

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DER - 10
"The Indian Problem"

November 13, 1953
c/o Barclays Bank
Queensway
Nairobi, Kenya
(Mailed from Nairobi)

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The other evening a friend of mine called for me at the Norfolk hotel, where I stay while in Nairobi. We were to go to his house for dinner. I had been waiting for him on the verandah, where European settlers, officials and businessmen were relaxing over a "sundowner."

When my friend found me, he was angry. "The way these people looked at me!" he said as we walked to his car. "You'd think I had some disease or had no clothes on. There's nothing wrong with me except for one thing: I'm a colored man."

My friend, Tajdin Ahamed by name, was born in Kenya. His father, Mohamed Ahamed, left India a half-century ago to settle in Africa. Taj and thousands of others like him in Kenya are what some people here call "The Indian Problem."

Taj's only look at the outside world was a short time spent studying at Cambridge. The war broke out while he was there and his father called him home. Taj went into his father's business in company with his four brothers. Under the watchful eye of his eldest brother, Badrudin or "Jimmy" as he is called, Taj manages the sales department for Ahamed Brothers on Hardinge St.

The store is one of the largest of its kind in Nairobi, if not the largest. The staff totals 50. All sorts of wearing apparel, dry goods and rugs are sold. A battery of Indian tailors is kept busy making suits, shirts and other items. Safaris are outfitted with tents and other camping equipment made in the firm's nearby workshops. Ahamed Brothers also supplies tents for the Kenya security forces and every now and then there is a juicy order to outfit a free-spending American movie company.

Taj, who is 28, is one of the wealthier young men in Nairobi. He has a comfortable house---mostly western but still somewhat eastern in style---where he lives with his pretty Kenya-born wife, Gulzaar, and their two children. Taj drives a Chevrolet, which is East Africa's mark of distinction. (They are valued highly for their ability to hold together on Kenya's roads---no mean feat---but are difficult to acquire because of dollar restrictions.)

Taj's father, now 65, is the East African Horatio Alger. He arrived in Kenya from Bombay as a youth with one rupee (now valued at \$0.21) in his pocket. Nairobi then consisted of two streets and lions prowled around at night. During the early years, he worked in an Indian duka. He waited on customers, swept up the store, minded the owner's children and did the housework in the owner's living quarters. He saved his meager earnings and eventually opened his own store. By the end of World War I he was moderately wealthy, but a depression and the rupee-to-shilling currency conversion disaster wiped out his wealth. He started over again and Taj says he now has assets totaling $\frac{1}{2}$ 500,000 or \$1,415,000. He now spends part of each year in Paris while his sons look after the business.

The Ahameds are Ismaili Muslims or followers of the Aga Khan, whom they consider the 48th imam or direct male descendant of Ali, the son-in-law of the prophet Mohamed. (Mohamed had no sons.) Next summer the family will visit Dar es Salaam in Tanganyika to see the Aga Khan's not inconsiderable weight matched in platinum by his followers for the benefit of charity.

The Aga Khan has been instructing his followers to sever their ties with India and Pakistan and adopt western ways. Taj and Gulzaar have been doing this and they speak only English to their children. "We want them to grow up speaking English better than any other language," says Taj. With Gulzaar, he speaks a mixture of English and Cutchi---one of India's unwritten dialects spoken in an area near Bombay. Taj also speaks Swahili, East Africa's lingua franca, Gujerati, the language of Gujerat, part of Bombay State, and Hindi, now the national language of India. Gulzaar, on a specific suggestion from the Aga Khan, wears western dresses during the day, putting on her gold-trimmed, Kashmir-made saris only in the evening.

Taj is good-natured, personable, and, like many Indians* is exceedingly hospitable. ("If my worst enemy comes to my house, I must welcome him, give him an excellent meal and the best room in the house for the night. Tomorrow we can be enemies again, but not while he is our guest. That is our custom.")

* I use the words "Indian" and "Asian" in this newsletter to denote someone whose origins were in the Indian sub-continent. Since partition in India, references is sometimes made here to Indians and Pakistanis or Muslims and non-Muslims. Taj would be a Pakistani by religion, but his forefathers lived in what now is part of India.

