

## Book Review

# India's Development Diplomacy in Africa—Through Western Lenses

Samir Bhattacharya

*India's Development Diplomacy and Soft Power in Africa,*  
by Kenneth King and Meera Venkatachalam (Eds). James Currey, (Suffolk and NY), 2021.  
Pp 242. ISBN: 9781847012746

**T**rying to assess India's Africa policy under Prime Minister Modi's government is a challenging work as it is still evolving and builds on the diplomatic and developmental work done by the previous governments. Arguably, a rigorous evaluation should be left to serious historians, economists, and foreign policy specialists. Nevertheless, Professor Kenneth King and Meera Venkatachalam have bravely attempted to analyse India's Africa policy under Modi while comparing it to the previous administrations, specifically those of Jawaharlal Nehru in the 1950s and Manmohan Singh a decade ago. Given that Nehru was India's first PM and a big supporter of Afro-Indian solidarity, the shadow of Nehru falls everywhere in this book. However, such an approach appears time warped since the Nehru period ended 60 years ago and the world as well as the issues that drive India-Africa relations have significantly changed since then!

The authors also make a discernible attempt to link India's current Africa policy to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) nationalist ideology rather than focusing on its foreign policy goals, practice and outcomes in Africa. Such an analysis is

---

Samir Bhattacharya is a Senior Research Associate at the Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF). He specialises in geopolitics with particular reference to Africa. He is pursuing his Doctoral work at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

---

National Security Vol. 6, No. 1, 2023  
(January - March 2023) Page 93-103, ISSN 25-81-9658 (0)  
©Vivekananda International Foundation

accomplished by relying primarily on several unscholarly secondary sources, using selectively chosen primary sources that support the author's narrative, and a lot of insinuations. Unlike most academic books, this book doesn't have a binding theory or historiography. It also lacks an objective assessment and an account of the many developments underway in India-Africa ties. As a result, this 242-page book with nine chapters divided into four parts, remains loosely connected and may appear jarring and disjointed to most readers.

### **An Ideological and Biased Account**

In the first chapter, "*India's Soft Power in East Africa: Opportunities and Challenges*" by Muhidin J. Shangwe, summarises India's engagement in eastern Africa very well and highlights different dimensions of India's soft power, which borderlines hard power, such as economic diplomacy. However, citing one British journalist's experience to establish the racism of Asians in Uganda towards Africans and somehow concluding India's mentality as 'racist' based on that account seem both unconvincing and motivated, especially given the British record of widespread racism, loot and slave trade in the continent. Indians as a minority group in an African majority Uganda were in no position to practice racism and in fact faced enormous violence, property takeover and mass expulsion from the country under the dictator Idi Amin! India had to rehabilitate many of them. In contrast, authors Mrittika Guha Sarkar and Jagannath Panda have used pragmatic and balanced approaches to bring out the current contours of India-Japan collaboration in Africa without ignoring the elephant in the room, China.

However the chapter that stands out the most for its inherent bias is written by one of the co-editors, Meera Venkatachalam, a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre for African Studies at the University of Mumbai. The key theme of her chapter, "*The Indian Political Right, Soft Power and the Reimagining of Africa*", appears to be to establish that a reinvention of Indian culture and reconceptualisation

**The chapter that stands out the most for its inherent bias is written by one of the co-editors, Meera Venkatachalam.**

of the nation's past civilisational role is underway, and this is changing the rationale for India's engagement with Africa. All this is done by the author against the backdrop of what she calls as the BJP's '*Hindutva ideology*'. According to her, the implicit notion of this '*Hindu mission civilisatrice*' can be found in some elements of India's soft power strategy in Africa. She does not, however, explain what those elements are or how they

are implemented. Yet she states unequivocally that religious diplomacy is an important component of Modi's foreign policy! When Prime Minister Modi speaks of restoring India's *Vishwaguru* status, he is not referring to land acquisition or religious conversion. However, his attempt to rekindle a sense of national pride in ancient Indic wisdom among the Indian people strangely becomes, in the author's eyes, *'Hindu evangelism'*. Meera Venkatachalam apparently is steeped and driven by her anti-Modi ideology and this shapes her treatment of the theme she has chosen rather than any serious and unprejudiced treatment of her topic.

