

## Modi's Visit to East Africa: Transforming Historical Relationships into Modern Partnerships

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The Indian Prime Minister Modi visited Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania and Kenya - all situated on the east coast of Africa- in July this year. These maritime neighbours are connected by the Indian Ocean which has facilitated movement of people, trade, culture and ideas for centuries between India's west coast and Africa's east coast. India, now, seeks to transform these historical relationships into modern partnerships.<sup>1</sup>

During the visit, among many issues, Prime Minister Modi spelt out a maritime agenda for cooperation and focussed on security concerns as well as the economic potential of the oceans. In Kenya, he said, "Over a millennia, the East Coast of Africa has had strong maritime links with India. Today the same east coast is facing a complex set of strategic and security challenges. The entire domain of maritime and coastal security is therefore mature for deeper engagement between our two countries."<sup>2</sup> In Tanzania, Modi said, "Being neighbours across Indian Ocean, President and I agreed to deepen our overall defence and security partnership, especially in the maritime domain."<sup>3</sup> In South Africa, he said, "The waters of the Indian Ocean are our common sea frontiers. And, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) has emerged as a key platform of engagement for the maritime neighbours connected by the Indian Ocean. I welcome South Africa's chairmanship of the organization for 2017-19".<sup>4</sup> In Mozambique, the Indian Prime Minister said, "It (the Indian Ocean) is an ocean of many economic opportunities. But, we are also aware of

the emerging strategic and security challenges in the maritime domain. To advance our shared security interests, President and I have today agreed to strengthen our defence and security relationship.”<sup>5</sup>

Modi’s visit was a continuum of India’s broader engagement with Africa, which saw a decisive forward movement with the third India Africa Forum Summit (IAFS) held in India from 26-29 October 2015. Representatives of all 54 African countries participated in the Summit. Among them were 41 Heads of State or Government<sup>6</sup>. India’s commitment to engage with Africa can be gauged from the fact that India’s Vice President visited Morocco and Tunisia from 30 May to 5 June 2016; and India’s President was in Ghana, Ivory Coast and Namibia from 12-18 June 2016. Interestingly, all these African countries visited by India’s apex leadership are coastal states. They are washed by the waters of the Indian Ocean like in the countries visited by Modi; or the Atlantic Ocean like in the countries visited by the Indian President; or the Mediterranean Sea like in the countries visited by the Vice President.

This thrust to engage African states, comes at a time when the dominant narrative is also changing from that of a ‘dark continent’ to a ‘rising’ Africa.<sup>7</sup> Africa is looking for partners and not donors and discussions about Africa now focus on economic policies, business models and investment opportunities and the stress is on how business opportunities will make a positive impact on societies in Africa. Significantly, on many occasions, it is the African youth who have been the torchbearers of this change.

In the above context, this issue brief spells out the importance of Modi’s four nation tour to the east coast of Africa; the historical ties India shares with them; and the key constituents of the modern partnership being sought to be built between India and Africa.

## Importance of the Visit

First, this Prime Ministerial visit was taking place in a long time; Mozambique after 34 years; Kenya after 35 years; and South Africa after 10 years. Tanzania was the only exception and former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had visited in 2011.

Second, these countries are India's extended maritime neighbours. Their ports provide access to many of the landlocked countries of Africa which have trade relations with India. So, cordial relations with these countries will help Indian businesses to get easy access to these countries as well as other landlocked neighbours.

Third, these countries have a sizeable Indian Diaspora. Kenya has 80,000; Tanzania 50,000; Mozambique 20,000; and South Africa more than a million. They are contributing to the development of these countries, and many of them hold key government positions; are successful entrepreneurs; and influential leaders. They are capable of positively influencing the policy formulated by the host government towards India. Fourth, the visit enabled to consolidate gains of the third India Africa Forum Summit (IAFS) held in October 2016 in New Delhi.

Fifth, these visits facilitated discussion on defence cooperation including maritime cooperation.

Sixth, these countries are members of IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association) of which, India is also a member. The IORA provides a platform for discussions on issues relating to the maritime domain.<sup>8</sup>

Lastly, it is essential that a peaceful environment prevails in the Indian Ocean as some of the world's most important and busiest International Shipping Lanes (ISL) carrying merchandise and critical energy resources pass through this ocean. While the Indian Ocean has no major territorial disputes, there exist non-traditional security threats. These, need to be addressed collectively by all littoral states. Thus, energy security, food security, merchandise security and overall trade security is closely connected to maritime security. In the absence of formal security architecture in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), visits such as these and the partnerships which emerge from these visits promote consensus building through a dialogue centric

approach.<sup>9</sup> All these positive bilateral and multilateral relations enable India to be an effective 'net security provider' in the IOR.

The visit confirmed India's commitment to a dialogue-based inclusive approach in the maritime domain wherein all parties refrain from threat or use of force; and all countries adhere to promotion of seamless connectivity, guaranteeing right of maritime passage and unimpeded commerce in accordance with international law. Further, that India believes in a consultative process to help defuse rivalries, rather than unilateral announcements, which could add to regional tensions.

## Historical Ties

Historical connections bring out the cultural and civilization bonding between different countries and their peoples. These provide that critical template on which the narrative of cooperation can continue and help respond to new challenges. During the visit, Prime Minister Modi repeatedly referred to the historical connections between India and Africa that were facilitated by the maritime medium – the Indian Ocean.

