

The Indian Cultural Diplomacy through the ICCR's Scholarships

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Abstract

This article aims at presenting the basics of literary and intellectual flow between India and Africa. It focuses on cultural diplomacy as a powerful lever of international relations. It analyses the role played by the Cultural Exchanges Program (ICCR) created in 1951 thanks to Indian Leaders like Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad and Jawaharlal Nehru. Such an Exchange Program unites the country of Mahatma Gandhi and the African continent. It manifests itself as an important example of cultural mobility. It also highlights that through this initiative, cultural bonds are enhanced and mutual understanding, religious tolerance, peace-keeping, and conflict reduction are promoted. Indeed, a certain form of Interculturality is born and breaks the racial, ethnic, regional, and political barriers. In this framework, Cultural diplomacy is becoming richer through these Afro-Indian areas (South-South). The Indian Council for Cultural Relations builds up linkages that have become a multicultural crossroads beyond geographical environments.

Keywords: cultural, diplomacy, exchange, mobility, nation, relations, tolerance, understanding, multicultural.

La Diplomatie Culturelle Indienne à travers les Bourses ICCR

Résumé

Cet article se propose de présenter des aspects fondamentaux de circulation littéraire et intellectuelle entre l'Inde et l'Afrique à travers la diplomatie culturelle, qui demeure un puissant levier de relations internationales. Il examine le rôle joué par le Programme d'Echanges Culturels (ICCR) fondé en 1951 grâce aux Leaders Indiens que sont Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad et Jawaharlal Nehru, étendant le pays de Mahatma Gandhi au continent africain. Celui-ci apparaît comme un modèle important de mobilité culturelle. Il souligne également, qu'à travers une telle initiative, les liens culturels se renforcent et la compréhension mutuelle, la tolérance religieuse, la recherche de la paix, la réduction des conflits se promeuvent. En effet, une forme d'Interculturalité s'éclot et transgresse les barrières raciales, ethniques, politiques et régionales. C'est ainsi que des accords culturels divers s'effectuent entre ces peuples. Dans cet élan, la diplomatie culturelle s'enrichit entre des espaces afro-asiatiques (Sud-Sud). Le Conseil Indien pour les Relations Culturelles construit des réseaux qui, au-delà des aires géographiques, deviennent un carrefour multiculturel.

Mots-clés : compréhension, culturelle, diplomatie, échange, mobilité, nation, relations, tolérance, multiculturel.

Introduction

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations named ICCR gifts scholarships to young people so that they can study in India. It is an essential initiative to equip them with the necessary competencies that are fundamental for the development of their countries. In terms of training, the ICCR has significantly contributed to the achievement of some projects. India has then become a reservoir of learning for those who benefit from the ICCR scholarships. The latter covers a diversity of domains and specializations. From technical institutes, public universities, technological institutions, to agricultural institutes, it is important to mention that students can freely choose the fields in which they would like to be trained. However, in Higher Education, the admission criteria are different from one university/institute to another.

The cooperation built via the Indian Council for Cultural Relations is, therefore, a cornerstone of cultural diplomacy. Beyond the scholarships awarded, it is worth noting that ICCR is a Cultural Exchange Programme signed between the Government of India and the respective countries where students are coming from. The Scholarships of the Indian Government are not restricted to African countries. It is internationally offered to students according to the agreements/conventions made. However, our analysis is centered on the cultural relations between India and Africa. It gives insights into the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. The pursuit of studies and research in Indian universities or institutes has a large number of features among which the cultural diplomacy. Through the Indian Missions Overseas, India is developing focal aspects of cultural diplomacy which is of paramount importance in globalization.

At a starting point, it would be useful to shed light on the meanings of diplomacy. In our methodology, the core aspects of cultural diplomacy will be explored in the second part of this study. The term diplomacy encompasses several aspects among which tasks are assigned to Officers named Diplomats. These people are representatives of their Nation in a foreign country. They can be regarded as Mediators between their State and the countries with which they have undertaken bilateral relations. They are defenders of their Nationals residing in a foreign country as well as the interests of their State. They provide services for the well-being of these citizens. Thus, they report to the Ministry of External (Foreign) Affairs. They are also concerned with supporting any person who would like to travel to their country. Officials acting as Diplomats are in charge of promoting the image of their nation. As Kishnan S. Rana asserts: “the central task of diplomacy remains the building and nurturing of political relations” (Kishan, 2000: 61). In this regard, services like embassies and consulates are the key headquarters of a foreign representation within a given state. The missions have an organizational chart so as to make their duties very efficient. One can find out the following services inside an embassy: the Consular Section (for the issue of visas, passports, birth, police clearance, death certificates or attestations, emergencies, *i.e.*all Consular Services), the Cultural Department (the cornerstone of cultural diplomacy), the Chancellery, the Interpretation and Translation (the interface between Officials and the external world like Government Officials and partners), the Economic Division (assisting in Imports/Exports, investment, commercial matters)the Administration and Secretary, the Accountancy (the management of money), to name but a few examples. In a nutshell, High Commissions,

