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Moral geographies: Indian exceptionalism, Africa, and the politics of South–South cooperation

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to understand the evolution of India's political relations and development cooperation with Africa, in the context of India's ambitions of playing a leading role in the Third World turned Global South. India's development cooperation with African nations was informed in the early decades after the country's independence by a sense of solidarity. It is argued that despite a sense of Third Worldist solidarity, Indian actors partially understood Africa and Africans in relation to themselves through racialised ideas of 'progress' which originated as part of the British imperial project. The justification for India's development cooperation with Africa came to be rooted in India's conceptions of its own exceptionalism, which has metamorphosed over the decades from a cultural-civilisational project to incorporate understandings of economic and technological progress, especially after neoliberal reforms of the 1990s. We place the rhetoric that characterises India's Africa policy within a broad framework of decolonial international relations literature by Global South scholars, thereby showing how relations between India and Africa have been shaped by perceptions of Africa and Africans in the *longue durée*, and accounting for why Indian actors have imagined their role in Africa in terms of a mixture of paternalism and benevolence.

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As early as the 1950s, countries such as the newly independent India sought to share developmental expertise with other nations also emerging from colonial rule, in fields as diverse as technology and education. These exchanges were justified on the basis of a shared experience of economic and political marginality in the global order, and were an effort to move away from the unequal power relations that characterised transfers of aid embedded in hierarchical relationships between former colonisers and the formerly colonised. These solidarities were a product of the political currents of that era: the famous Bandung conference of 1955; the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) which sought to articulate a 'third way' in the Cold War era; a strong commitment to anti-imperialism and political decolonisation, and the emergence of an 'Afro-Asian' bloc in multilateral arenas which had the potential to

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challenge the traditional global powers (see Sargent 2015; King and Venkatachalam 2021). But postcolonial solidarity was not simply an exercise in economic and diplomatic exchanges: southern nations also sought to radically reimagine the international order through principles of redistributive justice, and attempted to craft a new global financial architecture on the principles of historical responsibility, taking into account the legacy of imperialism. For instance, in 1974, the Group of 77 (G-77)¹ proposed the New International Economic Order (NIEO), which sought to reform the global financial architecture represented by the Bretton Woods system. The NIEO advocated self-determination, sovereignty over national resources, an improvement to the terms of trade for countries of the Third World, strengthening bilateral and multilateral institutions to promote southern industrialisation, and regulation of the activities of transnational corporations (Sargent 2015). Third Worldist projects such as this one, however, failed to operate as counter-hegemonic global structures (Muhr 2023). Nevertheless, there has been a remarkable upsurge in what we now term South–South cooperation in the last three decades: key players have included emerging economies such as China, Brazil, India and Turkey (see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Daley 2019). South–South cooperation was officially recognised, and christened as such, by the United Nations in late 1970s, recognising its potential to complement North–South flows (United Nations n.d.).

A number of opposing arguments have been made about South–South cooperation. Some scholars argue that southern flows of capital and technology have the potential to reduce inequalities within states and between them (Cheru and Obi 2010; Mawdsley 2012, 2019). Others argue that South–South cooperation has enabled recipient nations to exercise greater agency while choosing developmental partners and models (Soulé 2020; Lu 2024). Detractors point out that today's South–South cooperation has evolved from a critical structuralist-transformative project to one adopting a functionalist-instrumentalist problem-solving approach, which has enabled emerging southern powers that have undergone neoliberal reforms to find markets for their products and technologies, thereby creating new core–periphery dependencies in the Global South (Amanor 2013; Muhr 2023). Harsher critics term the exercise 'sub-imperialism', arguing that southern capital and technology have simply been socialised into following patterns and pathways established by northern hegemonic powers, thereby reinforcing global inequality (Harshé 1997; Bond 2016).

India's engagement with South–South cooperation dates back to the 1950s. For Indian actors of that era, the Third World was 'a political project' that sought to create solidarities between formerly colonised nations, to assert both political and economic sovereignty, and to serve as a space for imagining and developing alternatives to the United States-dominated emerging economic world order (Prashad 2007, xv). As African nations prepared for independence, the newly created Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR, est.1950) announced scholarships for African students. The Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme, inaugurated in 1964, began offering short-term scholarships, technical training, and technology transfer to countries of the then Third World. India also extended loans and lines of credit to several foreign governments, which came out of the national budget. Development cooperation worked within the parameters of a bilateral framework aimed at strengthening the 'collective self-reliance' of states (Duclos 2012, 17). Indian aid did not have any commercial or non-governmental dimensions at its inception, and was conceptualised as a state-to-state transmission of technology and expertise, in an era when nation-states were invested with the responsibility of looking after the health, development, and welfare of their peoples. India celebrated its capacity for 'frugal innovation' and developing low-cost

technologies, which are portrayed as being useful to Africa (and the Global South more generally) on account of similar historical trajectories characterised by postcolonial marginalisation (Cheru and Obi 2010; Modi and Venkatachalam 2021b). Policymakers in New Delhi have always referred to India as Africa's 'preferred partner' and 'true friend', claiming the relationship is 'demand-driven' based on 'mutual respect' and 'mutual gain' (Dubey and Biswas 2016).

