

India-Senegal: People-to-People Connections through the Ages



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Introduction

India and Senegal have a thriving tradition of people-to-people connections since Senegal’s independence in August, 1960, under the leadership of the late President Léopold Sédar Senghor. India’s first embassy in French West Africa opened in Dakar in 1961, with concurrent accreditations to Cote d’Ivoire, Niger, and Upper Volta. The first Ambassador was Dr. Nagoji Vasudev Rajkumar.

The two countries have several common attributes and similar political values – both are pluralist societies, with a democratic political set up, are known for free and fair elections and peaceful transitions from one incumbent to the other. They have been connected historically through the material medium of textiles and since the 1950s, through the love for Bollywood – commonalities that have formed the basis for their time-honored relations.

Shared political values: In 1980, President Senghor (in office from 1960-1980) gave up his presidency and retired voluntarily – an exception to the state of affairs on the continent at that time. African countries scored much better on the barometer of democracy after the 1990s, when the democratic ‘new winds of change’ or the ‘second liberation’ swept through the continent (Riley, 1992: p.116). But Senegal has had a long tradition of democratic institutions since the pre-colonial times. As a part of the Mali Empire of medieval West Africa, the

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West African nation drafted the Kurukan Fuga Charter (also known as the 'Charter of Mande') in 1235. It was a Bill of Rights, drawn about 450 years before the landmark "Bill of Rights" Act (1689, UK), and about 550 years before the French "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen" (1789) (UNESCO, 2009). These long entrenched shared political values and President Senghor's keen interest in Indian literature, culture and peoples, further strengthened relations between the two partner countries.

Senghor and India-Senegal Relations: President Senghor was a prolific writer, poet, cultural theorist and linguist. His concept of 'Negritude' was a part of his cultural politics. He stated that Africans should 'go back to their roots', be proud of their culture, and celebrate their indigenous traditions, which were considered 'backward' by the colonisers (Senghor, 1974a).

President Senghor believed there were similarities between India and Senegal. He started the ambitious Afro-Dravidian project and wrote about it in the September 1974 issue of the Journal of Tamil Studies, published by the International Institute of Tamil Studies (for details see Senghor, 1974b). He propounded that they may be profound cultural and linguistic similarities between the Dravidians in southern India and Black Africa. Senghor opined that geographically, only the Indian Ocean separated India and East Africa, which was a contiguous landmass centuries ago. As a scholar of linguistics, he was particularly interested in the linguistic similarities between the Senegalese languages (Wolof, Serer and Fulani) and the Dravidian language – Tamil.

Thus, he 'Africanised' the Dravidians of Southern India and extended the geographical arc to where he opined that peoples of African/Black ancestry were present. However, Senghor's thesis remains contested. As a part of his Afro-Dravidian project, he encouraged two-way exchanges between scholars from both sides (Senghor, 1974b).

Academic exchanges: Three academics from India – K.P. Aravanan, U.P. Upadhyaya, and his wife Sushila Upadhyay were invited to the l'Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire (IFAN), at the Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar (UCAD) in 1973. Three Senegalese scholars, Dr. Cheikh Tidiane N'Diaye (1974), Professor Souleymane Faye and Mamadou N'diaye (1977) came on Government of India scholarships for their doctoral studies on the linguistic affinities between Senegalese languages and Tamil (Aravanan, 1997).

In 1974, the former Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi and President Senghor collaborated with IFAN, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and Annamalai University (Tamil Nadu) to set up the Indo-African Studies Department in Dakar, to the study commonalities of culture and languages between India and Africa and other areas of mutual interest. Unfortunately, this project was stalled after President Senghor left office. This is an unfinished agenda that I think could be taken forward through centers of critical learning at UCAD and in India.

Cognizant of the friendly relations between the peoples of India and Senegal, President Senghor was inducted as an honorary fellow into the Indian

National Academy of Letters – the *Sahitya Akademi* in 1974; and was awarded the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding in 1982 (Chatterji, 1974).

Values of peace and accommodation: Further to the above referred commonalities and academic interest, there is an evident curiosity in Senegal about India's ideals of peace and non-violence, and regarding Indian philosophy, spiritualism, indigenous knowledge and traditional medicine systems. President Senghor had great respect for all that Mahatma Gandhi stood for – peace, *Satyagraha*, non-violence and dialogues for conflict resolution.

In Senegal, relations between the state and religious groups are underscored by deliberations and harmony. It is marked by the; 'rituals of respect', 'policy of cooperation', and the state's non-interference in religious affairs. The role of Muslim Sufi orders – the *Murid* (politically and economically influential); the *Tijaniyya* (largest in number); and the *Qadiriyya* (oldest) and their contributions to society are unique to the country (Stepan, 2012: pp.385-386). Brotherhoods- such as the *Murid* for example, and the support they have extended to the state in its efforts to contest socio-cultural practices such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), or more recently, to combat and spread awareness about the COVID-19 pandemic, is laudable. The best practices of the Sufi orders in peace building, reconciliation and accommodation, promoting harmony and supporting the state in its endeavors to deal with socio-cultural issues in particular—is an

important learning that a multi-religious and pluralistic country like India can imbibe.

