

ASIANS IN TANZANIA: SABOTEURS OR SAVIOURS?

In its heyday, Tanzania had more than 150,000 Asians but their numbers dwindled due to mass emigration. In 1994 there were 50,000 in the Tanzania mainland and 4,000 in Zanzibar. Today, Tanzania has around 40,000 Asians.



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his wife Gursharan Kaur on a state visit to Tanzania, with their hosts

Indian traders visited the spice island of Zanzibar, now part of Tanzania, as far back as 1st Century BC. In the 1890s, they migrated to East Africa, sailing in dhows, establishing themselves as a very hardworking, honest, religious and skilled community of traders.

Zanzibar's most famous visitor was Mahatma Gandhi, who stayed on the island en-route from South Africa, and for a long time, the Rupee was Zanzibar's currency.

The British originally brought Indians to East Africa to build railroads between Mombasa, Kenya and Kampala, Uganda.

A majority returned home on



Sir Jayantilal Keshavji 'Andy' Chande

completion of the railway while thousands settled in Kenya. They moved to the neighbouring Tanganyika Territory in search of opportunities and set up Dukas (shops in Swahili) and were known as 'Dukawallas'.

While discriminating against the indigenous Africans, British colonialists allowed Asians to establish a specific caste tier system, their own education system, temples and social centres.

When Tanganyika became independent on 9 December 1961 Asians with British Protectorate passports were given a choice of acquiring Tanzanian nationality. The majority became citizens while those who declined went to India or to the

UK.

For decades Indians successfully built a commercial base throughout Tanzania giving them top positions on the national economic map for their business acumen.

Although the Indian diaspora has been an integral part of Tanzania for decades, social problems have persisted. They live in their own communities separated from the local society, triggering resentment and mistrust among indigenous Tanzanians.

In its heyday, Tanzania had more than 150,000 Asians but their numbers dwindled due to mass emigration. In 1994 there were 50,000 in Tanzania mainland and 4,000 in Zanzibar. Today, Tanzania has around 40,000 comprising communities ranging from Hindus, Sunni Muslims, Shia Ithnasheri, Bohras, Sikhs, Jains, Christians and Zoroastrians making an intriguing diversity in this nation of 44.6 million.

Though Indians represent less than 0.2% of Tanzania's population, they control 75% of the business. Energetic and utterly business-oriented, with a huge network of contacts, their contribution to Tanzania's development is unparalleled, making them the most admired and rich people of the African sub-continent.

Apart from their contribution to Tanzania's economic and social development, Asians have even participated in advancing local aspirations for independence.

The names of Tanzania's Asians ring out like a roll call of millionaires who have helped to put the country



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on the world map of economic success.

Businessman Mohammed Dewji is the first Asian in modern-day Tanzania to be featured on the cover of the July 2013 issue of the prestigious Forbes magazine with a headline "100 Hours a Week; \$85 million a year."

Dewji, popularly known as 'Mo' is a businessman, philanthropist and politician who has built his family-run business in Tanzania from a mere \$30 million to \$1.1 billion in 12 years.

Mo said that when he joined Mohammed Enterprise Tanzania (METL) in 1999, its annual revenue stood at US\$26 million. With a projected \$1 billion turnover in 2013, METL employs 24,000 people – 5% of Tanzania's formal employment sector – in a corporation involved in trading, manufacturing, agriculture, financial services, real estate, distribution and telecommunications.

METL's revenue contributes just over 3% of Tanzania's GDP. "In agriculture, METL is the largest landowner in Tanzania with over 600,000 hectares to its name. In textiles, we are the largest textile manufacturers in sub-Saharan Africa," he said.

The illustrious Karimjee family has lived in Tanzania for 195 years and are pioneers of the Asian community. In 1818 Jivanjee Buddhabhoy, the son of Buddhabhoy Noormuhammed, a small scale hardware merchant, from Mandvi in Kutch, arrived in Zanzibar and set up a small trading firm which was to become one of the largest conglomerates in East Africa.

