
UNIT 16 INDIA-AFRICA RELATIONS

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16.1 INTRODUCTION

Indian sub-continent is the immediate neighbour to African continent separated by Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean waters provided a route through which India established trading and commercial relations with the African coast and Persian Gulf since pre-historic times. People to people level contacts between the Indians, East Africans and Arabs have predated the modern state relations for a very long time.

16.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Though it is not possible to fix an exact date of the First Indian contact with Africa, the Western and Indian scholars believe that ancient Hindus had fairly good idea of the East African coastline. India's contacts with East Africa are traced back to the age of *Puranas* which conceive the earth as consisting of seven territories, one of which is called "Cusha" which identify with Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa. In 1792, Lt. Francis Wilford, in a paper read at Asiatic Society, Bengal explained that Indians had established their settlements along the river Nile and even explored the regions as far as the surroundings of Lake Victoria regions, that is present day Kenya-Uganda border. He further claimed that the river "Cali" or "Nila" mentioned in *Puranas* was the present day river Nile. In *Bhagavat Puranu*, the Hindus conceived of the world as a grand lotus with four large

petals and two smaller petals. Four large petals according to Lt. Francis Wilford represent India, Europe, Siberia and China while two smaller petals represent Sancha (Zanzibar) and Harina (Madagascar) between India and Europe.

The 19th Century explorer John Hanning in his book *Journal of the Discovery of the sources of Nile* mentions that the Hindus opened trade in slaves and ivory prior to the birth of Christ with the country of the Moon. Wilford located the country of the Moon or *Chandrastan* round Devn *Sarobara* (lake of God) supposed to be the *Puranic* name of the modern Victoria Nyanza on the borders of Kenya and Tanzania.

According to R.K. Mukherjee the evidence suggests that the maritime commerce between India and Babylon flourished in the 7th and 6th centuries B.C., and that, by then several Indian traders had settled in Arabia and on the East African coast. This view has gained acceptance among wider number of scholars in recent times. The geography of Ptolemy provides historical account that throws light on the early pre-colonial Indo-East African contacts. The Indians were able to substitute other markets for those lost with the collapse of the Roman decline of 2nd and 7th Century A.D. and that this period in turn witnessed the rise of Indian and Persian sea power.

During the period of 5th and 6th centuries A.D. (i.e. later days of the Gupta Empire) parts of Sind and Gujarat appeared among the chief centres of westward naval enterprises. Al-Idrisi writes that East Africa's most valued export was iron trade which was valued in India and according to L.W. Hallingsworth in *Short History of East African Coast* ships from north west Indian kingdom of Gujarat came to the land Zanj carrying the supplies of cotton cloth and other things and carried back iron, ivory, rhinoceros horns, tortoise shells, amber, leopard skins and African slaves.

With the Islamic onslaught in northwestern part of India and its penetration into the South, Daulatabad in Deccan became the capital. The Hindu merchants continued to do their business under the Muslim kings. India also became prominent in trade with Africa; one conics across references to the African slaves in 1453-1474. Bengal's Muslim king Rukh-ud-Dio-Batbak appears to have purchased 8,000 African slaves and Indian history has recorded the rise and fall of slave dynasty before the arrival of Allau-din-Khilji in Delhi. The archaeological findings in Zimbabwe and in Kilwa in Somalia indicate Indian influence on the construction of mosques and other buildings.

16.3 COLONIAL PERIOD

The second phase of India Africa relations began with the discovery of sea route to the East by the Portuguese in 1498 and other European powers followed the same for the development of trade and commerce. From 1498 to 1900, the Europeans with their superior scientific, technological and organisational powers developed colonies in the African and Asian continents. The peaceful non-domineering Indian Ocean trade between the Indian and African littorals was subsumed by the European trading considerations,

While Portuguese controlled Goa and Mozambique situated on the opposite side of Indian Ocean since 16th Century, the British took possession of Cape colony in 1806. Mauritius in 1810, annexed Natal province to Cape colonies in 1843, peacefully partitioned territories and peoples on the East African coast between themselves, Germans, Italians and French after 1885 while taking over Indian possession from the British East India Company in 1857. The establishment of European imperial control on the opposite land peripheries gave birth to added political, social and cultural linkages to the existing trading and commercial interests.

