

University of Mumbai



European Slave Routes in the Indian Ocean

Working Paper No. 10

Prof. Aparajita Biswas

Centre for African Studies

University of Mumbai

Center for African Studies

Area Studies Building

Behind Marathi Bhasha Bhavan

University of Mumbai

Vidyanagari, Santacruz (E)

Mumbai: 400 098.

Tel Off: 022 2652 00 00 Ext. 417.

E mail: renumodi2003@yahoo.com

african_studies@rediffmail.com

Resume

Dr. Aparajita Biswas completed her M.A. in International Relations from Jadavpur University, Kolkata (erstwhile Calcutta). She did her Ph.D. in African Studies from University of Mumbai and presently is a professor at the Centre for African Studies, University of Mumbai, India. She is associated with many universities, research institutes and research groups in India and abroad. Her main interest in research includes India- Africa relations, Africa's international regional organizations in Asia and Africa, Africa and the Indian Ocean region and South and Southern Africa

Earlier version of this article published at <http://www.esocialsciences.com> in 2006.

European Slave Routes in the Indian Ocean

Prof. Aparajita Biswas

This paper attempts to discuss the implications of the European slave trade in the Indian Ocean from 15th century onwards; duplicity of the European policy of slave trade; the conflict of interests among the Europeans themselves; and how the slave trade had flourished, to replace Indian Ocean's traditional commerce in spices and ivory, involving the Arabs, Indians and Africans. The article also hypothesises that towards the middle of the 19th century, European capitalism created conditions that turned human beings into a commodity for sale. Such conditions helped produce a colonial proletariat in the form of indentured labour (i.e. Indian coolies and the French 'free' slaves) to be transplanted from one colonial possession to another by mutual agreement between European powers.

Keywords: Slave trade; Indian Ocean; European capitalism; African trade; Portuguese

The Indian Ocean Region has been known for trade and commerce since ancient times. Available documents between 1st and 10th Century A.D., such as the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* - a guide on the Indian Ocean, *Geography of Ptolemaus* and the *travelogue of Al-Masudi*, bear eloquent testimony to the vibrant trading activities in the Indian Ocean Region. Around 9th Century AD, commerce on the East African coast was given a boost by Arab, Persian and Indian traders who shipped East Coast staples to the traditional markets around the Indian Ocean and beyond, to China.

According to the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, there was an important trading port between the Bay of Zeila and Rhapta, a place located somewhere in Tanzania. The Mediterranean region traded commodities like dyed clothes, metal goods, wines and drinking cups; Indian traders on their part, brought cotton and sugar, in exchange for ivory, spices and gums available at the coastal market of Somalia. Significantly, none of the above documents mention slaves as a

significant article of overseas exchange. Moreover, European merchants did not venture to the East African coast during this early period. It was the Italian merchants who carried commodities like silk, rugs and spices of the East through the Mediterranean Sea, to the European markets. East African ivory and gold were also sent to the markets of Europe through Arab and Italian channels. Gold, which was exported in small quantities from Sofala (Mozambique) at the end of the first millennium, became a profitable commodity of trade along with iron, in the 12th and 13th Centuries. During this period, slave trade did exist, with slaves from Zanj (the land of blacks) being sent in significant numbers to Arabia, Iraq and Persia. However, compared to gold and iron, the slave trade occupied an insignificant place in Indian Ocean trade.¹

Subsequently, the expansion of commerce on the East Coast led to an increase in the volume of slave trade. Ibn Batuta who had visited India sometime in 13th century A.D had left a vivid account of the African slave trade to India. From his writings, we get to know that, when the Muslims conquered the valley of the Ganges river of India in the 11th and 12th Centuries, a slave dynasty held power for some time.

In the 13th Century, Ethiopian slaves known as *Habshis* or *Siddis* were much sought after in places as far apart as Ceylon and Gujarat (India). These slaves were usually soldiers and sailors. It was because of their navigational skills that they were specially entrusted with the task of guarding the forts along the coast of India. When the Portuguese invaded India and conquered places like Chaul, Bassein (near Bombay), Daman and Diu (Gujarat) on the western coast of India, they encountered forceful opposition from Indian rulers who had recruited the *Siddis* in large numbers in their armed forces.

During the 15th Century, at a time when Muslim traders dominated the South Seas, there was a record influx of slaves from East African countries into India. Not surprisingly, towards the end of the 15th Century, there were several interesting references to African slaves in the Muslim Kingdom of Bengal. Documents refer to King Rukh-ud-din-Barbak of Gaur, the ancient capital of Bengal, who ruled from 1453-1474. He possessed about 8,000 African slaves and was the first King in India to place a large number of these slaves in high ranks in the King's army²

The reason for such a big influx of African slaves into India was the decline in the exports of slaves from South East Asian countries like Malaysia and Indonesia: The Muslim traders found their best outlet for slaves in the Near East, which they reached through Yemen and the Persian Gulf. Thereafter, the next stimulus to the slave trade in the Indian Ocean region came from Europe, and not from 'their kinsmen in Asia'.

My paper attempts to discuss the implications of the European slave trade in the Indian Ocean from 15th Century onwards; duplicity of the European policy of slave trade; the conflict of interests among the Europeans themselves; and how the slave trade had flourished, to replace Indian Ocean's traditional commerce in spices and ivory, involving the Arabs, Indians and Africans.

The article also makes a hypothesis that towards the middle of the 19th Century, European capitalism created conditions that turned human beings into a commodity for sale. Such conditions helped produce a colonial proletariat in the form of indentured labour (i.e. Indian coolies and the French "free" slaves) to be trans- planted from one colonial possession to another by mutual agreement between European powers.

