

The Origins and Settlement of Hindus in Nairobi, Kenya

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Abstract

Hinduism is one of the minority religions in Kenya whose membership is basically drawn from the Indian immigrant community. This article analyzes the historical roots of Kenyan Hinduism and how it contributes to Kenya's religio-cultural heritage diversity. The following questions are answered in this paper: How did Hindus migrate from India to Kenya? What factors motivated Hindu migration from India to settle in Kenya and Nairobi in particular? In what ways has Hinduism contributed to the diversity of Kenya's religio-cultural heritage? The descriptive research design was adopted and data was collected through fieldwork using a structured questionnaire and oral interviews. The target population comprised Hindus residing in Nairobi. Data analysis was done using qualitative techniques emphasizing on the Grounded theory. The article reveals that push factors (such as inter-religious conflicts, poverty and unreliable climatic conditions) in India as well as pull factors (such as reliable climatic conditions, ample land for cultivation and absence of inter-sectarian conflicts) in Kenya, are among the major motivating factors for Hindu immigration to Kenya (Pundit, 1961). Most Hindus in Kenya chose to settle in Nairobi due to the greater potential it offered for business and industrial activities. Indeed, the colonial and post-colonial legislations tended to place restrictions on Indian settlement or business operations in rural areas. The research acknowledges the important role Hindus play in projecting the multi-religious and multi-cultural nature of the Kenyan society. But, the quest for national identity has, however, remained the key challenge for Kenyan Hindus of Indian descent.

Key Words: Indentured labour, 'rocket' immigrants, push factors, pull factors, Hindus in diaspora, Hindus of Indian ethnicity, independent migrants.

1. 1. Introduction

The Hindu people are widespread in the eastern, central and southern countries of Africa. In Kenya, Hindus are a strong presence and they form part of the larger Kenyan society. Various scholars have documented the history of Hindu immigrants in this continent, but, with varying degrees of success. The difficulty involved in undertaking such a comprehensive study on the subject of Hinduism in Africa rests partly in the fact that historical documents which are currently available do not classify the Indian migrants to Africa by their religion. In Africa this community is furthermore largely averse to public exposure of their religious affiliation, probably because Hinduism is (generally speaking) a non-missionary religion. The only information available therefore, is contained in various studies that document the general nature, history and development of the Indian Diaspora in specific countries or regions of Africa. Among those who have carried out such general studies include; P. Herzig (2006), G. Oonk (2013, 2009, 2007), G. Delf (1963), Z. Rajan (2011), S. Somjee (2000), Z. Patel (2002), J. M. Nazareth (1981) and C. Salvadori (1989). These scholars apply different approaches to record diverse aspects concerning the origin, settlement and development of Indian immigrant communities within certain regions in this continent.

An analytical examination of available literature states that Hinduism is the dominant religious affiliation in most of the Indian immigrant communities in Africa (Heizig, 2006). The highest concentration of Hindus in particular and Indians in general occurs in the Eastern and Southern parts of Africa. Although, there is limited presence in West Africa, Ghana has the highest population of Indians in this region. An apparent inverse relationship exists between Indian immigration to or settlement in Africa and the dominant religion as well as the political stability of the host country. The Muslim-dominated countries have registered the lowest population of Indian immigrants. Christian dominated regions are fundamentally more welcoming to Indian (Hindu) immigration and the largely Christian countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone and Nigeria have less or none of the Indian migrants than those countries of similar religious set-up that have not experienced civil war. Some Christian dominated countries such as Uganda and Ethiopia have less Hindu presence due to their anti-Indian policies.

In most cases, the Hindus comprise 70% of the total Indian population in the African Diaspora who are mainly urban dwellers and a vast majority is involved in trade and commerce (Patel, 2007). A significant number of Hindus have ventured into the manufacturing sector, particularly in the petro-chemical and steel metal industry, while others are skilled practitioners in law, medicine and engineering (in the construction sub-sector). Hindus, in whichever African country they may be found, are commonly viewed as economically powerful individuals although they are conspicuously inactive politically. Their political ambivalence may be attributed to the fact that, for most Hindus, engagement in political activism may attract hostility from members of the native communities and thus compromise their business interests (Philips, 1985; Johnstone, 1997). In Africa, the majority of Hindus are yet to become fully integrated into the cultures of their respectful host countries. In Kenya, for example, the majority of Indian immigrants, especially the younger generation have adopted some aspects of their indigenous culture such as speaking and reading scriptures in their language (Patel, 2007).

