



# THE 44TH TRIBE: The Asian Question and the Politics of Exclusion

By Rasna Warah



Early last year, some members of Kenya's Asian community visited a Nairobi branch of the Jubilee Party and demanded that Kenyan Asians - the vast majority of whom are of Indian descent - be officially recognised as a Kenyan tribe. Led by a human rights activist called Farah Mannzoor, the group stated that Kenyan Asians no longer wanted to live in a "political wilderness", adding that Kenyan Asians were fully behind the Jubilee Party because they believed in its development agenda.

This was followed by another visit to State House by other members of the Kenyan Asian community who pledged their loyalty to the government - a practice that was perfected during President Daniel arap Moi's regime when members of the Kenyan Asian community (mostly prominent industrialists and businesspeople) regularly visited State House to give "donations" to Moi's favourite causes, ostensibly in exchange for the state's protection of their business interests.

Loyalty to the ruling party by a group that has historically been a relatively minor player in post-independence politics - and perhaps the promise of much-needed "undecided" votes in the hotly-contested August 2017 general election - is probably what prompted President Uhuru Kenyatta to officially declare Kenyan Asians as the country's "44<sup>th</sup> tribe".

This announcement led to mixed reactions, not least from members of the Kenyan Asian community

itself, many of whom feel that official recognition of this ethnic minority as a Kenyan tribe is nothing but a political gimmick to garner the support of a community whose relatively small population of around 50,000 is numerically insignificant in a country of more than 40 million people - even though this community has significant clout in the country's economy.

Aleya Kassam, a Kenyan Asian blogger and writer, asked what being officially declared a tribe meant in practical terms. Does it, for instance, mean that Kenyan Asians will now have more rights than they did before? Maybe now, she pondered, Kenyan Asians won't have to carry their, their parents' and their grandparents' birth certificates to prove that they are Kenyan when applying for an ID.

Among the first to enter the fray was Zahid Rajan, a member of the Kenyan Asian Forum, which "identifies with the future of the Kenyan people as a whole rather than the primacy of any particular group", who argued in an article published in the *Star* newspaper that the groups seeking official recognition from the government did not represent the entire Asian community in Kenya, and that their emphasis on "tribe" was negative and divisive. "The fundamental tenet of free and fair elections is that every citizen has a right to vote. And that every citizen is free to cast that vote how-so-ever he/she wishes to and in complete confidentiality. To make this into a group exercise is not only unconstitutional and unjust, but it also undermines the whole ethos of 'elections'," he stated.

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Firoze Manji, a social justice activist, was dismissive of the whole notion of tribe, which he said was a colonial construct adopted by successive governments to generate divisions among people. "The classification of people into 'tribes' or 'races' is based on similar principles to those that formed the basis of apartheid. It serves to divide and enable control," he commented.

### **Can Kenyan Asians be called a tribe?**

Assigning the label "tribe" to a diverse community whose ancestors came from different parts of the Indian subcontinent, who do not all speak the same language and who belong to different religions, is also problematic. The Oxford English Dictionary defines tribe as "a social division in a traditional society consisting of families or communities linked by social, economic, religious or blood ties, with a common culture and dialect, typically having a recognised leader". Going by this definition, Asians in Kenya are not so much a tribe as they are an ethnic group - "a community or population made up of people who share a common cultural background or descent." However, even this definition falls short - India alone has more than 2,000 ethnic groups whose cultures and origins vary. North Indians of Aryan descent, for example, have languages and cultures that are significantly different from those of their Dravidian neighbours in the south.

Nor is religion a common denominator among this highly diverse group; although the majority of Asians in Kenya are Hindus, there are also a sizeable number of Muslims, Jains, Christians, Sikhs, Zoroastrians and other religious groups among them. What's more, these religious groups are not homogenous; there are sub-sects and castes within them who each pray at different temples and mosques.

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the adoption of the Devonshire Declaration of 1923 that declared the most fertile parts of the Rift Valley and the so-called “White Highlands” as “white man’s country” – an area comprising some 5.2 million acres.