After neoliberal reforms in 1991, India's South–South cooperation became bigger in scale and volume, and India's footprint in Africa has expanded greatly. India envisions South–South cooperation as a broad set of economic, political, diplomatic, and cultural linkages. The Government of India's cooperation with Africa currently includes capacity building in the form of scholarships; a broad portfolio of concessional and commercial finance; peacekeeping; technology transfers, and frameworks for cooperation in various multilateral forums (Venkatachalam et al. 2022). A multiplicity of actors is involved in the exercise today, from the public and private sector, non-governmental organisations and civil society, and state governments (Venkatachalam and Banik 2022). Bilateral trade between India and Africa stood at USD 98 billion in 2022–23, a significant increase from USD 7 billion in 2001 (CII 2023). Well-known Indian multinationals – Tata, Godrej, Mahindra, Dabur, and Airtel, among others – are established in Africa, regularly advertising the growth potential of African markets, while also emphasising favourable demographic dividends, abundant raw materials, and pro-business regimes (Mawdsley 2012; King and Venkatachalam 2021).² More interestingly, in the last three decades, Indian policymakers have argued that India's developmental trajectory can be replicated in Africa, and that the Indian model of development is better suited to African realities. Inbuilt into this paternalism is the idea that India is at a more developed stage than Africa (Duclos 2021; Venkatachalam 2021). Indian policymakers also argue that India is benevolent and non-exploitative in its approach (Mishra 2019; Singh 2022), in contrast to traditional donor countries of the Global North and China – both of which stand accused of exploitation and neo-colonialism.

We seek to understand how the rationale for India's Africa outreach has developed over the last century, through the late colonial and postcolonial eras, to the present. India's relations with Africa have been continuously re-constituted within a number of political paradigms – from anti-colonial solidarity, and now, in the context of an emerging sense of exceptionalism. Our methodologies reflect our engagement with a number of complementary disciplines – ethnography, history and political science. We reflect on our decade-long engagement studying development cooperation in the Global South to understand how India's identification with Africa has changed from a shared sense of solidarity to a hierarchical relationship. We have observed Indian state and non-state actors involved in development diplomacy with Africa extensively: in India, and also in Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Senegal and Togo. Our fieldwork has taken us to Indian-funded development projects in Africa, and we have conducted formal and informal interviews with users and beneficiaries of the same – from African students and skilled technicians trained by Indian expertise, to diplomats and bureaucrats involved in implementing these projects. Through our fieldwork, we encountered Indian political and business elites who insisted they are uniquely endowed to assume leadership of the Global South, and that their normative institutions, socio-political and economic systems are unique, and worthy of replication beyond their borders – a conception which rests on an age-old sense of Indian exceptionalism. We trace how notions of what constitute this exceptionalism appear to have changed over the last few decades. Indian

policymakers celebrate not just India's civilisational wisdom, but the successes of neoliberal reforms, and the advances of the country in technological spheres. We have also engaged in a critical deconstruction of a range of contemporary sources in stringing together this argument, such as opinion pieces in newspapers and popular media, policy recommendations emanating from Indian thinktanks written by policymakers, and scholarly work authored by academics. Our aim through this article is to place our observed reality within a broader historical and political continuum of relations between India and Africa.

The following analysis is divided into three sections. Drawing on some decolonial readings of Afro-Asian international relations, the first section looks at how ideas derived from imperial racialised geographies came to inform India's perceptions of Africa in the colonial era. The second section examines the origins of the notion of Indian exceptionalism, and details how it informed India's foreign policy through the era of anticolonial movements to the current multipolar world order. Despite the rhetoric of southern solidarity, India envisioned the Third World/Global South as a hierarchical terrain, where it could assume a position of leadership. The third section outlines how India's experiments with neo-liberalisation have reconfigured understandings of economic growth, and convinced Indian actors of the merits of an Indian model of development which could serve as a model for other regions of the Global South, especially Africa.

Moral geographies of race and development

In attempting to understand how Indian actors understand their relationship with Africa, this article employs the idea of a 'moral geography'. Moral geographies explore the interface between ethics, morals and space. We make use of definitions employed by Lee and Smith (2004, 2). Ethics involve reflection on moral values – their origin, meaning and justification. Morality refers to what people believe and what they do in pursuit of their own conceptions of right/good. Both ethics and morality can be specific to a place and/or time, and may be understood contextually. Moral geographies could prove useful in examining notions of progress, development, hierarchies, access to resources, manufacture of identities, and ordering space in national and transnational frames of analyses. The concept shapes the ways in which we may understand the global spatial order. It indicates a set of unspoken, ethical claims that produce, reproduce, and morally and politically support discourses and actions of, in this particular case, state actors (Shapiro 1994). To understand the genealogy of this moral geography, we analyse a plethora of interactions between Indians and Africans that occurred in the laboratory of European imperialism which viewed the colonised through orientalist tropes (Said 1978), where India and Africa occupied differential positions on scales of decay, moral decadence and civilisational progress in the European imagination.

