

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Kenya's Troubled Asians

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Dear Mr. Nolte:

The majority of Kenya's 177,000 Asians are worried about their future. They know that the Africans want to wrest away their commercial power and want to force them out of the Civil Service. India and Pakistan will not protect them and, although most are British subjects, they realize that they can expect little British help in a crisis such as occurred in Zanzibar. They feel isolated and vulnerable, like men on a treeless ocean island.

The monsoon brought the Indians (called Asians since the partition of India in 1947) to East Africa. For as long as men can remember, it has blown from the northeast during December, January, and February and then reversed itself from April to September. Indian traders in their high-prowed, bobbing dhows have ridden it from their homes in the Indian Northwest to the Arabian and African coasts where some settled in the Arab towns, trading Indian cotton cloth, pepper, ghee, rice, sugar, and grain for ivory, gold, rhinoceros horn, and slaves.*

The quietly prosperous Eastern trade of the Coast ended abruptly with the arrival of the rapacious Portuguese in the closing years of the fifteenth century. The Arabs finally ousted them 200 years later, but by then the Indian Ocean teemed with pirates so that only the bravest trader chanced the monsoon route. However, Indian prosperity returned as Britain gained control of the seas, reaching its peak in nineteenth century Zanzibar where Indian merchants outfitted the great Arab slave caravans and where the first resident sultan, the shrewd Seyyid Said, protected them.

It was not until the British moved inland and built the Uganda railroad at the turn of the century that large numbers of Indians left the coast, attracted by the trading prospects and encouraged by the British who needed them to supply the new administrative and settlement areas. It is these traders, not, as is generally thought, the men imported to work on the railroad who formed the basis of today's Asian community. In 1897, Sir Arthur Hardinge, the Commissioner for what was then the East African Protectorate, reported that there were 13,500 Indians in his territory. The coolies, to be sure, increased this figure, but only 6,700 of the 32,000 who came to work in East Africa stayed.

*Because of the slave trade, Africans once ruled an Indian state. In 1476, rebellious slaves, led by some giant, jiggling eunuch, murdered the king of Bengal and held power for 17 years.

The traders who moved into the interior and those who immigrated later, originated from villages in the Sind, Cutch, Kathiawar and Gujerat regions in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent. They were split into four main religious groups; divisions which remain today. The largest group, 53% of the Asian community in 1948, (the latest figure available) are Hindus, among whom the Shah and Patel castes are the biggest. Then come the Moslems (28%) representing both halves of the basic Islamic split between Sunni and Shia. One does not hear much about the Hanafi, the largest Sunni sect, but the biggest Shia sect, the Ismaili Khojas or Ismailis, are perhaps the best known of all Asians here because of their leader the Aga Khan. The bearded artisan Sikhs (11%), whose religion combines Hinduism with elements of Islam, are next in size and, finally, the smallest group (7%) consists of the Roman Catholic immigrants from once-Portuguese Goa, many of whom still carry Portuguese passports and all of whom have Portuguese names, derived, it is said, from those of the missionaries who converted them. To add to these religious differences, there are those of language. The Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs speak Gujerati, Hindi, or Punjabi while the Goan vernacular is Konkani.

Once the Indians arrived inland, they were dismayed to find that the British refused to let them settle in the Highlands and restricted them instead to a segregated quarter of each town. Initially, this enforced concentration and their limited number reduced the differences of caste, sect, and language, but, as more Indians came to Kenya, encouraged by relatives or friends, the community began to fragment when its various components grew large enough to be self-sufficient. One writer has observed that this was inevitable in the case of the Hindu community with its unrelated jumble of castes; in the absence of any local hierarchy, each caste could only find identification by separating itself and maintaining close ties with its counterpart in India. The lack of missionary schools for Asians only deepened and perpetuated the existing divisions, for each cell of the community educated its children separately.

Their early restriction to towns is largely responsible for the present distribution of Asians throughout Kenya. According to the provisional results of the 1962 census, 90% of the 176,613 Asians live in what the census calls, "the main towns" and 75% reside in Nairobi and Mombasa alone; there has been only one Asian rural settlement, a small group of sugar planters near Kisumu. The 1948 census, cited in the report of the East African Royal Commission, revealed that, "82.2 per cent of the Asian community were employed in private industry or trade, of whom half were in the wholesale and retail trades, 10.9 per cent were employed by government (including local government) and 6.9 per cent were employed in the public transport services." The surge of Africanization in the past two years has reduced the number of Asians working in the last two categories.

The largest section of the Asian community, the Hindus, are mostly merchants: retailers, wholesalers, and importers, although some, like the Patels, were landlord farmers in India. The richest Hindus have been members of the Lohana caste, the Madhvanis and the Mehtas, who have moved through the lower levels of commerce to become the only Asian businessmen to go into heavy industry. The

most successful group as a whole, however, has undoubtedly been the merchant and investor Ismaili community, which, under the astute guidance of the late Aga Khan, established its own building, finance, and insurance companies and recently started a venture capital organization. Somewhat lower down on the economic scale are the Sikhs, who, perhaps because their religion glorifies work with the hands, are mostly builders, mechanics, and repairmen, although each year increasing numbers of young Sikhs become white-collar workers, joining the great majority of the Goans. At the top of the Asian commercial society there is an inter-communal elite of professional men and the most successful business people. Unlike the rest of their community, many of these men mix freely with Africans and Europeans.

