The Asians in East Africa


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# The Asians in East Africa

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Following are some facts and observations regarding the situation of the Asians in East Africa. Since several of the people I met asked for a report, which they could use as a means for further discussions, I am also adding some (very incomplete) historical background. In fact, the more one tries to understand the present situation, the more one feels the need to know more about the historical developments between the three main racial communities involved: the (British) White colonists, the Asians and the Africans.

In my task I have been greatly helped by a number of discussions with both Africans and Asians, by Dharam Ghai's study: Portrait of a Minority - Asians in East Africa (Oxford University Press, 1965), by newspaper articles and several issues of the East Africa Journal (March 1965, April 1968, September 1968).

I. SOME FACTS

Recently, Asians in East Africa (Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania) have been very much in the news. On the one hand, they have been under severe criticism by East African political leaders for their unwillingness to "Africanize". These leaders are determined to create important structural changes affecting the traditional privileged economic position of the Asian community which has been marked by its dominant role in the trading business. Understandably, the East African Governments are deeply concerned about the advancement of Africans and their increased control of public and private life.

On the other hand, newspaper headlines have been full of the tragic situation of thousands of Asians who saw themselves almost barred entry into the United Kingdom although they legally have a right to settle in that country, being British citizens.

How did this situation develop? There are no reliable statistics available, but it is generally assumed that there are, at present, some 400,000 Asians (1) in East Africa in a total population of some 30 million in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania (or 1% per cent).

Why did Asians come to East Africa? This question must be
seen in the context of British colonial policies. The British considered their East African territories as extensions of their Indian Empire. Many of the British officers who came to East Africa in the second part of the 19th century served the Government of India. Indian currency became official currency in East Africa and Indian laws were extended there. Even Indian troops were imported to keep order. The British also used Indians as indentured coolies to build the railways. This was the beginning. Out of this sprang the idea amongst Indians that East Africa was an area providentially set aside for Asian trade. It is estimated that in 1844 some 1,200 Asians were resident in East Africa; by 1860 their number had risen to 6,000. But it did not take long before the economic position of the Asians was challenged by the white settlers. Economic rivalry developed, especially with regard to access to the land. If this question of land ownership never lead to a crisis, it was because the Asians stuck to their old principle of co-operation and survival, no matter under what circumstances. Nevertheless, two developments need attention. First, Asians in East Africa were soon forced to safeguard their interests. Second, Indians in India, while still under colonial rule, developed a newly articulate sense of nationalism. According to Chanan Singh (see Dharam Ghai: Portrait of a Minority) the "interconnections between these two developments were of the utmost importance to the course of East African politics, and just as Britain had been inclined to treat East Africa in the past as an economic dependent of India, so now she had to see East African politics in the context of Indian nationalism". Around 1910 it was even suggested to the Indian Congress that East Africa be formally annexed to the Indian Empire. Asians in East Africa continued to fight for land-ownership rights but in 1917 the white settlers gained a European-only franchise. This provoked sharp tensions between the white settlers and the Asian community. These years were marked by abuse and suspicion of Asians by; the whites who even planned the arrest and deportation of Asian leaders. Significantly, at that time the first contacts were made between Indian and African nationalism. An Indian newspaper gave publicity to grievances of the ikuyus and allowed one of their leaders to use its office as headquarters. The role of the Asian Community developed into one in between the white at the top and the African at the base. In the virtual absence of an African middle class, they became the middleman between the white and black communities either as civil servants or traders. In the latter profession, they controlled the coasts and had little or no contact with Africans. When they went inland, under the protection of the colonial power, they assumed additional economic roles which had so far been the monopoly of the Africans. This, understandably, lead to competition.
Because of their role of traders, Asians mostly became urban people. Even the small Asian shopkeeper in the bush was not a villager among African villagers but a guest from the city.

as it were. It was impossible for him to participate in African rural social life.

The present Asian monopoly of the retail trade (between 90 and 100 per cent) in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania must be seen in this historical context. Their economic power was and is very considerable. As a community in between the colonial power and the Africans they were, however, most vulnerable because of the vested interests and because of a lack of effective sanctions at their disposal. Added to this must be the fact that Asians in East Africa are by no means a cohesive group.

