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Bridging Boundaries: The Role of the Indian Diaspora in South Africa's Anti-Apartheid Struggle

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Introduction

The story of the Indian diaspora in South Africa—largely descendants of indentured labourers and later migrants—is often told with economic and cultural focus. However, a crucial dimension is their political engagement and contribution to the anti-apartheid struggle (roughly 1946–1994). This paper argues that the Indian diaspora served both as an internal actor within South Africa (through organisations like the Natal Indian Congress and the Transvaal Indian Congress) and as a conduit for international solidarity (including through the Indian state and global Indian communities). The dual role allowed them to bridge boundaries, between Indian and African communities, internal and international politics, and between colonial/indentured legacies and liberation politics.

The paper will address three key questions:

1. How did Indian-South African organisations contribute to anti-apartheid mobilization domestically?
2. How did the Indian diaspora and the Indian state influence international anti-apartheid efforts?
3. What were the limitations and tensions of this role (within the Indian community, between communities, and regarding identity/politics)?

Literature Review

1. Indian Diaspora in South Africa: Historical Foundations and Social Position

The Indian diaspora in South Africa has a long and complex history, originating from two major streams of migration during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — indentured labourers and passenger Indians. Between 1860 and 1911, nearly 152,000 Indians were brought to the colony of Natal under indenture contracts to work on sugar plantations, while a smaller group of free or "passenger" Indians, mainly traders, arrived independently from Gujarat and

Tamil Nadu (South African History Online, n.d.). After their indenture expired, many labourers remained, engaging in small-scale agriculture or trade, which gradually created a distinct Indian community that was socially and economically stratified.

Scholars such as Bhana and Brain (1990) describe the community as a "plural society within a plural society," torn between the colonial administration's racial hierarchy and its internal divisions of class, religion, and language. The Indians came to occupy what sociologists call a "middle-man minority" position, economically active but politically marginalised. Positioned between the dominant white minority and the oppressed African majority, they acted as intermediaries in trade, commerce, and service occupations (Cedar Publications, 2015). This role brought both opportunities for mobility and resentment from other racial groups, reinforcing stereotypes and occasionally fuelling inter-ethnic tensions.

Under apartheid, the racial classification of Indians as a separate category institutionalized these distinctions. They were denied full citizenship rights but were sometimes afforded limited privileges relative to Black Africans. The Group Areas Act (1950) and the Indian Representation Act (1946) formalized segregation, yet simultaneously fostered collective consciousness among Indians as a marginalized but organised community. Scholars have noted that by the mid-twentieth century, Indian South Africans were acutely aware of the shared structures of oppression that linked them to the broader anti-apartheid struggle (Desai & Vahed, 2010).

The *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History* (2017) highlights how, since the 1950s, Indians in South Africa began forging non-racial alliances with African liberation movements, rejecting apartheid's divide-and-rule tactics. These alliances emerged from a recognition of shared oppression and were crucial to the transition from communal politics to solidarity-based activism. The Indian diaspora thus evolved from a socio-economically segmented minority into an active component of the wider liberation front.

2. Organisations and Internal Mobilisation within the Indian Community

The organisational foundations of Indian political activity in South Africa can be traced back to the late nineteenth century. The Natal Indian Congress (NIC), founded by Mohandas K. Gandhi in 1894, was the first major political platform representing Indian interests. Initially focused on civil rights for Indian merchants and professionals, it gradually adopted a more

inclusive approach as it confronted discriminatory legislation such as the Asiatic Registration Act (1907). The *Wikipedia* and *South African History Online* archives note that the NIC pioneered methods of peaceful protest and legal petitioning, laying the ideological groundwork for later mass movements.

By the 1940s, under leaders like Yusuf Dadoo and Monty Naicker, the NIC had transformed from a conservative lobbying group into a radical nationalist organisation committed to non-racialism and mass resistance. Together with the Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC), it launched the *1946 Passive Resistance Campaign* against segregationist land laws. This marked the beginning of Indian-African solidarity politics, as the NIC and TIC forged alliances with the African National Congress (ANC). As scholars have argued, this cooperation was "a crucial step towards the articulation of a non-racial South African nationalism" (South African History Online, n.d.).

During the 1970s and 1980s, amid the resurgence of anti-apartheid activism, the NIC experienced a revival. It became aligned with broader liberation networks such as the United Democratic Front (UDF), founded in 1983. The *Wikipedia* entries on both the NIC and UDF emphasise the crucial role of Indian leaders — including M.J. Naidoo and Fatima Meer — who helped unify fragmented anti-apartheid movements under a non-racial platform. The NIC boycotted apartheid's "Tricameral Parliament" and denounced attempts by the regime to co-opt Indians through limited representation. In this period, Indian organisations transitioned from community-based resistance to integral participation in the national liberation movement, symbolising the diaspora's domestic political maturity.

3. International Role: India and the Global Indian Diaspora Networks

Beyond the borders of South Africa, the Indian diaspora and the Indian state played instrumental roles in internationalising the anti-apartheid cause. The Government of India was the first nation to sever trade relations with South Africa in 1946 and consistently supported anti-apartheid resolutions in the United Nations and the Commonwealth (Consulate General of India, Durban, 2020). India's foreign policy towards South Africa during apartheid was deeply shaped by shared colonial histories and the moral legacy of Gandhi's non-violence. As noted on the *CIAO* (Columbia International Affairs Online) platform, India viewed the South African liberation struggle as an extension of its own anti-colonial ethos.

Prominent members of the global Indian diaspora also made significant contributions to anti-apartheid activism. Among them, Enuga Sreenivasulu Reddy, an Indian diplomat, stands out for his leadership in the United Nations Centre Against Apartheid from the 1960s to the 1980s. Reddy coordinated global campaigns for sanctions, compiled documentation of apartheid atrocities, and maintained close ties with South African activists. His work epitomised the way diaspora networks bridged governmental diplomacy and grassroots solidarity.