Regionally, the majority of Asians in Kenya have roots in Gujarat in western India and in Punjab in northern India and in the eastern part of Pakistan (which was part of India until independence in 1947 when the Indian subcontinent was split into two separate nations), though there are many others, particularly recent immigrants, who come from other parts of the subcontinent. Gujarat and Punjab were the regions from which the British recruited Indian labour to help with the building of what was then known as the Uganda Railway at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The construction of this 657-mile railway from the coastal city of Mombasa to Port Florence (now Kisumu) on the shores of Lake Victoria led to large-scale Indian immigration into the colony. Although the majority of the indentured labourers used to construct the railway went back to India, the ones who stayed behind settled in townships along the railway line where they put up small dukas. After the railway line was completed, Gujarati traders and Punjabi station masters followed, as did a whole cadre of Goan clerks who oiled the British colonial administration.

**See also:** [WHAT IS YOUR TRIBE? The Invention Of Kenya’s Ethnic Communities](#)

However, Indian presence in East Africa predates British colonial rule, thanks to old trade routes in the Indian Ocean that linked the East African coast to India. Indian dhows have been docking at the coastal towns of East Africa for centuries. The Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama is known to have recruited an Indian pilot from the coastal town of Malindi to navigate his way to India in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. There was also a distinct Indian presence on the island of Zanzibar where Indians had settled and established themselves as traders in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### **Seeds of mistrust**

Initially, the British colonialists welcomed the presence of Indians in their Kenyan colony. Indian traders played an important role as middlemen between the colonialists and the indigenous African population. Indian dukas opened up the interior to commerce and the goods sold in these small shops became more accessible to Africans, who were neither welcomed nor encouraged to shop in white-owned enterprises.

However, the British colonialists’ attitude towards Indians changed dramatically in the years prior to the adoption of the Devonshire Declaration of 1923 that declared the most fertile parts of the Rift Valley and the so-called “White Highlands” as “white man’s country” – an area comprising some 5.2 million acres. Lord Delamere, the eccentric landowner who directly benefited from this policy, among others, felt that the growing presence of Indians in the colony might lead to the latter demanding rights to land and other resources. They justified their massive land grab and their race-based land policy by arguing that “owing to the unsanitary habits of Asiatics and Africans, they are not fit persons to take up land as neighbours of the Europeans.” Lord Bertram Cranworth, a settler and author of *A Colony in the Making*, was even more specific: “If the Indian in the protectorate were represented by the type so dear to tourists, we would welcome him with open arms. It is not because his skin is black that is he unpopular; it is because he is a foul liver, a drunkard and a thief.”

The Devonshire Declaration also purported to protect the “innocent” African natives from the “morally depraved” Indians. The 1919 report of the Economic Commission, whose members included Delamere, stated:

*“Physically, the Indian is not a wholesome influence because of an incurable repugnance to*

*sanitation and hygiene. In this respect, the African is more civilised than the Indian being naturally clean in his ways; but he is prone to follow the examples of those around him. In addition, the moral depravity of the Indian is equally damaging to the African, who in his natural state is at least innocent of the worst vices of the East. The Indian is the inciter of crime as well as vice, since it is the opportunity offered by the ever ready Indian receiver which makes thieving easy."*

This policy of "divide-and-rule" served to entrench the colonial administration's apartheid system of governance and established a race- and tribe-based arrangement, including racially segregated urban areas, that would continue in the post-independence era.

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In the 1920s and 1930s, Indian agitation was based mainly around the contents of the Devonshire Declaration, which, paradoxically, recognised African interests to be paramount, but reserved the Kenyan highlands exclusively for European settlement. However, while the Kenyan Indian Congress advocated against racial discrimination and for the right of Indians to own agricultural land, its influence dwindled in the post-Second World War period when African political parties became more prominent.

In the struggle for independence, many Asians contributed to the African cause. Lawyers such as Friiz de Souza and A.R. Kapila, among others, played key roles in defending Mau Mau suspects and the so-called "Kapenguria Six", including Jomo Kenyatta. Journalists such as Pio Gama Pinto and the trade unionist Makhan Singh were also vocal in articulating African aspirations.

However, after independence, Asians' political role was severely diminished, partly because the new post-independence government did not encourage this minority to play a big role in politics. Furthermore, the government of Jomo Kenyatta introduced an Africanisation policy that barred Asians from applying for civil service jobs and confined their businesses to urban areas (the latter a throwback to the colonial land policy) ostensibly to level the playing field for African participation in the economy. Thousands of Asians with British passports left for the United Kingdom after Kenyatta's government issued them with "quit notices" and denied them trade licences and work permits.