International relations as a discipline has been criticised for largely ignoring the question of how race influences global conceptions of order, interstate relations and hierarchies (Anievas et al. 2014), and addressing this deficiency could prove useful in understanding relations between postcolonial societies and states. Indeed, both 'India' and 'Africa' are racialised categories created by their encounters with colonialism. Several recent studies have shown that it is impossible to understand early Indian postcolonial attitudes towards Africa without interrogating the intersection of the discursive space occupied by race on the global stage and caste in Indian imaginaries. Kalathmika Natarajan shows us that 'the alarming intertwining of race and caste reiterates the ways in which

Indian understandings of race, particularly regarding the place of Africans in the international realm, relied on more local meanings and perceptions of [Indian] lower castes' (Natarajan 2019, 150). Caste was predetermined at birth, based on occupation and status, and the possibilities of mobility became increasingly scant in the late precolonial and colonial era. At the bottom of the caste system sat India's untouchables, now known as Dalits (oppressed), for whom redeeming the indignities of their ascribed roles was almost impossible. The visionary Dalit leader B. R. Ambedkar, who was educated in the United States, saw similarities between Dalit and African American conditions and drew inspiration from the American Civil Rights Movement. Ambedkar's intellectual project conceived of the Dalits as the 'Blacks of India', further conflating race and caste with each other (Slate 2011). Years later, in international arenas, Dalit activists would continue to equate casteism with racism, much to the fury of the Indian government, which has consistently argued that the country's existing legal frameworks against casteism are adequate (Krishna 2014).

The interrelationship of casteism and racism, and ultimately colour, finds expression in M. K. Gandhi's negotiations of his own upper-caste status in the socio-political milieu of South Africa, where he found himself championing the cause of disenfranchised Indians (Roy 2017; Shankar 2021). Gandhi's early writings expose his Victorian colonial attitudes, which projected Indians as more civilised, teachable and able subjects of Empire, in contrast to Africans (Davis 2018). Interestingly, he did not construct Indians as a unified category, but often implied that educated, propertied upper-caste anglicised Indians – British Indians – were closer in proximity to Europeans.³ Further, he argued that it would be an insult to equate the 'coolies' (the derogatory term used for low-caste indentured labourers) with the 'African native' or the 'raw Kaffir' (Krishna 2014, 143), even though the former lacked the cultural refinement of British Indians. Indian notions of Africa were also defined by prejudices about long-resident Indians there. The descendants of 'coolies', settled in Africa from the 1880s, were an embarrassment to the upper-caste elites of newly independent India, who could not quite decide how to incorporate them into the national imaginary and legal remit of citizenship structures (Natarajan 2019). The fault lines between race, caste and ideas of progress were articulated in early postcolonial Indo-African diplomatic encounters (Davis and Thakur 2016): for instance, India's representative to the United Nations from 1949 to 1952, Sir B. N. Rau, faced with the 'problem' of large-scale repatriation of South African Indians, argued that South Africa ought to provide full rights of citizenship to only a 'small number of ... the cultured and best type of Indians' – an encoded reference to upper caste Indians (Thakur 2016). Rau argued that Indians who went to South Africa were not 'the best type' and had given India a 'bad name' (Thakur 2016) – an indirect reference to the low-caste antecedents of the indentured. S. K. Patil, a leading Congress politician who headed the delegation of the Brihad Bharatiya Samaj, an organisation that aimed to champion the cause of overseas Indians in East Africa, claimed that 'Africans were still so backward as to be completely unfit for self-government' (Natarajan 2019, 150). He made a case for segregation between the two races – Asian and African – arguing that a similar reluctance to mixing with 'primitive' peoples such as the *adivasis* (Indigenous 'tribal' groupings of India) already existed in India (Natarajan 2019, 150). Against the backdrop of these ideas, a postcolonial spatial order was gradually developing, where elite upper caste Indians thought of themselves as interlocutors between their societies and the white international system, and defined the lower-class/caste Indians and Africans as positioned at the other end (Krishna 2014).

