



# INDO-MALAWI RELATIONS UNDER BINGU WA MUTHALIKA [2004-2012]: GAINS, CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNT

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## ABSTRACT

*Indo-Malawi relations became more observant and functional during the period Bingu wa Muthalika became president of Malawi, that is from 2004-2012. Bingu made all necessary efforts to open Malawi's resident mission in New Delhi for the first time in 2007, for Malawi to benefit from trade, aid and other social advantages which were not forthcoming at that time from the traditional Western donors. Bingu's track record of human rights violations made him unpopular among Western countries. The first objective of the study was to discuss the gains Malawi made from its ties with India which included access to loans, grants, capacity building programmes, trade and investment. The second objective was to identify the challenges, the Indo-Malawi relations, encountered during the period Bingu was in power. Limited connectivity because of the long route to India from Malawi to transport goods and services and trade imbalance were some of the challenges registered. The third objective was to digest the lessons learnt. The lessons learnt, the study unearthed, were on the importance of having a strategic choice for a bilateral partner for mutual and maximum benefit from the ties, and also that agreements made have to be followed up and implemented accordingly for mutual benefit of the two countries. Additionally, People of Indian Origin [PIOs] in Malawi remain a partner in development, as their companies and businesses create jobs for the locals. The PIOs need full support and cooperation from the host country. The study used library research to collect secondary data from articles, official documents, periodicals, newspapers and YouTube videos. The data was analysed using Content analysis.*

**KEY WORDS:** Aid, Bilateral Relations, Development Cooperation, Mutual Interest, Foreign Policy Choice

## 1. INTRODUCTION

India and Malawi have been in bilateral relations since 1964 when Malawi became independent from Britain. The relations have been revolving around areas of mutual interest including political, economical, social, cultural and in many other aspects of mutual significance. However, due to some administrative reasons, the Indian High Commission in Malawi was closed in 1993, though India continued to have diplomatic relations with Malawi. During this period, Malawi was concurrently accredited to India's mission in Zambia until February 2007. The resident mission was re-opened in March, 2012 in Lilongwe Malawi [High Commission of India to Malawi, 2017].

The re-opening of the resident mission occurred during the tenure of office of Bingu wa Muthalika, as Malawi president, that run from 2004 to 2012. During this period, the diplomatic ties with India were uplifted higher than the time of his predecessors, Kamuzu Banda and Bakili Muluzi.

According to Xinhua News Agency [2011], India then was ready and open to help African countries including Malawi in poverty alleviation, Millennium Development Goals [MDGs] realisation, creation of new and just international political and economical order. As discussed by Rajiv [2015], the principles of India's foreign policy were all allowing to a

robust and beneficial relations with developing countries. The principle of south-south cooperation and the principle of solidarity with the third world attested to this mutually strong and viable accommodation of other countries by India, to foster development and goodwill for the benefit of a common man and their respective countries.

Thus when Bingu became Malawi president, he saw an opportunity of increasing cooperation and uplifting social and economic status of Malawians with the helping hand of India, a country that was politically stable, financially strong and socially viable.

## 2. OBJECTIVES

The specific objectives of this study were to find out the gains Malawi realised from its relations with India spanning from 2004 to 2012 when Bingu wa Muthalika, who ironically, got his university education from India, ruled Malawi as Head of State. The second objective was to detail the challenges Malawi faced in its efforts to foster the diplomatic ties with India and the third objective was to list down the lessons learnt from the relations between Malawi and India during the period Bingu wa Muthalika was president of Malawi.