Taj has made many European friends and frequently invites them to his home for dinner. The hospitality usually but not always is returned. Then Taj finds that when Europeans invite him to their homes, they either make it an all-Asian affair or invite only Europeans he already knows.

Unlike the detribalized African, Taj does not especially strive to become a European. Although he has adopted many Western ways, he still prefers much of the old, including Islam. But he wants to be accepted as an equal in Kenya and so far he and his people have not been. Discrimination hurts his pride and he feels it deeply. Inevitably at any Indian gathering, the talk turns to the color bar. At a recent party, an Indian journalist who had lived in South Africa said: "You people talk about the color bar here. You don't know what it is. You should live in South Africa." But that is little consolation to the sensitive Kenya Indian.

Like in South Africa, where things are getting worse from the Indian point of view instead of somewhat better as in Kenya, fear of economic domination by the Indian is a strong factor here in shaping European opinion on "The Indian Problem." It is a fear, as expressed by Elspeth Huxley in "White Man's Country" that a "more prolific race on a lower economic level would gradually drive out the race with a higher standard of living." One hears continually in Kenya: "They live off the smell of an oily rag and they breed like flies."

Whereas the average Briton here spends a part of his income on "the good things in life," the average Indian works long hours, devotes few if any to recreation and, if not off an oily rag, lives on a much lower scale than the Britisher. Most of Kenya's Indians came from the Bombay area. They were poor, of a low caste and had little or no education. They emigrated in the hope of finding something better, as did the U. S. immigrant. Seeking to rise in the world and spurred on by a familiarity with poverty, they were industrious.

The small Indian merchant will exhaust himself making a sale. "Yes, Sir," he exclaims with an unctuous smile when you enter his shop. "Do you like this shirt, Sir? No? Wait a minute, Sir, I've got another one right here." He hurries up a ladder and knocks down several boxes from a shelf. Stepping over the pile on the floor, he hurries back with an apologetic grin. "This is made of the finest material, Sir. Only first class merchandise here. This is a first class shop. Oh, you don't like it? Wait a minute, Sir, don't go away. We can make one for you. It will be ready Friday. Oh, you have to have it sooner? It will be ready tomorrow, then, Sir. Do you need any socks? How about handkerchiefs? Look at this one, Sir."

The Britisher goes out to spend the rest of the afternoon knocking balls around a golf course or tennis court while the Indian squats on the floor of his dirty workshop making the shirt.

"They don't come into my shop because they like my face. They come in because they know they will get service," the Indian merchant said. In many ways the position of the Indians in East Africa is similar to that of the Jews elsewhere.

Several of Nairobi's hotels and office buildings are owned by Indians. Taj's father, who multiplied his one rupee into a tidy little fortune, recently purchased a new store building on Delamere Av., Nairobi's main street, for £50,000 or \$140,000. "If we send money to India, the Europeans accuse us of bleeding the country dry. If we invest it here, they accuse us of trying to take over the country," an Indian businessman said.

Only a few of Kenya's Indians have done as well as Taj's father and one finds the slums of Bombay reconstructed in Nairobi and in small towns and trading centers throughout East Africa. While the homes of the upper class Indians are as clean and as attractive as those of the Europeans, one finds different standards among the lower class Indians. I recently toured model housing put up by the City of Nairobi for low-income Indian families and even though the homes were practically brand new, they were littered with refuse and filth. "We can't make them keep these places clean," said the city official with me.

Although they are subjects of the same queen---or at least nominally so in the case of the Indians---the British and Indians are worlds apart. The Indians, particularly the followers of the Aga Khan, have westernized themselves considerably, but still remain Indian in many ways. Not all of them speak English. While the men have adopted western dress, their women generally stick to the sari. They eat Indian food and only a few have become Christians. The vast majority remain Hindus, Muslims, Jains, Sikhs and Parsees.* The Indians are not very well educated. Advertisements of firms in India for talismans guaranteed to bring the owner health, success in business and love and long life appear regularly in Nairobi's Indian newspapers, indicate there is a market for such charms. A Goan journalist, referring to the Kenya Indians, said contemptuously: "They aren't typical of India. Their vision doesn't extend beyond the shilling."

