries in India.

India also has a long history of cooperation in the defence capacity building in various African countries and participating in the UN Peace Keeping Operations starting in 1960 in Congo. Their role has been broadly appreciated especially in preventing genocide in South Sudan. Similarly, India women police personnel did a remarkable job in Liberia that was rather unique and President Sirleaf was all praise for them. Currently India trains a large number of Africans not only in its defence institutions but also in the peace keeping operations and maneuverability in addition to conducting counter terrorism and insurgency operations. India had set up National Defence colleges in several countries including Nigeria. It would also be useful to align our engagement with the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) devised by the then Organisation of African Unity (OAU) to deal with African problems like genocide and ethnic cleansing. India has also been very active in anti-piracy operations on the East Coast of Africa especially Somalia and Gulf of Aden to Mozambique Channel to ensure free lines of trade and communications. Indian navy successfully escorted around 2500 vessels. Like the US Africom, New Delhi needs to also strategically look at Gulf of Guinea and other maritime domain awareness initiatives. In the wake of US-Iran and Israel war and closure and blockade of choke points it has become imperative for New Delhi reorient its energy security efforts in a mutually beneficial manner towards the African continent and to secure Sea lanes of Communications through collaboration and capacity building.

The Diaspora helps a great deal in building bridges at people-to-people level and in turn contributes to the growth of bilateral relations, especially in the economic field as well as through the leadership positions acquired by them as a result of exposure and experience in a particular country. India has 3 million people of Indian origin people across the African continent who are highly successful. The Indian community has begun to synthesize with the socio-economic needs of the local communities by rendering various services like education, medical treatment, job creation and employment. No wonder the former President of Nigeria stated more than once that “That the Indian industrialists are the second biggest employment providers after the federal Government in Nigeria”. Time is ripe to also institutionalize with African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA).

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while speaking at the Parliament in Kampala in July 2018 outlined his Africa vision through his ten guiding principles which include : Africa is among top priorities for India and momentum of cooperation will be sustained through regular exchanges ;development partnership as per African priorities; preferential access to Indian markets for African products; assist in harnessing digital revolution in Africa ; improve Africa’s agriculture potential; fight climate change together; work together to keep oceans and maritime lanes free for all; Africa instead of becoming a theatre of competition should become nursery for its youth; and aspire and work together for a just , representative, democratic global order. These are ideal, achievable and collaborative policies that dictate a paradigm shift compared to other big powers who are trying to get into the ‘Gold Rush’ for exploitation by way of neo-colonialist approaches. India–Africa relations have developed

into a multifaceted partnership encompassing political engagement, trade and investment, development cooperation, capacity building, healthcare, education, digital connectivity, ICT, AI, defence cooperation, space, critical minerals, food and energy security, renewables and multilateral collaboration.

The 4th India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS) was postponed due to Ebola crisis and needs to be held at the earliest to focus on current issues, challenges and solutions. India -Africa engagement will be decisive in the emerging world order as their combined synergies of natural and human resources and capital and human centric approaches can be aligned for the global good through combining the Agenda 2063 and Viksit Bharat 2047. The partnership focuses on innovation, resilience, and inclusive transformation for sustainable development.