

The Politics of Dispersal: East African, British, and Indian Roles in the Creation of a Global Ugandan Asian Diaspora (1967-1974)

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This story is about the fate of a colonial diaspora in a rapidly decolonising world. The case of the East African Asians exemplifies how demographic realities shaped by colonialism clashed with imaginations of homogenous national spaces. The most (in)famous example is President Idi Amin's expulsion of Asians from Uganda in 1972. Scholarship on the Ugandan Asian expulsion has focused largely on three themes. The first is Africanisation and the African context that prepared the expulsion (Mamdani 1973; Mazrui 1975; Jørgensen 1981; Cooper 2002; Nugent 2003). The second theme discusses the effect of the Ugandan expulsion on Britain's multicultural society (Gilroy 1986; Dummett and Nicol 1990; Paul 1997; Hansen 2000; Hampshire 2005). The third theme is more anthropological and is concerned with the fate of the 'Twice migrants' - a term coined by Parminder Bhachu in 1986, that came to stand for an entire generation of East African Asians who had resettled in Western countries between 1967, when Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya first threatened with expulsion and Amin's expulsion order in 1972 in Uganda. This paper does not do any of these things, but start from the global British Asian diaspora itself. It presents a geopolitical history of the expulsion, by disentangling the triangular relation between the East African countries, the UK, and India that made the refugees the pawns in a game of passing the buck.

All three had their reasons to be concerned about the presence of a postimperial diaspora in a decolonizing world. According to British estimates, between 6 and 15 million diasporic Asians (both Indian and Chinese) were UK passport holders, with no other documents but British in their newly independent places of residence. For India, that estimate was almost as dramatic. Struggling with population growth, Indira Gandhi was not keen on receiving millions of diasporic British subjects with Indian heritage. In East Africa, Asians' citizenship status after independence remained highly ambiguous. While some adopted local citizenship, few definitively took distance of their British documents. This ambiguous citizenship position, combined with the perception of Asians as economic exploiters led to resentment among East African populations and governments.

The Kenyan President Jomo Kenyatta was the first to implement clear anti-Asian measures

in East Africa in 1967. In effect, Kenyatta did not ‘expel’ large amounts of people, but many Asians left voluntarily, fearing for their positions under the new legislation. At the end of 1967, migration figures of Kenyan Asians to Britain had doubled to 12,000 compared to the annual numbers between 1963 and 1966. In the first two months of 1968, another 12,000 Asians voluntarily left the country.¹

Britain reacted with a restrictive immigration bill, the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1968. The Act fitted in a larger pattern of controlling Commonwealth immigration that started in 1962. From 1948 to 1962, the entrance of Commonwealth and colonial citizens to Britain was unrestricted. In 1962, Harold Macmillan’s Conservative government –influenced by openly racist demagogues such as Enoch Powell, who served as Minister of Health in Macmillan’s Cabinet – restricted Commonwealth immigration for the first time. From that moment onwards, all Commonwealth immigrants, regardless of their skin colour, had to apply for a limited number of employment vouchers. The Kenyan exodus opened British policy makers’ eyes to the problem of the postimperial diaspora. From that moment onwards, migration policies were geared towards keeping diasporic subjects out. However, the subsequent measures provoked a rush on Britain’s borders, as East African Asians feared that the British borders would permanently shut.

Moreover, the 1968 Act irritated India, which was involved in a twofold way as the largest sender of Commonwealth immigrants to Britain (especially much needed medical staff, such as doctors and nurses) and as the ‘home land’ of the Asians.² The British need of Indian labour gave the Indian government an advantage at the negotiation table. Legally, they claimed, they hold no responsibility for the Asians without Indian passports. UK passport holders of Indian descent were entirely Britain’s responsibility.

President Milton Obote in Uganda was also aware of the great opportunity the 1968 Act gave him to undermine British legitimacy. By threatening to implement new anti-Asian measures in Uganda, Obote attempted to use the CIA 1968 as a weapon against the British. He knew that his actions would place great pressure on the British government. In the event of a large-scale expulsion of Ugandan British Asians, the British government could only lose face: not taking responsibility for the refugees would confirm its racism, taking the refugees in would show its political weakness in a post-imperial world.³ However, it would be his successor, General Idi Amin, who turned his plans into actions by expelling the Asians in 1972.

In the first place, Britain looked to India to resolve the problem of diasporic migration. Though India’s initial stance was one of firm denial of all responsibility, it became increasingly harder to deny entrance to ‘kith and kin’ as protest of lobby groups within India grew. India accepted to resettle some expellees temporarily, for periods of ninety days. However, the Indian government did not intent to actively expel people once the grace period had passed.

