

THE ASIAN IN KENYA

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It has become a cliché to speak of the bewildering pace of political advance in Africa and to profess stunned surprise. The white reaction to events in South and Central Africa has been violent. In Kenya, many Europeans have little in their minds besides the thought of "compensation". Among Asians in East Africa confusion and anxiety are no less apparent. But the general reaction seems to be one of passivity. At a time when a great deal of sound thinking and guidance is imperative, the old established Asian leadership has shown itself—except in Tanganyika—bankrupt and demoralized. If the Asian in East Africa is to avoid the agonies of the medieval Jew in Europe, he must urgently undertake positive steps towards integration into the new society arising here. This is, of course, not going to be easy, for it will require an orientation from attitudes and a position determined by a complex of historical, political and social forces in the past.

Although Indian commercial contact with East Africa goes as far back as pre-Christian times, Indian settlement in East Africa is relatively recent. By the middle of the nineteenth century, a few thousand Indians were to be found in Zanzibar and the coastal towns of the Arab empire ruled by the Sultans of Zanzibar. But real settlement in large numbers began only after the partition of East Africa during the continental scramble. This inaugurated a new and far more important phase in the history of Indian settlement in East Africa, for it enabled Indian immigrants to scatter throughout the interior. Like the colonial administration and the white settlers, they realized that the interior offered far greater opportunities. An army of indentured labourers was imported from India to build the Uganda Railway between 1896 and 1901; most of these were repatriated after the expiry of their contracts, but a number remained. The Asians of East Africa today consist largely of immigrants who entered the territories during the twentieth century, and their descendants, the latter representing the majority. In Kenya, they number 170,000.

Unlike the Asians in Uganda and Tanganyika, Kenya Indians became deeply involved in politics from the moment they had settled here in any numbers, as an inevitable result of their clash

with white settlerdom. Simultaneously with Indian immigration another stream of immigrants was flowing into Kenya from the beginning of this century, consisting of white settlers mainly from Britain but also from South Africa. These white settlers objected strongly to the presence of Indians in a country that they had already designated as their own. Their numbers were always much smaller, but what they lacked in numbers they made up for in their political truculence. With the help of the colonial administration, this hostility quickly took the form of determined efforts to construct a whole apparatus of racial discrimination against Indians. The most serious issue arose out of discrimination over land ownership in the Highlands and also, for a time, over segregation in the urban areas. As soon as a Legislative Council was formed in 1907, the question of Indian representation was raised and the white settlers proclaimed their firm hostility. In addition to this basic question, of course, Indians were constantly irked by the general humiliations of a racial society.

This struggle against discrimination and white settler dominion has been the major inspiration of Asian political effort in Kenya. It not only determined the direction of their political agitation, but compelled all Indians to organize themselves into a united front, which was finally disrupted only by communal differences after the second world war. Their various organizations came together in 1914 to establish the East African Indian National Congress; and although Indian organizations in East Africa outside of Kenya were affiliated to it, the Congress was dominated by Kenya Indians and concerned almost entirely with their problems.

The tension between the Indians and the Europeans erupted after the first world war over the question of the franchise and Indian representation in the Legislative Council, the members of which had till then all been nominated by the Governor. The Indians demanded a common roll with Europeans, and in this they received the strong support of the nationalist movement in India. Eventually, however, the Europeans got their way by threatening revolt and to kidnap the governor. Separate electoral rolls for Indians and Europeans were established, and the tiny European population (under ten thousand in 1921) received a majority of the unofficial elected seats. (There was to be no African in the Legislative Council until 1943). The Indians then embarked upon a boycott of the Legislative Council which lasted for several years.

The real political objective of the white settlers in Kenya was to secure self-government for themselves on the Southern Rhodesian pattern. One of the persistent obstacles in their path towards this goal however, was the vigorous opposition of the Indians. Their whole attitude to Indian participation in the affairs of the country is summed up in a statement made in the Legislative Council in 1938 by Major (now Sir) Ferdinand Cavendish-Bentick. He said, "I myself cannot admit, and never have, that they (the Indians) have any right to sit on this Council. Neither can I admit and never have I admitted in the past that they have any right to have a member of this race in Your Excellency's Executive Council."

During the years before the last war, Africans hardly entered the constitutional struggle that was being fought by the settlers and the Indians. The one prominent African political organization was the Kikuyu Central Association. This body—as Kikuyu political opinion in general—was deeply concerned with the land question however, and a large part of its energies was taken up in an effort to restore the Kikuyu lands alienated to European settlers. There was no national African political organization. The Indian Congress and the Indian members in the Legislative Council often pointed out injustices suffered by Africans and were accused by the settlers in consequence of irresponsible and dangerous agitation. In 1938 the then president of the Indian Congress even called for African representation by Africans in the Legislative Council. But it would be stretching the facts to suggest that the Indians were fighting the battle for all non-Europeans. They were interested primarily in their own relationship to the settlers. The struggle against settler domination gave a one-sided emphasis to Indian politics; little thought was given to anything else.

