Women in the South Asian Diaspora of East Africa, 1972-2013

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Abstract

South Asian women began settling in the East African countries of Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania in the late 19th century. They joined their husbands and other male relatives who first came as indentured laborers recruited by the British Crown and later transitioned into a subculture of traders. As traders, South Asians took near complete control of the East African economy which attracted the antagonism of colonial settlers and African aspirations. During the colonial period, due to the increasing wealth and westernization of South Asians in East Africa, the women in the diaspora began exiting the private domain and entering the public sphere. African antagonism after independence led to the exodus of the diaspora in the 1970s. In the 1990s, East African governments, caving into international pressure, allowed for the return of members of the diaspora promising an improved situation. However, South Asian returnees including women entrepreneurs and professionals witnessed and still continue to experience discrimination. Such a situation is partly the result of short-sighted policies stipulated by international aid agencies that allowed for the return of the diaspora and should not solely be attributed to the historical relationship between members of the diaspora and the greater African population.

Introduction

The role of Asians from the Indian subcontinent in the East African countries of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania has primarily been an economic one. The political economy of these countries as early as the 19th century featured Asian financiers of trade and agriculture (Oonk). These Asian or Indian financiers did not settle or own land in the earlier half of the century but started doing so in the latter half. Initially the settlers were male who often left behind their wives in India; however, the situation changed around the 1880s when there were several initiatives put in place to favor the immigration of Indian women. The women were the wives and daughters of Indian businessmen and were primarily relegated to the private domain. Their duties were inclusive of the upkeep of the home and rearing of children. Their entry into the public sphere was limited to aiding the operations and the day to day management of the businesses of their male relatives. Further migration of Indians was promulgated by the construction of the legendary Ugandan railroad between 1896 and 1901 (Adams and Bert). Since slavery was nonexistent and there was a surplus of labor in India, British authorities started recruiting Indians through indentured servitude. It is estimated that 32,000 Indians were recruited to work on the railroad. The laborers also included women, with their number being restricted to one to four women to ten men (Parekh). Of this number, only about 6,724 of them stayed back while 23,000 were repatriated; the rest died due to harsh labor and environmental conditions.

The repatriated *coolies* as they were called spread stories of the economic opportunities in East Africa, which led to an increase in immigration. In 1931, there were 57,000 Indians in East Africa; in 1969 their population numbered around 350,000 (Meisler). They were ethnically and religiously diverse. The population constituted that of the Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus and Goans. The Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims were traders often owning *dukas*/shops which ranged in its commercial

activities. The Goans, who were Christian, were mainly professionals and civil servants. In 1966, there were 350,000 Indians/Asians in East Africa with about half of them living in Kenya and the rest in Uganda and Tanzania. They lived among 26 million Africans who deeply resented them for their social exclusiveness and economic dominance. After Independence from British colonial rule in the 1960s, this resentment manifested itself in the exodus of the Indian population from East Africa either voluntarily or involuntarily (Bharati). The exodus had a dire effect on the East African Asians as they had to leave their homes in search of new ones. The majority of them migrated to the United Kingdom with some going to the United States and Canada. The exodus was more strenuous to East African Asian women as they suffered more than their male counterparts. To them, East Africa was their home, a home where they had socially, economically and politically achieved more than they ever could back in their ancestral land. Due to increasing wealth and westernization of the Asian diaspora in East Africa, women had begun to exit the private domain and enter the public sphere. Such an entry was inclusive of gaining employment, as well as becoming the sole proprietors of businesses. During the exodus, these women became the prime targets of ethnocentrism and were physically attacked with businesswomen having their enterprises either burned down or taken away from them by force or through legislative means.

In the subsequent decades, East African Asians began returning back to their homeland and again placed themselves into the prior position they held in the economic sector of the country. In this number included women who started businesses and those that did not occupied positions in lucrative fields such as accountancy, medicine and law (Nderitu). Although the returnees had hopes of an improved situation, this paper will show that the premise through which they returned—the policies stipulated by international aid agencies—rendered the environment hostile towards them, a situation no different than that of the recent past.

Today, East African Asian business owners and professionals including women are still being discriminated against through restrictive work permits and business licenses, which is partly the result of such shortsighted policy reforms. First, this paper will address the historical, social and economic aspects of Asian women in East Africa. Secondly, it will elaborate on the policies of the East African governments that led to the exodus of the diaspora and its effect on Asian women. Finally, it will state the factors for the return of the diaspora as well as how these factors contribute to the current plight of Asian women living in East Africa.