The Indian diaspora in the United Kingdom, East Africa, and the Caribbean also participated in advocacy and fundraising efforts for South African liberation movements. Their activism demonstrated how diasporic networks operated transnationally, transcending ethnic or national boundaries to support universal human rights. As Reddy's UN reports and speeches reveal, Indian-origin activists used the moral weight of their anti-colonial heritage to appeal to international consciences (Reddy, 1995).

Thus, both the Indian state and its diaspora functioned as diplomatic and moral bridges linking the anti-apartheid movement to global decolonisation discourses. This "bridging" was both symbolic and practical: it amplified South Africa's internal resistance and reinforced India's image as a leader of postcolonial solidarity.

4. Gaps, Tensions, and Underrepresented Narratives

Despite widespread acknowledgment of Indian participation in the anti-apartheid movement, several tensions and historiographical gaps remain. Firstly, the Indian community itself was not monolithic. It was divided along lines of religion (Hindu, Muslim, Christian), language (Tamil, Telugu, Gujarati, Urdu), and class (labourers, professionals, merchants). The literature on "middle-man minorities" (Cedar Publications, 2015) illustrates how economic stratification created uneven experiences of apartheid and unequal capacities for mobilisation. The merchant elite often prioritised economic security over political confrontation, while the working-class Indians, particularly descendants of indentured labourers, formed the grassroots base of militant activism.

Secondly, relations between Indians and Africans were complex. While the ANC and NIC forged formal alliances, mutual mistrust persisted at the local level. Economic competition and apartheid's racial engineering occasionally fostered divisions, as Indian traders were perceived as intermediaries benefiting from African subordination. Desai and Vahed (2010) caution that

although the Indian contribution to the liberation struggle was substantial, it sometimes existed in tension with broader African nationalism, which sought to centre Black African leadership.

A further gap lies in the historical scholarship itself. Much of mainstream anti-apartheid historiography has prioritised African resistance narratives, often marginalising Indian and Coloured contributions. Additionally, the literature reveals tension between diaspora identity and national belonging. Indian South Africans were caught between identification with India — as a civilizational homeland — and their rootedness in South Africa. Scholars such as Hassim (2009) note that anti-apartheid leaders like Fatima Meer and Yusuf Dadoo consciously redefined "Indianness" as a political rather than ethnic category, aligning it with broader South African identity. This redefinition marked a critical step in dismantling apartheid's ethnic compartmentalisation and creating a shared national consciousness.

Finally, the "middle-man" paradigm, while analytically useful, risks oversimplifying the diaspora's heterogeneous experiences. Recent works advocate a more intersectional approach that considers gender, class, and transnational factors. Women such as Amina Cachalia and Ela Gandhi, for instance, played crucial roles in bridging community divides, yet remain underrepresented in historical narratives.

Gaps & tensions

Despite positive narratives, there were tensions: intra-community (class/caste/religion among Indians), between Indians and Africans (competition, "middle-man" dynamics), and limitations in political influence. For example, the "middle-man minority" literature discusses how Indian economic advantage under segregation created both opportunities and resentments. Further, many histories of apartheid focus on Black African resistance and underplay Indian contributions. The article "The revenge of history: Indian indenture and its afterlife in South Africa" points to the under-writing of Indian roles.

Methodology

This paper will adopt a historical qualitative research design, relying on secondary sources (archival documents, published historiography, organisational records) supplemented by case studies of key individuals and organisations. Three case-studies will be selected:

- The revival of the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) in the early 1970s and its role in the UDF.
- Indian state/diaspora international lobbying through the UN via E. S. Reddy.
- Indian-African solidarity in grassroots anti-apartheid campaigns in Durban and Natal region.

Findings

1. Origins of the Indian Diaspora in South Africa

The history of the Indian diaspora in South Africa is deeply intertwined with the global patterns of colonial labour migration in the nineteenth century. Following the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1834, colonial administrations faced an acute labour shortage on plantations, particularly in the sugar-producing colonies of the Indian Ocean region. To address this, the British Empire instituted the *indentured labour system*, recruiting workers from India to serve fixed-term contracts overseas (Tinker, 1974).

South Africa entered this system in 1860, when the *Truro* docked in Durban with the first contingent of 342 Indian labourers bound for the sugar plantations of Natal (Desai & Vahed, 2010). Between 1860 and 1911, approximately 152,000 Indians were brought to Natal under indenture agreements of five years, with the option of re-indenture or return passage to India upon completion of their contracts (Bhana & Brain, 1990). A majority, however, chose to remain after their indentures expired, establishing small-scale farms, market gardens, and informal businesses, which laid the foundation for a settled Indian community in South Africa (South African History Online [SAHO], n.d.).

Alongside these indentured labourers came a smaller group known as “passenger Indians.” These were free migrants—mostly traders, artisans, and clerks—who paid their own passage and sought commercial opportunities in Natal, the Transvaal, and the Cape Colony (Meer, 1969). Originating primarily from Gujarat and Tamil Nadu, these migrants became the early Indian merchant class. The interaction between indentured labourers and free traders produced a heterogeneous community divided by class, language, and regional origin. This socio-economic diversity would later influence the forms of political organisation and identity that developed among South African Indians.

While the indentured Indians were subject to harsh working conditions and racial discrimination, they also brought with them rich cultural, religious, and linguistic traditions. Temples, mosques, and cultural associations soon emerged in Durban and Pietermaritzburg, anchoring a distinctive diasporic identity (Desai & Vahed, 2010). However, colonial authorities viewed Indians as "temporary sojourners" and implemented restrictive policies designed to limit their social mobility and residential rights. These restrictions included punitive licensing laws and location regulations that confined Indians to segregated areas (SAHO, n.d.-b).