One of the most frequently heard complaints about the Indians is that they block African advancement by holding jobs that otherwise would go to Africans.

* The Parsees, followers of Zoroaster, are of Persian origin but lived in India after fleeing their homeland because of Muslim intolerance to their fire rites.

The British and sometimes the advanced African points to the petty Indian trader, the clerk or the artisan and says: "If he wasn't here an African would be in his place."

The Indian replies: "The British control the government. They control education. If they are so interested in promoting African advancement, why don't they train the African?" The Indian will never block African advancement because if a European employer has a choice between an Indian and an African he will take the African because he can get him cheaper, the Indian adds.

A British businessman complained that try as he will, threaten and cajole, he can't get Indian artisans to train African apprentices. He says African advancement would have been pushed faster if there had not been a ready made artisan-clerk class among the Indians.

The Indians, at any rate, played an important part in the development of the country---a development that has been of tremendous benefit to the African. At a time when African labor could not be relied upon, Indian coolies built the Coast to Uganda railway which helped bring about an end to the slave trade and made possible the beginning of commerce.

Indian traders, fanning out over East Africa in the wake of the colonial administrators, brought blankets, trinkets and other such items to the African tribes. The African's desire for the goods of the outside world helped start him on the road of advancement.

Today, at the end of practically every set of dusty bush tracks in East Africa stands the inevitable Indian duka and some Britishers and Africans accuse the duka keepers of driving out prospective African competitors by price wars. Nevertheless, one does find African dukas in operation.

African opinion on "The Indian Problem" varies. A Luo journalist said: "We don't want people to come and do the work we can do. We want men to come and teach us like the British have."

A fiery Somali said: "I can understand why the European has to have the privileges he has. He is an intelligent man and he is a member of the ruling race. He is---I have to admit it---superior to us. But only for the moment! But why should the Indian receive more money than me? He is a man of color like me. He has never achieved the things the European has. Why should he have privileges?"

And a Maragoli said: "I don't think too much about the Indians. If I go into a European hotel, they will throw me out. I blame the Europeans even though the hotel may be owned by an Indian."

Many Africans share his view in regarding the Indian as a non-entity. Mau Mau, for instance is dedicated at least at present to driving the white man, not the brown man, from Kenya. Some Indians have suffered from violence during the Emergency, but many of these incidents were robberies which may or may not have been inspired by Mau Mau. Only a small number of Indians are serving in the security forces. Indian political leaders charge that the Europeans have not utilized Asian manpower because, with an eye on the future, they are reluctant to arm and give military training to the Indian.

Some Europeans here see the overall Indian-European situation as a struggle over which way the colony will develop---along eastern or western lines. "We pioneered this country. We brought civilization to the Africans and by God we're going to keep this a British colony," the settler snorts.

In recent years scholarships and other assistance for Africans to study in England have been matched by another scholarship program for Africans to go to India. It is financed by the Indian government and by local Indian merchants. Apa B. Pant, the Commissioner of the Government of India to East and Central Africa, said he approached Indian merchants and: "I told them 'You made a lot of money here from the Africans. This is your way of thanking them.'" About 100 East and Central Africans are studying in India at the moment.

A young Kikuyu who tends the switchboard at the Norfolk came up to me the other day to say excitedly that he might get a scholarship to study architecture---he could hardly pronounce the word---in India. To him, it was the promised land. Another young Kikuyu who gives me Swahili lessons said, while discussing his ambition to study abroad or at Makerere College in Uganda: "I wouldn't want a scholarship to India. I am interested in what the Europeans can teach me." His view seems to be shared by most Africans. Christianity and Islam have gained many converts among the Africans. Hinduism is not a proselytizing religion, but even still, few if any Africans orient themselves toward or are interested in India.

