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A portrait of African kings and queens of India

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Indian migration to Africa, Gandhi's days in South Africa, Mandela's espousal of Gandhian methods — the long and warm relationship between India and African nations is well known, but what's often forgotten is that Africans arrived in India as early as the 4th century — some as traders, some as slaves — and stayed on to become rulers of states and trusted aides of local kings.

An exhibition, 'Africans in India: A Rediscovery', which opened in the city on Friday, aims to highlight this connection. The show, which comprises photographs, paintings and documents retracing the achievements of Africans in India between the 14th and 17th centuries, is on loan from the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture of the New York Public Library. It will be on show at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts here till the end of December. It's an interesting show that offers a glimpse into a time when multi-cultural India drew people from across the world as traders, scholars, soldiers and slaves.

"Not only were the African men and women creators of their own accomplishments, but they also found themselves in societies in which enslavement did not necessarily preclude social ascension, where being a foreigner, having a different religion, being of a different race were not insurmountable obstacles to reaching the upper echelons of society," explains KM Chandrashekar, programme officer at the Southern Regional Centre of Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts.

Most of the Africans, who were packed into slave ships and brought to India, were from Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia, and were called Habshi or Siddi. They were prized for their military prowess, and it's from these men that generals, commanders and rulers emerged. They were usually employed in specialized jobs such as bodyguards in royal and noble households, and as a conse-



SETTLERS ALL: (clockwise from top) An African begum of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Oudh with other queens; Malik Ambar, prime minister of Ahmadnagar state who was an African, opposed the Mughals so fiercely that in 1616 Jahangir commissioned a portrait of himself standing on the top of the world and shooting the severed head of Ambar; Nawab Sidi Haidar Khan of Sachin, an African-ruled state established in 1791 in present-day Gujarat



Many African men and women found themselves in societies in which enslavement did not necessarily preclude social ascension
KM Chandrashekar | PROGRAMME OFFICER, INDIRA GANDHI NATIONAL CENTRE FOR THE ARTS (SOUTHERN REGIONAL CENTRE)

quence became close to those in power. So while they were enslaved, many managed to gain the trust of rulers and eventually even seize power, explains the exhibition. Many slave women become beloved queens as well.

Throughout the 15th and 16th centuries, Africans left their mark on the political landscape. The African-ruled state of Sachin, for

instance, was established in 1791 in Gujarat. It had its own cavalry, coats of arms and currency. In 1948, when the princely states were incorporated into independent India, Sachin had a population of 26,000 — 85% Hindu and 13% Muslim. Another state that was ruled by a dynasty descended from African traders was Janjira in present-day Maharashtra.