The early Indian diaspora's political consciousness grew out of these discriminatory experiences. The formation of the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) by Mohandas K. Gandhi in 1894 marked the first organised attempt to defend Indian rights within a colonial framework (Carter, 1995). Initially, the NIC primarily represented the interests of educated and mercantile Indians, but it gradually evolved into a more inclusive organisation advocating for civil rights, freedom of movement, and equality before the law. Gandhi's leadership in South Africa between 1893 and 1914 helped introduce the philosophy of *satyagraha*—non-violent resistance—which would later influence both the Indian independence movement and South African liberation politics (Nauriya, 2005).

By the early twentieth century, the Indian community in South Africa had thus transformed from a dispersed and economically marginal group of labourers into an organised and politically aware diaspora. Their experience of racial exclusion under colonial rule created a shared consciousness that would later underpin their involvement in the broader anti-apartheid struggle.

2. Position of Indians under Segregation and Early Apartheid

The transition from colonial rule to the apartheid regime did not mark a rupture in racial policies but rather a formalisation of pre-existing segregationist structures. The position of Indians in South Africa during the early twentieth century was ambiguous—they were racially marginalised yet sometimes economically stable, positioned between the white minority and the African majority. This "in-between" status would come to define much of their political experience under segregation and apartheid (Cedar Publications, 2015).

Legal and Political Exclusion

During the interwar period, a series of laws institutionalised the marginalisation of Indians. The *Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act of 1946*, often referred to as the "Ghetto Act," restricted Indian land ownership to certain urban locations and rural reserves, while simultaneously offering token parliamentary representation through white-elected Indian representatives (SAHO, n.d.-c). The Act was met with fierce resistance from Indian leaders such as Dr. Yusuf Dadoo and Dr. Monty Naicker, who launched the 1946 Passive Resistance Campaign, one of the earliest coordinated mass movements against racial segregation in South Africa (Vahed, 2001). The campaign mobilised thousands of Indians in defiance of segregation laws, marking a turning point from petition-based politics to mass resistance.

After the establishment of the apartheid regime in 1948, racial segregation was intensified through the *Population Registration Act (1950)* and the *Group Areas Act (1950)*. Indians were designated as a distinct racial category and forcibly relocated from racially "mixed" urban zones to designated Indian townships such as Chatsworth and Phoenix in Durban (Desai & Maharaj, 2005). The Group Areas Act not only disrupted established communities but also destroyed inter-racial solidarity networks by spatially isolating Indians from Africans and Coloureds.

The *Indian Education Act of 1965* further entrenched segregation by placing Indian schooling under the control of the Department of Indian Affairs, ensuring that education aligned with apartheid's racial ideology (Arkin, 1989). Politically, Indians were excluded from the main representative structures of the apartheid state. However, in 1984, the regime introduced a Tricameral Parliament that created a separate "House of Delegates" for Indians—a cosmetic reform designed to divide the anti-apartheid front. The majority of Indian South Africans, under the leadership of the revived Natal Indian Congress and the United Democratic Front (UDF), rejected participation in this structure, recognising it as an apartheid ploy to legitimise racial segregation (Meer, 1998).

Economic and Social Marginality

Economically, Indians occupied a paradoxical position. Many had risen from indentured backgrounds to become small business owners and professionals, yet apartheid policies systematically curtailed their upward mobility. Indians were excluded from certain professions,

denied access to prime land, and prohibited from residing in "white" zones. This duality—of modest economic advancement amid structural exclusion—shaped the perception of Indians as a "middle-man minority," mediating between white capital and African labour (Cedar Publications, 2015).

The *Durban Riots of 1949* serve as a vivid example of how apartheid's racial engineering fostered tensions between communities. Sparked by socio-economic competition and state propaganda, the riots led to widespread violence between Africans and Indians, leaving 142 dead and thousands displaced (SAHO, n.d.-d). Scholars such as Dhupelia-Mesthrie (1997) argue that these events were not spontaneous but the result of deliberate colonial manipulation aimed at undermining Indian-African solidarity. Despite these tensions, subsequent decades saw significant reconciliation efforts, with Indian leaders actively promoting non-racialism as the foundation of future liberation movements.

Emergence of Political Solidarity

By the 1950s, Indian political organisations had aligned their struggle with broader anti-apartheid movements. The *Defiance Campaign of 1952*, jointly organised by the African National Congress (ANC), South African Indian Congress (SAIC), and other bodies, marked the first large-scale multiracial protest against apartheid laws. This collaboration signified the convergence of Indian and African resistance traditions and reinforced the ethos of non-racialism (Mandela, 1994).

Through these shared struggles, the Indian diaspora in South Africa evolved from a marginalised ethnic minority into a politically conscious community aligned with the national liberation movement. Despite systemic discrimination under the *Group Areas Act* and related legislation, Indian activists consistently articulated their struggle as part of a universal quest for justice rather than a parochial ethnic cause. As Fatima Meer (1998) eloquently observed, "The Indian community's greatest achievement was not in surviving apartheid, but in refusing to survive it alone."

3. Organisational Mobilisation Inside South Africa

The political mobilisation of the Indian diaspora in South Africa developed through a sequence of organisational efforts that reflected both adaptation to repression and evolution in political

consciousness. From the founding of the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) in 1894 to the emergence of multiracial coalitions such as the United Democratic Front (UDF) in the 1980s, Indian organisations played a pivotal role in shaping the ideological and practical dimensions of anti-apartheid resistance. Their activism not only articulated the grievances of the Indian community but also sought to transcend racial barriers, aligning their struggle with the broader national liberation movement.