Hindu and other non-Muslim Indians have made bids from time to time for a political alliance with the Africans against the dominant Europeans. The Kenya Indian Congress held a joint meeting and made other advances to the Kenya African Union before the latter was outlawed and the recent policy statement of the Congress has been interpreted as a renewed bid for African support.* The Muslims, meanwhile, have tended to remain somewhat apart from the Hindus and the others and many Britishers regard the Muslims as "better" than the other Indians.

European settlers throughout Africa think that India is casting covetous eyes at her neighboring continent. They fear that one day India's surplus millions might find their way onto the African continent, swamping whatever European outlook it has. In Kenya one hears continually of "Indian imperialism" and "Asiatic hordes."

Indian immigration is a big political question in Kenya and in recent years there has been a decline. But even so Kenya's Indians are more prolific than the Europeans. The Asian birth rate in Nairobi during 1952 was 61 per 1,000, compared with 21 for the European population.** In Kenya the white man is outnumbered 134 to 1 by the African and 3 to 1 by the Indian.***

The intensity of European feeling even in Kenya's early years about "The Indian Problem" was shown by the threatened settlers' revolt of the early 1920s. They made detailed plans for a rebellion---including plans for kidnaping the Governor---when they learned that the home government was thinking of allowing unrestricted Indian immigration and giving Indians some seats on the Legislative Council. Under the threat of a revolt and because of arguments advanced in England by a settler deputation headed by the late Lord Delamere, the home government backed down. "Don't underestimate the tenacity of the British settler today in face of Indian encroachment," a European political leader said to me the other day.

* Reported in DER - 7.

** Annual Report of the Medical Officer of Health of Nairobi, 1952: Bhatt's Printery Ltd., Bazaar Lane, Nairobi.

*** The East African Statistical Department recently estimated Kenya's 1953 population at 42,000 Europeans, 120,000 Indians (persons of the Indian sub-continent racial group), 30,000 Arabs, 10,000 Goans and 5,640,000 Africans. The last official census was in 1948, when the population was reported at 30,000 Europeans, 90,000 Indians, 24,000 Arabs, 7,000 Goans and 5,250,000 Africans.

An earlier estimate of the current population was reported by me in DER - 5 (page 4). The figure 158,000 for "Asians" included Arabs and Goans.

Against this background, Mr. Pant, the mild-mannered, witty Oxford graduate and son of a rajah has become the settlers' Number One Bogey Man. They look on him as the architect of evil Indian designs on their security, land and prosperity. Mr. Pant's public utterances seldom fail to touch off a barrage of indignant letters to the European press. To all this uproar, Mr. Pant puts on a pained look, shrugs his shoulders and goes about his business of representing his government's interests in East Africa.

His stated view on the Indian in Kenya is:

"Persons of Indian origin who reside on this continent are repeatedly advised that they must not consider themselves as privileged people and expect, and accept, privileges at the expense of the indigenous people because it is privilege and desire to dominate that created conflict...

"Further, India has repeatedly stated that persons of Indian origin must consider themselves as citizens of the country of their adoption. In other words, the Indians in East Africa must consider themselves as East Africans."

As Mr. Pant himself admits, his words were not too enthusiastically received by some of the Indians in Kenya.

Mr. Pant apparently is held in high regard by his government for on one occasion Pandit Nehru, speaking at New Delhi, said: "I should like to say that among the many people in our foreign service, one whose work we have appreciated more than any other's is our Commissioner in East Africa, Mr. Apa Pant. From the very first day of his arrival in East Africa, about five years ago, he has worked for what is called the establishment of a multi-racial society."

Pandit Nehru's public statements on Africa are criticized by Europeans here as amounting to "meddling" in Kenya's internal affairs. Once, just after the start of the Emergency, when scores of Africans, including Jomo Kenyatta, were arrested, Mr. Nehru declared:

"I hope that the persons arrested will have a fair trial and every opportunity for defense and I hope that Indian lawyers there will help them in this defense because they may not have other competent helpers."

Pandit Nehru's references, too, to the "suffering Africans" and to "imperialism" also draw criticism from Kenya's Europeans. They declare he fails to point out the benefits of British rule to the Africans---the ending of tribal warfare, epidemics and famines and the introduction of education, better agricultural practices and a higher standard of living.