European Slave Trade Route

In 1498, Vasco da Gama's fleet penetrated the Indian Ocean from Cape Guardafui to Sofala in Mozambique, in the quest for spices. They were interested in the East African Coast of the Indian Ocean because it was a route to the Indies – the land of spices. Their interest in slaves and gold came much later. The arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean region altered the entire pattern of the maritime trade. In order to establish Portuguese supremacy on the entire Indian Ocean coastal region, they planted 6 commercial and strategic points from South-East Africa to South West India, from where Portuguese soldiers launched attacks on the rival traders.³

The ruthless monopolistic trading policy of the Portuguese caused a rapid decay of the coastal cities and struck a severe blow to Arab trade. In fact, the aggressiveness of the Portuguese completely displaced the commercial aristocracy of the Arabs and destroyed their dominant position in Indian Ocean trade. In 1507, the Portuguese colonized Mozambique, which since

then was regularly used as a port of call by shipping traffic to and from India. By 1509, the Portuguese had established their hegemony in the Indian

Ocean region which lasted throughout the remaining decade of the 16th Century. They seized strategic points along the shores of the Indian Ocean and made Goa their major base of operation, from where they went further a field, establishing markets in other parts of India.⁴

After 1550, Mozambique became the centre of trading activities of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean, and went on to gain the status of Headquarters of the Portuguese administration in East Africa. Thus, in a few short years, as Coupland writes, “the whole of the long-established Arab control of the coasts and waters in the Indian Ocean passed into the European hands.”⁵

It was only in the 17th and 18th Centuries that the Portuguese, on their way to India, discovered a number of ports in South-West Africa, which were involved in slave trade. The Portuguese, through their intermediary in Malagasy, loaded their ships with slaves from the northern part of the Malagasy Islands. They preferred to frequent the northwest coasts, which were layover points between Mozambique and Goa in India, and there take on slave cargoes bound for India.⁶

During the 17th Century, other European powers like the Dutch, the French and the English were also a force in the Indian Ocean. After the prolonged vicissitudes of the Portuguese rule and recurrent hostilities among rival European powers in the Indian Ocean, the Portuguese lost their hegemony in the region. In ousting the Portuguese from the Indian Ocean trade and commerce, the English and the Dutch took control of the strategically important area between the Red Sea and the Philippines. As a result, the Portuguese power collapsed and they lost their possessions in the Straits of Hormuz. Goa and Malacca were the only two places where they could retain their foothold.⁷

After Portuguese, the Dutch were the most active in slave trade in the Indian Ocean. Although they took possession of Mauritius in 1598, it was only in 1644 that they planted settlements there. They also wrested Ceylon (Sri Lanka) from the Portuguese. By the end of the 17th Century, they had established their trading spheres in the Persian Gulf as well as in the Indian Ocean coastal areas and the Malayan Archipelago, However, the unhealthy competition between the

British and the Dutch over the slave trade ultimately led to bitter warfare between these two rival powers in the second half of the 17th Century. It is important to note here that the subsequent victory of England over the Netherlands was a turning point in the history of the 18th Century, as it brought the British face-to-face with France. The Anglo-French rivalry, colonial and commercial, became a dominant theme in the years to come. It was a conflict of rival mercantilism, which was fought in India, West Indies, Africa and Canada - either for looting India or for gaining control over strategic commodities like 'Negroes', tobacco, sugar, fish and fur. Of these items, Negroes and sugar were considered to be the most valuable items.⁸

The French established their posts in India in the latter half of the 17th Century. The centers for their Indian trade had been established towards the south, at Pondicherry, in 1674, and eastwards at Chandanagore, near Calcutta, in 1676. However, it was their acquisition of Ile de France (Mauritius) from the Dutch in 1715 and Bourbon (Reunion) in 1642 and their subsequent settlement policy, which encouraged them into the slave trade in the Indian Ocean region. The need for manpower for the growth of sugarcane, cotton, indigo and food crops in Ile de France and Bourbon encouraged France to bring in slaves from India, Senegal, Brazil, Malaysia, Madagascar and Mozambique. Initially, supplies came solely from the south of Cape Delgado, a Portuguese slaving station in the Indian Ocean, which played a major role in the clandestine slave trade.⁹

Thereafter, France purchased the slaves from the Sultan of Kilwa in East Africa. As a result, the slave population of Bourbon grew substantially from around 387 in 1808 to 30,000 in 1779 and 50,000 in 1809-10... while that of Ile de France increased from 19,000 in 1766 to 55,000 in 1809-1810.¹⁰

Meanwhile the English had also settled themselves on the Indian soil, in places like Surat in 1612, Madras in 1639, and Calcutta in 1650. They also acquired Bombay as a dowry from Catherine of Braganza, wife of Charles II, in 1655. The following years witnessed extensive Anglo-French rivalries in the region, which ended in the establishment of English supremacy in the Indian Ocean, towards the close of the Napoleonic war in Europe. During this period, England was also very much engaged in the slave trade. Beginning with a very modest share in

the 16th Century, they went on to become the leading slave traders by the end of the 18th Century. The British government on its part was uniformly consistent in its encouragement of the slave trade.

In fact, all classes of English society like the Church, the Monarchy, and public opinion in general, supported the slave trade.¹¹ During the 18th Century, British slave traders provided the sugar planters of France and Spain with half a million Negroes. Britain was not only the foremost slave trading country in the world, it had become as Ramsay puts it, “the honorable slave carrier of her rivals.” It may be mentioned here that Liverpool and Bristol in England were the biggest slave trading ports in the Old World, with the profits from trading of the human cargo being enormous.¹²

The 18th Century also witnessed a new pattern of triangular trade in which England, France and colonial America equally supplied the exports and the ships; Africa supplied the human merchandise; the plantations the colonial raw materials. The slave ships sailed from the home country with a cargo of manufactured goods, which was exchanged for Negroes at a profit on the coast of Africa. The Negroes were then traded on the plantations at another profit, in exchange for a cargo of colonial produce, which was taken back to the home country. The triangular trade helped the British industry so much that the profits gained provided one of the main sources for the accumulation of capital in Britain, which went on to finance the Industrial Revolution.¹³

Paradoxically, however, when Britain was consolidating its power in trade and commerce in the region, it startled the world with its anti-slavery campaign and the passing of an abolition law in Parliament, in 1807. Four years after passing of the law, the British Parliament declared slave trade by British nationals as a piratical act, subject to severe punishment. Two important events - 1) the abolition of the slave trade by the British Government, as mentioned above and 2) introduction of the free labour scheme, proved to be the turning point in the history of 19th Century. In this regard, I wish to examine several propositions, as mentioned below.