Historical, Social and Economic Aspects of Asian Women in East Africa

There are around 85,000 East African Asians and 15,000 non-residents Indians (NRIs) in Kenya, 7,000 East African Asians and 5,000 NRIs in Uganda (2002 Uganda Population and Housing Census Population Composition) and 85,000 East Africans Asians along with 5,000 NRIs in Tanzania (Ministry of External Affairs). The first waves of migration of Asian women occurred during the colonial era, and there was consistently an imbalance between the sexes with the men far outnumbering the women. Asian men when first arriving on the continent came alone without their spouses, as either they deemed their sojourn to be temporary or would send for their wives later on when financial means permitted. But by the end of the colonial era the percentage of Asian women closely matched that of Asian men as 48 percent of the Asian population of East Africa were women (Zaidi).

The women of the Asian diaspora initially occupied the private sphere but by Independence, through increased wealth and westernization, came to hold prominent positions in the public domain. The Asian men, being relatively more educated than their African neighbors and having key skills such as bookkeeping, came to dominate

the commercial retail sector of East Africa, leading many of them to increased fortunes. Their success should not only be attributed to their education but to several other factors. Oonk states that their economic success may be explained through a "trial and error" process where only the successful remained in East Africa while the others left, transforming India into a safety net for those who did not make it as well as a source for new recruitment of traders, shopkeepers and clerks. Contrary to popular belief, colonial privilege was not conducive to Asians' economic success. Asians retained disproportionate small political representation in the territorial legislatures and the municipal councils; they lacked the right of trial by jury and were never appointed to higher posts in the civil service. They were also subject to special immigration and business licensing restrictions, as well as municipal and residential segregation (Gregory).

Such fortunes enabled them to send their spouses and other female relatives to schools and universities. In Uganda, the percentage of women between the ages of 18-35 who were gainfully employed rose from 1 percent in 1931 to 9 percent in 1969. The number does not include unpaid labor or women who work without pay in their family shops and businesses. Statistics for the education of women show a similar upward trend. In Uganda, 60 percent of Asian girls in the age group of 5-14 did not receive any schooling and of the age group 15-19, the rate of the lack of schooling of any kind was 98 percent in 1931. In 1969, only 21 percent of Asian girls of the age group 5-9 were not receiving any schooling; 5 percent for the cohort of girls 9-14 and 24 percent of girls of ages 15-19. Notwithstanding the fact of the establishment of good schools in the country since 1931, which enabled education locally, such figures show a substantial rise in educational levels of Asian girls and this is confirmed by the Ugandan census of 1969 (Hill).

Census data for Kenya and Tanzania are not available, but one can assume that such upward trends in Asian women's employment and education were present as was the case in Uganda (Hill). Again, education should not be considered as the sole cause to Asian women exiting the private domain. The other major factor includes exposure to the European community in East Africa, which led to a more westernized lifestyle. By 1951, the various Asian ethnic groups felt "closer" to Europeans and the European way of life. The Goans, who claimed to be of Portuguese descent, were quick to learn English and adopt European mannerisms, including the styles of dress even for their women. Some even took on European wives and soon were called "Black Europeans." Much of the same was true for the Parsees and the Patels among the Hindus as well as the Ahmadiya sect among the Muslims.

Due to the proximity of the diaspora to European settlers, westernization along with education played a key role in aiding the liberation of Asian women from their confining traditional roles. Westernization as a phenomenon was more prominent with women than men as Western women, being marginalized in their own societies, led them to form a less hierarchical and less authoritarian relationship towards Asian as well as African women (Tripp). In fact, European, Asian and African women worked together in organizations to develop a nonracial ideology that would help advance women's rights in East Africa. Education and westernization freed Asian women from the restrictive hierarchies of patriarchy prevalent in South Asian cultures as is evidenced in the narratives of East African Asian women who had to temporarily return back to the Indian subcontinent:

We were used to a much freer life. We did not live in the narrow confines of our relatives and society as is the case here. . . . At school we studied with children from other races and religious communities. Our clothes were not restricted to eastern only. We

wore trousers and shorts and I wore Westernized dresses too. We lived an outdoor sort of live. Went to excursions to the lakeside and up the mountains. We took part in sports, badminton, tennis, as well as swimming. Even horse riding. We knew the rudiments of our religion were taught the Holy Qur'an and even went to the mosque on festival days. Friends and relatives were not as overpowering as here. We respected our parents in the eastern way but could talk more freely with them than most young people here do. (Mustafa 212)

East Africa offered Asian women a chance to create their own space through carefully negotiated forms of female agency while navigating the rigidly established colonial hierarchies whilst being victims of an equally rigid family structure. In doing so, these women "have often become attached to the new land more quickly and less painfully than men and have proved themselves more capable of actively welcoming the prohibited and the transgressive and dismantling obsolete barriers" (Hand 103).