### 3. DEFINING STRATEGIC ASPECTS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Countries on the globe are in relations with each with for varying of reasons. It is also a fact, that some countries are not in any kind of relations with other countries owing to among other factors differences in ideology, security differences and many more. However, relations between countries are also strategic, other than general and normal relations, as is the case with private companies and corporate organisations. According to Vaidya [2011], strategic relations are a kind of collaboration between two or more countries on a particular aspect of importance. Furthermore, Jakada [2014] is of the view that strategic aspects of international relations are anything relating to long term interests and goals between organisations or countries. The author argues that the nature of partnership is more on a regular objective and that the agenda is development-based as well as issue-based rather than on anything else. Another angle of describing these strategic aspects of relations between countries, can be that of 'long term shared interests and ways of achieving and improving them' [Chang et al, 2008]. In addition, other scholars have defined strategic relations as 'agreements and arrangements between two or more countries to follow a set of agreed upon objectives while remaining independent of each other' [Jakada, 2014]. The strategic interests may be in different forms of style, ranging from shared agreements to contractual cooperation. The nature of working together is therefore relaxed and bases on the requirements and the necessities of the countries involved. For example Malawi's strategic aspects of relations with India, as depicted by the High Commission of Malawi in Delhi [2023], dwells much on trade, migration, education, culture and aid.

As the definitions of strategic relations have clearly explained, countries enter into relations with both common good and interests. Common good and cooperation which is idealism in great debates of IR, comes in as countries believe and reason that cooperation is vital for a positive world. On the other hand, interests, which in IR great debates falls under realism paradigm, may not be avoided as it describes the realistic view of the world. Realism is the pragmatic aspects of reality, including the national and personal interests of the ruling elite [Wilkinson, 2007].

What pushes a country to enter into a relationship with another? Literature has shown that there are a number of factors and interests that pushes countries to enter into relations with each other and that these strategic aspects and planned interests between two or more countries may not be avoided. TRT World, [2021] and Sinha [2010] have argued that countries select their preferred aspects of international relations so as to increase their geo-political influence and to promote their business interests. However and according to Beri [2011], these factors are many and they include political, economical, social and cultural. Bhattacharya [2010] added more aspects in the examples of diplomatic, scientific and historical aspects. On his part, scholar Rajagopalan [2017] included a security aspect to the list. The author discussed that countries align themselves with stronger nations militarily for

balance of power and to get the needed protection in times of external aggression and attack.

### 4. REASONS MALAWI IMPROVED BILATERAL RELATIONS WITH INDIA DURING BINGU WA MUTHALIKA PRESIDENCY

It is a non disputable fact, that every diplomatic relation is for mutual benefit of the two countries and their peoples in all aspects of importance, be it political, social, economical, cultural, security and many others. As a matter of a preamble, the paper discusses the key reasons Malawi uplifted and strengthened its diplomatic ties with India during Bingu wa Muthalika presidency. The reviewed literature has unearthed that the flexible principles of India's foreign policy gave space and energy for the two countries to enhance their relations. In particular were the principles of south-south cooperation and the solidarity with the third world [Rajiv, 2015]. These allowing principles of foreign policy cemented the confidence in both countries mainly Malawi as a small country both in size and economy, that the relations will be of mutual benefit. This development was unlike with the relations Malawi had with the West, where the relations centred much around dictations, sanctions in times of non compliance and dominance by the powerful partner [Ott, 2013]. Therefore Bingu wa Muthalika wanted to capitalise on the accommodative principles of foreign policy to improve Malawi's cooperation with India and benefit immensely in areas of economic cooperation, trade and investment, infrastructure, mining, coal, agriculture, human resource development, micro, small and medium enterprises [Targeted news 2010].

The other reason for a quick re-establishment of relations between Malawi and India when Bingu assumed presidency of Malawi rested upon trade, investment and economic cooperation. Bingu had to look to the East, India and China, as the traditional donors from the West were holding on to aid due to perceived Malawi's governance shortfalls during his presidency. Bingu had to fill up the gap with India and China. To strengthen trade and investment, in 2010 India vice president Hamid Ansari and Malawi vice president Joyce Banda signed four important bilateral agreements to support Malawi's economic development agenda spanning from 2009 to 2014 with nine priority areas including agriculture, mineral resource development, small and medium enterprises development, health and foreign office consultations. In the agreements Malawi was to benefit from India's technological advancements in various sectors especially agriculture and irrigation [HT Digital Streams Limited, 2010].

It has to be noted also, according to Xinhua News Agency [2010] that trade grew by 100 percent from 2004 -2008 from 43.2 million dollars to 79.7 million dollars. Furthermore, 56 companies that registered to invest in Malawi during that period, 10 were of Indian origin representing 10 percent of total investment inflows in Malawi [High Commission of India to Malawi, 2017].

