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# Documenting an Untold Story: Migration and Cultural Dynamics between India and South Sudan



**Tarnjeet Kang**, Research Fellow, Zambakari Advisory Ph.D. Candidate, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA

## Introduction

South Sudan became independent in 2011 and India one of the first countries congratulated it on becoming the world's newest country, with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh writing, "India stands ready to share its development experience and extend whatever assistance possible to Southern Sudan" (**PIB, 2011**). It was also the first Asian country to open an embassy in Juba (the capital) (**MEA, 2012**). President Salva Kiir has also visited Prime Minister Modi in India to reaffirm the commitment between the two countries and government officials are often sent to India for short-term training and capacity building (**DAP, 2016**).

The creation and movement of diasporas is key to examining the cultural aspect of inter-country relationships, by facilitating the exchange of knowledge, language, food, practices, etc. Thus, it is important to include the India and South Sudan's diasporas in the analysis of cultural transmission between the two countries. Given the lack of access to information on the experiences of South Sudanese diaspora in India, this article will instead delve into the cultural transmission that has emerged as a result of the Indian diaspora in South Sudan.

Beginning with a historical context that traces the introduction of the Indian

diaspora to South Sudan, I then delve into the influence of neighboring East African countries as a transit point. Building on this foundational context, the article will then delve into the cultural phenomenon that has been observed in South Sudan in relation to the transmission of two aspects of Indian culture: food and clothing. The examples that I refer to in this article are drawn primarily from my time in South Sudan in 2014 and 2015, when I traveled to five different states in the country as a researcher.

## A History of Cultural Relations

Connections between India and South Sudan were evident before independence in 2011. Dating back to the colonial period, British administrators that ruled over both India and South Sudan implemented native administration governance strategies that cultivated minimal local elite to assist in running the country (**Collins, 1983**). The administrators and the missionaries that they worked closely with, at times imported materials from one colony to another to support programming and their habitation. In South Sudan, the introduction of

certain fruits was a particularly notable legacy. Indian mangoes (“Mango”, n.d.), jackfruit (**Haq, 2006**) and other crops grow abundantly in South Sudan, especially within the equatorial greenbelt region of the country in the south, and even extending into the Bahr el-Ghazal region in the north. These areas share a similar a tropical topography and rich soil, similar to that found in southern India where these fruits are still grown abundantly today. While some fruit trees in South Sudan are located in people’s homes or on family land, they also grow in publicly accessible areas where they are considered a natural resource and are available for communal consumption.

After independence, Professor Sandeep Shastri, from Bangalore’s Jain University, served as an advisor to the constitutional committee, drawing from the lessons and challenges that India experienced during the partition of colonial India, into India and Pakistan, at independence in 1947 (**Seshagiri, 2011**). In addition to supporting the new country in preparations for independence, Indian nationals have also helped the country start the healing process from a multitude of conflicts. This includes missionaries posted across the country who serve in a religious capacity at community levels, largely through missions

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### The Diasporas

The Indian diaspora in South Sudan, estimated to be approximately over 700 citizens (**DAP, 2016**), is constituted of professionals in a wide range of sectors. India is one of the key contributing countries to the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), the UN peacekeeping force. It has provided South Sudan with approximately 7,665

peacekeepers and also contributed almost 757 officers to the UN police (**Troop, 2017**), who provide training to the national police force in addition to supporting law enforcement in the country. Indian nationals are also employed by multi-lateral institutions such as various UN agencies and the World Bank, as well as a host of international NGOs that operate across the country. Formal institutions have not been established yet for the Indian diaspora to practice their religions while in South Sudan, but practicing Hindus and Sikhs in Juba have created their own spaces to gather and worship. In Juba, the Indian Association was set up as a mechanism for creating a community and maintaining cultural practices (**DAP, 2016**).

Far less is known about the South Sudanese diaspora in India, although it is believed to a small community of over 100 citizens (**Chiengkou, 2016**). Following independence from Sudan in 2011, scholarships were made available for South Sudanese students to study in India – these



funds were provided by both the Government of South Sudan and the government of India. South Sudanese students have mobilized to create the South Sudanese Students Association, which provides both a social and an advocacy network for them to draw support from during their time in the country.