They would only encourage people to travel further to their ‘real’ destination, the UK. In return, they expected a “reasonable attitude” of the British government to take Asians with endorsed passports in as, “that would be of great psychological help”.⁴

British officials understood the Indian position all too well. They understood that the Indians needed a “face-saving measure” as much as they did. The solution was found in what became known as the “Indian Endorsement”. This was an arrangement in which British Asians wanting to travel to India retained the opportunity to go to Britain at a later stage if they so wished. In order to guarantee this right, the British High Commissioners in East Africa would “endorse” Asians’ passports, “to certify that the holder of this passport is a citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies who is entitled to an entry certificate to travel to the United Kingdom”. In return, India would accept Asians for permanent settlement and allow them to apply for Indian citizenship. Accepting Indian citizenship would then forfeit British citizenship, after which the Asians ceased to be Britain’s responsibility.⁵ This situation was not ideal, neither for Britain, nor for India, but it was a solution agreeable to both.

The precarious position of both Britain and India urged British policy makers (now lead by the Conservative PM, Edward Heath) to look further, first to the Commonwealth, later to the international community, for help. Some fifteen countries replied swiftly, mostly saying that they were interested in small numbers of professionals and highly skilled labourers in particular economic sectors, such as medicine and engineering. Only Canada and Malawi engaged themselves to take more than token numbers: 3,000 and 1,500 respectively.⁶ The international responses in the first month after the expulsion order were highly symbolic for Heath’s government. In a political climate in which migration numbers mattered so much, keeping the numbers down was a goal in and of itself.

The importance of international diplomacy lay in convincing the world that the expulsion of colonial diasporic Asians was not a post-imperial problem, but a matter of international concern. Dispersal was Britain’s ultimate means to cut through the ties with the former Empire. It was crucial, however, that the very strong imperial connection between the Asians and Britain remained as obscure as possible. During the ninety days of the expulsion, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) carefully monitored the public debate in Sweden that was one of the most vocal critics of continuing colonialism. However, the FCO bureaucrats were relieved to see no criticism of – and even Swedish willingness to help with – the dispersal of Ugandan Asians.⁷

The Swedish approval was a breakthrough for the British government. On 27 September 1972, Colin Crowe, British Permanent Representative to the UN in the General Assembly, officially raised the issue of the Ugandan Asians in New York. Crowe’s letter stated that the situation was “urgent by virtue of the time limit imposed and important because the mass expulsion of a group of people raises matters of principle, which are of concern not only to

the governments immediately involved but to the international community as a whole”.⁸ Even though the debate in the UN never led to a resolution, the British hopes to turn the issue into an international matter was successful. Soon after, expellees started leaving for the countries that had agreed to resettle them – most notably Canada. The UNHCR became responsible for the international resettlement of those who remained behind (mostly people who had become stateless after both Uganda and the UK denied responsibility for them).

By the end of October, the dispersal was in the final stage: of all UK passport holders, the UK had received 27,000 refugees while over 7,000 had gone to India and Canada. Over 1,000 others were dispersed over the entire globe. Some 4,500 fell under the auspices of the UNHCR, which erected temporary asylum in refugee camps in Austria, Belgium, Italy, and Spain. UNHCR officials were anxious international actors would interpret their actions as “acting at British behest”.⁹ Fact is that the UNHCR helped the former colonial power to establish a refugee regime that spread the burden of postcolonial migration. The system became a common practice in the years to follow, first with the Vietnamese ‘boat people’, later also with other refugees from the Global South.

Moreover, the international resettlement of Ugandan Asian expellees served as a precedent for further British dealings with its postimperial diaspora. Instead of drafting more restrictive migration policies, as they had done in the past, British policy makers now chose to work with the international community. In December 1972, Foreign Secretary Alec Douglas-Home declared that, “Suggestions have been made that we ought to bring forward legislation to alter our nationality law so as to alleviate the difficulties with which we could be faced. Our nationality law is in need of bringing up to date and we shall proceed with the review of it which is already in hand. But *the real answer lies in co-operation with other governments*”. [Emphasis added]¹⁰

Time did not diminish the concern over the Asian diaspora. In fact, the FCO would continuously draft contingency plans between 1972 and 1974. These plans tell the story of the development of British new, post-imperial policies in the former colonies. More and more, the emphasis came on economic retaliatory measures against ex-colonies in case of an expulsion. However, reprisals could only be practicable if the “white element” was not endangered. Therefore, it was necessary to “thin[] out the expatriate UK citizens when it seemed that expulsion was a definite possibility”. However, in case Britain would again be confronted with a “flood” of non-white expellees, the only real option was dispersal among third countries.¹¹

As long as the obsession with expulsion endured, Heath’s government did everything to prevent Ugandan UKPH abroad to come to Britain. This applied especially to those in India. The situation was complicated for stateless Ugandan Asians in India who wanted to reunite with family members holding British passports and resettled in the UK. The desire to leave India was related to the treatment stateless Asians received upon arrival. The lack of

repatriation aid for all who did not hold an Indian passport – Indira Gandhi declared that the UK passport holders and the stateless Asians were not her responsibility but that of the UK and the UN respectively – complicated their situation. Non-Indian nationals were not allowed to take up Government employment, did not receive Indian welfare support, and were not eligible for the special resettlement housing projects.¹²