Prominent Indian companies that exerted their strength in Malawi to boost trade and industry during the Bingu



presidency, as discussed by Global Information Network [2011], included Bharti Airtel, TATA, Mahindra, Godrej, Kirloskar, Ashok Leyland, TVS, Bajaj Auto, Eicher, Sukam, Atul, Sonalika, Escorts, Soil Master, L & T, Kalpataru Power Transmission Ltd, Escort and many others. In 2012, M/s Dhunseri Petrochem & Tea Ltd (DPTL) invested in Tea Estates in Malawi. About 10-12 alcoholic beverage companies were also set up by Indian nationals with an approximate investment of US\$ 15-20 million.

Additionally, one of the Indian companies that registered an incredible mark was Rab processors, a company in agro industry that employed over 1500 workers. The company was founded by the Jakhura family. Another Indian company Airtel had 2.5 million subscribers by 2010 and invested over 100 million US dollars in Malawi.

Development assistance in the form of loans, grants and lines of credit, was another priority aspect of relations between India and Malawi during Bingu's presidency. Bingu's intention was to see accelerated economic growth through foreign direct investment. In a positive response, India provided a 50 million dollars line of credit as part of cooperation to be used in cotton ginning and spinning facilities, green belt initiative, one village one product programme. Another 30 million dollars line of credit was successfully used for irrigation, grain storage and tobacco threshing projects in Malawi [High Commission of India to Malawi, 2023].

The other focal aspect of Indo-Malawi relations during the presidency of Bingu wa Muthalika was in the area of capacity building. India assisted Malawi in the field of capacity building through human resource development, using its India Technical and Economic Cooperation [ITEC] programme and Indian Council for Cultural Relations [ICCR] scholarships. The ITEC slots were 10 in 2007-08 and were increased to 60 in 2012-13. Statistics indicated that from 2007-08 to 2014-15 over 300 Malawians received ITEC civilian training programme in India. For long term courses, Malawi has been utilizing the ICCR scholarships where qualifying students undertake various programmes at graduate and post graduate levels.

Furthermore, under the Government of India's Pan African e-network project, VVIP video conferencing facility at the New State House, Tele-medicine facility at the Kamuzu Central Hospital, and Tele-education facilities at the University of Malawi, Zomba, were made functional. The multi-million dollar project was inaugurated through video-conferencing at the University of Malawi on August 16, 2010 by Shri Krishna, former External Affairs Minister of India and Symon Vuwa Kaunda, the then Minister of Information and Civic Education of Malawi. The Chancellor College held its first graduation ceremony for e-learning students on 14 December 2012. More than 1,000 Malawians benefited under this programme. Every year approximately 100 students graduate from Chancellor College, under the e-network programme' [High Commission of India to Malawi, 2017].

Furthermore, the most visible and healthy aspect of relations between India and Malawi during Bingu's tenure of office was the enhancement of cultural relations. The Indian community in Malawi has been present since time immemorial. From 2004 to 2012 PIOs in Malawi were estimated to be around 7000. Most of the PIOs originated from Gujarat State in India and settled in Malawi's major cities of Lilongwe, Blantyre, Zomba and Mzuzu. Primarily the PIOs engaged in trading, agriculture, agro business, pharmaceutical, hospitality, besides other professions [High Commission of India to Malawi, 2017]. Conversing on the reasons India puts much importance on cultural relations, Pal [2013] discussed that the cultural relations are meant to minimise the anti-Indian feeling among the locals and to encourage the heart of tolerance and solidarity as one of the principles of Indian foreign policy dictates.

## 5. NOTABLE GAINS

Right choice of a politically and economically stable India was the first gain Malawi got from its relations with India. Sinha [2010] stressed on the choice for a right partner country. The author argued that it is a daunting task to be in partnership with a country and stakeholders with similar policies and values and with its peoples who are dedicated, honest and full of integrity. Countries that are politically stable, register an impeccable economic growth and have impressive credit ratings. Bingu enhanced relations with India during his time in office, as India was politically stable, economically viable and doing well on national and international security. Bingu wanted to ride on the successes of India, the connectivity of India to the global village and the rapid developing status of India to leverage register Malawi's advantage to SADC region and the world at large.