### **Tributaries of the East African Migration and Trade Routes**

In conjunction to documenting direct flows of migration between India and South Sudan, there are also middle points of transit that influence the flow of culture, human resources,

goods and knowledge. Given that South Sudan is a land-locked country and shares international borders with six other countries, neighboring East African countries have acted as a middle-point for flows of information, goods and services into South Sudan. Prior to the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, NGOs and the logistical companies that supported them often used Nairobi as a home base or transit point. A small airport in the town of Lokichoggio, in northern Kenya, was often used as a storage and shipping point for supplies and aid as a part of the Operation Lifeline Sudan

humanitarian program during the civil wars (**After two decades, 2011**). When independence was obtained in 2011, many of these organizations and facilities transferred to South Sudan. Indian-East Africans in moving to South Sudan, seek to participate in the new and expanding market, using their existing business ties in the region and familiarity with the culture as a competitive edge.

### **Experiential Cultural Dynamics into the Discourse**

What is missing from much of the public discourse on the relationship between South Sudan and India is the experiential

aspect of the respective diasporas. The cultural aspects of the inter-country relationship are known largely to those that participate in this aspect, namely the diasporas, but does not necessarily become integrated into or inform international policy and research.

### Food

Historically, food has been a key conduit for transmitting culture across borders. Several Indian-owned restaurants have opened in recent years in Juba, and are primarily located in the central parts of the city. When conducting fieldwork in 2014 in Torit, the capital of Eastern Equatoria State located next to the Kenyan border, I discovered an Indian restaurant that had recently opened by an Indian-

East African businessman. While these restaurants mostly cater to the expatriate community that resides in South Sudan, they also serve the growing national elite and middle class in the country. The cost of the food and beverages in these locations often prices out the majority of the country's population, making these restaurants exclusive places.

In addition to restaurants, Indian groceries have become available in select stores in Juba. A key example is JIT Supermarket, a chain store of the East African business, which has been a resource for many years for expats looking to purchase goods and foods that are scarce in the country, particularly name-branded items. Among its supply of goods, JIT offers

members of the diaspora with products imported from India. However, the high cost of such goods, means that they are considered unaffordable for many South Sudanese citizens, and instead these stores are mostly frequented by foreigners and the South Sudanese elite.

Many members of the diaspora choose to stock up on spices and other scarce foods items when traveling abroad for leave because of the inflation of products due to the high cost of importing and transporting goods into South Sudan, as well as the reliance on cross-border commerce. Indian missionaries are often located in fairly rural areas, limiting their access to many of the restaurants and grocery stores that their urban counterparts benefit from. As



a result, they resort to bringing spices and other ingredients with them when returning from India, or having to be creative and work with locally available ingredients.

Aside from restaurants and home-cooked food, we also see the transmission of shared culture in the street food available in South Sudan, particularly in recipes that have been imported from neighboring countries. Across the country, especially in urban areas, a “rolex” is a common breakfast sold by street vendors. The “rolex” is composed of a “chapati” and an egg. Chapatis specifically also have a long history in other East African countries, such as Kenya and Uganda, and are believed to have been introduced to the continent by traders and merchants that crossed the Indian Ocean. In both India and East Africa chapatis are made over flat iron surfaces/pans that are placed over an open flame. However, in contrast, East African chapatis are often prepared with cooking oil which is readily available at a low cost, whereas in India they are often accented with butter or ghee after being dry-cooked. Samosas are also a common street food item in South Sudan, and are fairly affordable. Whereas Indian samosas tend to contain vegetarian ingredients, those sold in South Sudan and other African countries may contain meat. Unlike food sold

in restaurants, both chapatis and samosas are affordable options for most people in the country. They are primarily sold in Juba and other urban areas across the country, and are usually made by South Sudanese or East African vendors.

In examining the introduction of Indian food to South Sudan, it appears that historical influences are more accessible to the citizens of South Sudan compared to more contemporary business ventures that make Indian food exclusively available to those that can afford it.