Broadly speaking, the Asian community wants just two things: to do business and to have security for its capital. These depend on a stable government, yet when they consider Mr. Kenyatta's age and the conflicting ambitions of those who want to succeed him, the Asians question how long Kenya can retain its equilibrium. Although the Prime Minister assures them that his government wants to create conditions in which the private sector of the economy can expand, there are increasing demands from African politicians for nationalization of industry and for exchange control. Also, while Mr. Kenyatta and members of his Cabinet have told the immigrant communities that there will be no job discrimination on account of race, Asians continue to lose their jobs through Africanization. The more objective understand the reasons for this, but even they fear that Africanization will spread from the Civil Service to commerce. The Minister for Commerce and Industry, Dr. Kiano, has urged Asians to take Africans into their businesses and the Asians worry that the Government eventually will force them to comply.

They are also concerned about their helplessness. If there is racial violence or a breakdown of law and order, they wonder who will protect them. Certainly not, it seems, the British, although many have British passports--during the Zanzibar crisis, Britain sent a frigate to remove the wives and children of British Europeans, but did nothing to help the Asians who were also British subjects. The Indian Government, their only other recourse in case of trouble, blandly tells them that they must adjust to conditions in the new African countries if they want to live there. "They have to realize that they are junior partners in these countries and act accordingly," an official of the Indian High Commission told me, shuffling his papers briskly.

Underlying all these worries is the greatest Asian fear of all, that the Africans will force them to abandon their culture, particularly the conventions surrounding marriage which are so strict that even today, inter-caste marriages are rare and marriage with another race unthinkable. A moderate young Asian advocate told me, "You will not understand it, so few Europeans do, but marriage is very important to us. We are very afraid that the Africans will try to take our women. This is our deepest anxiety."

At the moment, the Asians are not worried enough to leave Kenya; their ties to India are solid, they say, but Kenya is their home.

Yet, just last January, when they heard about the harsh treatment Asians received during the Zanzibar revolt, there was, as one objective Hindu told me, "near panic, almost everyone was talking of leaving." But since Mr. Kenyatta's firm handling of the Army mutiny and the lack of subsequent crises, the Asians have calmed down. They realize that, if they want to stay in Kenya, they must be reconciled to increasing African competition in the retail trade, to the end of the Civil Service as a career, to the lack of political power and, most important of all, to the concept that the African is their equal. A few who have not wanted to accept such changes have returned to India, as have many of those who lost their jobs through Africanization, but there has been no sustained emigration of Asians as one often hears. The figures for the first half of 1963, in fact, show just the opposite; more Asians actually came to Kenya than left. Asian capital, on the other hand, has been leaving the country. All the Asians to whom I spoke told me that substantial amounts of their community's profits had been sent out of Kenya to England or India since 1960 when African rule became a certainty.

If they had more political strength, the Asians would be less anxious about the future, but they never succeeded in prying power from the Europeans. The Settlers, from the time they first came to Kenya in the early years of this century, realized that the larger Indian community threatened their land and hopes of domination. Accordingly, they lost little time in demanding that the British Government restrict Indian immigration, curtail Indian voting rights, and--here the Settlers were most insistent,--reserve the Highlands for European settlement. Despite the fact that the Indians were also British subjects, the Government yielded to the Europeans. In 1906 and again in 1908, Lord Elgin, the Colonial Secretary, affirmed that the Highlands were for Europeans only and, when a Legislative Council was formed in 1907, the Indians, although four times as numerous as the Europeans, were denied representation. Outraged, the Indians demanded a common roll with such a clamor that the Government, in a move that did little to quiet them, appointed one Indian to the Council. The conflict between the two communities culminated in 1923 with the near rebellion of the Settlers, who thought that the Government was going to give in to the Indians' demands, and the publication of the "Devonshire Paper", which was a resounding victory for the Europeans. It abolished Indian segregation in the towns, but it upheld the European claim to the Highlands, and, while granting the Indians more seats in the Legislative Council, established a communal roll instead of the common roll they wanted. It declared that, as "the interest of the African natives must be paramount", immigration should be controlled so that immigrants (implicitly Indian) would not hamper the Africans' economic development. The Indians angrily boycotted the Council, and in 1928 made one more unsuccessful effort to convince the British of the necessity of a common roll during the hearings of the Hilton Young Commission. But with the rejection of this plea and the ruling in London two years later of a Parliamentary Joint Select Committee that a common roll was "impracticable", they ended their boycott in 1931 and gave up the struggle.

