

A Quest for Identity: The Asian Minority in Africa

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Who are Asians and in which parts of Africa can they be found?

'Asians in Africa' generally refer to people from the South Asian subcontinent: from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Since they immigrated to Africa before independence from colonial rule, most of them were Indians, therefore 'Indians' and 'Asians' are used interchangeably in this paper. Africa here encompasses the three East African states – Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania and parts of central Africa - today's Zambia, Zimbabwe and Malawi (Rhodesia and Nyasaland during colonial times).

The renowned writer, Paul Theroux, wrote an article in the 1960s, entitled 'Hating the Asians' in which he observed that no commentator on Africa has ever taken pains to examine the plight of the Asians in a way that would endow the immigrant Asian identity with the dignity and position that it deserves in East Africa. While this may have been true at the time, the issue was subsequently addressed by eminent scholars like Ghai, Dotson, Pachai, Mangat and others following the repercussions of the Africanisation policy by African leaders, later in the 60s and 70s. Since then, however, the subject has been largely ignored, with a virtual silence on Asian issues since the 1980s, and particularly in the current years following the new wave of democracy in the 90s. Unresolved past issues thus still linger on, and have now become imperative with the current political and economic forces which are creating new dimensions and challenges on a fluid playing field.

The resurgence of ethnic conflicts, due to ethnic revivalism in the 1990s, generated renewed focus on the issue of ethnic minorities i.e. their identity, status and protection etc. Terms such as 'ethnic' and 'minority' have a wide range of definitions and both contain relational, dynamic and explosive aspects. Scholars have constructed typologies on minorities around assimilation, genocide, accommodation, federalism, group rights and so on, yet there is no singularly agreed definition or set of features that can be applied in all cases. It is, therefore, essential to delineate the context and define the terms in a specific context before embarking on examining the identity, status and issues surrounding a particular minority in a given society. The term 'Minorities' encompasses a myriad of complex dimensions, each of which addresses a particular aspect of the majority-minority dichotomy and each of which is very dependent on the context in which the observations are made.¹ What constitutes a minority? Is it the numerical position, the possession of power or influence, or merely different cultural and ethnic traits? It is, in fact, all of these, which surface in different contexts at specific times, in various ways and attracting diverse consequences. The majority/minority dichotomy is generally represented as:

1. Numerically small, yet **dominant** by wielding inordinate power over the majority. The numerical majority here, thus actually becomes a minority in terms of power and status. For example: Whites in South Africa, the Tutsis in Rwanda;
2. Numerically small, **subordinated** to and oppressed by the majority. Examples: Kurds in Iraq, Koreans in Japan.

¹ Gustave Goldmann, *Defining and Observing Minorities: An Objective Assessment*, Statistical Journal of the UN Economic Commission for Europe, Montreux, 2000.

The case of Asians (Indians) in Africa does not fall in either of these two categories. They are numerically small, yet economically **successful** but not dominant in the sense of wielding power and they feel insecure and **vulnerable** - for example: the Chinese in East Asia, the Indians in Africa, and the Jews in Europe.

The UN body dealing with minority rights examined several definitions but found that each had some limitation in capturing all elements adequately so as to apply for all minority groups across the globe, but the following definition was submitted by Jules Deschenes in 1985 at the request of the UN Sub Commission on Minorities Rights.

*A group of **citizens** (emphasis added) of a state, constituting a numerical minority and in a non-dominant position in that state, endowed with ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics which differ from those of the majority of the population, having a sense of solidarity with one another, motivated, if only implicitly, by a collective will to survive and whose aim is to achieve **equality** with the majority in fact and in law.*

Though this definition seems fairly adequate it has serious limitations in the context of Asians in Africa – especially on citizenship and related issues - which this paper touches upon.

African societies have not yet addressed the issue of minorities as have the European nation-states, although they are predominantly multiethnic societies with deep-rooted ethnic identities and cultural traditions. This is largely due to the arbitrary creation of boundaries and thereby the summary creation of African states which lacked a formative nation building process. While minorities with distinctive ethnic or/and linguistic identities are treated as such and debated as an issue of ‘national minorities’ in Europe, in the African context it is termed as ‘ethnicity’ with a pejorative connotation and regarded as a predominantly African issue, which is too complex to be melded into discussions on rights and democracy at large. The term ‘minority’ carries a negative connotation in the general mindset within many African states due to the tyrannical minority rules prevalent in South Africa, South West Africa, (now Namibia) and Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). The diverse and complex ethnic composition of African states illustrate the inadequacy of international standards, however international norms and standards still provide a minimum framework to apply in a given African context.

This paper has three parts:

- ▶ Part one deals with the qualities or traits of this group called ‘sojourners/middlemen’ based on the roles they assumed in the new countries that they found themselves in during colonial rule as a part of that legacy, and the manner in which they performed their roles.
- ▶ Part two deals with the phase of expulsions during the 1970s by dictatorial regimes as an aftermath of African independence, and resultant consequences on the community; and,
- ▶ Part three deals with the emergence of democracy in the 1990s and its impact on these communities and their relationship with the mainstream. It explores whether democracy is paving way for a gradual process of social integration or whether the forces of free market economy are increasing business prospects for the community at the cost of widening the racial divide?

Perceptions and Identities

Global phenomena such as colonialism, world wars, the ending of the cold war etc. have enhanced manifold migration of people from one part of the world to another, either driven by coercive forces such as the slave trade/indentured labour, or lured abroad in search of prospects and avenues for a better life. Indian arrival in Africa dates back to centuries before colonization.² However, during the colonial period Indians were brought into Africa for serving specific tasks of the colonial regime.

During the era of colonization, the workers, called 'indentured labourers', were taken from their homes to work in various fields such as mines, sugarcane farms, building of railways and general construction etc. in other parts of the colonized world for the white colonialist settlers. The manual labourers from India that worked for the British rulers were called 'Coolie workers', but professionals were also labelled with this derogatory epithet, e.g. Gandhi was called the 'Coolie Lawyer' in apartheid South Africa. This worker migration was usually accompanied by a corresponding merchant class venturing into newly 'opened' (colonised) areas in search of business opportunities.