Even after the last war, the settlers had not given up their dream of a Kenya completely under their control. But a new and ultimately decisive factor was beginning to affect the Kenya political scene. African political consciousness had advanced rapidly and at last found organized expression in the Kenya African Union. The return of Jomo Kenyatta from Europe in 1946 and his assumption of the leadership of the K.A.U. led to a tremendous upsurge of African nationalism. The Asians, in addition to continuing their old struggle against the settlers, were therefore now confronted with the necessity for defining their position towards African nationalism. The main political issue

facing the organizations of the non-white communities still remained the threat of settler domination, so that relations between the Indian Congress and the K.A.U. were amicable and co-operation was often close. The Indians also supported the Africans in their demands for increased and elected representation in the Legislative Council. Individual Asians, including a group of radical young journalists, were substantially ahead of the timid elements in Congress and far more critical of the colonial regime. One Indian, Makham Singh, played a leading role in the organization of the African trade union movement in Kenya and was among the first people in the country openly to demand independence. In 1948, he was convicted by the Kenya government on a charge of sedition and is still in exile somewhere in the north of the country.

While the political struggle in the country was growing more intense, a deep communal quarrel broke out within the Indian ranks. The short history of large-scale Indian settlement in Kenya, the continuous entry of new immigrants and the constant traffic between Kenya and India resulting from the relative proximity of the sub-continent, had kept alive a strong feeling of "Indianness". The struggle against the white settlers and the policy of maintaining separate racial compartments had only contributed further to consolidate this feeling. Kenya Indians had closely watched the nationalist struggle in India and not hesitated to invoke the support of Indian nationalism against the settlers. Inevitably, therefore, communal differences in India were in miniature reflected in Kenya. The partition of India in 1947 forced these differences to the surface. The Muslims formed their own political body, the Muslim League, and demanded a separate electoral roll and their own representation in the Legislative Council. A vast amount of energy was expended in a controversy that did not have the slightest relevance to the problems of Kenya or of the Asian community there. Needless to say, the settlers rejoiced at this split and lost no opportunity to take advantage of it. The executive committees of the Congress and the K.A.U. held a joint meeting to condemn the introduction of separate electorates. A part of the resolution passed at this meeting best illustrates the potential menace Africans recognized in this precedent: "It is of vital importance to avoid at all costs separate electorates, as they are likely to be used by interested parties to bring about on religious or tribal line: the fragmentation of other sections of the people of Kenya."

This statement represented perhaps the climax of Congress relations with the K.A.U. The following year, in 1952, the Emergency was declared and Jomo Kenyatta and other K.A.U. leaders arrested. In 1953, the K.A.U. itself was proscribed. Some Asian lawyers helped to defend Kenyatta and the other African leaders, while afterwards, during the discussions that precluded the introduction of the so-called 'Lyttleton' and 'Lennox-Boyd' Constitutions, the Asian politicians generally supported African demands. But throughout this period ambiguity and vagueness towards African nationalism became apparent in the Congress and even more so in the Muslim League. A minority group within the Congress fought unsuccessfully to elicit a more positive attitude from what had become the Congress establishment. African nationalism was now no longer directed at settler domination alone; it was challenging colonial rule itself. The Congress and Muslim League politicians balked at this. In 1958, some of them joined Michael Blundell's New Kenya Group while continuing to hold leading positions in their own organizations. Early in 1959, the African and Asian elected members of the Legislative Council got together in the Kenya National Party. At the last moment however, the most influential African leaders, Mboya, Odinga and Kiano, decided not to join; and soon afterwards the Asian members were unceremoniously ousted from the party.

To the constitutional conference at Lancaster House early in 1960 the Asian delegates came therefore in a mood of confusion, fear and pique at the rough treatment meted out to those of them who had joined the Kenya National Party. Their stand at the conference revealed only a vague hankering after the illusory safety of communal protection through reserved seats, and the disregard that they earned there has continued to be apparent since their return to Kenya. The Legislative Council seems no longer particularly interested in what they have to say; and, for their own part, they seem reluctant to add to the pages of Hansard.

