

THE EXPULSION OF THE ASIANS FROM UGANDA

The British had brought Indians to East Africa and Uganda for two main reasons. Firstly, to help build the railway from Mombasa to Kampala and secondly, to act as a buffer between the colonial masters and indigenous Africans. More than 30,000 labourers had been brought in from the Indian sub-continent on an indentured labour contract. On completion of the construction of the railways, the majority of the labourers returned to their homeland, but a significant minority stayed behind, settled, and made new lives for themselves. With time, some ventured into commerce, others into junior-level jobs within the colonial administration, and yet others became artisans and pursued vocational careers. From the early 1900s to independence in 1962, Uganda's Asian population level is estimated to have been between 65,000 and 80,000. Although initially referred to as Indians, with the independence of India and its subsequent partition, resulting in the creation of India and Pakistan, they were more commonly known simply as "Asians". This later even included people from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. By the time of the expulsion, it is estimated that there were about 80,000 individuals of South Asian descent in Uganda, out of which some 23,000 had applied for Ugandan citizenship; these had already been processed and granted. The vast majority of the remainder were British passport holders.

Over time, the Asian minority had become more established and educated than their indigenous counterparts. Many Asians had now progressed to setting up large industries, engineering firms, agro-industries and commercial enterprises. During the colonial era, they had been unfairly given advantages over the indigenous population, leading to understandable, underlying resentment. While not all Asians could be considered well off, they were certainly far better off as a group than the indigenous community, pro-rata wise significantly so. By independence, that underlying resentment towards Asians had grown and was by then palpable.

During the latter part of Obote's government, which had pursued a policy of 'Africanisation', new approaches emerged targeting the Asians and trying to redress the balance more in favour of the indigenous Africans. These policies included proposals for work permits and trade licenses to restrict the role of non-citizen Asians in economic activities. Later, during Obote's 'move to the left', these proposals went even further with the 'Common Man's Charter' and the eventual nationalisation of all large enterprises and industries. Thus, when Amin came into power, anti-Asian sentiment was rife and fully engrained in the indigenous population. In August 1971, Amin announced a sweeping overview of the citizenship status of the Asian community, while at the same time declaring a census of Uganda's Asian population. His justification for this was to resolve the 'misunderstandings' regarding the role of Asians in Ugandan society. At a conference specially convened in December 1971 to discuss the Asian issue, he expressed hope that the gap between Ugandan Asians and Africans would narrow, while simultaneously paying tribute to the contributions of Asians to the economy and various professions. During the speech, he accused a small minority of the Asian population of disloyalty, non-integration, commercial malpractice and tax evasion. In the same address, he committed to the promise that his government would recognise citizenship rights which had already been identified and granted but would immediately cancel all pending applications.

'On June 28 (1971), the General assured the African traders that his government would do anything in its power to place the economy in their hands. On October 7, a census of the Asian population only was ordered, and every Asian was required to carry a 'green card'. On December 7, following the 'Asian census', Amin put a stamp of finality on the non-citizen status of many Asian traders by cancelling the application of over 12,000 Asians for Ugandan citizenship. At the same time, he called together a conference of 'Asian community leaders' and accused them of economic malpractice, of sabotaging government policies and of failing to integrate into the community... Threats to the commercial bourgeoisie, articulated in a racial form, continued. On January 5, 1972, Amin warned thirteen representatives of the Asian community that, 'Uganda is not an Indian colony'. A week later, he said he would like to see Ugandans owning businesses on Kampala's main street....