Buddhabhoy gave his business to his three sons – Pirbhoy, Karimjee and Esmailjee. The brothers separated and in 1861 Karimjee established his own enterprise exporting commodities including ivory, copra, groundnuts, cereals,



Tanzanian-born Indian beauty Richa Adhvia was crowned Miss Tanzania in 2007

beeswax and cloves from Zanzibar and the East African mainland to India. The business was later handed over to his three grandsons who managed it very successfully. By the time Karimjee died in 1898, the



Tanzanian business tycoon Mohammed Dewji (right) was honoured by Forbes magazine

company had a presence in Europe.

Foundations for a massive expansion were laid after the company moved from Zanzibar to Dar es Salaam in 1943.

Aside from business, the family also built and donated community schools, gymkhanas, and medical facilities for the poor. Its philanthropy and community service was recognised when the British Government bestowed knighthoods on Yusufali and Tayabali.

Yusufali's son Abdulkarim was the Mayor of Dar es Salaam and speaker of the Tanzanian Parliament.

Many of the family's properties were expropriated in post-revolution Zanzibar and during Tanzania's



Hatim Karimjee, who heads the Karimjee Jivanjee empire

nationalisation. Their business empire saw tough times between 1964 and 1990 but their fortunes have bounced back with increasing dividends.

Today, Hatim Karimjee, the descendent of this family, holds the reins of the business empire which continues to grow. He is also the past District Governor of the Rotary Club at Oyster Bay, an organisation that is known for its charity work.

The list of this renowned family's charitable deeds is long and impressive; something that even President Jakaya Kikwete noted when he launched Hatim Karimjee's book, *The Karimjee Jivanjee Family - Merchant Princes of East Africa*.

The Karimjee Jivanjee family reflects triumph over hardship of the Tanzanian Asians in general. They helped transform a poor region into today's East Africa.

The pioneering Late Keshavji Jethabhai Chande left Gujarat, first set foot in Kenya in the early 1920s and quickly moved to Tanzania where he owned a shop selling consumer goods and fuel in Bukene village. The family later established a rice and maize flour milling and oil crushing business. His son Jayantilal Keshavji Chande (Andy or JK) took over the family business in his 20s and has been active in social, political and business circles for half a century.

He held important positions as a member of the Governor's Executive Council (Cabinet) and the National



Dar es Salaam City

Assembly until independence. The then Prime Minister Julius Nyerere offered him an electoral constituency but he turned it down to concentrate on the family business.

The family is among the most important architects in developing Tanzania's milling trade. Their business, Chande Industries, was nationalised in 1967 by President Nyerere under the Arusha Declaration when thousands of Asian properties and businesses were expropriated. Smarting from their losses many Asians left Tanzania, JK 'Andy' Chande stayed on without any feelings of rancour.

The Chande family's private sector business and eight similar firms were turned into a government parastatal, National Milling Corporation (NMC).

Nyerere appointed him CEO and General Manager of NMC because of his expertise and knowledge. He worked full time for 35 years and established himself as a shrewd businessman and a highly capable manager.

JK has been the director of 25 companies spanning the whole spectrum of national life from banking to agriculture. He was also involved with government corporations - Tanzania Tourist Corporation and East African Harbours Corporation. He held many prestigious positions in Tanzania and internationally, including London-based Commonwealth bodies.

He also served deprived

Tanzanians through voluntary and charitable sectors. He founded the Tanzania Deaf Society and School and was Chancellor of Tanzania International Medical Technological University. He is also the former World President of Round Table and Affiliated Youth Organisation and a past Rotary International Governor.

In 2003, Queen Elizabeth conferred on him a Knighthood. India honoured him with the prestigious Pravasi Bhartiya Samman award.

Tanzania's economically effective Indian descendent community is mainly concentrated in the major regional centres of Dar es Salaam, Arusha, Dodoma, Morogoro, Zanzibar, Mwanza and Mbeya. They are also spread in small numbers all over the country.

