

The great Asian

Zarina Patel goes behind the headlines of that traumatic event to unearth the story of the Asian journalists who brought it to the world's attention and recounts how they helped shape journalism in Kenya's early years

The 1960s were a turbulent time for Kenya's South Asian community. As the decade dawned, the Emergency had ended and Kenya was fast moving to Independence.

The Asians were apprehensive of their future in Kenya. In 1965, the imposition of exchange controls hit the community hard as many had their savings in British banks, or were educating their children in Britain or the US.

Soon, they had to decide whether to take up Kenya citizenship as the two-year grace period was fast coming to an end. *The Nation* published some reports of Asians taking up citizenship but the majority remained unmoved. They thought the "lifetime" stamp to stay in Kenya on their British passports was enough security.

In 1967, the government passed the Immigration Bill requiring all non-citizens to get work permits. British Asians now had to decide whether to take Kenya citizenship or emigrate to Britain.

In January 1968, *The Nation* was the first to report that an Asian Exodus was building up; the story hit international headlines a month later. *The Standard* had no inkling of this major event except that their London correspondent reported a Bill in the House of Commons to cover British Asians. Britain announced quota vouchers for South Asians.

The Asian Exodus was in full swing and *The Nation* went to town with it. The British High Commission in Nairobi was flooded with voucher applications from Asians.

This crucial event was covered extensively by *The Nation*, both in words and pictures. Scenes of Asians at the Nairobi Airport or at the British High Commission with interviews carried out in Gujarati or Punjabi, and written up in English, made good stories. Its rival could not come anywhere near this reporting, as they had mostly English or Scottish journalists then.

In June 1969, after nine years, *The Nation* overtook *The Standard* in circulation. In 1968, a poster in *The Nation* newsroom depicted a circulation graph of *The Nation* and

The Standard urging all journalists to "Close the Gap." It is arguable that the extensive coverage of the Asian Exodus from February 1968 onwards was partly responsible for this achievement in circulation figures.

The 1970s were kicked off by Quit Notices for the South Asian *dukawallas* or shopkeepers. The Exodus was followed by the big news on Quit Notices from 1969 to 1977. *The Nation*, again, had an edge in its reporting with business editor Kul Bhushan interviewing the *dukawallas*, who termed these notices *kankotris* or invitations! The government changed its terminology from "Africanisation" to "Kenyanisation" so that Asians who were Kenyan citizens could continue running their *dukas*.

In 1971, Idi Amin took power in Uganda and soon expelled the country's Asians; Kenyan MP Martin Shikuku declared that Kenya should follow Idi Amin's steps and expel Asians, too — sending shivers down many people's spines!

Bhushan travelled to Britain in 1968 and 1972 at his own expense to report on the Asian Exodus and the fate of the Ugandan Asians.

The little remembered story behind this story is that of the full-time South Asian journalists and photographers who played a crucial role in establishing *The Nation*, now a sister publication of *The EastAfrican*, as the leading newspaper in East Africa during the first half of its 50-year history.

When *The Nation* was launched in 1960, the *East African Standard* reigned supreme. The new tabloid threw down the gauntlet to the reigning broadsheet by declaring its support for majority rule. The *East African Standard* was very much an establishment paper, supporting the



Let's follow Amin's steps and expel Kenyan Asians, too

MP Martin Shikuku in 1971, sending shivers down many spines



colonial government. Its upper crust readership comprising Europeans and elite Asians considered *The Nation* a "cheap" paper because of its tabloid size and big headlines; and as an "Asian" paper because it was established by the Aga Khan.

The elected Asian leaders in the Legislative Council, and others, had a new national media to present their pro-African, anti-discriminatory views.

Certainly, Asian journalists embraced the new paper in large numbers. When Kenya became independent, Asian journalists reported how the community joined the Africans in hailing the new era. Statements from Kanu treasurer KP Shah always made good copy. The fact that Joseph Murumbi was the vice president; FRS De Souza the deputy speaker of parliament; Jan Mohamed an assistant minister for Tourism and Chanan Singh a judge of the High Court, boosted Asian confidence in their future in independent Kenya.

The Nation needed to win new readers, including those who had never bought a newspaper as well as those who would switch over or buy both — an uphill task.

Since a newspaper is more than the sum of the initiative and hard work of its staffers, the South Asian journalists gave the best years of their lives and their talents to help *The Nation* to flourish and overtake *The Standard*.

At various times over the quarter century from 1960 to 1985, more than 20 full-time Asian journalists held senior positions at the newspaper. These key posts included the editor in chief, managing editor, chief sub editor, business editor, sports editor, chief reporter/foreign editor, features editor and chief courts reporter. In addition, three chief photographers and two senior photographers were also Asians.

Immediately after the paper was launched, three Asian journalists — Joe Rodrigues as sub-editor; Chottu Karadia as a reporter and Cyprian Fernandes as a sports reporter — came on board. Rodrigues rose rapidly to become chief sub editor, assistant editor, managing editor and finally, editor in chief. During his tenure as editor in chief, he was elected president of the International Press Institute, the global organisation of editors and publishers.

Karadia resigned after a few years to study in Britain while Fernandes moved up to become chief reporter and to travel as a roving correspondent, specialising in

exodus of 1969



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We have a bullet for your 'inquisitive' husband...