Love for Bollywood: Indian and Senegalese people have been connected through Indian culture; music, dance and Bollywood. I had the opportunity to attend the *Tiranga*¹ festival hosted by the then Ambassador, Shri Rajeev Kumar, in 2019 (India in Senegal, 2019). I met a Kathak dancer who was named Hema. She came to India under the ICCR fellowship for training. Her rendition of *Krishnalila* was commendable. I learnt that there were about two dozen or so associations of Indophiles, located mostly in the suburb of Pikine in Dakar, and across the country. Senegalese people love Bollywood songs and dance and organise what they call the *Soirees Indous* (Indian evenings/parties). Bollywood films were first screened in Senegalese cinemas around the 1950s and became much more popular than Arabic films, which were seen as 'too western'. The first Indian film screened in 1953 was called *Mangala*.

One of the most popular Bollywood films is *Mère Indienne* (Mother India, 1957) (See Steene, 2008, p. 7). The Shah Rukh Khan and Salman Khan blockbusters (such as *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*, *Karan Arjun*, *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* etc.), too have been loved by audiences. The French speaking Senegalese, relate to the family dramas, the Indian culture of respect for elders, values of the joint family system and above all, the spectacle of Indian dance and the music. The Senegalese have also had a great allure for Indian textiles, over the past centuries.

Historical connections through cloth:

The presence of an old Indian diaspora is considered to be a precondition or a basis for an engagement between countries in Africa and India. However, despite the absence of an established diaspora, Senegal and India have been connected since antiquity, through the material medium of textiles. In the pre-colonial period, cloth was transported through the overland trans-Saharan trading routes. Indian made cloth was a prized commodity and much in demand by local elites across West Africa. By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Indian cloth was used as a currency by European traders to pay for slaves along the West African coast, who were then shipped, mainly to sugar plantations across the Atlantic Ocean. In the 19th century, *Guinée* cloth (from the Telugu word *giniyagudda*) – an indigo-dyed cloth produced in Pondicherry – was exported to Senegal, which was also under French colonial influence (Venkatachalam, M. et al., 2020: p.84). During my visit to the HLM market in Dakar in 2019, I saw made-in-India printed, embellished and designed textiles for sale by Gujaratis (mainly Kutchi traders) who also spoke the local Senegalese languages.

There are many such fascinating stories in Senegal, the Teranga land, which connects us with them. The Neem tree (the area around the Indian embassy in Dakar has many) was introduced in Senegal from India in the 1960s and is now known as the Independence Tree of Senegal! ²

These remarkable narratives showcase an extraordinary account of people- to people connections between India and Senegal- from antiquity till date.

Endnotes

- ¹ The Hindi word '*Tiranga*', which refers to the Indian tricolor flag, sounds similar to the Senegalese term '*Teranga*', which means 'hospitality' in the Wolof language. Both these sentiments are invoked to celebrate this Indian festival in Senegal (Embassy of India, Dakar, 2020).
- ² Pers. comm. Ambassador Shri. Rajiv Kumar, High Commissioner of India to the Republic of Mozambique, 11/12/2020

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EGYPT'S INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION MINISTRY AND WORLD BANK RELEASE NEW ECONOMIC REPORT

Ministry of International Cooperation of Egypt and the World Bank Group release a new Economic report titled, 'Economic Monitor Report: From Crisis to Economic Transformation, Unleashing Egypt's Potential in Productivity and Job creation'. The report describes the economic transformation process in Egypt with a focus on job creation, and the emergency measures undertaken by authorities to meet the challenges of COVID-19 crisis.

According to the report, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Egyptian economy had a stable macroeconomic environment, due to favourable fiscal, monetary and energy sector reforms. Some of the major reforms included energy sector reforms, easing of monetary policy and fiscal consolidation measures, containment of the wage bill, and the shift from a sales tax to a modern Value-Added Tax.

The report has proposed approaches to increase Egypt's productivity and job creation potential, through sustenance of macroeconomic stability and overall policy predictability, creation of a favourable environment for attracting domestic and foreign investments to improve within-sector productivity growth and to support the movement of workers into higher value activities and sectors, and upgradation of human capital and firm capabilities through investment in education and vocational training.

Source: Egypt Today. (2020, November 10). Egypt's International Cooperation Ministry, World Bank release new economic report: 'from crisis to economic transformation'. Retrieved from: <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/3/94100/Egypt-s-International-Cooperation-Ministry-World-Bank-release-new-economic>