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# 'Africans are as much Indian as you and I'

**Exhibition at Bengaluru's IGNA showcases life of African migrants and their roots in Indian culture**

by Seema Prasad

**Bengaluru** The diversity of India is not limited to language and religion, but extends to race as well, an exhibition emphasises.

Africans in India: A Rediscovery, shows how Africans came from Ethiopia and Somalia through the early slave trade. Known as Habbi, they were bought by Muslims and converted to the Sunni faith. Archaeologists have unearthed evidence linking Africans to India since 600 BC.

"In fact, they speak flawless local languages and take up occupations here. They are as Indian as you and I are. India is their home," said Dr Mangalam Swaminathan, Programme Director, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the

Arts, in an email interview with City Express.

A month-long exhibition was inaugurated by Dr N S Channappa Gowda, Secretary, Department of Kannada and Culture, Kamajit Singh, Regional Director, Indian Council for Cultural Relations, and Dr M S Murthy, Chairman of the Karnataka Lalit Kala Academy, on November 27 at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts, in Mallathalli, in the city. A painting titled Elite Slavery shows Sultan Mohammed of Bijapur with African courtiers.

The text below explains how they made it to the higher ranks. Africans were often emancipated if they converted to Islam. If children were born to slave women and free men, they were integrated into homes as free beings.



( From left ) Yasmin, wife of Sajid Ali Shah, the last of king of Oudh in UP, Nizam in Hyderabad and director Zubeida

Another path to freedom for the Africans was the military. Valued for their strength, they were guards and slave soldiers. After many years, they were even allowed to marry local women. A 1904 picture taken by Raja Deen Dayal shows African guards escorting the nizam in Hyderabad.

"It is difficult to quantify their contribution. They

brought their music and architecture to India. Some took to Hinduism and a few became Christians," says Mangalam.

Women were also integrated into the elite. The panel 'African Queens' shows Yasmin, wife of Wajid Ali Shah, the last king of Oudh in Uttar Pradesh. Mehr Leka Begum Sahiba was first an Ethiopian slave and then became the third wife of

Sayyid Mansur Ali Khan.

The exhibition also highlights how the Nawabs of Sachin, in southern Gujarat, are descendants from Africa, through marriage and proliferation. Zubeida, the first woman film director of Indian cinema was reportedly married to the Nawab of Sachin.

Dr Sylviane A Diouf and Dr Kenneth X Robbins through

their research in black studies compiled the photos. The exhibition was hosted by Schumburg Center for Research in Black Studies at the New York City Public Library. It was next shown at the UNESCO in Paris. In India, it was first exhibited at Delhi. It has since travelled to the National Science Centre in Surat. It was shown at the India Africa summit.