

On Migration, Minorities and Integration

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Autobiographical sketch

I seek to bring out these difficulties and ambiguities through an analysis of my own experience with migration, integration and identity. As an East African of Asian origin, I experienced these phenomena directly and forcefully. My grandparents migrated with their children from colonial India to colonial Kenya around the First World War. I was born in Kenya in a small township just outside Nairobi three years before the outbreak of the Second World War. After working as railway employees for some time, my grandfather and my father started their business in Ruiru- a township fifteen miles from Nairobi on the way to Mount Kenya.

After completing my primary and secondary education in Nairobi, I spent a year at a British school just outside London and four years at Oxford where I did my degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics, and BPhil in Economics. I then pursued my doctoral work in Economics at Yale University. I returned to East Africa in 1961 to take up a Lectureship in Economics at Makerere University College, then the only university level institution in the whole of East and Central Africa. I moved in 1966 to the University of Nairobi where subsequently I became Professor of Economics and Director of the Institute for Development Studies. In between I spent 1965/66 at Yale University and 1969/70 at the World Bank with the Lester Pearson Commission on International Development.

In 1974, I accepted an appointment in Geneva as Director of Research at the World Employment Programme, International Labour Office. I stayed there until 1987 in various capacities, including Head of the Secretariat for the World Employment Conference of 1976. From 1987 to 1997, I was Director of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development in Geneva. The next three years I served as head of the Transition Team of the ILO Director General, Juan Somavia, and advisor at the International Institute for Labour Studies. I have continued to live in Geneva after my retirement from the UN system.

As the preceding autobiographical sketch shows I have had an abundant experience of being a migrant and a member of a minority community. I have also had to contend with the problems of integration and identity in different contexts. My experience shows that these phenomena are complex and multi-dimensional. Each situation presents its specific challenges and people react to them in diverse ways. There are seldom stereotypical responses. In what follows I have attempted to delineate how I have experienced these phenomena and how I have attempted to resolve the dilemmas and conflicts inevitably generated by a life of traversing many borders and cultures.

Migrants as nomads

International migrants are defined as people who have moved from one country to settle in another. Thus my grandparents and my parents would certainly qualify as migrants in this sense. But I was born in Kenya and thus would not normally qualify as a migrant. But in reality throughout the colonial period and indeed well into the post-independence period, the Asians in East Africa, along with the Europeans, continued to be described as immigrant communities. Thus willy-nilly, one ended up feeling a migrant in Kenya, even though born in the country.

I have now lived in Switzerland for nearly 35 years. By normal definitions, I should be described as a migrant to this country. But I came to live here as an international civil servant with rights to home leave in Kenya every two years. And indeed I have visited Kenya at least once a year over this long period. International civil servants are regarded as working in a duty station. Thus no one ever regarded us as migrants. I certainly never looked upon myself as a migrant to Switzerland, but very much as a Kenyan national who happened to be working there for a while as an international civil servant, like thousands of others in a similar situation.

But can the same be said of the past eight years or so when I retired from the UN system? We continue to live here on special residence permit. But I cannot honestly say that I think of myself in any way as a migrant to this country. In that sense, my situation is radically different from the tens of thousands of East African Asians who left the region to settle permanently in countries such as UK, Canada, USA, Australia, India, Pakistan and elsewhere.

But the issue still remains as how to describe people in our kind of situation. There are now growing numbers in a similar category who leave their countries of origin to live elsewhere for varying periods of time. They do not abandon their nationalities and do not feel that they are migrants seeking permanent settlement in the countries to which they have moved. Yet it also remains true that with the passage of time, their ties with the home country become progressively more tenuous. Even as they hold tenaciously to their original identity and loyalties, they have been changed in subtle ways by their prolonged residence in other countries.

In searching for an appropriate word or phrase to describe their situation, the words nomadic way of life come to mind. Like nomads, they move between places, seeking nourishment and comfort in each place. They are not sure where their home is. Nor do they necessarily believe that they must have only one home. Should we describe them as without home or at home everywhere? These issues relate closely to the themes of integration and identity and are discussed in later sections of the paper.