There thus emerged a middle class described as 'sojourners' or 'middlemen minorities' that occupied the space between the white settlers and the local natives. However, it was the dukawalla (word used to refer to Indian merchants, which literally means 'shopkeepers') and not white settlers, who first moved into new colonial areas, laying the groundwork for the colonialist economy based on cash for food and goods. However, even before the advent of 'dukawallas', Indian traders had previously followed inland Arab trading routes on the coast of modern-day Kenya and Tanzania and thus had a virtual lock on Zanzibar's lucrative trade in the 19th century, working as the Sultan's exclusive agents.³

In British Central Africa during the 1890's, Sir Harry Johnston, the then Commissioner and Administrator of Nyasaland (which later became Malawi), initially brought in 70 Indian soldiers from the Sikh and Muslim communities followed by another 200 soldiers to augment military capacity. The unit, which was later named the Kings African Rifles (KAR), fought on the side of the British Army in the First World War. Some of these soldiers joined the 32,000 Indians who were brought in for the building of the railways for The Imperial British East Africa Company, which had proposed a daring scheme to lay track from the East African coast into the unsettled interior in the face of much vocal dissent from its critics such as the British media, which dubbed the proposed railway a "lunatic line."

According to the plan, the Central African Railway, starting at Mombasa, would move through 657 miles of African bush past a little-known Masai watering hole, at the time called "*Enkare Nyarobe*" or "sweet water," over the Great Rift Valley, across the equatorial highlands and down to the shores of Lake Victoria, where steamships could continue the route through to Uganda. This was also to provide a route via Lake Victoria and the Nile through British East Africa that would link the ports of the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea.

² Robert G. Gregory, *India and East Africa: A History of Race Relations Within the British Empire 1890-1939*, Oxford University Press, London, 1972.

³ Rudy Brueggmann, <http://www.rudyfoto.com/indiansofafrica.html>

Of course, at the time, there was no real population to service along the way, but strategically, it seemed like a very sound move, which could be built at a relatively reasonable cost of £3,685,400.⁴ The labour force who were assigned towards this project were predominantly from the states of Punjab and Goa - India and were followed by merchants from the state of Gujarat, whose number began to grow in the mid 20th century. By the 1960s, nearly three-quarters of the Asians in Central and East Africa were Gujaratis of various religious persuasions, with Hindus comprising by far the largest community.⁵

In the 1960s, a concept was developed by Blalock Hubert ⁶ called the 'Middlemen Minorities' and further explored by Edna Bonacich in her 'theory of Middlemen Minorities', that identifies characteristic traits of these groups, which provide very useful and relevant basis for understanding the behaviour and attitudes of the Indian community in Africa and also to discern the undercurrents of race relations between these two ethnically disparate communities.

Firstly, these groups mainly play an **economic role** - concentrating on certain occupations, notably trade and commerce, including other middleman roles such as agent, labour contractor, rent collector, money lender and broker. They thus play the role of middleman between producer and consumer, employer and employee, owner and renter, elites and masses.⁷ The Indian community in Malawi (then Nyasaland) for instance has been acknowledged as such since it has been said the Indians admirably bridged the gap between the European (manufacturers, producers) and the African (consumers). Indeed, the Acting Commissioner, Major F.B. Pearce, is on record to having admitted that, had there been no Indian traders, there is no doubt that many thousand natives would never have ventured into a European store for the purpose of making purchases.⁸

In Zambia, where established European traders strongly resented the arrival of Indian traders, the colonial administration supported a limited number of Indian immigrants, for it believed that Indian trade in the province would stimulate African desire and demand for European goods, and this development would help to incorporate the African community into the money economy.⁹ This three-tier system, according to Pearce and others, was geared to benefit both the European manufacturer and the Indian trader; however Mr. Pearce was not quite correct in his generalization - as proven by the subsequent course of events. In fact, the Indian minority became a common enemy to both the white and the African, as they competed with business groups in the settled population - as in the case of South Africa, where both the Whites and Africans were already 'settled' and, being resentful of the stiff competition from the enterprising Indian businesses community, proceeded to unite as a common front despite their very many differences.¹⁰ The gruesome attack on Indians by the Africans during the Durban riots of 1949 is a glaring illustration of simmering resentment boiling over into conflict.

Secondly, Middlemen minority live a **life of thrift**, i.e. willing to suffer short-term deprivation in order to hasten the long term objective of returning to the homeland. Sojourners aim to accumulate money, not spend

⁴ Linda Watanabe, *Aboard the Lunatic Express*, www.lwmcFerrin.com

⁵ John Mattausch, *From Subjects to Citizens: British East African Asians*, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 24, 1998.

⁶ Blalock Hubert M, Jr. *Towards a Theory of Minority Group Relations*, New York, John Wiley, 1967.

⁷ Edna Bonacich, *A Theory of Middleman Minorities*, *American Sociological Review* 1973, Vol. 38, pp. 583-594.

⁸ M.A. Karolia, *A brief historical survey of the Indian community in Malawi*, Paper presented at the History Seminar Chancellor College, University of Malawi. (unpublished).

⁹ Bizeck Jube Phiri, *A History of Indians in Eastern Province of Zambia*, p. 20.

¹⁰ Edna Bonacich, *op.cit.*, p. 590.

it, and this paramount focus enables them to amass and conserve capital.¹¹ This orientation is in stark contrast with natives and white settlers who lived a more rounded life as they did not intend to live elsewhere. A large number of Asian shopkeepers in the United Kingdom, and in the United States are those who migrated onwards from Africa. A good percent of this community - both businessmen and professionals, have made multiple migrations over the course of the past century. Asian communities from colonial India that migrated to Africa to work on contract, either on expiry of the contract, or due to other compelling circumstances, subsequently migrated to the west. They thus can be truly called 'sojourners'. May Joseph, an East African Asian, has developed a concept called 'nomadic citizenship' based upon the experiences of East African Asians and their multiple migrations over the years.

