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Africa - Mabira's Resistance To Monopoly Of Mehtas In Museveni's Uganda

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When I got an opportunity to visit Uganda to attend an international conference, the first thing that came in minds the issue of Indians in Uganda. Coincidentally, exactly a week before my departure to Entebbe, Uganda saw worst kind of riots in Kampala in the post Idi Amin era. The news of an Indian killed send shock waves through out the country. The Indian media reported as if the native Ugandans have turned to racism against the 'poor' Indians. It failed to report that two Ugandans were killed in rioting. How can a community which has been victim of racism in the past and still facing discrimination in its own country could be termed as racist just because it lost its patience and indulged in rioting ? There is a need to understand the issue of blacks, apartheid and Indian domination in the African countries and any analysis based on our 'nationalistic' pattern would be bias and unfair.

Uganda is a growing democracy despite army's control over power. In the streets you can still find big appeals on behalf of the election commission to participate in the political process. Among many FM channels, you will get political discussion going and the president and prime minister being lampooned by the people. It is the growing sign of democracy. However, it is important as what happened to Uganda that the entire country united and condemned and that there is more than what was presented to us.

Issue of Self Respect of Native Ugandans

Idi Amin is not much respected in Uganda. There might be some pockets where he may be adored, probably among the Islamic tribal community but Ugandans have moved far ahead from that narrow idea of Idi Amin, which destroyed their freedom and lampoonised the entire governance process. Commentators called him a government owned by a minority group without any mandate from the people, yet on one count, I found many native Ugandans were appreciative of him. It is clear that Amin's predecessor Milton Obote-1, had actually created another imperial class in his country. The Indians, particularly Gujaratis who went to Uganda and East Africa as laborers to construct the train track between Kampala and Nairobi and other East African countries by the British, later monopolized the Ugandan business and mercantile sector has now become a bone of contention. Not that Indians do not work hard but more than this, there habit of exclusivity and differentiate on colour. Yes, Indians are highly colour conscious. One they recognize your colour matches their own, then they shift to the caste loyalties. And when I was speaking to Ugandan friends about the Mabira Forest Controversy, many facts came into light.

Deo Sfekitooleko, is a teacher by profession at the University of Makerere, which is one of the largest Universities in

East Africa with more than 40,000 students doing various courses. Deo is Chairman of Uganda Humanist Association and very radical humanists who feel that the Christian Evangelical forces are equally a threat to Africa and its secular cultural values. The violence against Indians and Asians worried Deo but he confirms that it was not exactly the case what was being reported. " The idea behind the demonstration was good as Ugandans were demonstrating against their National Property being given to foreigner and also destruction of a great forest which has enormous value for Uganda.'

Responding to my question whether he felt that there was a similarity of pattern on attack against the Indian and Asians, Deo said that he found some similarity with the Idi Amin's days but Amin cannot be blamed for everything. The fact of the matter is that Milton Obote-1 has been supporting the Asians particularly the Indians and sidelining the Africans. That was the reason that when Amin's forces took over Uganda, he became an instant hero as he threw the Asians out of Uganda. But then he went to extreme endangering the progress of Uganda.

There is nothing particular against Asians or Indians, suggest Deo. 'The problem lie with the Asian culture and values. They do not associate with Africans outside business. They may have a good relationship, employee-employer relationship in business. They may have good business relations with Africans but outside that there has never been an effort to build of social bonding. No interaction with the Africans. No marriages. So, one can say there is a complete cultural barrier with Asians and particularly with Indians who have a caste system and they bring it here also. This life of exclusion which Indians live make it difficult for them to associate with the African community who they consider as inferior. The Europeans and Americans also come here and appreciate our values and culture, mixed up with us. Their men can marry with our women and vice versa. Therefore there is not much against them in the socio-cultural front but Asians have come here as a businessmen and nothing more than the same. They remain confined to monetary gains and are here to earn without any sense of belonging to the country.'

Deo's outspokenness is not without facts. As I go around the streets of Kamapla, I find lesser Indian. But once in the Old Kampala area, you will find the Muslims habitats, the Bombay Road, The Delhi garden as well as Bombay Garden, basically localities of the Indians. On the left hand side, there is a Gurudwara named as Ramgarhia Gurudwara. My mind swings into action that this must be a Dalit Gurudwara and I decided that I must visit them and find what is cooking inside. At the gate, a native guard stops my Ugandan friends and me. My Ugandan friends skip and allow me to go in.