Consulates, and Embassies are the State Apparatus of a Nation Abroad. They operate in a multitasking way. They function as the central body of their State in Overseas countries.

I-A Historical Background of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations

To better understand how the ICCR can be considered as a major example of cultural diplomacy, this article will try to review the historical background of the ICCR. It would be also useful to show the key elements of that Exchange Program through the bilateral cooperation relating to the Government of India and some African countries. Another significant point to be discussed in this study is the organization of Cultural Activities to sustain cultural diplomacy. It nurtures intercultural encounters. It examines the role played by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations in the strengthening of peace-building, intercultural relations, and discovery of others cultures, and acceptance of differences. This is the reminiscence of Nelson Mandela's words in the *Freedom Charter of South Africa* when he urged his people to invest in education as a powerful weapon to change the world:

The aim of Education shall be to teach the youth to love their people and their culture, to honor human brotherhood, liberty and peace; Education shall be free, compulsory, universal and equal for all children; Higher Education and technical training shall be opened to all by means of state allowances and scholarships awarded on the basis of merit. (Mandela, 1990: 118)

The plea made by Nelson Mandela seems to be similar to the main targets of the ICCR. This appeal meets the needs of young African students since they are granted scholarships thanks to the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. However, it is worth mentioning that Mandela emphasizes scholarships offered on a merit basis. Likewise, the ICCR's Scholarships are essentially selective and are concerned with giving good training to students once they reach India. In addition to the scholarships, the ICCR allows students from different origins to be in touch with one another. The beneficiaries are involved in brotherhood through friendship/comradeship. This is a model of intercultural relations that contributes to peace-building or peace-keeping. The ICCR is instituted "through the Ministry of External Affairs to strengthen cultural ties and promote understanding between India and other countries" (Azad Bhavan, 2003: ii).

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations has been developed over the years by the Government of India. The objective was to address the great demand of countries to boost Higher Education. It was to participate in one way or another in the training of students by offering quality courses and degrees at the Indian universities and colleges/institutes/institutions. However, the scholarships obey certain procedures, terms, and conditions. Once India became independent from the British colonizers, some leaders started thinking about how to implement a strong system that could efficiently uphold cultural diplomacy. That vision was fostered by two Indian leaders. As Kishan S. Rana explains:

Jawaharlal Nehru and Maulana Azad, created the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) in 1951 shortly after Independence, as the promoter of

cultural diplomacy. It functioned initially under the Ministry of Education, but after efforts initiated in 1957, it was placed squarely under the Ministry of External Affairs in 1960. Today ICCR serves as the prime, but not exclusive, channel for official activities abroad (Rana, 2000: 149).

In the light of the above quotation, one can underscore that through the ICCR, the Government of India keeps on conducting programs so as to support Cultural Diplomacy. The leading and supporting Official Body is the Ministry of External Affairs that have Representatives in Indian Missions Abroad such as Embassies. Thanks to the ICCR, international cultural relations are sealed under bilateral relations. Today, after 50 years of existence, the ICCR continues its fruitful worldwide cultural policies. Moreover, every year the Government of India donates scholarships on a merit-basis to students who go to study at the best Indian Universities. In bilateral cooperation, during each academic year, many students from all over the world can annually benefit from Indian universities and institutes and get the knowledge that will help them be in the service of their home countries. The quest for Excellency is one of the priorities to develop countries in almost all the domains. Young students are trained as future leaders. In this respect, after successful completion, they are imbued with human skills as well as professional competencies.

