

Editorial

“Contexts, comparisons and cooperation” between the African continent and India is a beginning to an emerging relationship between scholars from both these areas, as well as individuals from outside but who have an interest in the visibly increasing relationships between the two. Scholars from across a range of disciplines met at the University of KwaZulu-Natal from 25 to 27 September 2012 to present papers based on issues of current interest. The purpose was to build a longer term and sustainable working relationship that will bring individual and collective areas of research and growing patterns of bilateral and multi-lateral relationships into a framework for critical analysis.

In writing about India’s role in contemporary Africa, it is difficult to avoid mention of its perceived bigger and more assertive competitor viz. China. Each time India’s role in the global economy is discussed, it almost inevitably draws attention to China for several reasons, of which we choose to briefly mention just three. Firstly, China appears to continuously harass India in their common border areas and has often brought the threat of war into sharp focus internationally. The potential duel between the two is watched with an interest globally as it is a reminder of China’s invasion of India in 1962. But India’s meteoric rise to becoming a nuclear power has not only eroded the threat of China repeating such an invasion but the country has also worked itself up to a position that precludes ignoring them as a too light a force. Secondly, China’s influence in Africa has been rapid and arguably as exploitative as its American and European predecessors, while India’s interests in the continent has been substantially smaller, if not more circumspect. Protests about China’s style of investment in Africa abound to the point of urging its critics from within to match it with its colonial past and neo-liberal present. And thirdly, African governments are already known to succumb to China’s financial influence. For instance, they dangled the carrot of its US\$5 million aid package to Africa against granting the Dalai Lama a visa to visit South Africa to attend the birthday celebration of Archbishop Desmond Tutu on 4th October 2011. While China’s financial might, through its impressive foreign reserves, has exceeded that of the Interna-

tional Monetary Fund, it has bought off a substantial amount of Europe’s debt through the purchase of its bonds. However, the more influential countries in Europe such as Germany, France and the UK are concerned about two things. Firstly, they are afraid of losing their sovereignty, especially if China’s financial aid is targeted only at the bigger economies and not the smaller ones like Greece or Portugal; and secondly, they are equally concerned about China’s growing influence in Africa. For instance, France’s recent intervention in Mali was not merely a stand against Islamic militants, but also a veiled message to China about over-extending its influence in Africa.

While China appears to be presenting itself in the African continent as a “big brother” alternative to the “exploitative West”, India is presenting itself to Africa in a somewhat different way viz. as part of the collective victims of European colonialism over the last few centuries, as well as a leader of sorts in the developing world. The latter claim does have substance to it when viewed against the advances India has made in agricultural production – making it independent of foreign aid, education, pharmaceutical productions, military and nuclear technology, computer software development and overall economic cum infrastructural growth. As the hegemony of American and West European interests appear to be waning, China’s and India’s economic and political influences in Africa are engendering significant interests by journalists and scholars across the globe.

In this special issue, the context of Africa-India Relations is with special reference to the political realities at this particular historical juncture, that is, early 21st century. As the Eurozone is undergoing a serious crisis and the USA grapples with economic shrinkage and a high unemployment problem, China and India are experiencing comparatively (though relatively) bigger economic growth rates. The consequences of these conditions are, for India and China, improved investment capacities and influence in Africa, testing their abilities to compete against the established interests of the West, testing their respective capacities against each other, and entrenching their gains to make their presence sustainable over the years. However an-

tagonistic India and China might be towards each other, current economic and political realities forces them, at least at a rhetorical level, to cooperate in ways that ensures that the rest of the world perceives them as altruistic and responsible role players who are committed to development and world peace.

The first two papers in this volume deal with multilateral and bilateral cooperation and development. Aparajita Biswas convincingly raises the issue about multilateral cooperation through formations such as IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa) and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). All these states have been branded as “middle power” states, and are collectively and individually attempting to enhance their statuses in Africa through multilateral cooperation. In a more narrowed down approach, Sophia Thubauville’s paper is about India’s bilateral cooperation with Ethiopia. Her focus is on the history of Indo-Ethiopian relations which include economy, trade, cultural and educational cooperation. Thubauville emphasizes the cooperation of the two countries in the field of education. Indians have become known for their prominent role in establishing a secondary school system in Ethiopia under the leadership of Haile Selassie, and more recently in the current university boom through the export of a large number of university lecturers to Ethiopia.

The three papers that follow are disparate comparative analyses between issues around the fight for political emancipation, patterns of domestic labour and patterns of crime. Nandini Sen’s paper on women’s contributions in militarized opposition to the state in Kenya through the Mau-Mau movement, and in India through the Naxalbari movement, is an attempt to look at commonalities between two unrelated groups in different political and historical junctures. In both instances, women fought for equity in the political movements as well in the domestic environments. But on either side the literature that covered the activities of the movements were seriously gender insensitive and almost pathetically ignorant of the need to emphasize the women’s roles in these significant Movements. In Mariam Seedat-Khan’s (et al.) paper the need to compare domestic labour between India and South Africa is intended to highlight issues of common historical experiences as colonies of

the same imperial power, as economies that stand out in their respective sub-continent, and as nation states that have made significant economic strides at the macro levels, but unimpressive progress at the level of unskilled domestic workers. Shanta Singh’s paper on patterns of crime in South Africa and India adopts a similar approach to its forerunner in that it contextualizes patterns of crime through its historical and contemporary contexts, but goes further to suggest that the issues are serious enough to urge the states to cooperate with each other to find ways of reducing their occurrences.

In the paper that follows by Goolam Vahed and Ashwin Desai, the data straddles between the historical context and comparison between the two countries, that is, South Africa and India in a global context. They explore the fact that the adoption of neo-liberal policies has garnered both countries in ways that make them subservient to the unseen mechanisms of control and manipulation by the prevalent super-powers.

In the last three papers religion has assumed centre stage in different aspects of the writers’ research. India’s “voice” in South Africa through Hinduism in Kalpana Hiralal’s paper and through Islam in Sultan Khan’s paper raises the important issues of political resistance through the influence of two of the world’s major religions. In each of the papers, diversity and common goals played active roles in confronting racism in South Africa, but through the influential methods that emanated from India. Nirmala Gopal’s paper on the practice of Hinduism among the younger generation of PIOs in Durban, South Africa, continues to subscribe to philosophies that originated in India, albeit in adapted forms and practices.

The aim of the workshop was to keep the way open for individuals to exchange ideas on their research experiences and what they thought about Africa and India’s linkages in this contemporary period. In time each of these areas are bound to attract more scholars who will contribute towards panels that bring out variations of common themes. In the coming years the scenarios are likely to be substantially different and the challenges to rise to the top will continue to encourage comparative analyses of the Africa India relationship.