Exodus of the Diaspora and its Effect on Asian Women

Not only did Asian women begin to engage in gainful employment or operate their own businesses but also played a part in the political scene before and after independence. A prominent example is that of Sophia Mustafa, Tanzania's first female elected representative. But the economic and political freedom would soon come to an end for the East African Asian woman. The end of colonial rule in Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika brought about sentiments of ethnocentrism to the forefront in the new African political ethos. It was directed against Asians due to their near virtual control of the economies of the three countries, leading to measures that were aimed at loosening the Asian's grip on the economy. It was due to the Africans' sense of a loss of economic

advantage and the perception that Asians were more culturally akin to their former European colonial masters.

Such policies resulted in a mass exodus of Asian business owners and professionals. Over 150,000 Asians left between 1968 and 1969, with part of their properties and assets being sold and the rest expropriated by the state (Himbara). The exodus was a direct consequence of economic policies being pursued by Kenya and Tanzania; but in Uganda, the expulsion of Asian became a national priority. In January of 1971, Milton Obote the postcolonial ruler of Uganda was ousted in a military coup led by Idi Amin. Some 20 months later, the Ugandan Asians were ordered to leave the country (Amor). More than 50,000 Ugandan Asians left, heading mainly towards the Western countries of the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States. The period was fraught with violence directed towards the fleeing segments of the populace. In Uganda, one Asian woman was raped so many times on her way to the airport that she had to be hospitalized when her plane landed in Kenya. There were also reports of Ugandan soldiers inflicting physical abuse on Asian women by whipping them with kibokos-whips made from hippopotamus hide. The soldiers also robbed Asian women in transit of their bracelets, necklaces, watches and other jewelry. They even managed to take away extra underwear from these women (Meisler).

In Kenya, the requirements of trading licenses and work permits that were introduced to non-Africans led to the Asian population being reduced from 350,000 to 10,000 due the fact that the majority of Kenyan Asians were refused such licenses and permits. In Tanzania, a racial approach was eschewed to economic development. The country, unlike its neighbors, avowed that it did not seek to replace the Asian bourgeoisie with an African one, but rather, wanted to bring key sectors of the economy including real estate under governmental control. Under such a nationalistic guise, key markets in the country for imported

consumer goods, private health and educational services were taken away from the Asians. Extending a bit into the social realm, the Tanzanian government started a "decent dress" campaign aimed at Indian girls who enjoyed dressing in Western style clothing (Balachandran).

Asian women, during and after these turbulent years, were victims of discrimination and ostracization. Those who remained behind lived in a suspended state of fear and insecurity as continued looting of their properties and businesses took place. Contrary to the popular perceptions at the time, of Asian middle class women being lazy and inactive in economic affairs, choosing rather to live the cushioned life with African servants taking care of them, these women played an active role in the businesses that were either started by them or their male relatives "Many Asian women provided the economic support for their families whenever their husband died, were absent, or failed to fulfill their traditional role as breadwinners" (Hand 106). In addition, Asian businessmen in the more remote parts of East Africa came heavily to rely on the women to run daily operational activities and even become the sole proprietors when the men would venture off into new fields of the economy.

Such businesses came under attack in 1982 in Kenya and 1985 in Uganda where looting of Asian properties and businesses occurred on a large scale (Gupta). In Tanzania, it was the stagnant economy, a product of anti-capitalist policies that affected the Asian community living there. The outmigration of the Asians had a dire effect on the economies of the East African nation-states as the average annual GDP growth rate for Kenya fell from 3.2 percent during the period 1965-1980 to 0.2 percent from 1980-1989 with the industrial sector average annual growth rate falling from 9.7 percent during 1965-1980 to 3.7 percent in the period between 1980-1989. Uganda and Tanzania experienced similar economic trends. Such trends left East Africa without vibrant economies to generate revenue and led to their dependence on Official Development

Assistance (ODA). In order to receive assistance, these countries had to accommodate donor demands for policy changes.