Firstly, Britain’s anti-slavery movement was not prompted so much by humanitarian ideas as by its various commercial and imperial motives. This was also the view held by Britain’s European rivals. France, in particular, “suspected Britain’s campaign to abolish the slave trade as a

decorous cover for the profit- able extension of commercial connexions by the ‘contemptible shopkeepers’¹⁴

Secondly, the British undertook measures to combat the so-called Arab slave trade, to retain the strategically dominant position they had gained in the Eastern seas at the close of the Napoleonic war. It was under the cover of eliminating slave traffic that Britain attempted to a) promote its commercial and military interests; b) keep a guard over the activities of other European powers in the area, and c) to control the internal affairs of the littoral countries.¹⁵

Thirdly, it was precisely because of Britain’s anti-slavery campaign spread over half a century, that traditional oceanic commerce involving Arabs, Indians and Africans collapsed and was replaced by an immensely profitable trade in human flesh, which constituted an integral part of western penetration into the heart of Africa. The new slave trade of Indian indentured labour and French engage system opened new territories for the penetration of European capital and commerce. In other words, a labor force was created at exactly the time when European capital floated a host of commercial and industrial ventures for long investment in Africa.¹⁶ In the discussions that follow, I shall try to prove that there are substantial grounds to sustain the above propositions. After the Napoleonic War, the Indian Ocean, as Graham puts it, “became a British Lake”¹⁷.

Britain’s supremacy in the area was strengthened by the ring of strategic places it had captured during the war, such as Cape of Good Hope (1806), Ile de France – Mauritius (1810), Simon Bay (1813) and Seychelles (1810). After the Treaty of Paris (1814), England returned Bourbon (off Mauritius) to France and accepted Portugal’s claim to the coastal belt of Mozambique. However, Britain’s control over the Indian Ocean remained unassailable because, to quote Graham, “she needed only a few fortified bases to control the monopoly of the world’s busiest thoroughfare.”¹⁸ This monopoly was however used for the protection of the Indian Empire. In fact India was at the heart of the British Empire. All eastern sea-lanes led to the sub-continent, which had become the strategic center of a commercial network that covered the whole Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. These plans involved signing of political and diplomatic alliances with the local rulers in the region. In this regard, Britain’s alliance with Muscat in the Gulf of Oman became

imperative for the security of the sea and land routes to India, especially in view of the pressing need to meet the threat of piracy in the Gulf area. Also the island was an “indispensable watering and refreshment base” for the Royal Navy, with plenty of melons, grapes, mangoes, onions, potatoes, barley, and small quantities of wheat and rice—in the summer months.”¹⁹

This meant that strategic, not commercial considerations, governed Britain’s policy in the Indian Ocean region. As a result, the Imperial Government of Britain and the Indian Government were both anxious to cultivate Sultan Siddi Seyyid of Muscat. Seyyid, on his part, also realized that he needed British support to establish Oman’s superiority in the region.

Moreover, Seyyid raised a large fleet of merchant ships and battleships. He acquired a substantial fighting fleet of frigates, corvettes, sloops and brigs, as well as a large merchant marine that traded from Persian Gulf to Celebes and from shores of the Arabian Sea to Mozambique. By the end of 1826, he had added a ship-of-the line - the 74-gun Liverpool of 1,800 tons, built to his specification in Bombay. Along with it, there were 5 ships of over 30 guns, one of 24, one of 22, two of 18 and two of 12. Although he never fought a full-scale naval action, but this fleet used to escort convoys, frightened pirates, bombarded hostile or rebellious Arabs or African seaport and brought great prestige.²⁰

In 1833, an American Commissioner, Edward Roberts, who had visited Cochin, China and Siam on his way to Muscat, was impressed by the presence of trained naval officers in Seyyid’s navy and its relative strength. He admired the relative strength for Seyyid’s navy and asserted that Seyyid possessed “a mere efficient naval force than all the native princes combined from the Cape of Good Hope to Japan.”²¹

However Seyyid was more interested in trade than in the fleet. “I am nothing but a merchant” he confided to a French traveller.²² It was the prospect of oceanic trade that compelled Seyyid to move his capital from Muscat to Zanzibar in 1840. Zanzibar offered various facilities as a harbor. Not only had it fresh water that was famous for its pleasant taste, purity and abundance, but it also provided a creek just north of the town where vessels up to 300-400 tons could be careened.²³ There was also a beach nearby where mangrove poles could be landed and stored while waiting for local buyers or trans-shipment for the Gulf. Thus, both as a harbor and as a commercial center, Zanzibar had much to offer to dhows and to the European vessels. On one

hand, it offered sheltered harbor for European vessels along with safe water supply and access to the African produce, which the dhows brought from the mainland, and on the other, it offered a safe anchorage to dhows. Zanzibar's central location in the Indian Ocean region turned the island into the most important trading centre along the East African coast. By setting up his Headquarters in Zanzibar Seyyid had laid the foundation of growing commercial empire the like of which had never known before. In course of time, Zanzibar became an important transit point for all the commodities brought from African interiors like, ivory, gum, copal, coconut oil, hide, tortoise shell, etc to be sold to the European merchants for goods in cotton, floor, sugar, spirit, glassware, arms, etc.²⁴ However, it was not entirely due to the physical location that the harbor of Zanzibar became important. There was also a certain amount of compulsion in this regard. Trading in the Marina Coast, which was situated on the opposite side of Zanzibar, was legally limited to subjects of Sultan. Thus, American and European vessels had to trade in Zanzibar....cutting out the middlemen was not an option for them. Furthermore, there was a system of graduated duties for goods coming to Zanzibar from the coast. The Sultan imposed on all the European goods a flat rate of 5% tax. Goods from the more distant ports paid lower duties than the ports just opposite to Zanzibar from the coast. It was because of a centralized customs administration Zanzibar's revenues rose steadily during his time. For example, Zanzibar's total custom revenue was only 10,000 pound per year during 1820's, while in 1856, after his death it had increased five-fold.²⁵