On the contrary, they are divided into many castes and subcultures with little or no contact with each other. This division seems to exist amongst the many diaspora Asians in East Africa as much as it exists in India itself.

II TIM ASIANS AFTER AFRICAN INDEPENDENCE

When independence came in East Africa, the Asians were in trouble. Asians were abivalent in their attitude towards African nationalism. Asian leaders stated their solidarity with African nationalism and no doubt many Asians were sincere about their public stand. But there is also no doubt that many other Asians had other thoughts. As an immigrant group, they acted differently from their compatriots in India. Being a trading community in East Africa, they were primarily interested in improving their economic position. While fighting British colonialism in India, they did not fight against it to the same extent in East Africa. Here Asians were more interested in maintaining the status-quo.

Two sociological facts explain - not necessarily justify the Asian attitude: firstly, the Asians are a minority immigrant group of a different race; secondly, they are a separate economic class with vested interests.

What was the African attitude towards the Asians at the time of independence? British colonialism had been based on racial separatism, deviding the three main races culturally, socially, economically and politically according to a pyramidal structure. The newly independent governments of Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, however, put an end to the myth of white superiority which they did not need to replace by a myth of African superiority because of their numerical strength. Instead, the African governments concentrated - and depended - on national
unity regardless of racial or tribal differences. Under British rule, each of the three races were separately represented in the government bodies. The independent governments changed the system of a "communal" roll into a "common" roll and "reserved" seats for minorities into "open" seats.

-4-

Mother very, important change after independence was the generous offer of citizenship to Asians in East Africa, if applied for within a specific period (the period being two years from the time of independence). This offer of equal citizenship could be interpreted as a reward for their past contribution and also as an encouragement to a future condition. "Although in later years, practice, especially with regard to Africanization and promotion in the civil service, did not always conform to the law of equal treatment, one needs a little more thinking to realise that this discrepancy between law and administration is really a case of law based on a doctrinal foundation of equality bending under the weight of the hard realities of life. From the Asian point of view, it is better that there should exist some disparity between theory and practice, than that inequality as between races should become part of the law of the land. If it is evil, it is at least the lesser of the two evils... Theoretically, the Asians therefore enjoy a right that was not even open to them during British rule." (Yash Tendon in: Portrait of a Minority). No doubt the Africans knew they needed the Asians. In any case citizenship provided the Asian community with an opportunity to show their solidarity with the African cause.

How many Asians made use of this opportunity of becoming African citizens? How many opted for British citizenship? The following incomplete statistics are estimates, gathered from various sources:

ASIAN IN EAST AFRICA (January 1969) Citizens

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Indian/Pak.</th>
<th>British Total</th>
<th>Residence</th>
<th>Citizens</th>
<th>Citizens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td>50,000</td>
<td>40,000</td>
<td>40,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>200,000</td>
<td>58,000</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>60,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanzania</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zambia</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>410,000</td>
<td>133,003</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>127,000</td>
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</tr>
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'(with regard to Kenya, some 40,000 Asians automatically received citizenship if one of their parents was born in the country and if on the date of independence they were British citizens or protected persons. In
addition, some 24,000 applied for citizenship between 1963 and 1965 (deadline). Of these, some 18,000 were granted citizenship, while it is believed that some 6,000 applications are still pending)

2 Figure given by the British High Commission in Dar-es-Salaam.
3 not including Asian citizens of Zambia.

- 5
According to the above estimates, approximately 32 per cent of the Asians received African citizenship within the specific two year period, whereas 29 per cent opted for U.K. citizenship. Most of those who opted for African citizenship belong to the Ishmaili Muslim community which had been strongly encouraged by its leader, the Aga Khan, to do so.

