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After 22 years of Exile, Asians Return to a Different Uganda

Government and People Extend Warm Welcome As Country Recovers from Vicious Civil War

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In 1972 President Idi Amin gave the 80,000-strong Asian community of Uganda ninety days in which to leave the country, after which their businesses and homes would be handed over to native Ugandans. The shocked Asians numbly packed amidst sporadic violence and looting and quietly departed for the United Kingdom or India. The few who stayed behind, numbering less than a hundred, sent their families away. Asians, 65% Hindu, had been settled in Uganda since 1920.

Amin (who once remarked that "human flesh is more salty than even zebra") held onto power for seven years, during which hundreds of thousands of native Ugandans died in political strife. His successor, Obote, led a similar reign of terror. It was only when President Museveni gained power in 1986 and ended years of civil war that any sense of normalcy returned.

Museveni's 1992 offer for the Ugandan Asians to return was met with skepticism. But Asians were pleasantly surprised by the congenial treatment meted out to them by Museveni. Government records had not been destroyed. Just by locating the title deeds and confirming the original owner's identity, confiscated properties and businesses were handed back. Five thousand properties, including several Hindu temples, have been reclaimed. The time allotted to reclaim the properties expired in 1994 and the unclaimed balance (20%) was auctioned off. There are approximately 2,500 Hindus now in Kampala, the capital city.

The New Ugandans

The present population of Asians are not the same people who fled in 1972. Those people established themselves and are prospering in other parts of the world. They do not wish to give up that life and return to live in a not entirely stable Uganda. In their hearts, there is a fear syndrome. Except for a few, the original residents are repossessing their properties, selling them to newcomers and returning to wherever they carved a niche for themselves for the last two decades.

Some who are staying now are like Mr. Rajni Bakrania. He left in 1984 and became a British citizen. He returned to Kampala in 1993, not as a citizen but as an expatriate, and is working with a construction company. He has always been a social worker and is a staunch Hindu.

Good Race Relations

Hindus I spoke with credited Musevani with creating a climate for them to work and prosper in. The majority feel that the local population approves of the Asians' return, because Asians have brought a new prosperity to the war-racked country.

Bakrania has not encountered racial discrimination. According to him, Uganda is a thousand times better than neighboring Kenya which is full of violence and insecurity especially for Asians [see Hinduism Today, September, 1994].

I could not initially accept all the good things Asians said in connection with race relations. Then I myself talked to several Africans and did not get any negative feedback. The animosity which is rampant in Kenya is absent among the masses in Uganda, Tanzania and other African countries I have visited. I traveled alone through Uganda by car all the way. I interacted with many people and was pleasantly surprised at the positive and healthy attitude of the locals.

A major factor in the race relations is that the original tribes of Uganda are sensible, educated and mild people, unlike the more hot-headed Kikuyu of Kenya.

If there is any resentment, it is felt by landlords who have been removed from businesses and houses. But they also admit that properties were neglected once Asians were gone. The majority of locals also resent the fact that only Amin's clan and a handful of Muslims benefited from the expulsion. They sympathize with the Asians as having received unjust treatment.

The family of Bharat Gheewala, Hinduism Today franchise owner in the UK, was established in Uganda and ejected along with others in 1972. Bharat, who has been back to Uganda several times recently, said the local's attitude was "very warm, cordial and encouraging. There has always been a large section of Africans who appreciated the Asians. They could see the prosperity of Kenya resulting from Asian business development."

The popular sentiment expressed by black Ugandans is that they never felt comfortable with these properties and businesses. One lady teacher said, "It was like living on borrowed land, we never felt the sense of belonging. The fear was always lurking that one day Asians shall come back and claim what is rightfully theirs." Maybe this explains the lack of maintenance and general deterioration of buildings and factories.

One development worker expressed his joy at the new face for Kampala where hotels are now renovated and the tourist flow has started. Many do not care who owns what, as long as the country's economy is stable and the living conditions for the average Ugandan are good. Mr. Samuel Mpimbaza Hasakha, a broadcast journalist with Radio Uganda, respects Indians and is very happy with the visible progress made after their return. He said, "I like their style. They manage well on a small profit margin. I am overjoyed on their return."

Those Who Stayed Behind

About one hundred Asians never left the country. Mrs. Sharda Nandlal Karia, present Head of Religion of the Sanatan Dharma Mandal temple in Kampala, is one of them. She says, "We had no problems of any kind after the majority left. There were no restrictions of any nature. We could travel and exchange money freely. The life was very good after the initial turmoil. There were no robberies or violence of any type [the civil war took place largely in the countryside]. This is a proof that there was no racial hatred." She felt safe, but sent her teenage daughters away for their education. Mrs. Karia never felt the need to abandon her ancestral home, and the authorities never bothered her.

Babhubhai Ruparel, a third-generation Ugandan, also stayed back in 1972. He says a vacuum was created after the exodus. Survival was difficult, but the Africans were sympathetic. Things improved after business licenses were issued in 1975.

