India and South Africa have long historical relationship. It had been multi-dimensional relations. Their colonial experience and their struggle to establish democratic and equitable society are common. Geographically both are joined by Indian Ocean. There are about 1.2 million People of Indian Origin residing in South Africa. It is one of the most developed ethnic community in South Africa. Although it forms 2.5 percent of the total population professionally and educationally they are ahead of other ethnic groups. People of Indian Origin (PIO) contributed significantly democratization and human rights in South Africa. Their contributions to South Africa as a political group during apartheid period and now as the most advance educational and professional ethnic group is recognized and appreciated by democratic government of post-apartheid South Africa.

The PIOs in South Africa have a long history. Although some research reveal that Indians had settled in South Africa two thousand years ago, it’s only under the indentured system that a large number of Indians arrived in South Africa. Indian indentured workers were recruited to replace slave worker world wide. Most of the indentured workers who went to South Africa were from South India but a substantial percentage of them went from Bihar and U.P. The first batch of Indian workers went in 1860 and good number of them decided to stay back in South Africa. In addition to the indentured workers a good number of Indian merchants from Gujarat also went as fee passengers. They were significant in numbers. They were affluent also. Unlike indentured workers who lost their contact with India, these merchants kept very close ties with their families in India. The major turning point between India and South Africa relations came when one of the Gujarati businessmen hired barrister Mohan Das Karam Chand Gandhi for legal help in South Africa. Gandhi was subjected to existing practices of racial discrimination by colonial master and White settlers. He opposed this racist practices and discriminatory system. While opposing the colonial rule and powerful White settler administration he developed tools and tactics of mass mobilization and non-violent struggles. He mobilized the Indian community against the colonial rulers and started the process of liberation struggle which was taken over by the native African Community. The return of Gandhi to India and his leadership to Indian freedom struggle placed South Africa on important agenda of Indian National Congress (INC) for several subsequent decades. In other words the large migration of Indian workers to South Africa and the conversion of barrister Mohan Das Karam Chand Gandhi into Mahatma Gandhi during colonial period placed Indo–South African relations on different footings.

Nehru who was in charge of Indian National Congress foreign policy since 1930 onwards had a clear and categorical policy of active dissociation with Indian Diaspora. However, in case of South Africa, due to Gandhi, he had a proactive policy towards PIOs in South Africa. When he became interim Prime Minister in 1946, a year before India’s independence, he took the issue of discrimination of Indians in South Africa to UN. Vijay Lakshmi Pandit, Indian representative to UN, succeeded in getting UN resolutions passed.
to condemn South Africa’s racist policy and to bring this issue under UN Human Right Charter whereby South Africa regime could not avoid it under the domestic jurisdiction clause. In 1946 Nehru snapped India’s trade relations with South Africa which was five percent of India’s global trade at that time. India kept raising the issue of racial discrimination in UN and launched several programme and policies to support Front Line African States and OAU and to oppose and resist the Apartheid policy. India launched Africa Fund and provided material and diplomatic support to South African liberation struggle through multi lateral channel. India did not resume economic and diplomatic ties with the racist regime of South Africa till South Africa was liberated from internal colonialism.

On the other hand PIOs in South Africa after initiating the resistances, civil disobedience and peaceful agitation against the racist regime joined hand with the majority black community in South Africa who were the worst victim of racial discrimination. Gandhi had expressed solidarity with majority black community but emphasized that their community most be led by their own leaders. The majority of PIOs joined ANC formation to oppose Apartheid and many of them emerged as top leaders of this party. India also encouraged them to join hand with majority black community. The unique role of India and South Africa Indians in struggle against apartheid is acknowledged by the UN, South Africa and world community.

Therefore Indian Diaspora in South Africa played a prime and crucial role in bringing South Africa and India closer. Under globalization Indo- South Africa relations is growing fast. The PIO in South Africa have cooperate and supported the economic transformation during post- Apartheid period and unlike other affluent section of South Africa are determined to remain in South Africa. It is, therefore, important to examine the role it would play in South Africa’s development. Since India has also changed its diasporas policy under globalization, which has become more proactive, South African Indians have potential to contribute significantly in promoting India’s relations with South Africa.

The proposed seminar on ‘Indo South African Relations: Role and Contributions of Indian Diaspora will focus on following sub-themes though it will not be confined to them:-

1. Contemporary Indio – South Africa Relations: Dimensions and Issues
2. Role and Contributions of South African Indians and India in Struggle against Apartheid.
3. Historical connection between India and South Africa: Role and Impact of Indian Migration and Mahatma Gandhi.
4. India and Democratic South Africa: New Role and Challenges of Indian Diaspora in South Africa.