These moral geographies of race were also shaped by *trans*-colonial interactions during the zenith of British imperialism. Britain's empire was not a set of linear relationships between a European metropole and a series of colonies; rather, it created a number of horizontal relationships and webs of influence among them. Metcalf (2007) argues that after the 1850s, colonial India itself became a 'nexus of imperial power' that enabled British conquest, control and governance from Africa to eastern Asia. The British Raj in India was a laboratory in itself, and a number of institutions developed there were exported to govern other newly colonised geographies. Law codes and administrative forms in eastern and southern Africa were shaped by Indian precedents. Indian soldiers played a crucial role in securing Malaya, Africa and Mesopotamia for the empire, giving rise to the narrative of the ideal colonised subject people. East Africa was essentially transformed into a province of India through the construction of the Ugandan railway. In addition to the thousands of Indian labourers recruited to construct the railway, the burgeoning trade networks between the two geographies also saw an increased participation of the Indian mercantile elite. The industrialisation of the port city of Mumbai (then Bombay) in the late nineteenth century was fuelled by the East African demand for consumer goods – in particular, Indian-made cloth (Prestholdt 2008). In 1919, the East African Indian National Congress (EAINC) requested the League of Nations to reserve Tanganyika as an Indian territory 'for the purpose of Indian colonization' (Burton 2016, 10). The idea that East Africa was part of the Indian sphere of influence was so deeply entrenched within the Indian psyche that the celebrated activist and poet Sarojini Naidu, in her presidential address at the EAINC, declared that 'East Africa ... is the legitimate Colony of the surplus of that great Indian nation' (Burton 2016, 10). India's participation in the networks established by British imperialism opened opportunities for Indian elites to be both a colonising as well as a colonised people (Metcalf 2007).

Vishwaguru: India in the Third World turned Global South

As early as 1947, India saw itself as uniquely endowed to assume a leading role in the emerging Third World, a notion that rested on its identity as a country with an ancient history, protracted freedom struggle, and large size and population. Ideas of India's exceptionalism date back to the late nineteenth century, when Indian elites began coming to terms with their positions as colonised subjects of the British empire. In an attempt to counter demeaning ideas of imperial racism, destructive economic policies, and the restrictive apparatus of coloniality, Indian elites sought to extract value from India's history to reconfigure their identities. They drew from nationalist tropes of their past, which had recently been unleashed at home in order to gain support for the independence movement. India celebrated its internal ethno-linguistic and religious diversity; its ability to synthesise 'modernity' with its ancient traditions; and its non-violent ethos which drew from a curious blend of Gandhian-ism and Hindu-Buddhist traditions (Hall 2017). This narrative also cast the 'West' as spiritually impoverished and the 'East' as awakened, drawing from the teachings of nineteenth-century revivalist Hindu monks, notably Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902). For Vivekananda, Indian – and particularly Hindu – civilisation (which he understood through both orientalist and modernist lenses) offered answers to regulating personal, societal and international order better than any other system of thought. Vivekananda often referred to India as a *vishwaguru* (teacher of the world), implying that it had a special role to fulfil in imparting its civilisational wisdom to humanity (Hall 2018). Kate Sullivan de Estrada (2023) argues that different Indian

civilisational imaginaries across time produced a pedagogical imperative aimed at the transformation of global social hierarchies, including the political world order; they were centred on a quest to assert Indian social superiority and remake the terms of global recognition. This was key to the idea of the *vishwaguru*, which reverberated through Indian foreign policy, albeit in different manifestations, from 1947. While the *vishwaguru* project relied heavily on internal cultural references, it nevertheless sought external validation, as at its core was an insecurity of insufficient recognition on the world stage. Diametrically opposing political traditions – from post-independence Nehruvianism (which was open, future-oriented, and plural) to contemporary proponents of majoritarian Hindutva (which is exclusivist and steeped in the vision of a past civilisational zenith) – were able to adapt the core message of the *vishwaguru* project to their worldviews (Sullivan de Estrada 2023, 448). The *vishwaguru* project could be leveraged to provide justifications for the ambitions of Indian actors on the global stage – from championing internationalism as an alternative to realist power politics to promoting human rights and denouncing racism, and advocating conventional and nuclear disarmament (Hall 2017).

Independent India was critical of the bipolar world dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union, and sought to carve a separate path through the NAM with its allies. But crucially, the Nehruvian state sought to negotiate its positionality not only in relation to the two superpowers, but also in relation to Africa. At the Asian Relations Conference in 1947 in New Delhi, Nehru outlined the role India had to play towards ‘our suffering brethren in Africa’, still under European rule. He argued that Indians, as pioneers of anti-colonialism, had a ‘special responsibility to the people of Africa’ and ‘must help them to take their rightful place in the human family’ (quoted in Natarajan 2019, 116). Such ideas of Afro-Asia ‘positioned the global south and emergent African nations within it as clients of Indian technological expertise and the cultural/civilizational improvement that ostensibly came with it’ (Burton 2016, 91). Antoinette Burton painstakingly shows how Nehru’s thoughts about a decolonising world order reflected an ‘India-over-Africa ethos that had characterised British imperial policy since the late nineteenth century’ (Burton 2016, 9), which understood comparative global histories of civilisation and progress in somewhat racialised terms. Indeed, retrospectively identifying the ‘Afro’ in the exercise of Afro-Asian solidarity at the Bandung conference of 1955 was tricky – though many individuals from would-be African nations made significant contributions to burgeoning political networks across the Third World, Gerard McCann (2019, 91) argues that Africans were largely ‘staged’ at Bandung, merely as exotic, theatrical props in an Asian-led effort. What we understand from re-visiting these performances of Afro-Asian solidarity is that the Indian diplomatic elite conceived of the Third World as a geography stratified by stages of ‘progress’. The Bandung project was ‘less as an emancipatory lesson than a cautionary tale about the racial logics embedded in postcolonial states from the moment of their inception’ (Burton 2016, 6).