The middleman theory points to some common qualities among these communities, i.e. keeping alive, prospering materially and maintaining the **broader ethnic tie (national/regional)**. The community thus tend to form strong regional associations as umbrella bodies for Asians/Indians, but that should not be taken to mean that these sojourners/middlemen communities are homogenous and unified. The opposite, In fact, is true wherein, the larger identity was overshadowed by the narrower identity defined by profound religious, linguistic, caste and class diversities. Thus within the broad racial category of Asians, there were the Patels, Lohanas, Sunni Muslims, Ismailis, Bohoras, Sikhs and the Catholics. Each group converged within its own forum - for example the Hindu Seva Mandal, the Muslim Jamaat, the Goan Sports Club etc. These narrow ethnic groupings were, in fact, obstacles in attaining a larger unified forum to tackle major common challenges. For instance, at the time of the expulsion crisis in Uganda, it was only when Idi Amin called the Indians for a conference and the community felt threatened, that they finally came together under one umbrella. Until then, they were quite happy within their own little cocoons and interacting mostly within their own narrow interests. In Nyasaland (now Malawi, this trend was vividly illustrated by the saga of the Indian Sports Club (ISC) which served both Hindus and Muslims as a symbol of communal unity. However the two communities ended up in a bitter feud that was catalysed by the separation of Pakistan from India, and the Muslims split from the ISC and formed the Mpingwe Sports Club (MSC) with an acronym that could also be construed as the Muslim Sports Club. The finality of the severance was vividly symbolised by cutting the billiards table into two!¹²

Another common trait of these minorities is their adamant aversion to **out-marriages** for racial, cultural and for economic reasons. Asians generally consider themselves as racially superior to the Africans and, being determined to attain an economically advantaged position vis-à-vis Africans,¹³ are bent on preserving their cultural identities and, equally or even more anxious to keep wealth within their own inner circle. When it comes to marriage, the preference is always to marry within their own caste group, thus even inter-caste marriages are frowned upon, and inter religious marriages would be quite out of the question. While this mindset began to change in India where, with time, inter-caste marriages started to become quite common, it still remained largely unchanged in the Indian community in Africa. A case in point is provided by the Ugandan case, where General Amin placed enormous emphasis on intermarriages between Africans and Asians as a step towards racial integration and eventually ended up expelling all Asians for not complying with his directives. His objectives of racial integration may not, in themselves, have been wrong, but he erred

¹¹ Ibid, p. 585.

¹² Interview with Narhari Patel.

¹³ Yash Ghai, 1965.

in not forwarding a holistic and equitable approach to integration which embraced other elements and aspects of socio cultural integration, and he did not realise how his approach would conflict with deeply held traditional values of a very conservative society.

It is interesting to note that the very first Indian immigrants in Africa did not seem to have any reservations about fraternising with the native communities and often took African women as concubines or wives. This was perhaps necessitated by factors such as the non availability of Indian women locally, which in turn, stemmed from causes such as the arduous journey by ship from India, the primitive living conditions and prevalence of lethal diseases such as malaria, dysentery and blackwater fever, which took a heavy toll of the first wave of immigrants. The subsequent mingling of the races led to the emergence of a new community - who were commonly called 'coloured' - a derogative term generally used to refer to people of mixed race, probably coined in the South African context. The coloured communities in Africa are of mixed parentage - i.e. Euro-African or Afro-Asian and occupy a somewhat uneasy space between the races - and are characterised by a yearning to belong to all their roots - Euro/Asian/African. This community symbolises a major factor for racial hatred and animosity.

Thus, the general practice amongst Indian communities in African countries is to identify and select brides from India - preferably from known family circles within their own villages, (the system of arranged marriage) for their young men. This is also true of Indians living in the west, where a good number still opt for arranged marriages within the confines of their caste grouping, premised upon a commonly held delusion that women from India are more adaptable and can conform to the norms and standards set by the elders without much discomfiture. However, the rapid social changes generated by the phenomenal economic progress in India are making it increasingly difficult for Indian men in Africa to find suitably compliant partners, but Indian men in the west tend to have better chances of finding suitable matches.

There is a tendency to live together as a community creating residential **self segregation** and establishing language and cultural schools for their children. This propensity was exploited and encouraged by the European rulers who set up separate institutions for each race. This was later perpetuated by Indians for reasons of insecurity and an inherent feeling of cultural superiority. General Amin was vocal in his anger and irritation over this segregation and blamed the Indians of living in the past which would not build racial harmony and unity.¹⁴

Ethnic ties among middlemen minorities create and drive **preferential economic mindsets** by focussing the distribution of economic resources within the community including building capital through the use of partnerships, low interests loans and rotating credit associations.¹⁵ In addition, members of the extended family or a member from the ethnic group, who would work long hours for low or no wages with **total loyalty** would be preferred above all others to occupy positions of paid employment. In return for their loyalty and services rendered, they would eventually be given an opportunity to become partners or to receive training and aid in setting up their own business.¹⁶ It is thus not unusual to see Asian employees working and living under harsh conditions uncomplainingly in Asian shops with hopes of assistance in times of crisis and of achieving a life-changing reward in the future. This trend is illustrated by the continuing influx of Indians

¹⁴ Extracted from the Speech by His Excellency the President of the Second Republic of Uganda, General Idi Amin Dada delivered to the Asians Conference, 8th December 1972, p. 1.

¹⁵ Rashmi Desai, *Indian Immigrants in Britain*, Oxford University Press, London, 1963.

¹⁶ Edna Bonacich, p. 586.

into Zambia, Malawi and elsewhere throughout Africa, assured of boarding and lodging and social security in an unknown land, as employees of fellow Indians who are already established in retail/wholesale businesses. In most cases, the new arrivals were either relatives or neighbours of the employers in their home countries and shared strong ethnic ties.