Clearly, there was a considerable hesitancy on the part of the Asians to become African citizens. This mood was encouraged by the British when they left East Africa, by giving Asians the right to acquire British citizenship. It now proves that this move was not helpful. Most likely, it strengthened many Asians, who were already doubtful about their future, in standing aloof from integration and in adopting a position of racial superiority vis-a-vis the Africans. The fact that a majority of Asians did not apply for citizenship has contributed to a deterioration of race relations. Also, in spite of official warnings that Asians should invite and train Africans as their partners in the retail trade, Asians by and large have not reacted.

III THE PRESENT IMPOSSIBLE SITUATION
Under the New Kenyan Immigration Act, all non-citizens have to apply for a work permit before they can get a job. This new move is designed to force the non-citizen Asians out of their businesses. Under the Kenyan Trade Licensing Act (which came into force on January 1, 1969), non-citizens are not allowed to carry on retail trade and commerce outside the six main urban centres. Also, non-citizens cannot trade in certain goods or in some areas of those centres. In Zambia, the closure of at least one third of the country's shops, since January 1969, affected some 800 Asian traders. Non-Zambians are now barred from retail-trade outside ten prescribed areas - basically the business centres of ten major towns. This has led to a good deal of difficulty for their customers. An official press release stated that 80 per cent of the shops in some Copperbelt "second class" trading areas were closed. In the Eastern province, nearly all of the 200 shops were closed. Consequently, hospitals had to be supplied with emergency services. Here, as in
Kenya, Asians are being bitterly criticized for refusing to sell their businesses to Africans. Asians, on the other hand, say they are awaiting the outcome of their attempts to become wholesalers. Many of those who have received overtures for the purchase of their businesses have been made offers as low as 70.

In Kenya, according to official figures, some 3,000 trade licences have not been renewed or will be withdrawn in the first six months of 1969. As a result, some 15,000 Asians are being forced out of business (some even say 30,000 but this may be exaggerated). They have to sell their shops and quit the country. Asian civil servants have, to a large degree, been replaced by Africans. It is estimated that about 00 per cent of Kenya's civil servants are Africans.

Two factors have seriously complicated things for emigrating Asians:

1. the U.K. has curtailed the intake of Asians with British passports from Africa to 1,500 family units annually (involving approximately 7,500 persons),
2. Zenya, Uganda and Tanzania have halved the amount of capital which emigrants can transfer on departure. They can now take E.A.m?2,500 with them plus a travel allowance of E.A.2200 for adults and E.A.2100 for children under 12 years of age (equivalent of U.K.52,870). In the following five years the emigrant is entitled to have E.A.L1,000 transferred from his balance annually.

At the January 1969 Commonwealth Prime Ministers Conference, efforts were made to discuss, in a special committee, long-term Commonwealth agreement on citizenship and migration, but these efforts failed.

Most of the Africans and even some of the Asians I met agreed that the present forced exodus - which for the time being, is mostly from Kenya - was a logical consequence of the Asian attitude. They knew that this was coming but they never took it seriously. Now it is too late. Asians I met said that a reconciliatory gesture by them now would be misunderstood by the Africans as a political move to save their vested interests.

The Africans, on the other hand, feel it is not their responsibility to make the next move; they made the first move at the time of independence (by offering citizenship) without, in general, any positive result. What should be done in the present deadlock? Is there a way out of this vicious circle?

IV TWO GROUPS: TWO DIFFERENT SOLUTIONS? - SOME RECOMMENDATIONS
From the discussions with both Africans and Asians, it is evident that a different solution needs to be found for each of the two main groups of Asians: the citizens and non-citizens.

1. TE CITIZENS

Those who received African citizenship and those who applied for citizenship in time, but whose cases are still pending, have made the crucial decision to stay in East Africa and to link their future with the future of East Africa. But it is doubtful whether many of the approximately 133,000 citizens (Asians) have made any advance in the direction of integration or assimilation. In fact, the general complaint of the Africans - and Asians admit this - is that very few Asians have taken the consequences of their change of nationality. Many Asians think only in terms of "economic citizenship". They continue to live and work as a self-sufficient, ethnocentric community. Their reference group has remained the same. With one or two exceptions, no study and discussion of any significance seems to have taken place on the meaning of integration or assimilation in that specific situation. The beginning of such discussion is urgently needed. In this respect, one or two general definitions could be useful.