From the 1950s, Indian diplomats would adopt highly moralising tones in international forums as they sought to critique European empires in retreat, and the growing hegemony of the United States (Sullivan de Estrada 2023). Political support for decolonisation in Africa occupied centre stage in Indian foreign policy for decades. Alexander Davis and Vineet Thakur show that discussions of a ‘nonracial world order’ – often assumed to be peripheral to foreign policy – were actually at the heart of India’s diplomacy because it was crucial to political elites’ understandings of themselves and the moral order which they wished to create (Davis and Thakur 2016, 895). This non-racial world order which India envisioned went hand in

hand with India assuming the role of a responsible chaperone for newly emerging postcolonial nations of Africa. India would reserve its most vociferous condemnation for apartheid South Africa from 1948. Indira Gandhi (in office 1967–77 and 1980–84) accorded diplomatic recognition and provided aid to the African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa when it was denied legal recognition in most Euro-American states (Desai 2009, 416). During Rajiv Gandhi's premiership (1984–89), the NAM established the 'Africa Fund' (Action for Resisting Invasion, Colonialism, and Apartheid) in 1986 to assist liberation movements in southern Africa. The Fund made a significant contribution to thwarting the invasion of Mozambique, ending colonialism in Namibia, and dismantling apartheid in South Africa (Desai 2009, 417).

A multipolar world emerged with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. A provider of military and economic aid to India, the Soviets had offered diplomatic support in the form of its veto at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) when matters objectionable to India – such as the status of Kashmir – were deliberated. The end of the Cold War coincided with the beginnings of the 'War on Terror' in 2001 and the rise of China. In 1998, India had entered the nuclear club after successfully detonating a weapon, which gave the country greater negotiating clout on the global stage (Saran 2017). Indian actors began rebranding their place in this multipolar world, and India's strategy gradually moved from non-alignment to multi-alignment. The idea of the Third World also gradually became obsolete. However, three conceptual terrains gradually evolved from the Third World, drawing selectively from past counter-hegemonic projects aimed at reordering the world: countries that recognised themselves as economically disadvantaged on account of historical colonialism; emerging spaces of resistance against northern dominance in multilateral settings; and a descriptor of different sets of cross-regional alliances (Haug et al. 2021). Indeed, many strands in India's global diplomacy continue to inhabit these conceptual terrains. India continues to be invested in reforming the multilateral order, and to campaign for a seat at the UNSC (Dubey and Biswas 2016). In the 2000s, India supported setting up institutions which would be more inclusive of global voices, such as the G-20, founded in response to the Asian financial crisis (1997) and the Russian financial crisis (1998). India subscribed to the idea that the G-7/G-8 grouping of advanced economies and the Bretton Woods system were unable to manage the global financial order to the benefit of the Global South. The India–Brazil–South Africa (IBSA) grouping set up in 2003 is primarily concerned with reforming the multilateral trading system in favour of manufacturing, trading and patent regimes developed in these three large southern economies. In 2006, the BRIC countries (which later became the BRICS) – a grouping which consisted of Brazil, Russia, India, China and, later, South Africa – is meant to conceptualise an alternative to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, in the proposed New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) (Bond 2016). India's consistent push for de-dollarisation, and for the internationalisation of its currency, the rupee, is also part of its long campaign to challenge the financial architecture emanating from the Global North (Balasubramanian 2023). India also continues to call for a reform of the World Trade Organization (WTO); appeals for flexibility in global intellectual property rights (IPR) agreements to ensure affordable access to essential medicines and vaccines (Roychoudhury and Mawdsley 2021); and champions the principle of 'climate justice', arguing that nations of the industrialised North should shoulder a greater burden in mitigation and provision of climate finance (Modi and Venkatachalam 2021a). Notions of historical responsibility, reparative justice, and negotiation for fairer terms for nations of the Global South characterise Indian diplomatic rhetoric in multilateral arenas.