The above traits imbued the Asians in African societies with an insular inscrutability that hampered understanding and inter racial engagement within and outside Africa. Rudy Burgesmann captures this element by saying that, though Indians pervade every facet of East African commercial life, their presence in this region remains far less known in America (and the rest of the world) compared to the much romanticized - and fictionalized - legacy of East Africa's white settlers who imported the Indians as 'coolie labourers' in the late 1800s to build the Uganda-Kenya railway.

It is thus arguably apparent that the divergent interests of the host community and the middlemen minority created an incompatibility that was compounded by lack of initiatives towards social integration or assimilation. The resultant hostility has, therefore emanated from economic issues spilling over to other spheres. There has been a fundamental conflict of interest between the seller and the buyer – the typical relationship between the African natives and the Indian middlemen. This conflict, which was gathering impetus since colonial days, intensified in recent years, with the arrival of more merchant class Asians in these countries. But there have been some exceptions that are worthy of note.

The struggle for independence from colonial rule by Nationalist African movements provided an opportunity for all subjugated races to join hands against a common foe, and most Asians duly joined the Africans in this struggle. Independence movements in Kenya, Tanzania and Nyasaland amongst others enjoyed strong (mainly financial) support from Asian communities. There have been many unsung heroes, such as Mr. Makhan Singh of Kenya, the founder of the trade union movement in Kenya, and a freedom fighter who made notable contributions towards the cause of equal rights and freedom. He is hailed as having, for the first time in colonial Kenya, demonstrated that Asians and black Africans were bound together in the same fate and that their liberation was inextricably intertwined. Mr. Pranlal Sheth stands out as another staunch campaigner for equal rights, a passionate socialist who forwarded the centrality of workers participation in the freedom movement and was subsequently charged with sedition by The British Crown. In South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC) brought together all races in the battle against apartheid and stands as a striking example of racial unity against a common enemy as evinced by the number of Asians such as Ahmed Kathrada, Yusuf Dadoo and others who joined the struggle in the fight against Apartheid.

The general perception of the Asian in Africa is a person of Indian origin operating a trading establishment. In most cases, they are viewed as one homogenous community without ethnic and class differences. There are thus, many misconceptions and myths about the Asian/Indian community in the African mind and, to further exacerbate the divide, there appears to be correspondingly little or no desire or inclination to know or understand African society and culture, which can basically be attributed to an innate feeling of cultural superiority in the Asian mind. It has thus come to pass that these two communities, in spite of having lived together for centuries, face a huge socio-cultural gap without concerted and serious attempts to bridge the chasm. 'Sojourners', 'Saboteurs', 'Strangers', 'Exploiters', 'Plunderers', 'Looters', 'Bloodsuckers', 'Scapegoats', 'Nomadic Citizens', are some of the epithets commonly used during discussions about Asians in Africa. Do these represent the true image of the Asian in Africa? Whatever the case may be, it is a given fact that the picture of an Asian in the African mind reflexively evokes very negative connotations.

Recent economic and political events have only served to widen the gap and, in so doing, enhancing the feeling of vulnerability and insecurity that has haunted the Asian community during their stay in Africa. For instance, in South Africa, which is internationally considered as a model of racial integration in the post apartheid era, it has been observed that: 'although people of Indian origin have been present in South Africa since 1860, they are still objects of suspicion in the 'New' South Africa. In many quarters, they are accused of exploiting Africans and, in the past, collaborating with the apartheid regime. In a climate of increasing hostility, some Indians are reviving their old links to India and claiming membership of an Indian diasporic community. This is not the first time that Indian South Africans have looked beyond the borders of the nation state for a sense of home, place, and belonging'.¹⁷

Independence - African Governments and Asians

Around the time of their independence, the number of Asians in African countries numbered about 350,000 out of a total population of approx. 12 million. The manner in which independent African governments dealt with such a small minority that constituted less than 3% of the total population should be analysed in the context of the perceptions regarding Asian communities harboured by African leaders such as Jomo Kenyatta, Daniel Arap Moi, Idi Amin Dada, Kamuzu Banda and Robert Mugabe, who assumed powers after independence. All of them unhesitatingly used epithets such as 'looters', 'hoarders' and 'exploiters' when referring to the Asian community as a whole. The Africanization programmes, which were subsequently initiated by these leaders, were ostensibly pursued with the proclaimed objectives of meeting nationalist aspirations of African businessmen underlined with a hidden agenda to expel Asians from Africa. The real motive was a combination of factors based on race - the traits discussed above, and class engendered by the economic success of this community on African soil.

The pattern of expulsion was different in each of these countries, as was the British response to each. This perhaps also had to do with the status of each country, i.e. whether they were protectorates or colonies. It is important to understand each scenario in its historical context and perspective in order to avoid misleading conclusions such as those in a paper published on 9th April 2004 prepared by the Yale centre for the Study of Globalisation, which described Kenya as 'an exceptionally tolerant Society' where the Indian minority is an 'economically prosperous community' that is not subjected to the violent discrimination that Indians in Uganda faced under Idi Amin.¹⁸

While the Asian expulsion from Uganda under General Amin stands out in history as a glaring example of deplorable treatment of a minority, the situation in Kenya was just as dire, if not worse - as claimed by Theroux. The exodus of Asians from Kenya, East Africa to Britain started in 1967 with a about 60 persons per week to 400 to 500 a week.¹⁹ There were about 180,000 Asians residing in the country at the time of Kenya's independence in 1964, but this number was diminished by about 80,000 Asians, who had left the country to seek shelter in the UK by 1968. This exodus was not really surprising when one considers the

¹⁷ Parvathi Raman Yusuf Dadoo: *Transnational Politics, South African Belonging*, Workshop on South Africa in the 1940s, Southern African Research Centre, Kingston, September, 2003.

