

Interaction of the High Commissioner of South Africa with Scholars and Faculty of the Department of African Studies, University of Delhi

Introduction

On 10 September 2025, the High Commission of South Africa in New Delhi convened an interactive academic engagement with scholars and faculty of the Department of African Studies, University of Delhi. Presided over by His Excellency Dr Anil Sooklal, High Commissioner of South Africa to India, the event provided a rare and significant academic space where scholarship and diplomacy converged. Beyond its ceremonial aspects, the session functioned as a critical site for examining the intersections of research, policy, and practice within the broader ambit of India–South Africa relations and South–South cooperation.

Proceedings of the Session

The proceedings opened with the formal felicitation of Dr Sooklal, Professor Nelistra, Acting High Commissioner Mr Cedrick C. Crowley, and other senior officials by the faculty and scholars of the Department. Initial remarks by High Commission officials were followed by Dr Sooklal’s address, which situated India–South Africa relations within both their historical trajectories and contemporary exigencies.

Dr. Sooklal emphasised that the bilateral partnership is rooted in anti-colonial solidarity and the shared struggle against apartheid, but also suggested that its contemporary relevance lies in offering alternative models of cooperation for the Global South. This framing highlighted the need for academic inquiries not merely to recount and limit to shared histories but to theorise new modalities and methods of partnership in an evolving multipolar order.

Each participating scholar was encouraged to present their research focus, which collectively included diaspora studies, migration, comparative governance, political economy, multilateral engagements, and cultural diplomacy. The wide-ranging scope of the topics demonstrated the interdisciplinarity and contemporary relevance of Africa and India, emphasised by the African Studies at university of Delhi, further highlighting its extensive role as a site of knowledge production and a contributor to policies related to foreign affairs.

Scholarly Engagement and Intellectual Exchange

Dr Sooklal demonstrated a remarkable engagement with the scholars, listening attentively and responding with substantive insights. His interventions encouraged comparative perspectives, urging participants to locate India–South Africa dynamics within continental and global frameworks rather than treating them as isolated entities.

Discussions included emergent domains such as climate diplomacy, with particular reference to the International Solar Alliance (ISA) as a platform of shared leadership. Migration and diaspora studies occupied a central place, reflecting both the historical entanglements of Indian-origin communities in South Africa and the contemporary experiences of African migrants in India. These exchanges showcased how migration is not merely a demographic phenomenon but also a site of political agency, identity negotiation, and normative contestation.

Further, scholars explored questions of federalism, highlighting parallels in how India and South Africa manage diversity and decentralisation. Prison reforms and disability inclusion were also debated, situating human rights within comparative policy frameworks. Such thematic breadth attested to the capacity of African Studies to traverse disciplinary boundaries and engage with urgent socio-political challenges.

Importantly, Dr Sooklal sought to concretise these deliberations by suggesting institutional linkages. He directed and suggested researchers towards NGOs, think tanks, and policy institutes relevant to their work, thereby establishing the High Commission as more than a diplomatic place, rather, as a knowledge sharing and resource hub for advancing scholarly inquiry.

Proposals by the High Commissioner

Dr Sooklal concluded with a set of structured proposals designed to institutionalise and sustain the momentum of the interaction:

1. **Institutionalisation of Academic–Diplomatic Dialogue:** He proposed that such engagements be regularised, thereby creating a sustained platform for structured exchange between scholars and diplomats.

2. **Collaborative Partnerships:** He encouraged the Department of African Studies to cultivate partnerships with South African universities, think tanks, and civil society organisations, offering the facilitative support of the High Commission.
3. **Integration of Research and Practice:** He necessitated the bridging of academic research with policy praxis, positioning scholarship as a tool for shaping the normative contours of India–Africa cooperation.

A notable suggestion from the Department proposed the creation of a **digital repository of ongoing research on India–South Africa relations**, to be hosted by the High Commission. Conceptually, such a repository would function as a living archive of emerging scholarship, enabling intellectual exchanges and developing knowledge synergies between Indian and South African academia. The High Commissioner welcomed the idea, acknowledging its potential to advance both scholarly collaboration and policy innovation.

For the scholars, it provided rare access to a senior practitioner deeply invested in the bilateral and multilateral diplomatic relationship. For the Department of African Studies, the event reaffirmed its role as a hub for Africa-centred knowledge production in India, enhancing both its academic prestige and policy relevance. From a broader analytical perspective, the interaction highlighted how academic exchanges function as vital instruments of soft power, deepening people-to-people ties and embedding bilateral relations within intellectual and cultural domains. While trade, state diplomacy, and multilateral fora remain crucial, the long-term resilience of India–South Africa relations will depend equally on scholarly collaboration, cultural understanding, and shared normative frameworks. In this sense, the interaction successfully presented how **academic engagements can serve as ground for reimagining the modalities and methods of South–South cooperation**, moving beyond rhetoric to practical, collaborative knowledge production.

***Views are personal**

Author:

Chhavi Chaudhary
 Doctoral Researcher
 Department of African Studies
 University of Delhi, Delhi 110007.
cchaudhary.phd2025@as.du.ac.in

Forwarding Faculty:

Dr. Manish Karmwar
 Faculty, Department of African Studies
 Faculty of Social Sciences
 University of Delhi, Delhi 110007

About SoAf:

The Department of African Studies has launched an initiative called "Scholars on Africa" with the primary objective of promoting the research ideas of scholars and faculty members on current happenings and contemporary issues related to the African continent. This initiative serves a dual purpose, as it not only facilitates academic exploration but also provides valuable insights to the policymakers of India on matters concerning Africa. By actively engaging with scholars and faculty members, the initiative aims to foster a better understanding and relationship between India and Africa, bridging the gap between the two worlds.

Under the "Scholars on Africa" initiative, Scholars of the Department of African Studies are encouraged to contribute write-ups on various African issues, not exceeding 300 words in length. It is noteworthy that these write-ups will be forwarded by any faculty members of the Department. These write-ups serve as a platform for scholars to express their personal views and insights on a diverse range of topics, including History, Politics, economics, culture, and social issues prevalent in Africa.

Follow:

DEPARTMENT OF AFRICAN STUDIES

Scholars on Africa @<https://as.du.ac.in/?Scholars-On-Africa/Insights>