16.4 INDIANS IN AFRICA

The Portuguese employed Indians in their African colonial possession as bankers, accountants and skilled artisans during 17th and 18th centuries. In the 19th Century Indian immigration to the east and southeast African littoral and southwest Indian Ocean Island states increased. The British employed them as indentured labour to work on agricultural and sugar plantations, to build roads, railways, and administrative centres. Indian troops were employed to pacify and train militant African tribes in maintaining law and order.

Ramchandani in his book, *Uganda Asians*, mentions the push and pull factors for Indian migration to the East and South Africa in the 19th Century. In order to escape droughts, famines, deadly diseases and conditions of grinding poverty back home, Indians came to unknown lands to earn their livelihood and become materially rich. By 1900 there were nearly 65,000 Indian immigrant indentured labour in Natal, Anglophone East Africa had 31,000 Indians. Also 5 per cent of the total population of Zanzibar Island consisted of Indians.

The Indians adjusted to their changed status in the new global order. Besides fulfilling the demand for indentured labour of spices, condiments and other things, the commercial and artisan skills and the experience of the Indians placed them head and shoulders above the local African. The immigrant white population faced competition from these citizens of empire. As a consequence of the presence of the competitive Indians, colonial administration in the East and South Africa began to pursue a policy of racial discrimination against the Indians in matters of owning land, property, trade and commerce.

The policy of racial segregation against the Indians in South Africa gave rise to a passive or non-violent resistance by Indians. These were later successfully used by Mahatma Gandhi to win Indian independence from colonial rule. The Indians in South Africa and in Kenya set up their own political organisations to fight for their rights as equal citizens under the British colonial empire.

India's successful struggle for independence under Gandhi influenced the western educated young Africans to work for their independence in the post war period. Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana noted that after months of studying Gandhi's policy and watching the effect it had, he began to see that the policy could be a solution to the colonial problems when it is backed by a political organisation. Ali Mazrui, a noted African scholar, says: "Men in distant lands who study the origins of Afro-Asianism will remember the naked fakir Mahatma Gandhi who helped to shape the doctrine of passive resistance as a strategy of liberation in colonial days..."

16.5 POS INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

16.5.1 Government's Policy

The Government of India under Jawaharlal Nehru, adopted anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism and anti-racialism as the basic tenets of India's foreign policy. These were in agreement with the values of Indian freedom struggle under Mahatma Gandhi. As a consequence of this policy, India raised the problem of racial discrimination in UN in 1948, and broke diplomatic relations with South Africa. India favoured a peaceful non-violent struggle for African territories independence. It sent troops to Algeria and Congo, under UN banner, to maintain peace in these territories torn by Cold War. The Indian government told the Indian population in Africa to support Africans in their fight for independence against colonial administration and not to look to Delhi for solving their problems.

16.5.2 African Response

The Cold War situation divided the African political leaders. Violence erupted in several African territories, against colonial rule. Africans found the position of Indian government on use of violence as a means to win independence struggle ambivalent and looked at the role of Indian troops in Africa under the UN banner with suspicion. Vested colonial interests continued anti-Indian propaganda by inciting local Africans against Indians who were projected as usurping major economic, educational benefits of Africans in trade, commerce and employment.

India's anti-colonial image also suffered a blow in the African eye because of border problem with Pakistan and China. Only four African states — Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria and Libya — supported India against Chinese aggression in 1962. Nehru's Africa policy was suitably reframed to suit India's changing national interests post-1962. These combined with Indian government's earlier acts of non-recognition of Algerian government-in-exile and that of Congo after the death of the Congolese leader Patrick Lumumba distanced militant African states from India.

In contrast, to Indian's attitude of passing resolutions condemning violence as undesirable or harmful the Chinese supported armed struggle of Africans to win independence from colonial control.

