

“Africa is part of South Asia just as South Asia is part of Africa” – Tirthankar Roy

LSE’s Tirthankar Roy calls for greater historical consciousness of the centuries-old ties between India and African countries.

Q. What kind of economic ties have existed between India and African countries?

A. From the eighteenth century onwards, a cloth called guinée was produced in India and shipped from Pondicherry to West Africa (Senegambia) by the English and the French. Guinée was an indigo-dyed cloth that served as a currency in parts of Africa. African consumers and traders coveted South Indian cloths like these not as luxury – guinée was a utility cloth – but also for their smell. The distinct smell probably came from the indigo dye, the starch used to process the yarn, and the mordant materials used to make the dye fast. These qualities created a brand of authenticity as other people trying to enter the African market failed to reproduce the exact qualities. The use of cloths like guinée as a currency probably stems from this sense of its intrinsic value and authenticity.

Over time, the use of Indian cloth as a medium of exchange fell, but the cloth did not disappear. In fact, trade in such cloth has been remarkably enduring—even today, a certain quantity of Indian handloom cloth is exported to Nigeria and other African ports. Indian cloth consumption in Africa is not as large as it has historically been, but it persists.



Workers on the Uganda railway line
Photo credit: Sikh Heritage in East Africa

Q. Were any African goods being imported into India in the eighteenth century?

A. The eighteenth century was a period of triangular trade. Indian goods were imported into Africa, while African goods such as gum arabica were exported to Europe, rather than India. In the period before gum arabica became a major export, Indian cloth was being sold in Africa in payment for ivory and slaves, but these too were not coming back to India and were being transported elsewhere. As such, Indian cloth did not connect India and Africa in a two-way exchange, but it was the fuel that ran a global operation (of which slaves were the largest component before the nineteenth century).

Q. When did Indians start to migrate to Africa?

A. There is an ancient history of migration from Gujarat to the East African trading towns, like Zanzibar, which predates European involvement. A two-way Arabian Sea trade [between India and African countries] has been going on for centuries; if you were to take all the European countries out of the sea, Arabian Sea trade would appear as a three-way trade between the Indian coast, the Arabian coast, and East African coasts. Slaves, ivory, gold, textiles and many other goods were exchanged for a very long time between the sea ports of these three locations. When Vasco da Gama first navigated around the Cape to reach the Kerala coast (1498), European mariners, including da Gama, needed to pick up Gujarati navigators from the African ports to help the Europeans cross the Arabian Sea.

Q. Was Indian migration to Africa in the nineteenth century also driven by trading interests?

A. Nineteenth-century migration was driven by European empires, particularly the British empire, and was of a different order since it primarily involved workers, rather than traders. Workers from India went to South Africa, **particularly Natal**, while traders continued to go to East Africa. Some skilled workers from India went into railway building in Kenya and Tanzania.

Some of the workers became small traders, taking advantage of the existing Indian diaspora in places like Mombasa, Zanzibar, Mozambique and other East African ports. But this was different from the sea port linkages of previous centuries.

Q. What other kinds of migration occurred between India and Africa?

A. A large number of Africans – up to several hundred thousand – came to India as mercenaries and slaves. This large community, which continues to live in Gujarat and along the Konkan coast, cemented exchanges of skills.

Moreover, there were exchanges of colonial administrators. There was a different process of empire formation in India, where the British took over indigenous regimes, from that in Africa, where there was conquest. These two processes created different institutional dynamics. In India, old laws were preserved and changed slowly while the legislative dynamics in Africa was different. It has been well documented that British Indian law and officers became a portable resource within the empire, and laws were transported between British India, British East Africa, and British South-East Asia.

Q. Is there anything to be learned from history as India pursues strong ties with African countries, particularly in the context of energy security?

A. History can remind people that there is a precedent for **present-day engagement** that dates back centuries. The sense that Africa is a part of Indian history is very important. Studying India-Africa relations can help create a historical consciousness that Africa is part of South Asia just as South Asia is part of Africa. Many developments have weakened this sense, specifically African and Indian nationalism. By going back to the past you can revive the notion that South Asia is part of an Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea world.

For more information, see T. Roy, “India in the World Economy: From Antiquity to the Present”, Cambridge University Press, June 2012.

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