Those Asians who were left behind, many of whom opted for Kenyan citizenship, began to feel under siege. Their fear that they might also be targeted for expulsion was reinforced in August 1972 when President Idi Amin expelled more than 70,000 Asians from Uganda and when an aborted coup attempt in Kenya exactly ten years later resulted in the looting and destruction of Asian-owned shops by rowdy mobs in Nairobi's central business district.

Due to the way the colonial state was constructed, some groups enjoyed more rights and privileges than others, a practice that continued even after independence. The state decides who is an "insider" and who is an "outsider", and which spaces they should occupy. This has led to the politics of exclusion based on tribe or geographical boundaries

Kenyan Asians also became targets of scapegoating. In the 1980s, the Kenyan politician Martin

Shikuku often derided Asians for being mere “paper citizens” who were only interested in exploiting the country economically and whose loyalty and allegiance lay elsewhere. These statements were echoed by other prominent politicians, such as the opposition leader Kenneth Matiba, who in 1996 controversially asked Kenyan Asians to “peacefully pack up and go”, accusing Kenyan Asians of racism and of dominating the economy. Since then this ethnic minority has largely kept a low political profile, though in recent years many of its members have joined mainstream political parties and even vied for electoral seats, some quite successfully.

### **The politics of exclusion**

Kenyan Asians have thus had an uneasy relationship with the Kenyan state and are often treated as second class citizens, whose patriotism is always tested and whose citizenship is viewed as a privilege rather than a right. Due to the way the colonial state was constructed, some groups enjoyed more rights and privileges than others, a practice that continued even after independence. The state decides who is an “insider” and who is an “outsider”, and which spaces they should occupy. This has led to the politics of exclusion based on tribe or geographical boundaries – a fact recognised by Kenya’s Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission, whose recommendations have yet to be implemented by the government.

Kenyan Asians, Somalis, Nubians and others down the “citizenship ladder” are, therefore, often viewed as “second class citizens” which makes them more vulnerable to state persecution. Unsure of their rights, these second class citizens are then forced to use personal patronage networks to gain access to their rights – for example, through giving “donations” to the head of state or by bribing officials to obtain a passport.

In this context, many feel that it is only right that people who have no other place to call home should be recognised as an integral part of this country. *Daily Nation* columnist Jaindi Kiseru, for instance, welcomed the government’s decision to assign a tribe to Asians who hold Kenyan citizenship because “unlike most of us who did not decide where to be born, the Kenyan Asians are from descendants of people who became Kenyan citizens by choice”.

It is also an act of immense political maturity for a state to recognise that non-indigenous people living within its borders have claims over citizenship. Many countries in the Arab world, for instance, do not accord such rights to those they deem to be “foreigners”. The government’s recognition of Asians as a Kenyan “tribe” is akin to Nelson Mandela’s declaration of South Africa as a “Rainbow Nation” of black, brown, white and mixed-race people. Mandela rejected the unjust politics of racial exclusion, which he knew would ultimately have a negative impact on national cohesion and on the South African economy.

What makes me uneasy about the designation of Kenyan Asians as one of Kenya’s 44 tribes is that it reinforces the idea that one must belong to a tribe to be recognised as a *bona fide* Kenyan citizen. The message it sends to Kenyans is that tribe is an important – if not *the* most important – part of their identity.

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The reality is that it is not official recognition that counts, but the size of one’s tribe that matters; not only must one belong to a tribe, but one must belong to the largest tribes if one is to benefit from

goodies, such as political appointments, public service jobs and government tenders. Recent data from the National Cohesion and Integration Commission shows that three-quarters of all public service jobs in Kenya are held by members of the five largest tribes - the Kikuyu, the Kalenjin, the Luhya, the Luo and the Kamba. Furthermore, the largest tribe - the Kikuyu - has not only dominated top public service jobs, it has also hogged political leadership. Three out of Kenya's four presidents, including the incumbent, have come from this tribe.

In the tribal numbers game, therefore, Kenyan Asians will always lose. Having a tribe assigned to them may make it easier for this community to obtain a Kenyan passport or ID, but it will not help change politics in a country where tribal identity has been used to oppress and marginalise ethnic minorities.

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