

REMEMBERING AN EXPULSION, REMAKING OPPORTUNITY

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

A group of Uganda Asians among the first batch of nearly 200 Uganda Asians to arrive at Stansted Airport near London on September 18, 1972 | Photo Credit: THE HINDU PHOTO ARCHIVES

August 4 was a sobering day to reflect on the historic ties that bind Britain and Uganda. Exactly 50 years ago, on that date, [Ugandan dictator Idi Amin](#) gave the entire Indian community in the East African nation an ultimatum: leave the country or face the consequences.

Some 50,000 Ugandan Indians who had known nowhere but Uganda as their homeland were [made to abandon their country](#) to begin lives anew elsewhere. Some fled to neighbouring Kenya, others to Canada. Most left for the United Kingdom. The businesses, possessions and lands they left behind were confiscated.

We must never forget this forced expulsion and shameful chapter in Uganda's past: a warning from history to the world of what can transpire when there are no checks or democratic balances on the whims of those who hold positions of power.

Years later, after Amin and his followers had been overthrown in a civil war in 1979, the Indian community was welcomed back by my administration. Today, we should consider what we nearly lost — and what together our two countries can now gain.

The first Indians settled in Uganda in 1895, when the Imperial British East Africa Company extracted the first 350 men primarily from the Punjab region of India, bringing them to work on the first Uganda Railway. Over the course of six years, some 32,000 labourers were brought from India to lay train tracks.

Together with Gujarati traders, Uganda's Indian community — known then, and today, as "Ugandan Asians" — was born. At the time, the British perhaps could not foresee how these labourers and traders would extend their influence beyond the construction of a railway. An industrious people, the first Ugandan Asians became prosperous, helping build our nation's economy.

Much later, after independence (October 9, 1962) had been won, the then President, Idi Amin, who came to power in 1971, started fanning the flames of anti-Indian sentiment in Uganda. It is said a number had grown to believe that life was better under Britain — a country Amin first admired, but in office had grown to hate. A fearful, unstable, and paranoid man, some say, Amin decided to expel all Ugandan Asians after he heard voices instructing him in a dream. What is certain is that after a first attempt was made by Ugandan rebels and Tanzanian forces to overthrow him, he began to purge all those in Ugandan society he deemed a threat. What followed was one of the most vicious reigns of terror in African history, where over 300,000 Indigenous Ugandans were killed and disappeared.

After the war in which Amin was defeated, Uganda's economy and international reputation were in tatters. Integral to rectifying this was bringing our Indian community home.

Today their numbers are not what they were but continue to grow. Some, such as former High Court Justice Justice Anup Singh Choudry, have served at the highest levels of our judiciary system. Others, such as swimmer Supra Singhal (now Supra Agarwal), have represented us at the Olympics. Uganda's strong reputation for academia is upheld by the likes of Professor Mahmood Mamdani. Others and their descendants have stayed in countries such as Britain that welcomed them. From British Home Secretary Priti Patel to the Liberal Democrats' Lord Verjee, to Asif Din who played cricket for Warwickshire, scoring a hundred and winning the man-of-the-match award in the 1993 Natwest Trophy final, widely regarded as the best domestic final. There are many contributing to political, business, and cultural life.

Though trade between our two nations started centuries ago, before the British when Indian Gujaratis introduced cotton cloth into the hinterland of East Africa and took back elephant tusks, gold, and other precious metals in exchange, it has flourished since Amin's overthrow. During the last 25 years, Indian exports to Uganda have increased at an annualised rate of 11.1% — the value rising from just \$58 million in 1995 to close to \$1 billion in 2020. We want to go further still.

In today's global economic hardship and geopolitical volatility, fostering and building upon our international relationships is more important than ever before. Now, India and Uganda are among those countries that have a unique means of doing so: the Commonwealth. No club in the world is like it — 56 nations around the world united by a single language, shared values and similar legal systems, rendering it 21% cheaper to do business across member countries. This "Commonwealth Advantage", as it is known, means our shared and truly singular global network that has the potential to boost not just trade but also security, education, and diplomatic influence for its members well beyond their locality.

The United Kingdom, one of the largest economies in the Commonwealth, signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2021, becoming the first non-African country to sign an agreement with the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), a new pan-African trade bloc offering access for the first time to the African continent's combined \$3 trillion market. We urge others, especially India and Canada among Commonwealth members, as those with such a deep Ugandan Asian heritage, to follow suit.

The Ugandan railway built by the forebears of today's Indian community is, like the empire that created it, no more. Still, today some balk at using the Commonwealth to its full potential because it was born from colonialism. But the past is gone. What remains is our shared inheritance, and it is for all Commonwealth's members to rebuild, reshape, and take ownership of our historic club. We should use it to trade closer and better, and make it what it should be — the vehicle for our shared futures.

Yoweri K. Museveni is the President of Uganda

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