If the two races were at political odds, the social gap between them was even greater. From the beginning, the Indian had been sub-

ordinate to the European; he was a laborer, a shopkeeper, a repairman, who had business dealings with Europeans but folded back into his environment the minute they were over. Not, of course, that the Settler would have had it any other way. He did not care about Indian culture and assumed that all Asians were as servile and devious as the small shopkeeper with whom he did business. As late as 1959, the Electors Union, a European political group, passed a resolution calling for, "the total prohibition of any further Asian immigration...because the person who is holding the African back is the Asian." A supporter of the resolution, Air Commodore Howard-Williams, in the way many Englishmen have of discussing Asian fertility as they would that of some lesser breed of hamster, urged its adoption because the Asians were, "multiplying far too rapidly." A year later, A.T. Culwick, the Chairman of the right-wing, now defunct United Party, exhorted the Asians to "stop sitting on the fence, placating and appeasing in the hope that they may be allowed to survive." He ended his speech with the superbly Blimpish appeal to "come on out and behave and acquit yourselves like men."

Yet for all their disdain, the Europeans recognize that the Asians do jobs that they themselves would not want to do and provide them with valuable services on terms which they themselves cannot equal. (Asian businessmen enjoy recalling the unsuccessful efforts of the European-run Kenya Farmers Association (KFA) in the years after World War II to start a rival chain of stores in the Highlands. It lasted, so the Asians say, just one year and cost the KFA £50,000.)

The relationship between African and Asian is still more strained. A well-known Goan lawyer and Member of the House of Representatives told me that it has, in fact, never been worse. From the beginning, the two never understood each other; they lived close together in the towns and dealt with one another daily, yet the Asian never mixed socially and, to the African, seemed committed to India, not Africa. Until very recently, most of the Asians did nothing to improve this relationship, and as Independence approached, the Africans expressed doubts about the Asians' loyalty to the new Kenya. In the debates in the House of Representatives during its consideration of the Kenya Citizenship Bill last November, one Member, Mr. Mati, said, "In the past weeks we have seen the great scramble of Asians trying to get British passports...what is it that they fear? They fear an independent Kenya nation which shows that they do not yet accept the idea that they could be part and parcel of this country." Later in the debate, his colleague, Mr. Oduya, added "If Kenya is to be a stable country...particularly the Asians will have to be loyal to us...they do not even regard us as the leaders of the country." "I come from Teso", he continued, "where there are some Asians running businesses, and these people even up to date have not changed their attitude. The mentality they had before of calling us Africans, regarding us as just minor things, going on abusing us, calling us anything, is still going on." This behavior galls the African more when he compares it to the often fawning attitude of the Asian towards the European. If Asians are polite to him now, he can only think that

they want something because they are scared. The African will accept presents from them; many of the Mercedes' and German stereo sets that seem to be the insignia of the new African elite are Asian gifts, but this does not make him like them .

The Asian leaders to whom I spoke realize that they must change the image the Africans have of them. This will not be easy. They must first remove the cultural restrictions which prevent them from mixing freely with the other two racial groups. Then, they must convince the Africans that they really have changed. As the Ismailis have already discovered, this too is difficult. At the direction of the late Aga Khan, they have tried to disassociate themselves from Indian traditions and from the rest of the Asian community. In doing so, they have become a well-organized, autonomous group, but the harsh treatment they received during the Zanzibar revolution is unhappy evidence that few Africans see the difference between an Ismaili and any other Asian.

What will make it most difficult for the Asians to change their image successfully, it seems to me, is their inability to understand how the Africans react to them. One prosperous Hindu businessman told me with conviction, "When a proper assessment is made of the past contribution of the Asians here, no educated African will go against us." He is unaware, apparently, that most Africans have already made up their minds about the past--"the Asians exploited us." Also, the Asians' attempts to please the Africans have often been far too obvious to be successful. When the Kenya African National Union (KANU) won the general election last June, the entire Asian business quarter was festooned with KANU emblems, KANU banners, and snapping KANU pennants. But instead of being impressed, the African politicians to whom I spoke merely wondered what the Asians would do with the opposition Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) decorations which they were sure were ready for display in case KADU won. Most Africans would agree that the Asians have no political convictions except to be on the winning side.

At Independence time, the Asian community produced several publications which were even less convincing in their efforts to please the Africans. A good example is the booklet put out by the Kenya Indian Congress entitled, "An Independence Day Souvenir, A Spotlight on the Asians of Kenya". It praises "Our great and noble leader, Jomo Kenyatta" and "The African whom the Almighty has endowed with an intelligence which for its keenness is second to none in the world." The author assures the reader that "The African has always accepted the Asian. It was the imperialist intruder who created, or rather, sought to sow seeds of suspicion and disruption of this happy state of affairs." "It is not true to say that the Asian trader exploited the Africans", the booklet continues, "nor did he display the least disrespect for him because he had temporarily lost contact with his own undoubtedly glorious past." What seems to escape the Asians is that when Africans read this sort of thing, they just laugh.

The average African may not find Asians personable or appealing,

but his country needs their business skill, their money, and their willingness to work hard. He should realize that although the Asians can tolerate a certain amount of harassment--they seem to accept it quietly and passively, as earth does rain--but when it begins to damage their business and their way of life, they will leave. I hope that this can be avoided, for the Asians are, in my opinion, a natural resource that Kenya cannot afford to lose.

Sincerely



John Spencer