We are all minorities

In the conventional sense of the term; we were members of a minority in Kenya: the Asian community in Kenya, even at its maximum strength in the years preceding independence, accounted for less than one percent of the population. Their absolute numbers and relative share have declined sharply in the post-independence period. In my case, the term minority has an even greater resonance. I have considered myself a member of a minority all my life whether in UK, USA, Uganda, or Switzerland.

It is thus not surprising that I have always had a soft spot for minorities world-wide. I have mourned their oppression and sympathized with their predicament. On numerous occasions I have quoted with approval Mahatma Gandhi's characteristically profound words: "The test of the quality of a civilization is its treatment of minorities."

My experience, however, has led me to question some of the assumptions normally associated with being a member of a minority. First, although in some sense, I was a member of a minority group, I have always belonged to a privileged minority. There is a world of difference between discriminated minorities at the bottom of the political and economic heap and their more affluent and educated counterparts. Whether in East Africa, Europe or the USA, I have been a member of a tiny privileged minority, judged by the criteria of income, education and influence. This is not to deny that there were always some coveted positions

that one could never aspire to, but there are hardly any individuals who do not face some obstacle or another in their quest for top posts.

But my experience has also led me to question the conventional notion of minorities in a more fundamental sense. I now realize that in one way or another we are all members of minorities. It is all a question of the criteria we choose to differentiate among different groups. Members of apparent majorities may turn out to belong to minorities depending upon whether they are classified by socio-economic status, ideological dispositions, levels of education, language; religion or race, to mention just the most commonly used markers.

In Kenya, for instance, judged by racial criterion, the black Africans would be considered as belonging to the majority. But evaluated in ethnic terms, even the most numerous tribe-the Kikuyu- constitute a small minority of the Kenyan population. They are further differentiated by religion, ideology and economic status. Likewise, ranked by skin color, the whites in UK, USA and Switzerland constitute an overwhelming majority but judged

by other criteria such as language, national origin, political beliefs, religion and socio-economic status, they splinter into a series of minority groups.

This is more than an academic point. In our daily lives, many of us find that we have more in common with those doing the same sort of jobs, sharing a common ideology, professing the same religion or speaking the same language than with those conventionally regarded as belonging to the same minority. Certainly, as discussed further below, both in Kenya and Uganda, I found that I had more in common with my fellow academics, who constituted a kind of international elite group, than with most members of my own community. I was in both cases a member of a minority but of very different minorities.

Segmented integration

One of the most frequent complaints against minorities, especially the sub-continent minorities, is that they do not integrate with the majority. The meaning of the term integration is seldom made clear in these discussions. Yet a great deal depends upon the interpretation given to integration. One can distinguish among several meanings attached to integration in such discussions. In a deeper sense, a group may be considered as "being integrated" if it subscribes to what the majority regards as its core values. These may include rule of law, democracy, tolerance, freedom of expression and association, gender equality and such like. At another level, participation in political and social life may be considered as evidence of integration. A common religion and language and social interaction may constitute additional indicators of integration. It is clear that depending upon the definition used, a minority may be considered as more or less integrated in the country.

Most people when they think of integration have in mind the extent to which in their social and economic life, the members of a "minority" interact with the majority. This refers to their interaction with the members of the majority in their work, leisure activities and social gatherings. I use the term integration in this sense when I discuss my experience with integration in different places and times.

I spent my childhood and school days in colonial Kenya. A dominant feature of the country at that time was the segregation of society in three compartments-the Europeans, Asians and Africans, as the different communities were then described. While perhaps not as rigid as in South Africa, segregation nevertheless covered an extensive swath of social and economic life such as residential quarters, schools, hospitals, clubs, restaurants, places of worship and some economic activities. When some interracial mingling could not be avoided such as in government offices or business enterprises, the general rule was that European occupied the top posts, the Asians the middle ones and Africans the bottom positions.

It is thus not surprising that in my childhood and school years, I felt fully integrated in my community and totally isolated from other races. During those years, all our social get

together were confined to our relatives or friends within the sub-community of Hindu Punjabis. There were regular community gatherings at Arya Samaj religious and social functions. I went to Asian schools where I came into contact with Asian youngsters from all sub-communities. Thus all my life revolved around a set of activities where I only interacted with members of the Asian community. Our contacts with Africans were confined to those with the domestic staff (usually referred to as servants) and employees in our business.