¹⁸ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Country of Origin Research, 12th September 2005 in: www.irb-cisr.gc.ca

¹⁹ Paul Theroux, *Hating the Asians in Transition*, No.33, Oct-Nov 1967, pp. 46-51.

words of President Kenyatta, who stated “they have not realized that there is now an about-turn. This is a final warning to them and unless they change their ways, they should not blame the government for any measure that may be taken to deal with their nonsense”²⁰ in a blatant attack on Asian shopkeepers for allegedly being disrespectful to ordinary Africans. The political elite ranging from the President, the Vice President and other political elites constantly launched public tirades against Asian traders and this animosity was extended to those Asians who had become Kenyan citizens.

Most Asians (Kenyan Citizens), who worked in the Civil Service, lost their jobs; the Nairobi City Council excluded Asians from the central market; the Draconian Trade Licensing Act which limited the scope of economic activity that could be undertaken by Asians, etc. In sum, all the policies and measures under the guise of ‘Kenyanisation’ only served to make the lives of the Asians extremely difficult. Holding citizenship by no means guaranteed any equitable right to live in the country with equal status as deportation without any charge or given reason could also be applied to ‘Non-Indigenous Citizens’ – a term usually applied to ‘Citizens of Asian Origin’. This was indisputably demonstrated in 1966, when eight Asians were summarily expelled by the Kenyan Government and put on a plane bound for India, however none of them happened to be Indian citizens.²¹ In August 1966, when several Asians were deported, a Kenyan Parliamentarian is on record as having stated that “Kenya’s whole Asian community stands indicted by the actions of some of its members”. A subsequent broadcast a year later claimed that ‘the Government was neither instrumental in bringing those disgruntled Asians into the country nor is it bound to stop their exodus. Moreover this is not its responsibility. The Asians have stuck to their British passports like leeches.’²²

The Citizenship Debate

Why is citizenship of this community such a complex and confusing issue? Mahmud Mamdani asserts that citizenship in equatorial Africa is a notion inherited from the colonial period which has not been redefined and reformed. According to him colonial Africa had two political entities - namely the civil and the ethnic. Following this, the colonial state had two sets of laws - one was written law enforced by the central state dealing with civil and political spheres, while the other was customary law based on customs which dealt with cultural and economic issues. Customary rights were accessible only by virtue of belonging to an ethnic group, so no outsider could become, or be regarded as a native (deemed to belong). Whilst the civic space has been extended to the native with time, the ethnic distinction persists – with the Asian community remaining essentially an immigrant community i.e. neither fully part of civil society nor of the ethnic identity.

The Kenyan episode triggered a chain reaction, causing similar situations where thousands of Asians, mostly from the Indian Sub-Continent, were driven out of East and Central Africa through a host of racist policies. After decolonization, Asians faced discrimination and oppression in many ways. They were stripped of government jobs through enactment of laws to localise or ‘Africanize’ areas of economic and government activ-

²⁰ Ibid p. 50.

²¹ Anirudha Gupta, *Ugandan Asians, Britain, India and the Commonwealth*, African Affairs, Vol. 73, No. 292 July 1974, pp. 312-324.

²² Vincent Cable, *The Asians of Kenya*, African Affairs, Vol. 68, No. 272, July 1969, p. 230.

ity. The Trade Licensing Acts of Uganda and Zambia and of Kenya included two major provisions that affected non-citizen businessmen. The Acts reserved certain areas - the non-scheduled or non-prescribed areas, which in effect included all areas outside the main shopping centres or a few large cities - for citizens only. Asians were allowed to operate only if they were granted licenses that had to be renewed every year. In 1970, President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia banned Asians from operating in non-urban areas and, in 1972, Asians were partially banned in urban areas as well. There was indeed hardly an Asian family that was not affected by the Africanisation policy.

There is a general perception among the African leadership and citizenry that Asians are unwilling to take up citizenship of African countries. While this may have some merit, the citizenship issue has to be seen from many angles for a better appreciation. The first issue stems from the accessibility of citizenship i.e. could eligible Asians apply for citizenship with expectation of awardance? Secondly, the British Government awarded a special status, namely 'overseas protected citizenships' and British passports to Indians at the dawn of Independence of African states, thereby fostering the perception of 'difference' and thirdly the larger issues of ethnic identities, nationality and state formation in Africa - i.e. whether African societies could accept Asians as African nationals? In which case, could Indians be counted as another ethnic community within African societies?

The above paragraph raises further questions of whether citizenship guarantees basic protection and security to holders – regardless of race, creed or ethnicity. Conversely, a set of questions can be posed about the Asians attitude towards host countries. How patriotic are they towards the countries of their residence and why do they feel the need to secure shelter in another foreign land like the U.K. or the U.S.A.? The issue was complex and fraught with uncertainty during the time of independence The Kenyan case clearly demonstrates that citizenship per se was no guarantee of basic socio-eco-political rights and security. Bizeck Phiri presenting the Zambian case says that only over 200 out of 11,000 Asians obtained Zambian citizenship between 1965 and 1971, but he later contends that the Zambian government was reluctant to grant citizenship to Asians at independence.²³ It is thus necessary to undertake a thorough study of African Constitutions to see whether the dawn of democracy and the subsequent adoption of liberal constitutions have changed the scenario or not.

Kenyan Asians (Un)Welcome in Britain?

A red carpet welcome did not await Kenyan Asians who arrived in Britain during the large scale exodus in 1968. A major immigration scare gripped the U.K. and the British parliament rushed through the infamous 'Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1968' in a record three days. Thus the Kenyan Asians were denied the right of entry into Britain under this legislation despite holding British passports. This ensured that some 150,000 Asians were rendered effectively stateless by a stroke of the pen, through which the British government deliberately sought to shirk it's responsibilities by barring desperate immigrants from claiming the entitlements as British Citizens, whilst, at the same time, the Indian government chose to feign indifference.

²³ Bizeck Jube Phiri, *A History of Indians in Eastern Province of Zambia*, 2000.