In 1859, Zanzibar exported the maximum amount of ivory, cloves and gum copal to American and European markets. Besides these items, sesame and cowries were also exported to France and West Africa. The principal imports were American cottons, Indian dyed cloth, English cottons, rice, Venetian beads, and muskets. During this period, the total value of exports was 755,666 pounds and imports, 908,911 pounds.²⁶

Judging from the records of Zanzibar 's rising revenue from legitimate trade, it is difficult to accept the then British contention that the Sultan's income was derived primarily from slave traffic. The plantation of cloves which the Sultan had introduced in Zanzibar, may have encouraged a flow of African labourers to the island, but the large scale smuggling of slaves to which the Select Committee referred, could in no way have benefited the Sultan's revenue.²⁷

In fact, being eager to expand Zanzibar's legitimate trade with Western countries, Seyyid welcomed American and German merchants and businessmen to his domain. In 1833, he signed an agreement of amity and commerce with captain Roberts giving American merchants full access to trade with any ports of his kingdom by submitting a duty of 5% on all cargoes landed from American ships. In 1847, Germans had also shown an interest in importing ivory, gum, cowry, beads soap and other trinkets.²⁸ In 1856, an agreement was signed on the same lines of the American treaty between the representative of Lubeck, Broomen, Hamburg and Seyyid's successor, Sultan Majid.

However, with the French, Seyyid was a bit apprehensive. He was unconvinced about France's intention in the region because like the British, the French also had extra-commercial interests. In 1840, a French ship visited Zanzibar and its commander demanded permission to erect a fort and buildings in Mogadishu and Drava.²⁹ Seyyid did not like the aggressiveness of the commander; nevertheless he executed a trading agreement with France and accepted the French Consul in Zanzibar.³⁰

However, the British were disturbed by Seyyid's trading contacts. They suspected that it could loosen their political grip in the region. The British Consul in Zanzibar, Capt. Hamerton, was instructed to keep a close watch on the Sultan's transactions with other European powers. Hamerton who was a political agent as well as Consul was disturbed to see Seyyid's growing trading influence in the East Coast of Africa. In a letter to Palmerstone, the then British Foreign Secretary, he wrote "The East Coast of Africa is attracting the notice of the commercial men of all nations, particularly that part called Mrima, and His Highness now entertains the greatest possible fear that without the assistance and kind consideration of the governments of the Western World, changes most unfavorable to his interest will take place."³¹

Later, Hamerton brought Indian soldiers to protect strategic points in the island. Simultaneously, he used the British campaign against slave trade as a leverage to assert political authority over Zanzibar. The most effective means in this connection were the various treaties the British imposed on the Sultan between 1822 and 1870, which will be discussed elsewhere in this paper.

Before the Napoleonic War, both Portugal and France were known to have extensive engagements in slave trade off the coast of Mozambique and the islands under French possession. On the East African coast, the Portuguese were most active, with reports that they were exporting 10,000 to 12,000 slaves annually to their settlements in India, Madagascar, Mascarenes and Brazil. Every year, ships coming from Rio de Janeiro to Mozambique carried provisions and returned with slaves, besides gold dust and gums. However, trade on the East African coast was significantly reduced from 10,000 a year to 3,000 because of Britain's anti-slave campaign in the Indian Ocean and particularly, after the British occupation of Ile de France and Bourbon.³³

Nevertheless, in 1810, an Anglo-Portuguese agreement legitimized Portuguese overseas trade in slaves with South America. In 1823, Captain Owen, a British Survey officer aboard the ship, *Laven*, reported that the export of slaves from Quilimane had grown from about 2,500 during 1814-1819 to 10,000 in 1823.³⁴ Mozambique according to his report, was shipping 15,000 slaves a year, mainly to Latin America. As to the estimate of slaves transported to the French islands, the figures were not definite. However, the French planters in Mauritius, even after the island had come under the British, were demanding the supply of 40,000 African and Indian labourers to work on their sugar plantations.³⁵

Meanwhile, to check the flow of the slave trade, HM Government negotiated treaties with the European governments.³⁶ Under the Treaty of Friendship and Alliance, which was signed at Rio de Janeiro on 19th February 1810, Portugal had agreed to cooperate in the gradual abolition of its slave trade. The treaty affirmed Portugal's "rights" to carry slaves from Africa only to Brazil and to concede the reciprocal right to the British to search their ships. The Portuguese were forbidden to carry slaves to any land not subject to the authority of the Portuguese crown. There was no definite time limit set for the cessation of the slave trade.³⁷

However, in the absence of clear instructions from the British Administration, British men-of-war seized Portuguese ships carrying slaves from her possessions in Africa to Brazil. The Portuguese vehemently protested against this as breach of faith and subsequently, a Convention was signed between Portuguese and Britain on 21st January 1815 in Vienna. By this treaty,

Britain agreed to pay 300,000 pound compensation in full discharge of claims of Portuguese ships detained by the British cruisers before 1st June 1814. On the following day (22nd January), a revised treaty was signed.³⁸ Again, an Anglo-French Convention was signed in 1831 “for the more effectual suppression of Traffick in Slaves”. By this treaty, the contracting parties accepted reciprocal right of search of their ships carrying slaves abroad. However, France later repudiated this agreement of 1831 on the ground that the disproportionate naval superiority of England rendered reciprocity as futile and “illusory”.³⁹ In fact, France was skeptical about British motives. According to them, reciprocal right of search “was simply another device to ensure the prosperity of Britain by placing annoying obstacles in the way of French overseas trade.”⁴⁰ For several years thereafter, the French slave ships were still at work in the Indian Ocean.