Since 2023, India has hosted three summits called 'The Voice of the Global South' to discuss shared concerns from the Covid-19 pandemic to the climate crisis, during its G-20 rotating presidency (PIB 2023). Most importantly, India championed the inclusion of the African Union (AU) in the G-20 during its presidency. Despite its advocating for greater Southern representation in global forums, India's posturing in the Global South simultaneously challenges and supports the liberal international order upheld by the United States and its allies (Roy 2023). The current External Affairs Minister (EAM) of India, S. Jaishankar, often describes the country as a south-western power (PTI 2022), suggesting that the country privileges 'western' institutions of democratic governance, and has faith in multilateralism and free markets. While Indian actors continue to insist their intentions are about 'reforming' the world order, they appear to be more invested in amplifying India's own voice within the evolving network of multipolar alliances within a stratified Global South – for which they need African support.

Crucially, after the 1990s, India, like many nations of the Global South, was no longer engaged in re-envisioning the global financial architecture, but rather adapting to it. The neoliberal project created a new geography of production as northern-based multinational corporations sought to rely on inexpensive labour from the Third World which would effectively ensure that its peripheral status remained unchanged (Prashad 2012). These changes occurred as part of a broader worldwide system of financial restructuring, set in motion by aggressive fiscal policies of the IMF and World Bank, that sought to remake southern economies. Ravinder Kaur (2018) shows how multilateral financial organisations remade the politically marginalised Third World into a series of stratified 'emerging markets', ranked on indexes related to ease of doing business, security of foreign capital investments, and consumers' purchasing prowess. Increased denationalisation saw the private sector – especially large multinational corporations – take on a more aggressive role in formulating intra-state policies, governance, and foreign relations. Scholars of South–South cooperation also note this shift (see Mawdsley and Taggart 2022; Banik and Mawdsley 2023). Peter Kragelund (2015) argues that there was a tendency towards convergence and cooperation between Africa's most significant new development partner, China, and Development Assistance Committee (DAC)⁴ donors – China's development finance does not fundamentally alter the power relations between African countries and their financiers, because the terms and conditions are similar to those on offer by DAC donors. Barnaby Dye (2022) argues that Indian state actors now are increasingly influenced by World Bank and OECD⁵ donor policies regarding the assessment and management of projects, and the contracting of implementing companies, a technical change which is a further indication that India's development cooperation strategies emulate the working model of multilateral organisations emanating from the Global North. Indian development assistance to Africa gradually evolved to combine a unique fusion of government stakeholders and the private sector.

India's lines of credit (LoCs) disbursed by the Export Import (EXIM) bank have developed into a tool to introduce Indian firms to external markets, since the essential goods and services (to the tune of 75% of the loans value) are required to be sourced from India (DEA 2015). Crucially, rates of interest on LoCs are calculated based on IMF formulations – a feature which does not make them radically different from concessional credit extended by other northern development partners (see Mishra 2018). India-backed institutions of southern multilateralism also do not provide alternative architectures to the prevailing global financial order. Patrick Bond (2016) argues that BRICS institutions pioneered by India appear much closer to the Bretton Woods Institution model, promoting extractivist calculations based on

United States dollar financing, than to the opposite Bank of the South⁶ model whose core mandate was to finance basic needs goods in a rational manner using local currencies. Though India's engagement with Africa is still normatively understood as South–South cooperation for mutual benefit (Harris and Vittorini 2018), the exercise is far from cooperation as envisioned at the heyday of Third Worldism, which sought to reimagine global governance through alternative paradigms to the liberal capitalist world order. Instead, India's South–South cooperation largely reflects neoliberal India's drive to capture new markets for home-grown technologies and services in exchange for raw materials.

Mumbai consensus and neoliberal India's Africa outreach

India's perception of itself as a successful nation arose from its experiments with neoliberal economic reforms in the 1990s, spearheaded by prime ministers P. V. Narasimha Rao (in office 1991–96) and Manmohan Singh (in office 2004–14). These reforms saw India's 'license-permit-quota raj' transform into a free market economy. From 2002 to 2006, the economy grew at 7.5% a year, making it one of the world's best-performing economies for a quarter of a century (Das 2006, 2). India did not follow the trajectory of the 'tiger' economies of Southeast Asia, which involved exporting labour-intensive, low-priced manufactured goods to the Global North. Rather it relied on its domestic market more than exports, consumption more than investment, and services more than industry. This Indian model of development is often dubbed the 'Mumbai consensus', which New Delhi presented as radically different model from the 'Beijing consensus' – the Chinese export-led, state-controlled model of growth; and the 'Washington consensus' – the American free-market model based on deregulation and privatisation of state enterprises (Gateway House 2010). Other central features of this Mumbai consensus were: a pluralistic democratic polity; regional decentralisation; a demand-driven economic landscape; an emphasis on private entrepreneurship and innovation; and a non-expansionist geopolitical outlook. In the 2010s, political pundits speculated on the viability of exporting the Mumbai consensus to other geographies. Larry Summers, director of the White House National Economic Council during the Obama presidency, argued that the Mumbai consensus could benefit other geographies by evolving into a 'democratic, developmental state driven not by a mercantilist emphasis on exports but by a people-centric emphasis on growing levels of consumption and a widening middle-class' (Seetharaman 2018).