Return of the Diaspora and its Broader Societal Implications for East Africa

In Kenya, in order to receive budgetary assistance from donors, the Moi government had to agree in 1992 to emancipate the private sector, to allow for human rights to be prominent on the government's agenda, as well as multipartyism and democratization of all segments of society. The same scenario was repeated in the case of Tanzania, which in 1995 resumed its aid. The adoption of policy reforms was more drastic in Uganda than the other two countries as the World Bank and the IMF made it necessary the return of expropriated Asian businesses in order to receive aid. This was different than in Kenya and Tanzania where simply the promotion of private sector enterprise and human rights was thought to ensure the safety and security of the Asian communities retuning and resident.

The policies stipulated by international aid donors were logical but shortsighted. In their creation, the aid agencies failed to realize the nature of the state in these countries. The countries of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania are developing nations. In such nation-states, politics and economics are inextricably enmeshed and the state apparatus uses limited economic entry to create rents for the elites in exchange for credible commitments to support the current regime (North, Joseph, W., and B.R. Weingast). Among the characteristics fundamental to such a society are limits on access to trade and relatively strong property rights protection for the elites and relatively low property rights protection for non-elites. Elites are either groups or individuals who possess privileged rights, created and maintained by the state, to valuable resources such as land or valuable social interactions such as trade and worship. In a developing nation-state, the distribution of the aforementioned privileges must

conform to and support the distribution of political power. Broadening the entry to the economy would only be possible if the elites feel that the size of their rents will increase.

Following this logic, it was natural for the governments of these countries to enact the legislations they did after independence from colonial rule in order to wrest the control of the economy out of the hands of the Asians, even though it resulted in an economic and humanitarian crisis. The policies stipulated by the international aid agencies were, however, adopted and led to the return of many Asians back to East Africa as well as new immigration from the Indian subcontinent. The Asians returnees or new immigrants expected a changed environment from that of the period prior to the 1990s, but little had changed.

In Kenya, the assistant minister in the office of the president denounced the role that Indians played in the economy of Kenya with leading Kenyan African businessmen claiming by mid-1996 that Kenya could do without the Indian business sector. By late 1996, harassment of Indian business owners at the hands of the government was being reported in Tanzania and a political party was established led by Reverend Christopher Mukita who stated that the Tanzanian political elite had given "98 percent of the nation's to a mere 228,000 Asians and Arabs who turn around and 'loot the country'" (Gupta 136).

In Uganda bursts of violence including the more recent protest by Ugandans against an Asian corporation's development of a sugarcane plantation in a protected forest area left three people dead (Rice). The protestors sang anti-Asian slogans and even praised Idi Amin, the despot who executed a program of ethnic cleansing in the 1970s, so as to rid Uganda of Asians. There is also a divide amongst the Asian returnees and new immigrants which hinders them from uniting as an organizational force against such ethnocentrism directed towards them by the native populations.

In Kenya Asian returnees who ascribe themselves as Kenyan Asians are calling on the government to deal harshly with the new immigrants. The Kenyan Asian community views them as outsiders and uses a derogatory term known as 'rockets'. The term denotes the immigrant coming straight from South Asia with the proscription of being an alien who only wants to make money as fast as he/she can and does not want to learn the African way of life (Herzig). Part of the reason for this immigration fatigue is due to the influx of Somali refugees in the 1990s. Somalis in Kenya formed two communities. The first group consisted of the relatively poor who ended up in refugee camps in the northern desert and the second consisted of a large cohort of the wealthy who settled in the capital. The wealthy Somalis invested huge sums of money into the country's economy effectively closing off the space for competition (Onyango-Obbo).

Such animosity towards Asians in Kenya and the surrounding countries led their governments to enact restrictive measures on the employment of expatriates. This directly affects Asian professionals as they form the largest group amongst the expatriates. In Kenya, the government slapped age and salary restrictions on the employment of foreigners. The act stipulates that work permits to foreigners will only be given to those above the age of 35 making more than \$24,000 per annum (Olopade). It also bans non-citizens from gaining employment in positions of accounting, engineering, law and real-estate. The Ugandan government has also enacted similar measures banning outright the employment of foreigners by NGO's unless they can show that the required skills of the position cannot be met by local Ugandans (Bytagira).