"Assimilation implies a one-way street in group relations and ignores the many gifts brought by the newcomer to his new home. It is usually taken to mean the complete absorption of individuals of one culture by a larger or more dominant culture within one society." (1) Contrary to this, "integration" is a reciprocal process. A pluralistic Society has been called the logical consequence of immigration. In 1956, the International Conference of Non-Governmental Organisations interested in migration gave the following definition of integration: "The gradual process by which new residents become active participants in the economic, social, civic, cultural and spiritual affairs of a new homeland. It is a dynamic process in which values are enriched through mutual acquaintance, accommodation and understanding. It is a process in which both the migrants and their compatriots find an opportunity to make their own distinctive contribution." (2)

Clearly, Asians would favour integration as it would allow for pluralism. But then Asians will also have to "identify the areas where conformity is essential and try to conform", says Y.P. Ghai in an article (3) attempting to define these areas. Although his paper is somewhat outdated, much of it is still relevant.

Would Africans likewise agree about "integration"? And if so, under what conditions?

One particular area indicative of social integration is, of course, inter-marriage. So far, there has been some inter-marriage between Africans and Europeans and between Asians and Europeans but none between Asians and Africans.
In any case, both Asians and Africans each have to face the problem of integration within their own respective communities. The Asian caste system and the African tribal differences show that there are, as yet, no general patterns of reference for either communities when discussing integration.


ibidem


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One could easily draw up a long list of difficult issues, but the essential point is that somewhere the real discussion should start and that groups be willing to experiment integration (or assimilation). The initiative to break through the present vicious circle can only come from Africans and Asians within East Africa itself.

What should be the role of the churches in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania with regard to the question of integration (or assimilation) of Africans and Asians? The issue is, of course, not new for the churches. They have, on various occasions, been concerned about the Asians. 'But it is probably equally true that now new ways of involvement need urgently to be explored. Apart from the 20,000 Goans, a large number of whom are Roman Catholics, only very few Asians are Christians. But this is, of course, not a criteria for the churches responsibility towards them. The question is much more: what is the task of the churches in a socially, culturally, racially and religiously pluralistic society? The concern for the Asians could probably best be put in this context.

Several concrete suggestions were made during my visit by both Asians and Africans. There was a general feeling that special emphasis should be put on the integration of youth in primary and high school and at the university. The following specific proposals were made:

That the churches should:

1. Invite an Asian (layman) scientist from India to teach at the University College of Nairobi where there are a large number of Asian and African students. Besides teaching, this person would be involved in the Ecumenical Chaplaincy Team amongst students which is already functioning.

2. Appoint a research person in the N.C.C.K. or in the Research Unit (sponsored by the Anglican Church of the Province of East Africa and financed by the Protestant Episcopal Church in the U.S.A. The R.C. church in Kenya is likely to participate in future programmes). Although stationed in Nairobi, this person would be serving the churches of the African Countries together. His task would be to analyse existing material and to set up special enquiries and studies related to social, economic and cultural problems of a
pluralistic society, with special emphasis on integration problems: of Asians and Africans.

3. Make available the technical facilities for joint holiday and workcamps for African and Asian youth. It may not be advisable for the churches to take full responsibility for leadership of such camps.

4. Request the International Youth Exchange Programme (I.C.Y.E.) to sponsor an internal exchange programme within East African countries. The basic idea being that Asian youth spend a year in an African family and school and vice versa.

2. THE NON-CITIZENS
The position of the citizen, (Asians) does not seem hopeless; the position of non-citizen Asians, however, looks far from bright. Africans would say that this group too made up its mind when it failed to apply for citizenship within the specific two year period.

They are under increased pressure to quit, especially in Kenya, since the withdrawal of trade licences. One will, therefore, have to count with a continuing and increased stream of emigrants, mainly to India and the United Kingdom.

It is estimated that between 60 - 70,000 Kenyan Asians have resettled in the U.K. since independence. But a survey of opinion in 1968 among non-citizen Asians in Kenya indicated that most of them wanted to settle in India. Approximately 500 Asian families entered India during 1968. While a further 1,000 persons arrived there in the beginning of 1969.