She also equates Kautilya, who is widely regarded as the father of Indian Political-Economy and International Relations Theory, and his ideas to an "*extension of Hindu India's civilisational duty on the global stage*". She says, "*Hindutva ideologues wrote very little about Africans, and when they wrote about Africa, it was largely in the context of Hindu communities living on the continent. Ironically, this silence about Africans tells us a great deal.*" Except for the assertion that early Indian historians were pro-Hindu, the message is ambiguous. Yet, Indian thinkers and nationalists, including Tagore, Gandhi, Nehru-- all of them Hindus, have written with great empathy about Africa for over a century and India has more than any other foreign power campaigned for an end to colonialism and apartheid in Africa through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while the West was tormenting and exploiting the continent. She goes into great detail about the evolution of Hindutva—or Hindu/Indian cultural essence— from Savarkar to today's BJP without establishing that they differed from the wider Indian thinking or were unsympathetic about Africans. Occasional skirmishes with some African students in India are not really a recent phenomenon. However, the author associates such sporadic non-political acts at the local level with Hindutva without any evidence. Her chapter is deeply troubling for its political bias and is a scar that cuts through the book, especially since she is one of the editors.

The chapter by Professor Simona Vittorini is not very different where she first attempts to establish Gandhi as a product of Indian cultural export which Modi is attempting to appropriate even though every Indian leader has always spoken highly of Gandhi and PM Modi has just continued the tradition. Her disdain for PM Modi is not lost when she refers to him offensively and casually as a "*non-resident Prime Minister*", a derogatory term used by a section of India's Opposition leaders to disparage his foreign tours. Though the chapter is titled "*The Politics of Statues and the Saffronisation*", it is unclear why

promoting *Gandhibaad* is *saffronisation*, which is again a derogatory term used to depict Hindus as supremacists. Despite the title, Vittorini's chapter does not attempt to explain how PM Modi or his policies are to blame for the recent attacks on Gandhi statues in certain African capitals. Instead, she concludes and displays her Western bias by saying "*Nehru was an erudite thinker; he belonged to the Western-educated, English-speaking elite; he was a believer in reason and modern science, and preferred history over mythology*"—exposing the prime message of the chapter.

**Vittorini's chapter does not attempt to explain how PM Modi or his policies are to blame for the recent attacks on Gandhi statues in certain African capitals.**

On the other hand, the chief editor and the author of the chapter "*India's Changing Human Resource Diplomacy with Africa, and Africa's Responses*" meticulously depicts the evolution of India's human resource diplomacy, specifically with Ethiopia, Tanzania and Rwanda. He regrets the lack of recognition of the value of their work by the Indian government and the academic community. Thus, despite making a significant contribution, their work is not widely known. He also raises concerns regarding the gradual decline in the number of Indian teachers in Africa. He observes that with sixty-one Confucius Institutes (CIs) in forty-five different African universities, China would have a more long-lasting impact on African education than India. Indeed, while the West is shutting down the CIs, their numbers in Africa are growing at a steady rate. While several researchers have claimed that the principal objective of CIs is to promote China's influence, soft power and national interest in Africa through language training, the claim of their long-lasting impact is still dubious.

King's recommendations for e-ITEC and the requirement of an impact assessment of the last three India-Africa Forum Summits (IAFS) are well-founded. So is his demand for more information on the India-Africa institutes provided to Africa over the last two decades and more. Indeed, greater details and analysis will only help the government to make the system more efficient, especially since some of them have made significant contributions to the host countries, such as the Kofi Annan Centre of Excellence in ICT in Ghana or the Rajiv Gandhi Science Centre in Mauritius. Given the current government's fondness for technology, the government may take this exercise seriously and post its work and contributions of the institutes on its website for greater transparency, information as well as brand building.