Three key features stand out when trying to describe the Indian model of development. First, the state was assigned a limited role in India's economic growth story, and observers often remark that 'what is most remarkable is that rather than rising with the help of the state, India is in many ways rising despite the state. The entrepreneur is clearly at the centre of India's success story' (Das 2006, 3). Development was reimaged as an exercise liberated from state control, and at the heart of this exercise was the intrepid entrepreneur. Second, a key feature of this Indian model was the role assigned to information and communication technologies (ICT) in development. The idea that ICT could 'flatten' the world has been a central feature in the discourses on the Indian growth story: ICT was presented as the enabler of capacity building, having the power to accelerate economic growth, foster inclusivity and combat inequality (Duclos 2012, 215). Both these notions would come to define the design of India's development cooperation programmes abroad.⁷ Third, even though public discourse in India fashioned the state and bureaucracy as an obstacle to growth, India gradually witnessed a resurgence of a 'new state capitalism', where its developmental needs compelled

it to use state-owned enterprises and the private sector to implement its goals while continuing to promote privatisation – which eventually led to the growth of a few large business houses dominating the market, leveraging the resources of the state, and benefitting from regulatory policies (Chatterjee 2023). Commercial entities became tasked with the work of development cooperation, with the state merely acting as a ‘facilitator’ by creating the appropriate political and regulatory frameworks, and through the pageantry of public diplomacy. As Indian multinationals and firms sought to internationalise beyond their borders, they would come to understand their roles as they had done at home.

Since 2005, three India Africa Forum Summits (IAFSs) have been convened, which have brought together several African high-level delegations and heads of state to India. Since 2003, through the EXIM Bank of India, a range of concessional and commercial loans have been offered to African governments in an array of sectors, from infrastructure to agriculture and clean energy. In 2018, Narendra Modi became the first Indian leader to address the Ugandan parliament – a nod to India’s growing clout on the continent – where he declared Africa to be India’s ‘top priority’ (Viswanathan and Mishra 2019). Indian development assistance became more commercial in nature, and was meant to facilitate the internationalisation and establishment of Indian firms in Africa (Venkatachalam and King 2021). Private sector organisations such as the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), which network large corporations and small and medium enterprises (SMEs), were at the forefront of the internationalisation of Indian firms and capital to Africa. They work closely with the Ministry of Commerce (MCI) and the EXIM Bank of India. In 2005, the CII-EXIM conclave on Africa was established by these two institutions in collaboration with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). There have been 18 such conclaves, which have focussed on investments in sectors such as education, health, pharmaceuticals, defence, manufacturing and hospitality, and have seen high-level business delegations from numerous African countries participate – an indication that India’s interest in Africa is primarily geoeconomic, defined by a search for raw materials and markets (Venkatachalam and Banik 2022).

In advertising the benefits of choosing India as a development partner, Indian policy-makers often emphasise the competitive cost advantage of trading and doing business with India. They have also often advocated replicating aspects of India’s development trajectory in Africa. In 2021, the CII announced on its website that ‘India’s reforms process resonates with Africa’s aspirations of accelerating its infrastructure development, manufacturing growth, farm sector modernisation, services sector expansion, digital transformation and reliable healthcare services to build self-sufficiency ...’ (CII 2021). In 2023, EAM, S. Jaishankar stated at the 18th CII-EXIM conclave that

India’s recent experiences are worth sharing. Our digital delivery of public goods has had a transformational impact on Indian society taking the message of inclusiveness to the last man. Our deployment of green technologies has similarly penetrated from the biggest industry to the last individual. (The Print 2023)

Indian scholars have consistently advertised the lessons from its Green Revolution as a sustainable solution for the African continent (Chakrabarty and Mishra 2016; Modi and Venkatachalam 2021b), in spite of the wide-scale negative ecological and social impact of the same. It is often argued that India could facilitate a transformation in African agriculture by providing lessons from its own experiments with food security, in the form of

technological assistance, injections of capital and machinery, and development of agri-business supply chains. Triple A (affordable, appropriate, adaptable) technologies are portrayed as being useful to Africa on account of similar climatic and social conditions.

