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Beyond Scholarships and Soft Power: African Students, Educational Diplomacy and the Sociology of Belonging in India

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Abstract- India- Africa relations have historically been articulated through the languages of solidarity, anti-colonialism, development cooperation and South-South partnership. In this evolving relationship, higher education occupies a distinctive position because it connects diplomatic policy with the everyday lives of individuals. Scholarships, university admissions, training programmes and student mobility do more than transfer knowledge: they produce encounters through which ideas of nation, race, culture, identity and belonging are negotiated. This article critically examines India-Africa educational relations through the lived and sociological experiences of African students studying in India, with particular attention to Punjab, an important destination within India's expanding private higher-education sector. The article adopts a qualitative and interpretive methodology based on policy documents, government reports, existing empirical studies and sociological literature. It employs Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, symbolic interactionism, Berry's acculturation framework, postcolonial sociology and critical perspectives on race and institutional exclusion. The analysis is complemented by a philosophical reading informed by Frantz Fanon's account of racialised subjectivity, Amartya Sen's capability approach, Martha Nussbaum's conception of human dignity and Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy of education as intercultural encounter. Recent evidence demonstrates the scale of India's internationalisation ambitions: foreign-student enrolment increased from 46,878 in 2021-22 to 48,726 in 2022-23, while the Study in India programme now connects more than 600 institutions and over 8,000 courses across more than 136 countries. In 2024-25, ICCR offered 3,960 scholarship slots to foreign nationals, while the Ministry of External Affairs reported thousands of African participants in ITEC and e-VBAB initiatives. Yet numerical expansion does not automatically produce social inclusion. Research involving African students in Punjab and recent scholarship on African students in Indian universities points to challenges involving cultural adjustment, language, institutional procedures, social isolation, racial stereotyping and psychological well-being. The article therefore argues that the future of India-Africa educational diplomacy depends not merely upon increasing the number of African students entering Indian universities, but upon transforming the university into a genuinely reciprocal social and intellectual space. Educational diplomacy becomes sustainable when international students are treated not simply as recipients of education or instruments of soft power, but as social actors, knowledge producers and participants in a shared Global South intellectual community.

Keywords- India-Africa relations; African students; educational diplomacy; South-South cooperation; higher education; Punjab; cultural capital; belonging; race; postcolonial sociology; soft power; internationalization

I. INTRODUCTION: WHEN DIPLOMACY ENTERS THE CLASSROOM

International relations are frequently understood through treaties, trade agreements, diplomatic visits and strategic partnerships. Yet diplomacy also operates in quieter spaces: classrooms, university hostels, cafeterias, laboratories, student associations and everyday conversations. A student who travels from Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia or another African country to study in India does not merely cross a geographical boundary. The student enters a new social world in which language, skin colour, accent, food, religion, dress, academic practices and everyday behaviour become sites of interaction and interpretation.

This makes international students important sociological actors in international relations.

India's relationship with Africa has long been associated with anti-colonial solidarity and South-South cooperation. The relationship has subsequently expanded into trade, development cooperation, health, technology, agriculture, capacity building and education. Educational cooperation is particularly significant because it operates simultaneously at the levels of human capital, diplomacy, cultural exchange and interpersonal relations.

The institutional architecture supporting this engagement has expanded considerably. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) currently administers more than 3,000 scholarships through 21 schemes for students from more than 180 countries. India's Study in India programme has expanded to more than 600 partner institutions, over 8,000 courses and more than 136 countries.

The scale of internationalisation is also visible in enrolment. According to the Ministry of Education, the number of foreign students enrolled in Indian higher education increased from 46,878 in 2021-22 to 48,726 in 2022-23.



The policy direction is consistent with the internationalisation agenda of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which explicitly calls for attracting international students, strengthening international academic collaboration and developing “internationalisation at home.”

However, a central sociological question remains:

What happens after the student arrives?

Admission statistics measure entry. Scholarships measure financial support. Graduation measures educational completion. None of these necessarily measures belonging.