The racial myopia of the Asian delegation at the Lancaster House conference was strenuously condemned by a group of thirty-one prominent Asians from different communities in a cable to the Secretary of State during the conference. They attacked the principle of reserved seats for Asians, and soon afterwards constituted themselves into the Kenya Freedom Party. The two major objectives in the Party's programme are

an independent Kenya, with an electoral system based on universal franchise and individual rights outside of all racial considerations, and the social integration of all sections of the community encouraged by the immediate dissolution of all State-supported racial and communal institutions. It is still much too early to judge the extent of support that the Party has gained from the Asian man-in-the-street, but it is the only Asian group at the moment that has put forward any positive ideas and achieved a following among the young. The Congress and the Muslim League have shown themselves unable to face the future with any confidence or recognition of the changing circumstances.

What of the future? The Asian has no need to apologise for his presence in Kenya, yet it would be silly to argue that Asians have a right to stay merely because of their pre-Christian connections with East Africa or as a reward for their "achievement". The essential argument is surely just that Asians have made a home in Kenya. A majority of them were born there and know no other home. If it is accepted that Asians are also citizens of Kenya and, equally important, if the Asians themselves accept this wholeheartedly, the question of their future becomes much less complex and obscure. They have no special "interest", different from that of the rest of the population. Their interest is an integral part of the national interest. They too must surely join therefore the drive for independence, for a free and democratic society without communal trappings. A large number of Asians are likely to say to this that African nationalism is now so strong that whatever they themselves may do is immaterial. This sort of defeatism is too often made an excuse for a mere standing on the side-lines.

The problems of adjustment and integration are, of course, enormous. We have seen how a racially divided society in the past has tended to perpetuate Asian "Asianness" and has encouraged communal differences. It has also encouraged individuals to foster and use communal sentiment for the advancement of their own ambitions. As the racial character of Kenya society is dismantled, the artificial preservation of some Asian institutions, such as government-subsidized communal schools, will automatically go, while controlled immigration from India and Pakistan should help considerably to loosen ties with these countries. Universal suffrage would so reduce the place of any purely communal group in the field of electoral representation,

that an important reason for the preservation of tight communal organization would no longer operate.

There is doubtless a danger that, confronted with the necessity for rapid adaptation to a rapidly changing political and social environment, many Asians may find the temptation to crawl back into their elaborately sub-divided communal shells too strong. In the long run, however, the forces working against this sort of race escapism are bound to prove superior. The safety of communal protection is an illusion. The long struggle against the settlers had once made it necessary for Asians to fight as Asians. Those Asians who still think that they can and should assert themselves as Asians harm themselves and the peaceful growth of the whole society.

Is there any reason for believing that Asian and African interests must collide? The answer is surely in the sources of clash between white and black in South and Central Africa. There the two races have competed for land and for jobs and are now struggling for control of political power as African nationalism asserts itself. The whites have erected tall barriers to prevent African advancement. In Kenya the number of Asian farmers is insignificant, and there is no question of competition in that field. There is no fierce struggle for political power between Asians and Africans. The Asian minority is far too small and controls no entrenched political positions. And, significantly, no industrial colour bar exists in Kenya as it does in South and Central Africa. The artisans and other skilled workers are still predominantly Asian, but they have never been really effectively organized and have done nothing to debar entry into any class of work by Africans. The number of African artisans and skilled workers is therefore increasing rapidly. Where friction may occur, it is in the field of industrial disputes. Asians and Europeans have far too often been used as strike-breakers by semi-government agencies like the Railways and Harbours, the Post Office and the Kenya Meat Commission. Those who have allowed themselves to be used as blacklegs will have to learn the elementary principle of labour solidarity.

The popular myth about the place of Asians in trade has to be dispelled. Every Asian in East Africa is *not* a trader. In fact, traders form a minority of the gainfully occupied among the Asian population of Kenya. Most Asians are employees in one capacity or another. Nor do the Asians control trade. True, the majority of petty traders are Asians, but most of the import and

export trade of the country is in the hands of European firms, many of them merchant houses. In expatriate terms of control over commerce, these merchant houses are far more significant. Yet even if they do not dominate commerce as they are claimed to do, the Asians are clearly all-powerful in small-scale retail trade, the one field that most attracts the rising African bourgeoisie at the moment. This situation, however, is unlikely to last. While Asians may remain the predominant traders in the towns for a considerable time to come, the petty trader in the country-side will soon enough be edged out by African counterparts, perhaps rapidly. And in time, co-operative stores may very well supplant both.

The structure of society in Kenya is changing irresistibly. Those Asians who attempt to impede the process will be swept away by it. It would be far better for them, as for the society of which they claim to be the citizens, if they were to adapt themselves to the change and help make it a creative one.

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