It is evident from the above that there were contradictory aspects to the British campaign against slave trade in the East. Firstly, despite agreements, British cruisers did not search ships carrying cargoes loaded with slaves and hoisting European flags. This rendered England’s anti-slavery measures virtually ineffective. Palmerstone, the then British Foreign Secretary, admitted to this aspect in 1838. According to him, “the reason why the slave trade is extensive is not that the slave ships elude the vigilance of our cruisers, but this vigilance is rendered unveiling by the want of treaty powers.”⁴¹

The Slave Treaties

The absence of ‘Treaty Power’ did not deter the British from dealing with Seyyid, the ruler of Oman and Zanzibar. The British had systematically destroyed the legitimate trade of the Arabs in this region by calling it an illegitimate traffic in slaves. The Moresby Treaty which Seyyid signed included 1) abolition of all slave trade forever from his dominion; 2) all Arab ships engaged in slave traffic for other countries, to be seized and their captains and crew punished; 3) all Arab vessels had to carry passes without which vessels found with slaves could be seized by the British cruisers; 4) Arab vessels loaded with slaves would also be seized if bound eastward of a line drawn from Cape of Delgado, passing 60 miles east of Socotra and then to Diu on the western end of the Gulf of Cambay in India; and 5) appointment of an agent in Zanzibar and neighboring ports for the purpose of having intelligence and watching the traffic in slaves with Christian nations.⁴²

In 1822, Seyyid issued a decree to the effect that British ships were authorized to seize Arab vessels violating the terms of the agreement. By submitting to the provision of the Morseby Treaty, Seyyid virtually accepted the British surveillance treaty over his commercial dealings. It was open to the British ships to search any vessel suspected of carrying slaves on board.

The system led to many abuses, with Arab vessels bound for any part of the world, being interfered with and destroyed by British crewmen. Such interference was a regular feature because of an offer of bounty money for every slave captured, which gave further impetus to the “buccaneering spirit” of the average British sailor.⁴³ Moreover, there was no provision for compensation to ships from Muscat and Zanzibar, which the British treasury offered to any European vessel carrying slave trade.

The Mauritius Governor, Faraquhar, warned Moresby not to commit his government to any expenditure of that sort. Even the British Indian government was not very inclined to negotiate with the Arab chiefs regarding the matter. Interestingly, Faraquhar, who took great interest in crushing the slave trade, was found soliciting the British Government to liberalize rules for the import of African and Indian labour to Mauritius under the “free labour” scheme.⁴⁴

The important question that arose was whether the Arabs were indulging in the slave trade for commercial purposes. According to contemporary records, Arabs carried African slaves and took them to different places in Arabia, Persia, Turkey and India. But the major commodity of trade was not slave as was the case in Trans-Atlantic slave trade. According to the report, Asians were more considerate in their treatment of the slaves than their Europeans counterpart. “The Arabs,” wrote Livingstone, “are said to treat their slaves kindly and this also may be said of native masters (in Zanzibar); the reason is master and slave partake of the general indolence.”⁴⁵ During the long and tedious journey from Zanzibar to the Persian Gulf, Graham writes, a slave was hospitably treated as a “free passenger and he was not bound or kept in particular restraints: cloth was not abundant, but there was usually a sufficiency of dates, millet-seed, rice and fish....”

To judge by the records, the British officers never found a fettered Negro in any Arab dhow. As to the actual traffic in slaves, Capt. Owen reported from Leven, in 1823, that he found no export of slaves from Cape Gurdafui to Barawa.⁴⁶ The chief slave markets, according to him, were mostly located in the South, adjoining the Portuguese territories. It would appear that the anti-slave campaigners had misinterpreted the Arab custom of taking slaves, which had a social rather than an economic purpose. The move never succeeded; on the contrary, the extensive zone of slave traffic created conditions for the smuggling of slaves in a big way. Slave catchers came to know that no vessels with French flags could be taken and searched by the British cruisers. Hence slavers belonging to northern Arab piratical groups—converged on the East African coast to capture slaves and sell them to the Europeans for huge profit.

Even Seyyid himself favored the banning of slave smuggling as this deprived him of customs revenue. Besides, he had extensive business of clove and ivory with the foreign market. He had no compulsion to be active in the slave smuggling. However he became helpless in the face of British pressure and accepted the British rights of inspection even to his own ships.⁴⁷

The British Foreign Office realised that efforts to suppress the slave trade had borne little fruit. Moreover, the agreement worked out with other European powers had proved ineffectual. On the one hand, France defied the Royal Navy and openly transported slaves from the East African and Zanzibar coasts. Supplied with French flags, Arab dhows smuggled slaves to Mozambique, Nossi-Be and Bourbon. On the other hand, with the connivance of officials the slave trade off the Mozambique coast continued unabated. Portuguese governors even became part owners of slave vessels. A Governor of Qulimane, a notorious slave mart on the Mozambique coast, was said to have received \$7,000. Even if profits were not as large as this figure indicates, the financial profit was large enough to encourage widespread corruption and official collusion.⁴⁸

Even the abolition decree issued in 1836 failed to prevent the outflow of slaves from Mozambique, not because of the vested interests of the Portuguese residents in that colony as it was the major source of public revenue, but more so because of the large demand for slaves from the America and Asia. The trade in slaves continued to flourish, for which the Portuguese Governor of Mozambique pleaded for “understanding, sympathy and continued support” from the British.

The Portuguese trade from Mozambique continued to go north of the coastline, sometimes through Zanzibar to the Portuguese settlements on the coast of India, and the petty sheikhdoms on the Persian Gulf, and occasionally, eastwards to Bourbon (Reunion) or the French Comoro Island. An interesting estimate had been given by F.Torres Texugo, a Portuguese serving a political sentence in Mozambique, that no less than 17,000 slaves were officially exported annually... that is, after paying export duties at the estimated rate of seven and a half dollars per slave.⁴⁹ In 1850, Lisbon too announced that it would not allow the search for slaves aboard Portuguese ships in the Mozambique Channel. It is important to note here that the existence of slaves in the Portuguese colonies until 1869 stimulated the clandestine traffic in slaves, in spite of the Anglo-Portuguese agreement of 1842, prohibiting slave trade.