Under a compromise formula in July 1968, India agreed to give Kenyan Asians with a British passport a three month entry visa if they were forced out of East Africa and chose to settle in India. These Asians, however, are required to obtain an endorsement from the British High Commission in East Africa, agreeing that they are Britain's ultimate responsibility and have an unimpeached right to enter Britain at any time in the future. So far, the Indian Government has, however, turned a blind eye on visa expiry dates and most of the Asians are apparently allowed to stay.

On the other hand, there is a fear amongst Asians in East Africa that Britain might delay the renewal of passports, many of which are due for renewal in 1969 and 1970. In that case, Asians would become stateless refugees.

At present, one of the real hardships is that many Asians are forced to leave at short notice. In several cases, Asians did not have enough time to sell their business and to put their affairs in order. Here Christians should do everything possible to get agreement on a fair system of termination whereby one knows in advance how long one is still allowed to stay and the amount of time left for making the necessary arrangements before departure. In other words, there is a need for long-term planning from which both Asians and Africans would benefit. The Africans would thus be able to prepare for a phased take-over.
of certain professions and businesses - now almost exclusively in the hands of the Asians. The present rapid closure of Asian business will no doubt have considerable short-term effects on the economy of Kenya and Zambia, where there are too few Africans with sufficient capital and knowledge to take over these businesses and run them efficiently.

Another important point is that although many Asians are wealthy traders there are also destitute groups living under very difficult circumstances. These groups are often overlooked in a general mood of stereotyping all Asians as well-to-do shopkeepers. Apparently, little information on these destitutes is available and enquiries should be made.

This leads automatically to the question of social welfare services both to Asians staying in the country and to those forced to emigrate. Most of the Asian organisations have been dissolved by the governments concerned. Some churches and other voluntary agencies have already assisted emigrating Asians on an individual basis. The question as to whether some form of organised service to Asians is necessary seems to be justified. Could this be a joint service by the N.C.C. and the Roman Catholics? This suggestion has already been made by the R.C.'s.

With regard to reception and resettlement services in India, Pakistan and the U.K., this would need further enquiry through the National Councils of Churches in these countries. In the case of Britain, it would be important to know what could be done in order to arrive at a more generous quota system for Asians from East Africa than the present number of 1,500 (Appr. 7,500 persons).

For the Commonwealth countries, a major issue remains on the need for a long-term collective agreement on citizenship and migration. Such an agreement could help ensure the rights of migrants (temporary and permanent) of different races and cultural backgrounds and assist in the creation of truly pluralistic societies.

In summary, the following recommendations about non-citizen Asians are being made:

1. The Churches (N.C.C.'s) in Britain, India and Pakistan should be asked to enquire about the reception and integration of Asians from East Africa who have arrived over the last years. What services are being provided and are there specific needs which require assistance by the churches and/or other agencies?

2. In view of the limited emigration opportunities for a growing number of non-citizen Asians forced to leave, enquiries should be made by the churches about resettlement possibilities in other countries, especially within the Commonwealth - the most obvious amongst these being Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

3. There is a need for social welfare services to non-citizen Asians in East African countries. The churches (including the R.C.'s) in these countries could be instrumental in
4. For humanitarian as well as for economic reasons, in the interest of both sians and ricans, the churches in Xenya and Zambia have a special responsibility towards a longterm planning for a gradual take-over of Asian businesses by Africans, if renewed attempts for African partnership would prove impossible.

5. Finally, more than anywhere else, there is an opportunity between the Commonwealth countries for working at a longterm collective agreement of citizenship and migration in the context of development. The creation of a Committee on Migration within the Commonwealth at the last Prime Ministers Conference should be welcomed and the churches of the countries concerned should make special efforts in helping this Committee to function.

It would certainly not be helpful to over-dramatize the present situation in East Africa. Nevertheless, there exists a potentially explosive situation between Asians and Africans and everything should be done, by the churches and by other bodies, to cooperate in an effort to find solutions for the different communities involved.

March 1969