Secondly, Malawi gained immensely from India's respect for sovereignty. Mukerji [2023] discussed that India respects other countries' right to making their own laws governing the access of goods and markets, human rights and governance. Malawi was free to use its sovereignty to trade or enter into political relations with other countries without problems, thereby improving its economic stance and political standing worldwide for the benefit of its people. More importantly, India's respect to sovereignty was best of an example of good relations as it produced no sacred status like other developed countries including the UK and the US. Bobby [2020] argued that sovereignty on both political and economical pillars of other countries, even with less standing economic and political power in the world, should be respected the way India does. India's foreign policy principle of solidarity with the third world, signifies this approach to respecting of other countries' sovereignty, which is one of the strategic aspects of international relations.

Thirdly, a greater opportunity of reaching out to new markets was created. The partner companies from a stronger country helps increasing the size of the market as it has already established links [Chang et al, 2008]. Agricultural commodities that were being exported to India had an open access to new markets at competitive prices. Also, other markets for Malawi's priorities areas, that included mining,



tourism and hospitality were given the priority and the platform that they deserved, thereby increasing local job creation and foreign exchange generation.

Access to new customer base was another important gain. In strategic alliance it is possible to develop new and creative ways to expand the customer base. This is possible with a trusting and solid partnership [Buckles, 2011]. It was a known fact that Malawi was producing commodities including pigeon peas and cotton that attracted minimal local market. However, the MOUs signed between India and Malawi increased the customer base for these commodities. In 2009 for example cotton prices hovered around 30 cents per kilogram in Malawi [Mpaka, 2009]. However, with the increased customer base brought in by India, the raised prices were of significance to Malawi in terms of foreign exchange generation and profit returns to local farmers. India also gained in terms of commodity availability and security. As Chang et al [2008] argued, people have confidence and companies have wealth effect and realise significant gains where a country is in a strategic relationship with a strong and reputable partner. For example the US-Japanese firms realise significant gains when they are in a strategic alliance than when they are not.

Another gain Malawi had from its relations with India was the easy accessing of supplementary services. In terms of health services, Malawi gained a great deal as specialised medical cases were being referred to India where health services were top notch. Also, Malawians got employed by Indian companies, including Bharti Airtel, TATA, Mahindra, Godrej, Kirloskar, Ashok Leyland, TVS, Bajaj Auto, Eicher, Sukam, Atul, Sonalika, Escorts, Soil Master, L & T, Kalpataru Power Transmission Ltd, Escort and many others. Most Malawians who benefited from ITEC and ICCR scholarships, improved their skills and knowledge in diverse sectors and helped in fostering the development of Malawi further.

## 6. CHALLENGES

Several challenges may be outlined from the relations between India and Malawi during Bingu wa Muthalika era. The first was that of distance from Malawi to India and limited connectivity. Logistically, both countries were disadvantaged because of the long route to delivery of goods and services, and most importantly because Malawi is landlocked. As a result, some Indian companies opted to trade with nearby and easy to reach counterparts to profit more. The same was with Malawi; commodity producers rather opted to trade with neighbouring countries like Zambia and Tanzania, than India to cut transport costs.

Furthermore to challenges, only a few of the agreements signed were put to use. The other signed MOUs were neglected and forgotten due to lack of seriousness in following up matters of concern. Inadequate funding to planned projects was one of the factors leading to neglecting of some of the MOUs and that the local farmer and the business man that could have benefited at the end of the day, became losers. During the 2004-2012 period seven influential MOUs were signed including the a MOU in the field of Agriculture and

allied sectors. On ground, most of these signed MOUs were not being implemented as expected. Some of the MOUs that did not tick as required were the National small industries corporation of India and the One village one product for cooperation in the development of small scale enterprises in Malawi and also the MOU in the field of mineral resources and development.