The Hindu people have managed to preserve a significant proportion of their ancestral cultural heritage wherever they have settled in Africa. This fact notwithstanding, a majority of them are experiencing an identity crisis. On one hand, they do not belong to India, given their different citizenship. Yet, they remain conscious of the fact that they cannot claim to belong to the African culture since they are of a different nationality. Even in African countries, which are predominantly Muslim countries and whose socio-

economic environment is repellant to Indian immigration and settlement, there is a proportionate number of Hindus who work as expatriates or for International organizations that operate in those countries. The main distinguishing marks of Hindu presence throughout Africa, and Kenya in particular are the existence of Hindu temples and a crematorium (Oonk, 2013).

1.2. Historical Origin

The majority of Hindus living in Nairobi originated from the south-western and western Indian states of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Kerala, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Rajasthan (Kapila, 2009; Patel, 2007). These Indian states which lie along the western coastline of India are geographically closer to East Africa, but are separated only by the Indian Ocean. This may explain why the majority of Kenyan Indian immigrants are drawn from this region. It may not possible to exhaustively list all the states in India from which Hindus in Kenya originated because, most of the independent migrants did not register their personal details with any central authority. Some of them originated from Buhar, Andra Pradesh, Manipur and Orissa (Nazareth, 1981; Kapila, 2009; Patel, 2002). This is why, areas of origin for a significant number of the Indian immigrants in Kenya remain hitherto unaccounted for.

The Hindus, who migrated from India generally, came in two major waves. The first wave comprised indentured labourers (popularly known as Indian coolies), who migrated into the country at the direct expense of the Imperial British East African Company. These labourers were brought in to provide the much-needed work force in constructing the Railway which was to act as a link between Kenya and Uganda (Patel, 2002; Heizig, 2006). The second category comprised the Rockets (or independent migrants) who migrated at their own risk and cost, taking advantage of and exploiting the numerous business opportunities that were rapidly springing up in this region as a result of the completion of the Uganda Railway.

A critical analysis of the rationale for Hindu migration reveals two broad categories of the 'push and pull' factors. The push factors are related to the situation in India by the closing decades of the Nineteenth Century and the opening decades of the Twentieth Century. These factors include: adverse climatic conditions that led to prolonged famine and drought in most parts of India, a general sense of insecurity due to natural disasters such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions that frequented the region, population explosion, the caste system and general unemployment that led to acute poverty. Hence, when an opportunity presented itself to move away from the region for better prospects, many of the impoverished masses were more than willing to risk everything and take the opportunity (Gregory, 1971; Bhatt, 1976; Somjee, 2000).

The pull factors focus on the prevailing conditions in East Africa at that time. Among these include: the construction of the Uganda Railway, the stable and predictable topographical factors available in East Africa that favoured agriculture, the availability of large tracts of land for commercial farming in East Africa, and the numerous business opportunities that were opening up in the region (Borawar, 1996; Delf, 1963:15). The Hindu joined by hundreds of non-Hindu independent immigrants (mainly Sikhs, Muslims and a few Goans – Roman Catholics) who arrived as shopkeepers, artisans and professionals. Asians as well as Arabs were already in the region well before Europeans arrived. These people were involved in business along the coast and they also enabled European explorers and missionaries to penetrate into the interior of the African continent (Chiraley, 1996; Nazareth, 1981:63).

