India-Africa Ancient Trade Linkages

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Contemporary international politics has been largely dominated by economic engagement. All around the world, governments are engaged in creating spheres of influence that reflect their economic priorities. For most of their histories, this is also true in the case of India and Africa. In the pre-modern era, the coastal areas of east and south Africa and the western and southern coasts of India were important trading stations between the two countries. The geographical proximity and other natural factors (like monsoon, winds, etc.) open up a world of possibilities for the movement of people, traders, materials, ideas, styles, culture, and religion between India and Africa. For at least two thousand years, the Indian Ocean served as a highway for the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultures between the Indian subcontinent and the Horn of Africa. Since ancient times, commerce and trade between the two regions (India and Africa) have been facilitated by the monsoon, which in the western part of the ocean blows for roughly half the year from the north-east and for half in the opposite direction. So, thousands of years ago, by using the seasonal monsoon winds, Indian traders sailed to the east coast of Africa in search of mangrove poles, elephant tusks, soft-curved ivory, gold, gemstones, etc.The "Periplus of the Erythraean Sea" or "Guidebook of the Red Sea," written by a Greek author in 60 AD, describes the presence of Indians in Africa since ancient times. It was the Indians who introduced coconut palms to the eastern coast of Africa. The Kingdom of Aksum, ruler of Ptolemaic, had economic ties and cultural linkages with contemporary Indian rulers. The presence of Gujaratis in East Africa was neither unusual nor new; they had been part of African society since ancient times. The Persian Gulf, Gulf of Camby, Cape Guardafui, Swahili Coast, the Periplus, modern Kutch, Kathiawar, Broach or Bharuch, Barbaricum (modern Karachi), Barygaza, Muziris, Korkai, Kaveripattinam, Arikamedu, etc. were the important trading ports between India and Africa in the archaic era. The find of a bronze figure of the Sanga lion from Northern Kenya, a copper coin of Chola King Rajraja III from Kisimani Mafia (Tanzania), a silver coin of an Indian ruler from Mogadishu, and a wooden-made figure of the one-horn rhinoceros (one-horn rhinoceros is only found in India) found from Mapungubwe Gold coins that were prevalent in Sind have been recovered from Kilwa Kisiwani and Zanzibar; glass beads, which appear to have originated at sites such as Arikamedu in South India, were received from East Africa; Manda (an important trading town known for its ivory products) made ivory bangles, which were recovered from Saurashtra and Gujrat. All this historical and archaeological evidence reveals a wider web of relationships between India and Africa since ancient times.

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