Whether in Technical Engineering, Arts and Humanities, Commerce, Agricultural, Technological, Medical, Veterinary, Foreign Languages, Economics, Transport, Environment, Chemistry, Mathematics, Applied Physics, Mines, to name but a few fields of study, the grant holders can pursue their academic studies for 2, 3 up to 04 years. With regards to the African continent, the following countries have established cultural exchanges via ICCR with India: Senegal, Gambia, Cabo Verde, Guinea Bissau, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mali, Nigeria, Somalia, Egypt, Zaire, Zimbabwe, Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, Cameroon, Rwanda, South Africa, Lesotho, Zambia, Cameroon, Tanzania, Djibouti, Lesotho, Botswana, and Malawi. Scholarships are awarded to their citizens.

It is important to precise that for students granted scholarships, the ICCR is committed to paying all mandatory tuition fees charged by the universities or institutes in India. The courses include the undergraduate (three years completing a Bachelor's Degree) and the postgraduate (2 years completing a Master's Degree) levels. The candidates must have a good command of English. They have to be proficient in English in order to be able to better attend the courses. Because English has become an international language of communication and India is an English-speaking country, students are required to have good communication skills(oral and writing). A relevant selection is made by Indian Universities/Colleges/Institutes which are autonomous and have their selective standards. A list of the nominated candidates is conveyed to the Indian diplomatic missions representing the Indian Ministry of External Affairs in the respective foreign countries.

The cooperation built via the Indian Council for Cultural Relations is, therefore, a keystone of cultural diplomacy. Beyond the scholarships awarded, it is worth noting that ICCR is a Cultural Exchange Programme signed between the Government of India and the respective countries where students are coming from. It is internationally offered to students according

to the agreements made. The ICCR is instituted “through the Ministry of External Affairs to strengthen cultural ties and promote understanding between India and other countries” (Azad Bhavan, 2003: ii). Our analysis is centered on cultural relations. It gives insights into the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. The pursuit of studies and research in Indian universities or institutes has a large number of features among which the cultural diplomacy. Through the Indian Missions Overseas, India is developing focal aspects of cultural diplomacy which are of paramount importance.

II-The Indian Council for Cultural Relations: A Model of Cultural Diplomacy

To begin with, it is necessary to outline that the main notions of cultural diplomacy. Culture represents the heart of a community. It carries basic elements through which people identify themselves. It broadly embodies many traits such as the languages, folk tales, the arts, cinema, monuments, festivals and dances, music, etc. It embraces a variety of aspects that can be material or immaterial. Wherever people are residing, culture symbolizes the repertoire of their nation. The faces of culture are very broadly rooted in the policies of states. To better grasp culture, Krishnan’s work seems to be a relevant illustration:

A wider definition of culture covers the entire national personality, reflecting its civilization, history and distinctive heritage, plus the genius of its people. It encompasses the value system that the country identifies itself with, as also the language. (Krishnan, 2002: 99)

In this order of this analysis, culture is centered in diplomacy for a specific purpose and following the nation's cultural policies. People who are separated by colonial boundaries become linked by cultural diplomacy all the more as we are living in a digital and globalized world. Cultural diplomacy paves the way to political and economic cooperation. If people are cross-culturally related, it facilitates the dialogue for any diplomatic relation and makes world peace.

Another advancement to point out is the ICCR and its diverse cultural activities. International Students enroll to benefit from ICCR Scholarships. In this respect, Cultural Diplomacy brings together Learners around the world. This is a useful way to keep in touch with everyone. Students can gather and share some important activities scheduled in the agenda of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations: *Diwali* (a Festival of Lights commemorating the victory of Good over evil), the International Day of *Yoga* (a very famous feast celebrated with enthusiasm as part of Indian tradition).

In the Indian belief, Yoga is considered a practice that can bring peace and cohesion within communities. That’s the reason why, during the Second International Day of Yoga, a particular theme (*Connect the Youth*) was chosen following the objectives of the quest for harmony. Thus, many Yoga Centers and Institutions are created to enable people to experience yoga. It would be interesting to give a brief etymological definition of Yoga. According to the Ministry of Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy (AYUSH):