A university may be internationally diverse in demographic terms while remaining socially segregated. An African student may share a classroom with Indian students without developing meaningful relationships with them. A university may advertise multiculturalism while everyday interactions reproduce racial stereotypes. Internationalisation can therefore generate an important paradox: greater mobility does not necessarily produce greater social integration.

This article explores that paradox, focusing particularly on African students in India and Punjab.

II. INDIA–AFRICA RELATIONS AND THE RISE OF EDUCATIONAL DIPLOMACY

Education has gradually become an important instrument of India's engagement with Africa. The Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme, established in 1964, represents one of India's longest-running capacity-building initiatives. Alongside ITEC, ICCR scholarships, university partnerships and digital education initiatives have created multiple channels of educational engagement.

The contemporary scale is substantial. The Ministry of External Affairs reported that in 2024, more than 1,800 ITEC training slots were allocated to East and Southern Africa, while 1,272 ITEC slots and 251 ICCR scholarships were allocated for Central and West Africa. It also reported approximately 7,600 African students enrolled in the e-VidyaBharati AarogyaBharati (e-VBAB) online education programme.

These initiatives demonstrate that education is not peripheral to India's African engagement. It is part of a broader developmental architecture.

The significance of this relationship became particularly visible again in 2026 when India and the African Union prepared for the Fourth India–Africa Forum Summit. Although the summit originally planned for May 2026 was subsequently postponed, the joint statement reaffirmed the partnership's foundations in solidarity, mutual respect, South–South cooperation, development and shared prosperity.

The language of South–South cooperation is important. Unlike traditional North–South development relationships, India presents its engagement with Africa through the vocabulary of partnership rather than hierarchy. Yet the sociological question is whether this diplomatic vocabulary is reproduced in everyday institutional encounters.

This distinction may be expressed as:

Diplomatic discourse → institutional policy → university environment → everyday interaction → student experience

The final stage is often the least visible.

III. FROM SOFT POWER TO SOCIAL POWER

Joseph Nye's concept of soft power helps explain why education matters in international relations. States can generate influence not only through military or economic capabilities but also through attraction, culture, values and institutional relationships.

Universities can consequently become important sites of soft power.

A student who spends three or four years in India potentially develops relationships with Indian classmates, faculty members, administrators, businesses and communities. These experiences may influence perceptions of India long after graduation.

Educational mobility therefore creates a form of people-centred diplomacy.

However, soft power has a sociological limitation when viewed only from the perspective of the state. The state may imagine the international student as a future ambassador of goodwill. The student, however, experiences India through everyday life.

The difference is crucial.

At the macro level:

India offers education → Africa receives capacity building → bilateral relations deepen.

At the micro level:

Student arrives → encounters unfamiliar social norms → negotiates identity → experiences inclusion/exclusion → develops perceptions of India.

Thus, educational diplomacy is not simply something governments do. It is something students experience.

The university becomes a diplomatic space precisely because institutional policies are translated into everyday social relations.



IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: UNDERSTANDING THE AFRICAN STUDENT AS A SOCIAL ACTOR

A. Bourdieu: Cultural Capital and the Unequal University

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital provides an important explanation of international student adjustment.

Universities do not operate only through formal qualifications. They also reward particular forms of language, communication, academic behaviour, cultural knowledge and social confidence.

African students entering Indian universities may possess substantial educational and cultural capital, but that capital may not always correspond to the dominant expectations of the receiving institution.

The issue, therefore, is not simply whether students are “qualified.”

The deeper question is:

Whose cultural capital is recognised as legitimate within the university?

Accent, classroom participation, writing styles, modes of interaction and expectations regarding teachers can become subtle mechanisms through which students are included or excluded.

This is especially relevant in private universities that recruit internationally and increasingly operate within competitive global education markets.

B. Symbolic Interactionism: The Everyday Production of Identity

George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer enable the analysis to move from institutions to everyday interactions.

Identity is not created in isolation. It develops through interaction and interpretation.

For an African student in India, apparently ordinary questions such as:

“Where are you really from?”

“Why did you come to India?”

“Can you speak English?”

“Is Africa a country?”

“Do you have universities in your country?”

may become moments through which identity is socially constructed.

Repeated encounters can produce either recognition or othering.