The Hindu Temples

Only two temples remained in Hindu possession after the 1972 exodus. All others were taken over by the local people and the authorities. In Kampala, one temple was left with Hindus. The second, the Swaminarayan Temple just a few hundred yards away, was occupied and used as a hall. It has been repossessed and is under renovation, but not yet open.

Remarkably, the temples were not destroyed. "They preserved the temples after 1972," Gheewala reports. "The temples were never disrupted by Amin's soldiers, even though there was a lot of destruction all around. I do not know of one murthi which was damaged."

The other major towns of Jinja and Torro each have an active temple. The temple at Entebbe has been repossessed, but it will take some time before it becomes functional. The Vishvakarma Temple in Jinja has been occupied by the Muslim Tablic sect. They are refusing to vacate the premises. However, the Satya Narayan Temple in Jinja has resumed normal functioning with a full-time priest, Pandit B.R. Bhat, in residence from July, 1994.

When I visited the temple in September, 1994, large-scale renovations were taking place. There is a temple committee in place under the chairmanship of Mr. Jayantibhai Daliya which is receiving good support from the 250 local Hindus. The Madhwani family is instrumental in the restoration of this temple.

Pandit Bhat is the first priest after more than twenty years to conduct the prayers at the Jinja temple. Only four or five Hindus were left behind in 1972, thus the temple could not be functional. The temple's shrines to Ambaji, Shankar Bhagwan, and Shitla Mata were unharmed. The local people used the hall for gatherings and general evening activities such as disco dancing. The large compound of the temple premises was used for habitation.

In the outer compound, there is a statue of Mahatma Gandhi where the community celebrated Gandhi Jayanti on October 2nd in a big way. Significantly, it was not damaged at all. Part of Gandhi's ashes were placed in the Nile River in Uganda.

Present and Future Trends

The present government of Uganda is secular, and there is freedom of religion. Uganda is 66% Christian (half Catholic, half Protestant), 15% Muslim and 19% of tribal religion. The government is supportive of all the Hindu celebrations.

Great saints and gurus such as Morari Bapu, Swami Satyamitranand and Pramukh Swami Maharaj visit regularly. In the recent past Gayatri Pariwar from Haridwar held a very successful ashwamedha yajna.

Priest Trambaklal Harishankar Bhatt is from Rajkot, India. He has been serving the SDM temple in Kampala for the last two years, during which the Hindu population has doubled. Four to five hundred Hindus regularly attend the temple.

The returning Hindus come straight to the temple from the airport to prayfully

thank God for their safe return. Priest Bhatt remarked, "The Hindus have faith, but are materialistic. That is why they are coming back. There is a need to provide more religious motivation. I am constantly working towards that goal."

The faith of most Hindus is intact. They went to the UK as paupers, and are now thriving. Some people were shaken up for a while and thought, "Oh God, why has this happened to me?" They prayed for strength to recover from the shock of being thrown out of their homeland. Their prayers were answered and they recovered. In reality, their suffering caused them to pray with increased fervor and devotion.

Currently children are being brought up with all the rituals and traditional value system intact. Earlier, there were community activities to teach children about the religion and vernacular languages. As yet there is no organized religious or cultural institution. The families teach the children at home. Overall the future for Uganda's Hindus looks very bright indeed.

Why Amin Kicked The Asians Out

Idi Amin offered several justifications for forcefully expelling the Asians. Regardless of their validity, it is indisputable that the exodus made Amin an instant hero all over East Africa. Only later did the locals conclude it was misguided-first because of the disastrous impact on the economy, and second because the only ones to gain were Amin's soldiers.

Just a few days before he announced the expulsion of Asians from Uganda, Amin detailed his complaints: "Asians have always wanted to make the biggest possible profit with the least investment. They milked the cow, but they did not feed it to yield more milk. They prevented African farmers and businessmen from learning their skills and sabotaged the economy by profiteering, hoarding currency, frauds and similar offenses."

"You cut your community off completely," he went on a few days later, "You do not cooperate or join together with the Africans in social activity either here or in Nairobi, or in any place. You are sabotaging the economy by violating the income tax laws. You keep two sets of books-one in Gujarati or Hindustani which tax officials cannot read. You are smuggling goods out of the country and sending money illegally out of Uganda to the UK and other countries."

Asians sent overseas for training doctors, lawyers and engineers at government expense never returned, or joined private practice or business when they did, he claimed. He spoke with bitterness about the Asian doctors who refused to take any posts in the up-country.

In December, 1971, Amin's rhetoric took a decidedly personal tone. "There is the question of your refusal to integrate with Africans in the country. It is particularly painful that in the seventy years which have elapsed since the first Asians came to Uganda, the Asian community has continued to live in a world of its own to the extent that the Africans in this country have, for example, hardly been able to marry Asian girls. There are only six mixed couples in Uganda. The matter becomes even more serious when attempts by Africans within Uganda to fall in love and marry Asian girls have in one or two cases even resulted in the Asian girls committing suicide when it was discovered by their parents that they were in love and intended to marry Africans."

It is widely known in Uganda itself that Amin was interested in an Asian woman from a very prominent family, and had proposed marriage to her-even though he had four wives already. Amin took the impossibility of this arrangement as a personal affront-and it became a major motivation for his historic dismissal of Asians.