Yoga is essentially a spiritual discipline based on an extremely subtle science which focuses on bringing harmony between mind and body. It is an art and science for health living, The word “Yoga is derived from the Sanskrit root “**yuj**” meaning to “join”, to “yoke” or to “unite”. According to Yogic scriptures, the practice of Yoga leads to the union of an individual consciousness with the universal consciousness. According to modern scientists, everything in the universe is just a manifestation of the same quantum firmament. One who experiences this oneness of existence is said to be “in Yoga” and is termed as a yogi who has attained a state of freedom, referred to as *mukti, nirvana, kaivalya or moksa*. “Yoga” also refers to an inner science comprising of a variety of methods through which human beings can achieve union between the body and the mind to attain self-realization. The aim of Yoga practice (*sadhana*) is to overcome all kinds of sufferings that lead to a sense of freedom in every walk of life with holistic health, happiness and harmony (AYUSH, 2017: 5)

For *Gandhi Jayanti*, it is a feast celebrating the Birth of Mahatma Gandhi, the Founding Father of the Nation and the Apostle of the Non-violence), Republic Day (rejoicing the Declaration of India as the Independent Republic, August 15th, 1945). As for *Holi*, it is a Spring Festival that honors merry mankind with multiple colors. In these cultural festivals, dance, music, and arts-exhibitions are performed.

These preceding feasts are parts of Indian Culture. However, they do not prevent Foreign Students to show their own cultures. Hence, our assumption according to which cultural diplomacy enhances intercultural exchanges. According to the Annual Report of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs “In 2017-2018, Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) undertook a wide range of activities to promote better understanding” (MEA, 2018: XXV). Likewise, Indian Cultural Centers are set up in order to host the major ceremonies. Indeed, culture becomes a bridge that unites human beings no matter how their differences. Another example remains the International Students Festival organized through the label *friendship through Culture*’ exhorting people to share positive differences. This slogan is used as a means of communication to convey the idea of mutual relationships and intercultural rapport. The report of the academic year 1996 alludes to the target of the Cultural Activities:

In order to make the overseas scholars feel at home, the ICCR also organizes several cultural functions for the scholars which are participatory in nature. The biggest festival is the International Students’ Festival which is organized every year on the Birthday of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad the Founder-President of ICCR. This event over the years has become very popular and displays the musical and dance talents of the overseas students who depict portions of their national culture on stage for their friends, fellow students, and a large Indian audience. This festival is immensely popular and attains high standards. In addition there are other festivals to which students are invited by the regional offices or the International Students’ Advisors. (MEA, 1996: 56)

The consolidation of Cultural Diplomacy under the Ministry of External Affairs is established for the sake of bilateral cooperation. The Indian Government has integrated important cultural activities in the ICCR programme. During the Exchange Programs, many cultural activities, festivals, and holidays are celebrated to make stronger the bilateral diplomacy linking India and external countries. While pursuing their studies, Overseas Students have the opportunity to attend cultural events and live in a multicultural area. These occasions connect them with other people and help them discover new cultures, beliefs, ideologies, perceptions of the universe. One case in point is that: “Afghanistan-India Cultural Week Festival was organized from 29 November-01 December 2017, as part of Students Exchange Program” (MEA, 2018: 253).

Such examples are highly sources of reciprocal discovery of the ‘*Alter ego*’ i.e. another person, another human being created by God, who may be different from me but with whom I share some common values within mankind. Meeting another person and exchanging with him/her is worthwhile and beneficial in intercultural relations. In this regard, a profound and mutual understanding of close relations can be fruitful. This is a Cross-cultural encounter enabling to get rid of some stereotypes. It also gives a new impetus to cultural diplomacy through peace-building and the lessening of conflicts based on the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of others’ cultures. Cultural Diplomacy can be viewed as a model of peacemaking.

One of the key points remains how to better promote dialogue between people from different areas. Better still, it is to examine how the quest for peace could be more fruitful. The analysis investigates at the core of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations to show elements that could help people better understand the necessity of considering more what they have in common in terms of human values instead of laying the stress on the differences. Indeed, the focus is on the reduction of conflicts in societies. Today, the topicality of such an issue is so crucial in the sense that radicalism and religious fundamentalism seem to be wide-spreading in many countries with the development of migration. In this order of analysis, one can argue that: sharing common values could be a mightier force contributing to the reduction of conflicts based on racial, ethnic, religious, gender, regional or ideological prejudices. This approach tries to establish a relation between the ICCR’s Scholarships and cultural diplomacy.