## India's Role in Healthcare

Both chapters six and seven deal with India's healthcare diplomacy with Africa. In chapter six, author Vincent Duclos focuses on the India-designed and funded Pan African Network (PAN), its expansion, evolution and its ground results based on his survey. While in chapter seven, authors Supriya Roychoudhury and Emma Mawdsley, detail India's medical diplomacy with Africa with a specific focus on COVID-19. PAN was set up to provide quality tele-education and telemedical expertise to Africa. The aim was to build capacity and expertise in education, medical practice and telemedicine. By 2017 e-networks had been installed in 48 African Union (AU) member states and its headquarters. The same year it was handed over to AU to manage and run the network. Several thousand engineers and medical professionals have been trained under the programme. PAN was meant to help the developing world under India's ancient ethos of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" (the world is one family). However, author Duclos identifies it as an effort to project India's exceptionalism and attempts to persuade the readers of what he assumes to be its primary objectives. He states:

"PAN fed the imagination of a South to come, and in whose future India would be called to play a central role. ...Telemedicine emerged as a technological solution to India's increasingly inequitable healthcare landscape in the early 2000s...The most visible change lies in the network's new Sanskrit designation: e-VidyaBharati and e-ArogyaBharati. The network acted as a medium through which the nation would come to imagine itself in relation to a South it conjured and intervened in. But while in President Kalam's vision, India clearly was the name of the nation to imagine, the network's new denomination suggests this vision is now at least partially a thing of the past... What futures e-ArogyaBharati might have us imagine remain uncertain, but they are nevertheless a good deal worrisome..."

The author strangely drags in India's national vision and linguistic nomenclature in assessing this important programme for Africa. Further, he makes a highly prejudiced and objectionable argument that to be credible India must use English names for its international programmes and not names such as 'Bharat' or 'Arogya Bharati' (Health and Well-being system of Bharat) in Sanskrit or Hindi. Indian names used by the present government evoke a meaning or a vision of a future that is highly 'worrisome', according to the author. Such a sentence reeks of both ignorance of Indian names, meanings, and symbols, the significant progress in healthcare made since the early 2000s, especially under the present government, and reveals continuing Western arrogance. He suggests

that PAN may sometimes have aggravated existing inequalities in the global distribution of biomedicine. “It may have contributed to the production of connected enclaves of knowledge and care”, he adds. Ironically, no other country, including the rich Western nations, has any universal healthcare plan for Africa or even a single African country, and nothing like the Indian scheme.

Authors Roychoudhury and Mawdsley conclude in their chapter that India’s healthcare diplomacy with Africa frequently comes at the expense of India’s poor and needy people. This in effect means India should not aid and support Africa! They go on to say that, while competition with China may bode well for Africa in the short term, the long-term consequences of India’s healthcare diplomacy with Africa would be negative both regionally and globally. As an explanation, they only offer the phrase “*implications of arrogance and monumental errors made by the Modi government in handling the pandemic*”, leaving the rest to the reader’s deduction.

### **The Central Focus: Modi and not Indo-African Ties**

Overall, the central message of the book is clear. In a book on India’s development cooperation with Africa, a sentence such as: “*The professed aim of the BJP is to make India a ‘Hindu Rashtra’*” only exposes the clear and misplaced bias of the editors. There are plenty of sentences throughout the book that have neither any meaning nor significance, such as “*colourful diplomacy of Modi.*” Sensational and catchy titles that are used by journalists to attract readers, such as ‘*India’s China Challenge*’ or ‘*India risks losing Africa to China*’ and many others have been used to demonstrate India’s supposed growing insecurity vis-à-vis China. Terminologies used are often misleading, and sources are frequently chosen based on convenience, such as one particular photographer or one particular student.

The rearrangement of work between Indian Ministries, such as channelling more aid from the Ministry of Defence instead of the Ministry of Finance, has been seen as a tactic to capture power by Modi! The reasoning for introducing the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) is astonishingly presented as to repair some of the damage it had suffered on the global stage in the aftermath of the border war with China in 1962 and sentences like “*ITEC declared itself to be a demand-driven and response-oriented programme...*” are intended to nudge the reader in concluding the hollowness of the ‘ITEC’s demand-driven’ claim.

In reality, India ranks among the top five destinations for African students for higher education. Currently some 25,000 Africans students are studying in 500 public and private universities across India, according to Association for African Students in India. Students who have studied in India are now pursuing successful careers in fields like government, management, academic and scientific research, law, IT and accounting.