16.5.3 Non-alignment

After 1962, India gave up efforts to cultivate Africa as one collective political bloc, and instead began economic diplomacy with only those African states, which stood by it during Chinese crisis. New Delhi built, with the help of Indian capital, large scale textile mills, imported greater amount of goods from Ethiopia, and encouraged Indian industrialists to invest in the building of an industrial estate in Nairobi. Export of private Indian capital and managerial expertise to the African countries encouraged 24 joint ventures from 1964 to 1972 covering a wide spectrum of manufactures ranging from cotton textiles, razor blades to pharmaceuticals in countries such as Libya, Algeria, Kenya and Ethiopia.

Non-alignment became a force for the Indian and African states, for fighting common causes of development, decolonisation and disarmament at the international fora. In the late 1960s and 1970s, African countries on becoming independent adopted non-alignment as their official policy and became members of the UN.

Their presence gave non-aligned group of countries numerical majority in UNGA and with the support of socialist bloc of countries and other third world non-aligned states which included India, Egypt, Indonesia and Yugoslavia, African states could pass resolutions on burning issues facing them. The UN resolution on NIEO, isolating South African government from world community, decolonisation of Southern Africa prominently figured on the African agenda in the UN and non-aligned forums.

16.6 RELATIONS DURING THE LAST THREE DECADES

India's image with the African states in the seventies improved through the coalescence of fortuitous circumstances at the domestic and global level. The liberation of Bangladesh and the conclusion of Indo-Soviet treaty in 1971, underground implosion of nuclear device in 1974, declining Chinese influence in Africa due to ideological quarrels with Soviet Union and support China gave to South African and CIA supported forces in Angola, India's initiative to back various liberation forces in

Africa withdrawal of Indian diplomatic mission from Salisbury five months before Ian Smith's UDI in Southern Rhodesia, cumulated to revive India's image and favourably impacted India's relations with African states.

16.6.1 South-South Cooperation

Performance of the Indian and African states in the post independence period deteriorated. India's border wars with Pakistan and China, growing democratic mobilisation and the rising expectation of finances impacted the state's performance. While the declaration of internal emergency in 1976 arrested the growth of democratic tradition, issue based politics, and secular democratic mobilisation was debased by the rise of communal, casteist forces, dynastic and money power in Indian politics.

The crisis of economic and political governance in Africa had multiplicity of factors. The non-acceptance of Euro-centric states model by African masses demographic explosion from 1950 to 1980, drought, famines and consequent inability of agriculture to meet food needs of the people, lack of resources with the African states to industrialise and modernise their economies, African states consequent inability to diversify its exports from minerals and raw materials to manufactured goods, cumulated to create conditions of political instability and put the economies debt crisis in 1980s.

Economic cooperation between the countries of the South having common colonial experiences, resource and production complementarities was seen as a panacea for reducing dependence on the western metropolitan powers. The Lagos Plan of Action agreed upon by African Heads of State and Government in 1980, forcefully endorsed the concept of South-South Cooperation for reducing African states structural dependence on West and India wholeheartedly welcomed it.

The South-South Cooperation between India and Africa did not get off the ground due to the African economic linkage with the metropolitan European economies and India's inability to provide financial support for the supply of an intermediate range of technology suited to Africa's developmental needs. India continued to have bilateral trading relations with nearly 40 African states, and in 1980s composition of Indian trade underwent changes.

16.6.2 Political Cooperation

While economic cooperation under 'South-South Cooperation' failed to take off, India's cooperation in political spheres reached its peak during the 1980s. As the South African apartheid state began to squirm and went on the defensive, non-aligned support to the frontline African states peaked. In 1980s non-aligned movement set up Africa Fund to provide financial and material help to the frontline African states so as to enable them to withstand the South African military offensive against them.

16.7 INDIA-AFRICA RELATIONS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The 21st Century will see marked change in India's approach to develop political relations with the African states and penetrate African markets with the Indian goods. Though some scholars are of the view that South-South Cooperation is still possible, the global realities beckon the decision makers to develop new approaches in the new Century that has just begun.