The Natal Indian Congress and Transvaal Indian Congress: Histories and Activism

The Natal Indian Congress (NIC), founded by *Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi* in 1894, was the earliest organised political association of Indians in South Africa (Carter, 1995). Initially conceived as a platform to protect the commercial and civic rights of Indian merchants in Natal, the NIC's political philosophy was shaped by Gandhi's formative experiences with racial discrimination and his advocacy of *satyagraha*—the method of non-violent resistance (Nauriya, 2005). During its early decades, the NIC relied heavily on petitions, memoranda, and legal appeals to challenge colonial laws that curtailed Indian trading and property rights. Although its membership was limited to elite "passenger" Indians, the organisation established a framework for civic activism within a racially stratified society (Desai & Vahed, 2010).

By the 1930s and 1940s, the NIC underwent a generational and ideological transformation. A younger cohort of radical leaders—including *Dr. Yusuf Dadoo* and *Dr. Monty Naicker*—emerged to challenge the conservative leadership's accommodationist stance. This internal shift culminated in the 1946 Passive Resistance Campaign, a landmark movement jointly organised by the NIC and the Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC) to protest against the *Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act of 1946* (SAHO, n.d.-a). The campaign saw thousands of Indian volunteers defying segregationist land laws by occupying restricted areas, resulting in mass arrests. According to Vahed (2001), this movement marked the transition from "elite petition politics to mass-based defiance," setting a precedent for later anti-apartheid civil disobedience.

The TIC, founded in 1903, paralleled the NIC in both objectives and evolution. While initially focused on protecting the rights of Indian traders in the Transvaal, the TIC grew increasingly militant under Dadoo's leadership. By 1947, the "Dadoo-Naicker-Xuma Pact"—an agreement between the NIC, TIC, and the African National Congress (ANC)—formally united Indian and African struggles under the principle of non-racialism (Desai & Vahed, 2010). This alliance,

often referred to as the Three Doctors' Pact, represented one of the earliest structured attempts to build cross-racial solidarity against white minority rule.

Throughout the 1950s, both the NIC and TIC participated in national campaigns such as the Defiance Campaign of 1952and the Congress of the People (1955), where the *Freedom Charter* was adopted. These initiatives signified the ideological convergence of Indian and African political movements. As Meer (1998) observes, the NIC's decision to align fully with the ANC marked "a decisive rejection of communalism and an embrace of inclusive liberation politics." Despite severe state repression, including the banning of both Congresses in 1960 under the *Unlawful Organisations Act*, their legacy of non-racial resistance continued to inspire underground networks that sustained anti-apartheid activism through the 1970s.

The "Durban Moment" and Alliances with the United Democratic Front (UDF)

The 1970s represented a critical period in South Africa's liberation history, commonly referred to as the "Durban Moment." Coined by historian *Bill Freund* (1984), this term encapsulates a resurgence of intellectual and political ferment in Durban, where a new generation of activists, academics, and trade unionists—many of Indian descent—played leading roles in redefining the anti-apartheid struggle. The Durban Moment signified a fusion between Black Consciousness ideology, revived Marxist analysis, and grassroots organising.

Universities such as the *University of Natal (now University of KwaZulu-Natal)* and the *University of Durban-Westville*became hubs of political engagement, producing leaders like *Fatima Meer*, *Rick Turner*, and *Strini Moodley* who advocated for participatory democracy and worker solidarity (Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 1997). Indian activists, drawing from their community's historical experience of resistance, began to engage more deeply with African and Coloured movements, creating intellectual bridges that would later underpin the formation of the UDF.

The revival of the Natal Indian Congress in 1971 was a direct outcome of this intellectual renaissance. The reconstituted NIC explicitly rejected apartheid's racial divisions and sought to reconnect with the broader democratic movement. Under the leadership of figures such as *M. J. Naidoo*, *Yusuf Mohamed*, and *Kumi Naidoo*, the NIC became instrumental in mobilising opposition to apartheid's constitutional reforms (Desai & Maharaj, 2005). In 1983, the NIC joined the newly established United Democratic Front (UDF), a broad coalition of over 400

civic, labour, student, and religious organisations united under the slogan *"UDF Unites, Apartheid Divides."*

The UDF's formation represented a pivotal moment in reconstituting the anti-apartheid movement after decades of bans on the ANC and PAC. Indian organisations such as the NIC, TIC, and the *Release Mandela Campaign* provided critical organisational capacity, financial resources, and networks of solidarity. As Lodge (1983) notes, "the UDF's durability owed much to the infrastructural and ideological groundwork laid by Indian political organisations."

During this period, Indian activists like *Amina Cachalia*, *Ela Gandhi*, and *Jay Naidoo* emerged as national figures, linking local struggles in Durban and Pietermaritzburg to the broader anti-apartheid cause. Their activism within the UDF exemplified the Indian diaspora's role as **bridging actors**, facilitating cooperation across racial and ideological divides (Meer, 1998). Despite state repression, including arrests and banning orders, Indian participation in the UDF demonstrated a profound commitment to non-racial democracy.

Grassroots Indian–African Alliances: Local Solidarity in Action

While national-level organisations played an important role, the strength of the Indian contribution to the anti-apartheid struggle also lay in grassroots activism. In Durban and surrounding areas, Indian and African communities forged practical alliances through labour movements, civic associations, and neighbourhood committees. These collaborations challenged apartheid's divide-and-rule policies and cultivated a shared political culture of resistance.