This was probably due to the fact that the Non-aligned Movement was gaining momentum at the time and India, who was at the forefront of the movement under the Prime Ministership of Nehru, needed the support and cooperation of the newly independent countries of Africa. It was thus not in the interest of India's foreign policy to take up the case of the Indian community in Africa. Indeed, Prime Minister Nehru was reported to have said that Indians overseas had a double loyalty, one to the country of their adoption and other to India.²⁴ This statement may have been the cause of serious misgivings among the Asians on the one hand and their African hosts on the other. The policy of Africanisation with its emphasis on de-Asianisation, coupled with attitudes of evasive indifference from the British and Indian governments served to instil a feeling of statelessness and helplessness amongst the Asians in Africa who came to see themselves as the 'unwanted children of Africa'.²⁵

From a legal standpoint, the British action contained grave ramifications, the most glaring one being the authorized violation of the duty imposed on the United Kingdom by international law to admit its own citizens. The "Kenyan Asian" episode of 1968 also exposed the innate racism of Britain's immigration controls at the time. However, ethics aside, this was also the first clear indication of Britain putting its economic interests before those of the politically persecuted - even when they were its own citizens.²⁶ The acceptance of Ugandan Asians into Britain following their expulsion by Amin did not thus create a furore or arouse such antagonism. This may have been due to Uganda's erstwhile status as a British protectorate and not a colony like Kenya, but that should have had no bearing as all of them were British citizens?

This nonchalance may have been due to the development of a appropriate mechanism to deal with these exodus however, Sivanandan holds the view that the definition of political refugee and economic migrant became interchangeable, so that, whilst the Kenyan exodus was regarded with horror, British Asians from Uganda were deemed acceptable as political refugees just four years later, because they, unlike the Kenyan Asians, belonged, by-and-large, to the entrepreneurial class and could contribute to Britain's coffers. Thus nomenclature, status, nationality all become a matter of convenience and interpretation and commonly used terms such as "British", "alien", "political", "economic", "bogus", "bona fide" - were suborned to suit a larger economic or political purpose.²⁷

In Uganda, Prime Minister Apollo Milton Opetu Obote during his first term (1966 -1971), made it clear to the British that Uganda would not agree to act as a refugee camp for British Indians and would accept them only so long as they could be useful to Uganda.²⁸ The subsequent overthrow of Obote's regime by Idi Amin Dada in 1971 and the events following soon after, particularly in his treatment of the Asian community (about 65% of which were Hindus) was something that neither the community nor Britain ever imagined or was prepared for. Amin propagated economic reforms, which he referred to as 'war of economic liberation' and this, according to him, could be done by getting rid of the Indians from various sectors of the Ugandan economy which were deemed to be under the control of this community. He sent a shock wave to the Asian community by calling them for an Indian census derogatively known as the 'cattle count' or forfeit their claim to live in Uganda and followed this by holding a conference with the community.

²⁴ Anirudha Gupta, p. 316.

²⁵ Interview with Mr. Rafiq Hajat, a prominent social activist, a fourth generation Malawian of Asian origin.

²⁶ Ambalavaner Sivanandan, *Casualties of Globalism*, The Guardian 8th August 2000.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Hasu H. Patel, *General Amin and the Indian Exodus from Uganda*.

While the Asian community thought this was a 'consultative' opportunity to present their cases, iron out any differences and forge a new relationship between them and the State, this sentiment was not reciprocated by the government side who seemed to have already arrived at a decision - i.e. to expel the community. The community would have been forewarned of this strong possibility if they had kept abreast of the events in neighbouring Kenya and heeded the clear messages being transmitted through the utterances of Obote and Amin. They would have then realized that the time had come for a coherent front to present a strong, united case as one community. As Hasu Patel puts it when Amin called for the conference it was a golden opportunity for the community to unite leaving behind their specific ethnic groupings, but this unity was too little too late.

The failed conference was followed by the announcement of a presidential order of expulsion of Indians within 90 days. He later announced that God appeared to him in a dream and instructed him to expel Uganda's Indian and Pakistani populations, who owned almost all of Uganda's businesses, thereby implying divine acquiescence for this overtly racist act. At first, only non-Ugandan citizens were forced to leave, but eventually even citizens of Asian origin were also expelled. Official figures indicate that about 40,000 Indians and Pakistanis left, however countless others fled across the borders.

Amin and Kenyatta both claimed that the reluctance of Asians to integrate into the mainstream was the main reason for their radical 'cleansing' strategies. This was in marked contrast to President Nyerere's (Tanzania) approach to the race issue, which was to bring the nation together under one ideological umbrella. Thus in Tanzania, reference to ethnic identities for official purposes was very restrained by comparison. The predominant group within the Asian community (the Ismailis) was persuaded by their leader to take up Tanzanian citizenship and fully support the measures of the government, however the community could not cope with losses emanating from policies of nationalization and they decided to leave the country. Thus real integration did not occur in spite of deliberative efforts by the State and the Community Leadership.

The anti-Asian trend continued to sweep across Africa. In Zambia the Mulungushi Declaration of 1968 aiming at economic reforms towards empowering Zambians had a major impact on Indians by basically challenging their dominance of the wholesale and retail trade. The said declaration literally forced Indians out of their businesses in rural areas. 1969 -1979 was a decade of overtly gradual and smooth but covertly ruthless and vicious expulsion for Asians in Malawi. Some similarities can be drawn between Uganda and Malawi in that Uganda became independent in 1962 and Malawi in 1964, General Amin attained power in 1972 and Dr. Banda became the Life President in 1971 and both, almost immediately after acquiring dictatorial powers, vigorously pursued Asian expulsion policies. The observations, views, and attitudes of both leaders towards this community were the same. Both were driven by the belief as exemplified in their pronouncements that the successful Africanisation of the economy required the absence of Indians but they differed in their approach to achieve a workable 'final solution'.