They hail from Gujarat - mainly Kutch and Kathiawad. They also help in strengthening India's ties with Tanzania, in trade and business, culture and in other areas.

Asians who have chosen to remain have done very well but problems of integration still remain. However, this is easing today as there have been inter-marriages between Asians and indigenous Tanzanians.

But there is restlessness in the lower and middle echelons of Tanzania's African community. Egged on by mischievous politicians, Asians are riled as economic saboteurs and accused of fuelling corruption. Some have accused them of being "strange bedfellows out to Asianise the



Devotees praying at the Shri Swaminarayan Hindu Temple in Dar es Salaam

economy". Racists have disparagingly called them "wanyonyaji" (exploiters) saying they are not black. Ironically, their positive side is ignored.

Many Asians concede there are rotten apples in every society and theirs is not an exception. Over the years, it has had its share of criminals who have been convicted of economic sabotage or have fled abroad after salting away millions.

Positively, the Tanzanian leadership acknowledges their contribution to national development, acknowledging they are largely saviours not saboteurs.

President Kikwete has noted the benevolent deeds of the Asian community and character, which he said, have "demonstrated to us that patriotism is not defined by the colour of our skin or the origin of our fathers. It is about what you do."

Bhupendra Patel, a third generation Tanzanian whose ancestors came from India eight decades ago, agrees with President



UK-trained Optometrist Hussein Ali Datto runs Vision Plus in Dar es Salaam with a goal to serve Tanzanians in eye care

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Young dancers at Onam celebrations organised by Kalamandalam in Dar



Ranchod Oza in his photo studio in Zanzibar



Indian businessman enjoys a cup of 'kahawa' (coffee) in his shop

Kikwete.

"We are Tanzanians of Asian origin. We know no other home. Tanzania is our country. We were born and brought up in Tanzania."

"Why are we grouped as muhindis?" asks Patel, "Just because we speak Gujarati at home doesn't mean we are any less Tanzanian than others here!"

While Asians in Tanzania are today not directly victimised or ill-treated by the government, its past national and socialist policies have caused resentment and an exodus.

President Nyerere's 1967 Arusha Declaration led to mass nationalisation of foreign-owned banks, businesses and expropriation of properties surplus to Asians hurting the community deeply in the pocket. Smarting from the economic blow many Indians fled to Britain, the Indian sub-continent, Canada and the US.

Ibrahim Patel, a third generation Tanzanian, believes Asians have made a significant contribution to Tanzania's development.

"Old people have passed on or migrated, the present generation of Indians, have largely, inherited family businesses or have wealth left behind by their elders," he said.

"Most Indians, before and after independence were living all over the country, including rural areas

but with the changes in post-independence politics, particularly the Arusha Declaration, many pioneers migrated overseas."

There has also been mass migration of Indians from the villages to the towns where there were better business opportunities as those departing left a gap remaining to be filled.

"However," notes Ibrahim, "in recent years, there has been a new trend – the small Indian Dukawallas from the villages who once came to towns have moved to Dar es Salaam to chase better education and medical facilities."

While the majority have headed for the cities, small pockets of Asians still live in smaller towns. Today, there are more Hindus in Dar es Salaam than anywhere else among the Asian population.

The Indian community plays a vital role in social and charitable events. Volunteers from the Swaminarayan Hindu Temple (BAPS) offer humanitarian services through their temples in Dar es Salaam, Mwanza and Arusha.

They visit leprosy patients and orphanages regularly offering essential items and bringing a smile to the unfortunate children by entertaining and offering them sweets.

Tanzania's Africanisation policy, which gave priority to qualified



Desi food is popular at Chappan Bhog Indian restaurant in Dar es Salaam

indigenous Africans in civil service, hit non-citizen Asians in government jobs as their services were terminated. They either migrated or established businesses in Tanzania.