Thus, in view of above facts, it became clear that the treaties pertaining to slave trade were not forceful enough to check the outflow of slaves from East Africa. It is to be mentioned here that the Christians on the one hand and the Arabs on the other carried on the slave trade. Portuguese, French, and to some extent Spanish traders continued to export slaves from Africa to different parts of Latin America, West Indies and Mascarenes. Arabs, especially piratical tribes in the Persian Gulf, became active in this forbidden trade on a large scale. By 1839, Cogan, a British agent from the Persian Gulf, sent a report that about 40,000 to 49,000 slaves from Zanzibar were being transported to Egypt, Arabia, Persia and the Mukhran coast. In 1841, Lord Leveson of the Foreign office in his letter to the India Board, asked for more stringent measures on the Slave Trade. In 1843, Aberdeen wrote from the Foreign Office informing Seyyid that Her Majesty's Government had heard "not without pain, that vessels from dominions are in the habit of supplying the market of Quilimane with human beings for sale in violation of the treaty of 1822."⁵⁰

However it must be mentioned here that although Seyyid imposed various punitive actions to curb the slave trade, it was not possible for him to control either the Christian or the Arab slave trade in this area. On the other side, HM Government was also in a quandary. The paradoxical situation was that neither could it persuade other "civilizing" Christian powers against indulging in this kind of "despicable" traffic, nor it could, for reasons of financial stringency, strengthen its

own fleet in the Indian Ocean area. At the same time, there was tremendous pressure on the British Government from the abolitionists.⁵¹ In order to come out of the situation, HM Government entered another treaty in 1846. It was signed between Seyyid and Hamerton. Under this treaty, Seyyid accepted 1) to prohibit export of slaves from his African dominions; 2) to prohibit importation of slaves from any part of Africa into his possession in Asia and to use his “outmost influence” with the chiefs of Arabia, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf to observe this prohibition; 3) to grant the British Navy and the East India Company permission to seize and confiscate every vessel of the Sultan subjects engaged in the transport of slaves, except from one port to another of his African dominion between the port of Lamu to the north and the port of Kilwa to the South.

The treaty came into force in 1847, and for a while it was felt as a sort of victory to the British government. Whereas the Moresby treaty had regarded the export of slaves from Seyyid’s possessions in Africa to his territories in Asia as an “internal” slave trade, the new treaty not only forced Seyyid to accept a new definition of the term but also made possible future erosion of the sovereign rights of the ruler of Zanzibar.⁵²

The treaty of 1845 merely limited the spheres of Seyyid’s sea borne trade to his African dominions. The following years witnessed the presence of Arab, European and American vessels in Zanzibar waters to smuggle slaves. According to Hamerton’s estimate, between 11,000 and 15,000 slaves were annually imported into Zanzibar in the early 1840’s. In 1860, Rigby reported that the number imported in to the island was 19,000 in the previous year.⁵³

Seyyid however, no longer had the means to guard the coast. He neither had a single commissioned ship, nor officers or seamen. His 20-year-old alliance with Britain had ensured the gradual dissolution of a great fleet once praised so greatly by Captain Roberts. When Burton visited Zanzibar shortly after Seyyid’s death, the glory had completely gone. He wrote... “the decks had no awnings against the weather. The masts are struck and stripped to save rigging, the yards lie fore-and aft upon the booms, the crew consist of half a dozen of thievish, servile “sons of water”: rats and cockroaches compose the life of the stock; ammunition is nowhere, and though the quarter and main decks are sometimes swept, everything below is foul with garbage and vermin. ...”⁵⁴

Accepting the Royal navy's arbitrary powers Seyyid and his successors looked up to Britain for protection of their legitimate commerce. Colonel Pelly the then acting consul and political agent in Zanzibar noted that "the Sultan urges, and with some reason, that it is on us who possess maritime power, who claim to be the maritime police of the Persian Gulf, and who have such slave treaties with the Northern Arabs, to keep these Arabs from pirating and slave dealings." But seldom, the British men-of-war intercepted slavers.

In contrast, there was the general harassment to the legitimate trade, caused by the piratical qualities of the anti-slavery campaign.. In 1869 F.R. Webb, an American merchant in Zanzibar, reported that the anti-slavery campaign was "raising the devil with the trading dhows on the coast, and will ruin the trade if they keep it up. Not less than 70 have been destroyed by them in the past year and there is no doubt that a great proportion of them were harmless traders with no slaves in the board except their crews." ⁵⁵

Moreover, the harassment of legitimate traders was not limited to the unlawful destruction of dhows but also included the theft of the goods belonging to the crews and passengers. They collected prize money. For example, in 1869 HMS *Nymph* captured and burnt a dhow. When the case was adjudicated, the nakhoda, the captain of dhows, insisted that the boarding party that searched his ship had taken most of the crew's personal belongings and when they returned, 1000 pounds had been removed from them. He also said that the search party broke into his desk without asking for the key, and the Sultan's flag was trampled. Several members of his crew supported his testimony. This type of behavior probably encouraged even legitimate traders to try to escape when confronted by naval patrol. In fact, the slave suppression campaign on the dhow trade, as Eric Gilbert, articulates, "was not the immediate disruption that occurred while anti-slave patrols did their work. Rather it was that dhows became associated in the minds of the colonial powers with illegal trade rather than legal trade and hence with disorder rather than order and modernity. Thus the dhow trade entered the colonial period as a legal pariah and was subjected to the intense vigilance to ensure that it would not slip back into its old slave trading ways." ⁵⁶

As a result, this type of disruption affected Zanzibar commerce enormously. In 1858, Rigby wrote that not "half of the usual quantity of iron, hide, gum, and other produce of the interior has arrived here this year from Kilwa, and other ports of the South."⁵⁷

The Sultan's political authority had also gone. After his death Sultanate of Oman and Zanzibar was divided and placed under the charge of his two sons. This division was effected under the Canning award of 1860, which forced Zanzibar to pay an annual subsidy of 9,000 pound to Muscat. In a word, Britain took over the control of Zanzibar's administration at a time when the island's political authority over East Africa was fading.