As a matter of fact, in 2002, the sub-Saharan Africa division at India's External Affairs Ministry was divided into two: one for East and Southern Africa and another for Central and West Africa. The West Asia and North Africa divisions were combined, and even countries such as Sudan, Somalia and Djibouti were examined through the Arab league framework. In 2015, the Africa portfolio was transferred from the Secretary (West) to the Secretary (Economic Relations), who also oversaw the Development Partnership Administration. In January 2020, there was a further change with an Additional Secretary appointed to oversee Africa as a whole. Despite the fact that these policies have constantly evolved, they were, however, done in good faith with the sole intention of prioritising African issues and needs. Indeed, with time, India's focus on economic diplomacy with Africa has intensified in tandem with other areas of engagement, including capacity building. However, labelling this as '*mercantilism*' again reflects the inner bias of the author against the current dispensation. For the editors, only upper-caste Indians represent its diverse Indian political elites, and therefore, India's foreign policy reflects casteism!

**India's focus on economic diplomacy with Africa has intensified in tandem with other areas of engagement, including capacity building.**

### **India's Contributions Overlooked**

The book fails to mention a plethora of positive contributions made by India. The book makes no mention of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). Since 2008, IONS, led by the Indian Navy, has brought together the navies of six African countries: Kenya, Mauritius, Mozambique, Seychelles, South Africa, and Tanzania as members, and Madagascar as an observer and undertaken active support for their capacity building. Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), Non-combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO), Search and Rescue (SAR), and Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) expansion are all part of India's effort to support Africa, that are strangely not mentioned in the book on India-Africa collaboration. The Kofi Annan Centre of Excellence in ICT,

India-Africa Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasting, India-Africa Integrated Textile Cluster (IAITC), India-Africa Food Processing Cluster (IAFPI), India-Africa Centre for Medium Range Weather Forecasting, India-Africa University of Life and Earth Sciences, Pan-African University (PAU) are some shining examples of India funded and conceptualised institutions that are contributing to Africa's development at the ground level. India is also a full member of the African Capacity-Building Foundation (ACBF) and has donated USD 1 million for skill development and poverty alleviation programmes. To date, India remains the only Asian country and only South-South aid provider to be a member of the ACBF. None of these facts find any mention in the otherwise extensively written book.

To sum up the future of India's development cooperation with Africa, the book, in its concluding chapter, claims without authentic evidence how the holy Kumbh Mela festival on the banks of the Ganges was responsible for the spread of Covid in India. Arundhati Roy, a well-known activist known for her extreme anti-BJP viewpoints, has been cited to demonstrate the Modi government's failure to combat the pandemic at home—a subject that has no relationship either to the theme of the book nor to the internationally recognised success of India's anti-Covid measures under the Modi government.

As a matter of fact, when Western powers were stockpiling vaccines, India's humanitarian approach to Africa won widespread praise. During the high-level UN General Assembly session in September 2021, several world leaders thanked India for its assistance and support in battling the coronavirus pandemic through "early and meaningful" shipments of COVID-19 vaccine doses. President of Nigeria Muhammadu Buhari expressed gratitude to India for its aid and support for the COVAX initiative. As a matter of fact, many European nations, including the UK where the research was done initially, did not recognise the COVID-19 vaccine Covishield produced by the Serum Institute of India. Several countries including Ghana described this as unfortunate.

**When Western powers were stockpiling vaccines, India's humanitarian approach to Africa won widespread praise.**

Ghana's president, Nana Akufo-Addo, expressed regret over these European nations' refusal to recognise Covishield, an Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine made in India. Although this vaccine was donated by India to the African nations using COVAX facility, by refusing to recognise it, the European countries actually made it a tool for immigration control.



According to a study by the Stanford Institute in California, the Indian government's strategy, which included, among other things, launching an unprecedented nationwide COVID-19 vaccination campaign, helped save the lives of close to 34 lakh people. The report asserts that after deducting the cost of the vaccination campaign, India received a net benefit of USD 15.42 billion. This COVID-19 tally of infections could have reached 200,000 without the lockdown by April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020, posing additional problems. In fact, the lockdown's implementation prevented a large number of fatalities. Therefore, a strong argument can be made for the lockdown as it took India approximately 175 days to reach its peak from its initial 100 cases while most other nations (such as Russia, Canada, France, Italy, Germany, etc.) did so in less than 50 days.