Malawi, under Dr. Banda, embarked on a similar policy of expulsion of Asians under an Africanization programme that aimed to satisfy the nationalist aspirations of African businessmen. This was meant to be achieved by way of gradually eradicating Asian trading activities in the country side -initially from the market centres to the trading centres and thence to district centres and cities. By 1979, all non-farm sector activities by Asians had ceased in the countryside. One of the justifications he gave was 'as far as I know, there is no Malawian trading either in Bombay, Madras or elsewhere in India, and it is only right and proper

that the Asians, too, should leave the Malawians to run business in their own areas.’²⁹ The Asians were given a period of three years to sell off their businesses and leave homes that some had occupied for decades. However, for those settled in the rural areas (as was the case with most of them), it was almost impossible to sell for a reasonable value because it was widely known that they had to leave anyway. There was no attempt at consultation or conference as in Uganda however pretentious they might have been. It was an order by decree without any right of appeal and people of this community had to leave regardless of any mitigating circumstances such as the possession of Malawian Citizenship (deemed to be a mere ‘Travel Document’ when held by a ‘non-indigenous’ person). This expulsion was further reinforced by another decree forbidding Asians from being involved in Farming and Transport sectors thus creating yet more panic and uncertainty within the fast dwindling community. It is interesting to note that this ban applied only to Asians and did not extend to the White or Coloured Communities, thus it was not unusual to find Greek Tobacco Farmers, British Tea Growers and ‘Coloured’ transporters going about their business with no hindrance whilst no Asian could dare to venture in those forbidden fields. At the height of the anti-Asian campaign, Asians were barred from building houses in the newly formed Capital City environs in Lilongwe, and some prominent Asian personages who had built ostentatious mansions in those areas (with official permission) were summarily ordered out.

Specific mention should be made of a particular community within the Indian community called the ‘Goan Catholics’ - members of the Catholic Christian faith from the western Indian state of Goa. This community consisted of about 800 to 1000 and they were ordered to leave the country within 24 hours. There are many different versions of what prompted this action and it is difficult to prove any of these, but all the renditions reveal a vitriolic vindictiveness and malice by a regime that would not heed any voice of reason.

The Asian population in Zimbabwe descended mainly from families who arrived with white settlers late in the 19th century. They have evolved into a good number of largely apolitical, affluent traders and professionals, apart from a few who took public office in the ruling Zanu PF party. Despite the Asian minority’s low political profile, it has begun to be targeted by Zanu PF as evinced by the threat from Mr Ndlovu, a prominent ‘war veteran’ who stated “nothing will stop us from reclaiming commercial land from Indians.” He accused Asians of amongst other things, creating a black market in critically short foreign currencies, refusing to attend Independence Day celebrations and of owning vacant property “which they did not want to share with blacks”. Mr Ndlovu had also given Zimbabwe’s Asians an ultimatum to reduce rents, to bank their money locally and to increase wages. He warned that the movement had started what he called “Operation Liberation” to seize Asian business properties. “We want these Indians to surrender a certain percentage of that land to the Government,” he said. “Indians are not here to develop our country or to work with the Government. They are economic looters.”

Post expulsion scenario

The middlemen theory provided a useful base for examining the peculiar traits of the community and how they were responsible for not pursuing closer ties or integration into the mainstream and thus earned the wrath of the post-colonial regime of their respective host countries. Today, while the situation remains

²⁹ Guy Mhone (ed) *Malawi at the Crossroads*, Sapas Books, Harare, 1992.

largely unchanged, there is an element of flexibility and mobility which has been facilitated by the winds of democracy and subsequent change of regimes in these African countries. Stephen May and others contend that since ethnicity fades into race, nationalism, multiculturalism, identity politics, community, its significance and dynamics are circumstantial, conjectural and contingent.³⁰ The dynamics of recent political history underscores the point that ethnicity is not static - it is a moving target and a process. This has been explained through a typology which suggests that there are four types of ethnicity and each type is a stage leading to the next – i.e. domination leading to enclosure then to competition and finally to optional.

Ethnicities	Variant	Keywords	Dynamics
Domination	Nationalism	Monocultural regime	Engenders enclosure and/or competition
Enclosure	Dormant, latent Confinement, inward-looking	Low mobility, monocultural	Tends towards competition over time
Competition	Patronage, survival	Mobile, bicultural competition over niches, political development, resources	Tends towards optional ethnicity over time
Optional	Symbolic, low intensity ethnicity, Hybridity	Bicultural, multicultural agency, ambivalence, multiple identity	Beyond or after ethnicity

Domination ethnicity refers to the imposition of a monocultural regime and discriminatory treatment or uneven regional development. In the case of Asians in Africa, it has not been a case of cultural domination of the majority over the minority. In fact, in all these countries, the Asians managed to preserve and practice their religious beliefs and traditions and other socio-cultural practices. However, the urge to protect its identity coupled with a deep sense of insecurity led to an ‘enclosure ethnicity’ mindset which seeks to use cultural confinement, self chosen segregation as a strategy of building group strength. This, typically, fits the Asians case, where tendencies towards self segregation and confinement have been observed as one of their defining traits.

Competition ethnicity addresses competition in relation to state power, resources and development and this problematic area in ethnic relations could be said to depict the current scenario in which, with the emergence of new economic policies, political changes driven by Globalisation, the community is interfacing more closely with structures of state power. However, this may not always be a smooth affair and there is a high possibility that the contact could enhance the vulnerability of the community - this scenario corresponds with the current reality confronting ethnic minorities such as the Asian Communities in Africa.

A decade after the exodus of Asians from Kenya, the Kenyan government still continued to express dissatisfaction with Asians who still clung to their retail businesses thereby impeding progress towards Kenyanisation of commerce. The underlying message was it was clearly necessary to completely weed them out of the retail sector. In neighbouring Uganda, Amin’s expulsion of Asians had a direct effect on Kenya where the African traders stepped up their campaign for speedier ‘Africanisation’ and, in August 1973, more than a thousand non-citizen Asians were told to part with their businesses.³¹ A sample survey of private companies registered in Kenya in 1965 and 1973, indicate that, while in 1965, 66% of the big firms were Asians, in

³⁰ Stephen May, *Tariq Moddo & Judith Squires, Ethnicity, Nationalism and Minority Rights*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 2004.