Condition of the victims of (Kabootarbaji) illegal human trafficking

It is evening time and I can hear the beautiful Sabad-Kirtan inside the Gurudwara. After a short while, I meet a middle-aged woman Raj Pal Kaur who is an Indian immigrant here. I tell her about my motive to understand how Indian feel here and what were their relationships. Raj is very happy that a fellow Indian has come from Delhi and therefore invites me to her house.

Her husband accompany me to their house in Bombay Garden. The guy is a mechanic in a local company and his inability to converse in Hindi is equally baffling. Her speaks with me in native Punjabi and narrates how the Indians are living here with 'bhaichara'. Once inside the house, one find two blacks, a very young teenage boy and a girl are doing the household chores. I am told most of the Indians still keep the blacks in their houses as domestic servant.

Inside the house, the story is similar to that of any Punjabi family who aspire to grow up in Canada. Raj kaur and her husband along with a daughter were trapped into 'dream Canada' by a travel agent. They were dumped in Uganda. With great difficulty they established themselves and started recovering. Old habits die-hard. Once again another expatriate Punjabi robbed them of whatever they had by alluring them to take to Canada. They end up in paying up over USD 9000/- by selling their household items and Raj's gold ornaments. For many days, she could not work. Situation turned volatile for them in an entirely alien country. But a remarkable thing about the Punabi woman is her

strength of working hard. Raj decided that her husband's salary was not enough for running their home and paying back the debt.

Raj Kaur today fetch 15 paying guests from India. She takes care of them, provide home cooked food there for an amount of Rs 5,000/- per person. This provides her help her children's fees in school.

Once inside the house, I am shocked to hear the tales of Indians who are brought by the Kabootarbaji business rampant in Punjab and Haryana. Surjeet Ram, 27, is a graduate from Jullandhar, Punjab. He paid Rs 4,50 lakhs to the travel agent. Who promised him to Italy ? Surender's father is an agricultural labour. He is a Dalit Sikh though he does not have long hair. Surendra today is living in a very difficult situation. being helped by a local Sikh woman who herself was victim of Kabootarbaji but now have obtained Ugandan citizenship, this woman Raj Kaur run a paying guest house. Her story is of a great struggle and how Indian cheat. Raj Kaur have two children. her husband is a mechanic who cannot even speak Hindi. I met them at a local Gurudwara in old Kampala when she said that I must narrate her story of how an Indian took away USD 9000 after staying for nearly a month at their place and promising them to take to Paris.

Surjeet Ram's story thought that he was going to Italy but at the end he was asked to take a flight to Entebbe. Since Uganda provide visa on arrival, this has become a heaven for the travel agents to dupe their client, extort huge some of money from the illiterate relatives.

Sudesh Kumar is just a matriculate and is about 22 years of age. He comes from Kurushetra district of Haryana. The travel agent promised him to get a job in Europe.

He also paid nearly four lakh of rupees. He is in equally difficult situation.

Satpal Singh is 45 years of age. He has younger children who are going to schools in Kurushetra. He sold his land and paid Rs 7,50,000 to travel agent. The travel agent promised that they will get a job in Europe but were dumped in Uganda.

It is equally shocking to hear the narratives from these people how their travel agent came to Uganda and stayed for a few days. He got the two guys arrested and extorted another USD 2,500 each for their release. Because of rampant corruption, police extract money from the foreigners.

Now, the travel agent have taken their passports and disappeared. Every one of them is today living in horror. They do not have any travel document today and fear that they might get arrested and no body is there to take care of them except Raj Kaur who herself is facing lot of troubles and had to sold her ornaments and other household itmes just to get Canadian visa.

Gandhi belongs to us in Uganda but abandon Gandhi in Gujarat ?

