

# Indians in East Africa

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THE contribution of the Indians to the economic development of British East Africa is very significant. British East Africa comprises of Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika, Zanzibar and Pemba. This region can no more be called a dark sub-continent. Certain localities in the towns and cities of Kenya, for example, compare favourably with the best in other parts of the world. All modern amenities necessary for comfortable living are available in almost all the towns. Of course, East Africa cannot be compared to any country in Europe, because a large part of East Africa is still covered by dense forests, and extensive plains on which lions, giraffes, deers, zebras and other animals roam. Except a few thousand educated, the Africans are very primitive in their ways of living. East Africa has got airways which enable one to see the entire country in a few days. Deep lakes, which resemble the sea, can be crossed by steamers. A large part of the country can be covered by train and motor car. British East Africa is a picturesque land with snow-capped mountains, extensive lakes, thick forests, green tea estates, golden wheat fields, shady coconut plantations, well-trimmed coffee estates and bushy clove plantations. In certain places which are more than five thousand feet above sea level, the climate is cool, vegetation green, and sky generally cloudy. Tanganyika territory is of great attraction to millionaires who can invest money in mines of diamonds and gold. With rich natural resources, British East Africa is a land of promise and prosperity.

All persons of Indian origin who are now in British East Africa, number about two lakhs. Among them, half are Muslims, a few hundreds Christians, a few Zoroastrians and the rest are Hindus. A large number of the Indians are Gujeratis, many of whom emigrated from Cutch, some from Kathiawar and some from Surat and Kaira districts. The Punjabis are so many in number that they can have many schools to teach their children through the Punjabi language. Maharashtrais, Travancoreans, Bengalis, Kanarese and Andhras are just a few.

Indians emigrated to what is now British East Africa long before the

Europeans. Anthropologists think that the Africans resemble certain faces in South India. The Hindu Puranas refer to sources of the Nile and John Hawning Spike had written that the Hindus had christened the sources of the Nile "Amara". They had communications with the northern and southern regions of lake Victoria Nyanza. The Indians traded with East African Coast in ivory for at least a thousand years, if not more.

In the middle of the 19th century jairain Shivji, a native of Gujerat, held from the Sultan the contract for the collection of Customs in Zanzibar, while Ula Jetha was a banker, and Cowasji Dinshaw Brothers, Shipping Agents, Indian businessmen, imported from India, Alpak, Kaniki Radarpat, satin, and other varieties of cloth, besides jowar, ghee, rung, saffron, horses and fire works. The presence of the Indians helped the British to place a Consulate General in East Africa. Where there was no currency in the East African countries, the Indians introduced the rupee currency, which remained in circulation for many years.

Indians played an important role in the slave trade by financing Arab traders engaged in it as also in the emancipation of slaves at a subsequent date. On the 16th December 1872, Maharajadhiraj Maharao Shri Pragmalji Bahadur of Cutch issued a proclamation to his subjects in Zanzibar to the effect that he would confiscate all the property of those who happened to follow slave trade in any way or assisted in the same. Tharia Topan, an Indian, who did much for the emancipation of slaves and abolition of slavery, was the first person to be knighted in British East Africa. This humanitarian task, without monetary compensation, put many Indians, who were owning slaves, to considerable loss. But when the time came, the Indians bore the loss with a spirit of self-sacrifice.

Communications are essential for the development of any country. The Uganda Railway which runs from Mombasa to Kisumu can be called the backbone of the economic structure of East Africa. Even at the end of the last century, the Africans could not be made to work. Hence 18,000 Indians, many of whom were carpenters, mechanics,

engine drivers, etc, were recruited for the construction of the railway line. Out of them, hundreds were devoured by lions while some died of malaria and black water fever.

Before the railway line and metal road were constructed, all the Indian traders travelled either on foot or bicycle many miles daily and traded in manufactured goods in the interior of the country.

When the construction of the railway was completed the Indians were offered land for agricultural purposes. A few with foresight accepted land, while many did not take land, because the country was full of wild beasts and the conditions of living being discouraging, returned to India. The sons of the railway carpenters and mechanics in course of time obtained rights to cut trees in forests and set up saw mills. Their less fortunate compatriots took to making of furniture. The descendants of retailers became importers and exporters and wholesale dealers.