1.3. Hindu Settlement in Nairobi

Construction of the Uganda Railway continued progressively until it reached Nairobi (derived from the term *Enorobi*, a Maasai word for 'place of many waters'). The sheer attractiveness of this terrain prompted the Imperial British East African Company (IBEAC) to relocate its headquarters from Mombasa to Nairobi. This was the transitional period between the company era and the colonial administration in East Africa. But, when the colonial government came into effect in 1898, the headquarters were relocated from Machakos to Nairobi. Nairobi, thus, sprouted quickly into a vibrant town and welcomed many Hindus who had migrated to Kenya independently (Kapila, 2009:12). After settling here, the independent (or rocket) Hindus started operating *dukas* - shops which initially consisted of shanty structures. These were later transformed and upgraded into high-rise concrete buildings that currently characterize the architectural landscape of Nairobi. Some of which are still owned by Hindus either singly or in partnership (Patel, 2002:11).

As the railway reached completion, some of the Indian labourers who had opted to stay in Kenya rather than travel back to India chose Nairobi as their preferred residential abode. More Indians later came from India and took part in the economic activities that were being unveiled as a result of the newly constructed railway line. The colonial government instituted laws which ensured that only people of European descent had access to the fertile and productive areas in the country. Hindus, just like the rest of their fellow Indians were restricted to settle in designated areas. The rural and hinterland areas were clearly out of bounds for them, except the non-productive areas. Hence, they were forced to become urban dwellers with most opting for Nairobi as their preferred residence (Somjee, 2000).

The construction of Uganda Railway was completed in December 1901 when it reached *Port Florence* - the present Kisumu. Most of the indentured labourers opted to return to their original homeland country, India. A sizeable number however, chose to remain in Kenya, but as opportunities for self-advancement became obvious in the rapidly transforming East African region, more Hindus joined other similar-minded Indians and migrated to Kenya for business and employment prospects. The number of Hindus in Kenya continued to soar and by the eve of independence, the total population of Indians was approximately 100 000. Other religions represented within the larger Asian immigrant community at the time included Islam, Sikhism, Jainism and Parsiism (Indian Zoroastrianism). It was difficult to determine the precise number of Hindus at the time since most of the earlier census statistics did not factor in the issue of religion among Asians. But, this has since been rectified because the later census statistical analyses among Asians include religion as a variable. It was in 1999 that for the first time, the Kenyan National Census results confirmed earlier speculations that the Hindus were, and have always been the majority group within the Asian immigrant community in Kenya (Heizig, 2006:20).

1.4. Diversity within the Hindu Community in Kenya

Upon settling in Kenya, the Hindu community were divided into various sectarian and sub-ethnic groups, some of whom are mutually exclusive. The criteria for this subdivision varies greatly, but, may include such factors as their area of origin in India, religion, dialect, ethnicity, occupation and social status. Most of the Hindu immigrants came from Gujarat, Sindh, Kutchi, Punjab, Tripura, Kerala, Kannada and Maharashtra which are located on the south-western and western coastline of India (Salvadori, 1989). The Hindus are also categorized along linguistic distinctions as the *Punjabi, Hindi, Konkani, Sindhi, Telugu, Marathi, Kutchi, Gujarati and Kumar*.

The Hindus also fall into the following sub-ethnic groups in Kenya: *Lohana, Luhars, Bhatias, Bhaic Rajs, Gujarati, Kutchi*, among others. The Gujarati, who form the majority, are a dominant ethnic group in South-Eastern India where the majority of Kenyan Hindus originated from (Mangat, 1989:22). Most Hindus in Kenya can also be identified along the predominant trade, profession or occupation according to their family lineage. The Patels, whose roots are traced to the *Vaishya* caste are mainly farmers or have ventured into farming-related industry such as food processing enterprises (Adam, 2002). They initially settled in the farming sector in Kenya – with interests in sisal, tea, coffee and sugar cane plantations. A combination of factors, however, later pushed them out of farming into other occupations (Nazareth, 1981:49). Hindus are also sub-divided along religious or denominational lines, such as the: *Arya Samaj, Hare Krishna, Swaminarayan* and *Saraswati* faithful. The leading caste-based subgroups within Kenyan Hinduism include; *Lohanas, Lohars, Rajput, Patels, Mehtas* among others. Apparently, the majority of Indians who migrated to Kenya belong to the lower castes but, a few *Brahmins* and *Kshatriyas* are also present and include the *Mehtas. Rajputs* belong to the warrior caste lineage, while *Patels* and *Lohannas* belong to the *Vaishya* caste.