Fifty kilometer from the Kampala city is another beautiful and planned town of Jinja. Jinja is famous for its tourist resorts, planned streets and the 'source' of river Nile, Ninja showcased Indian diaspora led by the Gujaratis. A large number of Gujaratis were settled here and build their mansions before Idi Amin asked them to leave Uganda. While the biggest commercial building in Kampala city belongs to 'Bank of Baroda', in Jinja you can find big mansions named after the Gujaratis.

At the source of river Nile, I meet Rubina, a native Ugandan, who owns a shop of the handcraft items, and ask her

what is her reaction to recent anti Asian riots, which left Indians concerned. She said, ' The people of Uganda are not against Asians or Indian in particular. We are friends but Asians must understand that we cannot allow our forest and environment to be finished by private corporations. It is not a war against Asians but efforts of the private companies to loot the resources of the poor nations. You too have waged a war against imperialism and we have been together in our struggle against imperialism.'

While the success of Indians or in other way round, Indian imperialism in the East African countries, has hurt their relationship with local populace yet it reached the optimizing point, when Mr Madhavan N Mehta, the director of Sugar Corporation of Uganda Limited was granted more than 9000 Hectare of Mabira forest for developing another sugar factory. It is no secret that Indians control business in Uganda. While the Indians feel that since they are competent and know to do their work better (a racist propagation of their superiority), the native Ugandans feel that the Indian exploit their wide ranging connections particularly in the big corporations and the World Bank and other institutions. Mehta's SCOUL was a joint venture with the government and earlier the government partnership was 49% but not it has reduced to a mere 23%. Secondly, newspaper reports continue in Kampala that Mehtas are not even the Ugandan Citizen but British Citizen. According to The Monitor, Kampala, The sugar baron has already pocketed Shs29.7 billion as compensation from government. Sunday Monitor has learnt that in 2002, Mehta demanded to be compensated for losses he had incurred during the regimes of Idi Amin (1971-79) and Milton Obote (1980-85).'

The paper's report furthers that Mehta and his company has never paid any taxes in Uganda during the past 26 years. The compensation has become a controversial issue with President Yoweri Museveni firmly supporting the industrialization process. This 'sale off' triggered strong reaction in entire Uganda. Already president Museveni's high handedness has created stir among the local population. In the name of development you cannot just shunt people from their inhabitat.

It is strange that Uganda does not have rehabilitation laws. When the people were uprooted from mabira forest under the guise of saving the forest, none of them objected but the same government shamelessly went ahead with providing land to a big corporations, which the Ugandan now feel are betraying their national interests.

Hence the violence against Indian is not because of Mehtas or Madhvanis who have controlled the sugar companies of Uganda but broader nature of Indians. At Jinja, I go to a Gujarati temple. Since it is Sunday therefore not many had turned up in the temple but I meet a young Gujarati who had been working in Uganda for the past three years. Accordingly, he feels that Jinja was a much better and safer place unlike Kampala, which was crowded and tense. There are three Gujarati temples in Jinja, he says. The temple that I visited was of 'Satya Narayan'. At the temple, we join a discussion about how Gujarati's are working. The man is proud of Mehtas and says that Gujarati's build Uganda and now this country is not respecting us. When I ask him as what is the situation and how does he feel here ? ' These issues are politicized. Look, President Museveni is a nice person and very supportive of investment but politicians do not like this.' At this, I refer to situation in Gujarat. He says, Gujaratis always lived in brotherhood with Muslims and it is just the politics. Still today, many Gujaratis live together, no question of Hindus or Muslims. The fellow asks me to take photograph of Mahatma Gandhi. I am amused at this. Gandhi has been thoroughly rejected by the Hindus in Gujarat. They feel he is an obstacle in their progress but in Uganda, the same Gujaratis are asking me to remember Gandhi ? Why ?

We have to understand this psychology of using the popular names. There is a statue of Gandhi at the bank of river Nile. Gandhi is popularized as a person who fought for the rights of the blacks in Africa. Therefore the blacks too feel that Gandhi fought for their battle and is best symbol of fight against imperialism. Gujaratis knows it well and are using the same. Unfortunately, Gandhi's statue in Black Africa is a conspiracy to disconnect the Africans to the popular anti caste movement in India. Gandhi has become a tool for every one to exploit particularly his native Gujaratis who have abandoned him. It is in the fitness of thing for the Gujaratis to think of how they treat others in their home state. What are the Gujarati industrialists doing ? Supporting the Hindutva and its hate monger in Gujarat

but at the same point of time want the world to respect their 'culture'.