One of the earliest and most significant examples of grassroots solidarity was the Durban housing protests of the 1950s, when Indian and African residents jointly resisted forced removals under the *Group Areas Act* (Desai & Vahed, 2010). Indian activists such as *George Sewpersadh* and *Phyllis Naidoo* worked with African community leaders to organise petitions, demonstrations, and legal challenges against evictions in Cato Manor—a mixed community targeted for racial clearance. Although the protests were ultimately suppressed, they left a legacy of inter-racial cooperation that would re-emerge in the 1970s and 1980s.

During the 1973 Durban strikes, Indian and African workers again united to challenge exploitative labour practices, leading to the formation of the *Federation of South African Trade*

Unions (FOSATU) in 1979 (Webster, 1985). Indian shop stewards played key roles in negotiating labour rights and connecting industrial action to broader political goals. This collaboration between labour and civic activism laid the foundation for mass mobilisation under the UDF in the 1980s.

At the community level, Indian women were often at the forefront of cross-racial solidarity initiatives. The *Women's Federation of South Africa*, which included both Indian and African activists, organised welfare, literacy, and protest campaigns that transcended racial boundaries (Hassim, 2006). These efforts challenged patriarchal and racial hierarchies simultaneously, situating the anti-apartheid struggle within a broader social justice framework.

Such alliances also redefined notions of identity and belonging. As Meer (1998) argued, the Indian diaspora's involvement in non-racial grassroots movements symbolised a rejection of apartheid's ethnic compartmentalisation and an assertion of shared South Africanness. In communities such as Phoenix and Inanda, everyday acts of cooperation—joint boycotts, community policing, and clandestine political education—created what Desai (2002) termed "microcosms of a democratic South Africa before its time.

4. Diaspora and International Dimension

The Indian diaspora's involvement in South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle cannot be confined to domestic activism alone. Beyond South Africa's borders, the Indian state, transnational diaspora networks, and international institutions played vital roles in amplifying anti-apartheid discourse, mobilising global opinion, and sustaining pressure on the apartheid regime. The internationalisation of the South African question—through the diplomatic, moral, and cultural instruments of India and its global diaspora—was one of the most significant features of twentieth-century anti-colonial solidarity.This section explores three interlinked dimensions: (1) the Indian state's diplomatic leadership, (2) the role of diaspora actors and institutions such as the United Nations Centre Against Apartheid, and (3) the symbolic bridges of solidarity rooted in the shared Gandhian legacy.

The Indian State's Role in Anti-Apartheid Diplomacy

From the earliest years of independence in 1947, India adopted an unequivocal moral and political stance against apartheid. In fact, India was the first country in the world to sever trade

and diplomatic relations with South Africa in 1946—before achieving its own independence (Consulate General of India, Durban, 2020). This decisive act followed the *Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act* (1946), which restricted land ownership and political rights of Indian South Africans. The Indian government denounced the law as a "violation of human dignity" and brought the issue before the newly established United Nations General Assembly in 1946 (Carter, 1995). The resulting Resolution 44(I) marked the first time a domestic racial policy was discussed at the UN, thereby internationalising South Africa's racial question.

After independence, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru incorporated anti-apartheid solidarity into India's broader foreign policy of anti-colonialism and non-alignment. Nehru viewed apartheid not as an isolated racial problem but as a continuation of imperial domination that undermined the moral legitimacy of the global order (Nehru, 1958). Consequently, India consistently sponsored and supported UN resolutions calling for sanctions and international isolation of the apartheid regime (Reddy, 1995). In 1954, India formally banned trade with South Africa, and by 1963 it championed the establishment of the *Special Committee against Apartheid* at the UN.

During the Commonwealth Conferences of the 1960s and 1970s, India worked alongside newly independent African states to pressure Western governments to impose sanctions and arms embargoes on Pretoria (Lutchman, 2006). These diplomatic initiatives not only demonstrated India's moral leadership but also underscored its vision of solidarity among post-colonial nations—a vision articulated in the Bandung Conference of 1955 and institutionalised through the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). At the 1979 NAM summit in Havana, India's foreign minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee reaffirmed that "apartheid is the most virulent form of colonialism," calling for comprehensive cultural and sporting boycotts (MEA India, 1980).

In the 1980s, India extended support to the African National Congress (ANC) and the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) by providing scholarships, medical assistance, and diplomatic platforms. New Delhi served as a crucial site for exiled South African leaders to engage with Asian and African counterparts. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and the Ministry of External Affairs organised numerous solidarity events, exhibitions, and public campaigns, while Indian civil-society groups raised funds for South African liberation movements (Lazar, 2013).

Through these measures, India institutionalised a form of *diaspora-centred diplomacy*—using its historical, moral, and cultural ties with the Indian community in South Africa to strengthen international advocacy. The state thus acted not merely as a moral voice but as a diplomatic amplifier for the struggles of both the Indian diaspora and the African majority.

Indian Diaspora Networks at the UN and in Global Campaigns: The Role of E. S. Reddy

Among the most distinguished figures linking India and South Africa on the global stage was Enuga Sreenivasulu Reddy (E. S. Reddy), whose decades of service at the United Nations Centre Against Apartheid (1963–1985) made him one of the key architects of international solidarity against racial oppression. Born in India and educated at New York University, Reddy combined the moral vision of India's anti-colonial movement with the bureaucratic instruments of the UN system to sustain global attention on South Africa (The Presidency, South Africa, 2023).

As Director of the Centre Against Apartheid and Secretary of the *Special Committee against Apartheid*, Reddy meticulously documented apartheid legislation, human-rights violations, and the role of multinational corporations in sustaining the regime. He compiled extensive bibliographies and information sheets distributed to governments, NGOs, and the media (Reddy, 1995). His office coordinated worldwide campaigns urging governments to implement sanctions, withdraw investments, and enforce sports boycotts. These materials became primary reference sources for activists and policymakers globally.