The five years I spent studying in UK marked a drastic change in the groups with whom I interacted in my work and leisure. In place of the Asian community, suddenly I found myself amidst English school boys and even at Oxford, the overwhelming majority of the undergraduates comprised British students. Even today I marvel at the ease with which I made the transition from interaction at work and play exclusively with Asians to spending my time with the British students. This was no doubt a reflection of the resilience and openness of the youthful phase of our lives. Oxford was more international than my English school and I made lifelong friendships with students from Asia and Africa, but most of my interaction inevitably took place with the British faculty and students.

While in this respect my stay in UK presented a sharp contrast to my experience in Kenya, the pattern of integration also revealed some common elements. For instance, while I felt fully integrated in the British university society, along with my British colleagues, I was almost totally cut off from the surrounding society in town, whether the working class or the business community. My experience in UK shed important light on the nature of integration, namely that one is integrated into only a section of any society and almost never with all segments of society. This is as true of the indigenous people as of migrants. My subsequent experience in totally different environments in East Africa and Switzerland has served only to reinforce this conclusion.

In this respect, my two years in the US as a graduate student at Yale University were simply an extension of my experience in UK. Even in the late 1950s and early 1960s America was in many ways very different from the UK, though ethnically vastly less diverse than today. And the graduate students at Yale were more international than the undergraduates at Oxford. But when it came to patterns of integration, my American experience was remarkably similar to the British. I quickly became an integral part of the student community, interacted extensively with American and overseas students and the faculty but remained isolated from the neighboring society in New Haven. Again as in UK, this was largely the case with my American colleagues as well.

The four years I spent in Kampala at Makerere might be expected to show a more varied pattern of social integration. There was a large Asian community in Kampala. Furthermore, half way through my stay there, I got married to Neela Korde whose family had long term roots in Uganda. While I did interact to some extent with the local Asian community, the bulk of my working and leisure time was spent with my students and academic colleagues on the campus. Whereas the students, drawn from all over East Africa, were almost wholly African, the faculty was truly international. Thus while I was fully integrated into some sort of an elite international society and had limited contacts with the local Asian and African elites, I remained, as did my colleagues on the hill, largely isolated from the mass of the people in Uganda.

Even more surprisingly, given my roots and the presence of relatives and old friends, the same experience was repeated in Kenya where I spent eight years at the University of Nairobi. While as in Uganda, I spent a limited amount of my leisure time with the local Asian community, the bulk of my interaction took place with students and faculty at the university and with senior government officials. The university faculty was even more international than at Makerere, where most of the academic staff came from UK, and comprised a larger proportion of East Africans. Nevertheless, in all important ways, it continued to be an elite group. Thus once again while I was fully integrated into the elite Kenyan society, I remained in all essential ways cut off from the ordinary people of the country despite their being at the centre of all my professional work.

The same pattern of integration was repeated in Switzerland with even sharper contrasts. We have lived here for 34 years-longer than in any other country. For the first 24 years of this period, I worked at the

International Labor Office and the UN in Geneva in various senior posts. There is a large international community in Geneva drawn from all parts of the world, comprising UN officials, members of the country missions accredited to the UN and of many civil society organizations, and the business community. There are also a large number of low-income foreign workers. During my years with UN, my work and social contacts were exclusively with the members of the international group, mostly officials of international agencies and of the country missions. I had hardly any social contacts with the Swiss people.

Even after my retirement from the UN system, my contacts with the Swiss people remain limited. With a sharp decline in work and social contact with the international group at the same time, I have tended more and more to retreat into my own shell, spending most of my time with the family and in reading, writing and sports activities. Perhaps the final phase of my life might well be a negation of integration of all types!

Triple cultural heritage

The issue of integration is closely related to that of identity. We spend working time and share leisure activities with people who we feel at home with. This generally means that we share with them common interests, core values and cultural norms. These aspects in turn define our identity.