Moreover, between January and March 2021, 24.4 million made in India COVID-19 vaccines were delivered to Africa. Some 8.4 million vaccines were exported under commercial arrangements to five African countries: Mauritius, Morocco, Egypt, Algeria, and South Africa. One million vaccines were distributed to 17 African countries as part of an international grant, and approximately another 15 million vaccines were distributed to 26 African countries under the COVAX initiative. Probably, these data sets would not support the overall argument and direction of the book and hence are ignored too.

**Between January and March 2021, 24.4 million made in India COVID-19 vaccines were delivered to Africa.**

Since the book criticises India's Covid management measures, some facts may be mentioned. The three-month lockdown did indeed cause a lot of problems, especially for the poor, who suffered due to the slowdown in economic activity. Many people also lost their jobs as a result of the closures and slowdown in business activity. Therefore, the government faced a serious challenge in helping millions of people who lacked access to basic necessities while also stopping the process of reverse migration. In light of this, the government introduced the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Package for the poor to aid them in the fight against the pandemic's atrocities. Some 800 million people have been provided free food rations and healthcare facilities for the past three years under the scheme and various welfare programmes. India also was one of the few countries that produced its vaccines and provided it free to all its people in the largest such programme in the world.

In this otherwise grim book, one of the positive points depicted by the authors, though they still termed it as “*commercialisation of capacity building*” is the increasing Indian private sector participation in Africa’s economy, which has occurred rather organically without much support from the government.

Prime Minister Modi’s personal style is fundamentally different from that of his predecessor. While Dr Manmohan Singh was media-shy and bland, Modi has demonstrated his media skills through structured media events and effective use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Both these approaches of two different leaders have their own merits and demerits. However, referring to PM Modi’s style as ‘*Hinduisation of India’s public sphere*’ doesn’t reflect a scholarly tone but rather an inherent bias. As often accused by those who oppose him that his policies are nothing but a replica of previous governments, one may argue that his foreign policies represent an essential continuity, but in a new style, dynamism and much larger scope.

### **A non-Scholarly Collection**

Indeed, if the book does have a theme, then it is the authors’ desire to convey the message that the plural identity of India is under attack from the current political dispensation of BJP, which the authors have referred to as ‘*Hindu right*’ on several occasions and that BJP wants to turn India into a ‘*Hindu version of Pakistan*’. Besides being a false narrative, this is a strange approach for a book devoted to India’s development diplomacy in Africa! The central feature of the book reveals a hysterical rather than scholarly tone. Too often, several of the authors attempt to make their point by romanticising the contributions of the “*morally exceptional foreign policy of the Gandhi–Nehru era*” at the expense of the current dispensation of PM Narendra Modi. A regrettable choice considering the changes constantly occurring in the world, both economic and geopolitical, as well as in India’s multi-layered engagement with Africa.

**The book lacks the scholarly investigation that one would expect from this set of international scholars.**

Whilst the editors have taken up a unique theme to work on, the book lacks the scholarly investigation that one would expect from this set of international scholars. When a reader picks this book to learn about India’s soft power diplomacy with Africa, both what is working and not working, and instead ends up reading about

Modi's allegedly failed COVID policy at home, the book clearly misses its objective. While reading the book, one finds constant tirades against the BJP government and sweeping generalisations like '*policy of Hindutva as social engineering.*' These do not reflect well on a book that claims to be scholarly and is intended to explain India's soft power in Africa. The book reads like many other books on India available in the market, to merely criticise the Modi government and the BJP, and doesn't add anything even in that respect. The disappointment is justified because, as the phrase goes, the bigger the expectation, the bigger the disappointment.

Written like a work of fiction, it is unclear what the intentions are for writing the book since it neither educates nor informs us on the subject selected. Taking up historical issues, including colonial rule, and constructing them as '*religious imperialism by Hindutva Brigade*' is not only far-fetched but also baseless. This book fails to take a wholesome approach and is not recommended for a serious scholarly reading.