³¹ P.K. Balachandran, *An Embattled Community: Asians in East Africa Today*, African Affairs, Vol. 80, No.320, July 1981, p. 317.

1973, they accounted for only 47%. Among the medium sized firms, the Asians share had come down to 41% from 60%.³² This decline in Asian ownership did not usher in a new breed of African entrepreneurs as envisaged and further, seemed detrimental to the overall economy.

While the political leadership deliberately undermined the Asian contribution to Kenya's economy, and in fact blamed them as a burden on the economy, Michael Chege, in his article on race as a variable in the political economy of Kenya, points out the neglect of the contribution of the Kenyan Asian capitalists by non Kenyan authors. This neglect was subsequently corrected by David Himbara in a book published in 1994, where he confirmed on the basis of a sample of 100 companies, that relative development success in Kenya was primarily due to Kenyan Indian capitalists and secondarily due to contribution of remnants of British administrators and the international development brigades that had saved the state from the total collapse which African administrators had allegedly set in motion since the dawn of independence.

While the traders of the community in past decades were pawns in the hands of the regime, some emerged as big businessmen and formed close nexus with political leadership in later decades. This may seem beneficial as it gives the community more access to state power, but in reality this further widens the gap between the mainstream and the minority - especially where, as in the case of Kenya in the 1990s, many corruption scandals involving Asian businessmen were exposed in the media.

In Uganda, while thousands of Indians left the country due to expulsion, about 35 families had nowhere to go and they stayed on. According to one of those who stayed behind, things eased out eventually and they could live and move around without fear or intimidation. Ten years later, in 1982, the Parliament in Uganda under the renewed leadership of Obote, passed a bill to return the property that was seized by the Amin regime from Uganda's Asians amounting to approx. 3,500 businesses worth about \$400 million US. The bill required the Asians to return to Uganda and reclaim their property within 90 days. The reclaimed property could not be sold without the consent of the government for five years. Those who did not return were eligible for compensation upon sale of the properties.³³ In 1992, the new President, Yoweri Museveni, officially called upon the Asians to return and at present, there are about 15,000 Asians living in Uganda,³⁴ though not all of them are returnees. From their views and comments to various media channels, it seems they feel welcome and secure. The hatred and animosity that previous regimes had expressed was perhaps not what the people at large felt. However, some prominent businessmen of the community have re-emerged on the local stage and they enjoy close relationship with the government of the day. This may perhaps impart a feeling of security to them and also to the community at large, but it is not the best basis for lasting cordial relations between the two communities as it sometimes serves to widen the gap as shown elsewhere in this paper.

Thus, established businessmen secretly fund politicians and political parties, whilst keeping an overtly low profile and distance from local politics, perhaps as a way to ensure personal security. In Kenya, for instance, some Asians businessmen have funded the ruling KANU officials and, in the early 1990s, a number of cases exposing corruption at high levels revealed the involvement of Asians. Corruption has become more open and rampant and Asians are frequently suspected of involvement in corrupt practices like evading tariffs.

³² Ibid, p. 318.

³³ The New York Times, *Uganda Passes Bill to Compensate Asians*, September 4th, 1982.

³⁴ The Mercury, 26th August 2005, p. 10.

There is also an immigration of job seekers into the country and there are, reportedly, a number of illegal immigrants working illegally in Asian firms.

The politicians take bribes on one hand from the Asians, and provoke anti-Asian sentiments on the other hand to galvanize public support by calling for their expulsion. The leader of the Democratic Party of Tanzania, Rev. Mtikila, a pastor, incited his supporters to 'stone the cars belonging to Asians' and accused the government of allowing Asians to plunder the country's wealth.'³⁵ In the recent Zambian elections, Michael Sata, a Presidential candidate, promised to expel Chinese, Indian and Lebanese traders whom he had called "infesters" in his campaign, accusing them of taking jobs and business at the expense of Zambians. These sentiments indicate that a repeat of the saga of past decades cannot be ruled out, but also that the forces of free market economy and democracy in societies that allow wide economic disparities actually create fertile grounds for minority annihilation. Amy Chua addresses this eloquently in her book 'World on Fire', where she asserts that, in a number of societies, markets and democracy are not mutually reinforcing and the global spread of markets and democracy is a principal, aggravating cause of hatred and ethnic violence throughout the non-western world. She further contends that introducing democracy in these circumstances has opened competition for votes, thereby fostering the emergence of demagogues, who scapegoat the resented minority and foment active ethno-nationalist movements by demanding the country's wealth and identity be reclaimed by the true owners of the nation.'³⁶ Such hatred can ferment ethnocentrism and entrench ethnic minority vulnerability even further.

Asian communities have of late, appeared to have become more sensitive of the need to bridge the gap between themselves and the majority and have thus resorted to carrying out charitable and philanthropic work such as donations towards the health, education sectors and food aid during droughts and such crises. In fact, while this has become more streamlined and regular over the years, it has not made much impact towards integration.

Certainly the community will have to do much more than merely say that they are concerned and willing to be involved and to be a part of the system at large. Of course, this is not as simple as it may appear. The community will need to emerge from its small ethnic, religious, linguistic and, importantly, class cocoons to become a part of the larger civil society and be concerned with issues of governance in order to break the image that it is content with bribing officials for a false sense of security. Though this would be a long and difficult process, it is not impossible due to the fact that, in these democracies, fragile as they may be, there is space for all members of civil society to raise issues of specific importance in order to attract the attention of the decision makers. The participation of the Hindu Community in the 2002 Kenyan elections observer mission and again in the subsequent Constitutional review is a very good case in point.

More instances of such participation and active involvement will help to diffuse the perception that Asians do not take an interest in the life of the country thus opening opportunities for better understanding, interaction and harmonious integration – to the benefit of all the people in Africa.

³⁵ Wikipedia, Democratic Party of Tanzania.

³⁶ Amy Chua, *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability*, Anchor Books, A Division of Random House, New York, 2004.

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