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INDIA AND SOUTH AFRICA: EXPLORING NEW OPENINGS¹

The visit of the South African Foreign Minister, R.F. Botha to India and the signing of the protocol for the re-establishment of diplomatic and consular relations between the two countries is an event of historic significance for both countries.

India and South Africa, neighbours across the Indian Ocean, have had intimate relations for centuries, but have been isolated from each other for the past half century because of the short-sighted, irrational and cruel policy of apartheid embraced by the National Party in South Africa in the vain hope of preserving white domination. Our differences ceased to be bilateral, however, when Pandit Nehru declared that the problem of Indians in South Africa had merged into the larger problem of oppression of the African people, and India withdrew its complaint against South Africa from the United Nations agenda. Now that the South African people as a whole are on the way to building a non-racial democratic society, we have no bilateral disputes to resolve and we can look forward to the rapid development of fruitful relations for mutual benefit.

This is an occasion when we might look back into the history of our relations - much of it little known - and look forward to the great opportunities that lie ahead.

Cyril Hromnick, a maverick South African historian, in his book *Indo-Africa*, claimed that the earliest non-Africans in southern Africa were Dravidians from South India who were attracted by the gold deposits.

Whether his hypothesis is accepted or not, there is no doubt that India had trade with southern Africa long before the Europeans "discovered" the region on their way to the fabulously rich India.

The Dutch established a settlement at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652. In the next century, they took to the Cape thousands of Indians - from Bengal, Coromandel and Malabar coast - as slaves.

A woman from Bengal, Mary, was bought for Van Riebeeck, the Governor of the Cape, in 1653. He purchased a family from Bengal in 1655. The first of many marriages between the Dutch and Indians was solemnised at the Cape in 1656. Simon Van der Stel, the Governor at the end of the century after whom Stellenbosch is named, had Indian ancestry.

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I believe that at least 10 percent of the Afrikaners in South Africa, the majority group among the whites, have Indian ancestry. They include many prominent families and political leaders.

Perhaps half of the Coloured people of South Africa, numbering over three million, have Indian ancestry. Dr. Abdullah Abdurahman, the most prominent Coloured leader in the first half of this century, was descendant of a Bengali family.

The Indian slaves not only laboured for the development of the country but were prominent in the uprisings of slaves for freedom. Some of them were incarcerated on Robben Island long before Nelson Mandela made it famous.) Freed Indian slaves helped develop the wine industry in Stellenbosch.

In 1860, after slavery was abolished, Indian indentured labourers began to be brought into South Africa as semi-slaves. They developed the agriculture in Natal and contributed to the prosperity of the colony. They were also the first to organise a strike in South Africa, as Oliver Tambo pointed out in his address in some years ago.

The poor Indian workers and peasants, under the leadership of Gandhiji, led the first great *satyagraha* on South African soil which was to become one of most significant events of the twentieth century. They helped the transformation of M.K. Gandhi into a *Mahatma*.

Since the late nineteenth century, the histories of India and South Africa became intertwined.

During the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902, for instance, British troops from India were the first to be landed in South Africa. They were followed by thousands of Indian auxiliaries. Over 9,000 Boer prisoners of war were brought to India and housed in cantonments all over the country. Many of them died and were buried in India. I hope that India and South Africa will soon sign an agreement on the maintenance of the graves.

Several of the martyrs of *satyagraha* were buried in South Africa. They deserve proper memorials.

The intimate relations between the two countries were interrupted on the eve of Indian independence as the South African Government enacted a humiliating law against the Indians despite repeated appeals from India. India broke trade relations with South Africa in 1946 - South Africa accounted for no less than five percent of our trade at that time - and recalled its High Commissioner from South Africa. In 1954, South Africa closed the Indian High Commission. Some contact between the two countries was maintained in London and New York for some time, and that too was broken off in 1963 when India tightened sanctions in 1963 in

response to a United Nations resolution.

India has had the strictest sanctions against South Africa among all the countries of the world. It provided all forms of assistance, within its resources, to the South African liberation movement. Above all, India helped greatly in promoting international solidarity with the liberation struggle.

All through these years when India denounced apartheid and took vigorous action against that inhuman system, it never condemned the whites. It always looked forward to reconciliation of the people of South Africa to build a free, democratic and prosperous land.

Now as we resume friendly relations with South Africa - significantly in the year the Gandhi Centenary is being observed in South Africa - we need to explore the opportunities. The relations will now be no more with the oppressed people and their liberation movement alone, but with all the people of South Africa.

There are great possibilities for the rapid expansion of trade, investment and joint ventures in the spirit of South-South co-operation. But it would be short-sighted to look at the economic aspects alone.

India and South Africa as major Powers in their respective regions can play a crucial role in promoting Asian-African solidarity, peace and international co-operation.

India and South Africa as nations with many languages, cultures and racial origins face similar problems as well as the opportunity to forge unity out of diversity. They can set an example to the world by sharing their experiences and learning from each other.