We have all at some stage or another asked the question: Who am I? Where do I belong? For a long time, I was able to ward off this troubling question. My busy life left little time for what then appeared to me as abstract and philosophical enquiries. But with more time for myself in the last few years and no doubt abetted by advancing age, I have had to face this question with greater frequency. I cannot claim that I have found a fully satisfactory answer but some things have become clearer.

We are all products of varied and complex influences. In my own case, I have found it helpful to approach the issue of identity and belonging by reminding myself of my triple cultural heritage (with apologies to my good friend Ali Mazrui). I have been molded by influences-cultural, social and political-from three major contemporary civilizations- Indian, African and the Western. I have sought to shed what seemed to me regressive and harmful elements and to cultivate the good and progressive in each culture. I have also tried to blend them into a harmonious texture.

Although I have not spent more than three months in India in my entire life, I have been deeply influenced by my upbringing in an Indian family in Kenya and living in a largely isolated Indian community during my childhood and student days. I have absorbed much from this experience. This has ranged from things like food, music, films to religion and social relations. I am not a believer but somehow my upbringing has profoundly inclined me towards tolerance, peace and non-violence. I attribute this to the Hindu and Buddhist influences in my early life. At the social level, I have imbibed from my upbringing respect for elders, a sense of hospitality and sharing with relatives and friends and love of children. My heritage has also turned me off from crass materialism.

From my African heritage, I have learnt the importance of humor even in difficult situations, love of nature and commitment to conservation. The respect for elders and the importance of sharing with relatives and friends have been reinforced by my African experience. But most of all it is in the social and political domain that I have been most profoundly touched by my African upbringing. My life-long interest in issues of poverty eradication, social justice, human development and human rights, have largely flown from my African experience. Likewise, my intolerance of corruption, waste and squandering of resources by governments can be traced to my African experiences.

I have been deeply influenced by western civilization. This was the result mainly of my education at universities in UK and the US and the many years I have spent in Europe. The student days are always the most formative years in one's life in terms of intellectual growth and the development of a worldview. This was even truer of me, as I entered one of the most famous universities in the world without having given much thought to political and economic issues. At Oxford I had an opportunity to read some major

western works in economics, philosophy and politics. Interaction with students from around the world, especially from the Commonwealth countries, stimulated my interest in contemporary global issues as also on political emancipation and economic development. The latter was to become for me a life time vocation and passion.

The great works of the west in humanities and social sciences have profoundly affected my values and worldview. In specific terms, my education and life in western countries have taught me the importance of individual dignity, democracy, rule of law, human rights and equality for girls and women. It has reinforced my belief in tolerance and freedom.

World citizenship and universal ethics

Have my efforts at cultural synthesis resolved the issue of belonging and feeling at home? It is said that religion, nation and community provide the bedrocks of belonging. Alas, I cannot derive succor from any of them. I am a non-believer. While I continue to be a Kenya national and to harbor strong feelings for my country, the long years of separation, despite frequent visits back home, and dwindling personal links and lack of participation in national life in any meaningful manner, have inevitably taken their toll. As for the community, it has been a long time since I have felt fully integrated into any community.

It would be idle to pretend that I have been unaffected by these deprivations. How many times have I felt a sense of utter loneliness, a deep longing for a community I could be part of and a yearning for participation in public life! And most of all, I have felt a profound sense of despair in my inability to transform directly my knowledge, experience and insights into actions to improve the lives and well-being of the deprived and the oppressed.

We all learn to develop mechanisms to counter these moods and construct shelters to escape from loneliness and a sense of rootlessness. In my own case, I have sought to go beyond the community and the nation in attempting to expand my moral horizons to the planet, comprising both people and nature. This has been facilitated by my lifelong preoccupation with efforts to improve the conditions of life of the poor, the exploited and the oppressed throughout the world. I have sought to root my planetary concerns in a set of universal values. For me these have evolved over the years into social justice, equality, generosity, compassion, tolerance, non-violence, and reverence for nature and respect for other species.

Universal ethics, world citizenship and ecological stewardship are ideals that I strive to live by. Needless to say they are almost never fully realized in real life. However, even under the best of circumstances, they cannot completely resolve all our problems of identity and belonging, but that is all that some of us have.