

# INDIAN IMMIGRATION IN UGANDA: TRENDS AND PATTERN

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## Introduction

Lord Salisbury, Secretary of the State for India, in 1875, recommended Indian immigration to East Africa for the purpose of settlement and colonization. The Government of Uganda Protectorate worked meticulously in this direction and the emigration of the Indians was encouraged to serve the imperial designs of Britain. The decision of the Imperial British Government to link Uganda to the Indian Ocean through a railway line connecting Mombasa, the port town of East Africa Protectorate, with Kisumu. The eastern port of Lake Victoria provided the required official arrangement for the mass movement of the Indians to that region in the mid-1980s, particularly because the locally available African labour was not trusted and considered less efficient. Though the Indians had been commercially vibrant in the East Africa for nearly two thousand years but this new political and economic situation changed the entire nature of Indian penetration in the region. In the pre-colonial period Indian commercial enterprise had only a peripheral impact on the Ugandan economy and that had not touched its interiors. The colonial interest set the target with various incentives to the poverty-stricken Indians who were passing though hard times due to heavy pressure on agriculture and the repeated occurrence of famines. These push and pull factors led to the emigration of Indian labour to Uganda without any governmental restriction from 1894 onwards. However from 1914 the government tried to restrict the rising tide of Indian immigration and in 1949 an Immigration Act was passed to check this practice.

This paper seeks to analyse Indian immigration and its impact on Uganda in different phases of the colonial economy of the British Protectorate of Uganda.

## The Indian Connection

The partition of East Africa in 1886 ushered an era of extended European penetration in the interior of the region which redefined Indian relations with the region. British influence then provided for a greater element of security and Indian traders moved rapidly into the interior in great numbers. The Imperial British India Company, in 1890, employed Indian administrative staff along the coast and in the interior. The presence of Indian traders and artisans in the region, especially in Mombasa, helped

the Company to recruit the Indians for its various services. Then in order to develop agriculture the Company unsuccessfully made several proposals for the Indian indentured labnourers, along the lines of the Indian Emigration Act of 1883 in relation to the emigration to Ceylon and the Straits,[1] but the demand was set aside on the pretext of malicious indenture system.[2] However, when the question of the construction of the Uganda railway gained momentum in 1895 the Government of India sanctioned the emigration of Indian labourers under the Indenture System to the East Africa in 1896[3] as it was decided to construct the railway upon the Indian methods and chiefly by means of Indian coolies'.[4] Before the final notification to this effect by the Government of India came into being in May 1896, the first two batches of Indian indentured workers under three-year control reached Mombasa in January and February 1896.[5] The early recruits were from north-western India for whom Lahore served as the main recruiting place.[6]

**Indian Immigration: Trends and Pattern**

The Government of Uganda Protectorate adopted different immigration policies according to the changing political scenario of the region and British interests. The immigration pattern can be broadly divided into three phases:

(i) Unrestricted Immigration (1894-1913);

(ii) Restricted Immigration (1914-1949);

(iii) Checked Immigration (1950-1962).

This was the period of establishment and consolidation of British rule and thus Indian presence was hailed as a guiding factor that could help the British Imperial East Africa Company in various ways. The President of the Company, William Mackinon emphasized the need for Indian settlement and recruited Indian personnel for its economic, administrative and defencee purposes.[7] This place was marked by the unconditional official support and encouragement to the Indian emigration which widened Indian trading avenues in the interiors. The age-old Indian connection with the East African region forced the Ugandan Protectorate Government to imitate the Indian system for its socio-economic setup. With the expanding trading activities in the region, particularly after the systematic replacement of Sudanese soldiers by the troops of British Indian Imperial Army since 1897,[8] the Indian rupee started to occupy the position of the principal medium of exchange in East Africa replacing the Maria Theresa dollar in this process in 1910. The National Bank of India became the official Bank of the East Africa Protectorate.[9] Thus the interior areas became one of the most favourable Indian trading zones:

"Indian traders and shopkeepers spread over the country, selling the calico of Lancashire and buying hides for export in return."[10] For the general affairs the Indian Penal Code was taken over for the whole of East Afirca and the Indian tramways Act 1886, the India Post Office Act 1898, and the India Stamp Act 1899, were adopted in Uganda respectively as ordinance 32 of 1902, Uganda Post Office Ordinance 1903, and Uganda Stamp Ordinance of 1903.[11] Their entrepreneurial skill and the thrift sketched the success story of most of the immigrant Indians in East Afirca, which led Sir Hary Johnson to write to the Marquess of Salisbury in 1901 to broaden the emigrational network to include Indians in its agricultural development,[12] an unfulfilled wish that figured again in 1909 when Governor Hasketh Bell echoed the same sentiment[13] regarding the question of the Indian immigration to Uganda.

Nineteenth century India was reeling under the impact of economic distress due to the destruction of the Indian industries which caused great pressure on the rural sector. The oppressive Land revenue policies and the colonial commercialization of agriculture to meet the demand of the international market had wrought havoc on Indian agriculture. The frequent occurrence of famines and the few opportunities of meager and scattered income pushed the Indian masses to migrate in search of livelihood.[14] Indians were thus compelled to emigrate to ameliorate their economic conditions.[15] East Africa provided ample opportunities for the starvation as well as enterprising Indians. As a result of these push and pull factors a number of Indians Immigrated to Uganda along with the indentured Indians who had been recruited for railway construction works in the region.[16] The voluntary emigration was due to the fact that economic prosperity in this area was due to fast administrative penetration and its economic exploitation which led to a rapid rise in the Indian population of Uganda and of the East Africa Protectorate. Indians were among 200 Asians present in Uganda in 1893.[17] Their number rose to 500 in 1903, 3,000 in 1906, to 2,803 in 1908, to 2,216 in 1911 and to 3,651 in 1913-14.[18] The Indian community became the early custodian of the colonial development process in Uganda.