Reddy's activism was not confined to institutional advocacy. He maintained close contact with ANC leaders such as Oliver Tambo and Thabo Mbeki, ensuring that their voices were represented in international fora. He also collaborated with British, Canadian, and Caribbean Indian diaspora organisations that lobbied their respective governments to adopt stronger sanctions (Lazar, 2013).

Perhaps Reddy's most influential contribution was his insistence on framing apartheid as a crime against humanity, a position the UN General Assembly eventually adopted in 1973 (UN Resolution 3068). His sustained diplomatic pressure and coalition-building efforts helped keep the South African issue central to UN deliberations even during periods of geopolitical distraction, such as the Cold War détente (Reddy, 1995).

In recognition of his efforts, the South African government awarded Reddy the Order of the Companions of O. R. Tambo (Gold) in 2013, acknowledging his lifelong dedication to justice. His career symbolises how the Indian diaspora, through individuals embedded in international institutions, played a decisive role in shaping global perceptions and policy toward apartheid.

Reddy's work also exemplifies the transformation of diaspora activism from cultural identity politics to transnational political agency—a shift that situates the Indian diaspora as an actor within global governance rather than a mere community of origin.

Bridging India–South Africa: Solidarity and Symbolic Linkages

Beyond formal diplomacy and institutional advocacy, the connection between India and South Africa was sustained through symbolic and moral linkages, most notably the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi's formative political years (1893–1914) in South Africa profoundly shaped both Indian and South African political traditions. His philosophy of *satyagraha*—non-violent resistance—was first articulated in response to the racial discrimination faced by Indians in Natal and the Transvaal (Nauriya, 2005).

For South Africa's liberation leaders, Gandhi's methods offered both moral inspiration and strategic insight. Nelson Mandela frequently acknowledged Gandhi as "the archetypal leader who taught us that non-violence is not passivity, but the highest form of moral courage" (Mandela, 1994, p. 112). The *Gandhi-Mandela continuum* became a potent symbol of Indo-South African solidarity, reinforcing the perception that both nations were engaged in a shared civilisational struggle against racial domination.

During apartheid, Indian organisations and cultural institutions worldwide leveraged this symbolic connection. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) sponsored exhibitions, film screenings, and conferences that portrayed Gandhi's South African years as the genesis of modern human-rights consciousness (ICCR, 1989). Meanwhile, the South African Indian diaspora kept alive the memory of Gandhi through the *Phoenix Settlement* near Durban—founded by Gandhi in 1904—which became a pilgrimage site and later a hub for anti-apartheid education under the stewardship of his granddaughter, Ela Gandhi (Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 1997).

The Phoenix Settlement and its associated newspaper *Indian Opinion* embodied a moral continuity between early Indian resistance and modern non-racial activism. Even under

apartheid censorship, the site hosted inter-racial meetings, youth seminars, and underground political education sessions that linked the Gandhian ethos to the contemporary liberation agenda (Desai & Vahed, 2010).

Beyond Gandhi, cultural diplomacy further reinforced India–South Africa ties. Indian musicians, writers, and academics used art and scholarship to express solidarity with South Africa's freedom struggle. Joint commemorations, such as the centenary of Gandhi's arrival in South Africa (1993), were co-organised by the ANC, the NIC, and the Indian government, symbolising the re-entry of post-apartheid South Africa into a shared moral community of nations (MEA India, 1994).

These symbolic acts not only honoured historical ties but also constructed a narrative of shared struggle and redemption that continues to shape bilateral relations today. The post-1994 diplomatic engagement between India and South Africa—within frameworks such as IBSA (India-Brazil-South Africa Dialogue Forum) and BRICS—can be seen as the modern institutional expression of that historical moral bond.

5. Challenges, Tensions, and Limitations

While the contribution of the Indian diaspora to South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle is significant, its trajectory was neither linear nor devoid of internal contradictions. Beneath the celebrated narratives of solidarity and resistance lie deep-seated tensions and structural limitations, both within the Indian community and in its relations with the African majority. Furthermore, historiographical imbalances have led to the underrepresentation of Indian experiences in mainstream liberation histories. This section analyses three core dimensions of these challenges: (1) internal community stratification and identity issues; (2) complex relations with African majority struggles; and (3) historiographical gaps that continue to obscure the diaspora's nuanced role in anti-apartheid politics.

Internal Indian Community Stratification and Identity Issues

The Indian diaspora in South Africa has never been a homogeneous community. From its inception, it was stratified along lines of class, caste, religion, and linguistic origin**,** producing layered identities that shaped the nature and intensity of political engagement (Bhana & Brain,

1990). This diversity—while socially enriching—created persistent tensions that constrained the development of a unified diasporic political front.

Historically, the distinction between indentured labourers and passenger Indians was foundational. Indentured labourers, recruited primarily from Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Bihar, were economically marginalised plantation workers subjected to harsh colonial controls. Passenger Indians, in contrast, were largely merchants and professionals from Gujarat and North India who migrated voluntarily and possessed greater economic autonomy (Desai & Vahed, 2010). This bifurcation generated an enduring socio-economic hierarchy within the community. The merchant elite often sought accommodation with colonial authorities to safeguard business interests, while working-class Indians gravitated toward militant trade unionism and later nationalist politics (Meer, 1969).

Religious pluralism added another layer of division. Hindus, Muslims, and Christians coexisted within the diaspora, but differing cultural practices occasionally reinforced social segmentation (Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 1997). Moreover, caste identities—though attenuated in the diaspora—continued to influence marriage, social networks, and community leadership structures. As a result, political mobilisation was often fragmented, with elite organisations like the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) initially dominated by merchant-class interests (Carter, 1995). It was not until the 1940s, under leaders such as *Dr. Yusuf Dadoo* and *Dr. Monty Naicker*, that the Congress movement began bridging class and regional divides by integrating working-class voices and aligning with African liberation movements.

