

THURSDAY, JUNE 20, 2013

# Indian labourers triumphed over warriors, lions to open up E Africa



Travellers board a train in Mombasa for a journey into the hinterland. The railway line is strategically and economically important for both Kenya and Uganda. Many of the 32,000 Indian workers who constructed it remained behind after its completion and were instrumental in introducing the cash economy in the region through which used the rupee. Their descendants today run many businesses including most of the shops on Nairobi's Biashara Street. PHOTO/FILE NATION

## In Summary

- Today, the Indian material culture found all over East Africa could not have happened without the Kenya-Uganda Railway, even though there were many later migrations from India. Temples, such as the Sikh and Hindu temples figure prominently in the East African urban landscape, as well as Mosques, particularly those built by the large Ismaili Muslim community emigrating from Gujarat.

Kenyans have been celebrating their Heroes Day (now Mashujaa Day) for 49 years, but the people who opened up Kenya and the East African region for commerce and trade by building the Uganda Railway, have never been recognised.

The Indian Coolies, who toiled and lost their lives through the man-eating lions of Tsavo and hostile warrior communities, ought to be included in the list of heroes as Kenya prepares to unveil the National Hero's Acre.

The railway was a huge logistical achievement and became strategically and economically vital for both Uganda and Kenya. It was also useful in the suppression of slavery, as the anti-slavery crusaders could move with speed and catch up with captured slaves.

Again, the railway allowed coffee and tea to be exported and encouraged colonial settlement and other types of commerce. In order to help pay for the project, the British government encouraged white settlers to farm large tracts of Kenyan highlands which the railway had made accessible; this policy would shape the development of Kenya for decades.

The British colonial government started large-scale importation of cheap labour from India for the construction of the railway in 1895, because the East African Protectorate was considered as province of British India. For instance, the currency used was the Indian Rupee, while the legal system was an extension of the Indian law so it was only natural for the British to look to India for cheap labour.

Of the original 32,000 contracted labourers, about 6,700 stayed on after the end of indentured service to work as dukawallas (shopkeepers), artisans, traders, clerks, and, finally, lower-level administrators. Their descendants went to occupy a central position in the economies of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

The railway construction ran into serious problems on various occasions. A major incident was the Kedong Massacre, when the Maasai attacked a railway worker's caravan killing around 500 people after two Maasai girls were raped.

At the turn of the century, the railway construction was disturbed by the Nandi resistance led by Koitalel arap Samoei. The British killed him in 1905, finally ending the Nandi resistance.

But the events for which the construction of the railway may be most famous are the grisly killings of a number of workers by lions in 1898, during the building of a bridge across the Tsavo River.

Hunting principally at night, a pair of mane-less lions stalked and killed at least 28 Indian and African workers — although some accounts put the number of victims higher.

The lions, dubbed “the Man-eaters of Tsavo,” were eventually shot and killed by the bridge construction supervisor, Col John Henry Patterson, who had their skins made into rugs before selling them, some years later, to the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago for a sum of \$5,000.

Though the majority of the Coolies returned to India on completion of the railway, an estimated 6,000 stayed behind, working with the railway or the British administration, while a number of them ventured into business and other professions.

Demand for various services was soon created at the outposts and hundreds of Indian merchants mainly from Gujarati and Goa in the form of tailors, shopkeepers and barbers arrived in Kenya, and to some extent, Uganda to take up economic opportunities that were still alien to the indigenes.

Later migrations from India were traced to settlers who having established themselves sent for their families. By 1911, the Indian population in Kenya stood at 12,000 compared to 3,000 Europeans.

Despite the 1906 order that barred non-Europeans from owning land in the “White Highlands”, the Indians were not hampered and they concentrated on their trade in urban centres like Nairobi, Kisumu, Nakuru, Kitale, Eldoret, Thika and Meru.

By independence in 1963, very few Indians took the option of moving to Britain. But between 1968 and 1969, the Jomo Kenyatta government introduced the economic Africanisation programme which replaced many Indians from the civil service.

The 1969 Trade Licence Act also barred Indians from operating businesses in remote areas, but the Indians interpreted it as an issue of being sacrificed at the altar of promoting indigenous enterprises. As a result, there was an exodus of close to 20,000 Indians who left Kenya for Britain and other countries like Canada, Australia and United States.

Though Indians pervade every facet of East African commercial life, their presence in this region remains far less known compared to East Africa’s white settlers who imported them. It was the dukawalla— not European settlers— who first moved into new colonial areas, laying the groundwork for the colonialist economy based on cash for food and goods.

But even before the dukawallas, Indian traders had followed the Arab trading routes inland on the coast of modern-day Kenya and Tanzania, especially in Zanzibar numbering 6,000 by 1875. Some of the powerful Indian merchants were largely responsible for financing Arab caravans into the interior encouraged by the then Sultan of Oman, Seyyid Said.

While many black East Africans have learned the art of business, Indians still run many shops, hotels, and factories in Kenya, as well as in Uganda and Tanzanian cities. The five East African Community countries are currently running modern economies, with a combined GDP of \$80 billion, the foundation of which was laid by the Indian coolies.

The biggest blow to Indians in the region came in 1972, when Idi Amin, expelled 75,000 Ugandans of Asian descent.

Their businesses were nationalised and given to Amin’s cohorts, only to be plundered and ruined. Many of them moved to Britain, Canada and the United States.

Today, however, many of these same ethnic Indians have returned. In 1992, under pressure from aid donors and Western governments, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni simplified a then 10-year-old law letting Asians reacquire lost property.

Two families, the Mehtas and Madhvanis, have built multi-million-dollar empires in Uganda, while in Kenya; Manu Chandaria is a household name.