The growth of Indian settlers in Uganda in the intermediary and the subordinate services along with their advancing activities due to the voluntary emigration caused alarm in the minds of European settlers in East Africa. Also the British commercial interests in the development of the region without letting it being attached to the British India initiated the process of curbing Indian immigration which stood in the way of establishment of a dream white colony of United South Africa. The Indian control of all occupation and trades posed a great threat to the British effort to provide economic opportunities to the poor white

subjects intended to be brought there.[19] There was thus an impending urge to curb the Indian immigration into Uganda. The Commissioner of the East Africa Protectorate Sir Charles Eliot, in 1902, asked for the measure to encourage European Settlement in the Highland region and then the land regulations were liberalized to attract the Europeans who, on their arrival resented the Indian dominance of the internal trade.[20] To keep the Indian influence away and to highlight the feelings of superiority Uganda's Capital town was, in 1907, declared a residential area for the Europeans only.[21] In 1916 the Government of East Africa Protectorate came with a novel idea to restrict the immigration. According to the new Immigration Restriction Ordinance the intending immigrant had to furnish a cash security deposit,[22] a condition which most of the Indians coming from the poverty-stricken areas found impossible to meet. Further the new immigration regulations of 1921 asked the illiterate entrants to record their finger-prints. Numerous other powers were also vested in the immigration officers to control migration.[23] These developments in East Africa set in the mood of unrest in the Indian population and they tried to convince the Government not to adopt harsh measures. There had also been widespread discontentment in India itself and the Government of India conveyed the message to Uganda that no Indian should be assigned a status inferior to that of any other class of British subjects in a Crown Colony and Protectorate in the administration of which the local population had no control.[24]

However due to the heavy pressure of the white group the Imperial British Government was bound to restrict immigration in Uganda[25] and in the name of providing safeguards to the natives' rights they decided to act in 1923 with the preparation of a draft to this effect.[26] To ensure African interests wide powers were given to executives to decide the probable entry of a non-African into this region. The move was contested by the Central Council of Indian Association in Uganda in 1923.[27] Looking at the growing tensions in Uganda as well as in India the Colonial Secretary, J.H. Thomas, overruled these measures; however, the fear of curtailment of immigration to Uganda had become very obvious. In 1934 a new Bill was framed in Uganda which, though it did not say much on curbing the immigration, accelerated the process of fast entering into the territory. During the Second World War, in February 1944, the three African Governments of Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika passed regulations making it mandatory for every intending immigrant to obtain an entry permit. Entry was normally allowed to those who would have helped in the war effort. Also, a person away from the region for over two years had to seek permission which in certain cases might not be given. These were the war-time arrangements,[28] but definitely pointed

to the future policy. Finally in 1946 Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika and Zanzibar drafted new bills to close immigration and despite the Indian Government's appeal and deliberations with the East African Governments and with the British Government to adopt a liberal outlook,[29] the Bills were passed in 1949 imposing severe restrictions on immigration. The intending immigrants from India/ Pakistan were required to the following conditions:

(a) Information had to be provided about the nature of their occupation (for trading/ mining a sum of eight hundred pounds and for manufacturing two thousand five hundred pounds was needed);

(b) They had a satisfy the Immigration Officer that their stay would not effect the interests of the natives;

(c) The license for trading before entry in the region.

Besides these if a suitable qualified person might be found locally the application of the probable immigrant would not be entertained.

The 1950s witnessed the rise of African nationalism and African political aspirations automatically started exerting pressure on the policy-makers of the Protectorate and their major economic and political decisions were being influenced by this new element. Their political goal became very much obvious with the formation of the African National Congress in 1952. They viewed with contempt the introduction of various non-Africans in the region and so the only permission of immigration of non-Africans in Uganda on the basis of their marriages to resident non-Africans holding British citizenship was taken back in the Immigration (Amendment) Ordinance of 1955. However due to abundant economic opportunities, a number of Indians managed to get entry into the region which led to the clash between their socio-economic and political interests. Indians were not actively involved in the African struggle for Independence and so the Africans resented their economic position in Uganda. In 1959 during the riots a number of Indian concerns were looted and in the following years Indian immigration to Uganda registered a sharp decline.

**Assessment**

In sharp contrast to the Caribbean Indians who were essentially indentured labourers, the Indian element in the Ugandan population was due to the free trading Indian communities who operated on broad canvas to exploit the vast and unlimited economic opportunities in the East Africa. Most of the Indian labourers employed on the Uganda Railway had returned to India after the termination of their contracts and

encouraged the immigration of the Indian business class as well as the enterprising people into the interiors during the colonial period.[31] Riding high on the work of the Indian labour and the Indian trading class the English were able to command their authority and protect their interest in the area. Indian traders filling the gap between the colonizers and the general African mass provided the services extensively used by the public at large. They soon established small stores which the Europeans was too proud to operate, saved money, and bought property which appreciated greatly in value with the development of the country.[32]

In the pre-colonial period the Indian trading activities aroused suspicion, jealousy, and condemnation on account of their involvement in the custom-collection, money-lending and financing the caravans carrying slaves to the Zanzibar market. Sir Richard Burton even referred to the Indian traders as the "local Jews".[33] But in the colonial period their role in the opening up of the interior enabled the smooth functioning of the British administration during its early phase of establishment in East African Protectorate, a fact duly acknowledged even by a die-hard imperialists who praised the Indian contribution to the East African territories.[35] The Indians in Uganda can point to a record of service and devotion to the interests of this region which has few parallels in the chequered annals of the region.[36]

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