16.7.1 Globalisation and Interdependence

Global changes have some serious consequences for African and Indian state systems. With the states of former Soviet Union opting for democracy and open market economies, the pressures on the rest of the third world states to embrace the values of open market liberal economy and democracy. With the western controlled international financial institutions insisting on democracy and protection of human rights as a precondition to giving financial assistance and liberal trading arrangements under WTO coming into existence, the African and Indian states had to relax their control over economy by privatising state controlled public sector units and invest an increasing amount of foreign direct investment in the development of infrastructure, telecommunication and modernisation of different sectors of economy.

16.7.2 Regional Cooperation

The African continent has been burdened by inter and intrastate conflicts and endemic conditions of poverty. In the fast changing international political and economic environment, states everywhere find themselves hard pressed to attract international capital and technology. They were further pushed into the periphery of international economy. Cooperation among states at the regional level for economic purposes has become an order of the day.

The European, Latin American, Asian and North American states have moved towards regional cooperation. African states have decided to form AU by 2050. Meanwhile the trend is to strengthen unity at regional level, SADC, ECOWAS, PTA, EAC, COMESA, ECCAS, SACU, OECD provide some examples of proliferating sub-regional organisations in the African context.

These organisations at the sub-regional level have been forced to look after security needs of the states at the regional level as Western powers have lost interest in African conflicts with the ending of cold war rivalry.

16.7.3 Indian Diaspora in Africa

Africa has a sizeable Indian community. The Indians are spread over 35 African states though large number of them is found in Anglophone East, Central and Southern Africa. They constitute middle level entrepreneurs and provide skilled manpower for economic growth of these countries. Being educationally and economically equipped, their presence in several African countries as intermediaries could be beneficial for the penetration of the Indian goods and capital into hinterland once the process of trade liberalisation in Africa takes place through the removal of customs and tariff barriers.

The Indian government has recently introduced several beneficial measures for the Indians abroad, with a view to co-opting them in the Indian domestic development and promotion of external trade.

India-Africa relations in the 21st Century may hinge on this crucial Indian factor. In the post-apartheid and cold war condition had come in the way of the government in cooperating with Indians in Africa. The 21st Century, being an age of growing interdependence, the Indian government will be able to utilise this national asset for India's national interest. The growth of regional organisations and the presence of Indians in Africa can help Indian trade to penetrate largely into African areas and also help in multiplying the trade between these two Indian Ocean territories.

16.8 SUMMARY

It is believed that people to people contacts between India and East Africa can be traced back to the *Puranas*. Political, cultural and social linkages continued with trading and commercial interests of the European imperial powers during the colonial period. Indians were employed by the Portuguese as bankers, accountants and artisans and by the British as indentured labour to work in the plantations but were racially discriminated against. After independence, the Government of India raised the issue of racial discrimination in the UN in 1948. The Indians were supportive of a non-violent struggle for independence against the colonial powers. The Africans found this position of India ambivalent and looked at the role of Indian troops under the UN banner in Africa, with suspicion. After 1962, India began economic diplomacy with some of the African states encouraging Indian industrialists to invest in Africa. By late 1970s African countries started adopting non-alignment as their official policy and became members of the UN. Since then, India's relations with Africa improved.

While economic cooperation between countries of the South was seen as a panacea for reducing dependence on western metropolitan powers, it could not take off between India and Africa due to Africa's economic linkage with the metropolitan European economies. Though it is considered that South-South cooperation is still possible in order to give a fillip to relations between India and Africa, new approaches will have to be developed by decision makers. This could be achieved by cooperation among states at a regional level for economic purposes. Apart from that, India-Africa relations may hinge on the crucial factor of a sizeable Indian community in Africa.

16.9 EXERCISES

- 1) Arrival of European Powers to the East after 1498 was a watershed in India-Africa relations, Do you agree?
- 2) Explain the factors influencing the 19th Century Indian migration to African colonies?
- 3) How did the African experience help Mahatma Gandhi to work for Indian independence'?
- 4) Explain the concept of South-South Cooperation? Why did South-South economic cooperation between India and Africa fail?
- 5) What was India's role in the non-aligned forum for supporting frontline African states against South Africa?