One of the possible reasons for the disparity in caste composition is the fact that Indian migration to Kenya was basically demand-driven. The indentured labourers moved to Kenya because there was a demand for hired labour on the Uganda Railway. Previously, slaves were used to do such a work, but beginning 1872, the United Kingdom (through the landmark Wakefield ruling) outlawed the institution of slavery. Hence, the IBEAC had no option but to hire the labour they required for construction of the Uganda railway. Members of the upper castes considered themselves to be a privileged lot and did not take up the offer for hired labour since it was tantamount to lowering their dignity. The independent migrants also moved to Kenya because of the rising demand for their services and trade so as to satisfy the needs of the Indian community. Those citizens who belonged to the noble and the upper castes did not consider it worthwhile to migrate to Kenya and exploit the business opportunities arising therein. For them, their economic situation was satisfactory because, they controlled the bigger percentage of resources in India. They were highly respected and enjoyed a lot of authority and moved to faraway countries like Kenya. But, as the Indian population in Kenya continued to expand, some *Brahmins* started moving into the country because of the demand for priests and hospitality services to satisfy the growing Indian population. Their significance in the hospitality industry arises out of the basic Hindu belief that members of a lower caste cannot prepare food for those of a higher caste. Similarly, the office of priest in Hinduism is traditionally a reserve for *Brahmins* (Salvadori, 1989:29).

1.5. Contribution of Hindus to Kenya's religio-cultural diversity

One of the underlying factors that have favoured Indian immigration and settlement in Kenya is the constitutionally embedded religious freedom in this country. Capitalizing on this constitutional protection, Hindus have established themselves as a strong religious minority group within Kenya. Their largest concentration is in Nairobi city where *mandirs* -houses of worship can be found virtually in every sub county. Most Hindus prefer living in secluded residential areas such as Westlands, Parklands, Nairobi West, Karen, Kileleshwa, Muthaiga, Lavington, and Pangani where Hindu temples of various natures are a conspicuous architectural feature. Akaranga and Ongong'a (2013) observe that Hindu priests regularly participate in inter-religious prayers during important state functions such as swearing-in ceremonies and opening of the legislative assemblies in Kenya. The traditional Hindu cultural practices such as clothing, food, art, music and dance have been integrated into Kenyan Hinduism. These serve to provide a basis for the expansion of the diverse nature of Kenya's cultural heritage which boosts Kenya's international image and competitiveness. Inter-communal marriages between Hindus and people from other religions are also on

the increase, although on a small scale. Economically, Hindus through their widely acknowledged business acumen have left a lasting legacy as an industrious people. They own a good percentage of the multinational companies in this country and are also among the leading industrialists and in various professional fields.

2.1. Conclusion

The history of Hindu migration to and settlement in Kenya is important as it helps in understanding the origins and reasons for such migration. It also enables scholars to form a basis for a comparative study of the spread of religious movements, particularly those that are non-missionary such as Hinduism. It is evident that Kenyan Hinduism offers immense opportunities as well as challenges to the realization of inter-religious harmony in this country. Hindus have maintained a peaceful approach in their interaction with members of other faiths and have contributed to the establishment of key social services in education, healthcare and recreational facilities. In Kenya, the language barrier has been the greatest impediment to Hindu interaction with members of other ethnic communities, particularly between Hindus of Indian ethnicity and non-Hindus of African ethnicity. But, an examination of the history of Hindu migration (as well as that of the larger Indian community) can generate important lessons for our country that is struggling with issues of unemployment and poverty. The Indian entrepreneurial skills have enabled many Africans from a poor background to rise to great riches, as most Hindu families have done in Kenya. It is recommended that more studies be conducted to enable a proper and accurate understanding of the Hindu community to enhance social cohesiveness with inter religious tolerance and unleash greater potential for socio-economic development in Kenya.

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