During the last half a century the occupational distribution of the Indian community has changed considerably. At present 34.1 per cent of the gainfully occupied Indian population in Kenya are engaged in commerce, 23.3 per cent in manufacturing industries, 13.1 per cent in public service, 12.2 per cent in house building and construction, 8.4 per cent in transport and communications, and 1.6 per cent in agriculture, forestry, and farming, while the rest are engaged in miscellaneous occupations.

India's annual trade with East Africa is valued at about £20 million. After the UK, India is the biggest trader with East Africa. No country exports to East Africa as much as India. Besides sarees, dhotis, blouse pieces and jari goods, India exports to East Africa canvas shoes, artificial jewellery, linseed oil, artistic brassware, curios and Mangalore tiles. On the other hand, from East Africa, India imports cotton, wattle extract, tanning materials, sodium carbonate, beans and peas, sisal fibre and sisal tow. Most of the trade with India is handled by the Indians, while practically the entire retail trade in commodities of various countries is in the hands of the Indians. There are many towns without European shops and the Indian retailer sup-

plies the requirements of the Europeans, Indians and the African!. Even in places where there are some European shops, it is said that the Indians render more service to their customers, and sell their goods a bit cheaper than the Europeans. The Indian retailer cannot be replaced by Africans or Europeans, for at least a couple of decades.

Though there is restriction in respect of sale of agricultural land to Indians, there are a few Punjabis each of whom own not less than 400 acres of land, on which sugarcane is raised. Some Gujaratis own even 17,000 acres of land. They grow sisal and sugarcane. In Zanzibar, Indians own clove and coconut plantations. Probably the biggest sisal estate owners in Tanganyika are Indians.

Early emigrants from India had no capital to invest in East Africa. But their descendants have prospered and saved up enough to be able to start factories and mills. A large number of saw mills are owned by Punjabis and most of the cotton ginneries are owned by Indians. Indians own a few of the coffee curing factories also. The biggest sugar mills and bakeries are owned by Indians. Aluminium works, glass works, brick and tiles factories, lime kilns, oil presses, soap works and wattle tanning extract factories are owned by Indians. Some of the big flour mills, breweries, tanning factories, electrical laundries and printing presses are completely Indian-owned and Indian managed.

Small scale industries in which the Indians are engaged are (1) furniture making, (2) shoe making, (3) dress making, and (4) motor car body building.

In the learned professions of law, teaching and medicine, the Indians are very prominent. In Kenya Colony and Protectorate there are 58 Indian barristers and solicitors against 43 European barristers and solicitors. In the same territory there are 141 Indian teachers and 51 European teachers. There are 65 Indian physicians and surgeons against 75 Europeans in the same professions. Among Insurance officials and agents, Indians outnumber Europeans. Similarly, Indians are more in number than Europeans in the categories of hotel and restaurant keepers, hair dressers, laundry workers, bank clerks, draftsmen, stenographers and typists.

In every town a large number of residential houses are owned by the Indians. Most of the buildings in East Africa are constructed by

Indian masons. Some building owned by the Indians are bigger and more artistic than the buildings owned by the Europeans.

In future also, Indians can play an essential part in the development of East Africa. Although the Africans are progressing rapidly and have started opening small shops in the outskirts of towns and villages and have also begun to work as clerks, typists, telephone operators, salesmen, motor drivers and mechanics, the Indians can have many other occupations. Of course they should be prepared to face healthy competition with the rising Africans. For the prosperity of the Africans, the Indians may have to hand over ginneries and coffee curing factories one after another and invest the money received as compensation in new industries and businesses. Prosperous and educated Africans will in course of time become rich customers and good

neighbours of the Indians.

For the development of East Africa and for raising the standard of living of the Africans, Governments of these countries have many schemes and have set aside considerable sums of money. Indians with foresight, clear thinking and enterprise can take advantage of the various development schemes. Cottage industries which require an artistic bent of mind can be taken up by Indians. Mining, paper making, coffee grinding, fruit canning, dairy farming, fishing and house construction may be lucrative for the rising generation of the Indians. They can meet the great demand for investors, technical experts, engineers, doctors and artists. By whatever name they go, people of Indian origin in British East Africa can play hereafter an irreplaceable and essential role in the development of the countries of their adoption.

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