### Clothing

The introduction of Indian clothes into South Sudan as a cultural phenomenon is far less obvious and not well documented. It becomes more evident when one is able to visit different parts of Juba and is able to see the increasing number of stores that have begun to sell imported clothes. Historically many citizens have depended on the second-hand clothing market in the informal economy, in which items are imported from neighboring countries. The expansion of the clothing market with brand new clothes imported from abroad, and initiatives to develop local manufacturing capacity, was considered to be a significant development in South Sudan. Initially businessmen catered to the Indian diaspora

and elite in selling their wares, however in more recent times as supply increased and the clothing became more affordable, customers have expanded to include the diaspora from other parts of the East African region, as well as civil servants and other members of the middle class in the country. Increasingly, South Sudanese women that can afford it are purchasing salwar-kameez sets or saris to wear to weddings, holiday celebrations and other formal events.

Widespread conflict in broke out in South Sudan in 2013 and yet again in 2016 – both events took place on the cusp of economic recovery and opportune times when businesses were on the verge of increasing foreign direct investment and expanding South Sudan’s manufacturing capacity (Law, 2013). In 2016 a number of Indian businessmen decided to leave the country permanently, after concluding

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that the cyclical risks to their business investments were no longer worthwhile (Golla, 2016). This hampered not only the potential to expand the Indian clothing market in South Sudan, but also local economies and manufacturing capacities. The dissuasion of investing in infrastructure and facilities in unstable regions also exacerbates the imbalance in trade by increasing South Sudanese dependency on imports.

In addition to ready-made clothing, fabric plays a significant role in South Sudanese cultures. In Ezo County in Western Equatoria state, cross-border trade thrives as a result of three international borders connecting – South Sudan, Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). At a market straddling the South Sudan – DRC border, textiles are sold among other goods with a variety of patterns. According to the labels on them, some of these textiles were manufactured

in India. However, as the sale of goods in these markets are often under small businesses that are considered to be a part of the informal economy, it is difficult to track and measure the extent to which they are sold, as well as how they are transported to this part of the world. As South Sudan is a land-locked country, much of the imports into the country, particularly cheaper goods sold in the informal economy, arrive from neighboring countries. Some of the fabrics available, known as kangas and kitenges in Kenya, often contain East African prints although they are manufactured in India with Indian materials at low cost. The cheaper fabrics are produced with wax prints, and more expensive ones are made with ink dyes. They tend to have a multitude of uses for women in South Sudan who are the main customers of such items: the fabric can be tailored to make clothing into styles worn by different ethnic groups,

used as a wrap when performing household duties, bedding, as a sling for carrying infants, wall hangings, gifts, etc. The transmission of Indian culture through clothing appears to mirror the dynamics observed in Indian food in South Sudan.

### The Voids in our Knowledge

In better documenting the experiential and cultural aspects of the Indian diaspora, we are able to understand the new lives that members of the diaspora have created for themselves that goes beyond their professional lives and financial interests. It presents the diaspora instead as diverse, extensive and wide-reaching community that has transplanted their lives to another country, and has brought their culture with them.

It is evident from the lack of available research and

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documentation on India-South Sudan cultural relations that as researchers and policy-makers we still have much to learn. What is particularly problematic is that while there is much colloquial knowledge as well as formal documentation in foreign affairs of the role of India in South Sudan, the reciprocal relationship appears to be non-existent in the public discourse.

The future research should create space for the documentation and leveraging of the narratives of the South Sudanese diaspora in India. How they have created lives in India, and preserved aspects of their culture in a new country, is glaringly missing from the public discourse – both in terms of academic scholarship, as well as in foreign policy matters. The most visible members of the diaspora are South Sudanese students.

A more comprehensive understanding of the experiential aspect of students' experiences would allow both the Indian and South Sudanese governments to better support the students during their time abroad, and when they enter the job market once their degree has been completed. Investment relationships between the two countries are also one-sided, and do not provide opportunities for South Sudanese nationals to actively participate in the

economy of India with the educational qualifications that they have obtained. There is also little institutional encouragement from the Indian government to expand relations with South Sudan beyond economic and security matters.

— Tarnjeet Kang

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