Trade imbalance was another challenge to the Indo-Malawi relations. Vaidya [2011] argued that one partner most often benefit more than the other, particularly the strong partner. Malawi's major export commodities were pigeon peas, chickpeas and other pulses. Major imports from India were textile yarns, fabrics, transport equipment, pharmaceuticals, machinery, generators, invertors, motor pumps. The balance of trade was dominantly in favour of India. It is very clear that India was working to the advantage mainly of trade relations, as it was supplying Malawi with the most essential products than Malawi was exporting to India. Only pigeon peas were favourably being exported to India from Malawi their by creating a visible trade imbalance. The same applies to health care. Medical experts and top notch medical facilities were available in India and that Malawians in need of medical attention had to travel to India which was expensive owing to transport costs. Health experts and hospital equipment needed to be right in Malawi for more patients to benefit.

## 7. LESSONS LEARNT

Right and strategic choice of a partner country is essential. The choice of India to enhance relations and to subsequently improve Malawi's economic status was very strategic for Bingu wa Muthalika. It has to be noted also that it was the very same time that Malawi closed its relations with Taiwan and opened diplomatic ties with Mainland China. The choice of India as a bilateral partner, had the much anticipated outcomes that included aid, trade and economic acceleration, human resource development and people to people ties. Malawi benefited from India's increased trade in agro business and acquired flagship infrastructure projects from China including the state of the art mountainous Chitipa-Karonga road, Malawi University of science and Technology campus, state of the art parliament building, International conference centre and the five star hotel complex and the magnificent national stadium. These projects accelerated the economic growth of Malawi as road infrastructure improved, tourism industry enhanced and tertiary education gave much priority in the field of science and technology which is vital for growth of any country.

Building a mutually beneficial alliance is another important lesson learnt. Indo-Malawi relations needs regular re-assessment to verify its effectiveness. The capacity of the locals in Malawi should be improved with the help of Indian experts to enable the locals maintain the projects and not relying on foreign experts only. As discussed by Buckles [2011], relations have to strive not on domination but on growth and innovation. Therefore, the relations have to be favourable to both sides, the weaker country and the strong country, their shareholders and their peoples.



Maintenance of Professional standards in business is essential in instilling confidence in customers. This is another lesson to learnt. Reputable Indian companies like Airtel, Tata, and many others are helping in giving confidence in Malawians of desirable service delivery as they already proved their prowess in India where operating standards are not compromised but maintained through government regulation and compliance inspection. Airtel Malawi for example, is one of the leading mobile network providers in Malawi because of its Indian roots and most local companies in Malawi are following on the same discipline and standards to instil sense of confidence in their customers the same way the Indian companies do.

Another lesson learnt is that social and cultural factors are key in relations between countries as they help in promoting cooperation, exchange and cultural development, gain new experiences and help in the proliferation of technological innovations [Kumar, 2016]. From social development cooperation, it has been learnt that mega farms are an option for national food security. With MOUs on agri business targeting local farmers in cotton and pigeon peas production, farmers may produce more and satisfy the Indian market adequately for their own benefit economically and socially. Furthermore, the given quota of commodity exports to Indian market has to be secured with diplomacy to bring the needed stability in the market.

It has also been learnt that PIOs are a partner in development, and that they need to be accorded all the needed support for their full realisation of their goals. The PIO in Malawi are another source of employment creation to the locals. The locals work in the shops, companies, hotel and lodges, being owned the PIOs. The PIOs also advance the cultural aspects of relations through Hindi religion, dressing, food and spiritual integrity.

## 8. CONCLUSION

From the findings gathered, the conclusion states that the Indo-Malawi bilateral relations during the presidency of Bingu wa Muthalika, were of mutual interest to both countries with Malawi benefiting more from India's immense advantage in democracy consolidation, stable political standing, economic superiority and capacity building programmes. Trade Imbalance and limited connectivity between Malawi and India as the route to India is long and complicated for trade and investment, stand as some of the challenges to the rather strategic and beneficial ties between the two countries. The PIOs in Malawi running businesses and companies are a part of source of employment to Malawians and that Bingu wa Muthalika was very strategic in his foreign policy choice of uplifting relations with India, which were rather being ignored by his predecessors.

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