The African student may therefore become simultaneously:

Student → foreigner → African → Black person → international student → cultural representative

depending on the social context.

This fluidity makes identity an interactional achievement rather than a fixed category.

V. RACE, POSTCOLONIALITY AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

A particularly important dimension of the Indian context is that India and Africa share histories of colonial domination, racial hierarchy and struggles for political sovereignty. This creates a complicated relationship.

India can simultaneously occupy the position of a postcolonial society and a powerful regional educational destination.

Frantz Fanon's work is useful here because it demonstrates how racial categories are not merely external classifications; they can shape how individuals encounter themselves and are perceived by others.

Edward Said's critique of Orientalism further demonstrates how knowledge about “the other” can reproduce unequal representations.

Applied to India–Africa educational relations, this suggests that postcolonial solidarity at the state level does not automatically eliminate racialised perceptions at the social level.

This is precisely why the experience of African students requires empirical attention.

Research on internationalisation in Indian higher education has previously identified separation and exclusion along several lines, including race, nationality, region, caste, class, religion and gender.

Recent research specifically concerning African international students in Indian higher education similarly reports problems involving language, cultural adjustment, teaching methods, administrative procedures, inadequate orientation, social isolation, limited faculty interaction and nationality-based stereotyping.

The important point is that these should not automatically be interpreted as representative of every African student's experience. Rather, they reveal structural possibilities that institutions need to recognise and investigate.

VI. PUNJAB: THE REGIONAL SOCIOLOGY OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

Punjab provides a particularly useful setting for studying this phenomenon.

The state has witnessed the rapid expansion of private higher education and has developed an international student market involving students from Asia, Africa and other regions.

Institutions such as Lovely Professional University and other universities have actively developed international recruitment networks.



LPU, for example, has publicly documented graduates from 27 African nations, illustrating the geographical breadth of African student participation within a single large private university.

Punjab therefore provides an interesting sociological setting because internationalisation takes place not only within the university but also in the surrounding social environment.

African students encounter:

University + hostel + market + transport + neighbourhood + digital spaces + religious/community institutions

as interconnected social worlds.

A study of dietary acculturation among African students in Punjab illustrates this point particularly well. The research examined 120 African students across Punjab Agricultural University, Lovely Professional University and Punjab College of Technical Education, demonstrating that everyday issues such as food are important dimensions of cultural adjustment.

Food may appear trivial within diplomatic discourse.

Sociologically, it is not.

Food represents:

identity → memory → family → religion → community → belonging.

Consequently, the availability of familiar foods, spaces for cultural expression and opportunities to maintain community practices can significantly affect how international students experience a host society.

VII. BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: THE PROBLEM OF SOCIAL BELONGING

One of the most important distinctions in international education is between academic integration and social integration.

A student may successfully attend classes, pass examinations and complete a degree while remaining socially isolated.

Earlier research on diversity in higher education has shown that separation between student groups can persist even within formally diverse campuses.

This phenomenon may be understood as institutional inclusion without social belonging.

African students may consequently establish their own networks, associations and cultural communities.

Such networks should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of failed integration.

They can perform positive functions:

- emotional support
- cultural preservation
- information sharing
- academic assistance
- protection from discrimination
- celebration of national identity
- social networking.

The African Students' Union and related student communities illustrate how students can become active producers of institutional belonging rather than passive recipients of university support.

Recent reporting from LPU, for instance, shows African student organisations functioning as spaces of community and leadership.

The sociological question is therefore not:

“Why do African students stay together?”

but:

“Why should cultural solidarity and integration be treated as mutually exclusive?”

A multicultural university should allow both.

VIII. RACISM AND THE POLITICS OF VISIBILITY

Race remains one of the most difficult dimensions of African student mobility.

Historical reporting from Punjab has documented incidents in which African students were subjected to racialised language and negative stereotyping.

Such evidence should be understood historically rather than treated as a description of every contemporary interaction in Punjab.

Nevertheless, it demonstrates why race cannot be excluded from discussions of internationalisation.

Recent international research also shows that Black students in higher education can experience racial microaggressions, heightened scrutiny and questions concerning whether they “belong” within academic spaces.