A Special Branch officer warning Cyprian Fernandes' wife after a story he wrote stung somebody in power

In the cultural field, *The Nation* reported on visiting South Asian films and film stars, Indian and Pakistani artistes and local cultural events. The Asian gurus or spiritual leaders also got coverage. All this reportage helped to increase circulation and build revenue as well. Since the Asian journalists reported on Asian festivals like Diwali and Baishaki, the advertising department saw an opportunity to turn these events into lucrative supplements.

The women feature writers produced articles on women, children and health care and on flower and fashion shows. Rashid Mughal compiled *The Nation Style Book* as a bible for editors, reporters and writers in 1981; its updated version is still in use till today.

After joining in 1966, Kul Bhushan started the *Education Notebook*, which had a dedicated readership as education was and still is a top national priority. Later, as business editor, his reporting on the annual budget and economic and financial matters boosted readership.

In 1974, Norman da Costa became the first South Asian sports editor of a daily newspaper in East Africa, if not the continent. He covered all major sports events in East and Central Africa, met British Prime Minister Ted Heath and Princess Anne and, most important, President Kenyatta before the Munich Olympics – presenting him with the official Olympic brochure he helped to produce. He reported on Kenya's glorious nine-medal haul in Munich and two years later, the World Cup won by the host nation, Germany.

In 1974, the International Sports Writers Association honoured him with a medal for his contribution to

sports journalism.

Sultan Jessa worked as *Nation's* chief correspondent in Tanzania and later moved to Nairobi. Covering the 24th Boy Scouts World Conference in Nairobi, he spotted Prince Shah Mahmud, third son of the deposed King Mohamed Zahir Shah of Afghanistan. The prince was shocked and surprised to learn his father had been overthrown. Jessa's story made international news.

Asian photographers captured many a historic moment in this quarter century, starting with Kenya's independence, the leading events of the Kenyatta era, including the Asian Exodus, the election of President Moi and various news-making events during his presidency. For their pictures, they won many international awards. An extraordinary picture of an energetic President Kenyatta hopping down a rocky slope, by Anil Vidyarthi, for instance, led to the president ordering dozens of copies, which his office then circulated widely to quell rumours that the ageing leader was not in good health.

Political reporting in Kenya was a dangerous exercise at best, since one had to be careful not to step on anyone's toes as this could have an adverse affect on one's career, and even life. Joe Rodrigues, Kul Bhushan and Cyprian Fernandes were picked up by the notorious Special Branch for questioning time and time again.

Fernandes, especially, pulled off many scoops, including the Cabora Basa Dam in Mozambique, interviewing Milton Obote after his overthrow and Idi Amin after the coup, not to mention covering the arrest of Jaramogi Oginga Odinga in Kisumu after the 1969 riots.

Fernandes was perceived to be close to Foreign Minister Njoroge Mungai. After one particular report in 1974 stung somebody in power, his wife was told by a Special Branch officer, "We have a bullet for your husband." Within three months, the couple had left Kenya.

Thus, in no small measure, Asian journalists contributed to covering the formative years of Kenya as an independent country.

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Journalist Joe Rodrigues (second right) with family and friends at a 1978 function. Inset, left, then Assistant Minister Jan Mohamed and writer Kul Bhushan. Many Asian journalists were picked up by the notorious Special Branch for questioning time and again in the 1970s. Pictures: FILE

made forceful contributions. Among outstanding contributors were Shamlal Puri and Anwar Sidi.

These Asian journalists contributed new perspectives to *The Nation*. Asian readers were attracted by reviews of Indian films and cultural events, reports on Asian festivals and Asian VIPs arriving in Kenya, and most of all, in-depth coverage of national news directly impacting the Asians.

The Safari Rally was the biggest news at Easter every year. By 1960, it was a local Kenyan event with most entrants being white settlers, also known as Kenya Cowboys. These were gradually joined by Asian mechanics who wanted to make a name for themselves and publicise their small motor garages. During the next 25 years, the Asian reporters for *The Nation* always had an edge with the Asian drivers and got many a scoop before, during and after the event.

In the sports field, Asians dominated hockey, cricket and tennis during those years. The Asian sports reporters recorded their performances with a special understanding of their background.

Commonwealth and UN affairs.

More full time South Asian journalists joined as the years went by. This group included chief court reporter Billy Chibber, reporter Karim Hudani, sports reporter Polly Fernandes, sports reporter Norman da Costa, reporter Monte Vianna, reporter Sultan Jessa, sub editor Chander Mehra and three young women feature writers: Gayatri Syal-Saggar, Olinda Fernandes and Lorraine Saldanha-Alvarez.

Kul Bhushan, who is mentioned at the beginning of this story, started as the education editor, worked as a sub editor and was later appointed as the first business editor. Rashid Mughal's career started as a proof reader, rising to become features sub editor and finally, features editor. Alfred Araujo started as a sub editor, rising to become chief sub editor and assistant editor of *The Sunday Nation* and finally its editor.

The photographic department had three chief photographers: Akhtar Hussain, Shashi Vasani and Azhar Chaudhry. Young photographers Chandu Vasani and Anil Vidyarthi