Modi stressed how in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Indians were brought to build railways in Kenya. In this context, he spoke of the iconic Mombasa Uganda Railway built during the colonial rule. Many of these Indians stayed back and, participated in economic development of Kenya, joined their freedom struggle and became citizens of that country. It is interesting to note that the rich Swahili language includes many Hindi words.<sup>10</sup>

In Tanzania, the PM said, "We are old maritime neighbours. Together, our leaders and our people have fought colonialism and racial oppression. Our merchants have traded since early nineteenth century. And, the vast stretch of Indian Ocean has kept our societies and people connected"<sup>11</sup>. He further explained how the world was closely connected in the eighteenth century itself; for the Mandvi Port in Gujarat and the port in Zanzibar were inter-dependent. He also referred to

the literary works wherein merchants of Mandvi Port are shown eagerly awaiting the arrival of Swahili boats.<sup>12</sup>

In South Africa, Prime Minister Modi recalled that it was in 1860 that the first Indians landed in the country. On 16 November 1860, the ship TRURO touched the shores of port Natal with 342 Indians. He noted that Durban is home to the largest number of people of Indian origin in South Africa; and referring to Mahatma Gandhi he said that it was in South Africa that Mohandas became Mahatma.<sup>13</sup>

As regards Mozambique, Modi referred to the Siddi community that resides in parts of India, and is known to trace its ancestry to that country. He said that these communities are a living testimony to age old links that have connected the people, their ideas, traditions, culture and commerce.<sup>14</sup>

It were on these historical relationships that Modi sought to build modern partnerships of security and development.

## The Modern Partnership

The process of building modern partnerships in Africa took a decisive leap forward with the IAFS -3 held in India and the summit adopted the Strategic Partnership Agreement. Among other issues, the IAFS called for technology partnership; high priority to increase trade and investment flows; intensify cooperation against terrorism and rally the word to build a common cause against it; and develop closer defence and security cooperation especially in capability development, which would be the key pillar of India-Africa partnership. The deliberations of the summit also brought out the gaps that existed between intention and implementation of various projects involving India. To address this, the members decided to set up a monitoring mechanism.<sup>15</sup>

One of the important issues highlighted during the IAFS 3 was cooperation in Blue or the Ocean Economy. The Framework for Strategic Cooperation spelt out that India and Africa would place special emphasis on exploring closer collaboration through training, capacity building and joint projects in developing sustainable

fisheries, maritime connectivity, managing marine resources, exploring non-marine resources, promoting eco-tourism, developing renewable energy, and disaster risk reduction through modern early warning tools, pollution control and other coastal and ocean studies; and pursue cooperation in port operations and marine transport, address illegal and unregulated fishing and hydrography. All this was important as livelihoods of large sections of people in India and Africa are dependent on the oceans. This includes the salience of global and regional trade, and harnessing of marine resources, which contribute towards economic prosperity of the peoples of the region. <sup>16</sup> Further to develop Blue Economy there is need to develop infrastructure in coastal areas and island territories; build new networks of economic activity in the coastal areas and in the linked hinterlands; and develop eco-friendly marine industries and technologies.

Apart from bilateral efforts, India sees multilateral fora IORA to have the potential to address issues of security and economy in the maritime domain. This was brought out in its discussions with South Africa, which takes over as the chair of IORA in 2017 for two years. South Africa would commemorate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the formation of this grouping, wherein the deliberations would focus on the need to fully harness the economic opportunities offered by the maritime domain, including Blue Economy as well as the maritime security aspects.

During the visit, discussions on defence cooperation were held, and agreements concluded with some countries. The MoU on Defence Cooperation signed with Kenya proposes to strengthen the institutional cooperation between their defence establishments. This would include greater staff exchanges; sharing of expertise and experiences; training and institution building, cooperation in hydrography, and supply of equipment. India shared its views on terrorism and the rapid spread of radical ideologies which pose common challenges to all regions of the world. India and Africa agreed to deepen the security partnership including in the fields of cyber security, combating smuggling of drugs and narcotics, and human trafficking. <sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

Prime Minister Modi's visit to the four countries of east Africa has conveyed India's commitment to engage with Africa economically, politically and strategically. Modi sought to strengthen the relations by transforming the historical connections into modern partnerships by focusing on Blue Economy and the opportunities that it offers; and addressing collectively the challenges of maritime security. A closer look brings out that they are two sides of the same coin. For, it is the assurance of maritime security, which will enable economic activity in the maritime domain to flourish.

The key elements of the modern partnership with these four countries are same as those in SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), which is India's maritime policy towards the Indian Ocean littorals. The goodwill created by such high level visits to Indian Ocean littoral countries, also helps India to be an effective 'net security provider' in the Indian Ocean Region. Further, Blue Economy calls for development of coastal areas and island territories by building networks of economic activity, which link them to the hinterland; upgrading existing ports and building new ones to facilitate trade; focus on ship-building and associated activities. These are part of India's 'Sagarmala' Project, which seeks to tap the economic potential of India's long coastline and inland waterways. However, the fruits of these policies will depend on not only the investments made, but also the implementation of these projects .

While, more reciprocal visits between India and Africa are likely to follow and strengthen the process of engagement, India needs to implement the agreements at three levels- political, strategic and economic. Only then, will real and meaningful transformation of the relations take place, more so at a time when Africa itself is moving ahead and is attracting major players like the USA, China and Europe.

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