"When Tanzania's policy of Ujamaa (villagisation) and socialism failed, there were better opportunities for Asians in business. Once again, the community rose like a phoenix from the ashes developing small and medium outfits into multi-million enterprises. Large industries sprung up and Asians here are now a force to be reckoned with."

In recent years, adds Patel, expatriates from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are filling acute qualified manpower shortages. There are currently around 8,000 expatriates.

The role of Ismaili and the Ithnasheri communities in Tanzania's development cannot simply be under-estimated, says Dilip Mehta, a

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third generation Indian.

"Among the Asians in Tanzania, the most successful community is the Ithnasheri followed by the Bohras. A few Hindus who have stayed behind are also successful in business," he says.

The Shia Ismaili community led by their spiritual leader, the Aga Khan, has played a major role in Tanzania's development. Tanzania has received aid through The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), the largest International, private, non-denominational international development agency founded and chaired by the Aga Khan.

The community's presence in East Africa has seen a steady growth and today it employs 18,000 people, mostly indigenous Africans, and is the largest investor in economic, social and cultural development initiatives in East Africa.

Sir Sultan Mohamed Shah Aga Khan III built 200 schools in East Africa. The present Aga Khan IV is investing \$1 billion in health and education in the next decade.

Tanzania nationalised 64 Aga Khan Schools now run by the Ministry of Education.

Ismaili politicians have played a vital role in Tanzania's development.

The late Amir Habib Jamal was a revered member of the post-independence Tanzania. He was Finance Minister in the Nyerere Government from 1965 to 1980. He was Tanzania's Permanent representative to the UN in Geneva before retiring in 1993 after 28 years of service. He died in 1995.

Al Noor Kassum was the Minister of Finance and Administration in the East African Community, the three-nation economic grouping of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, and as Minister for Water, Energy and Minerals.

"Although history bears witness to the contributions of Asians from

the Indian sub-continent," Mehta says, "We are being overtaken by the Chinese. They speak fluent Kiswahili unlike most Asians who have been here for such a long time."

"In the economic hierarchy within Tanzania, Asians are now fifth in importance to the economy. With the gradual African regional growth, Asians will slide further," he predicted.

"Major changes are in the offing, with the Chinese and others competing in business with the Indians. They include newly arrived Turks, Brazilians, Russians, Canadians and Somalis. This is a new development and it seems those from the Indian sub-continent will



Tanzanian Indians (in yellow jackets) helped when this building collapsed Dar es Salaam in March 2013

be edged out of business slowly. I wonder how the 19th century Indian immigrant family will fare in 25 years with this massive globalization of Africa."

"Overall," says Mehta, "young people educated in the West do not want to come back. The future looks challenging for the Asians here. As in the past, each Asian community will take its own route. Some have cut the umbilical cord with the mother country and developed new bases in the West. In a globalized world, globalized communities will grow in different stages all over Africa."

Patel says that while Asians take criticism from all sides, they do give the drive to Tanzania's business

engine. "Our business acumen has lifted Tanzania out of the depths of the huge economic mess into which Nyerere had led it. We have a select core of patriotic and dedicated Tanzanian Asians, respected by international bodies who give invaluable advice to government ministries on financial and social matters."

While many Asians have left thousands more, born and brought up in Tanzania, will continue to make the country their home. The Indian community is here to stay and in spite of the new arrivals from China and elsewhere, their overall contribution will not be seriously undermined.



Hatim Karimjee (left) presenting a copy of his family's history to Tanzania's President Jakaya Kikwete

Shamlal Puri, TII's Contributing Editor, is a veteran British journalist, broadcaster, author and press photographer from Tanzania. He has worked with the media in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Middle East. His novels 'Dubai on Wheels: The Slippery Road to Success' and 'Triangle of Terror' (Diamond Books) are acclaimed bestsellers. His next novel is 'The Illegals' (Crownbird Publishers). He has travelled to more than 100 countries in an illustrious career spanning 40 years. His work has been published in more than 250 magazines, newspapers and journals around the world.