A new system of slavery

The 18th Century also witnessed a new system of slavery. Slavery as practiced was replaced by "free labour". For Britain, "free labour" meant plentiful supply of indentured labour from India and China. From 1833 onwards, British agents in Mauritius began importing "coolies" who accounted for a rapid increase in the island's agricultural produce.⁵⁸

Replacing the system of plantation economy based on the import of captured slaves, Britain used India's excess manpower as "free" wage labour, to develop its other colonies. This gave rise to a floating population of skilled and semi-skilled workers (a colonial parallel to the proletariat in the initial phase of industrialized Britain) who were technically 'free' but wholly tied to the plantation economies of the colonies for a living, on minimum wages. In 1860, the first batch of indentured labour reached South Africa to cultivate sugar plantations introduced by the white settlers. Thousands of Indians went to Natal, Transvaal and Cape Colony under the "free labour" system, and to Britain's East African colonies, to work in the construction of the Uganda Railway. In order to encourage sugar plantations in Mauritius, the British Government agreed to the introduction of coolies from India in the 1830's. Interestingly, while in 1844, the Government of India permitted coolies in British India to emigrate to far off places like Mauritius, Trinidad and Africa, it forbade their emigration to any other foreign country.⁵⁹ The new system proved less onerous and cheaper than that of using slaves for commercial agriculture.

Thus, it was clear that a new system of slavery was about to be instituted, one that would incorporate many repressive features of the former slave system. As indentured labour, the Indian emigrants undertook an extremely hazardous journey to the sugar plantations, little knowing the dangers that lay ahead. It was a bondage that was based on the fact that slavery had produced not only the system but also an “attitude of mind” in which the product determined everything, not the people. Life for these indentured labourers was very hard and very short. In fact, most of the plantations witnessed a high mortality rate among these labourers.⁶⁰

The French too saw the advantages of the “free labour” system, but they did not possess a country like India that would provide the surplus labour for transport to other colonies. Hence they demanded coolies from India, failing which they threatened to continue getting slave labour from Africa.⁶¹ After some vacillation, the Government of India agreed to the recruitment of Indian labour by the French agents, but the French in the meantime, invented an attractive device to obtain “free” labour from Africa. Ships with French flags visited ports of East Africa, obtained assurances from slave dealers that their captives were free, and took them to Bourbon, Reunion and Mayotte. The patent injustice was apparent, yet it was not slavery in the old sense of the term.

In Zanzibar, despite Sultan Seyidd’s protest, the British agreed to grant an extension of the “engage” or free emigration system to the Sultan’s dominion. The repercussion of this system was that it undermined Zanzibar’s existing clove production that required a free flow of African labour. With the French putting up higher prices for Africans under the engage system, labour supply to Zanzibar dried up.

Thus the Anglo-French understanding on free labor systematically destroyed Zanzibar’s economy. It started a scramble for African labour all along the East African coast and deep into the interior, leading to a collapse of the entire structure of Arab-African commerce.⁶²

The French were thereafter, followed and overtaken by others. Towards the end of the 1850’s, large American clipper-built ships flying Spanish flags, appeared off the Mozambique Coast and other islands, for the transportation of slaves to South America. Around this time, Lyons

McLeod, the first British resident consul in Mozambique, reported that the American slaver, Minnesota, visited Ibo and left with a cargo of 1200 slaves for Cuba. The worst sufferers were Africans located in the interiors. Here the capture of slaves took a systematic and devastating form. The high price offered by French slavers turned “the whole business of the Portuguese population (in Mozambique)” into “men-stealing and men-selling.”⁶³

McLeod wrote that every Governor General in Mozambique had a share money on slaves exported from Ibo, “this share being6 dollars on every Negro being shipped on board of any ships either of American or the Spanish or the French.” In short, a new pattern of trafficking in slaves had emerged. This consisted of the shipment of Negroes in large vessels by French, Spanish and American speculators, who took orders from their agents in the oceanic islands and trans-Atlantic ports. They carried as many slaves as they could, on each visit to East Africa.⁶⁴

In the Portuguese possessions, they found an administration, which subsisted on slave trade. With the increasing demand for slaves, the Portuguese sought new sources of supply of slaves from Africa’s interior regions. In the process, the role of Arabs and Swahilis (those who went in caravans to collect ivory from distant African tribes) became that of an intermediary. Instead of ivory, they captured slaves and brought them not for household purpose as in the past, but for lucrative transactions.

Scholars like David Northrup, Ralph Shlomowitz and others have however, challenged the above interpretation of linking indentured labor and slavery. According to them, in the early years of trade, indentured labourers were recruited through kidnapping and coercion, or “were misled by unscrupulous recruiters”. These labourers also endured harsh disciplinary measures, and lived in dwellings – circumstances that were similar to the “slaves they replaced”. However, the similarities ended there. Indentured labourers were “recruited, transported and employed under conditions that were quite distinct from the systems of New World slavery”.

These scholars point to the voluntary nature of the migration of indentured labour. To quote Stanley Engerman, “It must be emphasized that the movement of contract labour differed from slavery” – with the labourers voluntarily agreeing to a bondage of limited duration. In fact, Colin

Newbury draws a parallel between the overseas migration of “free” Europeans and “indentured” non-Europeans----both leaving their homes voluntarily, compelled to seek a better existence, away from a life of economic misery, discrimination and famine at home. ⁶⁵

In the case of India, because of famine and misery during the British rule, people were ready to leave their land and search for their worthwhile livelihood overseas. Earlier people from the Western Indian region, i.e. from Sind, Gujarat, Saurashtra etc. had trading experiences with the East African region. This thriving trading community was a source of inspiration for others in the region. The stories of their wealth had circulated far and wide in India. In this process, the dual factors of push from within and pull from East African territories, there was considerable acceleration of the tempo of Indian immigration into East African territories, and the “coolie” factor was rendered insignificant⁶⁶ Yash Tandon, a well known africanists, also underscores the impact of the push and pull theory on Indian immigration in East Africa. According to him “for most of them, it was the push imported by the relative economic poverty in their country’s of origin, and the pull of their brighter economic prospects in East Africa, that were instrumental in persuading them to part peacefully with relatives and friends and undertake a long sea voyage to an unknown continent.”⁶⁷

Conclusion

My submission is that although the Indian Ocean Slave Routes constitute an important postulate in understanding the overall European slave trade, not much research work has been done on slave trade in this region. Any study on this aspect of world history must take into consideration the physical and psychological impact of the slave system, the large scale displacement of natives from both Africa and India to faraway places, their inhuman treatment by the ‘masters’ who used them in plantations and infrastructural projects, the low wages given to indentured labour from India, their squalid living conditions which led to high mortality rates, and the unholy nexus of the European colonial powers in perpetuating the slave system for their own selfish ends. Above all, a close study is called for, to examine the African diaspora whose forefathers were sold as commodities and forced to settle in unknown lands, as well as the Indian diaspora who were transported as indentured labour, to bring prosperity to the lands of their foreign masters. Finally, we must examine and acknowledge the integration and consolidation of this diasporic population with mainstream life in their adopted countries, their subsequent

struggle to lead a life of dignity and self-respect, and their success in various fields as professionals and entrepreneurs.