These internal fissures were further complicated by questions of cultural belonging and national identity**.** Many Indians in early twentieth-century South Africa faced an existential dilemma—whether to identify primarily with their ancestral homeland or their adopted country. The apartheid state exploited this ambiguity by framing Indians as "temporary sojourners" with no legitimate claim to South African nationhood (Cedar Publications, 2015). Consequently, part of the community focused on cultural preservation—through religious associations, schools, and social clubs—while others sought full political inclusion by participating in broader non-racial movements.

Post-independence India's support for South African liberation sometimes reinforced dual loyalties. While India's anti-apartheid stance inspired pride, it also allowed the apartheid regime to question Indian political legitimacy by portraying Indian activists as foreign agents

(Lazar, 2013). Balancing ethnic identity and national belonging thus became a constant challenge. As Fatima Meer (1998) observed, Indian South Africans had to "forge a South Africanness that did not require the erasure of Indianness." This dual identity, though productive in generating cross-cultural solidarity, remained a site of psychological and political tension.

Relations with African Majority Struggles: Cooperation and Friction

Relations between the Indian diaspora and the African majority have been marked by alternating cycles of cooperation and conflict. While formal alliances such as the Three Doctors' Pact (1947) and the Freedom Charter (1955)symbolised shared visions of non-racial democracy, social and economic realities often strained these partnerships at the grassroots level.

One major source of tension stemmed from the "middle-man minority" position Indians occupied in apartheid society. As traders and shopkeepers in African townships, Indians often mediated economic exchange between white capital and black labour (Cedar Publications, 2015). This role generated resentment among segments of the African population, who perceived Indian merchants as beneficiaries of racial privilege. The Durban Riots of 1949, which resulted in over 140 deaths and the displacement of thousands of Indian families, epitomised how apartheid's divide-and-rule tactics successfully incited racial antagonism (Desai & Maharaj, 2005).

Scholars such as Dhupelia-Mesthrie (1997) and Desai (2002) argue that these riots were not spontaneous eruptions of hostility but rather outcomes of systemic economic inequality and state manipulation. The government's propaganda portrayed Indians as economic exploiters, thereby diverting attention from structural white dominance. In the aftermath, Indian leaders, including *Dr. Dadoo* and *Monty Naicker*, intensified efforts to rebuild trust by emphasising non-racial solidarity through joint resistance campaigns with the African National Congress (ANC).

Nevertheless, tension persisted even within cooperative frameworks. During the 1950s and 1960s, some African nationalist currents—especially within the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC)—criticised Indian participation in the liberation movement, arguing that true African liberation should exclude non-African actors (Lodge, 1983). Conversely, Indian activists

sometimes struggled to navigate their position between solidarity and leadership; they risked being perceived either as outsiders or as paternalistic intermediaries.

Despite these challenges, cooperation between the two communities deepened over time. The Defiance Campaign of 1952 and the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in 1983 demonstrated how cross-racial alliances could transcend earlier mistrust. Indian activists such as *Amina Cachalia*, *Ela Gandhi*, and *Jay Naidoo* became prominent figures within national movements, symbolising an evolving ethos of inclusivity (Hassim, 2006). Still, the persistence of economic inequalities and residential segregation limited the full integration of Indian and African struggles at the local level.

The historical ambivalence of African-Indian relations thus reflects both the successes and constraints of South Africa's non-racial project. While Indian organisations helped articulate non-racial ideals, the material realities of apartheid-era capitalism—where Indians occupied intermediate economic niches—posed enduring barriers to complete solidarity. As Vahed and Desai (2013) note, "Indian resistance was always conditioned by proximity to privilege and exposure to vulnerability—a paradox that defined its moral complexity."

6. Conclusion:

The story of the Indian diaspora in South Africa is not merely a chronicle of migration and settlement—it is a testament to how transnational communities navigate marginalisation, identity, and belonging to influence transformative political change. From the arrival of indentured labourers in 1860 to the dismantling of apartheid in the early 1990s, the Indian diaspora's journey reflects a remarkable evolution: from a subordinated and segregated minority to a bridge between communities, ideologies, and nations. This bridging role—social, political, and moral—constitutes the core legacy of the diaspora's contribution to South Africa's liberation struggle and offers enduring lessons for contemporary diaspora engagement policy.

Internally, the Indian diaspora in South Africa functioned as **a** bridge between racial communities**,** translating the ideals of non-racialism into lived political practice. Under apartheid's rigid racial hierarchy, Indians occupied an ambiguous "middle position"—neither fully privileged like whites nor as disenfranchised as Africans (Cedar Publications, 2015). This

intermediary status often placed them in moral tension, yet it also positioned them uniquely to mediate and connect struggles across racial lines.

The Natal Indian Congress (NIC) and Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC) exemplified this bridging capacity. Initially established to defend Indian civil rights, they evolved into platforms for multiracial solidarity, particularly after the 1946 Passive Resistance Campaign and the Three Doctors' Pact (1947) with the African National Congress (ANC). These alliances transformed Indian political consciousness from communal protectionism to universal liberation politics (Vahed, 2001).

The revival of the NIC in the 1970s and its integration into the United Democratic Front (UDF) in the 1980s further cemented the Indian diaspora's role as a connector within the anti-apartheid movement. Activists such as *Fatima Meer*, *Amina Cachalia*, and *Ela Gandhi* transcended racial and gender boundaries, embodying the ethos of an inclusive democracy (Hassim, 2006). Through intellectual, civic, and grassroots initiatives, Indian and African activists collectively articulated a vision of a South Africa free from both racial domination and ethnic parochialism. Thus, the diaspora's bridging role was not only political but also symbolic—it redefined what belonging meant in a country designed to exclude.