In recent years, there has been a push to introduce digital governance technologies developed in India to African stakeholders (Mishra 2022; Mirani 2024): these include the Aadhar biometric identification system; the United Payments Interface (UPI) developed by the National Payments Corporation of India, which merges several bank accounts into a single platform enabling instant mobile money transfer; and Co-Win, a government web portal developed to fight the Covid-19 pandemic and administer vaccinations. (The design and implementation of these technologies have been criticised in India by citizens' welfare and human rights groups over privacy concerns; the damaging impact on the informal sector, and the potential for exclusion of marginalised groups from welfare provisions) (Trikanad and Bhandari 2022). On 14 March 2023, *The Economic Times* ran the headline: 'India's infra[structure] development model can be applied to uplift Africa', featuring an interview with Sunil Mittal, the Chairman of Bharati Enterprises⁸ (ET Telecom 2023). The story reported that Mittal 'called for the application of the Indian model of infrastructure development to Africa for the continent's economic upliftment' (ET Telecom 2023). He opines that the African continent is 'falling behind' as it has less than 2% of the world's manufacturing capabilities. Further, Mittal argues that India's developmental experience has shown that installing digital infrastructure is easier and faster than building physical infrastructure, and that India can play a role in improving digital systems in Africa. He singles out India's biometric identification system, *Aadhaar*, and *Jandhan* (which has provided financial services to rural areas with poor infrastructure). 'Why would we not just simply lift and shift a lot of these modules into Africa?', asks Mittal. 'I think India has done remarkable work in the area of scaling education and healthcare through digital interventions. So, I would say Indian model must be applied to Africa as it's frugal and low-cost ...' (ET Telecom 2023). Indian political and economic elites therefore understand their actions in Africa not simply as an exercise in neoliberal economic expansion and tapping new markets, but as a paternalistic gesture to 'develop' Africa – a combination of self-interest and ethical ideas which govern how to act in the world, notions which have a long genesis in Indian conceptions of moral geography.

Conclusion

This article has sought to make two contributions to the understanding of the evolution of South–South cooperation. First, we have attempted to show how South–South cooperation has gradually changed from the 1950s onwards, as the Third World was transformed into a patchwork of alliances that is now referred to as the Global South. In political arenas, emerging nations of the Global South continue to articulate the need for a broader programme of structural transformation. We show that India continues to be invested in the Third Worldist idea of reforming of the northern-dominated global order, as evidenced by the country's actions in multilateral settings. However, India's economic relations with Africa (including its development diplomacy and financing) do not appear to be a radical departure from that of other emerging or established powers, evidence that South–South flows of capital and technology have been domesticated by the neoliberal order. Indian actors currently measure development by conformity to neoliberal logics, characterised by successful experiments with free markets, democracy and the rolling back of the state

(see Mawdsley and Taggart 2022), having internalised what Robtel Neajai Pailey (2020, 729) describes as the ‘white gaze of development’. Second, we have also argued that India’s development cooperation with Africa has moved from being rooted in the politics of solidarity to displaying a sense of hierarchy. While India provides development assistance to a number of geographies, nowhere are the merits of India’s developmental culture more heavily emphasised than in its engagements with Africa. Indians engaged with Africa through a number of frameworks over the *long durée* – from imperialist notions of a hierarchical racialised geography to political frameworks of anti-colonial solidarity and Third Worldism, and through neoliberal understandings of progress. Through all of these paradigms, Africa was framed to be underdeveloped, and in need of assistance from its counterparts like India. If the Nehruvian state incorporated Africans as junior partners in a struggle to challenge the global order, the new Indian vision has reconfigured them as benefactors of a newfound Indian developmental and technocratic wisdom. This superiority is informed by a sense of exceptionalism, and the idea of what entails exceptionalism has changed in India over several decades. Indian actors take pride in not only their cultural and civilisational legacy, but also their techno-economic wisdom and ability to adapt to the neoliberal world order, and believe this trajectory is worthy of replication elsewhere.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethics statement

Several informal and formal interviews fed into this article. Research participants were informed about the aims and scope of the project. None of the respondents are named in the text, and findings are reported in an anonymised, generic form, in the interest of protecting the privacy and safety of respondents.

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Notes

1. The G-77 is a coalition at the United Nations. Members include China and India, and several African, Asian and Latin American Nations (see Sargent 2015).
2. Indian developmental assistance is not restricted to Africa: countries in the immediate neighbourhood have historically received the lion's share. For instance, in 2023, Bhutan received INR 2400 crore (about USD 2.8 billion), almost 41% of the Ministry of External Affairs funds earmarked for development assistance, while African countries received INR 250 crore (USD 29 million) (Economic Times 2023).
3. An idea supported by the philological work of the German linguist Friedrich Max Müller who suggested that speakers of the Indo-European/Indo-Aryan family of languages must have had common genetic origin on account of the phonetic similarities (see Venkatachalam 2021).
4. DAC represents the largest providers of development assistance.
5. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, loosely representing developed nations.
6. Founded by Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez in 2007, it offered an alternative to development finance associated with the Washington Consensus (Bond 2016, 614).
7. These understandings of economic progress coincided with the gradual ascent of the Hindu political right, which seeks to emphasise the virtues of a (majoritarian) Hindu civilisational and business ethos, which includes cultural attributes as well as the ability to adapt to the neoliberal world order (Venkatachalam 2021).
8. Bharti Enterprises is an Indian multinational conglomerate headquartered in New Delhi, which owns businesses in telecommunications, manufacturing, insurance, real estate, food and hospitality. It owns Bharti Airtel, which operates in several African countries.

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