Footnotes

1. Gervase Mathew, "The East African Coast until the coming of the Portuguese", in Roland Oliver and Gervase Mathew, eds, *History of East Africa*, (Oxford, 1963,) pp94-95
2. Sir W. Haig, *Cambridge History of Africa*, (Oxford, 1928,) pp94-95
3. Reginald Coupland, *East Africa and Its Invaders*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1938)
4. G.D. Keswani, *Indian Cultural and Commercial Influences in the Indian Ocean, from Africa and Madagascar to South East Africa*, (Unesco, 1974) pp.21
5. Coupland, *East Africa and Its Invaders*, pp.47
6. Keswani, *Indian Cultural and Commercial Influences in the Indian Ocean*, pp.22
7. See in this context, E.A. Alpers, *The East African Slave Trade*, (Nairobi, East African Publishing House, 1967)
8. Eric Williams, *Capitalism and A slavery*, (Chapel Hill, The University of North Caroline Press, 1944), pp40
9. Ibid.pp.34
10. Ibid.
11. G.S.Graham, *Great Britain in the Indian Ocean1810-1850*, (Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1967), pp.2
12. S. Miers, "Brussels Conference of 1889-1890: The Place of Slave Trade in the Policies of Great Britain and Germany", *African Affairs*, vol.68, 1969, pp.195-217
13. Tinker Hugh, *Anew System of Slavery; The Export of Indian Labour Overseas*, (London, OUP, 1974)
14. Graham, *Great Britain and the Indian Ocean*, pp. 16
15. Ibid. Pp.56
16. Erik Gilbert, *Dhows and Colonial Economy of Zanzibar 1860-1970*, (James Curry Publishers, 2004) pp.30
17. Coupland, *East Africa and Its Invaders*, pp.299
18. Ibid. and also see in Ingham Kenneth, *A history of East Africa* (London, Longman,) 1962, pp.72
19. John S. Galbraith, *Mackinnon and East Africa 1878-1895:A study in the 'New Imperialism'* (Cambridge University Press1972), pp.19-20
20. Gilbert, *Dhows and the Colonial Economy*, pp.31
21. Ibid.and Alpers, *The East African Slave Trade*
22. Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, spices and Ivory in Zanzibar*, (London, 1989), and C.S Nicholls, *The Swahili Coast:Politics, Diplomacy and Trade on the East African Littoral, 1798-1856* (London, 1971)
23. Gilbert, *Dhows and the Colonial Economy*, pp.31and John S. Galbraith, *Mackinnon and East Africa 1878-1895:A study in the New Imperialism*, pp.17

24. For text of the Select Committee Report, see Appendix in G.N.Sullivan, *Dhow Chasing in Zanzibar Waters*, and (London, New Impression), pp.432
25. Coupland, *East Africa and Its Invaders*, pp.189
26. Ingham, *A History of East Africa*, pp.73-94
27. Ibid.
28. Coupland, *East Africa and Its Invaders*, pp.492 and Galbraith, *Mackinnon and East Africa*, pp.21-23
29. Galbraith, *Mackinnon and East Africa*, pp.22
30. Graham, *Great Britain and the Indian Ocean*, pp.59
31. Ibid.pp.114
32. Ibid
33. Ibid.pp. 95-105
34. Ibid.pp.111
35. Haight Mable V Jackson, *European Powers and South East Africa*, (New York, 1967), pp 220
36. William L Mathieson, *Great Britain and the Slave Trade 1839-1865*(London. 1929), pp.10-11
37. Graham, *Great Britain in the Indian Ocean*, pp.104
38. Sir John Gray, *The British in Mombassa 1824-1826*, (London, Macmillan 1957) pp.201-202
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid. pp.28
41. Graham, *Great Britain in the Indian Ocean*, pp.104.
42. David Livingstone, *The Last Journals of David Livingstone*, (London, Macmillan 1957) pp.201-202
43. Graham, *Great Britain in the Indian Ocean*, pp. 157
44. Coupland, *East Africa and Its invaders*, pp.518.
45. Federick Lamport Barnard, *A Three Years' Cruize in the Mozambique Channel for the Suppression of the Slave Trade*. (London, 1848), pp.14-15
46. Coupland, *East Africa and Its Invaders*, pp.518
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid pp.515.
49. Ibid. pp.519
50. Sir R. Burton, *The Lake Regions of Central Africa* (London, Longman Roberts 1864).
51. Sullivan, *Dhow Chasing in Zanzibar Waters*, pp.53-55
52. Gilbert, *Dhows and the Colonial Economy*, pp.33
53. Coupland, *East Africa and Its Invaders*.
54. Tinker, *A New System of Slavery*,
55. Ibid.pp.19
56. Ibid.pp19
57. Ibid

58. Coupland, *East Africa and Its Invaders*, pp.434
59. On 13th September 1858, Rigby communicated to Bombay that “so great a demand for slave has been created by the French all along the coast of the south of the island of Zanzibar that the price of them has lately almost doubled, and from conversation with Arabs, I have ascertained that slaves are now taken along distances by land from the opposite mainland of Africa to the ports situated in the South of the island in order to supply the French demand, also that very few able bodied slaves of either sex are now brought to Zanzibar for sale, as they are all taken to south to this new market.” See McLeod, *Travels in Eastern Africa*, pp 304
60. Ibid.
61. David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834-1922*, USA, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp.6
62. Aparajita Biswas, *Indo-Kenyan Economic and Political Relations*, (New Delhi, Kanishka Publishing House, 1992) pp.51
63. Yash Tandon, “A Political Survey” in Dharam Ghai, ed. *A Portrait of Minority*,(Nairobi, OUP,1965), pp.62-66