This situation continued for several years after the expulsion. As late as 1976, the UNHCR received information on programmes set up for Indian nationals specifically.¹³ It took until the election of a new government in Britain – again under the lead of Harold Wilson – in 1974, before the UK would allow heads of households from India to reunite with their wives and children in Britain.¹⁴ This provision, however, did not change the situation of the stateless refugees without relatives in Britain, whose living conditions remained far below average. By the time the UNHCR became aware of their precarious situation, Asians with non-Indian passports in India preferred leaving to staying. With the door to Britain still firmly shut for Ugandan Asians, the UNHCR eventually persuaded the USA and Canada to take in more Asians ‘stranded’ in India.¹⁵ India, like Britain, had thus effectively reduced the number of people for which to take responsibility.

In conclusion, this paper shows how former colonial diasporas formed a challenge to postimperial imaginations of homogenous national spaces, in East Africa as much as in Britain and India. The angle of ‘dispersal’ allows to look beyond officially drafted migration policies in that period and to understand the power dynamics between all three geographical players during and immediately after the colonial transition. This approach challenges the common view of a successful resettlement of Ugandan Asians in a compassionate British society that rose above itself and the racist (Powellite) rhetoric of the time.¹⁶ Instead, it explicitly unmaskes the Ugandan Asian episode of the watershed moment in which Britain, devoid of all compassion, cut ties with its former diasporic subjects. It also shows that, despite attempts of the newly independent countries of changing the power dynamics, the old colonial world order did not cease to exist after decolonization.

Notes

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- 3 Ministry of Information, Broadcasting, and Tourism Uganda, The President’s Press Conference Held in Parliamentary Buildings Kampala, 26/2/1968. FCO 31/496/2 TNA.
- 4 Freeman, Report to the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, H. Bowden – The ‘Asian Exodus’ from Kenya, 4/7/1968, FCO 50/134/12 TNA, 4.
- 5 Geoffrey Otton, Letter to Heddy – Kenyan Asians Travelling to India, 8/7/1968, FCO 50/134/48

TNA.

- 6 Ugandan Asians: “The Diplomatic Defensive”, 31/8/1972, FCO 31/1402/11 TNA.
- 7 S.Y. Dawbarn , Telno. 374 to FCO – Uganda: Expulsion of Asians, 30/8/1972. FCO 31/1402/4 TNA; T.L.A. Daunt, Letter to East Africa Department – Ugandan Asians and Sweden, 5/9/1972. FCO 31/1402/50 TNA.
- 8 International implications of the expulsion of the Asian Community from Uganda, Letter dated 26 September 1972 from C.T. Crowe, 27/9/1972, Twenty-Seventh session, A/8794.
- 9 Alec Douglas-Home, Telno 771 to UKMIS New York – Stateless Asians in Uganda, 3/10/1972, FCO 31/1406/490 TNA.
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- 11 Draft record of a meeting to consider contingency planning against a further mass expulsion of Asian UKPH, 5/2/1973, FCO 50/448/5 TNA.
- 12 Margaret Owen, Stranded in India – A report prepared for the Co-ordinating Committee for the Welfare of Evacuees from Uganda, 14/11/1973, FCO 50/461/1 TNA; Suresh D. Patel, Letter to the Indian Council of Social Welfare, 21/7/1976, 100/IND/ASI/345 - Asian Refugees in India, Vol. 1 (1976-1977), Series 2, Fonds UNHCR 11.
- 13 Satyam K. Patel, Letter to the UNHCR – Assistance for housing project of Uganda Repatriates holding Indian passports in Gujarat State, India, 23/12/1976, 100/IND/ASI/353 – Asian Refugees in India, Vol. 1 (1976-1977), Series 2, Fonds UNHCR 11. Bert N. Adams and Mike Bristow, “Ugandan Asia Expulsion Experiences,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 14, no. 3/4 (1979): 191–203.
- 14 John Kelly, Telegram to all UNHCR Representatives and Correspondents – Uganda Asians/United Kingdom, 9/4/1974, 100/GEN/ASI/262 – Refugees from Asia General, Vol. 2 (1974), Series 2, Fonds UNHCR 11.
- 15 P. Mitha, Report of mission to Canada and New York, 4/2/1974 – 100/GEN/ASI/248 – Refugees from Asia General, Vol. 1 (1973-1974), Series 2, Fonds UNHCR 11.
- 16 “The Official Website of Lord Popat of Harrow | Debate - Ugandan Asians,” 2012, <http://lordpopat.com.s72754.gridserver.com/parliament/debate-ugandan-asians>; Aiyar, “Nation, Race and Politics,” 433.