Back in Kampala, I am at the house of an Indian and for the first time in 10 days watched Aaj Tak. The woman talks of 'Sansani', a programme of crime reporting at the Star News. The 10 PM news at Aaj tak shows horrible footage of a paster being beaten by the goons of the Hindutva in Jaipur, Rajasthan. Acharya Giriraj Kishore is defending the Hindutva action on these things. I ask an Indian. What do you feel when such things happen in our country. " Oh, its not an issue here, he says. Sikhs and Hindus are always friend.' But such incident does not make you feel insecure here in Uganda. The Indians do not feel offended with that. It is more shocking. When riots occurred in Uganda, the government became over conscious to defend the Indians but what happen when we see such situation occurs with in our own country.

Land for Investment : While President Museveni confirmed that the struggle against Mabira forest take-over would subsidise. As a human rights activist, I felt proud to have spoken against the take over and expressed my solidarity with the native Ugandan people. Having heard the voices of sanity against this gross exploitation of natural wealth, Indian people would be doing great disservice if they support their crony capitalists. In fact, the governments everywhere should ensure that the corporate houses indulged in hate mongering formula and supporting fundamentalists groups must be kept out. At the time, when Americans are going crazy over war against terror, it is also worth demanding that such corporations which displace people, spread hatred elsewhere or support such campaigns should be barred from every where.

It is better that Mehtas have right now not staked the claim for the Mabira forest after the bloody riots. In case he continue to pursue his family interest, it would be difficult to contain the local resentment. Mehtas have given Ugandan an opportunity to think and unite and if he persist with the more take over ; the day would not be far, when other 'nationalists' forces might take over Uganda. While the civil society organizations that assembled in Uganda to participate in the Assembly of International Land Coalition wholeheartedly spoke against the degazetting of the Mabira forest for commercial purpose threatening the biodiversity of the green Uganda, it is ironical that intergovernmental bodies desisted from issuing a statement against the government. People have forgotten Idi Amin but nobody can deny that his action to acquire property of the Indians was targeted at the popular sentiments with in the country who were frustrated with Indian domination over all walks of life. Clear enough while the Gujaratis want every one to follow their culture in Gujarat, they refuse to do the same elsewhere. The events of Uganda are a reminder that you cannot take a community for granted. If the Indians have got so much in Uganda, they must also respect local sentiments and be part of it.

And finally my disappointment with the current regime of President Museveni who continued to assure Indians that action would be taken against anti social elements but at the same point of time refused to understand the sentiments behind the protests. The cabinet does seems to lack unanimity on this issue as Agricultural minister told us that the president has no power to sale of a national asset and unless parliament approves it, nothing can be done. Very unfortunately, the government defines land in terms of investment, which is dangerous. Even when Indians do not have a fair record of land reform, yet our constitutional forefathers provided enough tools for poor to get a fair deal. Zamindari Abolition Act, land Ceiling Acts were out come of such concern but it is shocking that the land minister accepted in the conferences that his deputy was a landless person in the area where people have land in the area of over 10 kilometer. There was no system of land reform in Uganda. Idi Amin captured the land and property of the Asians to be distributed among his own cronies. People who thought his nationalism would help them remain clueless. Uganda government can learn a lesson or two from Indian constitution to help its landless population and allow people to access and control its vast natural resources. Uganda remains the 'pearl of Africa' and its greenery is enchanting. It must tread carefully with a greater balance with national aspirations, sustainability and development. The government needs investment but it cannot do so at the cost of displacing its people and killing the environment. India is already facing this war of people against the multinational onslaught on their sovereignty and Ugandans will do the same. Government should ultimately remain loyal to their people and not to private corporations and international institutions failing which there are dangers of political instability, greater chaos and anarchy, which

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has already killed thousands in African continent. To attain short term objectives, the government should not lose sight on greater national interests and Mabira forest have become Uganda's symbol of resistance against the onslaught of the private corporations and their masters in the government, any effort to discount popular sentiment would result in further polarization of communities and create further instability in the region.