Ancient Red Sea Route

Why in news?

In the G20 Summit 2023, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday announced the launch of the historic India-Middle East-Europe mega economic corridor.

To know about the key outcomes of the G20 Summit 2023, click here

What is India Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor?

- **Infrastructure corridor**- The rail and shipping corridor is part of the *Partnership for Global Infrastructure Investment* (PGII) — a collaborative effort by G7 nations to fund infrastructure projects in developing nations.
- **Aim**- To enable greater trade among the involved countries, including energy products
- **Member countries**- India, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, the European Union, France, Italy, Germany and the US.
- **Proposed corridors**-
  - **East Corridor**- It connects India to West Asia/Middle East
  - **Northern Corridor**- It connects West Asia/Middle East to Europe.
- **Railway link**- The project involves the laying of a railway link through the *Arabian Peninsula* that could then link up with shipping passages to India and Europe.
- **Proposed projects**- The corridor will include
  - Electricity cable and high speed data cable,
  - Hydrogen pipeline
  - A green and digital bridge across continents and civilizations.
- **Significance**- The use of the land route in the Arabian Peninsula could bypass the congested Suez Canal that cargo ships currently take.
- The project eventually aims at laying out a seamless corridor running all the way from South East Asia to Europe
- It is seen as a weighty ideological alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

What is the ancient Red Sea trade route?

Before Common Era

- **Meluha**-There are evidences of Indian diaspora in the Middle East even at the time of Meluha (the Indus Valley Civilisation, c. 3300-1300 BCE).
- It seems to have been more coastal and involved small quantities of goods.
- **Roman times-** The trade expanded with huge cargo ships moving directly between the subcontinent and the Roman Empire.

After Common Era

Roman Empire covered from lowland Scotland to the borders of Persia, and from the Sahara to the banks of the Rhine and Danube.

- **Conquest of Egypt-** The trade picked up in the 1st and 2nd centuries after the Romans conquered Egypt, opening up for Roman merchants, who were adventurous enough to try to sail to India.
    - Sir Mortimer Wheeler's excavations at Arikamedu, Pondicherry in the 1930s and 40s, had established the existence of Indo-Roman trade in the 1st century CE.
- **Muziris Papyrus**- This document gives details of one particular cargo sent to the Egyptian port of *Berenike* from Muziris port, India.
- According to latest estimates, custom taxes on the Red Sea trade with India, Persia, and Ethiopia may have generated as much as one-third of the income of the Roman exchequer.
- **Maritime link-** In the 1st and 2nd century CE, maritime highway linked the Roman Empire and India through the Red Sea, with many hundreds of ships going in both directions each year.

What was being traded on this route?

- **Exports**- There was a great demand across the Roman Empire for luxuries from India.
    - Cinnnamon-like plant called malabathrum whose leaves were pressed to create perfume
    - Luxury items such as ivory, pearls, and precious gemstones
    - Ivory figures such as Yakshi fertility spirit
    - Exotic goods especially wild animals like elephants and tigers
    - Spices such as pepper have been found during excavations at Berenike
- **Import-** The flow of goods in the other direction was more limited.
    - The Roman historian ***Pliny the Elder*** (23-79 CE) says it was mainly gold that went to India and the balance of trade was firmly in India's favour.
    - There was some trade in *olive oil and Garum*, an ancient Roman fermented fish paste, evidence of which has been found in Arikamedu and in Kerala.
- **Trade organisation**- The evidence points that the trade being highly organised.
- **Contracts-** They were written between merchants in Kerala and shippers in Alexandria. There are even references to insurances.

What roles did Indians have in this trade?

- **Role of monsoon winds-** The Indians were quick to grasp that the heating of the Tibetan Plateau meant that the monsoon winds blow in one direction in winter and the other in summer.
- **Paintings-** The pictures in Ajanta had large double-masted ships.
- **Coins-** Ships were a common insignia in many early Indian coins.
    - For example- Satvahana coins

- **Graffiti evidence**- It is found in the Hoq caves on the Socotra island, at the mouth of Gulf of Aden, left by Indian sailors (mostly Gujaratis from Barigaza, modern-day Bharuch)
- **Images**- There are images of Buddhist stupas, Shaivite tridents, swastikas, Syrian Christian crosses, and pictures of large three-masted Indian ships, as well as prayers to Krishna and Radha.
- **Recent evidences-** There is a lot of evidences in places like Muziris in Kerala and Berenike in Egypt.
- Recently, the head and torso of a magnificent Buddha, the first ever found to the west of Afghanistan, was discovered at the site in Berenike along with a triad of early Vaishnav deities.

How does the Red Sea Route differ from the Silk Route?

> ***Silk route is an overland trade route stretching all the way across Asia from Xian in China to Antioch in Turkey.***

- **Absence of record** - The Silk Road was completely unknown in ancient or mediaeval times.
- It certainly existed during the Mongol period (13th and 14th centuries CE).
- However, during the Roman period, there's no evidence that China and Europe knew of each other's existence.
- **Usage of Indian ports**- Chinese silk seems to have reached Rome during this period via the ports of India.
    - For instance, overland through Kushana territory in northern India, to the ports of Gujarat and the mouth of the Indus.
- **China factor**- China has politicised the Belt and Road initiative and actively mobilised the idea as part of Chinese foreign policy, to make China the end of a worldwide trade network.

References

1. Indian Express- Maritime trade route India and Europe silk route
2. Indian Express- India Middle Europe Economic Corridor

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