Besides, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations upholds Scientific Research through the publication of revues, books. The periodicals are more frequent. Articles are received from Contributors and address diverse issues in different fields of study. For instance, the *Indian Journal of African Affairs* a quarterly periodical dealing with the specific themes related to Africa and India. In *The African Quarterly* that started publishing in 1961, Researchers are invited to submit their manuscripts. Azad Bhavan explains the concern of ICCR in the following lines:

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations, founded in 1950 to strengthen cultural ties and promote understanding between India and other countries, functions under the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. As part of its effort, the Council publishes, apart from books, six periodicals in five languages-**English** Quarterlies (*Indian Horizons and Africa*

Quarterly), **Hindi** Quarterly (*Gagananchal*), **Arabic** Quarterly (*Thaqafat-ul-Hind*), **Spanish** bi-annual (*Papeles de la India*) and **French** bi-annual (*Rencontre Avec l'Inde*)(Bhavan, 2003: i).

On the one hand, a central facet of the ICCR is the publication of books, periodicals, quarterly journals in five languages such as English, Hindi, Arabic, Spanish and French. Such a linguistic diversity shows to a large extent that ICCR is a Model of Cultural Diplomacy shared by India and Africa. ICCR is committed to contributing to the development of Research by supporting authors for their publications. The multi-languages illustrate how culture remains a pivotal domain in Exchanges Programs. Great consideration is given to culture and its different elements. In this context, the language represents a potential linguistic instrument to create profound cultural diplomacy. It is a mightier weapon that allows the transmission of knowledge.

On the other hand, cultural relations are nurtured via Cultural Centers. The foundation of these hubs is a milestone in the history of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. Indian Cultural Centers (Example of Indira Gandhi Cultural Center) are established in the country but also in some countries India has bilateral relations and conventions with. They are implemented to welcome cultural activities and serve as reservoirs to perform the cultural heritage of the nations. A wide range of events is planned and executed for the academic years to enrich interpersonal relations. The role played by Cultural Centers is significantly productive in the sense that students participate in cultural activities, festivals' of culture. By so doing, they can acquire some skills thanks to the discovery of new cultures. In other words, the concern consists in fashioning a reciprocal and mutual understanding:

The prerequisite to cultivating cross-cultural skills is to develop an understanding of the other culture, through a study of its history, its valuesystem, and all the other specific factors that identify and differentiate it. Regardless of pride in one's own heritage, notions of superiority and rejection of the other have to be put aside. This is much harder to actually practice, than to accept it intellectually. Genuine curiosity and a desire to learn is a good guide to moving to the higher plane of cross-cultural understanding. (Rana, 2002: 202)

Cultural diplomacy is one of the key domains that sustain international relations. It is an integral part of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. In this perspective, such a Programme allows fortifying the bilateral agreements between the Republic of India and the African countries. It is necessary to maintain a positive image of the nation throughout the international outside scene. In addition to that, it makes powerful ties uniting nations in terms of bilateral cooperation. It demonstrates a prominent aspect of cultural diplomacy to a wide extent. One can state that cultural diplomacy is a means and an approach to better fathom the soul of a country. This is to underline the added-valued of the ICCR in improving the above-stressed diplomacy. Apart from that, cultural diplomacy keeps on being a tool permitting to open the doors of Indian Foreign Policy. It is equally important in the process of carrying out the policies of the ICCR. Therefore, cultural diplomacy contributes to building political relations.

CONCLUSION

In the exploration of Scholarships of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), two major points have been discussed. The historical background has significantly helped us examine the ways the ICCR has evolved for years since the Republic of India became sovereign. It reflects the epitomes of a Nation that seeks to play a key role in the academic as well as cultural domains. India has extended ICCR scholarships to several countries all over the world. However, our study has mainly emphasized the cultural diplomacy between India and Africa.

Steps towards the empowerment of cultural diplomacy have been made so as to give opportunities to the youth. This stratum of the societies is benefiting from the scholarships awarded and are expected to work harder in order to contribute to the development of their countries after completion of their studies. The cultural aspects have drawn our attention and have shown that intercultural relations can propel peace-making, mutual understanding and infuse young people with human values of living together with no matter how the differences could appear. Initiatives like the Indian Council for Cultural Relations can be a step forward to develop stronger cultural as well as political and economic diplomacy in a revolutionary world troubled by fundamentalism, terrorism, and violence. The conclusion we draw from this study is the following: today, economic and political cooperation should be integrated into the cultural one to live in brotherhood and sisterhood for human development and peace-building.

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