Along with professionals, Asian owned businesses have also had to and are operating under strenuous conditions due to the Anti-Asian sentiment in East Africa. Contrary to the popular belief that Asians have an easier time in running an enterprise in East Africa due to the historical relationship that the two regions have had, Asian owned businesses have rather a hard time in establishing and maintaining themselves (McCann). East Africa's graft issues and the cultural baggage of historical Asian presence are pushing Asian investors out of the region and into other parts of Africa.

Current Effects of the Broader Societal Implications of the Return of the Diaspora on Asian Women in East Africa

Such official and unofficial restrictive conditions on Asian businesses and professionals have, or will have, a dire effect on Asian women in East Africa. In Kenya alone, since the 1990s, there are a growing number of Asian businesswomen. Of the 10,000 Asian women in the country, 200 of them own small to large business enterprises, while the rest occupy lucrative positions in the employment sector inclusive of medicine, accounting and law. The number of Asian businesswomen and professionals in the countries of Uganda and Tanzania are unavailable, but it can be assumed that similar trends prevail and such governmental and non-institutional barriers affect them adversely (Nderitu).

Asian women in East Africa today are what they once were before the exodus of the community that began in the late 1960s. They, instead of remaining in the private domain, enter public life. In the public sphere, they either tend to be proprietors of their own businesses or occupy lucrative positions in the labor sector inclusive of medicine, accounting and law. This trend is very much unlike the situation that women in their ancestral land of South Asia currently encounter. Women in South Asia mainly rest in the private sphere of the home where their sole responsibility is its upkeep and the rearing of children. When they, in the least likely of cases, enter the public sphere, they do not tend to fare as well as their counterparts in East Africa. The reason for this, as mentioned earlier in the paper, is historical. Asian women before their exodus from East Africa benefited from the wealth of the diaspora, as

well as its proximity to the Western/colonial community. Both of these reasons aided them to a certain extent to overcome the cultural and patriarchal norms of their respective communities.

Upon their return, East African Asian women and their descendants enacted the values that they held dear in the past, and the result of that was a prominent stay in public life. They not only entered the public sphere, but succeeded in it to an extent that they never had before. However, the current political, economic and social conditions affect these women adversely, and it is partly due to the policies of the international aid community under whose premise the Asian diaspora returned to their East African homes.

The policies stipulated by international aid agencies intended to uplift the economies of East Africa and place them on the path towards becoming developed are partly to blame for the conditions facing Asian business owners and professionals. These reforms failed to recognize the nature in which developing economies operate and the steps through which such economies can transcend to become developed. It is not through humanitarian and privatization policies that Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania can transition to become developed or even be put on the path towards development, but rather through establishing a rule of law for the elites, creation of perpetually lived organizations and political control of the military. The limitations of entry into the economies of these countries were placed in the 1960s and 70s as the elites felt that they did not see an increase in their rents but rather the opposite, a decline. Inappropriate policy reforms and forced enlargement of the entry into the economy without regarding this principle is the reason behind the animosity towards Asian business owners and professionals.

Conclusion

East African Asian women, upon their return beginning in the 1990s, engaged in the public domain as proprietors of small-large businesses, doctors, lawyers, accountants and real estate agents. In doing so, they continued the trend of breaking away from the cultural and patriarchal norms of their respective communities that initially began with East African Asian women in the 1940 and the 1950s. This trend was brought to a halt due to the exodus of the diaspora beginning in the early 1960s. The exodus was the result of legislations imposed by East African governments on the Asian diaspora due to the minority's near virtual control of the economies of these countries.

In these developing economies, politics and economics are inextricably enmeshed and the state apparatus uses limited economic entry to create rents for the elites in exchange for credible commitments to support the current regime. Also, the distribution of privileges such as trade must conform to the distribution of political power. Following this logic, it was simply natural for the governments of Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda to wrest the control of their economies from the hands of the Asian minority who had little to no political clout. When these three countries were going through an economic slump in the 1980s and requested donor assistance from international aid agencies, the agencies called for policy reforms that completely ignored the aforementioned logic and brought about either directly or indirectly the return of the Asian community. Members of the Asian diaspora again placed themselves into the prior position they once held within the economies of the three countries, and so, attracted the animosity of the political elite and the public. This animosity rendered itself into official and unofficial legislations in recent years that create a net negative environment for the operation of East African Asian women proprietors and professionals.

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