These studies are not evidence that identical patterns exist in Indian universities. They are useful comparatively because they reveal a broader sociological mechanism:

Visibility does not necessarily equal recognition.

An African student may be highly visible because of skin colour while simultaneously being socially invisible as an individual.

This creates what may be called a paradox of hypervisibility.



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The student is noticed as “African” before being known as:

John, Amina, David, Grace, Emmanuel or Fatima.

The transformation from category to person is therefore central to genuine inclusion.

**IX. PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING: FROM ADJUSTMENT
TO RECOGNITION**

The psychological dimension of international education is often reduced to “homesickness.”

That explanation is insufficient.

Recent research focusing specifically on African international students in Indian universities has examined psychosocial adjustment and mental well-being, indicating that the transition involves psychological as well as social processes.

Stress may emerge from the interaction of multiple factors:

academic uncertainty + financial pressure + cultural adjustment + racial experiences + administrative difficulties + loneliness + distance from family

This is important because psychological well-being cannot be separated from social structure.

A student who repeatedly experiences exclusion may not simply be experiencing an individual psychological problem.

The problem may lie partly in the social environment.

This insight resonates with Amartya Sen's capability approach. Education should not be understood merely as access to an institution; it should expand a person's substantive capabilities to participate, learn, communicate and live with dignity.

In this sense:

Admission $\neq$ capability

and

physical presence $\neq$ meaningful participation.

A genuinely international university must therefore ask not merely how many international students it admits, but whether those students possess the social and institutional capabilities required to flourish.

**X. A PHILOSOPHICAL READING: EDUCATION AS
ENCOUNTER**

The deepest question raised by India–Africa educational mobility is philosophical:

What is the purpose of education when people cross cultures to obtain it?

Rabindranath Tagore imagined education as an encounter between cultures rather than the mechanical transmission of information. His educational philosophy emphasised openness, human fellowship and engagement with the wider world.

This perspective is particularly relevant to international education.

If an African student comes to India and experiences only: classroom → examination → hostel → graduation then international education has been reduced to credential acquisition.

But if the student experiences:

learning → dialogue → cultural exchange → friendship → intellectual debate → mutual transformation

education becomes an intercultural encounter.

Fanon provides the critical counterpoint. His writings remind us that encounters between groups can also reproduce hierarchies and racialised identities.

Together, these perspectives generate a useful philosophical tension:

Tagore asks: Can education bring human beings together?

Fanon asks: What happens when the encounter takes place within unequal structures of recognition?

The answer cannot be obtained through policy documents alone. It requires listening to students.

**XI. EDUCATIONAL DIPLOMACY AND THE ETHICS OF
RECOGNITION**

The problem can also be examined through the philosophy of recognition.

Recognition means more than tolerance.

Tolerance implies:

“You are different, but I permit your presence.”

Recognition implies:

“Your difference has legitimate social and intellectual value.”

This distinction is essential for India–Africa relations.

If African students are viewed primarily as consumers, scholarship recipients or future ambassadors, their individual agency becomes secondary.

A more democratic conception treats them as:

students + knowledge producers + cultural actors + social participants + future professionals + partners in South–South cooperation.

This approach also challenges the idea that educational diplomacy is a one-way process in which India “gives” education to Africa.

African students also bring knowledge to India.

They contribute:

- African intellectual traditions
- languages
- histories
- entrepreneurial experiences
- music and cultural practices
- perspectives on development
- experiences of colonialism

different understandings of community and social solidarity.

Educational diplomacy should therefore be understood as reciprocal knowledge production.

XII. MARKETISATION AND THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT

The expansion of private universities introduces another sociological dimension: the marketisation of international education.

International students can become economically significant to universities because they contribute tuition revenue, international rankings, global visibility and institutional branding.

This produces a potential tension.

The student can simultaneously be:

a learner + a cultural representative + an international citizen
 + a revenue-generating customer.

When the economic dimension becomes dominant, inclusion risks becoming instrumental.

The university may ask:

“How many international students can we recruit?”

The more important question is:

“What kind of institutional environment can we create for the students we recruit?”

Internationalisation should therefore move from a recruitment model towards a belonging model.