Kenya's Indians agree that the color bar has lessened considerably in recent years. Nairobi's hotels---including those owned by Indians---once were the exclusive domain of Europeans. Now Indians are accepted as diners and as guests---with the stipulation that Indian guests must have private baths. The hotels say that Indians in general have ideas on sanitation and whether this is true of the individual Indian or not, the Europeans would object to sharing such facilities. The hotels point out they cannot guarantee against "dirty looks," but that if Europeans complain of the presence of Indians in the hotel, the Europeans are told to go elsewhere if they don't like it. It has been my impression that some of the dirty looks are more imagined by the hypersensitive Indian than real. Then, whenever anyone walks into a public place in Kenya, everyone cranes his neck to see who has arrived.

No segregation exists in the privately-owned theaters or the privately-owned bus service. Government buildings though have separate washrooms for the two races. Washrooms marked "Asian type" and "European type" are found in some government places and each contains a different type of plumbing facility.

Restrictive covenants operate against Indians wanting to buy property in some residential sections of Nairobi and although they are barred from owning land in the white highlands, they are free to purchase alienated land elsewhere in the colony.

In the professional grades of the Civil Service, Indians are paid three-fifths of what a European receives for the same job. Differentials also exist in the lower grades. A commission is studying the whole wage question now and the government hopes to abolish these inequalities next year.

Politically, Indians have less than half the representation of the Europeans in the colony. The Indians further are disunited whereas the Europeans stick together.

Of the six Asian seats on the unofficial side in the Legislative Council, four are reserved for Hindus and other non-Muslims and two for Muslims. The setting aside of two seats for Muslims, done in 1952, was criticized by non-Muslims as a European effort to "divide and rule." Demands are now being made by the Sikhs for a reserved seat as well.

There are six African unofficials in Legco, all appointed by the government, and two Arab members, one elected and the other appointed. The European unofficials have 14 seats---or the same as the total non-European strength on that side of the house.

Together the unofficials have two more seats than the government. The government strength consists of eight ex-officio members who are government officials and 18 members nominated from the public. The nominated members include two Indians, two Africans and an Arab. Nominated members are obliged to vote with the government on important matters.

* * *

Whatever his effect on African advancement, the Indian settler, like the white settler, is a fait accompli. He is here and here to stay. Understandably, he wants full rights as a citizen and the Europeans, however distasteful it may be to them, should be ready to yield, if only in their own interest. It is not a healthy condition for a country to have a frustrated class, even if that class has the trader's non-militancy and is imbued with the idea of Ghandian non-violence. The African may not be ready for a full share in government, but the Indian certainly is.

It seems unlikely though that the Europeans will grant full, equal rights to the Indian in the immediate future. But right now he at least needs to be given a sense of security. It is hard to separate platitude from honest conviction, but Europeans seem to be coming around to this idea. Mr. Michael Blundell, leader of the European elected members of the Legislative Council, declared at Nakuru yesterday:

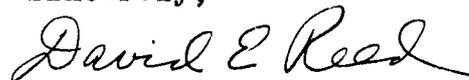
"It is not only unwise, but impossible, to shut out the African from a share in the political future of the country. We shall also be wise to create opportunities whereby members of the Asian and Arab groups, who have made their homes here and look to Kenya as their country, feel that they too are part of the country and have a future here."

The statement is, of course, vague and general, but, judged by Kenya standards, it does represent something of an advance in European thinking. Mr. Blundell and his colleagues want to meet with Indian and African representatives to see if agreement can be reached on a future policy for Kenya.

"In America," said Mr. Pant, "everyone is assured of his place in society. It's not like that here. You can't have progress without security."

A group of Indian businessmen held a luncheon in the Norfolk the other day. As they were leaving, they passed by a table on the verandah occupied by a man and woman and a young girl. The three obviously were settlers---they had the deep tans and wore the somewhat nondescript clothing of the Kenya settlers and the man was packing a .45 on his hip. They looked at the procession of Indians. The man took a deep drink. They sat in silence for a while, then they resumed their conversation.

Sincerely,



David E. Reed

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