Externally, the Indian diaspora and the Indian state forged enduring transnational bridges that internationalised the anti-apartheid struggle. India's diplomatic leadership—from its 1946 trade embargo to its consistent advocacy at the United Nations—transformed apartheid from a domestic policy into a global moral issue (Reddy, 1995). Figures such as *E. S. Reddy* exemplified the fusion of diasporic activism and institutional diplomacy, using global platforms to sustain pressure on the apartheid regime.

The United Nations Centre Against Apartheid, under Reddy's stewardship, became a hub of transnational mobilisation, coordinating governments, civil-society groups, and diaspora networks worldwide (The Presidency, 2023). Meanwhile, India's own foreign policy framed apartheid as an extension of colonial injustice, reinforcing solidarity with Africa through the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Commonwealth (Lazar, 2013).

Equally powerful were the symbolic bridges grounded in shared moral heritage—most notably, the Gandhian legacy. Gandhi's political awakening in South Africa created a philosophical continuum linking *satyagraha* to the broader African struggle for liberation. Nelson Mandela's

reverence for Gandhi underscored this moral kinship, reaffirming that both India and South Africa viewed non-violence and justice as civilisational imperatives (Mandela, 1994).

Through these multiple linkages—diplomatic, institutional, and symbolic—the Indian diaspora transformed itself from a marginal community into an instrument of global conscience**.** Its activism demonstrated that diasporas are not merely passive extensions of homelands but active agents capable of reshaping international norms and moral narratives.

The Indian diaspora's experience during the anti-apartheid struggle offers critical insights for contemporary diaspora engagement policy—in South Africa, India, and beyond. Three key lessons emerge from this historical trajectory.

1. Diaspora as Moral and Political Intermediary

The Indian diaspora's anti-apartheid role illustrates that diasporas can serve as moral intermediaries between states and societies. Long before formal policy frameworks existed, the diaspora mobilised resources, legitimacy, and transnational networks to advance justice. This anticipates what Gamlen (2006) later described as the "diaspora engagement cycle," wherein diasporas act as both partners and policy influencers. South Africa's post-1994 engagement frameworks—such as the *South African Diaspora Initiative*—can draw on this precedent by recognising diasporas not only as investors but also as advocates for democratic values and social cohesion**.**

2. Inclusivity and Internal Cohesion as Preconditions for Engagement

The internal divisions within the Indian community—of class, caste, and religion—highlight that successful diaspora engagement depends on internal inclusivity. Policies that ignore internal heterogeneity risk reproducing inequalities and alienating subgroups. South Africa's own diaspora policy, in its effort to engage a diverse expatriate population, can learn from the NIC's historical shift: moving from elite lobbying to inclusive, participatory activism. A cohesive diaspora—united by principles rather than privilege—can act as a far more effective agent of national representation.

3. Bridging Domestic and International Spheres

Finally, the Indian diaspora's dual activism—within South Africa's borders and in international fora—demonstrates the necessity of multi-scalar diaspora engagement. Contemporary policy must move beyond the dichotomy of "home" and "abroad." Diasporas operate across borders, linking communities, governments, and global institutions. The anti-apartheid experience shows that diaspora diplomacy—when anchored in moral legitimacy and cultural empathy—can complement state diplomacy in advancing human rights, trade, and cultural exchange.

These lessons align with broader diaspora engagement theories proposed by scholars such as Vertovec (2009) and Cohen (2008), who view diasporas as transnational actors whose loyalties and contributions transcend geographic confines. The Indian diaspora in South Africa exemplifies this paradigm: its strength lay precisely in its ability to act simultaneously as an internal minority and a global constituency.

The Indian diaspora's contribution to South Africa's liberation is not merely a historical episode but a continuing moral reference point. Its bridging function—linking oppressed communities, connecting nations, and reconciling identities—remains instructive in an era marked by new forms of exclusion and nationalism. In post-apartheid South Africa, Indian-origin citizens continue to participate actively in politics, education, and civil society, upholding the values of pluralism and social justice. Simultaneously, the evolving India–South Africa partnership within multilateral frameworks such as IBSA and BRICS reflects the institutionalisation of that historical solidarity in the twenty-first century.

From a policy perspective, the Indian diaspora's anti-apartheid legacy underscores that diaspora engagement must be understood not merely as an economic strategy but as a humanistic and democratic enterprise. Diasporas can help reconstruct post-conflict societies, advocate for human rights, and serve as conduits of peace and reconciliation. The moral vocabulary forged in the anti-apartheid era—rooted in solidarity, equality, and transnational justice—remains a powerful foundation for reimagining the role of diasporas in global governance.

The Indian diaspora's role in South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle embodies the quintessential *bridging identity*—one that connects rather than divides, mediates rather than isolates, and humanises rather than politicises. Through its institutions, activism, and symbolic

legacies, the diaspora demonstrated how a historically marginal community could become a vital architect of liberation and moral diplomacy.

Its journey illustrates that diaspora engagement is not a contemporary invention but a deeply historical process of connection, negotiation, and transformation**.** As scholars such as Gamlen (2014) and Cohen (2008) note, diasporas are not just populations in exile—they are agents of change whose transnational experiences enrich both homeland and host nation.

For policymakers, historians, and diaspora scholars, the Indian diaspora in South Africa offers a living template of what a "bridging diaspora" can achieve: it can transcend inherited divisions, globalise local struggles, and humanise international relations. In doing so, it transforms the very meaning of belonging—from a matter of geography to a commitment to justice.

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