XIII. FROM ACCESS TO INCLUSION: A NEW INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

The evidence suggests that Indian universities require a more comprehensive model of internationalisation.

First, pre-arrival preparation

Students should receive reliable information about:

- academic expectations
- accommodation
- food

- transportation
 - financial planning
 - cultural norms
 - visa procedures
- emergency contacts.

Second, culturally responsive orientation

Orientation should not be limited to administrative formalities.

Indian students should also receive intercultural orientation.

The responsibility for adaptation should therefore be shared, rather than imposed entirely on the international student.

Third, anti-racism mechanisms

Universities should establish clear systems for reporting and responding to:

- racial harassment
- discriminatory language
- stereotyping
- bullying

exclusion.

Fourth, intercultural pedagogy

Faculty members should be encouraged to recognise international students as sources of knowledge rather than merely students requiring adjustment.

Fifth, international student counselling

Counselling services should include culturally responsive practices and, where feasible, professionals trained in intercultural mental health.

Sixth, student integration without cultural assimilation

Universities should promote interaction between Indian and African students without expecting African students to abandon their cultural identities.

The objective should be:

integration without erasure.

Seventh, alumni diplomacy

African graduates should become part of long-term India–Africa academic networks through:

- alumni associations
- research partnerships
- joint conferences
- entrepreneurship networks
- faculty exchange

collaborative research.



This would transform educational mobility into a long-term social infrastructure for India–Africa relations.

XIV. REIMAGINING SOUTH–SOUTH COOPERATION

The idea of South–South cooperation carries a normative promise: countries with histories of colonialism and developmental challenges can cooperate through mutual learning rather than hierarchical aid.

But this promise must be tested at the level of everyday life.

If state-level discourse speaks of solidarity while students experience exclusion, a contradiction emerges between diplomatic imagination and social reality.

The solution is not to abandon educational diplomacy.

It is to deepen it.

The future of India–Africa educational relations should move through three stages:

Stage I — Access

Scholarships, admissions and mobility.

↓

Stage II — Inclusion

Social integration, institutional support and cultural recognition.

↓

Stage III — Co-creation

Joint research, knowledge production, innovation and long-term intellectual networks.

This third stage represents the most mature form of educational diplomacy.

XV. CONCLUSION: FROM STUDENT MOBILITY TO HUMAN MOBILITY

India–Africa educational relations should ultimately be understood not simply as the movement of students across borders but as the movement of people, identities, ideas and memories.

India has developed a substantial institutional infrastructure for international education. Foreign-student enrolment has grown, the Study in India programme has expanded across hundreds of institutions, ICCR continues to operate large-scale scholarship programmes, and educational and training initiatives remain an important component of India's engagement with Africa.

Yet the sociology of international education reveals that access alone does not guarantee belonging.

The experience of an African student in India is shaped not only by tuition fees, scholarships or university rankings but also by the mundane realities of accent, food, friendship, skin colour, classroom participation, hostel life, administrative encounters and recognition.

Punjab provides an especially valuable setting for examining these processes because the state's expanding private higher-education sector has become an important space for international student mobility.

The larger lesson is therefore philosophical as much as sociological.

Education is not merely the acquisition of a degree. It is an encounter with the other.

The success of India–Africa educational diplomacy should consequently not be measured exclusively by the number of scholarships awarded, students recruited or programmes established. It should also be assessed through a more human question:

Does the international student leave India with the experience of having merely studied here—or with the experience of having been recognised, respected and transformed through a meaningful encounter with another society?

The distinction is fundamental.

For India, Africa and the wider Global South, the university can become more than an educational institution. It can become a laboratory of postcolonial cosmopolitanism—a space where historical differences are acknowledged without becoming permanent hierarchies, where cultural identities coexist without forced assimilation, and where South–South cooperation moves from diplomatic language to lived social reality.

In this sense, the future of India–Africa relations may depend not only upon what governments negotiate across conference tables, but also upon what young Africans and Indians learn about one another in classrooms, corridors, hostels and everyday life. Educational diplomacy ultimately succeeds when mobility becomes belonging, and when belonging becomes mutual knowledge.

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